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## Introduction: Hemingway and the Practical Reader

PAUL SMITH

TWENTY years ago common knowledge told us that there was nothing more to be said about Hemingway's fiction: The patterns were clear; motifs, categorized. We had an authorized biography and what seemed to be stable texts. Then, just as our beliefs were beginning to harden into dogma, Hemingway's manuscripts and unpublished letters were opened to scholars and revisionist work opened the fiction to new readings. A cottage industry was born. Those academics, myself included, who moved into that virtual village found overwhelming evidence that every Hemingway text was flawed in its publishing, that the author was more literate and complex than we suspected, and that there was much in his fiction we had ignored. My contribution to this endeavor has focused almost entirely on reading Hemingway's rather amazing short fiction, which I have argued was his real genius, transforming as it did the way American writers tell stories. In the opening lines of *The Making of Americans*, Gertrude Stein writes of an angry son dragging his father through his own orchard. "‘Stop!’ cried the groaning old man at last, ‘Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree.’" This parable might well be the epigraph for this book. When asked to edit a collection of new essays on Hemingway's short fiction, I solicited submissions from five diverse, rigorous, and talented scholars, challenging them and myself to take you, my practical reader, beyond your previous limits.

Let me explain myself. The *Hemingway* of my title refers to both the writer and his fiction. I make this point because I want to consider at times what he wrote in letters, articles, and memoirs about his fiction, and at others, the fiction itself. For

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“the reader” I have you in mind (like Whitman, I feel your eyes upon my page), a “practical” reader who will agree that reading fiction once took, and with any luck still takes, practice. Not, however, so practical as to oppose all speculation or theory, for reading itself is speculative, and it’s been said that there is nothing so practical as a good theory.

In raising some questions about reading Hemingway, I take as my text a passage from *Studies in Classic American Literature* where D. H. Lawrence warns a practical reader of his generation:

An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day. . . . Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it. (12, 13)

Lawrence’s striking prose seems at first to dare us to step outside and settle the matter, and this reader is practical enough to agree; after all, Lawrence is an artist himself, and if it takes one to know one, then, yes, they are liars and not to be trusted. We can all cite an occasion when a writer assured an audience that some profound work is really very simple: Robert Frost often claimed that “Stopping by Woods” was just a poem about a fellow who wanted to get the hell home. Then, again, if all artists are liars, and Lawrence is an artist, is his remark that artists are liars itself a lie? No, for it’s as if Lawrence acquitted himself as one of those artists who are only “usually” liars – you know, only now and then.

By now, any practical reader has become a bit skittish. There is a way out of this quandary, as is often so when we’re faced with only two options. Why not use the tale to discover whether to trust the artist? If the art will tell us the truth of the artist’s “day” – whatever that may be – it should tell us if the artist is to be trusted. Begin with the fiction, the story, and if what it tells us is confirmed by anything the writer might have said of it, so much the better; if not, then take Lawrence at his word. A sensible attitude, I think, and not out of order in reading Hemingway.

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## The Theory of Omission and "Out of Season"

Working on the memoir *A Moveable Feast* in the summer of 1957, Hemingway discusses a moment in 1924 when he remembered writing a story in the late spring of 1923:

It was a very simple story called "Out of Season" and I had omitted the real end of it which was that the old man hanged himself. This was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood. (75)

A "simple" story, yes, of course, but how that word "theory" seems to leap at us out of what is some rather lame prose. If what we are being told is that an implication we discover as readers is often more persuasive than a writer's statement, it might have been new to Hemingway but to few others and it would hardly count as a theory.

Consider the story. "Out of Season" is one of the three in Hemingway's *Three Stories & Ten Poems* (published in 1923), and like the other two it stakes out scenes he would explore in later stories: in "Up in Michigan," the small villages and surrounding woods in northern Michigan where he spent his boyhood summers; in "My Old Man," the realm of sport and gambling – here, horse racing; and in "Out of Season," the stations, hotels, and favored haunts of the American tourist in Europe. "Out of Season" opens on a cold and overcast spring day in Cortina d'Ampezzo in the Italian Dolomites. Peduzzi, a local character, has spent the morning spading a hotel garden for four lire, getting drunk on his pay, and arranging to guide a young gentleman and his wife to a trout stream after lunch. He has three more grappas, and they join him to walk through the town to the Hotel Concordia. As they enter the hotel bar to buy some marsala wine, there is tension between the couple. The husband is barely apologetic; the wife's still embittered over something he said at lunch. They walk with Peduzzi to the stream. The couple argue over fishing with a drunk for a guide before the season legally opens, and the wife leaves. The young man prepares to fish but neither he nor his guide has remembered to bring the lead

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sinkers, so he and Peduzzi finish the marsala. Peduzzi plans the fishing for the next day; the young man gives him four lire, and the story ends as Peduzzi promises that

"I will have minnows, Signor. Salami, everything. You and I and the Signora. The three of us."

