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# Painterly Ambitions: Hemingway, Cézanne, and the Short Story

Monika Gehlawat

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- 1 That Ernest Hemingway was influenced in the beginning of his career by Cézanne's paintings comes as a matter of fact to most literary critics familiar with his early writing. I do not intend to dispute that claim or to repeat many of the well-known comments that presumably prove its accuracy.<sup>1</sup> In *A Moveable Feast* and some letters, Hemingway speaks frankly about his debt to Cézanne and most critics go no further than quoting these admissions. In this article, I want to delve deeper – to reconstruct what is usually just assumed and understand what this attention to Cézanne did for Hemingway's short story *form*. To do this, I will focus on "Big Two-Hearted River," published in 1925, and Cézanne's late landscape paintings. This study concentrates mainly on the particulars of the story, because I believe that its overall structure is contingent on how elemental factors develop plasticity and tone; the innovation of "Big Two-Hearted River" as well as the influence of Cézanne lie in Hemingway's manipulation of these particulars.
- 2 My argument is that, in studying Cézanne, Hemingway learns how to use visibility to reorganize the structural necessities of the modern short story form. He presents the aesthetic project as a moment of world-making; "Big Two-Hearted River" is about how to see the world and, in seeing it anew, how to make it and oneself over. This story has little interest in plot, history, or dramatic action. There are plenty of symbols in the text, if the reader wants to look for them, but I want to consider, rather, the looking itself. Nick's vision is at the center of "Big Two-Hearted River" – it is what gives this story its paradoxical quality of being at once corporeal and formalized. It is also a clue that illuminates the young Hemingway's purpose in following Cézanne for this particular story. I believe that some of the fundamental techniques Cézanne developed in his formal aesthetics require certain ways of looking, and that this visibility, when practiced by Nick Adams in "Big Two-Hearted River," indicates the possibility of rehabilitating sensorium. His attempts to totalize the fractured nature of experience through visual re-imagination also demonstrate a protest to the postmortem conditions

of World War I. In other words, Hemingway does not decide to write as Cézanne paints simply because he fancies the painter's handiwork, but because he requires it to tell this story and imbue it with a particular psychic context. After Cézanne, Hemingway relies primarily on landscape, motif, and structure to tell this story. If we focus on these aspects, and how visuality defines and activates them, then the story really communicates itself and makes "people feel something more than they underst[and]" (Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 75).

- 3 In addition to visiting the Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay, the Musée du Luxembourg, and the Jeu de Paume, Hemingway also went to galleries and Gertrude Stein's apartment to see Cézanne's work when he lived in Paris in the early 1920s. One late painting, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, now at the Philadelphia Art Museum, was owned by Paul Rosenberg in Paris until 1936. Hemingway quite possibly saw this work, or, at least, ones like it, when Rosenberg had an exposition of his collection of French Impressionists in 1922. This late landscape painting helps me to introduce some elements of aesthetic structure present in Hemingway's story: the elemental integrity of brushstroke, the notion of depth without penetrability, and a dynamism that inflects the artwork's structure through resistance. The painting's vivid greens and yellows, and the offsetting soft sky, a lavender shade of blue, demonstrate how color *forms* the world of the painting, rather than just filling it in. The bottom half of the canvas is jarring in its short patches of juxtaposing brushstrokes; one nearly forgets the fact of a valley in the blur of these alternating scraps. Were it not for the motif of the mountain, placid and luminous, the notion of depth would be replaced entirely by a kind of toppling stack of color. The painting has dimensions but lacks classical perspective; it is neither bright, nor light, nor dark, and yet it is completely determined by color. It also demonstrates how Cézanne increasingly rid his paintings of representational efforts in favor of visual mobility. The editors of the Philadelphia catalogue write:

The brushstrokes in this extremely complicated work are very evenly distributed over the surface and retain a fairly similar, smoothed-on, texture throughout. It is as if, during its making, the artist were working to hold together a picture in constant danger of blowing apart. The result, ironically, is a canvas that is perhaps the most formally constructed and least expressive of the sequence. (Rishel 74)

