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“THERE WERE MANY INDIANS
IN THE STORY”: HIDDEN HISTORY
IN HEMINGWAY’S
“BIG TWO-HEARTED RIVER”

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THE JOURNEY OF INQUIRY THAT HAS TO BE MADE when a writer enters a landscape for the first time is clearly to the fore in an early dispatch that Hemingway wrote for the *Toronto Daily Star*, dated 10 June 1922. The article describes a day’s fishing on the Rhône Canal, a stretch of water “barely a yard wide.” The day is a hot one and Hemingway looks “out across the green, slow valley” before he gets a measure of the place. The landscape is impressionistic—“cool and flickering” like “a moving shape,” it contains suggestions of the world beyond, a sense of otherness that enters the valley on the afternoon breeze “from Lake Geneva.” The reader feels that if Hemingway can read the landscape correctly and observe the “changes” that are taking place—the “great shadows” that come with the breeze “down from the mountain” and the shapes that accompany the angle of the sun “behind the big shoulder of the Savoie Alps”—the more successful he will be with the rod. With this in mind Hemingway bides his time on the stream and avoids the temptation to thrash around in the midday heat. He appreciates the hidden narratives that lie in wait “under the edges of the banks”: the trout that come to life in the evening and are very “shy” and have to be searched for and worked “against the current.” He notes the obstructions—“the willow trees near the water,” the weed in the current—and even then there is always a risk of losing his line and no guarantee of success with the hook. The trout are liable to stay well hidden. At certain times and under certain conditions they will rise to the surface and make themselves known;

if he is “lucky” he will “tire” them out and “snake” them onto the river bank (*BL* 48–49).

Hemingway leaves the Rhône valley as he arrives—alive to its wonders and imaginary pasts. As he walks in the direction of Aigle he begins to ponder the absorbent properties of the earth and the hidden imprints left by others. He sees a landscape in a state of change, the wind and light that are signs of the landscape’s externality and an indication of its outwardness. He thinks about the French and the Romans who came before him, as well as “some Helvetian,” a Celtic tribesman who “used to sneak away from the camp” to fish the stream “under the willows” in the days when the trout weren’t quite “as shy.” (*BL* 51). These outward signs tend to suggest that a writer’s duty is to explore the histories that precede his arrival. Landscapes like this bring histories to life. Those that don’t, more often than not, are incorrectly read by the reader or governed by narratives that serve the interests of a privatized life.

Three years later, in “Big Two-Hearted River,” Hemingway re-considered the implications of the earlier challenge and decided to explore in greater detail the artistic possibilities of hiddenness and landscape. The Helvetian tribesman returns to life, not as a member of a Roman “road gang,” but as an American Indian whose multiple presences and hidden personalities have a role to play in guarding against unwarranted trespass. The Roman soldier re-appears also. He is now a World War One veteran, fishing for trout as a therapeutic release from military activity. Both characters are smuggled into a story set in upstate Michigan, a countryside more problematic and historically fraught even than that of the Rhône. For example, native presences dominate the action and additional histories that are very specific to the United States have to be accounted for. Peace in the region remains a long way off and a soldier who leaves his camp to fish is now at risk from surprise attack. Indian history is critically important in explaining the changes that have taken place and the effect they have on the war veteran, Nick Adams.

It’s a statement of the blindingly obvious to say that Nick returns from the First World War with post-traumatic stress. What is often forgotten is that he shares this condition with a number of Indian soldiers who returned to states like Michigan with acute stress disorder, the result of fighting in some of the most dangerous theaters on the Western Front. Native America, says Russell Laurence Barsh, had always sent high num-

bers of soldiers to front-line theaters, but in the First World War the level of casualties was disproportionately high. Those who survived fared badly and on their return felt let down by the continued lack of social and economic opportunity on the reservation. This feeling of betrayal provided the “critical momentum for a new Indian militancy.” In acts of “local resistance,” says Barsh, Indian veterans resorted to “witchery” and ghostly ceremonies in order to generate self-respect (377). For the Indians, spiritual transformation became a basis for personal survival at a time of social and economic decline.

The reassertion of tribal identity and the cultural revival of Indianness reached its peak in the 1920s, says Clyde Ellis, with the appearance of tribal dances, songs, and rituals “previously associated with warfare” (365). In the aftermath of war, these rituals became a “validation” of the Indian “allegiance to specific and honorable traditions,” as well as acts of regional and local importance which re-confirmed the pre-reservation status of the tribes. Indeed, writes Thomas Britten, “many aspects of traditional Indian cultures gained renewed importance” as a result of the war (qtd. in Ellis 365). Indian communities, agrees Ellis, were either “drawn to the martial ethos that defined a great deal of the past” or they “saw participation in the nation’s wars” as a way of reviving their warrior ethos. Rather than feeling demoralized and defeated, some veterans gained considerable self-esteem from their war experiences and were able to use them in order “to create a context in which traditional rituals assumed a new and useful meaning.” To an extent, the First World War culturally empowered the warrior ethic as the war’s aftermath “inaugurated a flurry of celebrations” in honor of the returning servicemen. These events, says Ellis, contributed to “the first wave of a revived dance culture” and a new spirit of tribal self-confidence (365).¹

Tribal militancy is a pervasive feature of “Big Two-Hearted River,” in stark contrast to the feelings of defeat and demoralization that we come across in earlier stories like “Indian Camp” or the fragment “The Indians Moved Away.” Almost thirty-five years after he published his story, Hemingway offered a word of advice to readers and critics who had missed the point and refused to delve below the narrative surface of “Big Two-Hearted River.” In a posthumously published piece composed in 1959 and titled “The Art of the Short Story,” he briefly explained what the purpose had been that governed his approach: “there were many Indians in the story,

just as the war is in the story, and none of the Indians nor the war appeared" (131).