"I may not be going," said the young gentleman, "very probably not. I will leave word with the padrone at the hotel office." (*Complete Stories* 139)

I cite the story's conclusion because it is from there that the narrative directs us to imagine what might happen in the silent future, speculation crucial for the concept underlying the theory of omission.

Nearly a decade after writing that story in the late spring of 1923, Hemingway first mentioned the theory in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), and then only in passing and with no mention of "Out of Season." In 1958, three years before his death, he referred to the theory as it applied to *The Old Man and the Sea* (*Paris Review* 125). Then, in the posthumous *A Moveable Feast* (1964), the theory was associated with this story to become in time something of an axiom in Hemingway criticism. And there's fair warning, for what yesterday's criticism takes as self-evident is often what tomorrow's will challenge. The counter-evidence came to light later in Hemingway's own letters and manuscripts. In a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald (ca. 24 December 1925) Hemingway described the occasion that inspired "Out of Season." The story was, he said, an almost literal transcription of what happened.

Your ear is always more acute when you are upset by a row of any sort, . . . and when I came in from the unproductive fishing trip I wrote that story right off on the typewriter without punctuation. . . . I [had] reported [the guide] to the hotel owner . . . and he fired him and as . . . he was quite drunk and very desperate, [he] hanged himself in a stable. . . . I wanted to write a tragic story without violence. So I didn't put in the hanging. Maybe that sounds silly. I didn't think the story needed it. (*Selected Letters*, 180–1)

On the face of it, this letter seems to confirm Hemingway's later memory. Hemingway did have a good ear for dialogue whatever

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his mood; the story's only manuscript shows that it was written rapidly without punctuation and immediately revised on the typewriter; and that he was angry after that row, for he struck the typewriter keys so hard that some of the letters punched holes in the paper (Kennedy Library/EH 644).

But imagine what had to have happened if Hemingway did angrily type the story right after the day's fishing and then deliberately omitted the hanging, for whatever effect. After reporting the "real" Peduzzi's behavior to the padrone, he began typing furiously, and then: The padrone sought out the guide and fired him on the spot; the guide became terribly depressed, raced to the stable and hanged himself. He was found almost immediately by someone who reported the news to the padrone; the padrone then, quite naturally, informed the guest who had made the original complaint; and, after all this, Hemingway turned back to his story, thought about the hanging in the light of his new theory and decided to omit it. Maybe this scenario sounds silly. If so, we should recall that Hemingway was in his early twenties when he wrote the letter, and that Fitzgerald, however much a friend, was also a writer, a competitor only three years older who had published two volumes of stories and three novels, the latest *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The letter was written in response to Fitzgerald's rating of the *In Our Time* stories just recently published. Maybe Hemingway was trying to impress Fitzgerald; maybe he was merely joking, making fun of slick magazine fiction. Maybe he was thinking more about "Big Two-Hearted River," which he himself rated as the best in the collection.

Whatever Hemingway's motive, the practical reader is fairly driven to agree with Lawrence and to trust the tale, for *if something has been left out that implies more than we know, some vestige of it, some trace, must have been left behind in the story to initiate the implication*. Few readers can find anything in "Out of Season" to imply that Peduzzi would be fired, or that he might hang himself, certainly not on that day, for he has earned as much for simply walking to the river as he did in a morning spading the garden. What, then, does the story imply? However much Peduzzi's vinous garrulity intrudes on the scene, the story is not about him

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but about the benighted couple. Nearly everything in the setting and the action of the story, from its title to its final lines, points to the hopelessness of their marriage. They have come to the perfect place to foreshadow their separation, for here three dialects merge but none of the three characters either listens to or understands what the others say. They arrive at the perfect time of year for such miscommunication, for like the fishing, they, too, are "out of season." Perhaps the story's final irony is that only Peduzzi, deep in his cups, has any hope for the morrow: "The three of us," he exclaims. But with the singular pronoun, "I may not be going," the young gentleman belies that hope and directs our attention toward his own lonely prospect.

