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Mr. Novelist Goes to War: Hemingway and Steinbeck as Front-line Correspondents

The United States entry into World War II found Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck at the top of their form as fiction writers. *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, gained Steinbeck international critical and popular acclaim. Already a force in the literary world, the publication of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1940 earned Hemingway rave reviews and financial security. When they turned to reporting from the battlefields, Hemingway for *Collier's* as chief of their European Bureau and Steinbeck for the *New York Herald Tribune*, the war was well underway. It is not that they had been uninvolved in the war effort prior to these assignments. Both men had contributed, each in his way, before joining the troops at the front. Hemingway's activities provoked some controversy. Both his wife and the F.B.I viewed his intelligence gathering and makeshift crew of sub-hunters, patrolling the waters of the Gulf by day and carousing by night, derisively, although Ambassador Spruille Braden was more supportive.¹ The enterprise, drolly named the Crook Factory, was disbanded in April of 1943. The Pilar's orders and authority for sub-chasing ran out in July of that same year.

Steinbeck's contributions were more in keeping with his pre-war career. He wrote for the Air Force, the Writers' War Board, the Office of War Information, and the O.S.S. *The Moon Is Down*, written as a propaganda piece encouraging resistance, was less than enthusiastically reviewed by this country's critical establishment, but its effectiveness in inspiring resistance has been convincingly documented.² After the war in 1946, King Haakon of Norway decorated Steinbeck for this effort. *Bombs Away*, a propaganda book he wrote for the Air force as a pseudo-documentary about the training of a bomber team was also dismissed as unworthy. Hemingway scornfully wrote to Max Perkins: "I would rather cut three fingers off my throwing hand than to have written it."³

Of the two, Steinbeck was first into the war zone, publishing his initial dispatch from England a good year before Hemingway put on his correspondent's uniform. The first piece published in *Once There Was a War*, Steinbeck's collection of WWII dispatches, is dated June 20th, 1943. *By-*

Line: Ernest Hemingway contains the six articles Hemingway wrote for *Colliers*. The first is dated July 22, 1944, although the event he is writing about is the D-Day Invasion on the sixth of June.

The two men had decidedly different preparations for their roles as war correspondents. Both had spent some time as journalists prior to their recognition as novelists, but Hemingway's press credentials were markedly superior to Steinbeck's. On the one hand, Hemingway had worked successfully as a reporter before and during his flourishing career as a creative writer. He had learned the trade right out of high school working for the *Kansas City Star*. That was before WWI. After the war, in the 1920s, he wrote for the *Toronto Star Weekly* and the *Toronto Daily Star*, and wrote dispatches for the North American News Alliance (NANA) from the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. In the run-up to WWII in the Pacific, he reported from China, writing articles for the New York newspaper *PM*. His experience as a journalist was global and ongoing. Frontlines and by-lines were nothing new to him.

Steinbeck, on the other hand, had initially been a failure at the press game. His brief stint as a reporter for the New York *American* in the 1920s was a dismal fiasco. He got lost trying to find his stories, missed workdays, and was eventually dismissed. However, not all of Steinbeck's experiences writing for newspapers were disasters. In the 1930s, on assignment from the *San Francisco News*, he wrote a series on migrant farm workers, particularly those refugees from the devastation of the Dust Bowl. The series, which he called "The Harvest Gypsies," provided much of the material for his fiction masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

For Ernest Hemingway, arguably the nation's most renowned writer at the time, writing about war, in fact or in fiction, was not something new. War and its aftermath are the subjects and settings of many of his best works. WWI had served as background for two novels, *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*. Hemingway had personal experience in war zones, having been wounded in WWI. He wrote about the war between Greece and Turkey and the consequent Lausanne Peace Conference. In the 1930s he reported on the Spanish Civil War, generally regarded as dress rehearsal for WWII. For Hemingway, war and attendant emotions were familiar materials. Frederick Busch calls him "our poet, in prose, about fear and the imagined encounter—before we die—with death".⁴

Steinbeck, though he had no experience in a war setting, was in the early stages of his own international fame. He was just coming off of a hugely successful half decade, one which saw publication and critical kudos for many of his most successful novels, *Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, culminating in his masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*. For both men, though they did not know it, their most productive

and successful years as novelists were behind them.

