
Milton A. Cohen. *Hemingway's Laboratory: The Paris in our time*.
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The slim chapbook published in Paris as *in our time* (1924) by William Bird's Three Mountains Press represents for Milton Cohen an essential precursor to all of Ernest Hemingway's subsequent works. While the volume's eighteen vignettes, written over a period of seven months, gave the fledgling Hemingway something to contribute to a series of texts assembled and promoted by Ezra Pound, critical appreciations of that work have treated *in our time* as little more than undistinguished juvenilia. With extant volumes fetching as much as six figures at auction, the 170 copies of the work printed are of most interest today to rare book collectors, exceeding in renown even first editions of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) as desirable artifacts of Paris in the 1920s. Cohen hopes to move beyond a simple acknowledgment of the formal innovations in this unusual little text to argue that all elements of the mature Hemingway's writings are, in fact, discernable in embryonic form on the pages of *in our time*. Indeed, the central trope of *Hemingway's Laboratory* obliges readers to accept that the novelist sought to distance himself from his earliest writings through a great deal of willful experimentation. In examining Hemingway's extensive trial and error through this period, however, Cohen also discovers a number of elements of his writing, consistent with a burgeoning modernism, that never found their way into his mature prose.

By charting with painstaking accuracy the compositional history of *in our time*, *Hemingway's Laboratory* presents a detailed portrait of a young writer at work. Cohen suggests that circumstance thrust Hemingway into a period of forced creativity that forever cut him off from his early writings: Pound requested a typescript from his latest promising discovery at the same time that a case of Hemingway's manuscripts went missing from the possession of his wife, Hadley. Still, it is the actual experiments and not the circumstances surrounding their composition that preoccupy Cohen. Following Hemingway's own claim that he had worked out a new narrative form in fulfilling Pound's call for original work, Cohen argues that *in our time*, in part, extends the experiments of imagism to prose, and by doing so Hemingway finds a way to move beyond his journalistic background to refine his skills of description and even parody within a fresh technique. It was this collection that marked the appearance of the representative sentence pattern that came to be associated with Hemingway's prose, for example. Generally speaking, readers might characterize the style of his sentences as terse, sometimes fragmented, but Cohen illustrates the

care with which Hemingway ties different sentence lengths to the subject matter of his various vignettes. While the plodding reality of war may be appropriate for simple constructions, Hemingway describes the external realities of the bullfighting ring, colored for the author by the deep impressions Spain made upon him, with far more ornate structures.

In the final analysis, Cohen argues, Hemingway made the conscious decision not to pursue the most radical modernist forms with which he toyed, hoping instead to forge a style that would earn for him greater commercial success. Indeed, the singsong rhythms of some of these passages quickly fell away and his tersest sentences, at least, moved beyond fragmented mutterings. Hemingway continued to manipulate point-of-view, but the disorienting effects of multiple perspectives were hammered into controlled ambiguities intended to focus the attention of his readers. His use of irony grew subtler. Obviously, the thematic concerns of Hemingway's miniatures were rudimentary, though Cohen finds in these fractured passages evidence of the subjects that stayed with Hemingway throughout his career. Over time, of course, the mature novelist would build on his war experiences and his fascination with bullfighting to help develop great themes treating individual experience and responsibility, preoccupations that came to define his greatest works.

Clearly, this is a study that obsesses over Hemingway's aesthetic, and the reader can sometimes tire of the overwhelming detail that defines Milton Cohen's scholarship. For example, the relative brevity of *in our time* makes it practical for Cohen to count the number of triple compound sentences Hemingway uses. (There are three, two of which appear in the tenth chapter: "the recovering soldier and Ag.") On occasion, *Hemingway's Laboratory* thus threatens to drift into narrow readings of the prose of an apparently insular obsessive. The danger here is that decidedly hagiographic treatments of Hemingway, even ones that suggest him fueled by mad genius, overemphasize his exceptionalism, mirroring the self-portrait framed in his autobiography, *A Moveable Feast* (1963). What ultimately distinguishes Cohen from other admiring scholars is his ability to illustrate in great detail what Hemingway did, what made him essentially unique, while still connecting his achievement to what went on around him. While it may be little more than the most obvious comparison in a study that emphasizes Hemingway's development, for example, it is still to Cohen's credit that he discusses Gertrude Stein's influence on the impressionable Hemingway when outlining the latter's use of repetition, the signature stylistic feature of the former's aesthetic. Cohen also gives full credit to the influence of Sherwood Anderson, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, whose advocacy for fellow Americans abroad inspired *in our time* in the first place. It may well be that Hemingway undertook work on his prose style in a laboratory, of sorts, but this laboratory was the whole of

the city of Paris, the site of the most vibrant imaginative influences on a generation of expatriates in the 1920s—and so the experiments done were never undertaken by Hemingway in isolation. ✱