It should be obvious why this comment caught my eye. The creative effort to contain the catastrophic effect of intensity results in a painting that is more self-consciously structured than many of its counterparts. This is what I see happening in "Big Two-Hearted River." Hemingway "cut[s] out the scrollwork," as he once said, in order to isolate and magnify the tension of the story generated from Nick's point of view. The author discards traditional forms of aesthetic control such as plot development or dialogue, so he must crystallize what does remain in the work in order to hold it together. He uses simple motifs – the river, fishing, the trees – just as Cézanne stuck with *Mont Sainte-Victoire* or the *Bibémus Quarry* or the *Château Noir* in order to demonstrate the infinite plasticity of looking and making. Like the Philadelphia landscape of *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, "Big Two-Hearted River" suggests depth without access. I believe the distinctiveness of these works is that they are deeply immersed in a sensuous world, full of its material slack, and at the same time they are super-aesthetic, super-controlled and formally aloof. One cannot escape the self-consciously crafted quality of "Big Two-Hearted River," although much of its sophistication comes from the fact that in writing it, Hemingway evolves out of a merely reportorial precision and generates a kind of palpability that makes the story a new thing in the world. He

receives guidance from Cézanne in how to handle this contradiction and uses it to achieve the mutual development of the eye and mind, what the painter called “the logic of organized sensations.”

- 4 I want to focus first on the aesthetic side of this equation in the hope that a technical grasp will allow us to gain intimacy to Nick’s sensations and mood. Both Hemingway and Cézanne resist representation and have no illusions about the utterly formal quality of their work. Hemingway says he is “making the country,” that he is “making it all up.” There is a remote tone, or what Adorno calls the artwork’s “inwardness,” that resists the mimetic function in these particular paintings and prose. This cognitive strangeness occurs for instance when the artist leaves space empty, rather than filling the story or painting with material. The bare space that often structures Cézanne’s paintings correlates to Hemingway’s iceberg theory. But rather than mine for hidden meaning below the surface of this story, I want to study the very surface itself. Despite the natural setting of “Big Two-Hearted River,” and Nick’s heightened sensory attention, there are curious absences that indicate the aesthetic control of “an artist trying to hold together a picture.” Namely, there is no life to the story outside of Nick and his reasons for being there. There are fish because Nick has gone fishing, there is a mosquito because he put up a mosquito net, and there are grasshoppers for bait. But it is not a natural world; there is no rustling squirrel, no bird suddenly landing on a branch, no snapping twig. These missing interruptions function actively as negative space which highlights the work’s artistic intentionality and the perspectival dominance afforded to Nick.
- 5 In Cézanne’s watercolors especially, the use of bare space carries structural potentials. Consider, for instance, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, painted in 1900-1902 and sold to Leo and Gertrude Stein sometime before 1910. Hemingway saw an exhibition of Cézanne’s watercolors at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery in 1924, but could have studied this particular painting in Stein’s salon as well. Whereas Cézanne uses a weighty blue to define the sky, most of the landscape is activated by bright areas that are represented by exposed paper, not paint. This view of Mont Sainte-Victoire appears infinitely closer than others to the motif; volumes of bare space pull the image toward us in an odd reversal of the dynamics of vacancy. Emptiness brings what is there to light. Just so, in “Big Two-Hearted River,” the absence of other perspectives, the sheer lack of a world outside of Nick’s sensory focus, magnifies him and underscores the unrelenting formality of the writing.
- 6 Areas of exposed canvas also intimate the atmosphere of tentativeness which surrounds Nick’s sojourn into the countryside. We see Nick take pause in the face of various decisions: to make coffee the Hopkins way or not, to strike out for the river sooner or later, and of course, whether to fish the swamp. In each of these wavering moments, Hemingway allows space into the prose, the unexposed canvas of the story is suggestive but equally resistant to any confirmation of depth. At times, Hemingway emphasizes this spatial patience with visual cues that echo it. On his way to the river, Nick seeks shelter from the sun in an island of trees and lies down to take a nap. Hemingway writes:

The branches were high above. Some interlocked to make a solid shadow on the brown forest floor. Around the grove of trees was a bare space. It was brown and soft underfoot as Nick walked on it. This was the over-lapping of the pine needle floor, extending out beyond the width of the high branches. The trees had grown

tall and the branches moved high, leaving in the sun this bare space they had once covered with shadow. (166)

The bare space Nick discovers is like the exposed paper in Cézanne's watercolor; it exists among other colors and forms, but is recognized as an emergent, shifting absence. Lilion Brion-Guerry describes this quality in Cézanne as a "hesitant breathing." She explains that when the artwork is "no longer encased within its limits, it may recede or overflow its own volume...The image 'breathes' like a living being" (Brion-Guerry 79). This potentiality for expansion or retraction occurs when other traditional outlining factors disappear; in "Big Two-Hearted River" the sense of anonymity that surrounds Nick results not in loneliness but in a kind of shelter for free will.