They went to the war with different agendas. Martha Gellhorn had been urging a reluctant Hemingway to take up a correspondent's role. She was unhappy in her role as the mistress of the Finca Vigia, and took an assignment with *Collier's* ETO (European Theatre of Operations). The marriage was clearly coming apart, though the two still wrote letters to each other professing their love. Hemingway's drinking had increased and when they were together, he was bullying and abusive toward her. Once she left, however, Hemingway was very lonely, complaining even to ex-wife Hadley, about "so damned much time to think" and his inability to "sleep from having lost the habit" (*Letters*, 555). Also, his writing was not going well and according to his son Gregory, he was in a state of psychological crisis.⁵ Michael Reynolds contends that Hemingway's behavior during this period (1943-44) was a "manifestation of the depression that eventually destroyed him" (91). In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, he comments plaintively, "I miss writing very much" (557). To read his letters from the war zone, however, one could surmise that the war acted as an anodyne for his mental state. It replaced the diversion of sub-chasing with another serious war game, acting as a distraction from his worrying about his inability to write in that it provided an alternative writing assignment. Hemingway wrote Maxwell Perkins about the experience of liberating Paris: "Finest time ever had in my life".⁶ The war theatre also provided an antidote for his marital woes. "Funny how it should take one war to start a woman in your damn heart and another to finish her," he wrote about the end of his marriage to Martha Gellhorn and the beginning of his relationship with Mary Welsh. He was enthusiastic as he wrote his son Patrick: "Have never been happier nor had a more useful life ever."⁷

Steinbeck's participation did not have an equally salubrious effect. His new wife, Gwyn, did not want him to leave her. Loneliness and insecurity mark his letters of the time. Rather than finding himself having either the "finest time" of his life or feeling happy and useful, he expresses his fear to Gwyn. He wonders about her constancy and continually exhorts her to "keep this thing we have inviolate and waiting."⁸ If there is a positive side to his experience, it is in his satisfaction that he "had done the things [he] had to do" (Steinbeck *A Life* 262).

Turning from the personal to the professional, their "reporting" of the war evidences their dissimilar preparations and writing styles. Both participated in an invasion and wrote about it, Steinbeck in the Mediterranean theatre, Hemingway in the Normandy offensive. The resulting reports are, for the most part, in keeping with these individual styles and experiences. Also, the genre each is writing in necessitates an unevenness of scope. Hemingway's pieces are articles, published in a magazine, some time after

the events. Steinbeck's are briefer, written closer to the time of publication, in keeping with their placement in a newspaper. "Invasion" is the heading Steinbeck gives to four pieces, dated October 3 through October 8, 1943. Hemingway's "Voyage to Victory" is dated July 22, 1944.⁹

Steinbeck, like the untried soldiers he accompanied, was untested in battle. It is not unfitting then that he explores that situation in his commentary. But he does not approach it from a personal perspective. All of his language is couched in terms of what the soldiers are thinking. One can surmise that he, like they, was unsure about how he would behave, but he does not let us know that directly. The narrator or reporter does not become part of the scene. It is only the reader who senses a kind of "projection" in his painstaking exploration of the state of mind of the "green troops," Steinbeck identifies knowledge of how one will behave, whether or not one will run or go to pieces, as what distinguishes "green troops" from "soldiers" (*Once There* 111). The dispatch is written as if Steinbeck is in an LCI, which he tells us, stands for Landing Craft Infantry, as it heads for shore. Steinbeck writes of how the men deal with their almost palpable fear, joking, accusing each other of being scared until a "silence creeps over them" (*Once There* 110). He writes of the baptism of fire, although he doesn't call it that, detailing each man's self-doubts about whether or not he will be a "good soldier." He ends with the sound of one man whistling, projecting that the reason for this sound may be the man's need to assure himself that "he is there." (*Once There* 112)

Hemingway, as reporter, also crouching with the men in a landing craft—this one a LCV—approaches the subject in a more external way. He does not try to theorize about what the men are thinking. He is more descriptive of their actions and more inclined to metaphor than Steinbeck is. He writes of the seasickness and the soldiers "trying to hold on to themselves" (Hemingway *By-Line* 342) in anticipation of having to leave the relatively safer environs of the LCV and the protection of the firing ships. Hemingway evokes fanciful images as he compares the men to "pikemen of the Middle Ages" and the battleships to "some strange and unbelievable monster," which has come unaccountably to their aid. The motif of the "mysterious monster" is continued several paragraphs later when he describes the silence that falls over the men when they leave the "line of firing ships." Their sense of impending danger and fear is metaphorized in a realization that "the mysterious monster that was helping them ... was gone and they were alone again" (*By-Line* 342).