The cultural critic Ella Shohat helps unravel the textual significance of Hemingway's remark. In her work on the dialectics of "absence" she invites us to consider the importance of ethnic and "marginalized groups" and the way they appear in "exclusively white" cultural texts. Shohat explains "the various ways in which ethnic presences can penetrate these [texts] without always literally being represented by ethnic and racial themes or even characters." "Big Two-Hearted River" gives us the opportunity to see a similar process of penetration at work. The story may appear white but the landscape we enter is distinctly tribal and, in Shohat's words, "textually submerged" (215). A narrative of fishing on the "epidermic surface," it is also a story whose clues reveal the symbolic importance of what William Adair calls the "interior landscape that lies underneath" (144).

Malcolm Bull describes this type of writing as a challenge to the reader's confidence. When landscapes are only accessible on the basis of their "hiddenness," he argues, the reader is inclined to lose heart. Yet if something is hidden from you, says Bull, it is not necessarily the case that "truth has eluded you and is unattainable." It might well be that "truth is flirting with you, simultaneously offering and withholding" its identity from you (19–20). In "Big Two-Hearted River" truth flirts with us in a similar way. The masked identities the story asks us to explore—an ancient wetland in a state of revolt, the hidden inscriptions of Indianness—have to be searched for on every occasion. Readers must keep their nerve in the shadows, and not assume they are in for an easy ride. At the heart of the story lies a central contradiction: Hemingway wants the Indians involved "in" the life of the river, but the peace Nick Adams searches for depends on their continued exclusion. The problem is neither Hemingway's nor the reader's, but belongs to Nick. His reading of what the landscape can offer him is premised on the need for sublime encounter, an effect precisely opposite to the one Hemingway intended when he gave the story an Indian name.

The blocking tactics used by Nick are already at work before the story begins. A clue can be found in a paper Hemingway wrote for Oak Park High School entitled, "How to Hike." "The secret of hiking is in 'going light.'" In the youthful Hemingway's opinion, Indian moccasins "are the best" shoes to wear on a hike. "The rule of lightness applies to everything"; it is an Indian philosophy and "the Ojibway Indian," he tells his reader, "is

the greatest natural hiker of us all" (qtd. in Buske 117). Nick Adams does not share Hemingway's reliance on the folk wisdom of the Ojibway. Nick's pack is "much too heavy" and the load on his "back" stops him from thinking about Indian customs (NAS 178–179). Nick associates physical effort with feeling "happy"; he prefers "hard work" to a process of thought that might remind him of the Indian landscape in which he has chosen to hike. Nick's efforts are in vain. The moment he relaxes and leans against "a charred stump," the local grasshoppers search him out (NAS 179). One of them crawls across his woollen sock, its entire body genetically adapted to a countryside ravaged by fire. The hopper has survived in a "changed" environment and is "black from living in the burned-over land" (180). Nick tells the grasshopper to "fly away somewhere"—and so it does, but not before Nick has been reminded that the blackened earth has been reclaimed far more easily than he would like to imagine. The insect has developed an affinity with the fire and taken advantage of its regenerative power. The grasshopper is not a casualty of war. In a land laid waste by the "commercial rivalries" of loggers and miners and the terrible fires that devastated the Seney region at the turn of the last century (Svoboda 35), the grasshopper has become a triumphant survivor. When Nick tells the insect to disappear, it's a forlorn hope. As long as Nick remains in the vicinity of the river where the grasshoppers breed, he can't avoid them. Nick's journey is an encounter with Indianness in which insects, fish, trees, and water are part of an ancient ecosystem that preserves and regenerates indigenous life.

Nick's silence on the relationship between styles of disguise and styles of revival emphasizes the precarious nature of his earlier commitment—in an *In Our Time* vignette—to "a separate peace" (NAS 143). "Big Two-Hearted River" is a dynamic country that changes and evolves as an actual and historical form as we follow Nick on his journey down river. On the surface the story appears benign and unassuming; at other times, the fish and insects that inhabit it are politically defiant and willing to initiate, as Joel Martin puts it, a fight for "the repatriation" of "sacred sites." These guerilla presences are not the courtiers of some fabled Fisher King but the hidden ancestors of the Indian tribes. They are "anticolonial" and make a claim for lost sovereignties. They warn against "the conventional trope of disappearing Indians" and call for "the restoration of indigenous land values" (Martin 174–177).

