

ANALYSIS

“Big Two-Hearted River” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

Chapter IV

The vignette preceding the story, Chapter IV, renders the death of a bullfighter gored in the arena. In the previous vignette the bullfighter, Maera, is characterized as a responsible matador with integrity who is consequently assigned the bad bulls that survive bad matadors. The story dramatizes the recovery of a soldier wounded in the war, who like the bullfighter got injured by chance. A bull is wild like warfare and wildfire. The first 7 vignettes in *In Our Time* are about war, followed by one about crime, then 6 vignettes about bullfighting. This vignette and story bring together the thematic motifs of war and bullfighting. Both the soldier and the bullfighter are carried away on a stretcher, one in war and one in peace. Everything speeds up for the bullfighter as he dies, whereas everything slows down for Nick as he recovers. The vignette that follows the story is the second one about crime, bringing the third motif into relation with the other two. *In Our Time* is a succession of dispatches and stories by a war correspondent intended to shock complacent readers into facing the brutal facts of life. Violence and the prospect of death are everywhere in our time and all time.

I

Nick Adams, an American Adam, experiences a “Fall” when he gets wounded on the Italian front in Chapter VI of *In Our Time* (1925): “He had been hit in the spine.” Though he is the protagonist, Nick is so much subordinated in the book, especially by the vignettes—in the Naturalist tradition the individual is a small and insignificant speck in the universe—that most readers miss the fact that he got wounded and consequently have no idea what happens in the last story or what it means. The book ends back home with “Big Two-Hearted River,” recounting Nick’s gradual recuperation from traumatic shock through the ritual of fishing. Hemingway got blown up on the Italian front and when he got back home he went fishing where Nick does, near the ghost town of Seney on the upper peninsula of Michigan 15 miles from Lake Superior. The title of the story makes the setting a psychological metaphor transcending a literal place. When the young Hemingway got off the train at the ghost town the brakeman said to the engineer, “Hold her up. There’s a cripplie and he needs time to get his stuff down.”

The train is a traditional symbol of progress, which also led to the war. Nick steps off the train into a waste land of “burned over country.” The land attacked by wildfire is like a battlefield he has brought back home inside himself. War is not mentioned in the story, nor is the literal name of the river. “Show the reader everything, tell them nothing,” Hemingway said. “I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows.” He wrote this story in part to demonstrate this “omission theory.” He gives us tips. Leaving out information that is implicit “strengthens the iceberg.” In this case the omissions are consistent with Nick’s repression of horrible memories and makes the psychological allegory of his recovery from trauma more universal. Some critics were so bewildered by the story they thought that “nothing happens.”

Nick is burned out by war and the town burned up by wildfire but “The river was there.” This major theme in Hemingway, faith in Nature, is also expressed in the epigraph from *Ecclesiastes* for *The Sun Also Rises*: Nature is always there, as it is for Jake Barnes, who also got wounded in the war, when he goes fishing up in the mountains and when he acquires a moral code from the bullfight ritual. That novel and this story are Hemingway’s rebuttal to T. S. Eliot’s influential poem “The Waste Land” (1922), evoked here by the waste land and when “A kingfisher flew up the stream,” a submerged allusion to the myth of the Fisher King used in the poem by Eliot and then by Hemingway to counter Eliot.

On a bridge, from the spiritual waste land of civilization into divine Nature, Nick looks down into the river and watches the trout “keeping themselves steady.” He watches them a long time, holding calm and steady in the current, displaying the steadiness he lost in the war. “Nick’s heart tightened as the trout moved. He felt all the old feeling.... He was happy.” As he hikes inland, deeper into himself, gradually he leaves the waste land behind. “He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs.” He hikes along a road that is “always climbing. Nick went on up.” The river is “off to the left.” The river, the flow of Nature, is identified with the left side of the body, which is controlled by the right brain—the heart, in metaphor. Most writers differentiate between the archetypal spaces of the heart (Garden) and the unconscious or animal self (Wilderness). In this story Hemingway expresses his love of all Nature by identifying both the sunny “good place” (Garden) and the dark swamp (Wilderness) with the heart. The two-hearted river is “big” in representing the unity of all Nature.