## Dimensions in the Stories and "The Killers"

There is a second passage in *A Moveable Feast* that, like the remark on the theory of omission, has started a good many critical hares. Hemingway is describing how in his early days he sometimes had difficulty beginning his stories if he wrote "elaborately, or like someone introducing or presenting something," but usually could overcome the difficulty if he discarded those elaborations to "start with the first true simple declarative sentence" he had written and go on from there. That led him to recall that when he finished writing a story he put it out of his mind and walked through the streets of Paris, often to the Musée du Luxembourg to see the Impressionist paintings. He was especially drawn to the Cézannes, because, as he remembered it,

I was learning something from the painting of Cézanne that made writing simple true sentences far from enough to make the stories have the *dimensions* that I was trying to put in them. . . . I was not articulate enough to explain it to anyone. Besides it was a secret. (my italics, 12, 13)

What was he learning from Cézanne and why was it a secret? The original 1924 ending of "Big Two-Hearted River," which was replaced before the story was published, tells us more. In that discarded fragment which appeared posthumously, Nick says,

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It was easy to write if you used the tricks . . . Joyce had invented hundreds of them. . . . They would all turn into clichés. . . . Cézanne started with all the tricks. Then he broke the whole thing down and built the real thing. . . . He, Nick, wanted to write about country so it would be there like Cézanne had done it in painting. . . . There wasn't any trick. Nobody had ever written about country like that. He felt almost holy about it. It was a thing you couldn't talk about. (*Nick Adams Stories* 239)

This manuscript ending both explains and dramatizes the harsh imperative for originality that literary Paris in the 1920s demanded, and why, if one writer thought he had discovered a way to achieve it from Cézanne, he would hold it as a secret. What the manuscript does not explain, and there has been a good deal of critical commentary to make up for that omission, is what precisely Hemingway learned from Cézanne, and why he turned to a painter as his master in the first place.

Hemingway's young writer, too often identified with the author himself, has an almost religious zeal to be the Cézanne of modern prose, writing about landscape so that it becomes the "real thing," and just before the manuscript ends, it happens: Nick saw "how Cézanne would do the stretch of river and the swamp, stood up, and stepped down into the stream. The water was cold and actual. He waded across the stream, moving in the picture" (240). At that dramatic moment, when the cold and actual stream in the virtual prose becomes a holograph painting into which the fisherman steps, Hemingway's young artist has come close to realizing his ambition.

The reader, perhaps practical to a fault, might suspect that if one's ambition is to be more original than Joyce after *Ulysses*, there would be few masters if any to follow, discounting the fact that any writer one took as a master would be a writer still. So, choose a great artist, dead but not too dead, and if it is "dimensions" you feel your stories need, who else but one known for the geometric forms underlying his landscapes; Cézanne. That is one way to argue from the author's comment on the story, or at least from whatever he had in mind for the word "dimension."

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Another way, perhaps more practical, would reverse the critical direction by beginning with what the word might refer to in a story and work back to the meaning it might have in a Cézanne painting. At the outset it is obvious that the word *dimension* is more commonly applied to a painting, and for the very good reason that art is spatial, the painting is perceived in space, however much our eyes may be directed first to a certain shape or color, then to the next, and at last to another. In reading a work of fiction, however, we begin by perceiving the story unfolding in linear time: first that happened, then that, now this. Our minds are mostly concerned with what will happen next. After we've read something, we may recall that experience as it occurred, but now, with nothing left to happen next, we are more concerned with what it means, as if it resides in some timeless space. Often, to express that meaning, we draw a diagram – a triangle to represent a conflict, circles to suggest the differing social worlds, a broken line for an action, metaphors in space for what happened in time, serving to describe the relationship among the parts of the story's "structure."

