

What Are People For?



Wendell Berry



Essays

STYLE AND GRACE

Works of art participate in our lives; we are not just distant observers of *their* lives. They are in conversation among themselves and with us. This is a part of the description of human life; we do the way we do partly because of things that have been said to us by works of art, and because of things that we have said in reply.

For a long time, I have been in conversation with Hemingway's "Big Two-hearted River," and with myself *about* "Big Two-hearted River." I have read the story many times, always with affection and gratitude, noticing and naming its virtues, and always seeing clearly in imagination the landscape and all the events of Nick Adams's restorative fishing trip. It is this clarity with which Hemingway speaks his story into the reader's imagination that is his great and characterizing virtue:

The river made no sound. It was too fast and smooth. . . . Nick looked down the river at the trout rising. . . . As far down the long stretch as he could see, the trout were rising, making circles all down the surface of the water, as though it were starting to rain.

There is a moving courage in this plainness, freeing details, refusing clutter.

But that is not what my conversation with this story has been about. It has been about the ending, when Nick has fished down the river to where it leaves the sunlight and enters a heavily wooded swamp. At that point Nick turns back because "in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic."

The story ends: "There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp." I assume that such days were indeed coming, but they do not come in this story. And I have asked myself

what it means that the story ends where it does, and what Hemingway meant by "tragic."

So far, I have been unable to believe that he meant the word literally. The swamp seems to be a place where one might hook big fish and then lose them, but tragedy is not a name for the loss of fish. Or it may be that Nick fears that fishing in the swamp would make him sad, a dark swamp inevitably suggesting or symbolizing what is mysterious or bewildering. But the correct name for such sadness (in anticipation, at least) is melancholy, not tragedy. It is hard to escape the feeling that Hemingway uses "tragic" more seriously than a casual speaker would use "awful" or "terrible," but not much more. If he means the word seriously, then he is talking about a tragedy that he knows about but the reader does not.

At any rate, the story receives a challenge at the end that it does not accept: it refuses to go into the dark swamp. I think that what it calls "tragic" is really messiness or unclarity, and that it refuses out of a craftsmanly fastidiousness; it will not relinquish the clarity of its realization of the light and the river and the open-water fishing. It is a fine story, on its terms, but its terms are straitly limited.

Similarly, the burned town and countryside at the beginning might have been felt as tragic, suggestive as they are of the war damage in Nick's past—but they are felt, in fact, only as a kind of cleansing away of all that is past, leaving Nick in isolation: "He felt he had left everything behind." That sentence sets the story in its bounds: it cannot be tragic because it is about a solitary man in an unmemoried time. So far as we can learn from the story itself, the man comes from nowhere, knows and is known by nobody, and is going nowhere—nowhere, at least, that he cannot see in full daylight.

"Big Two-hearted River" seems to me, then, to be a triumph of style in its pure or purifying sense: the ability to isolate those parts of experience of which one can confidently take charge. It

does not go into dark swamps because it does not know how it will act when it gets there. The problem with style of this kind is that it is severely reductive of both humanity and nature: the fisherman is divided from history and bewilderment, the river from its darkness. Like the similarly reductive technical and professional specializations of our time, this style minimizes to avoid mystery. It deals with what it does not understand by leaving it out.

Lately, my conversation with "Big Two-hearted River" has been joined and a good deal clarified by Norman Maclean's long story "A River Runs Through It," also a story about fishing, not so neat or self-contained as Hemingway's, but just as fine, on its own terms, and far more moving.

Fishing, in Mr. Maclean's story, is not a rite of solitary purification, a leaving of everything behind, but a rite of companionship. It is a tragic rite because of our inevitable failure to understand each other; and it is a triumphant rite because we can love completely without understanding. Fishing, here, is understood as an art, and as such it is emblematic of all that makes us companions with one another, joins us to nature, and joins the generations together. This is the connective power of culture. Sometimes it works, sometimes it fails; when it fails, it falls into tragedy, but here it is a tragedy that confirms the completeness, and indeed the immortality, of love.

Though the river of "A River Runs Through It" is the Big Blackfoot, which, so far as we are told, enters no swamp, the whole story takes place in a dark swamp of sorts: the unresolvable bewilderment of human conflict and affection and loss. The style is confident enough, for Mr. Maclean accepts fully the storyteller's need to speak wholeheartedly however partial his understanding, but it is not pure or self-protective. It is a style vulnerable to bewilderment, mystery, and tragedy—and a style, therefore, that is open to grace.

This story is profoundly and elatedly religious—though it is

untrained by the doctrinal arrogance and the witless piety that often taint "religion." Reading it, we are not allowed to forget that we are dealing with immortal principles and affections, and with the lives of immortal souls. "In our family," the first sentence reads, "there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing." And one is inclined at first to take that as a little family joke. The sentence states, however, the author's conviction of the doubtfulness, the essential mysteriousness, of our experience, which presides over the story to the end and gives it imaginative force of the highest kind.

The theme of fly fishing and (or as) religion is developed masterfully and with exuberant humor in the first few pages, which give the story its terms and its characters, its settled fate and its redemption. These pages sketch out the apprenticeship served by the writer and his younger brother, Paul, to their father, who was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman:

As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace. . . . I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty.

"Our father's art" of fly fishing, then, is seen as a way of recovering God's rhythms and attaining grace—no easy task, for "if you have never picked up a fly rod before, you will soon find it factually and theologically true that man by nature is a damn mess." Before he is "redeemed," "it is natural for man to try to attain power without recovering grace." There are sentences that we celebrate, reading them, because they are themselves celebrations of their own exact insight: "Power comes not from power everywhere, but from knowing where to put it on." "The boys' father believed that "all good things . . . come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy."