Nick’s journey requires Puritan virtues—discipline, patience, hard work, endurance—in order to reach “the good place,” the ideal Pastoral setting or heaven on earth. In literary history the spiritual journey recalls *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the Puritan allegory of the journey to salvation, except that here the spiritual goal is attainable in this life and the Slough of Despond is the swamp. Nick Adams never does get past the swamp. In the Hemingway canon the main exemplars of psychological wholeness, grace under pressure, and Transcendent consciousness are Pedro Romero the bullfighter in *The Sun Also Rises*, Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* and Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Hemingway’s descriptions of landscape were influenced by Expressionist painting: “I’m trying to do the country like Cézanne.” The influence is evident in the simplicity of the large general images repeated without detailing—“burnt hillside,” “pine plain,” “range of hills,” “far blue hills.” These basic forms are archetypal, particulars that express universality. Cézanne mutes colors, Hemingway minimizes colors—both exemplifying Expressionism in contrast to Impressionism. Both artists deploy contrasts between light and dark and major forms such as hills and plains. Both delineate objects, Cézanne with outlines and Hemingway with successions of short sentences. Both are economical, increasing the significance of selected details. The following description, for example, resembles in some details Cézanne’s “Mont Sainte-Victoire,” the favorite landscape he painted repeatedly: “The trunks of the trees went straight up or slanted toward each other. The trunks were straight.... The branches were high above.”

When he sits down and smokes, Nick is associated with the burned country. It is all inside him. He sits among grasshoppers that have adapted to the blackened land by turning black themselves. “He wondered how long they would stay that way.” The story poses the same question about Nick at the end. The journey of recovery from trauma is long and difficult and it is better to immerse yourself in experience, in a ritual—fishing, quilt-making, whatever calms and steadies your nerves. Hemingway’s primary motive as a writer is Realism: to give the reader a vicarious experience so that it will “seem actually to have happened.” While the large forms in his landscapes are general, specific details evoke real life through continuous action in a natural flow like the river. Nick is very tired and lies down in the shade and falls asleep and wakes up in the next sentence, as Hemingway keeps his river flowing.

Refreshed, Nick crosses a meadow and reaches the river, where trout are jumping: “As far down the long stretch as he could see, the trout were rising, making circles all down the surface of the water, as though it were starting to rain.” This is heaven for a trout fisherman. Circles are archetypal forms, images of perfection in the context of literature in the Transcendental mode, as explained by Emerson in his essay “Circles” and by Black Elk speaking of all Indians. The land, the trout, and Nick all rise—rising is a motif throughout the story. “The ground rose...” Nick makes his camp on the level, methodical and precise. Every successful movement he makes is therapeutic, steadying his nerves. “Experience is communicated by small details intimately observed,” Hemingway said of his method. Nick renews himself by accomplishing small tasks, enjoying sensations and internalizing pastoral qualities in Nature: “Inside the tent the light came through the brown canvas. It smelled pleasantly of canvas. Already there was something mysterious and homelike. Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent.”

His fatigue and need for simplicity are expressed by a series of very short sentences: “He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it.” The “good place” is the defining image in pastoral

literature—Crèvecoeur's farm, Irving's Sleepy Hollow, Thoreau's pond, Huck's river, Alcott's matriarchal Victorian household, Benjy's pasture, and so on. The "good place" is relative, of course. As Huck says, "Now she [Miss Watson] had got a start, and she went on and told me all about the good place... Well, I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it."

When he opens cans of spaghetti and pork and beans Nick thinks, "I've got a right to eat this kind of stuff, if I'm willing to carry it." He is not a primitive, he has a moral sense. Carrying in equipment and canned food is evidence of psychological integration of civilized and natural values. His labor justifies the rewards of civilization. He is so hungry that when he takes his first spoonful from the plate he feels ecstatic: "'Chrise,' Nick said, 'Geezus Chrise,' he said happily. His pronunciation of Christ is incomplete, missing the last letter. This is not a conventional Christian experience, yet it is spiritual as well as physical. At the end of the story his fishing ritual of recovery is incomplete until he is strong enough to fish in the swamp, a trial similar to Christ in the wilderness overcoming evil.

Christianity is evoked again when "he remembered the bread." Eating bread symbolizing the body of Christ is a sacrament. Since God created Nature, Hemingway affirms Christianity and pantheism as one. He joins the two by referring to his last meal in St. Ignace, invoking Christianity, while he eats the food he carried in to fish. A fish was a recognition symbol among persecuted believers in the early history of Christianity and Christ's disciples were fishermen who became "fishers of men." Nick has not been able to satisfy his spiritual hunger with religious doctrines alone and fishes for fulfillment in divine Nature: "He had been that hungry before, but had not been able to satisfy it."