- 7 The brushstrokes that do appear on the canvas or page in these works are short, repetitive, and concentrated. With effort we can spot patches in Cézanne's late landscapes that stand in for houses or rooftops or trees, but really what they do is break up the view and keep the viewer's gaze perpetually animated on the surface of the painting. What I find most relevant to Hemingway here is the lack of sequence or ascending order in the concentration of paint; there is connectivity and chromatic modulation without the assurance of linear or classical perspective. In a helpful study devoted to "Big Two-Hearted River," Elizabeth Wells breaks down Hemingway's prose style to show how short his sentences are (they average 12 words and almost half are well below that average), and explains that this brevity occurs when Hemingway repeats a subject at the start of two simple sentences, rather than creating a complex one (Wells 131). I agree that Hemingway steers clear of complex sentences but also find that his longer sentences are composed of series of phrases, all short, simple, and highly visual. This frequent use of the compound sentence form allows him to attribute equal weight to all the clauses in a sentence, rather than creating a hierarchy of logic. Hemingway's use of prepositions and conjunctions I find *fundamental* to his painterly approach to writing. They function like facets or hooks, or what Kurt Badt refers to as "shadow-paths" in Cézanne. Badt writes:

Cézanne's new interpretation of how the boundaries of things appear in space – by means of the shadow-paths placed between them, which sometimes follow the outlines of a thing, sometimes go away out beyond them [...] but which always belong to several solids and are determined by the fact that several solids are existing together. (Badt 52)

Badt's attention to these shadow-paths allows us to see how, despite the fragmented quality of Cézanne's paintings, an organic relationship persists among seemingly abstract elements so as to produce a sense of totality. So too, Wells shows that Hemingway consistently writes in a way that emphasizes simultaneity and material immediacy. He prefers conjunctions that propose concurrent action (like "as" or "while") rather than those that establish causality ("since," "because," or "if"). I also believe that Hemingway uses prepositions to make simple sentences longer and more mobile without losing the power of direct expression. He hooks together series of prepositional phrases to form a connective tissue over the landscape.

- 8 Hemingway's use of Cézanne's painterly technique is quite deliberate here for it allows him to show Nick's sensorium undergoing a subtle transformation. In his book on World War I, Eric Leed describes some of the destructive, psychic effects of battle on war veterans like Nick. Among other debilitating conditions are a severance of the "thick tissues of connectivity" that weld separate events together, and the elimination

of one's ability to order collective experience in a rational sequence of what comes first and what comes later (Leed 130-131). These two cognitive activities link up the human sensorium with the psyche and are treated by Hemingway vis-à-vis the visuality made available to him in Cézanne's paintings. He shows Nick at a very particular postwar moment; he is beginning to relate phenomena and create an organic image of the world but still fails to register most details in any kind of pattern or sequential order. This explains Hemingway's preference for conjunctions that suggest concurrent rather than causal relations, as well as his use of either simple or compound (but rarely complex) sentences. He experiments with the prose to approximate a Cézanne landscape which lacks an orderly or classical perspective but achieves a kind of enmeshed vitality regardless. The patches of color or word phrases mesh closely and produce a picture world that *is country*. Consider a passage from Part I of the story:

Nick stood up. [...] He stood *with the pack on his back on the brow of the hill looking out across the country toward the distant river and then struck down the hillside away from the road*. Underfoot the ground was good walking. [...] Then it was sweet fern, growing ankle high, *to walk through, and clumps of jack pines; a long undulating country with frequent rises and descents, sandy underfoot and the country alive again*.

[...] He kept *on through* the pine plain, mounting small rises to see other rises *ahead of him and sometimes from the top of a rise a great solid island of pines off to his right or his left*. (165, emphasis mine)

Hemingway is not describing a landscape here, he is making one. There is an internally mimetic quality to the passage: rather than mirroring nature, it folds back upon itself to build a natural landscape with language. The compound sentences are incremental but grow with three-dimensional plasticity. Series of prepositions and conjunctions make the prose supple, creating a "long undulating country with frequent rises and descents." Action verbs get a lot of credit from Hemingway critics, and indeed they do contribute to the dynamism of the writing. But the painterly effect, the Cézanne effect, occurs when Hemingway employs the linear conditions of language in order to circumvent them. This is also what gives the story its lush effect, despite the apparent simplicity of the language Hemingway uses. Like Cézanne's color patches, his conjunctions and prepositions create contours without sedimenting the image.

