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ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S WORLD WAR I SHORT STORIES *PTSD, the Writer as Witness, and the Creation of Intersubjective Community*

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Ernest Hemingway's early World War I short stories can be read as an effort to identify, attest to, organize, and communicate the experience of a traumatized soldier—which, on the evidence, is what Hemingway himself was. The stories create what might be called an *intersubjective community* of experience: the writer as honest witness who makes witnesses of his readers.

Keywords: PTSD, witness, writer, intersubjective, Hemingway

To read Ernest Hemingway's early short stories now (some 80 or more years after they were written and some 50 years after Hemingway's own death by suicide) is to be impressed with two things. The *first* is that while Hemingway is known in popular culture and psychoanalytic imagination as an iconic figure of wounded sexuality and narcissistic compensation, he is probably better understood as a survivor of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The *second* is Hemingway's extraordinary capacity for communicating the frame of mind of a man suffering PTSD. His spare, unadorned declarative prose is, perhaps paradoxically, enormously evocative of rich, nuanced, and responsive experiencing in the reader. His work generally is an exceedingly interesting example of art as intersubjective communication—in particular, of the writer as a witness who makes witnesses of his readers. His work makes possible what might be called an *intersubjective community* of shared experience.

As a young man, Hemingway volunteered as a Red Cross ambulance driver and served with the Italian Army in World War I. After brief service he was wounded in a shelling on the battlefield. The soldier nearest him was killed instantly; another had his legs blown off. Hemingway carried still another wounded man to the safety of the medical tent before collapsing of serious wounds himself. According to a letter written to Hemingway's parents by a friend who was there on the Italian front along with him (Spanier & Trogdon,

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2011, p. 114), Hemingway had no immediate memory of the incident. He was hospitalized and in pain for many months while hundreds of pieces of shrapnel were removed from his legs and hands. He was awarded a medal, appointed an honorary Second Lieutenant by the Italian army and discharged. In his own letters home written in this period (Spanier & Trogdon, 2011) and written with difficulty from his hospital bed, he attempts to reassure his family and in a macho way to make light of his experience. But his early short stories are telling: eloquently revealing of his intimacy with the frame of mind of a trauma survivor, and, most important, of a trauma both personal and larger than personal. He served on the battlefield among the dead and dying and subsequently as a journalist and war correspondent before going on to become a major figure in the 20th-century American literary canon.

PTSD, of course, is a well-documented psychiatric symptom cluster having been identified as such in service personnel traumatized in the War in Vietnam. It was known to earlier generations variously by such terms as “shell shock” or “traumatic neurosis” or “combat stress” or “battle fatigue.” (Freud (1921) addressed what was then called “war neurosis” in terms of the theoretical problems the syndrome posed for the psychoanalysis of the time in an introduction to a book on the subject by Ferenczi, Abraham, and Simmel.)

At present, PTSD has become an accepted and frequently diagnosed clinical disorder (see American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 683, and the Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual [PDM]; PDM Task Force, 2006, p. 100), for survivors of extreme stress and especially for soldiers returning from battle. Less well recognized, but as suggested in the PDM (PDM Task Force, 2006) and by McWilliams (1994), and apparent to clinicians working with trauma survivors, PTSD may give rise to a chronic pattern of problematic adjustment—and even to a personality disorder.

This may well have been the case with Hemingway: his famous obsession with physical courage, his well-documented later life narcissism, womanizing, alcohol abuse, and depression and his ultimate suicide may well be best understood as expressions of such a personality disorder. And it can be argued that even in his

later fiction and even where the *content* of any given narrative would seem far removed from the battlefield, the *subject* inevitably is trauma—and reflects his deep fascination with its intrapsychic aftermath and its interpersonal consequences. A look at several of Hemingway's stories set in and following World War I is revealing.

