Sentencing: Hemingway’s Aesthetic

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Abstract Ernest Hemingway’s aesthetic—a better term than style—is based on constant acts of choice, decisions that he makes as a writer at every moment about which word and phrase to set down on the page. All writers must make choices—what to include, what to exclude. Hemingway is special because his work as a writer foregrounds this fact. The structure of Hemingway’s sentences makes the reader keenly aware of the words that he has selected and, just as much or more, the countless other possibilities that he has not selected. Hemingway first presented and developed his aesthetic in his major novels and short stories of the 1920s. But this high level of achievement proved very difficult for Hemingway to sustain in the decades that followed. The story of his aesthetic, the shape of his literary career, is both triumphant and tragic.

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I went to the Ayuntamiento and found the old gentleman who subscribes for the bull-fight tickets for me every year, and he had gotten the money I sent him from Paris and renewed my subscriptions, so that was all set. He was the archivist, and all the archives of the town were in his office. That has nothing to do with the story. Anyway, his office had a green baize door and a big wooden door, and when I went out I left him sitting among the archives that covered all the walls, and I shut both the doors, and as I went out of the building into the street the porter stopped me to brush off my coat.

If the reference to the archivist and archives has nothing to do with the story, then why does Jake mention it? Why does Hemingway include it? Hemingway is showing that Jake both seeks order and lapses from it. His pain from his sexually crippling war wound and his unconsummated, unfulfilled love for Brett Ashley make him intent on doing everything—that is, everything he can control—correctly, even as his mind keeps becoming unsettled, upset and distracted by thoughts of her. But, more importantly, Hemingway is dramatizing through Jake the question that every writer faces and that for this writer is the condition, the ground, of the act of writing itself, the opportunity that it offers and the paralysis that it threatens.
How does a writer know what to write—that is, what to put in, what to leave out? This question motivates and defines Hemingway’s aesthetic. It explains why writing for him is less writing than it is editing: setting down a word, a sentence, a paragraph, and then making the crucial decision about whether to keep, change, or cut it. For Hemingway, the acute aesthetic challenge is confronting and making choices about words that have something, everything, or nothing to do with the story.

Later, Jake speaks with the hotel owner, his friend Montoya:

“Well, how did you like the bulls?” he asked.
“Good. They were nice bulls.”
“They’re all right”—Montoya shook his head—“but they’re not too good.”
“What didn’t you like about them?”
“I don’t know. They just didn’t give me the feeling that they were so good.”
“I know what you mean.”
“They’re all right.”
“Yes. They’re all right.”
“How did your friends like them?”
“Fine.”
“Good,” Montoya said.

Presumably this has something to do with the story: it testifies to the connection between Jake and Montoya, which barely requires language to express itself. On the page, the dialogue is flat, almost toneless: the vocabulary is uninteresting, with no embellishment, as though a word of more than a syllable were a burden and a metaphor were unimaginable. This exchange between the two men is, nonetheless, part of the story. It is there. Yet it did not need to be. It does not need to be even now: it contributes something but it does not add anything. It is not essential, but Hemingway decided that it had to be in the story, intact, not deleted.

In “The End of Something,” from In Our Time, the young Nick Adams says to Marjorie that the fish “aren’t striking”:

“No,” Marjorie said. She was intent on the rod all the time they trolled, even when she talked. She loved to fish. She loved to fish with Nick.

Hemingway learned about rhythm and repetition from Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson, and he works here with the “o” sounds and the double “loved.” It is conceivable that the meaning is more heard than seen, experienced more than understood. But there is more to be said about Hemingway’s choices in these sentences, the operation of his aesthetic. Hemingway could have omitted Marjorie’s single word of dialogue. His so-short paragraph might have been sharper without it, focused even more on her act of fishing. On the other hand: Hemingway wanted her to say something, if only a word, to confirm through her voice her bond to Nick. Marjorie loves to fish—the activity in its own right. She loves to fish with Nick: she loves it as much, equally, or maybe more than fishing by herself.