- 9 The rhythm of the prose also recalls Cézanne's systematic work with chromatic modulations. In another very late painting of Mont Sainte-Victoire, the buoyancy we perceive in the landscape results not only from small strokes of different color patches but also from their situated tension. A detail of the same painting shows how brushstrokes move in a parallel and perpendicular fashion with respect to the horizontal planes of the painting, so that each patch (and in fact, each stroke within it) collides with the other, rather than merely stacking or lining up. Cézanne also stimulates the painting's surface by invoking unexpected color marks, like the vertical and nearby horizontal orange brushstrokes that stand out amidst a mostly blue field of tonal development. Similarly, Hemingway evokes formal tension with his use of active verbs but also with repetitive prepositions that jerk and pull the prose in different directions, keeping it mobile and prodding the reader along. Despite the bucolic setting of the story, it is rendered perpetually strange, especially when Nick acts within it. In the following example, notice how present participles and prepositions work together to deliver a new rhythm to the ear and to give the prose a prismatic quality as in painting:

Holding the rod far out toward the uprooted tree and sloshing backward in the current, Nick worked the trout, plunging, the rod bending alive, out of the danger of the weeds into the open river. Holding the rod, pumping alive against the current, Nick brought the trout in. He rushed, but always came, the spring of the rod yielding to the rushes, sometimes jerking under water, but always bringing him in. Nick eased downstream with the rushes. The rod above his head he led the trout over the net, then lifted. (178)

Let us start with the last sentence because in some ways, it is the most peculiar. The sentence begins oddly with a direct object (“the rod”) of the supposedly omitted verb “holding” followed immediately by the prepositional phrase locating it “above his head,” thus introducing visual juxtaposition and simultaneity. Picture here Cézanne’s orange brushstrokes that run perpendicular to the blue in the previous painting detail. Also, by placing this phrase early in the sentence, Hemingway makes room for another, just four words later. “Over the net” positions the fish just as “above his head” does the rod, so that there are two horizontal planes on either side of the verticality of Nick’s body. The sentence ends with “then lifted,” alternating back again to the vertical. This shifting planar intensity does not describe the thematic tension of fishing, but *follows* it, as when Cézanne says he wants to paint *after* nature. The sentences here are nearly all top-heavy (recalling the looming Mont Sainte-Victoire), for Hemingway doubles up on subordinate clauses at the start before concluding with a succinct main clause. The phrases swing the reader’s imaginative eye back and forth across the landscape, “far out toward the uprooted tree” while “sloshing backwards” and “yielding to the rushes.” These swooping angles crisscross to create a totalizing image space even as they fragment and diversify it. As with the previous passage, Hemingway’s writing is clearly self-reflexive here; Nick works the trout as the language itself works exhaustively, the verbs (“sloshing,” “holding,” “plunging,” “pumping,” “bending,” “yielding”) are nearly all present participles and the phrases, as usual, are kept brief. This is Cézanne country.

- 10 The odd effect of the writing on the reader’s ear comes from the blend of simple language in irregular form. When spoken aloud, it almost seems natural, but in a hermetic way, as though it sounds right so long as we stay in the story. Yet looking at its surface, the prose appears disjunctive, repetitive, sculptured – in other words, highly formalized. The complete authority of that linguistic style emerges because it is all Nick’s world. Or as Robert Gibb puts it, “[this writing] gives us a world and a point of view. It does even more. It gives us the world as point of view” (Gibb 257).
- 11 The immediacy of the third person perspective in “Big Two-Hearted River” brings me to the other side of the artwork equation – from the aesthetic to the organic. Both Hemingway and Cézanne are invested in sensation, in a relationship with nature that is not imitative, but actual and engaging. The artwork’s energy is paradoxical; surface formality is born from a keen (almost spiritual) attention to the natural world. Hemingway initiates the reader into this experiential mode with the vignette that precedes Part I of “Big Two-Hearted River.” Titled “Chapter XIV,” this passage is about the bullfighter Maera. It stands out from the other vignettes or “Chapters” because of its acute focus on sensation. Most of the vignettes take up motifs of war, bullfighting or crime, and are almost brittle in their photographic mode. Their language is distant, precise, and ironic. But “Chapter XIV” immediately shifts from a detached third person voice to subjective proximity, inhabiting the bodily sensations of the bullfighter as he is dying. What is really interesting to compare is how Hemingway manages to maintain



the mood of grim inevitability that haunts the other vignettes while accessing a great sensual intimacy with Maera, thereby expressing something like pathos. The language of the vignette is striking both in its materiality and formal experimentation:

