

Three Ways of Being Modern: the Lost Generation Trilogy by James R. Mellow · *Benjamin Anastas*

IN HIS ESSAY “Modernity on Endless Trial,” Leszek Kolakowski writes, “Having no clear idea what *modernity* is, we have recently tried to escape forward from the issue by talking about *postmodernity*. . . . When we leave aside these labels, the real question remains: Why is the malaise associated with the experience of modernity so widely felt, and where are the sources of those aspects of modernity that make this malaise particularly painful?” Though Kolakowski is referring to our culture at large, he could just as easily be narrowing his focus to our literature. Our time is, as of yet, insufficiently defined. If we are to know where we are now—which seems to be at least one of contemporary literature’s obsessions—we must look closer at where we came from. James Mellow’s three biographies of this country’s first and most famous modern writers—*Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein & Company*; *Invented Lives: F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald*; *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Without Consequences*—is the best record we have of our literary primogenitors and the processes by which they changed a Victorian literary landscape to better reflect their differently troubled, modern world.

Charmed Circle, the first of the biographies, is a meticulously researched recreation of the artistic community on the West Bank of Paris. Aided first by her brother Leo, and then by companion Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude Stein turned her salon at 27, rue de Fleurus into “the first museum of modern art.” It was here that other artists and important collectors encountered Cezanne’s subtle division of an object into spatial planes; the wild color and fluid lines of the Fauves; the primitive, pictorial violence of Picasso’s early cubist experiments. Mellow’s critical knowledge of the paintings is crucial to our understanding of the written texts Stein produced under their influence, such as *Three Lives*, which was written literally *underneath* a Cezanne portrait:

. . . each exacting, carefully negotiated plane—from the suave reds of the arm chair and the gray blues of the sitter’s jacket to the vaguely figured wallpaper of the background—[had] been struc-

tured into existence, seeming to fix the subject for all eternity. So it was with Gertrude's repetitive sentences, each one building up, phrase by phrase, the substance of her characters.

Painting influenced not only the way that Stein wrote, but the way that she lived, and Mellow uses paintings—much as Stein did herself—as the map for her passage into modernity. It was through her experimentation that Stein found the modern sentence, and it was in her salon, where she read her work in the glow of her paintings, that a generation of American writers came of age.

Stein's early life is given ample treatment, and her relationship with the "rabbinical" Leo, an important influence, is Mellow's focus. While early on they were referred to as "The happiest couple in the West Bank," their eventual split, aided by aesthetic differences and the arrival of Toklas in Gertrude's life, seemed to be an inevitable and important step in Gertrude's education. Given their long inseparability, Mellow finds a "dependency . . . marked by a certain kind of desperation" at the heart of their relationship. The split is completed with "The Good Anna," one of Stein's *Three Lives's* narratives, which is "remarkable for its erasure of Leo" from its autobiographical beginnings. The discovery of Stein's deletion is an example of the book's careful biographical method. Life is a text to Mellow: it informs the art in ways both easily discernable and obscure, and while an artist's life has its own shape and purpose its real value, to the biographer, lies in its relationship to the *next* text, an artist's work. We are given firsthand access to the material circumstances of the creative act, where gossip and opinion play diminished roles.

Mellow's understanding of Stein's sometimes obscure written work is impressive. Her first fiction, the autobiographical *Q.E.D.*, he intuitively to be a largely "therapeutic exercise," written in the aftermath of a botched affair—her first—with May Bookstaver. A "forthright discussion—without, however, labelling it as such—of the lesbian relationship into which her heroine is initiated," *Q.E.D.* is a "secret" document. Mellow reads a "certain poignancy" in the fictional affair, and states "the modern note of the lack of privacy in a large and impersonal city is struck clearly." The novella's autobiographical nature and Stein's own perfectionism account for her "embarrassment" about her earliest work, though it would not be the last time she wrote closely about her private life. Later she stated,

“Except in daily life nobody is anybody.” Mellow quotes editor Edmund Wilson on her experimental word portraits: “The vagueness that had begun to blur [her writing] . . . and the masking by unexplained metaphors that made it seem opaque, though partly the result of an effort to emulate modern painting, were partly also due to a need imposed by the problem of writing about relationships between women of a kind that the standards of the era would not have allowed. . . .” Stein’s appropriation of the new rules of the modern canvas can be seen as an attempt to change the rules of the blank page, to make public space for a different kind of private utterance.