This is the order of the paragraph, the structure and tempo of the sentences. It is firm, steady and secure, but then again it is not really, not when one realizes, as the austere paragraph makes clear, that Hemingway could have done it differently. He could have written more, or less, or kept this cluster of words but reorganized them.

Every word in this paragraph from “The End of Something” counts: it has something, not nothing, to do with the story. The language is pure, unalloyed, as if preserved from contamination. But every word also is given its place in relation, in opposition, to other choices of words that Hemingway could have made instead. The test for the creative and critical mind, exemplified in Hemingway’s work, is how to know, or to convince oneself, that the decision matters about which words to use, that it makes a difference, is not arbitrary. It is not a question of meaning, but of placement, of where to locate words in the configuration of a sentence. Hemingway is not asking, what does this sentence mean? His concern is where he should position the words in it.

Hemingway is highly derivative, and from the research that scholars have done, and from Hemingway himself, we have learned much about the writers, painters, musicians, and institutions that influenced him: his first-rate education in literature and composition at Oak Park, Illinois, high school, 1913–1917; his months, late 1917 to early 1918, as a reporter for the Kansas City Star; his interest in popular magazine fiction of the period; his journalism for the Toronto Star, from February 1920 to January 1924; his friendships with his advisers and mentors Anderson, Stein, and Ezra Pound; his reading and study of Stendhal, Twain, Crane, James, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Kipling, and Conrad, among others; his appreciation of, and the kinship he claimed, with Monet, Cézanne in particular, and other visual artists; and his professed admiration for Bach and Mozart—he said they taught him counterpoint.

While this is illuminating, it does not account for Hemingway’s aesthetic, which possesses a power, a nervous system, all its own. Hemingway’s writing exhibits sources, influences, and literary debts, yet he is immediately recognizable as himself, unlike anyone else. Everywhere in the movements of his words is the pressure of his literary personality, the interior intelligence that is making (that presumes, that dares to make) the choices of which sentences he will write, revise, cut, and decide to keep. It is not just the organization of the language that declares a sequence of sentences to be by Hemingway. It is an indwelling activity of mind, a hum of constant decision making, of decisions made. He seeks accuracy in his prose and affirms its virtue, the sentences informed by robust character, a fortitude that, each instant, the making of (and abiding by) this choice rather than that one requires.
In part I of “Big Two-Hearted River,” Hemingway furnishes precise details to make us see and sense Nick’s fastening of his tent: here again, the writer’s aesthetic is beautifully, and, I now want to say, fearfully at work, the trauma of the character enacted in the fate-filled structure of the sentences. For example: “He pegged the sides out taut and drove the pegs deep, hitting them down into the ground with the flat of the ax until the rope loops were buried and the canvas was drum tight.” (186) There are slight but significant emphases in this sentence: the words “out,” “down,” and “drum” need not be present for the sentence’s meaning but each prompts us to discern more exactly what it is that Nick is doing. The rhythm is vitally important, with the alliterative “t” in “tight,” reaching back to “taught,” sealing the sentence’s arrangement. This is the sentence that Hemingway wants—it seems exactly as it should be, must be—even as it demarcates itself against an array of other sentences that Hemingway could have inscribed on the page instead and that might have been as good or better.

Hemingway could have done this: “He pegged the sides taut and drove the pegs into the ground with the ax. He buried the loops and made the canvas tight.” Other options come to mind, many of them. We could, of course, perform such variations on the sentences of any writer. My claim is that Hemingway, in the functioning of his aesthetic, makes us conscious of the possibility of choice and difference from moment to moment as we read him: it is ground zero for the tension in his best work, his act of sentencing. The sentence that Hemingway writes must be this way: it is as it is. Yet the sentence need not be this way: it appears stable and sounds strong but it is fragile, precarious, and vulnerable to endless revision. Each sentence is closed yet open, perfectly complete in the midst of other possibilities.