Maera lay still, his head on his arms, his face in the sand. He felt warm and sticky from the bleeding. Each time he felt the horn coming. Sometimes the bull only bumped him with his head. Once the horn went all the way through him and he felt it go into the sand [...]. Maera felt everything getting larger and larger and then smaller and smaller. Then it got larger and larger and larger and then smaller and smaller. Then everything commenced to run faster and faster as when they speed up a cinematograph film. Then he was dead. ("Chapter XIV," 161)

Here, Hemingway frequently uses the word "feel," and modifies it with tactile sensations that invoke the body and bring the reader close to Maera. The language he uses to show how Maera feels is also highly visual so that the combination of the two – "felt" repeated with visual signifiers – has a kind of synaesthetic effect that contributes to the overall sense of tragedy in the passage. We are simultaneously watching and feeling what happens to Maera, going in and out of the canvas, so to speak. Hemingway echoes this movement when he repeats the words "larger" and "smaller" at the end of the passage, in order to alter the rhythm of language and, once again, demonstrates a self-reflexive style so that the writing mirrors the reader's imaginative movement which mirrors the cinematograph film which in turn mirrors death.

- 12 The passage captures the paradoxical structure of "Big Two-Hearted River" in that it is self-consciously stylized and at the same time utterly material and sensuous. "Big Two-Hearted River" also accesses a tangible domain of experience by incorporating language that expresses a synaesthetic response to the world. Not only are Nick's sensations heightened throughout the story, they overlap and associate with each other. Rocks are "water-smooth," bark is "gray to the touch," and the world is seen through the "heat-light" of the afternoon. These word-pairs summon materiality while invoking aesthetic formality through their visual cues. As when he plays with sentence structure and repetition, here Hemingway gives language a kick while operating within the simplicity of motif.
- 13 The total body sensorium is activated in the story, but vision is still the predominant experience for Nick. He sees the world in a way that metonymically recalls Maera's death; that is, his vision zooms in and out of perspective (getting larger and smaller), capturing infinite detail in one moment and landscape in the next. This double vision recalls T. J. Clark's observation about Cézanne: "The painter's conviction that in a world made up of matters the being-in-the-eye of an object is also its being-out-there-at-a-distance, known to us only by acquaintance" (Clark, *Farewell*, 159). Clark's comment seems to represent the reader's odd experience of being both aloof and near to Maera's death. In Cézanne, the perspectives of Mont Sainte-Victoire are never simply vistas; the painting surface teems with brushy detail and any small corner of the valley reveals crosshatches of color that from a distance suggest, merely, the edge of a roof or perhaps a red wall amidst the trees. To see like the painter, one must engage the work on both micro and macro levels. Hemingway recognizes this and tries to put such "dimensions" into his writing. This is a daunting task for the prose, like the landscapes, is curiously detached and unadorned. It must maintain a double-edged visuality, itself juxtapositional, and Hemingway keeps us close to Nick to see it.
- 14 Early in the story, Nick stands on a bridge and sees the fish in the river below. Here Hemingway explicitly invokes the visual process – each time the prose zooms in closer



to the object; the reader is brought nearer to the fish and we see more as Nick does. His vision captures irregularities – shadows that do not fit bodies, shifting planes of water, angles cutting through surfaces. Everything seems denaturalized, formalized, and yet, all the more real for its magnified sensuality. Likewise, consider Cézanne's *Le Pont de Maincy*, which was owned by the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery until 1930, and very likely shown at the exhibition Hemingway attended there in the spring of 1924. One of the few paintings made of this particular motif, it seems a perfect setting for Nick's study of fish from the bridge. But a merely thematic parallel is dull and does not get at the power of the work, particularly at this early stage in Cézanne's career. To understand this painting, we must grasp its inconsistencies and work the eye in several ways at once. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes that "dissonance is the truth about harmony," and this particular landscape, with its strange cacophonous beauty, urges us to see more carefully to locate the balancing power that makes it, literally, *work* (Adorno 110). The dark shadows and reflections below the bridge capture the gaze immediately like a black hole in the painting's center. This centripetal pull is helped by the busy world above the bridge as well where Cézanne shows his early experimentation with the short choppy patches of color; their extreme brevity in some cases tempered by the fact that here they all move in the same diagonal direction. Just as they hit the slim horizontal branch overhead, however, the painting changes. To the right are long slender trunks, their black paint oddly smooth, and only occasionally marred by a sketchy green. But to the left, in the upper corner, a strange pale confusion gives the canvas a somewhat unfinished feeling; white and green paint are distressing, they do not fit any particular pattern nor are they patched in like the density of the middle leaves. In fact, they are stretched so broadly that they seem incomplete, only belonging to this painting with its dark center of damp green because of the horizontal branch that connects one side of the canvas to the other. This corner, along with the horizontal peachy brushstrokes below and the mottled stone bridge, catch the viewer off-guard and radicalize chromatic rhythm, so that the eye shuttles busily but also attempts to encompass parts into a whole.

