



PAPA AND "ST. GEORGE": THE (UN)MEETING

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George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway were mutual admirers and shared a similar political vision. Both were men of the left in the 1930s and '40s: Hemingway a sometime fellow traveler; Orwell an English socialist who feared the power of the state. Both prided themselves on being realists; both were literary craftsmen—Orwell in prose, above all in the essay; Hemingway in fiction, especially his masterful short stories. Born just four years apart, Hemingway (1899-1961) and Orwell (1903-50) were literary contemporaries who have influenced several generations of writers and intellectuals in the English-speaking world. Numerous historians, literary scholars, and biographers have noted that the two men met just once—and a storied encounter it was.



But is the story true? Did they in fact ever meet? The prospect is tantalizing; the evidence is both scant and contradictory.

In March 1945, as the Third Reich crumbled, Orwell arrived in Paris as a foreign correspondent for two English newspapers. Hemingway was also there, having taken part in the liberation of Paris. Yet apparently not until March 1952—more than two years after Orwell's death—did word of the purported meeting ever circulate. In a letter to one of his literary confreres, Harvey Breit of the *New York Times Book Review*, Hemingway disclosed that Orwell had called on him just as Hemingway was returning to the United States. Hemingway's version of the meeting bears touches of the braggadocio, egoism, and tough-guy posing that characterized his last decade. Hemingway wrote Breit that Orwell "told me he was afraid he was going to be knocked off by the communists and he asked me to loan him a pistol. The only pistol that I had...was a .32 caliber colt with a very short barrel [sic]....He was fairly nervous and worried."

No reference to this meeting exists—neither in Orwell’s extensive correspondence nor in his *Complete Works*, the monumental 21-volume compilation of Orwell’s writings edited by Peter Davison. Nor did Orwell ever mention a Hemingway encounter to any of his London circle of friends, among them Malcolm Muggeridge, Anthony Powell, Arthur Koestler, and Julian Symons—all of whom were assiduous record keepers and inveterate gossips and with whom he lunched almost daily in the mid-1940s.

Several years later, a British version of the story appeared in print for the first time. In his collection *Dante Called You Beatrice* (1960), the bohemian poet Paul Potts, an Orwell acolyte who knew him well during his London years, recounted a tale that he claimed Orwell had confided directly to him. (Oddly enough—and perhaps suspiciously—no mention of the Hemingway story appears in the original version of Potts’ book chapter, which appeared in the form of a memoir “Don Quixote on a Bicycle,” published in *The London Magazine* in 1957.)

Potts’ account possesses some similarity to Hemingway’s. Hearing that Hemingway is in Paris, Orwell goes to his hotel room and introduces himself as Eric Blair. “Well, what the fucking hell do you want?” growls Hemingway. Blair replies: “I’m George Orwell.” According to Potts, Hemingway suddenly becomes expansive. “Why the fucking hell didn’t you say so? Have a drink! Have a double! Straight, or with water, there’s no soda.” At this point, Potts’ tale oddly breaks off, just when the reader would like to know what the two writers talked about.

A third and final version of the alleged meeting appeared in 1998 in Hemingway’s posthumous novel, *True At First Sight*, subtitled (perhaps all too fittingly) “A Fictional Memoir.” The Orwell meeting is given the full hard-boiled Hemingwayesque treatment here. Now a “gaunt” Orwell who is in “bad shape” visits an indomitable “Papa” (as Hemingway refers to himself throughout the memoir) because he fears assassination by communist enemies. The paranoid-sounding Orwell repeatedly voices anxiety about being tailed by a mysterious “They.” Hemingway not only offers Orwell a gun in this version, but also protects him more directly. After Orwell leaves, Papa dispatches two of his Paris lieutenants to follow Orwell and directs them to intervene if he is in harm’s way. They report back that he is not in danger. The solicitous, macho Hemingway has guarded and guided his literary junior to safety.

So the supposed Orwell-Hemingway encounter has three sources: two Hemingway versions, both of which cast him in a favorable light; and the Potts tale, which shows the aspiring writer as a confidant of the famous author of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Let us now pose the questions again:

Did this meeting ever take place? Or was it nothing more than a figment of the imagination of two notorious exaggerators?

The first published reference to the meeting—Potts' tale—didn't appear until a full decade after Orwell's death—when Orwell, rather conveniently, wasn't around to dispute it. Of course, Hemingway was still alive, but not a word about any meeting with Orwell surfaces in any of the many articles, reviews, or books written by him—or indeed even in the avalanche of fanciful tales about him until long after his suicide in 1961. Not until 1969 did Carlos Baker, in the first serious biography, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*, allude to the Breit letter. Furthermore, the tale didn't find its way into any memoir or biography of Orwell until Bernard Crick's citation of Potts in *George Orwell: A Life* (1980). Thereafter the story appears with greater frequency in subsequent studies of both men. The legions of scholars who have cited the story show few signs of any hesitation about its authenticity. At most, they hedge: Baker for instance, records the meeting straight, appending the caveat "with what truth it is impossible to say."

On the other hand, Crick expressed no doubts when he used the story, despite acknowledging Potts' reputation for embroidery (apparently Crick was unaware of the Breit letter or Baker's biography). Subsequent Orwell biographers such as Michael Sheldon, Gordon Bowker, and D.J. Taylor recycled the story without raising any red flags. Only Jeffrey Meyers, possessing the advantage of authoring biographies of both Orwell and Hemingway, has cast a cold eye on the story. "Orwell never mentioned their meeting," he notes in his biography, *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of His Generation* (2000), "and there is no record of their conversation." Yet even Meyers leaves it simply at that. In neither his Orwell nor Hemingway biography does he investigate the origins or history of this long-running, almost Bunyanesque tale. He never inquires if it is more myth than fact—that is, whether it is really (as Eric Erikson phrased some suspect accounts of Luther in his provocative biography, *Young Man Luther*) "half-legend, half-history."

