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The writer as fisherman: Hemingway and Wordsworth

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In everyday speech, in literature, in psychological writing, both psychoanalytical and academic, we fairly often find language – "stream of consciousness," for example, or "depth psychology" – that implicitly compares the mind or psyche to a body of water. But though we are familiar enough with this comparison and have an easy intuitive understanding of it, surprisingly little has been said explicitly about the underlying conceptual metaphor: THE MIND IS A BODY OF WATER. There are some exceptions to this statement. One is the paper, which anyone interested in this subject will want to read, that María Sánchez-Vizcaíno presented a year ago in Córboda. But as Sánchez-Vizcaíno's title indicates – "The Waters of the Mind: Rhetorical Patterns of Fluidity in Woolf, William James, Bergson and Freud" – she is mainly concerned with *flow*. Today I am more interested in the issue of *depth*. And so I would like to begin with a passage by E. M. Forster, taken from his account of the English national character and its relation to English literature. "People," Forster writes,

> talk of the mysterious East, but the West also is mysterious. It has depths that do not reveal themselves at the first gaze. We know what the sea looks like from a distance: it is of one colour, and level, and obviously cannot contain such creatures as fish. But if we look into the sea over the edge of a boat, we see a dozen colours, and depth below depth, and fish swimming in them. That sea is the English character – apparently imperturbable and even. The depths and the colours are the English romanticism and the English sensitiveness – we do not expect to find such things, but they exist. And – to continue my metaphor – the fish are the English emotions, which are always trying to get up to the surface, but don't quite know how. For the most part we see them moving far below, distorted and obscure. Now and then they succeed and we exclaim, "Why, the Englishman has emotions! he actually can feel!" And occasionally we see that beautiful creature the flying fish, which rises out of the water altogether into the air and the sunlight. English literature is a flying fish. It is a sample of the life that goes on day after day beneath the surface; it is a proof that beauty and emotion exist in the salt, inhospitable sea. (17)

Like the sea, then, the mind has a surface, which is directly visible; below its surface, the mind, like the sea, has depths. In both cases – in both the "source" and the "target" domains – the depths are less easily visible and less easily accessible than the surface. In the depths of the sea (or of a lake or pond

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or even river) there reside living creatures, which may be of great value and beauty, although, to add a point that Forster does not make, they may also be repulsive or frightening. In Forster's rather restrictive mapping of the metaphor these living creatures correspond in the target domain (mind) to *emotions*-to *feelings*. In fact, however, in psychology and especially perhaps in psychoanalysis, they correspond more generally to *mental phenomena*: emotions yes, but also desires and wishes and fears and memories. On occasion these submarine creatures – Forster's flying fish – make themselves visible without any outside intervention. So too, in the target domain, do certain mental phenomena sometimes rise of themselves from the depths. But there is another, related aspect of the source domain that Forster neglects. For an important human activity consists of *fishing* – of intentionally and sometimes laboriously retrieving subaqueous creatures, bringing them to the surface, and making use of them. Fishing can be vital – and this fact can carry great symbolic significance – on account of its ability to provide *sustenance*.

In the target domain, that of the mind or psyche, fishing corresponds to the attempt to retrieve feelings, memories, and the like from the region of the mind that is normally not visible and that is not immediately accessible. Such a metaphor is used frequently in psychoanalysis (in addition to the archeological, subterranean metaphor that Freud was so fond of). Indeed, perhaps on account of the influence of psychoanalysis, images of fishing are sometimes used even in everyday life to express an effort to recall forgotten memories – we might "plumb the depths" of our memory in an attempt to "fish up" some forgotten information. But the most interesting examples of piscatorial images to symbolize the retrieval of psychic material from the depths of consciousness probably come from literature – and have to do with the creation of literature.

I'm going to look at three works in which fishing is used, as it seems to me, to symbolize the psychological effort needed to bring a literary work into existence. The first two (which are so interconnected that they could count as one) are the short stories that conclude Hemingway's collection *In Our Time*: "Big Two-Hearted River: I" and "Big Two-Hearted River: II" The third is Wordsworth's poem "Resolution and Independence." Time being short, I'm afraid that today I'll have to examine these works in a fairly summary way.

The "Big Two-Hearted River" stories are extremely detailed descriptions of a solitary fishing trip, "Big Two-Hearted River: I" setting the scene, "Big Two-Hearted River: II" describing the actual fishing. In the first of the stories, Nick Adams gets off a train at a town that has been utterly destroyed by fire. Then he hikes over country that has been "burned over and changed" (309). But before very long the burned country ends. Late in the day, Nick reaches a meadow with the river flowing at its edge. He looks "down the river at the trout rising... to insects come from the swamp on the other side of the stream when the sun went down" (312). On some high ground overlooking the meadow he carefully makes camp, and is "happy" (313). After supper, he remembers anecdotes from an earlier fishing trip. At this point he notes, apparently with some concern, that "his mind was starting to work." He knows, however, that "he could choke it because he was tired enough" (316). And indeed he gets into bed, and goes to sleep.