The structure in a Hemingway story can usually be described, conventionally enough, with a set of scenes marked by a change in setting or by a change of characters. What is unconventional, and so inscribes his fiction as modernist, is that the scenes often are juxtaposed with little transition and less logic to effect or explain their sequence or rationale. Such a structure may result from his prose style with its syntax linking sentences and clauses by simple, at times temporal, but rarely logical or subordinating, conjunctions. This is not to say that the structures of the stories lack form or significant pattern. Recall the pattern of the scenes in "Out of Season": five conventional scenes, the central one of which (the couple's conversation in the Concordia) is embedded between two scenes in which they walk with Peduzzi to the river. These two scenes are in turn embedded between two scenes in which the young gentleman and his guide open and close the story. This simple pattern turns the reader's attention to that crucial and literally central moment in the hotel bar when the wife utters that terrible condemnation of their relationship, "None of it makes any difference" (*Complete Stories* 137). If that is



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the sort of dimension, more than a sequence of true sentences, that Hemingway felt his stories needed, he might well have learned the technique from Cézanne or, indeed, from any other artist, for that dimensionality in both painting and prose directs our attention to the telling point in the narrative or on the canvas.

One of Hemingway's most familiar stories, "The Killers," offers a perfect example of a narrative that challenges and rewards the reader's perception of its structure, partly because, although its suspense is literally almost killing, not very much happens. (In most Hemingway short stories very little *happens*.) The first scene opens with two strangers entering Henry's lunchroom, where George is waiting on Nick Adams at the counter. The strangers, Al and Max, try unsuccessfully to order from the dinner menu, then settle for sandwiches, after which their small talk turns ugly. Al takes Sam the cook and Nick into the kitchen, gags and ties them up, and then he and Max reveal that they are waiting to kill Ole Andreson when he comes in at six. As evening approaches and others arrive for dinner, George tells them the cook is away or makes them a sandwich. When Ole Andreson does not arrive, the killers leave. The second scene is some twenty-five lines of dialogue: Sam says he doesn't want any more of that; George tells Nick he ought to go see Ole; Sam says he ought to stay out of it, but Nick leaves to tell Ole. In the third scene, at Hirsch's rooming house, Nick talks briefly with the landlady, Mrs. Bell, and then to Ole in his room. He tells him about the two men waiting to kill him, and offers to tell the police; but Ole, lying on his bed and looking at the wall, says that he got in wrong, there's nothing to do, and he's through running. Nick leaves after a brief conversation with Mrs. Bell. The fourth and final scene is another twenty-five lines of dialogue back at Henry's. Sam won't listen to it and goes to the kitchen. The story ends as Nick wonders what Ole did, and George says:

"Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for."

"I'm going to get out of this town," Nick said.

"Yes," said George, "That's a good thing to do."

"I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful."

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"Well," said George, "you better not think about it." (*Complete Stories* 222)

Whatever image you have of the story's dimensions it will reflect the obvious symmetry between the two sets of two scenes in which the action of the first scene is followed by a reaction in the second. For all the impending violence and seemingly inevitable bloodshed, nothing happens: The killers don't kill and their victim still lies with his face to the wall. Even in the two scenes of reaction, two of the three persons do nothing, only Nick acts or resolves to act. The dimensions of the story almost by default direct our attention to the story's details. And we see in the story's texture that almost every detail, from the opening moment when we see George in charge of Henry's lunchroom to the moment when Nick assumes that Mrs. Bell is in charge of Mrs. Hirsch's rooming house, seems to have some counterpart serving as its agent: Al and Max are indistinguishable, dressed like "twins" or a "vaudeville team," even their sandwich orders are interchanged; there isn't much difference between the reactions of Sam, the cook, who denies that anything has happened, and George's dismissive explanations of the killers' motives. On the face of the wall clock, which is fast, every minute stands for twenty minutes earlier.

Reminiscent of the settings in a Franz Kafka story or a Harold Pinter play, the world of this story is not so much reflected as it is refracted, as if in a cracked mirror. Within this world two characters are intimately joined, Ole Andreson, the victim, and Nick Adams, his lonely representative, who will bear the image of the doomed boxer into his maturity. There's a good deal more one could say, as there always is with a fine work of fiction, but this much may suggest the ways in which the simple structures of Hemingway's stories, the geometric design of their scenes, direct our critical attention toward their meanings.

## The Sense of Audience and "One Reader Writes"

Hemingway once promised the publisher of *In Our Time* that his stories "will be praised by highbrows and can be read by low-