From her first purchase, the early *Jeune Fille*, Stein and Picasso had an “immediate understanding” of each other, though it was Stein’s understanding of Picasso’s work that was remarkable. She knew that there may be a reason for making something “ugly,” because “those who follow can make . . . a beautiful thing because they know what they are doing, the thing having already been invented, but the inventor because he does not know what he is going to invent inevitably the thing must have its ugliness.” Gertrude’s claim that she was “alone in understanding” Picasso’s *Les Desmoiselles d’Avignon* may have been true: Leo found the painting a “horrible mess.” For two self-proclaimed geniuses an intellectual attraction seemed inevitable. Mellow traces Picasso’s influence from Stein’s word portraits to *The Making of Americans* to the “radical disassociation” of her 1913 prose poems. This is the groundwork that would “ready” the artists, when the time came, “for their cultural revolution to take the place of global war.”

It was in the expansive atmosphere of postwar Paris that Gertrude—famous since the Armory Show of 1913, which included three paintings from her collection—met a new student of interest, Ernest Hemingway, one of the many who called at 27, rue de Fleurus with a letter of introduction. Gertrude later stated that she found it flattering “to have a pupil who does it without understanding it, in other words he takes training and anybody who takes training is a favorite pupil.” Mellow’s reading of *Fernhurst*, written long before the two authors met, prefigures some of Hemingway’s interest in the older woman’s experimental work: “The dialogue sounds often as if it had been lifted from the novels of Gene Stratton Porter, for whose manly, clean-spoken heroes Gertrude once professed an admiration.” Stein’s and Hemingway’s complicated relationship is, in a sense, untangled in *Charmed Circle*, for rarely has the meeting of

two artists been so fabled. While their influence on each other was legend it was largely a legend of their own making. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, written after Hemingway had far outdistanced his teacher, was Stein's chance to evaluate her student as someone who "looks like a modern and smells of the museums." Hemingway would save his own version of the time for the posthumously published *A Moveable Feast*, which Mellow shows to be remarkable for its author's revision of life to suit his bitterness. Mellow picks through the sources to find corroborations, similarities, and subtle nuances in their respective versions, and this attention brings the time—and their relationship—vividly to life.

With the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude Stein became a "popular" author, and Mellow explores the last famous years with the same sensitivity he brings to the early, important years of aesthetic revolution. *The Autobiography* "achieved one of the ambitions that had dogged her throughout the twenties: a perfect collaboration. And she achieved it by collaborating with herself." Mellow makes it clear that even during her homecoming lecture tour, when she was finally an acknowledged genius (with the submissive Alice devotedly working as her booking agent), the influence of the painters did not leave her. She described the American landscape from an airplane window: "The wandering line of Masson was there the mixed line of Picasso coming and coming again and following itself into a beginning was there, the simple solution of a Braque was there and I suppose Leger might be there but I did not see it." Stein brought the same painterly understanding to American language and culture. She began to see America as unique:

History repeats itself anything repeats itself but all this had never happened before . . . Think about American writing, from Emerson, Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Henry James, myself, Sherwood Anderson, Thornton Wilder and Dashiell Hammett and you will see what I mean, as well as in advertising and in road signs, you will see what I mean, words left alone more and more feel that they are moving and all of it is detached and is detaching and in this moving it is being in its way creating its existing.

Her theory of American language could easily have been written by an

academic star of today, and the fact that her realizations came during the heyday of New Criticism is testimony to the seriousness of her experimentation. Mellow describes an attachment to America so troubled and strong that it can only be described as filial, characterized by both insight and blindness. For Stein, America was “the most important country in the world—but a parents home is never the place to work in.”

In defining Picasso, Stein intentionally described her own vision: “Picasso sees something else, another reality. Complications are always easy but another vision than that of all the world is very rare . . . to complicate things in a new way that is very difficult.” James Mellow has done both Stein and our literature a service by recording both this “difficult” vision of the world and the circumstances of its genesis. This was not art formed in a vacuum of thought—materialized out of nothing—it was an art connected to social change, created by people who sought to reorder their respective mediums to both reflect and encourage a changing world. *Charmed Circle* recreates the classroom, the texts, the students, and the world at large, giving us special access to the first teacher of our elderly twentieth century.