The story hints at some kind of inner torment that makes Nick's escape into what he thinks of as the "good place" (313) especially necessary and meaningful, not to say therapeutic, for him. Exactly what this torment consists of we do not know. But from the other stories in *In Our Time* we know that in his personal life and, especially, in his experience of World War I, Nick has both witnessed and experienced significant violence and loss. He has been wounded physically. It's reasonable to believe that he is suffering from psychic wounds too,[1] and in fact a story from a later volume confirms that

[1] There is some controversy on this point. To a great extent the Nick Adams stories are autobiographical, and many critics feel that "Big Two-Hearted River" has to do with the aftermath of Hemingway's having been wounded in World War I. Kenneth Lynn, however, has forcefully argued that what lies behind the two stories is a quarrel between the young Hemingway and his mother, not Hemingway's war experiences (102-08). It is also possible (though Lynn does not seem to think so) that both explanations hold true at the same time. For the reading of the story given here, the reason behind Nick's inner turmoil is of not of crucial importance. The main point is that he is in turmoil. About that there is general agreement.

Nick's wound, apparently to the head, damaged him mentally and led to his being "certified as nutty" ("A Way You'll Never Be" 505).

Given that, it is very difficult to read "Big Two-Hearted River: I" without a sense that the desolation of the landscape mirrors or expresses something in Nick himself, whose experiences have, metaphorically, laid waste to his psyche as the fire has laid waste to the town and the land. There appears to be further symbolism, moreover, in the story's last paragraph, devoted largely to Nick's killing a mosquito, which appears to annoy him even though he is protected from it by his tent and by the cheese cloth that he has hung over the entrance specifically as a barrier to mosquitoes. Now, in all likelihood the mosquito comes from the *swamp*, which breeds insects. And there is, in that last paragraph, just before Nick hears the mosquito, a rather odd mention of the swamp:

> Out through the front of the tent he watched the flow of the fire, when the night wind blew on it. It was a quiet night. The swamp was perfectly quiet. Nick stretched under the blanket comfortably. (316)

What is the point of the sentence about the swamp? Would the story be any different without it? And why, if the sentence does add something to the story, is it important that the *swamp* is quiet? Wouldn't it have been more natural to say that the *river* was quiet, or that *everything* was quiet? Why the sudden stress on the swamp?

That the swamp, like the burnt out landscape (and like the river itself) has symbolic force is made almost inescapably clear in "Big Two-Hearted River: II," in which Nick fishes the river. He catches one small trout, which he puts back into the water. Then he hooks an enormous trout. He is unable to land it, but the experience is a very great thrill. He does catch one big trout, but loses another when his line catches in some overhanging branches. Then he catches a second big trout. In the course of all this, the narration creates an association between, on the one hand, *big trout* and, on the other, *depth* and *darkness*. Then Nick has lunch. He has been moving downstream, and has nearly reached the swamp. But rather than enter the swamp he ends his fishing for the day.

> Nick did not want to go in there now. He 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 the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches; in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He did not want to go down the stream any farther today. (329)

So Nick treks back to camp. "There were plenty of days coming," the story ends, "when he could fish the swamp" (330). That final sentence seems to carry some mysterious resonance, as if the swamp – and fishing the swamp – were meant to have special significance. This feeling is reinforced by the title of the story. The title "Big Two-Hearted River" invites us to draw a distinction between the clear, fast-flowing river itself which Nick initially fishes, and the dark, stagnant, "tragic" swamp which he says he'll fish another day. Sheridan Baker has suggested that the "Big Two-Hearted River is life-and-death itself." For him, "the swamp represents the darkness of death, of unknowing and the unknown." It is "the biggest mystery of life, and… to be a man Nick must face it" (154).

Baker isn't wrong, but these two stories can be read on a number of levels. On one of them, Nick's fishing trip, which requires him to be alone with himself, seems to me to symbolize a kind of self-confrontation. The swamp, in this reading, represents (among other things) the darker side of Nick's own psyche, containing "tragic" fears and wishes (including, perhaps, death wishes) and memories, including memories of trauma. It is, as Baker says, "unknown" and "a mystery," and it is true that "to be a man Nick must face it." But in both "Big Two-Hearted River" stories Nick has stopped short of facing it. At the end of "Big Two-Hearted River: I" Nick has had to "choke" the working of his mind, and in order to sleep has had to kill a mosquito (presumably come from the swamp) that could not in fact have bitten him. At the end of "Big Two-Hearted River: II" he stops short of going into the

swamp because it would be too "tragic," although the swamp is precisely where his morning's activity has been leading him.