The landscape that petitions Nick requires from him both political and personal admissions of wrongdoing—from the colonial treatment of the nation's Indians in the marshes and swamps, to his mother's recent vandalism in "Now I Lay Me," her destruction of "stone axes and stone skinning knives" and "the tools for making arrowheads and pieces of pottery" (NAS 147). As we move downstream to where the river narrows into a swamp, Nick experiences a heightened feeling of personal risk. As public history comes into view, he begins to realize that his own imagination and detailed knowledge of Indian history cannot be contained within the pastoral landscape he has sought. Memorial terrains are double exposures that lie in wait; imagined dangers that lurk within phantasmic sites trigger traumatic negatives into life.

In *Hemingway in Michigan*, Constance Montgomery describes the region through which Nick "passes" as a place of great historical significance. In local folklore, she says, it is still associated with the 1763 massacre by Ojibway Indians of a cohort of English soldiers at Michilmackinac (Fort Mackinac). The attack—"the bloodiest battle between Indians and white men in the history of northern Michigan" (Montgomery 23)—took place under the leadership of the Ottawa chief Pontiac and came about as a result of strong anti-British feeling following the defeat of the French in 1760. By exploiting the subsequent growth in English settlement and resultant loss of Indian rights and access to lands, the French convinced the Ojibway "that the English were their deadly enemies" (22).

Montgomery's account is taken from *The Traverse Region*, a book published anonymously in Chicago by H.R. Page and Co. in 1884. *The Traverse Region* relies heavily on the narrative of Alexander Henry, an English trader who survived the massacre by hiding in a garret and watching events unfold below him.² Henry describes the ruse used by the Ojibway to launch their attack on the fort. The plan involved the use of a ball game called baggatiway—"the most exciting sport in which the red man could engage," says Henry—on the grass outside the fort (qtd. in Anon. 20). "The plot was so ingeniously laid," he continues, "that no one suspected danger" (21). Like Hemingway's Roman soldier at the Rhône Canal, the English became so relaxed that they drop their guard and stroll outside. The Indians take advantage of this lack of "discipline" (21) to launch a surprise attack, overwhelming their enemies and storming the fort. The ferocity of the attack and the sudden change of the landscape from play-

ground to battleground have a devastating effect on Henry. The blood sacrifices and “rude athletic exercise” leave him “shaken, not only with horror but with fear” (21). The effect is mesmeric. Henry is horrified by the scalplings but also intrigued at the way a harmless piece of entertainment has mutated into war. He, like the soldiers, appears to have fallen under the spell of Pontiac, the charismatic leader of a magic association (the Metai) adept at exploiting the fervor of its followers.

One can imagine how *The Traverse Region*, a popular history book published in Chicago at the end of the nineteenth century, might have appealed to the Hemingway family. Henry’s narrative might even have proved a fascinating read for Ernest himself. Indian stories of the Michigan area, says Christopher Schedler, were Hemingway’s stock in trade and provided him with a “tribal legacy” on which he based not only his “themes” but his “narrative structures” (64). The historical meaning of Pontiac’s Rebellion in the northern Michigan area cannot be underestimated. According to Constance Montgomery, events of this magnitude did not diminish in importance over time. On the contrary, the “past” still lingered in the Traverse region when the Hemingways arrived, and the “flavor” of life that the family encountered was very much that of a bygone age (Montgomery 27).

In “Big Two-Hearted River,” the Ojibway past comes into focus with dramatic clarity as Nick looks down into the water from the bridge at Seney. Within seconds of his arrival, local history is a force to be reckoned with. For anyone familiar with Henry’s narrative (and Nick may well be) the correspondence between the trout at play and the *ruse de guerre* of Pontiac’s rebellion becomes self-evident. In no time at all Nick finds himself in trouble and is transfixed by an old, remembered ploy. As he gazes down into the currents he appears sucked into an historical landscape and embarks on a journey that will eventually lead to the terrible *dénouement* of Henry’s story. At first, he is oblivious and, like the soldiers in Henry’s narrative, does not connect with the tricksterish play of the trout below. Nick is beguiled by the scene and, on such a hot day, finds it eminently refreshing to look “down into the clear, brown water” (NAS 177). The feeling Nick gets is one of unfettered space in which trout and kingfisher appear to move in a state of harmony which is blissfully reassuring. Nature at play is tame and unassuming, while the fish and the bird are reminiscent of good-natured Indians who seem to know their place in the world. Nick looks “into” the river’s current and moves outside the heat of the day.

He enters a world of visionary performance where body and shadow co-exist. His is a benign and reassuring place, one described by the critic Thomas Strychacz as vacant and unblemished; “untouched” by history (82).

But the more we read the less certain we are that “Big Two-Hearted River” is as “untouched” or morally “unsullied by cultural transgressions and exploitations,” as Strychacz claims (82). In the deep, fast-moving water there are always slight distortions and a lack of clarity. The light is diffused and the mesmerism of a nostalgic moment—“it was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and seen trout”—allows the fish to escape his attention momentarily. Nick loses sight of the trout, but then finds them again “at the bottom of the pool” where they hold themselves “steady in the fast water.” He watches the fish for “a long time”; the trout appear “very satisfactory” (NAS 178).