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Independent of Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, with his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, became America’s foremost chronicler of the Jazz Age, the cultural explosion closely connected with the economic success of World War I and the end of the Victorian Age. The Jazz Age can be seen as the pop-cultural equivalent of the modern aesthetic revolution, and though Fitzgerald didn’t write sentences in the same way as Stein, his art is inextricably bound to his time, and he has as much claim to the “modern” label as those who look more experimental on the page. *Invented Lives: F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald*, from the very beginning, explores the many fictions surrounding the famous pair: the gossip columns, journal entries, short stories, and novels that record their troubled history together as the Jazz Age’s first couple. In his foreword Mellow states, “Fiction became a method of discourse about their marriage, allowing them to air their grievances and dissatisfactions, fix the blame, indulge in bouts of self-gratification—even, it seemed, to play roles they had not managed to play in the reality of their marriage.” Going further than just a study of their fiction, “*Invented Lives* is about the personal cost of American success and American failure.” The

Fitzgeralds were boom-to-bust personalities in an economy that looked a good deal like our own.

The biography follows the course of their lives together closely, characterizing the Fitzgeralds by incident, very much like fiction. Early on we see Zelda as a rebellious young woman wanting both independence and a traditional security: "On a dull summer afternoon in Montgomery, she had been known to call the fire department, then climb to the roof of her house and push the ladder away so that she could be rescued." We see a young Scott faithfully recording his life in a "thoughtbook," writing impressions of girls and dances and athletic boys he admired, like Paul Ballion, "strong as an ox, cool in the face of danger, polite at times and very interesting. Now I don't dislike him. I have simply outgrown him." People were to be admired, learned from, and thrown away. Later, the mature author wrote that being middle class "depresses me inordinately—I mean it gives me a sort of hollow, cheerless pain," and this feeling informed his attraction to the Catholic church, to his classmates at Princeton; first to debutante Ginevra King and then to the "fast" Zelda Sayre. But Mellow's attention never strays from the work for long, for he finds in Fitzgerald's life a "curiosity" about women that "accounts for the vitality of his heroines as contrasted with the more pallid, circumspect and conventionally minded heroes. Women are the focal points, the suns around which the plots and the male characters revolve." Zelda, it seems, fulfilled a need of Fitzgerald's to get the "top girl," and he spent the rest of his life writing about her as if to forget where he had come from. He called fiction a "back door way out of reality." Zelda—and their marriage—had to carry the weight of his secret middle-class history.

Mellow traces Fitzgerald's lifelong fascination with the church, which, through Father Cyril Sigourney Fay, became a "dazzling, golden thing, dispell[ed] [of] its oppressive mugginess." Fay shunned asceticism, choosing to "praise God . . . by enjoying and thanking Him for the good things He sends our way." Fitzgerald echoed his mentor while at Princeton: "Why, I can go to New York on a terrible party and then come back and go into the church and *pray*—and mean every word of it, too." One of the lines the author reportedly cut from the first version of *This Side of Paradise* was "the dark celibacy of greatness," though it is the short story "Absolution," an episode from an early draft of *The Great Gatsby*, that Mellow reads as the clearest example of "Fitzgerald's ambivalence toward sex, his

odd notions about celibacy and greatness and the problems of identity.” Mellow’s exegesis of this nearly perfect short story is breathtaking: “Everything about the story—the boy’s guilt in the midst of terrible, small sins, the priest’s fall from sanity, even the sweltering afternoons, the torpor of summer in the wheatfields—seems to converge in the final paragraph, which is raised above the story like some monstrosity, a pure invention, a symbol of life’s irreverence and fecundity.” The priest’s mad poetic bursts about the “glimmering” of crowds and the “heat and the sweat and the life” can be seen as the meeting place of the secular and the religious in Fitzgerald’s work. The drugstores (an institution Gertrude Stein thought “filthy”), and the young Swedes in gingham endure, because, as the short story ends, “It would be night in three hours and all along the land there would be these blonde Northern girls and the tall young men from the farms lying out beside the wheat, under the moon.”

For Fitzgerald there was no one 27, rue de Fleurus, there were many: the cotillions, the parties in hotel suites where Ginevra King “made luminous the Ritz roof,” a country club dance near Camp Sheridan in Alabama where the young Lieutenant (“the worst,” he admitted, “in the American army”) first met Zelda Sayre. From the beginning Fitzgerald was a keen social observer, and he knew the composition of a dance as well as Stein knew Picasso’s canvasses. A more substantive education took place in New York, after he had won and married the young flapper. In the first rush of success Zelda recalled “the strange excitement of New York, of reporters and furry smothered hotel lobbies, the brightness of the sun in window panes and the prickly dust in late spring.” Through Scott’s classmate Edmund Wilson, the Fitzgeralds socialized with the literary and theatrical crowd, and Mellow spends the same effort describing this world as he spends on the West Bank of Paris in *Charmed Circle*. There were the young critics associated with *The New Republic* (Wilson, Van Wyck Brooks, Malcolm Cowley, Allen Tate); the “Round Table” group of Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, and George S. Kaufman; the actresses Helen Hayes, Ina Claire, and Tallulah Bankhead. The Fitzgeralds, throughout their life together, elicited a peculiar sympathy from star-struck friends: Gilbert Seldes of *The Dial* wrote, after meeting them, “I thought to myself, ‘If there is anything I can do to keep them as beautiful as they are, I will do it.’” The recklessness of the period was best described by Fitzgerald in the aftermath: “Even now, even now I go into many flats with the sense that I have been there before or in