The next paragraph of part I begins:

Across the open mouth of the tent Nick fixed cheese cloth to keep out mosquitoes. He crawled inside under the mosquito bar with various things from the pack to put at the head of the bed under the slant of the canvas. Inside the tent the light came through the brown canvas. It smelled pleasantly of canvas. Already there was something mysterious and homelike.

“Crawled” is almost too vivid, too much of an image, and the surprise is Hemingway’s intention. He does and does not want us to linger over the word and ask what it says (and makes of) Nick. A child, a baby? Is the home a womb? Possibly, but to say this is heavy-handed. Hemingway does not, he would not, state such a meaning in a sentence. His sentences are detached from explicit meaning-stating and symbolizing. If Hemingway had become explicit about meanings and symbols, he would have destroyed the impact of his sentences. He is evoking, implying, intimating, not naming; the words that he resists, that he does not use, represent his verdict on the choices that he could have made and that other writers would have made. Sentences like these are judgments on the sentences that other writers write and on those that Hemingway might have written and inserted in their place.

“Various things from the pack”: why not tell us what these are? Does it matter that we do not know, that we are not told? So much is specific elsewhere: the contrast between that specificity and the vagueness in this sentence is disquieting, as is the triple insistence on “canvas.” Hemingway could have written: “…under the slant of the canvas. Inside the tent the light came through. It smelled pleasantly.” As the sentences move from sensory detail to atmosphere, he could have concluded: “The tent was mysterious and homelike.” Or, “The tent was homelike,” or “To Nick, the tent felt mysterious and homelike.” Hemingway made the right choice, the authoritative one. It also was the choice that he did not have to make. His prose is assured, but endangered: the carefully built structure is always on the brink of collapse, letting go, loosing into fragments, scattered among countless other possible (and contending) words, phrases, and sentences.

Hemingway does not say explicitly what are Nick’s feelings, his responses. It is more effective not to, because then we can imagine our way into Nick’s experience and share his sensations as our own. Yet the prose does solicit questions from us: why include the word “mysterious?” What is mysterious about being inside a tent? How does this word fit with “homelike?” Hemingway does not write “mysteriously homelike.” He wants the words to be together yet disjoined. Again Hemingway’s aesthetic creates the pressure of sentences taking their ineluctable place on the page, staking a claim to the space they occupy, but jeopardized by, establishing themselves in relation to, other sentences that beckon to be there.

Hemingway continues to focus on Nick:

Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. 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. Now he was hungry.

We could elucidate why the sentences belong in this pattern and why it works. Nick is ordering his mind, bracing himself, the three uses of “Now” at the start of the sentences like pegs anchoring a tent to the ground. Once the work is “done”—passive voice, twice—then Nick can claim it as something he has made. There it is: he sees and absorbs this fact. He did it himself: he then absorbs this second fact. Homelike is “home”—a greater sense of accomplishment and security. Sheltered and able to breathe freely, Nick allows himself to feel hunger.
When Gertrude Stein finished her reading of young Hemingway’s pages from a novel in progress, she told him, “Begin over again and concentrate.” This is what he did. He concentrated, in the sense of centering his mind on the making of sentences. He concentrated also in his action of paring away, condensing, seeking complexity through stringent simplification. These performances of sentencing rely on the confidence, the audacity, of the writer: he must be confident enough to say that he knows that this sentence must be here; and he must be determined and brave enough to say that he knows that he could have erased this sentence (maybe he should have) and replaced it with others or replaced it with nothing. Hemingway’s Scylla is the blank page that stays blank because no sentence ever could be right and necessary. His Charybdis is the page filled with sentences that lead to other pages filled with sentences interminably, pointlessly. Between these two is Hemingway: he has no rationale or justification for either starting or stopping.