This problematic judgment replicates the relaxed discipline of the English soldiers who, on a sultry day in June 1763, threw caution to the wind as they watched their opponents (Page 21, 20). The trout, like the Indians, refuse to comply with their role as entertainers. The trout and kingfisher that have been specially convened for Nick’s benefit in his imaginary landscape now give way to a guerilla assembly. The landscape suddenly turns upside down. A rogue fish explodes into life, exposing the atrocious sentimentality to which Nick has descended in his revision of the river. The trout shows us where Nick has gone wrong. Not only has Nick demeaned the fish, but by describing its actions as “satisfactory” he has brought to mind the out-of-touch “high diction” that, as Paul Fussell tells us, was comprehensively blown away during the First World War (21–22).

The trout’s performance is adversarial. It unbalances Nick, jolting him out of a benign narrative and into a story of violence he does not want to be associated with. The complexity of the long sentence that describes the trout’s performance marks the undoing of whatever Nick believes is “satisfactory.” He sees a display of almost magical intensity in which the fish is like an apparition. It shoots upstream, breaks apart the surface of the water, catches the sun, escapes its own shadow, and with an economy of effort moves like a shimmering, dancing shadow to its “post” under the bridge (NAS 178). These are the actions of the watchful sentry as acrobat, a guardian endowed with powers of performance that appear to come from another world. These are also the actions of an Ojibway Indian from the

18th century. Like the English soldiers in the 1760s, Nick is the victim of a conspiracy to deceive.

The effect of looking too long and too hard at moving patches of light and water unsettle Nick. The absence of clarity the deeper Nick goes in scanning the pool and the emotional undoing that accompanies the effort contrast starkly with the behavior of the trout when “facing” the current. “Nick’s heart tightened,” we are told—the involuntary spasm that overcomes him is a hypnotic response to the “tightened” position taken by the trout. With this loss of control in bodily rhythms, “all the old feeling” (historically induced) comes back to life. Nick has been duped. The river appears to have thrown sand in his eyes. “In a varying mist of gravel and sand, raised again in spurts by the current” the trout takes on the irresistible appearance of an Indian performer (NAS 178).

Nick raises his eyes from the stream to look at the boulders in the middle distance. The change of perspective from river to bluff is a vain attempt to bring the narrative of Pontiac’s Rebellion to an early close. The “old feeling” that has come over Nick is almost identical to that of Alexander Henry at Fort Mackinac. It is also a graphic illustration of what happens to those who wander uninvited into Indian country and allow themselves to be taken in. After the loss of the fort in 1763, Alexander Henry was hunted by the Indians, betrayed by the French, and threatened with scalping. The narrative depicts him as an emotional wreck. As the Indians pursue him, his powers of endurance are stretched to the limit. “The state of my mind can only be imagined,” he says. As the Indians approach from “every direction” he suffers “on the rack of apprehension.” In a world where “every attempt at concealment” appears pointless he is “resigned” to his “fate.” “The dye [sic],” we are told, “appeared to be cast” (qtd. in Anon. 21).

Nick recoils from the fate that awaits him in the narrative history of Alexander Henry. Henry’s has been a dynamic confrontation with local history that Nick has no intention of repeating. In the small streams of Michigan, the trout have been able to convey their intentions, as Thomas McGuane puts it, through “the deep, shadowy color of the pool,” sending their “messages” from unusual positions to the outside world. In “Big Two-Hearted River,” these “messages” take the form of echoes from the past, movements expressed through the reaches of time, “glints” that break through the sediment of history (McGuane 5). The challenge is a difficult one for Nick to accept, and the moment the trout decides to break cover,

Nick refuses to incorporate the full historical meaning of the act into his reading of the local place. “It did not matter,” he tells himself, as he contemplates the “burned over country” (NAS 179) of the Seney region and the “battlefield” terrain the region has become (qtd in Svoboda 37). Nick feels he can avoid the challenge of a theater of war by leaving “everything behind” him—the need to think, “the need to write,” and those “other needs,” which may or may not include reading (NAS 179).

Nick has an artist’s sensibility, but he does not want his mind “to work” in an imaginary space (NAS 187). His imagination has already got him into trouble and he’s determined to avoid any recurrence. Nick, from now on, will try to live in the world of the actual, not the imaginary. The perspective of the artist as historical reporter—and the imaginative landscape that Henry created in his version of the massacre—must now be avoided at all costs. The problem is that Nick’s thoughts are counter-intuitive. There is a certain element of false bravado in claiming he’s been able to dispense with the past. He hasn’t. As the aspiring artist in “Big Two-Hearted River’s” discarded conclusion, “On Writing,” Nick understands that “what you made up” is an inescapable condition of being a writer (NAS 237). At crucial moments on his journey down-river, the artist in Nick will come alive—drawn in an almost helpless way to reconsider the historical possibilities and implications of an Indian landscape. But Nick’s ambitions during this period are inconsistent and difficult to resolve. He is familiar with this landscape, but cannot bring himself to acknowledge its authority and spiritual importance with formal gestures of propitiation.

Whatever his literary inclinations, Nick Adams has yet to be convinced of the cultural importance of Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915). John B. Vickery has called *The Golden Bough* the pre-eminent cultural and intellectual work of the late 19th and early 20th century and “the most encyclopedic treatment of primitive life available to the English-speaking world” (4). Hemingway owned a copy of *The Golden Bough* and was well-read in the ritual practices of tribal communities and primitive religions and their deities. According to Jeffrey Meyers, Hemingway believed “that the primitive past influenced the psychology of the present” and his familiarity with totemic places—Mount Kilimanjaro, the Gulf Stream—is clear evidence of his long-standing interest in sacred places and sanctuarial life (305).