The great battleships and the roar of their guns produce some of Hemingway's most effective imagery. The incredible din of battle is evoked when he writes of never being out of the sound of naval gunfire, of his technique of keeping his mouth open to minimize the concussion shock of

the bombardment. Reaching for a metaphor to encapsulate the thunderous sound, he writes of “The big guns of the Texas and Arkansas that sounded as though they were throwing whole railway trains across the sky” (*By-Line* 343). As the landing craft move closer to shore and the great ships are left behind, Hemingway describes it as “like the thunder of a storm that is passing in another country whose rain will never reach you” (*By-Line* 343). The poetic impact of his language is never more effective than when he projects to the battle ahead where “death was being issued in small, intimate, accurately, administered packages” (*By-Line* 343).

Steinbeck uses little metaphor, few images. Whereas Hemingway’s reportorial eye ranges far and wide—back at the supporting battleships, forward to the coast and the beaches, Steinbeck’s vision is more limited. His focus is mainly psychological, what the men are thinking and feeling. In particular, he explores the sense of loneliness, even as the men are huddled together in the LCI. Writing of the soldiers’ thoughts, he declares: “When he [the soldier] designs the assault in his mind he is alone and cut off from everyone. He is alone in the moonlight and the crowded men about him are strangers in this time” (*Once There* 111). The enemy is evoked, but only in the soldier’s mind.

Comparing the two men, Jackson Benson has written, “Hemingway almost invariably wrote about himself, either directly or indirectly, and Steinbeck wrote about the emotions and problems of others” (*Looking* 208). This description is appropriate for their reportorial styles also. Steinbeck is almost invisible in his dispatch, a distanced and omniscient narrator as he is in his fiction. He never uses the first person; the dispatch is always about the men, they, he. Conversely, Hemingway is a character in his invasion report. He begins in the second sentence to use the pronoun “we.” He positions himself as part of the offensive, writing that “we took Fox Green beach” and that “we moved toward land” (*By-Line* 340). Then he positions the reader with him, using the second person; “ahead you could see the coast of France” (*By-Line* 340). After reporting the conversations between the coxswain and the lieutenant, he has Lieutenant Anderson ask him for help, referring to him by name: “Mr. Hemingway, will you please see if you can see what that flag is over there, with your glasses?” (*By-Line* 341). He complies. He then begins his first person narrative, writing about how he took out his glasses and even about trying, ineffectively, to dry them.

Steinbeck is characteristically modest and private about his activities. Revisiting his participation in the “introduction” to the 1958 reprinting of his dispatches, he does not glamorize his role. He states “I attended a part of that war,” stressing the minimal impact of his being there. Key to this tone is his choice of the word “attend,” rather than a word with more active connotations. In a subsequent description, he uses the word “visit” to empha-

size his outsider's status. Underlining his lack of credentials he explains that he wore "the costume of a war correspondent" (*Once There* vii). He is keenly aware of his lesser credentials, writing that he was a "Johnny-come-lately" to the scene, "a kind of tourist" among a "hard-bitten bunch of professionals" (*Once There* xiv). He writes of his "coy little trick" of always describing scenes through the mouths of others. Steinbeck's self-deprecation is in marked contrast to Hemingway's placement of himself in the forefront of his stories, his emphasis on his insider role, his proficiency.

Hemingway is definitely the protagonist of his reporting. He highlights his participation in the invasion both in his articles for *Colliers* and in his written recollections after the war. In "Voyage to Victory" he asserts his expertise, telling the reader that he "had studied" the map of the coast and "memorized most of it" (*By-Line* 343). A substantial part of the story is dialog between Hemingway and "Andy," the commanding officer, about a map of the French coast in an attempt to ascertain if they are on course. Hemingway points out that there should not be any cliffs on the shoreline, that he has studied the features and that the cliffs do not begin till where the Fox Red beach starts. An officer from an LCI validates his opinion.

As they come closer to shore, Hemingway continues his description of the battle zone in highly poeticized language, writing of the tanks "crouched like big yellow toads along the high water line" (*By-Line* 346). He describes the LCV(P) as "slanted drunkenly in the stakes like a lost gray steel bathtub" (*By-Line* 347). He compares the men working to "Atlas carrying the world on their shoulders" (*By-Line* 352).

Hemingway is commanding and decisive in his invasion reportage. When the lieutenant expresses some hesitancy about his authority to take the LCV in to shore, he encourages the lieutenant to go in, explaining "We can go in where an LCV(P) has been in or an LCI . . . It's bound to be clear where they run in, and we can go in under the lee of one" (*By-Line* 348). No frightened green soldier, he is in command of the situation. As they roar in to the beach, he explains, "I sat high on the stern to see what we were up against" (*By-Line* 349). He scouts the shore, spotting two machine-gun nests and warns the lieutenant. Writing later of his role as a correspondent, Hemingway saw himself as a key part of the war effort. In a letter, written after the war, he notes: "I thought I could be more useful in trying to destroy the Krauts".¹⁰ Reaching Paris ahead of the army, his half-joking claim of having liberated the Ritz bar, and of the Army catching up to him all became part of the Hemingway ethos. Nor does he limit himself to the role of observer; he writes of commanding men, of "working ahead with the Maquis." This was an activity that led to his being interrogated later at Third Army headquarters (Baker 428-29).¹¹