PTSD in Hemingway's World War I Stories

The symptoms of PTSD will be familiar to the readers of this article. In capsule, characteristic symptoms arise following the experience of a life threatening or otherwise intensely emotionally disorganizing event involving extreme fear, horror, or helplessness. The symptoms include but are not limited to an unbidden and persistent reexperiencing of the event; an emotional numbing that extends to an interpersonal withdrawal from and discomfort in ordinary interpersonal exchange; often but not always, a wish to avoid all exposure to related stimuli that can include a denial or outright forgetting of the traumatizing event; sometimes an intense shame; and a host of autonomic disturbances like sleep disturbances, hyperarousal, hypervigilance, exaggerated startle responses, and exaggerated emotional responses.

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In Hemingway's much studied early stories, the symptoms of PTSD figure prominently.¹ In particular, the short stories originally published by Hemingway in collections including *In Our Time* (1925), *Men Without Women* (1927), and *Winner Take Nothing* (1933) address aspects—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—of the antecedents to, the experiencing of and the ordeal of recovery from battle-induced PTSD.

“Nick Adams” is the name most often given by Hemingway to his protagonist and fictional alter ego (although the character appears sometimes unnamed or with other names). He appears variously wandering the battlefield in a hypomanic state; recovering in a farm building behind the front lines in the company of a concerned but uncomprehending orderly; in an outpatient rehabilitation in a hospital in Milan; coming home dissociated and estranged; and, searching for recovery some years after the war.

In “Now I Lay Me,” Nick suffers severe insomnia and hyperarousal following his near death experience on the battlefield.

I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body. I had been that way for a long time, ever since I had been blown up at night and felt it go out of me and go off and then come back. (Hemingway, 1987, p. 276)

To avoid recurrence of those feelings, which come overwhelmingly and unbidden as he falls asleep, Nick has developed a system of willfully remembering past preoccupations in obsessive hyper-focus with the aim of staying awake until dawn.

I had different ways of occupying myself while I lay awake. I would think of a trout stream I had fished along when I was a boy and fish its whole length very carefully in my mind But some nights I could not fish, and on those nights I was cold-awake and said my prayers over and over and tried to pray for all the people I had ever known. That took up a great amount of time . . . (Hemingway, 1987, pp. 276 –277).

Prayers in any case are not much help. The title “Now I Lay Me,” the first phrase of the common prayer for a death-free sleep is, of course, ironic. Nor is there much promise of relief in the ruminative memories of his early family life which are bitter and humiliating. The story ends with Nick’s flat response to his orderly’s idea that marriage would cure him: “He [the orderly] was going back to America and he was very certain about marriage and knew it would fix up everything” (Hemingway, 1987, p. 282).

In “A Way You’ll Never Be,” Nick is a hypomanic, trauma sufferer who experiences peculiar and dissociated flashbacks of the battle in which he was shot. He does what he can to avoid recurrences, and has begun to understand the rhythm and usefulness (and limitations) of his hypomanic episodes — which is to say, that they serve, somewhat paradoxically, the adaptive function of organizing his overwhelmed state of mind.

The story begins with Nick walking his bicycle toward the front lines through a postbattle landscape: “Nicholas Adams saw what had happened by the position of the dead” (Hemingway, 1987, p. 306) and by their “papers,” the signifiers of their human identity, scattered around them. He has come to realize the absurdity of the war, so obvious to him now in the cancelled lives of the dead on both sides: “The hot weather had swollen them all alike regardless of nationality” (Hemingway, 1987, p. 307).

¹ See, for only two examples, the essays in Bloom, 2004 and the introduction in Hemingway, 1972.

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Again Nick is afraid of falling asleep in the dark. Always trying to downplay symptoms and demonstrate his toughness, he tells his old friend the Italian captain: “I’m all right. I can’t sleep without a light of some sort. That’s all I have now” (p. 309). And: “I don’t seem crazy to you, do I? . . . It’s a hell of a nuisance once they’ve had you certified as nuts No one ever has any confidence in you again” (p. 310).

He says of his reliance on alcohol: “I was stinking in every attack” (p. 309). But there was one exception and that particular battle was the traumatizing one: “It started them [the symptoms]; making it cold up that slope the only time he hadn’t done it stinking” (p. 310).