At Cambridge, Frazer and his colleagues were literally “obsessed,” argues Robert Alun Jones, “with questions about the nature of primitive

religion in general and totemism in particular" (105). William Robertson Smith, Frazer's intellectual mentor at Cambridge, exerted the greatest single influence on *The Golden Bough*. Smith defined a totemic landscape as a place of sanctuary and "totemic sacrament" where the normal rights of entry, ownership and exploitation "could not be exercised without definite restrictions." In tribal societies, he argued, the sanctuary was "a special place where the god is constantly present" as a "visible embodiment" of the holy. As such, it was a place where rules of trespass and "rituals of precaution are strictly enforced." The use "of a totemic sacrament," made available by a sacrificial gesture or act of homage, was a key "principle" in "governing access to the sanctuary" and a way of differentiating between those who were "holy" and those who were possessed by "commonplace" motives. In tribal societies a state of holiness did not amount to "morality or purity of life," but pointed instead to "specific places" where "human beings came into relation with divine things and behaved accordingly" (qtd. in Jones 95).

It is important not to confuse this idea of a sacred sanctuary with the Puritan version of the sanctuary. For example, the colonial New England poet Edward Taylor characterized the material world of the spiritually devout as "beauty in the sanctuary," its errand to subdue a wild place and enclose it within a settlement of the elect. For Robertson Smith, the tribal sanctuary was instead divinely owned and "private encroachment" made it subject to prohibitions and sacred taboos that kept it "apart" from the "ordinary" world. Those who violated the conditions of entry by refusing to make "gestures of homage and words of prayers" were liable to punishment. The oldest sanctuaries, those "charged . . . with a certain supernatural energy," protected themselves against encroachment with "the curse, the ordeal, the oath of probation." These were invoked "to stamp an offender with the guilt of impiety and bring him under the direct judgement of the supernatural powers." On the other hand, individuals who approached the sanctuary as a holy place and were "motivated by respect" did not need to fear a "hostile supernatural power." In the search for "supernatural help," the exercise of "benevolent" powers could always be "relied" on, especially so if the individual sought access to the sanctuary through "magical ceremonies" and the proper use of the sacrificial (qtd. in Jones 96).

The act of homage required of Nick Adams in a tribal wetland like the Big Two-Hearted River ought to begin with recognition of his impure sta-

tus. *The Golden Bough* tells us, says John B. Vickery, that in tribal societies fishermen and other hunters were regarded with profound suspicion and that, “during their work,” they were “thought to be dangerous,” as servants of illness “and even death itself.” Societies confronted by tabooed persons would guard against their own misfortune by curtailing the work of the trespasser and imposing a range of “prohibitions” to limit the influence of “profane” activity (Vickery 47–49). Nick’s failure to offer a prayer to the ancestral deities and his reluctance to acknowledge the river with a gesture of homage puts him in an endangered position. Nick’s confusion is apparent when he wets his hand before touching the trout so that the mucus covering its body is not disturbed. This action and the care with which it is undertaken appear to convey an understanding of the need for homage.

Yet if Nick understands about tribal needs, he limits the effectiveness of this gesture of atonement with a cleansing ritual that is inappropriate. In ancient religions, says Robert Alun Jones, “the oldest sanctuaries” were thought to contain a supernatural energy that was “contagious or infectious” and capable of “propagating itself by physical contact.” Anthropologists like Smith suggested that “ritual washings or ablutions could remove the sanctity born of physical contact”—and the presence of the holy—thus creating a state of separation from the tribal sanctuary where supernatural energy was always contained (qtd. in Jones 96).

Throughout “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick is conscious of the need for surgical procedures that limit and remove supernatural life from the body of the fish. At the end of the story Nick keeps the fish he has caught alive in a net. They lie motionless in a “sack” which is “sunk, heavy in the water,” prize exhibits in the hands of an aspiring taxidermist (NAS 195). When death comes it is instantaneous. One has its neck broken; the other is “whacked” against a log. The pair are “laid” out “side by side” on the log. Visual appearance is crucially important. The water acts as an ideal preservative and Nick playfully returns the trout to the river where, he says, “they looked like live fish. Their colour was not yet gone.” Satisfied that they are truly dead and their real essence has been eliminated, Nick is willing to give them back the illusion of life in the certainty that their actual life—their “insides”—have come away “clean and compact” and “all together.” The fish are then put into the landing net, stripped of their guts, and, “hanging heavy,” are taken from the river “toward the high ground” (NAS 199).

The idea of retreating to a strategic position is precautionary. The fish are “clean” and no longer hidden and Nick gains provisional reassurance from a job well done. The operation has involved none of the emotional risk of “Indian Camp” where his father performs a Caesarean operation without anaesthetic. In “Big Two-Hearted River,” the surgery culminates in a dream of commodity. The fish laid out side by side remind us of the winter game in “In Another Country” that hang outside the shops in Milan, sentimentally “pleasant” in the snow but “stiff and heavy and empty” (CSS 206). This is a world with the heart gone out of it, visually pretty but no threat to anyone.