In *A Moveable Feast*, written late in his life, Hemingway recalls that he sometimes struggled when he began a new story:

I would sit in front of the fire and squeeze the peel of the little oranges into the edge of the flame and watch the sputter of blue that they made. I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, “Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence you know.” So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there.

Hemingway wrote these words when he was a battered old man for whom writing true sentences and completing books were painfully impossible tasks. He now is portraying himself when he was a young man in postwar Paris, and the scene he describes of a crisis averted is surprising when we recall that Hemingway was just in his early twenties: one might have guessed that this young man was then much older, with a body of work behind him, who feared he might not live up to the inspired expertise he had shown in the past. In fact, except for newspaper articles, manuscript writings, and stories rejected by editors, Hemingway had at this moment barely begun. How, then, would he begin, make his mark, finish? The extinction of the bits of orange peel, the looking out from on-high over the city: in this recollection, Hemingway describes of a crisis averted is surprising when we recall that Hemingway had no rationale or justification for either starting or stopping. Nothing is more urgent and significant than the making of a sentence—and with it, the decision to keep a sentence as it is. It might endure for centuries. But ultimately it makes no difference which sentences a writer writes: ten thousand or none, it is all the same. The big picture is oblivion; nothing makes a difference. Hemingway’s aesthetic, with its insistent, imperiled choice-making, is designed to come to grips with this reality—not to prevent it, which is impossible, but for as long as possible to postpone it. Persevere at the task and make sentences imbued with strength of will and choice: impede, hold back, the erasure of the page, the effacement of the writer’s presence.

In the passage from *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway tells a story that highlights the mentality that had been slipping away from him for many years. He depicts the stout-heartedness and tenacity that the younger Hemingway possessed—the practice, procedure, and process that the writer entering and reentering his work remembers. He reorients himself; he does what he knows he must do and can do. He writes a sentence, a true one. What is it? The true sentence is the sentence chosen in the face of the knowledge that the number of possible sentences is infinite: all are true; all are false. Hemingway could have crossed it out. Instead, he has faith in it. The truth of his sentence thus is the conviction that he gives to a specific organization of words on the page, the conviction with which readers become intimate and which they find credible and compelling.

Hemingway’s earliest writing is his most convincing. Set to the side the warm-up exercise that is *Three Stories & Ten Poems* (1923)—Hemingway was not a poet. Set to the side, too, *The Torrents of Spring* (1926), a cruel book, mocking Anderson and others, which attests that Hemingway had no talent for comedy or satire. The small-letter *in our time* (1924); *In Our Time* (1925); *The Sun Also Rises* (1926); *Men Without Women* (1927), which includes “Hills Like White Elephants,”
“Ten Indians,” and “The Killers”; and A Farewell to Arms (1929): this is the astounding achievement, by a man in his twenties who honed, who in truth inhabited, an aesthetic that differentiated him from every writer who preceded him (and from whom he had learned) and who would come after him. Then, it all began, and quickly, to fall apart.

Hemingway knew all along that it would. In “In Another Country,” from Men Without Women, Nick Adams, recovering from a wound in a Milan hospital, asks the major: “Why must not a man marry?” The major replies:

“He cannot marry. He cannot marry,” he said angrily. “If he is to lose everything, he should not place himself in a position to lose that. He should not place himself in a position to lose. He should find things he cannot lose.”

The major then tells Nick that his wife has died. The major married; he lost her. The better course would have been for him not to marry, not to have put himself in a position to lose. But the structure of the sentences, with “lose” resounding four times, enforces loss. No one can protect himself against it: it happens, repeatedly. Human beings gain some things. They lose everything. Not a thing that they hold and enjoy, no work, no relationship, is exempt from loss, and this includes the writing that Hemingway was doing in this story from his great years. It is a prophetic story about the act of imagining, of pretending, that there are things that one cannot afford to lose and that one somehow could protect them from the destiny that consumes everything else. But no one can: writing is concentration, choice, expenditure, depletion, loss.