Whatever the differences in Hemingway's and Steinbeck's reportorial

styles, their conclusions about the difficulties of the task of the correspondent in conveying the realities of invasion battles to the reading public are tellingly similar. They both struggle with the difficulty of conveying to the non-combatant “how it was”—the sound, sight, feel, and smell of it. Steinbeck writes “You can’t see much of a battle . . . the account in the morning papers of the battle of yesterday was not seen by the correspondent, but was put together from reports. What the correspondent really saw was dust and the nasty burst of shells, low bushes and slit trenches.” In tentative language, using “perhaps” and “he might” to indicate that the reporting is suggestive rather than an accurate account of what he experienced, Steinbeck explains the difference between what the correspondent “might have seen,” such as “a small Italian girl in the street with her stomach blown out” and “dead mules . . . reduced to pulp” and what he writes about in his communiqué: “His report will be of battle plan and tactics, of taken ground or lost terrain, of attack and counter-attack” (*Once There* 116). Writing of himself in the third person, but using his experience as a paradigm for the discrepancy between the individual experience and what is reported, Steinbeck writes of raw skin and hot, dirty and swollen feet, of burial squads, and the poignant detail of detaching one of two dog tags, “so that you know that that man with that Army serial number is dead and out of it” (*Once There* 116). The correspondent, he writes, will merely note, “The 5th Army advanced two kilometers” (*Once There* 116). Hemingway conveys a similar sentiment in the conclusion of “Voyage to Victory.” While he details rescuing a “wounded boy” and taking him back to the destroyer and how the destroyers “were blowing every pillbox out of the ground,” he explains that there is “much I have not written” (*By-Line* 344-355). Like Steinbeck, he notes that “real war is never like paper war, nor do accounts of it read much the way it looks” (*By-Line* 355). After a cataloguing of the number of craft missing, all by enemy action and none by bad seamanship, and the difficulty of crediting all those who took the beach, a front of 1, 1135 yards, Hemingway concludes with a pointed disclaimer: “But if you want to know how it was in an LCV(P) on D-Day when we took Fox Green beach and Easy Red beach on the sixth of June, 1944, then this is as near as I can come to it” (*By-Line* 355).

Two middle-aged novelists went to war. Each covered a different theatre of that war, Steinbeck North Africa and the invasion of Italy, Hemingway the Normandy landing and push through France into Germany. Steinbeck left the front lines early; his last dispatches are dated December of 1943. A generation later, in the late 60s, he would take up his correspondent’s role again, reporting the war in Vietnam for *Newsday*. Hemingway arrived in London after Steinbeck had returned to the U.S.A. leaving in the waning days, the war in Europe all but won. World War II

would be the last war he covered. Both writers tried to communicate how it was and each succeeded in his own way. In reporting as in fiction, their texts are strongly imprinted by their distinct styles and creative approaches.

Notes

1. The differences of opinion between the Ambassador and F.B.I. agent Leddy are detailed in Michael Reynolds' *Hemingway: The Final Years*, 50-72.
2. Donald Coers' *John Steinbeck as Propagandist* details the European reaction to *The Moon Is Down* both during and after WWII.
3. Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*, New York: Scribner's, 1968, 371.
4. Frederick Busch, "Fear Was His Beat," *New York Times Book Review*, 9 May 1999, 27.
5. D.T. Max, "Hemingway's War Wounds," *The New York Times Magazine*, 18 July 1999, 28.
6. *The Only Thing That Counts*, Matthew Bruccoli, ed. New York: Scribner's, 1996, 256.
7. Letter to Patrick Hemingway, 15 September 1944, *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters*, New York: Scribner's, 1981, 571.
8. Letter to Gwyndolyn Steinbeck, July 1943, *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten, eds. New York: Viking, 1975, 256.
9. Quotations from the dispatches will be from the collected editions, *By-Line: Ernest Hemingway*, William White, ed. New York: Scribners, 1967, and *Once There Was a War*, New York: Penguin Books, 1958, and will be noted in text by the abbreviations BLEH and PTTW.
10. Letter to Konstantin Simonove, June 1946, *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters*, New York: Scribner's, 607.
11. For more information about his interrogation, see "Hemingway's US Third Army Inspector General Interview During World War II," edited and introduced by James H. Meredith, *The Hemingway Review*, 18.2: 91-101.

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