the one above or below . . . We had run through a lot, though we had retained an almost theatrical innocence by preferring the role of the observed to that of the observer. But innocence is no end in itself. . . .” Mellow, on *The Beautiful and Damned*, is eloquent on the author’s method of artistic transformation:

As with his finances, so with his literary capital; Fitzgerald lived hard on his resources, spending them profligately, letting them slip through his fingers on occasion. But he was also one of the more autobiographical novelists of his generation, and from each vaguely defined phase of his life and career he managed to draw a single novel, each one summarizing the lessons of his experience . . . *The Beautiful and Damned*, in hasty fashion, was Fitzgerald’s book about marriage, a narrative about the crossfire, the minor and major skirmishes of two egos, the truces and capitulations of love and living together. Oddly, he had begun sketching it out a bare three and a half months into his own honeymoon.

Fitzgerald seemed unaware of how costly his art would become.

It is a somewhat humbled author that Mellow sees in Paris, and the biographer again performs a feat in deciphering the source materials on Fitzgerald’s relationship with Hemingway, who was still obscure, but “always willing to give a helping hand to a man on a ledge higher up.” Much like the degrading Stein episode in *A Moveable Feast*, the memoir’s Fitzgerald episode is proven to be largely false, its author “sav[ing] a special sort of bitterness for his dead and forgotten friend.” Though Zelda found Hemingway “phony as a rubber check” the two authors shared an intense bond, which resulted in Hemingway’s publication by Scribner’s. It seemed to have been another case of Fitzgerald’s hero-worship and prompted the older author to say, as he left for his first trip to Hollywood, “I can’t tell you how much your friendship has meant to me during this year and a half—it is the brightest thing in our trip to Europe for me.” The Fitzgeralds had arrived on the continent literary stars—as wealthy friend Gerald Murphy put it, “. . . you two belong so irrevocably to that rare race of people who are valuable.” Stein had noted to Fitzgerald, “You make a modern world and a modern orgy strangely enough it was never done before you did it in *This Side of Paradise*.” They left under the cloud of marital discord, the

author still smarting from the poor reception of *The Great Gatsby*, summed up by his editor's, Maxwell Perkins, telegram: SALES SITUATION DOUBTFUL EXCELLENT REVIEWS.

With the slow decline of Fitzgerald's reputation came Zelda's descent into insanity, and it is fitting that Hollywood was the scene of their first real problems. Scott saw "a tragic city of beautiful girls . . . You never want to see any more beauty" while Zelda felt the frustration of an ambitious and intelligent woman without a creative outlet. Things would soon explode, and it was Fitzgerald who best explained it in a letter to his hospitalized wife: "You were going crazy and calling it genius—I was going to ruin and calling it anything at hand." In this section of the biography Mellow paraphrases the couples' feverish letters into a personal dialogue. At one point the narrative switches to Zelda's point of view, with riveting results: "She was aware of strange experiences; there were times when everything hovered at the edge of some new significance. The façades of buildings, streets, metro stations, stood out so clearly colors seemed infinite, part of the air . . ." While Scott wrote, "I left my capacity for hoping on the little roads that lead to Zelda's sanitarium," Mellow finds a new personal desperation in *Tender Is the Night*: "The problem . . . is that Fitzgerald tried to solve in literary terms the problems he could not resolve in private life." Gerald Murphy would give the time a perfect postscript, "I know now that what you said in 'Tender Is the Night' is true. Only the invented part of our life—the unreal part—has any scheme, any beauty. Life itself has stepped in now and blundered, scarred and destroyed." In the end, Mellow's portrait of the Fitzgeralds is unusually responsible, sparing their image nothing with the knowledge that it is only through faithfulness that their brilliance will show through the darkness of their self-indulgence in a kind of biographical chiaroscuro. It is testimony to Mellow's skills as a journalist and literary critic that our compassion for the Fitzgeralds remains. Scott Fitzgerald traded his present for his future; substance for celluloid, without ever being aware of the price of his version of modernity.