In letters, articles in Esquire, and interviews from the 1930s to his death in 1961, Hemingway voiced his ongoing commitment to the identity as a writer he had defined for himself and achieved in the 1920s. He could not sustain it in practice: he lost it. There are superb stories in Winner Take Nothing (1933), among them “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” “A Way You’ll Never Be,” and “Fathers and Sons.” The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” and “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” both published in 1936, are as authoritative, coruscating, as anything he wrote. But elsewhere in the 1930s, he falters, in decline, his aesthetic fracturing and fragmenting. Perhaps praiseworthy as experiments in literary form, Death in the Afternoon (1932) and Green Hills of Africa (1935) are failures because they are verbose, full of unmoored, expendable words and unmonitored sentences. There is little to no resistance to the narcissism (it aggravates and oppresses the reader) in Hemingway’s tone and point of view. The novel To Have and Have Not (1937): I cannot find a single true, good, or interesting sentence in it.

For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940) is a partial and impressive recovery, with stretches of sharp, precise writing, but it is much too long, with pages that wander and ramble, sentences on automatic pilot. No book for a decade, and then Across the River and Into the Trees (1950), discordant and embittered, keyed to an implausible love-story between a ravishing 18-year old Venetian woman and a grizzled, unhinged 50-year old American colonel, written as if Hemingway were impersonating himself and taunting his aesthetic, a novel by a writer who was not operating as either an editor or a reader of his sentences. For me, The Old Man and the Sea (1952) is affecting as Hemingway’s re-embrace of plain and simple prose, enacting as best he could the control of his sentences, loyal to his cherished commitments even as they decayed. Other readers, to the contrary, maintain that for them this book is facile and hollow, special pleading, an artificial exercise that simulates craftsmanship long gone.

Does Hemingway’s prose in The Old Man and the Sea possess genuine command or only the signs of it, touches and traces on the surface? The sentences might be true; then again, they might be false. Some of us, seeking the revival of Hemingway’s aesthetic, may desire his sentences to be what they are not, which is a temptation or hazard for readers that shadows our experience of Hemingway’s aesthetic even in the midst of his masterpieces of the 1920s. Are we reading, collaborating, or inventing? At its best, Hemingway’s aesthetic succeeds in making us sense and feel great fullness from very little, sometimes, it seems, from next to nothing. This writer makes us highly and complicately articulate about what he resolved, through countless exclusions and abstentions, not to set down explicitly. What matters, is barely there (placed there with deadly accuracy) or is not there at all, like the infinitely expressive single notes and adroit silences of a great jazz trumpeter’s solo.

Hemingway burned to be a novelist: this is where the acclaim and the money were, the prestige. Driven to compete with Stendhal, Flaubert, and Tolstoy, Hemingway concluded that he had to create books of scale and scope, and he did compose two major novels in the 1920s. Yet it could be argued that he should have refrained from writing novels and concentrated instead on short stories, for his aesthetic was not in accord with the longer form. The tendency of a novel is expansion, whereas a short story mandates compression—keeping a sequence of sentences at a certain length and no more, less than a novella, much less than a novel. “Boiling it down always”: this, from a letter, 1933, is Hemingway’s statement of his theory and practice in the stories in Winner Take Nothing. A short story calls constantly for concision and omission. It aligns with the propensities of Hemingway’s aesthetic, its insistence on making do with less. When writing The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms, Hemingway scrutinized his sentences as if line by line he was structuring a short story: he wrote, edited, and revised with rigorous attentiveness, the sovereign of his sentences. He could not do this again, and one wonders why.