He describes his recurring nightmare:

[O]utside of Fossalta there was a low house painted yellow with willows all around it and a low stable and there was a canal, and he had been there a thousand times and never seen it, but there it was every night as plain as the hill, only it frightened him. That house meant more than anything and every night he had it. That was what he needed but it frightened him . . . (Hemingway, 1987, p. 310).

He goes on:

[W]hat frightened him so that he could not get rid of it was that long yellow house and the different width of the river. Now he was back here at the river, he had gone through that same town, and there was no house. Nor was the river that way. Then where did he go each night and what was the peril, and why would he wake, soaking wet, more frightened than he had ever been in a bombardment, because of a house and a long stable and a canal? (Hemingway, 1987, p. 311)

Now, in the present tense of the story, visiting his Italian former comrades at the front, he can no longer suppress his need to know about the yellow house because it is critical to his ability to stay in control, to know where he has been and where he is.

If it didn’t get so damned mixed up he could follow it all right. That was why he noticed everything in such detail to keep it all straight so he would know just where he was, but suddenly it was confused without reason as now. (Hemingway, 1987, p. 311)

When asked by the Italian soldiers whether more Americans are on their way to the war, Nick responds:

Oh absolutely. Americans twice as large as myself, healthy, with clean hearts, sleep at night, never been wounded, never been blown up, never had their heads caved in, never been scared . . . (Hemingway, 1987, p. 311).

Nick’s manic hyperbole calls out for a responsive laugh, but the laugh gets stuck in one’s throat. The reader understands this as more of Hemingway’s bitter irony. And further, the Italians around Nick don’t understand a word he is saying.

The story moves toward its climax, the reliving of the trauma. “Nick felt it coming on now . . .” (Hemingway, 1987, p. 311) “He felt it coming on again. . .” (p. 313) “He was trying to hold it in” . . . “He could not stop it now.”.. “Here it came.” (pp. 311–314) Captain Paravicini gently gives Nick an order: “Lie down a little while,

Nicolo.” Nick lies down and relives his traumatic memory.

He shut his eyes, and in place of the man with the beard who looked at him over the sights of the rifle, quite calmly before squeezing off, the white flash and club-like impact, on his knees, hot-sweet choking, coughing it onto the rock while they went past him, he saw a long,

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yellow house with a low stable and the river much wider than it was and stiller.
(Hemingway, 1987, p. 314)

After this flashback and the discovery of the link between the yellow house and the shot that hit him, he feels better.

I’m all right now for quite a while. I had one then but it was easy. They’re getting much better. I can tell when I’m going to have one because I talk so much. (Hemingway, 1987, p. 314)

Nick’s need to know where he has been and where he is remains crucial to his sanity. On his way back to Fornaci from the front, he again experiences a sense of confusion. The last lines of the story leave the reader with a sense of his fragility.

The horses’ breath made plumes in the cold air. No, that was somewhere else. Where was that? . . . I’d better get to that damned bicycle,” Nick said to himself. “I don’t want to lose the way to Fornaci.” (Hemingway, 1987, p. 315)

Paravacini’s sympathetic patience for Nick is touching—and in the context of the story, promises the possibility of some healing. There is something reassuring in it for the reader. It’s worth looking at why this might be.

Human Connection

In a recent article that cites Stolorow’s (2007) thinking on the recovery from trauma, Carr (2011) talks about the importance of a healing intersubjective exchange. Other authors, for example, Boulanger (2008, p. 648) point to “the failure of relational ties” as a critical contributor to PTSD and to the importance of the restoration of those in treatment. She quotes Ferenczi (1933/1980, p. 193) who says, “Traumatic aloneness is what really renders the attack traumatic”

It is clear that Hemingway understood the importance of the interpersonal exchange in the recovery from PTSD. The sleepless soldier in “Now I Lay Me” has a relationship with his orderly; Nick, in “A Way You’ll Never Be,” has a relationship with his friend the Italian captain. The wounded soldier in “In Another Country,” despite being plagued by his own “detached” state, has a relationship with an older Italian major. These all hold some promise of

connection, understanding and recovery.