- 15 The complexity of brushstrokes in this work really shows how Cézanne builds a canvas from the inside out, creating forms with his brushstrokes so that the painting surface always remains activated despite its geometric composition. In fact, when seen from a distance, this landscape painting uncannily resembles an interior, with trunks for pillars and leaves for wallpaper. The chromatic structure is so embedded and intense that it creates a hermetic atmosphere, bringing the viewer into him or herself as well as into the world of the artwork. The visual effect of the painting's formal principles is, consequently, paradoxical. It makes the viewer feel both at home and estranged. Put another way, Charles Altieri describes Cézanne's landscapes thus: "The tonal effects of light seem so tightly woven into the subtlest nuances of feeling that looking out, and looking within, become inseparably linked. This basic relation between eye and object makes the most delicate of self-reflexive states themselves part of the immanent life of the visual field" (Altieri 175). In a sense, we might be able to think of visuality as a motif for Cézanne as much as the hills or the river. The act of seeing is approached by the artist as an aspect of nature, elemental in its constructive power. Hemingway underscores this subtle bond between the eye and the world by granting Nick a kind of painterly vision. Now let us turn to the bridge scene in the story:

Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins. As

he watched them they changed their positions by quick angles, only to hold steady in the fast water again. Nick watched them a long time.

He watched them holding themselves with their noses into the current, many trout in deep, fast moving water, slightly distorted as he watched far down through the glassy convex surface of the pool, its surface pushing and swelling smooth against the resistance of the log-driven piles of the bridge. (163)

The agility of vision here demonstrates the variety of brushstrokes and perspectives Cézanne presents in the painting. The water is both clear and brown because it is colored from below, the pebbles seen through its transparency. In one sentence, Hemingway gives his reader three levels of perspective. This visual complexity is mirrored by the fish who are both steady and wavering, their noses create slight conical breakers in the water, they are still and yet quickly angling. All the water, deep water, fast moving, flows around them. Finally the surface of the water itself sustains a multiplicity of form: convex, glassy, pushing and swelling. These variations exist because of Nick's visual versatility, as well as a kind of logic that is capable of grasping the whole at once. Similarly, in *Le Pont de Maincy*, Cézanne presents a peculiar landscape made up of disparate, competing elements and yet the picture hangs together, at times by the slimmest branch of connectivity or the mere presence of a shadow-path. It is a provocative world because in looking at it, one sees what was necessary to make it; that is to say, it reveals the vision that made it a possibility. About Cézanne, Clark writes: "The world has to be pictured as possessed by the eye, indeed 'totalized' by it; but always on the basis of exploding or garbled or utterly intractable data – data that speak to the impossibility of synthesis even as they seem to provide the sensuous material for it" (Clark, "Phenomenality," 105). This totalizing effort is manifested at the start of the story when Nick gazes down into the river and simply observes that the "the river was there."

- 16 Hemingway also shows Nick seeing the world at a distance; his vision exercises itself on a range of motifs. When hiking to his campsite, at one point, Nick looks out over the countryside as if peering at a view of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Here, his expansive visuality resembles Cézanne's effort "to picture the world as possessed by the eye," revealing how, despite its sustained color and completeness, this landscape painting is quite dynamic. The kind of vision required for this undertaking must not fix the particulars it recognizes, but allow them to be mobile and activate different regions of the picture plane. In the story, Hemingway suggests that the sensitive eye can generate this plasticity. He writes:

Ahead of him, as far as he could see, was the pine plain. The burned country stopped off at the left with the range of hills. On ahead islands of dark pine trees rose out of the plain. Far off to the left was the line of the river. Nick followed it with his eye and caught glints of the water in the sun. There was nothing but the pine plain ahead of him, until the far blue hills that marked the Lake Superior height of land. He could hardly see them, faint and far away in the heat-light over the plain. If he looked too steadily they were gone. But if he only half-looked they were there, the far-off hills of the height of land. (164)