In these novels, written in the first-person, Hemingway was connected to his main characters, whose experiences to an
extent mirror his own, but he was separated from them as well.
There was another voice—Jake Barnes’s, Frederic Henry’s—that Hemingway was listening to. Who was making the decisions about the sentences? Hemingway, or Jake and Frederic? This relationship between writer and character, author and narrator, perhaps served for Hemingway as a means of supervision and containment: the writer could dictate to his character how to relate to the act of telling the story—which choices to make, and when, finally, to cease. It is striking in this respect that the final chapters of *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* literally terminate on the page with the words THE END. *To Have and Have Not, For Whom the Bell Tolls, Across the River and Into the Trees,* and *The Old Man and the Sea,* do not.

Denouncing the prolific Sinclair Lewis, in a letter, 1940, to his editor Maxwell Perkins, Hemingway said, with an allusion to Lewis’s pockmarked face:

If I wrote as sloppily and shiftily as that freckled prick I could write five thousand words a day year in and year out. My temptation is always to write too much. I keep it under control so as not to have to cut out crap and rewrite. Guys who think they are geniuses because they have never learned how to say no to a typewriter are a common phenomenon. All you have to do is to get a phony style and you can write any amount of words.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Hemingway’s deep affliction as a writer was that he had no restraint, no discrimination. He could not stop writing. He wrote too much; he was not in control; he was not cutting out crap. There were few published books in Hemingway’s final decades, though we should acknowledge that for major projects he could not complete, he did spin out thousands of pages. We know these manuscripts in severely edited forms; the posthumously published books are *Islands in the Stream* (1970), *The Dangerous Summer* (1985), *The Garden of Eden* (1986), and *True at First Light* (1999, and in an expanded text, *Under Kilimanjaro,* 2005). We also have *A Moveable Feast* (1964, published in a “restored” edition, 2009)—Hemingway came close but he did not finish and finalize it. For all their limitations, these ongoing projects testify that Hemingway wrote incessantly, seeking to remain at one with his aesthetic identity: he was unwilling to surrender to a sentence-less existence. But these are manuscripts, not books, and they should not be treated as something they are not. Hemingway goes on and on in them, questing for a destination he never reaches. The exactitude of his supreme prose has deteriorated, and the writing has turned formulaic and discursive, pleonastic, the opposite of inevitable.

Hundreds of pages into the manuscript that became *The Dangerous Summer,* and beleaguered by nonessential phrases and surplus sentences, Hemingway wrote this: “Everything you read in the paper every morning makes you feel too bad to write.” This has nothing to do with the story: here is Hemingway’s hazily expressed, wounded admission that he knows he does not want to do what he is doing. He is immobilized, incapacitated, unable to concentrate and choose, writing but not writing, producing pages that seem to him to come from someone else and that he cannot edit. Hemingway, recalled his fourth wife Mary Welsh, had become by this point “all inward and quiet and inarticulate.”

Could it have been otherwise? From Hemingway’s letters, and from biographies and other sources, we know about the bouts and binges of drinking, the black moods, and the ailments and accidents that befell him in his final decades. But he had been aware for a long time of the damage he had inflicted on himself as a writer, despoiling his aesthetic. With punishing vividness in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” when just in his mid-thirties, Hemingway revealed in the dying writer Harry the enmity of a man who perceives he has wasted his gifts. Harry is dying and knows it: he has corrupted his talent and realizes with self-contempt that he did not accomplish what he should have. Hemingway knew that he was inexorably becoming Harry, a writer who had failed to honor and apply his rare and marvelous skill. This story is not a warning. It is Hemingway’s statement of a change that has already occurred and that cannot be reversed.

“The Snows of Kilimanjaro” ends with Harry’s demise, his mind as it expires entertaining a last illusion that he might be saved. For Hemingway, there was no such illusion: he knew he was done and he had composed his epitaph, sentencing himself and his aesthetic to death. Yet the splendor of this maimed, tormented man is that he summoned the courage to persist in his work, fending off, denying, the reality he had faced and described in his books with excruciating clarity. Year after year, Hemingway told himself that his organizations of words were as good and true as ever. It is remarkable that he lasted as long as he did. Hemingway kept writing, knowing the day would come when he would kill himself. He had to.

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