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If Gertrude Stein wrote the first self-consciously modern sentence, then Ernest Hemingway was largely responsible for its proliferation. Stein herself mused in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "What . . . a book

would be the real story of Hemingway, not those he writes but the confessions of the real Ernest Hemingway. It would be for another audience than the audience Hemingway now has but it would be very wonderful.” Mellow’s *Hemingway: A Life Without Consequences* is just this book. There have always been two Hemingways to consider. The first was a doctor’s son from Oak Park, Illinois, from an early age prone to bragging, a sportsman who served in the ambulance corps in World War I and was wounded by mortar fire. This Hemingway sought to recreate the danger of war in his everyday life, worked and drank hard, married often and embodied a self-created myth of manhood. The second Hemingway was more the son of his independent-minded mother—a musician named Grace—a young man who possessed an unusually sensitive intelligence and lived in Paris with aesthetic revolutionaries and social misfits such as Stein, Ezra Pound, and Robert McAlmon. This Hemingway learned, through careful observation and practice, the artistic techniques that would help liberate the sentence from Victorian convention. Mellow gives these two Hemingways equal time, for though his personalities seem to be at odds, they were bound in his consciousness, and are simultaneously visible in all of his surviving work. No American artist has mattered so much to our culture—one wonders if an artist will ever matter as much again—and Mellow’s understanding of Hemingway’s life and work is singular in its scope and execution.

This literary biography considers everything—early poems, numerous short stories, the legendary novels, and a wealth of unpublished material (most of it discussed for the first time)—with a careful attention to biographical roots. In one of the author’s asides, a charm of the book’s construction, Mellow states:

But no story or poem completely leaves its author behind, abandons him in the orchard. Every name, prejudice, every innocent detail of a fiction bears the genetic imprint of the writer. If the writer borrows experiences, situations, uses the gossip of other people’s lives, creates characters of his own, what he does with them is his own choice, reflects his character and imagination.

It is from this position that Mellow reads, and rarely is the transmutation of

fact into fiction so accessible, and informative, as it is in Hemingway's semi-autobiographical work. Mellow recognizes "an element of coarse sexuality in Hemingway's character, early and late, that occasionally edged over into the vulgar, encouraged a fascination with the darker side of passion." The textual references are multiple, and none more important than the sexually explicit short story "Up In Michigan," where:

[Hemingway] had discovered the underground current of sexuality that exists in every life and underlies much of what passes as wit or whim; that gives rise to dreams and finds channels into art and music and literature; that affects relationships and enmities in the personal life; and that may be tapped or dammed up with damaging results or run into strange tributaries that linger for years like dry creek beds waiting to rise at unexpected flood times . . .

This is an eloquent literary biographical method, neither gossip-laden nor dryly academic.

Mellow states that "In his youth, Hemingway elicited from his male friends a kind of devotion that was almost sensual with its unabashed warmth and sincerity." This devotion was reciprocated. After a fight with Bill Smith, Hemingway wrote, "It's hell when a male knifes you—especially when you still love him." Certainly Hemingway's relationship with Fitzgerald is an example, the two often exchanging banter as in Fitzgerald's 1929 letter: "Here's a last flicker of old cheap pride: the *Post* now pays the old whore \$4000 a screw. But now its because she's mastered the 40 positions—in her youth one was enough." The comment becomes intriguing when one discovers Fitzgerald considered himself "half feminine." While it is irresponsible—and irrelevant in this case, considering the biographical evidence—to draw too many conclusions about an author's behavior in life, the work is open for interpretation, and Mellow is an astute reader: "What lies beneath the surface details, nearly unspoken, in *Death in the Afternoon* is the worrisome undercurrent of Hemingway's relationships with men in his life and work, and the nagging threat of homosexuality." There is also the question of the female characters: "In Hemingway's fiction, women often seem cast for a role, tailored for some typical male presumption, adoring and flattering, their conversations apt to be cloying,

submissive, simpering. His women, fairly often, beg the question of reality in order to convey some masculine idea of the feminine. A Lady Brett may escape the stereotype, but not the Maria of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*." As Zelda Fitzgerald once said of the author, "No one can be as male as all that." While its meaning is merely metaphorical, Mellow relates the story of the Hemingway impostor (again, two Hemingways) who gave readings and seduced young men in the midwest early in the writer's career. Hemingway stated, "When you have a phony around who lectures on his life and works and the life is yours and not his and the works are your own, and you try never to talk about them, it makes things complicated." For an author especially reliant on a manly public image, a homosexual impostor must have made things more than "complicated."