Nick is so successful in getting away from it all, in leaving even thinking behind, that "He could not remember which way he made coffee." He feels so laid back that when he remembers an argument about it he had with a friend named Hopkins, he cannot remember which side he had taken. "He had once argued about everything with Hopkins." He has become less contentious, more receptive and Pastoral. Ironically, before he remembers, he makes coffee Hopkins' way. In contrast to Nick, Hopkins was a Puritan type, a self-made man who went on to get rich and forgot his promise to join Nick and his friend Bill on another fishing excursion the following summer. The busy Hopkins is called Hop Head, an implied comparison to grasshoppers and a suggestion that he got addicted to money. "They never saw Hopkins again. That was a long time ago on the Black River." Hopkins adapted to the values of the spiritual waste land like the black grasshoppers adapted to the burned land. "Nick drank the coffee, the coffee according to Hopkins. The coffee was bitter. Nick laughed. It made a good ending to the story."

At night the "good place" is peaceful. Even "The swamp was perfectly quiet." Nick is comfortable under his blanket in the tent until he hears a mosquito. When he incinerates it with a lighted match, "The mosquito made a satisfactory hiss in the flame." It is a mock heroic moment. Nick is still far from ready to fish in the swamp. A mosquito is as much a dragon as he is fit to slay. The first part of the story ends with Nick's tiny triumph on his way to recovery, a measure of his strength.

Chapter XV

This vignette counterpoints the contented pastoral mood of Nick going to sleep at the end of Part I of "Big Two-Hearted River." This is a wake-up call to death. The preceding vignette dramatizes the death of the noble bullfighter Maera and this vignette contrasts the death of Sam Cardinella, apparently a criminal. Maera dies bravely trying to set an example of honor, Cardinella soils his pants. The purpose of this vignette is to induce in the reader a vicarious experience of facing death, to evoke sympathy, dread, and shock. These feelings carry over into Part II of the story, intensifying our sense of Nick's dread. It is unlikely that when he tries to fish in the swamp Nick will tangle his line in the overhanging foliage and strangle himself or that he will slip and drown. It is a question of whether he will fail with self-control and integrity like Maera, or go spineless, disgust himself and collapse like Cardinella.

II

In the morning, Nick catches grasshoppers for bait. He lacks the confidence to flop over a flapjack in his skillet, doing it the safe way. Killing a grasshopper is poignant: "The grasshopper took hold of the hook

with his front feet, spitting tobacco juice on it. Nick dropped him into the water.” Him, not it. When he catches and releases a small trout, “He had wet his hand before he touched the trout, so he would not disturb the delicate mucus that covered him.” He has knowledge, respect, even reverence for other creatures that many fishermen do not have. Nick has a head, a heart, and a soul.

He wades deeper into the river and its two hearts are juxtaposed: “on the left, the lower edge of the meadow; on the right the swamp.” He catches a huge trout, but it breaks his line: “...his heart down, Nick reeled in. He had never seen so big a trout. There was a heaviness, a raw power not to be held---“ That the power of Nature is greater than Man is a theme embodied in this trout as it is in the whale Moby-Dick and in the great marlin Santiago cannot land. “By God, he was a big one. By God, he was the biggest one I ever heard of.” Feeling connected to the great fish by his “gut” leader, for a few ecstatic moments Nick feels the power of God. “Nick’s hand was shaky. He reeled in slowly. The thrill had been too much. He felt, vaguely, a little sick, as though it would be better to sit down.... He went over and sat on the logs. He did not want to rush his sensations any.” He is trying to “Go with the flow” of experience—the river—in harmony with Nature like a Huck Finn, or a hippie, or a Taoist.

Overcoming his disappointment, Nick catches a good trout and is satisfied. He is not acquisitive or greedy like Hop Head Hopkins, “He did not care about getting many trout.” In a place where the stream went back under tree branches drooping into the water, “There were always trout in a place like that. Nick did not care about fishing that hole. He was sure he would get hooked in the branches.” He would be the one getting hooked rather than a fish. This hole is a lesser example of what it is like in the swamp. Nick casts once and gets a strike but sure enough his line gets caught in the branches and he loses the fish. This experience prepares for the end of the story when he decides he is not yet ready to fish in the swamp. “He wished he had brought something to read. He felt like reading. He did not feel like going into the swamp.” As it often is for many people, reading would be an escape from unpleasant but necessary experience, an opiate like the radio in “The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio.”

Nick “felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them.... In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure.” He knows because he has fished in there before. Since then he has had all too much tragic experience in the swampy war. He is recovering from an injury to his spine. Fishing in the swamp he will get hung up and might go spineless like Sam Cardinella. His nerves are shot, his confidence is gone and he has lost the will to struggle. Fishing in the swamp will be a test of his mental stability and character. The swamp is the dark and tangled unconscious mind where repressed memories lurk with the “shadow” that Carl Jung says everyone must confront. Nick resumes his therapy, accomplishing easy tasks. “There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp.” Implicitly, he will not be able to return to society until he is able to fish the swamp and it will take him days, at the least, before he is ready.

Michael Hollister (2012)