By the end of page six, not only have these connections been made between fishing and religion, art and grace, but attention

has also been brought to focus on Paul, the brother, who we have learned is a superb fly fisherman and a compulsive gambler. By the end of page eight we know also that he has a high temper, that he is inflexibly self-ruled, and that he is a street fighter. The story by then has its direction, which is as unbending as Paul's character. It is a story of the relentlessness of tragedy, and it is told with the relentlessness of the grace that comes by art. The story is painful, and it causes one to read on, rejoicing, to the end.

This is tragedy pretty much in the old Greek sense: a story of calamity and loss, which arrive implacably, which one sees coming and cannot prevent. But the relentlessness of the tragedy is redeemed by the persistence of grace. The entrances of grace come at moments of connection of man and fish and river and light and word and human love and divine love. If we see Paul drunk, defeated, jailed, and finally beaten to death, we also see him in glory. In the passage that follows, the writer has sat down to watch his brother fish. Paul has swum out through dangerous water to a rock and climbed up on it and begun casting. There is no minimizing here:

Below him was the multitudinous river, and, where the rock had parted it around him, big-grained vapor rose. The mini-molecules of water left in the wake of his line made momentary loops of gossamer. . . . The spray emanating from him was finer-grained still and enclosed him in a halo of himself. The halo of himself was always there and always disappearing, as if he were candlelight flickering about three inches from himself. The images of himself and his line kept disappearing into the rising vapors of the river, which continually circled to the tops of the cliffs where, after becoming a wreath in the wind, they became rays of the sun.

The story is not in that, of course; that is only a glimpse that the story affords of the truest identity of the man it is about. The story is about the failure of the man to live up to his own grace, his own beauty and power, about the father's failure to be able to help, and about the writer's failure as his brother's keeper. And

yet it is this glimpse and others like it that give the tragedy and the story their redemption and make possible the painful and triumphant affirmation at the end. This Paul, who failed, was yet a man who had learned the art of participating in grace. After his death, his brother and his father spoke of him, acknowledging their failure to help and to understand. The father asked:

"Are you sure you have told me everything you know about his death?" . . . I said, "Everything." "It's not much, is it?" "No," I replied, "but you can love completely without complete understanding." "That I have known and preached," my father said. . . .

"I've said I've told you all I know. If you push me far enough, all I really know is that he was a fine fisherman."

"You know more than that," my father said. "He was beautiful."

This story's fierce triumph of grace over tragedy is possible, the story "springs and sings," because of what I earlier called its vulnerability. Another way of saying this is that it does not achieve—because it does not attempt—literary purity. Nor does one feel, as one reads, that Mr. Maclean is telling the story out of literary ambition; he tells it, rather, because he takes an unutterable joy in telling it and therefore *has* to tell it. The story admits grace because it admits mystery. It admits mystery by admitting the artistically unaccountable. It could not have been written if it had demanded to consist only of what was understood or understandable, or what was entirely comprehensible in its terms. "Something within fishermen," the writer admits, "tries to make fishing into a world perfect and apart." But this story refuses that sort of perfection. It never forgets that it is a fragment of a larger pattern that it does not contain. It never forgets that it occurs in the world and in love.

I will not, I hope, be taken to be downgrading the literary art or literary value. This story is the work of a writer who has mastered his art, and I am fully aware that it would not be appreciable otherwise. I am only trying to make a distinction between two literary attitudes and their manifestation in styles.

Hemingway's art, in "Big Two-hearted River," seems to mean art determined by its style. This style, like a victorious general, imposes its terms on its subject. We are meant always to be conscious of the art, and to be conscious of it as a feat of style.

Mr. Maclean's, in contrast, seems to me a used, rather than an exhibited, art, one that ultimately subjects itself to its subject. It is an art not like that of the bullfighter, which is public, all to be observed, but instead is modest, solitary, somewhat secretive—used, like fishing, to catch what cannot be seen.

1988

WRITER AND REGION

I first read *Huckleberry Finn* when I was a young boy. My grandmother's copy was in the bookcase in my grandparents' living room in Port Royal, Kentucky. It was the Webster edition, with E. W. Kemble's illustrations. My mother may have told me that it was a classic, but I did not know that it was, for I had no understanding of that category, and I did not read books because they were classics. I don't remember starting to read *Huckleberry Finn*, or how many times I read it; I can only testify that it is a book that is, to me, literally familiar: involved in my family life.

I can say too that I "got a lot out of it." From early in my childhood I was not what was known as a good boy. My badness was that I was headstrong and did not respond positively to institutions. School and Sunday school and church were prisons to me. I loved being out of them, and I did not behave well in them. *Huckleberry Finn* gave me a comforting sense of precedent, and it refined my awareness of the open, outdoor world that my "badness" tended toward.

That is to say that *Huckleberry Finn* made my boyhood imaginable to me in a way that it otherwise would not have been. And later, it helped to make my grandfather's boyhood in Port Royal imaginable to me. Still later, when I had come to some knowledge of literature and history, I saw that that old green book had, fairly early, made imaginable to me my family's life as inhabitants of the great river system to which we, like Mark Twain, belonged. The world my grandfather had grown up in, in the eighties and nineties, was not greatly changed from the world of Mark Twain's boyhood in the thirties and forties. And the ves-