Scenes like this in which death is commemorated through still life rather than gestures of homage and propitiation take us back to an earlier version of Protestant triumph, the death of King Philip in the Great Swamp Fight of 1676 at Mount Hope Neck, Massachusetts. In the years after Philip’s death, the use of almanacs, skulls on poles, books, bullet holes, and public performances, alongside the preservation of body parts—what the Puritans liked to call “rarities”—was part of a large-scale and largely unsuccessful attempt to exorcise the colonists’ fear of the Indian and the Indian dead through visual display (Lepore 178). Colonial concern with an unruly dead shows up strongly in “Big Two-Hearted River.” For this reason Nick takes up a defensive position in which he tries to counter the presence of the supernatural through the imagined art form of the taxidermist. Unfortunately for him, the Michigan landscape does not submit to this ploy. Nick is confronted with interventions that are ghostly and insurgent and make him the victim of a lingering anxiety he would rather forget.³

In Indian folklore, river systems, and especially marshes and swamps, have always been peculiarly susceptible to the phantasmic power of historical events.⁴ Wetland regions were among the most highly contested frontier sites, characterized by violent and unrelenting conflict between those who wanted to tap the natural wealth of the wilderness and those who resisted, like King Philip, the imposition of repressive laws and jurisdictions. After Philip’s death the Indians of Massachusetts were banned from fishing, while rivers and marshes were deemed out of bounds. In the aftermath of the Great Swamp Fight, the swamps of New England were drained and “entire ecological communities,” says William Cronon, wiped out on the basis that they harbored wolves and “wild beasts” (133). The English knew that the

swamps had attained the status of a sanctuary for the Indian as well as a place of refuge and encampment. Nevertheless, says Jill Lepore, the colonists were “inept at navigating through them” and avoided going into them whenever possible, except to massacre Indians (86).

The fear of “wild beasts” and swamplands that began in the 17th century resonates throughout the latter part of “Big Two-Hearted River.” Without an historical reference point to guide us, Nick’s fear of entering the swamp—and the imaginative chaos in which he once again finds himself trapped—appear inexplicable. According to Frederick Svoboda, a considerable amount of wetland terrain around Seney was “drained by a development company and sold as farmland” in the early 1900s (37). But in “Big Two-Hearted River,” it is Nick who feels drained. When the fish breaks Nick’s leader, the emotional charge leaves him feeling “a little sick.” He suffers from “too much” excitement; his hand is “shaky” and the “thrill” which accompanies “the feeling of disappointment” stops his progress (NAS 193, 194). He fears reprisal and starts to brood about the trout “somewhere on the bottom,” growing “angry” as it cuts “through the snell of the hook” and waits for him “far down below the light” (193).

As we near the swamp, the gloomy atmosphere of “Big Two-Hearted River” becomes more intense. The legacy of conflict witnessed by Alexander Henry in the 18th century is now displaced by a memorial darkness whose reference point is the colonial past. Placed alongside each other, these two discreet historical conflicts add depth to the various “messages” embedded in the story. Each of them tells us that tribal wetlands are like hidden texts; they have to be read and properly understood at a narrative depth that is hard to reach. If we do not explore them the various traumas and the different histories they represent remain, in the words of Cathy Caruth, “unassimilated” (4).

For generations of Americans on both sides of the racial divide the Great Swamp Fight of 1676, says Jill Lepore, “proved impossible to forget” (191). Indian memories of massacre, burning, and looting by English soldiers were matched by the colonists’ memories of Indian reprisals involving massacre, abduction, and torture. Not only was it “the most fateful war in all of American history,” it was also “one of the most merciless” (Lepore 191). The bloodshed haunted the populist imagination, and, as Richard Slotkin points out, created tensions and “anxieties” that left an “indelible mark on American literature” (169, 177). In popular culture, Philip’s death,

for example, was the centerpiece of one of the most successful plays of the 19th century, John Augustus Stone's *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags*, premiering in New York in 1829. Stone's play was performed "until at least 1887," says Jill Lepore; its phenomenal success based around a combination of white anxiety and Protestant guilt (191). The story of terrible atrocities became deeply rooted in popular culture. The American nation found itself unable to forget the "depravity" of the militias and Indians alike, and for artists and writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—Revere, Whittier, Cooper, Irving—the war's savagery still raged within the American psyche. A play like *Metamora*, says Lepore, attested not only to "the incompleteness" of the colonial victory (175). It also confirmed the dead King's powers and the triumph of his presence from beyond the grave.

Hemingway was born at the tail end of "King Philip Fever" and may well have been aware of the interest Philip's death aroused by dime novels and theater companies like the Chester Wallace Players that visited Chicago during his youth. Hemingway owned a copy of Washington Irving's *Sketchbook* and may well have read "Philip of Pokanoket," first published in 1841. In this story Irving presents us with a revisionist version of Philip's life and asks his readers to identify with the King of the Narragansett: "a courageous leader struggling to free his people from the foreign tyranny embodied by colonial authorities" (Lepore 194).