In “Soldier’s Home,” Hemingway’s alter ego, now named “Krebs” (but essentially the same Nick Adams character), returns home from the war to find that he is unable to relate to his family and neighbors. He feels he has to “lie,” that is, to tell them all only what they want to hear about his battle experiences. When he can’t lie, he has nothing to say. He is saved to the extent he is saved at all by his feeling for his little sister and by her feelings for him.²

Still, for all the small (and relieving) instances of healing human contact, we are given to understand that Nick remains sealed off in his aloneness. In “Big Two-Hearted River” we find Nick by himself camping and fishing on the river, trying to stay focused on the

² Throughout Hemingway’s fiction the innocent love of a little sister is a recurring theme— bringing reassurance and a kind of moral redemption. This is central in his late story, “The Last Good Country” (p. 504), Hemingway’s own version of the Huckleberry Finn narrative, where adolescent Nick runs away from home and into an idyllic wilderness adventure with his little sister. That story remained unfinished.

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here and now, trying (the reader knows) to put the nightmares of his war-traumatized past behind him. “He did not feel like going into the swamp,” we are told. He decides to fish the clear river, not the “tragic” swamp. “There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (p. 180).

The Intersubjective Exchange: Hemingway’s Method

What is evoked in the spare, affectless, even dissociative *compression* of experience that characterizes Hemingway’s writing results in the *expansion* of experience in the mind of the reader. How does Hemingway manage to convey that expansive pressure? What core capacities is he tapping into on both sides of the exchange? How can such a “hard” look at experience as Hemingway’s evoke such an extensive and nuanced elaboration of human feeling and inner struggle?

It is important to acknowledge the extensive critical study that has gone and continues to go into an examination of Hemingway’s work: his writing style; his life, both before and after his war experiences (see for only two recent examples, *Hemingway’s Boat*, Hendrickson, 2011 and *The Letters of Ernest Hemingway, Vol. 1*, Spanier & Trogdon, 2011); his place in the 20th-century canon. Mindful of that (and of Hemingway’s own warning on the futility of critical analysis), the authors of this paper enter into what follows with some humility.³

Here are some things Hemingway manages to do in allowing us to see and experience what he has seen and known:

First, his stories seem always to start after the beginning—a thing not so unusual in modernist writing, but with Hemingway more so. As each story opens the reader hardly knows why he's being told what he's being told, hardly knows where the story is going until it gets there. It's as if the universe itself is without order or involves an order that the protagonist (and the writer and the reader) can't quite grasp. Why, for example, the reader wonders, is young Nick Adams walking alone with a bicycle through a Bosch-like landscape of recently killed soldiers at the start of "A Way You'll Never Be"?

The stories end in the same way: stopping rather than concluding, deepening the sense of living in an arbitrary and unfathomable and ultimately absurd world. The (little) story being told represents only one thread in a huge and unknowable texture of meanings. It might be said that there's a sense of time in which time hardly passes—as if the events unfold in an extended present or in a present in which the past (to paraphrase Faulkner) isn't even past. "In Another Country" begins, "In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more" (p. 206).

In Hemingway's stories, the things of the world give up their meanings with small deceptively simple clues. A strange word, a familiar word used oddly, a suddenly vivid descriptor stands out in what is otherwise statemental description. In "In Another Country" Nick says of a fellow soldier: "He had lived a long time with death and was a little *detached*. We were all a little detached, and there was nothing that held us together except that we met every afternoon at the hospital" (p. 207, italics added). *Detached*: a minimal

³ Hemingway himself said by way of warning against too easy analysis: *In truly good writing no matter how many times you read it you do not know how it is done. That is because there is a mystery in all great writing and that mystery does not dissect out Each time you re-read you see or learn something new* (quoted in Phillips, 1984).

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signifier of a tragic frame of mind, a signifier that the reader understands to mean dissociated, alienated, half-dead.

In Hemingway's minimalist prose, the world is stripped of its redundant and reassuring and stabilizing hand-holds. This is done in large part by ignoring the possible metonyms. There are no specifically "ominous" clouds—just clouds, or sun, or sky. The day is hot or cold, not "oppressively hot" not "numbingly cold." The writer leaves it to the reader to grasp the larger emotional context without

extra help. (The “tragic” swamp in Big Two-Hearted River is a notable exception.)

