HEMINGWAY, CÉZANNE, AND WRITING:
“REALITIES THAT ARISE FROM
THE CRAFT ITSELF”

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Ernest Hemingway’s writing, with its stark sense of reportage, hardly seems to challenge ordinary ways of seeing. Yet his desire to write the way Cézanne painted not only demanded rethinking the craft of choosing and arranging words, it also demands a different attention to the written text before the reader can see the text or story as there. Hemingway, in “On Writing” and in his personal letters, mulled over the difficulties that the writer faces when trying to make fiction have the ontological presence of an object. In his collection of short stories, In Our Time, he experimented carefully and methodologically with repetition and with syntactical patterns that brought his writing close to achieving his objectives. While the writing retains a definitive literal impression, an attentive reading will recognize the linguistic characteristics which give the writing its unique sense of presence.

And so we have this situation, a settled language because a language is settled after it does not change any more that is as to words and grammar, and it being written so completely written all the time it inevitably cannot change much and yet the pressure upon these words to make them do something that they did not do for those who made that language come to exist is a very interesting thing to watch.¹

As he looked at Cézanne’s paintings, first in Gertrude Stein’s Paris flat and then at the Musée du Luxembourg, Ernest Hemingway felt some of that “pressure upon these words” out of which “realities … arise.” He narrated his feeling sometime around 1924 in roughly nine pages of manuscript originally written into the longish two-part short story “Big Two-Hearted River.” These nine pages, which Hemingway deleted before its publication, are not an unfinished story—which is how they appear, as “On Writing” in the posthumously published collected

stories—but are a story within a story or a layer within a story, a layer of Nick Adams's thinking as he makes camp and fishes. Left in the story, the narrative would have been too explicit of the writer’s own wrestling with the construction of fictional narratives. While “On Writing” obviously tells how Hemingway was thinking about the making of fiction, when it is read collaboratively with “Big Two-Hearted River” it dramatizes the very problem Hemingway grappled with: that the intrusive subjectivity of reflection threatens the conditional object-state of writing itself, since reflection arises out of actual (and remembered experience) rather than out of the craft itself.

Realistic writing seems to depend either on detailing the realities of actual perception or on bringing perception and craft into productive dialogue. How, then, can the writer go beyond these two alternatives to craft an object such that it has the ontological status of actual things?

Excised from the original manuscript, “On Writing” seemingly begins in medias res, as a meditation no longer causally or chronologically linked to previous events. Prior to the meditation, Nick Adams has hiked deep into the woods on a personal trek into the wilderness to a place where he will be alone and will be left alone, and he had set up a campsite. He knows the place yet the place retains its rawness, its wildness, and by setting up camp, he has tamed his small bit of it. The reader gets the details of the setting up, of cutting pegs for the tent and cutting ferns for bedding and the smell of the ferns on Nick’s hands and the making of a campfire and of a meal. The reader knows this as Nick knows it, as what he is aware of and not more, and the details of his consciousness shape him as a subjective immediacy in the present tense; so he is read in the present tense. “On Writing” picks up with the second day, and the day is hot, and Nick has been fishing and has caught one trout, a “good” one, and he has been observing the river and not only observing it but taking it all in with all his senses. Nick meditates on the past—“His whole inner life” (NAS 245), on his fishing buddies and their relation to women and to living and all the things that he loved about living: fishing and digging potatoes and playing baseball and watching bullfights, and summer. He remembers these things without deliberation or order. He pays attention to the river, reading its spots and currents and pools and shadows pragmatically, to determine where the fish are and how they will respond to flies and lures. And then the fishing/fishing-thinking stops.

At this point, he thinks about writing and the writing of his that had been good and how the Nick in the stories had never been himself but someone he’d made up. He realizes that loving life too much makes writing difficult and that a certain amount of “discontent and friction” (NAS 247) facilitates writing. Writing

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