Philip is an example of what Renée L. Bergland calls the "spectral native" (1), and his ghost haunts the later stages of "Big Two-Hearted River." Here, the reader discovers that a way of war has come back to life (Lepore xiii) and taken hold of the imagination of the fisherman, Nick Adams. The moment Nick enters wooded terrain the river takes on a new, phantasmic appearance and the cedar swamp begins to reveal its hidden, colonial meaning. Nick looks at the river water and the word "deep" is repeated. Holes open up on the water's surface; physical objects begin to penetrate the revisionist screen of Nick's imagination. The terrain is "dark" and the trout less "fun" to hunt in "the deep holes" (NAS 194, 196). As the ghosts of those who have been evicted start to reclaim their ancestral land, we see Nick's mood change from wonder to fretfulness to melancholy. He gradually loses the desire to fish, and finally reaches a point where his deepest fears (and those of his nation) are released. The swamp threatens to become "a tragic adventure" for Nick (198); he fears entering a

place of entombment, a secret vault. The Puritan view of the swamp as unsafe reappears in his haunted description of the swamp as a place where it is “impossible” to land trout (198). In the “deepening” water, progress stops and the desire for what Toni Morrison has called “the clean slate” of history remains unfulfilled (Wood 6). The longer Nick fishes, the more he becomes the haunted revisionist sucked into a world of definitions that began to enter the English language in the 1620s when Puritan colonists described the swamps as “habitations of cruelty” and “habitations of darkness” (qtd in Lepore 86). In “Big Two-Hearted River,” says Peter B. Messent, Hemingway takes us back to a landscape of “primal origin,” a place where colonial America articulated a foundational argument against those who lay in the way of progress (131).

On his way to the swamp, Nick is dragged back into a 17th century where physical obstructions assume allegorical importance. Tree roots are “clotted with dirt” and the “grass growing in them,” and a bank is layered over with sedimentary deposits (NAS 194–195). In the river, there are “deep channels, like ruts, cut in the shallow bed” where the “current” has exposed the sediment (195). Nick tries to avoid getting “hooked in the branches,” but as he moves nearer to the swamp where the roots and branches of other trees go “down” into the water and block his path, he lacks composure. The reader feels an emotional undercurrent at work—something that is trying to pull Nick “underwater” (196).

Like Cotton Mather, Nick has little love for “the dismal thickets of America” (Carroll 220). The “deep holes” are places he does not “care about” and his fear of being hooked gives the narrative an archival feel (NAS 196). As Nick’s mind gathers momentum, the memorial landscape threatens to sweep him away and drag him under. The Rhône Canal is a long way off. Imaginative wonder has been replaced by what Tony Tanner calls a reign of terror, a “shocking abrupt disillusion, a very sudden sense of blighting deprivation, an impotent gloom” (24). The artistic mind becomes narrow and allegorical. For Nick, trees provide a spectral enemy with cover and the cedar logs look threatening, as do the roots, leaves, branches, and trunks of the trees and the shadows they cast. He is unsure of himself, and although there are moments of dexterity with the rod, he can not wade against the current or enter the holes shaded by the leaves. His journey has taken him from a post-colonial environment (one whose ecology appears to have been changed by industrialism) when he steps off the train, to a place where

change has yet to occur. The swamp has become vestigial history. It bears the imprint of a war grave where the dead have not been laid to rest.

As the story finishes, Nick is engaged in a desperate attempt to eliminate the curse the swamp represents. He has blood on his hands from the gutted fish, reminding us of those Puritan doctors who sought an “emotionally cathartic celebration” of Philip’s death by placing their hands into “the split corpse” to remove the organs (Lepore 178). The menace as well as the beauty of the corpse and the memory of hands dipped in blood, remains intact. The problem for Nick is that *Metamora*’s curse cannot be removed by evisceration; the act of disemboweling only makes things worse. Nick tries to visualize the trout “held back up in the water” as dead objects, but their powers of survival are attested to by an ability to appear “live” (NAS 199). Nick’s suspicions remind us of the English soldiers described by William Hubbard, official historian of the Great Swamp Fight. Before they confronted the Indians, says Hubbard, the soldiers

were not willing to turn into the Mire and Dirt after them in a dark Swamp, being taught by late Experience how dangerous it is to fight in such dismal Woods, when their Eyes were muffled with the Leaves, and their Arms pinioned with the thick Boughs of the Trees, as their Feet were continually shackled with the Roots spreading every Way in those boggy Woods. It is ill fighting with a wild Beast in his own Den (qtd. in Lepore 85).

Similar fears of entrapment enter Nick’s mind as he looks at the wooded, tangled, and “uprooted” landscape. The Michigan river bank is a cloned colonial New England, a dark and “clotted” place, its vegetation “close together,” its undergrowth “solid” and impenetrable (NAS 198). For the Puritan writer Nathaniel Saltonstall progress on “foot” in such a place was only possible with “great Difficulty” (qtd. in Lepore 85), a point Hemingway also alludes to when he describes trees “slanted” and collapsed at angles. In the gloomy “half light,” Nick’s mind slips its moorings. The phrase, “You could not crash through the branches,” suggests that an escape would be blocked off, should an attack occur. An earlier phrase, “it would not be possible to walk through a swamp like that,” reminds us again of a sedimentary history that threatens to bog him down or drown him (NAS 198).