Overall, there is an emotional flatness. In terrible events (boots filling with blood as if with warm water) there is a startling distancing from feeling—the exaggerated flatness a way of communicating a struggle to control overwhelming affective hyper-arousal. Ultimately the flatness deepens the sense of being overwhelmed. And there is a dissociated loneliness—the story is experienced as taking place inside the protagonist’s mind. Hemingway uses an intimate narrative style (often the close third person voice), to put the narrator—and to put the reader—simultaneously within and outside (that is, observing) the protagonist’s experience. What is communicated, and felt by the reader, is a kind of dissociative experiencing—which, of course, is a hallmark of posttraumatic experiencing.

Furthermore, there is a large sense of disconnect between the way things are and the way we would want them to be, a disconnect between the facts—for example, dead soldiers lying on the ground with their papers scattered about them—and the urgent human requirement of seeing those same dead soldiers as individuals, identified by their papers and important to other people. Related to this: the reader finds a skepticism that barely covers—and thus signals—a profound disappointment: a disappointment that a war entered into as an expression of idealism, valor and aspiration to manhood turns out to have nothing in it to celebrate; a disappointment at the evaporation of a moral order in the civilized world. Meaninglessness is given a clear and statemental report.

And still, there are hints about the possibility of a healing human exchange and these would seem to redeem and rescue Hemingway’s stories from what would otherwise be an unrelieved pessimism.

To summarize: Hemingway’s is a storytelling that foreshadows our historically later catalogue of posttraumatic experiencing. Time is altered and meaning damaged. The tone is dissociative; the protagonist’s experience is lonely. The minimalism signals an emotional flatness in the communication of deeply distressing things. But the spare language, minimal as it may be, communicates a full range of manifold (if disordered) experiencing. Running through Hemingway’s writing is a *stance*, a point of view that communicates a profound irony: what had promised to be so meaningful is meaningless. In all of this, there is the cumulative effect on the reader of Hemingway’s signature style—to which we will return below. And there is a hint of redeeming connectedness—even healing—in the characters interest in and concern for each other. This is worth looking at closely.

Intersubjectivity, Witness, and Healing

The healing of individuals damaged by war has become the work of

psychotherapists. For coming to terms with the shared wounds of the larger world, we look to our artists and writers (along with our philosophers and our priests). An examination of the clinical sheds some light on how the larger project might work—and in particular how it might work in Hemingway's writing.

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In his recent article, Carr (2011) gives us an up-to-date clinical psychoanalytic model for the intersubjective healing process as applied to the treatment of PTSD (where intersubjectivity is defined as experience held in common between two, or among more than two people, a perhaps unstated and often unconsciously evoked consensus as to the terms of any experience and thus a sharing of that experience). In the case history Carr presents, his soldier-patient has committed an atrocity in the war in Iraq. Carr finds a way of providing a healing therapeutic presence—what Seiden (1996, 1997) among others (see, e.g., Boulanger, 2007, 2008; Felman & Laub, 1992) have called a *witnessing* presence. He can be thought of, as Boulanger's puts it, as a witness who "serves as container for the terrifying and alienating experiences" of the patient (2008, p. 652).

Carr says that his capacity to provide such witnessing came out of his own personal war experiences. But empathic witnessing must be based on something more than coincidental similarity of experience—on more than what Boulanger refers to as merely the "recognition" of similar experience. The recovering soldiers in "In Another Country," for example, despite their similarity of experience, are not capable of providing much comfort, much less healing, for each other. The soldier narrator says: "There was nothing that held us together except that we met every afternoon at the hospital" (p. 207).

Boulanger (2007, 2008) also reminds us of an important distinction: most of our usual psychoanalytic psychotherapy (that is, in nonposttraumatic situations) requires the empathic recognition of the patient's experience and, beyond that, requires that individual developmental antecedents be taken into account. But for severe adult onset trauma there are no conceivable relevant antecedents. What could these be for battlefield experiences, for concentration camps, for torture? And there are no terms for adequate recognition, in either personal memory or in language in which even the victim can make sense of the experience. The therapist/witness must both be willing to experience the horror and also to provide the terms—to testify to the reality of the events witnessed. Without such testimony, as Felman and Laub (1992) observe, there is literally be no experience to be grasped—or worked with.