But there is no touching Hemingway's early version of the American tongue, and Mellow traces his progress as a student, starting with the vignette "Paris, 1922," which "might have gained something from Stein's use of repetition; the concise imagery might have been prompted by Pound's imagist practice, but the rapid-fire one-sentence accounts represented the true beginnings of the Hemingway style." The opening of "In Another Country" is another example:

In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more. It was cold in the fall in Milan and the dark came very early. Then the electric lights came on, and it was pleasant along the streets looking in the windows. There was much game hanging outside the shops, and the snow powdered in the fur of the foxes and the wind blew their tails. The deer hung stiff and heavy and empty, and small birds flew in the wind and the wind turned their feathers. It was a cold fall and the wind came down from the mountains.

Hemingway uses Stein's technique in a more openly descriptive way. The electric lights, the game hanging by the shops, the small birds are frozen in an existence that seemingly comes from the cadence of experience. Everything—the war, the street, the light—is as inevitable as cold weather. Hemingway described his technique in *Death In the Afternoon*: "I was trying to write then and I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel and were taught

to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced." What Hemingway was after—and more often than not, achieved—was an unusual authenticity.

There are other clues in Mellow's critical reading, for "Hemingway's [work] is, in fact, a remarkable case history of the transaction between real life and fiction and the personal rationalizations deployed in both. He is an author negotiating a different, perhaps more significant, truth than the one life presented." For example, Mellow finds "nothing in Hemingway's known childhood experiences [that] seems traumatic enough to justify his later prolonged vendetta against his mother." She was doctrinaire—worried about his "lazy loafing, and pleasure seeking"—but what seemed to bother him most was her resentment of "acting the part of the family drudge, standing at the sink cook stove." The famous story of Hemingway's mother sending him the revolver his father had used to kill himself as a sort of challenge is proved—for the first time—to be another Hemingway myth. Mellow finds that "In that same package she had also sent cookies . . . a cake for [his second wife] Pauline, and a book for [his son] Bumby, as well as the Smith and Wesson revolver, which Hemingway had wanted." As Mellow puts it, "Life experiences in the hands of a master of fiction are extraordinarily malleable. Under the compulsion of some hidden obsession, some necessary perversion of the truth, they become screen memories, or the stuff of dreams . . ." It seems Hemingway and Fitzgerald shared the same wish: to escape from a modern reality they saw as too dangerous on its own terms. While Fitzgerald had meant to use the "back door" of romance as an ordering device, this strategy came to involve ruthless self-examination, a scripting of his life that made the dream-world of escape impossible. On a certain Catholic level, he must have seen himself as damned. For Hemingway, the experience of modernity demanded a personal code of ethics related to the rules of war, a projection of the individual male with a foolish dream, articulated at the end of "Soldier's Home": "He did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again." Hemingway was an unusually ambitious artist who "had—unwittingly, perhaps—put more of himself on paper than he had intended, and his enemies had seized on his weaknesses: the too insistent masculinity; the too easy, shallow, romantic views of women; the corrupting need to create a self-image that would, inevitably, fail." For

many, the proper Hemingway biography is a surface examination of the famous exploits, a “life without consequences.” The point of Mellow’s biography is that Hemingway’s impossible goal was both the substance and the death of his art.

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Together, Mellow’s biographies serve to illustrate three artistic solutions to the ongoing problem of modernity. Stein, in her engagement with Picasso’s canvasses, sought to apply painterly rules to the page in order to describe an experience—her own—that defied Victorian representation. Fitzgerald’s ambivalent religiosity informed what was essentially a social realist vision of a specifically decadent time and place: America’s Jazz Age. His romance was with a system that could produce the unreality of his own fame. Hemingway’s appropriation of Stein’s techniques to serve the doctrine of clarity as opposed to obscurity is, in effect, modern literature’s great magic trick, for what disappears from a recognizably rendered world is the strange autonomy of objects that Stein herself discovered when she detached language from its referents. Stein was the influence Hemingway could never quite reconcile, for it was at odds with his declarative blindness. Hemingway, while freeing literature from the tyranny of Victorianism, wrote a conventionalized American tongue that has come to represent the end of American literature. Everything else, it seems, is a new degree of imitation, or worse, mindless rejection. Perhaps his art’s insufficiency is the proper focus at the end of the century, and in describing the literature of the lost generation James Mellow has done a service for the next.