Nick's perspective here is connective, not hierarchical. His eye sweeps across the landscape and sees how things fit together, the pine trees rising out of the plain or the line of the river as glinting contour. The elements fill in the picture plane both vertically and horizontally so that rather than classical perspective, he creates a lively, moving landscape that achieves Hans Hofmann's "push-and-pull effect," generating three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional canvas. Most striking about this passage, however, is the heightened attention to *how* Nick sees. The world manifests

more material for his eye as he produces new ways of looking. Just as in the earlier moment at the bridge when Hemingway repeats the phrase “Nick watched a long time,” here he reiterates the visual act and consequently expands what is seen. By only “half-looking,” he is able to see what is otherwise “gone;” he uses the synaesthetic mediation of ‘heat-light’ to access the full height of land and gain proximity to the hills. This resourcefulness carries the subjective force of visuality that makes Cézanne or Hemingway’s work both expressive and aloof. Cézanne references the infinite potential of visuality in a letter to his son, writing: “Here on the edge of the river the motifs are very plentiful; the same subject seen from a different angle gives a subject for study of the highest interest and so varied that I think I could be occupied for months without changing my place, simply by bending a little more to the right or left” (Rewald 259). Simple motifs may provide ample material because the imaginative potential of vision creates the world. The landscape refuses to be seen by just anyone. It requires a skilled eye to exercise new habits of seeing, or to break old ones, and thus to catch glimpses that double as moments of world-making.

- 17 Ultimately, this brings me to what I think Hemingway invents in “Big Two-Hearted River” and how Cézanne helps him get there. He is trying to show, through language, how an individual comes back to life. I do not dispute that the story is about coming back from the war, with no mention of the war in it (Hemingway, *Moveable*, 76). However, I do not think Nick is numb or escaping experience out of fear. True, he does not fish the swamp, but he does a lot before he gets there, and the world of the story cares most about where Nick *is*, rather than where he is *not*. He is learning how to live again and to suggest this, Hemingway must show how Nick begins to look and feel again. Those who fought in World War I had lost “the logic of organized sensations.” As Martin Jay puts it, “after this experience, men could no longer believe their eyes” (Jay 213). Nick wants to re-enter the visual field, experience it tangibly and reacquire familiarity with the materials at hand. In the process, he actually stimulates his senses to a new versatility. It is a slow, painstaking process and requires the simplicity of motif.
- 18 After Cézanne, the young Hemingway picks for his landscape the unwavering stuff of nature: the river, hills, an island of trees, fish which allow him to test Nick’s awakening sensorium. The familiarity of this terrain enables Nick to open out to sensation (synaesthesia) rather than shutting down (anaesthesia). Susan Buck-Morss writes that “the nervous system is not contained within the body’s limits,” and she also reminds us that “Freud situated consciousness on the surface of the body” (Buck-Morss 12-13). These observations underscore the importance of a careful study of the infinitesimal discoveries Nick makes in the story for it is here that he dwells in a space of “hesitant breathing.” The potential for expansion or retraction made available to color planes in Cézanne’s watercolors, here makes fluid Nick’s interpenetration with other surface phenomena. He is acutely aware of sensations, of his body in space. Predominant among these sensory activities is Nick’s vision, for in its careful and tentative sifting through materiality, it seems simultaneously the safest and most definitive way for him to re-enter the world. Charles Altieri describes the transformative potential of visuality in Cézanne’s landscapes: “What we see depends on how we see, which depends on who we become as we see” (Altieri 174). Sensations in the story allow us to experience how Nick sees in each moment and consequently, who he becomes. Sensitivity, intelligence,

comprehension – these qualities emerge – but so does a budding resilience. Consider this moment, just after he loses the big fish in the river:

He went over and sat on the logs. He did not want to rush his sensations any. [...] He sat on the logs, smoking, drying in the sun, the sun warm on his back, the river shallow ahead entering the woods, curving into the woods, shallows, light glittering, big water-smooth rocks, cedars along the bank and white birches, the logs warm in the sun, smooth to sit on, without bark, gray to the touch; slowly the feeling of disappointment left him. [...] It was all right now. (177)

Nick does “not want to rush his sensations;” indeed, with the help of conjunctions and prepositions, the prose continually circles and floats, landing now on a tactile sensation, now on a visual discovery. Although this scene is commonly read as the dramatization of traumatic loss, it could also be a moment of sustenance where the absence of something becomes a structural necessity for internal change. Nick wants to take in the moment, not reject it. Before continuing to act, he pauses, dwelling in sensation, feeling the heat of the sun, the smoothness of the rocks, allowing the actuality of space to fill his immediate lack. Also, he looks at the world and finds it dynamic, connective, detailed. This vision is not a flight from life but an exercise in human being and world-making.