With such flimsy evidence to ground it, why has the story persisted? In part, because a meeting between two of the century's greatest literary icons, "Papa" and "St. George," enflames the imaginations of the gatekeepers of our intellectual culture.

Let us pictures the scene:

In the early spring of 1945, during the dying days of World War II, George Orwell, a left-wing London novelist-journalist and author of a still-unpublished little fable that had been making the rounds of the wartime publishing houses, meets Ernest Hemingway, then at the height of his international glory as a man of letters and well on his way toward becoming the biggest American literary icon of the postwar era.

Ah yes, it is a grand prospect! Just the thought of such a transatlantic cultural event is enough to spark the dramatic imagination and excite lovers of literature, both the fan of "Papa" or "St. George" and the serious historian alike.

One wants to know all the details.

What an investigation of this storied meeting reveals is, however, something rather different—and lesser—than a transatlantic cultural summit. Such an inquiry instead furnishes valuable insight into how literary legends emerge and establish themselves—indeed into how literary reputations are made, not born.

Claims about a meeting of these two cultural figures took hold for diverse reasons. As we have suggested, the story of a Hemingway-Orwell meeting in liberated Paris has, first of all, an almost Hollywood aura about it: a pair of literary greats meeting for the first and only time, exchanging compliments, and sharing drinks. A creative scriptwriter can easily turn the scene into a literary version of the Russians and Americans extending handshakes at the Elbe. Even the meeting's brevity and sparse dialogue can be turned to advantage—the audience can fill in the gaping holes as it pleases. "If only we knew what was said!" the curiosity seeker rhapsodizes. "If only we knew the topics they spoke about!"

At another level, the story possesses journalistic "legs" because it is an almost perfect expression of the hairy-chested Hemingway myth that mushroomed during the troubled last decade of his life. Moreover, as one follows Hemingway's revisions and additions to the tale over the years, one gains the impression that, as he vainly struggled to recapture his literary skills, an insecure Hemingway sought to identify with the growing reputation of Orwell. In the 1950s, despite his Nobel Prize, Hemingway wallowed in depression, drinking ever more and writing ever less. Meanwhile Orwell, in the United States as well as in Britain, came into his own as a literary icon majestically eulogized and exalted as "the conscience of his generation," "St. George," "the last honest man," "the Crystal Spirit," and on and upward.

A third reason, and possibly the key one, why the myth behind the meeting gained credence is related to both the occupational hazard of academic specialization and the long-persisting, if somewhat surprising, disjunction between the literary-intellectual scenes in Britain and the U.S. Aside from Jeffrey Meyers, all those who wrote about the meeting were familiar with only one version of the story, either the British (Orwell) or American (Hemingway) side. The Hemingway scholars cited the Breit letter and *True At First Light*, whereas the Orwell experts relied on Potts' tale. Despite Hemingway's popularity in postwar England and the lionizing of Orwell in the United States during the Cold War era, critics and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic failed to dig into the primary sources and question the now-established claims about the two authors' meeting.

Can we say definitively that a meeting did not place? No. In a March 1948 letter from Hemingway to Cyril Connolly, who had lunched together a few times in London and Paris in the early 1940s, Hemingway closes a long, chatty missive with a request that Connolly convey his regards to Orwell:

If you ever see Orwell, remember me to him, will you? I like him very much and it was a moment when I had no time when I met him.

These final sentences, which seem to be rather an afterthought, are the full record of any mention by either Hemingway or Connolly (or anyone else) regarding a personal encounter between Hemingway and Orwell during the latter's lifetime. The last two sentences are matter-of-fact. Fully absent is the all-too-familiar tone of Hemingway's swagger and vainglory. Moreover, unlike the preceding paragraphs of this very same letter written to Connolly, Hemingway's closing comment about Orwell is neither maudlin nor hackneyed. So there is no reason to dispute the empirical fact that an uneventful encounter between the two men did occur. Although Hemingway's tendency to bluster and bravado was already well under way by the spring of 1948, he had not yet become so hungry for applause and so prone to fabrication as he would by the 1950s. If Hemingway had intended to invent out of whole cloth a meeting between himself and Orwell, he certainly would not have limited himself to such a modest description.

All this casts strong doubt on the embellished stories about what was probably a fleeting, forgettable incident. One pauses and recalls the comment about Hemingway by his wife, Martha Gellhorn: "He was the biggest liar since Munchausen."

Equally doubtful is Potts’ version. A fabulist and a self-promoter, Potts was always declaiming his close friendship with the most famous writer of his generation—and Orwell’s friends brushed off such claims and even mocked Potts publicly.

“Not proven,” we believe, is the just verdict about the trumpeted tale. It is clear that while Hemingway admired Orwell’s work especially *Homage to Catalonia* about his experiences in Spain and the early novel *Burmese Days*, the evidence for anything more than an ephemeral, nondescript “un-meeting” between the two is lacking. The fact that Orwell, a voluminous correspondent and journal keeper, doesn’t refer to the meeting is enough to call it into question. And the fact that both Connolly and Muggeridge had met Hemingway several times—as did quite possibly, other friends of Orwell—virtually seals the case.

Finally the doubtful status of this fabled story warrants a cautionary reminder: Beware of swallowing a tale that seems too good to be true. And beware of scholars, critics, and journalists promoting any such “half-legend” without a substantial record of historical evidence to support it.

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