To be a witness in the larger sense would be to provide something quite different from what the wounded soldiers give each other. This would be a willingness to share the suffering—a willingness to serve as a container of destabilizing and

horrifying thoughts and affects. Such a sharing would have to be based on a larger human presence, one that would include a belief in the possibility of recovery and include a continuing sense of value even in the face of overwhelmingly value-destroying experience.

An honest and gifted writer who, like Hemingway, was there in a senseless and brutal war, and who despite his own traumatization could maintain his psychological integrity, could both share and provide the terms for identifying and managing otherwise unmanageable experience. He could do this for his audience, for the world at large, even if he can do it finally with only limited success for himself. That is, a writer can make it possible for his readers to be witnesses too.

Hemingway evokes a depth of experiencing in the reader with his words but that goes beyond words: His writing is more than a reporting of events. For any writer style might be thought of as a kind of intersubjective music—a music the reader is invited into and enters into along with the writer.⁴ In Hemingway's stories, his words together with his music provide for the intersubjective experiencing—and thus for the witnessing—of the

⁴The authors are grateful to David Lichtenstein for a discussion that led to a clarification of the connection between style and intersubjective communication.

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horror and absurdity of the war and its aftermath that had already entered the collective consciousness of his age. It is said that modernism began in the trenches of World War I. Hemingway was one writer among many to bear witness to that war. He would make witnesses of all who read him then and all who read him now—creating in effect, an intersubjective community of witnesses.

Coda: Hemingway, Writing, and PTSD

For Hemingway himself, the story of the war would have been a hard one to tell. Although denying it in his letters home, he suffers (and will for a lifetime) from his traumatization. His mannered, hard-bitten style is a deliberate (and admirable) consequence of not wanting to say a word that is not true and personally felt—and felt in the manner of a PTSD sufferer, that is, dissociated, existing in a world robbed of meaning and order, experienced in a way that is at once overcontrolled and emotionally overreactive, desperately vulnerable beneath the tough guy surface.

No doubt there were personal antecedents, childhood experiences hinted at in the early Nick Adams stories involving a need, for the author as a boy and before the

war, to stand up to assaults on his own emerging manhood. These it is likely brought Hemingway into the war on the Italian front to begin with. But somehow—and this is the elusive thing about genius—he managed to bring something else with him, something which allowed him a personal transcendence. Perhaps it was his capacity for writerly observation: for an observing that could be alert to the nuances of feeling (in himself and in others) even though what is observed is the absence of feeling; for a sensibility that is life-honoring even as (and despite the fact that) its subject is living deadness. Perhaps it is not too much to say that Hemingway’s writing was his adaptation and that it saved him—until ultimately it didn’t.

It is clear that the intention to be a writer and a witness to hard things was well in place from early on in his life. It was a significant reason for enlisting in the war—and then for turning from journalism to fiction, the better to capture the experiential truth no matter how horrible. The intention is there in the quasi-autobiographical musings that are spread though his fiction. In “On Writing, part III” (which is part III of “Big Two-Hearted River” and included in the Hemingway, 1972, edition of the Nick Adams stories) for example, Nick turns from meditating on his love of fishing to a still greater and more redeeming love:

He wanted to be a great writer. He was pretty sure he would be. He knew it in lots of ways. He would in spite of everything. It was hard, though. It was hard to be a great writer He wanted to write like Cezanne painted . . . [without] tricks He felt almost holy about it. (Hemingway, 1972, pp. 239–240)

Of his “almost holy” witnessing and his spare technique for creating maximum impact, Hemingway wrote famously in *Death in the Afternoon*:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. (Hemingway, 1932, p. 192)

The community of thus engaged readers participates in Hemingway’s truth—feels his deliberate and ironic taunt: This traumatized state, Hemingway says, is “a way you’ll

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never be.” Meaning, of course, that it’s a way you could easily be. The traumatized mind could be our mind, too.

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