If the swamp represents the darker, hidden, essentially unconscious side of Nick's psyche, then the river would seem to represent the more conscious workings of his sensibility: flowing, complex, strong, and, at times, profound. The fish that Nick is out to catch stand, as I've been implying, for memories and feelings of his own. Catching them means that he has mastered them. "Big Two-Hearted River: II" implies that while he can retrieve and master important memories and feelings from the more accessible regions of his psyche, he is not yet ready to confront those from the deeper, darker, and more "tragic" regions. Now, the last thing I want to do is read these stories as simple allegories. Though the text tells us that Nick is a writer, fishing is not simply to be equated with writing. On the contrary, we have been given an explicit signal that on a literal level one of the purposes of Nick's fishing trip is to allow him to *escape* from writing. Near the beginning of "Big Two-Hearted River: I" he feels that "he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, *the need to write*, other needs" (308, emphasis added). Nevertheless, on a symbolic level Nick's fishing evokes an attempt at retrieving and mastering memories and feelings so as to turn them into works of literature. What I am suggesting is that because of the underlying conceptual metaphor, THE MIND IS A BODY OF WATER, the act of fishing is so congruent with that of writing that, for Nick, the two are inevitably, though perhaps unconsciously, associated. It is this close but unstated parallel between fishing and writing (and the self-confrontation that is inseparable from writing) that gives to the description of fishing in "Big Two-Hearted River: II" its overtones of mysterious, almost numinous significance.

This quasi-numinous identification of fishing with writing, though also found in *The Old Man and the Sea*, is not limited to Hemingway. It is also present, I think, in Wordsworth's poem "Resolution and Independence." In examining this poem, I will not be discussing the kind of nearly metaphysical significance that water can take on in Wordsworth, as seen, for example, in certain very well-known passages from *The Prelude*. I do want to point out, however, that if there is any metaphysical aspect to the water symbolism of "Resolution and Independence," it can be viewed as perfectly complementary to the metaphor that I am discussing: THE MIND IS A BODY OF WATER.

"Resolution and Independence" is the poem where Wordsworth, walking on a moor one fine joyous morning, is inexplicably overcome by a fit of depression. He thinks of Chatterton and Burns, whom he later calls "mighty Poets in their misery dead" (123) and famously concludes, "We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness" (48-49). Then, at the edge of a pond, he encounters the leech-gatherer. Very poor and "bent double" (73) with age – "The oldest Man he seem'd that ever wore gray hairs" (56) – the leech-gatherer is presented as a wonder of nature. Wordsworth compares him to a huge boulder of unknown origin sitting mysteriously on the peak of a mountain and to "a Sea-beast crawl'd forth, which on a shelf / Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun itself" (69-70). The leech-gatherer is, moreover, endowed – like a poet – with a remarkable gift of expression. He seems "not all alive nor dead, / Nor all asleep" (71-72) but when addressed he replies – with a fire about his eyes" (98)[2] – in particularly stately fashion, in "Choice word, and measured speech; above the reach / Of ordinary men" (102-03). Wordsworth perceives him as a kind of prophet-like vision bearing a message: "Like one whom I had met with in a dream; / Or like a Man from some far region sent; / To give me human strength, and strong admonishment" (117-19). The leech-gatherer's message has to do with the qualities named in the poem's title: resolution and independence. He says

> ... that, gathering Leeches, far and wide
> He travelled; stirring thus about his feet
> The waters of the Ponds where they abide.

[2] So reads the original version of the poem. Wordsworth later softened the phrase to "his yet-vivid eyes."

"Once I could meet with them on every side;
But they have dwindled by slow decay;
Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may." (128-33).

Worsdworth, still beset by despondent thoughts, concludes

I could have laughed myself to scorn, to find
In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.
"God," said I, "be my help and stay secure;
I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor." (144-47)

Critics have wondered how the poem manages to make the figure of the old man carry so much weight – how it is that his words about himself should speak so directly and powerfully to Wordsworth. There are multiple answers to those questions. But I would like to propose an additional one of my own. The poem is based, obviously, on the contrast between the resolute leech-gatherer and the despondent Wordsworth. But no contrast is possible without some kind of similarity or parallelism between the two figures. In addition to the obvious similarities there is one, I think, that Wordsworth does not state and probably does not even consciously perceive. You have no doubt worked out what it is. If retrieving subaqueous creatures, like leeches, symbolizes the work of the writer in going into his own psyche and finding there material or inspiration to sustain his own poetic creation, then Wordsworth must in some deep sense *identify* with the leech-gatherer. And if that is so, the leech-gatherer has perhaps revealed the underlying cause of Wordsworth's despondent thoughts. For the old man, it has become harder and harder to find leeches, which have "dwindled" with the passage of time. His situation thus mirrors that of the poet for whom, the first flush of youth having passed, inspiration comes with greater and greater difficulty. Indeed, we know that at the time he wrote this poem Wordsworth was concerned with the waning of that inner responsiveness to nature which had served as the inspiration for so much of his poetry. The collection in which "Resolution and Independence" appears, the 1807 collection called *Poems in Two Volumes*, concludes with the Immortality Ode, a poem that progresses from a lament that "The things which I have seen I now can see no more" (9) to a final resolution that

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind[.] (180-83)

My point, then, is a pretty simple one. In both the Hemingway stories and the Wordsworth poem, the act of "fishing" carries a heavy symbolic weight. All three works appear to be about fishing (or leech-gathering), and they *are*, primarily, about fishing. But in them, via the conceptual metaphor THE MIND IS A BODY OF WATER, the act of fishing is invested, tacitly, with a further and psychologically momentous significance. This unstated attribution of meaning is what gives to all three works their particular aura of mysterious, unstated import.

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