- 19 When Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that Cézanne wanted “to make *visible* how the world *touches* us,” he is attempting to relate visibility and tangibility (Merleau-Ponty 69-70). Hemingway also emphasizes the synaesthetic effects of visuality by recreating the conditions that allow seeing to be *felt*. When Nick watches the fish in the river, he is reclaiming his psychic life rather than fleeing from it. The more angular and subtle Nick’s vision, the greater the feeling he experiences. After Cézanne, Hemingway here is making visible how the world touches Nick; by breaking down the elemental process of seeing, by focusing on the simplest motif, he is able to isolate and magnify experience. The close third person perspective of the story makes it possible for the reader to see how Nick produces this visionary world. Who does Nick become as he sees? He becomes whole again. I believe that Hemingway wanted to show this process *in the moment* of its happening which, in a sense, is why nothing much happens in the story. Its most innovative moments occur in the shadow-paths of action.
- 20 T.J. Clark offers an interesting definition of modernism in his book *Farewell to an Idea*. He calls it “the art of the time that is not yet ripe” (160). I think that Hemingway hones in on this quality by allowing his protagonist to see the world as Cézanne might. The hesitant spaces in which Nick rests or remains reticent, the long curving sentences that escalate into acute and momentary joy, the subtle nestling of visibility and tangibility; all these experiences are so newborn, so daring. The fishing trip in “Big Two-Hearted River” feels like an activity outside of time, or an interlude, before Nick returns to the world where he is not so nearly cloaked with anonymity. But it is also the revelation of a time that is not yet ripe. Nick is re-learning the world; his sensorium is not completely repaired, though it is burgeoning. In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway expresses his dismay with Gertrude Stein’s charge that the generation who went to war, his generation, is lost. I think that “Big Two-Hearted River” demonstrates Hemingway’s challenge to that pronouncement for he shows Nick not only coming to life, but producing a way to see that makes the world alive for those who inhabit it. Through his sensations, we, too, see the mountains only when we half-look, as we see the several layers of pushing water under the surface of the river, as we see the chromatic

structure that builds landscape and makes Cézanne's world of painting a vivid experience.

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## NOTES

1. Some critics have offered helpful readings on this topic, although few conduct close readings of "Big Two-Hearted River," using the painterly vocabulary that pronounces Hemingway's affiliation with Cézanne. See Ron Berman who places great emphasis on visuality but focuses primarily on parallels in imagery, such as bends in the road, mountains, and other forms of landscape seen in both writing and painting. See also Lawrence Stanley who supplies helpful biographical support for the influence of Cézanne on Hemingway, but does not emphasize the short story's form and provides few close readings that show the reader how theory was implemented into practice. Another relatively recent study is Theodore Gaillard's "Hemingway's Debt to Cézanne: New Perspectives," in which the author extrapolates the psychological dimension of this parallel but does not attend to visuality or the imaginative aspect of the artwork.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on "Big Two-Hearted River" and the influence of Cézanne on the story's structural innovations. Although this aesthetic relationship is often mentioned in Hemingway criticism, scholars rarely conduct a rigorous formal study of these two distinctive Modernist moments, and the creative process involved in carrying out such a cross-disciplinary project. This paper will attempt to delve deeper. Using the principles of post-impressionist art, I show how Hemingway uses visuality to craft dramatic tension and tone without relying on traditional categories of storytelling. This paper also performs readings on Cézanne's landscape paintings, particular those of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Every element of the formal art-making process becomes functional and innovative – word choice in Hemingway and color in Cézanne create structure, descriptions of sensation decelerate time and expand space, and an emphasis on point of view underscores the formality and aloof tone of the works.

Cet essai analyse "Big Two-Hearted River" à la lumière des apports de Cézanne en ce qui concerne ses innovations structurelles. Certes, la relation esthétique entre les deux artistes a été mentionnée à plusieurs reprises par les commentateurs, mais peu de critiques ont fait des analyses formelles rigoureuses de ces deux moments modernistes typiques, ou du processus créatif mis en place pour réaliser ce projet inter-disciplinaire. Cet essai tâche d'aller plus loin. S'appuyant sur les principes artistiques du post-impressionnisme, je montre comment Hemingway utilise la visualité pour créer le ton et la tension dramatiques, sans recourir aux schémas narratifs traditionnels. L'étude est également une lecture de certains tableaux de Cézanne, notamment la série "Mont Sainte-Victoire". Chaque élément du processus artistique créatif devient fonctionnel et novateur. Le choix du mot chez Hemingway et de la couleur chez Cézanne créent la structure, la description des sensations ralentit le temps et étend l'espace, et la mise en valeur du point de vue souligne l'aspect formel et le ton distant des œuvres.