The spectral intensity of the natural world at the end of the story and its claustrophobic feel bring to mind the language used by the Puritan essayist Edward Johnson. In his *Wonder-Working Providence*, Johnson describes the typical errand travelers must undertake in the wilderness of New England. In their journey through “unknowne woods” and “watery scraupes,” he says, the Christian journeymen must pass through thickets “where their hands are forced to make way for their bodies passage” and their feet must “clamber over crossed trees, which when they missed they snake into an uncertaine bottome in water” (qtd. in Miller 211). Johnson concentrates on bodily punishment: the blood trickling from the torn flesh, the swamp’s power to weaken the body and reduce its ability to function normally.

Nick’s anxiety is similar and shows up in a concern with the genetic mutation of the animals that live in the swamp and are “built,” as he puts it, in a different “way” (NAS 198). Haunted almost to the point of despair, Nick resembles the early English who referred to the homes of the swamp Indians as “animal ‘nests’” (Lepore 87). For Nick, equally, swamps are places of moral and mutational change that induce, in the words of James Axtell, “Criolian Degeneracy” (qtd. in Axtell 160). When Nick says he does “not want to go. . . any farther” (NAS 198), he seems forcibly restrained by a historiography that conceived the swamp—from the Holy Crusades to Cromwell’s suppression of the papist threat in the bogs of Ireland—as an obstruction to errand. By the end of the story the swamp has become a foreign place, a place of cultural otherness resistant to conquest or physical improvement. Nick has entered the 17th century, and would not disagree with Nathaniel Saltonstall’s description of the swamp as “a Moorish Place, overgrown with Woods and bushes, but soft like a Quagmire or Irish Bogg” (qtd. in Lepore 85).

Such is Nick’s desperation that he throws away the fish offal “for the mink to find” (NAS 199). What Nick does is not in accordance with tribal practice. The mink are sacred creatures and the totem animal of the Ojibway family named Zhangweshi.⁵ As such, their status as hunters would be compromised by the act of feeding on offal. In the fishing ceremonies of the Ojibway Indians, says James Frazer, the bones and offal of slain fish were never used as food, but were returned *to the water* to await resurrection and a new life (my emphasis). Nick’s policy of baiting the land instead is an attempt to bring closure to “the old feeling” and the Indian histories that have lain in wait. It’s a short-term strategy. As 17th century

history shows us, indigenous presences are never overcome by military campaigns, especially those that violate the sanctity of a sacred place.

NOTES

1. The Sun Dance ceremony was first performed at the Chicago World's Fair in 1892. Hemingway's possible interest in the Sun Dance as a healing rite and sacred ceremony may be implicit in the balletic display of the trout at Seney and the way the trout mesmerizes Nick by its use of the sun (Loughlin 157–158).
2. Page tells us that “no better description” of Pontiac’s “conspiracy” “has ever been given” than by Francis Parkman in his “History of the Conspiracy of Pontiac,” supplemented with some additions by J. A. Van Fleet in his work entitled “Old and New Mackinac” (Anon. 18).
3. America’s need to “write itself as haunted” has long been a feature of its modernism. In *The Vanishing American*, Brian Dippie shows how “cultural anxieties” integral to “the origins of American identity” were replayed at the turn of the 20th century in the emerging sciences of ethnography and anthropology, as well as the documentary work of Western photographers like Edward S. Curtis (18). The great modernist writers of the period, agrees Walter Benn Michaels in *Our America*, were “deeply committed to the nativist project of racializing” American readers. According to Michaels, race emerges “as the crucial maker of modern identity.” This involves, in modernist fiction, a large and general commitment to cultural pluralism and for writers such as Ernest Hemingway it is shaped and expressed through the specificities of “nativist modernism.” In Hemingway’s early work, especially in the stories of *In Our Time* (1925) and those relating to his hero Nick Adams, there is explicit recognition of the political failure to empower the Native American together with an exploration of what happens when the Indian is relegated to a peripheral role in the life of the nation. Issues of dispossession and cultural haunting are crucial to the meaning of *In Our Time*, as is the date of publication. In the background of the text lie the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and the attempt to absorb Indians into the national life, “not as Indians, but as American citizens.” Michaels calls this “a futile gesture” and “at worst a cynical acknowledgement of the ultimate irrelevance of citizenship to the Indians’ predicament” (29, 31).
4. In the poem “New Orleans,” by Creek Indian Joy Harjo, phantasmic presences have been deposited in the silt of the Mississippi river. Harjo tells us how the “voices” of the “ancestors” are buried deep “beneath the currents, their stories . . . made of memory.” The sedimentary past deposits rich silt, a silt of history dredged from the depths by the changes and incantations of the poet. In a city of “magic stones” and memories the modern-day experience of adventure in New Orleans amounts to so much tourist traffic, the trivial pursuits of pleasure craft on the river. The city of commerce, says Harjo, is helpless to suppress the tide of memory, the river-as-creek that bides its time in “the undercurrent” of the Mississippi (in Lauter 2546–2547). Ella Higginson captures an equally fascinating insight into the phantasmic power of the “disappearing Indian” in her 1916 poem “The Vanishing Race.” Higginson speaks of the “phantoms . . . wronged and lonely, that have drifted on” and assumed the form of “voiceless shadows” in the afterlife (qtd in Dippie 209).
5. I am indebted to Susan Beegel for supplying me with this information.

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