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"Nourished at the Same Source": Ernest Hemingway and Gerald Murphy

LINDA PATTERSON MILLER

In *A Moveable Feast* Ernest Hemingway recalls how he went "nearly every day" to the Musée du Luxembourg "for the Cézannes and to see the Manets and the Monets and the other Impressionists"; if the museum was closed, he could always stop off at 27 rue de Fleurus where Miss Stein reigned over "the big studio with the great paintings . . . like one of the best rooms in the finest museum" (13). Stein would talk endlessly "about modern pictures and about painters—more about them as people than as painters" (17), and she would give advice about how to meet painters and how to purchase their art. He should seek out "around the quarter" the painters of his own "military service group," she told Hemingway: "There are always good new serious painters" (16).

In late 1925, Hemingway met one of these "new serious painters" of his own "military service group," an American named Gerald Murphy. Murphy had been in France since 1921, at which time he had turned unexpectedly to painting. The modernist works which he saw displayed in Paris had caused him to declare: "If that's painting, it's what I want to do" (Rankins 29). He gave up his plans to become a landscape architect and began to study painting under Natalia Goncharova, a designer for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris. By the time he met Hemingway in 1925, he had already gained recognition as the only "American" painter in Paris. Picasso told Murphy that his paintings were "simple, direct, and it seemed to him American—certainly not European" (Rubin 30), and Fernand Léger repeatedly hailed Murphy as "the only modern American painter today" ("File" III).¹ Murphy noticed that "there seemed to be no U.S. painters working in

the modern manner. Even Waldo Frank, prolific and gifted, was not contemporary in his point of view." ("File" VI).

Although Hemingway was influenced by many of the modernist painters, and in particular Cézanne, Murphy was one of the few American painters with whom he associated during the 1920s. Neither of them identified solely with a set community of American artists (referred to today as expatriates), but rather they interacted loosely with a nucleus of artists which according to Murphy numbered about two hundred and which included both Americans and Europeans ("File" 5, 11-12). These artists kept "abreast of each other," Murphy said, as they also went their independent ways and were "extremely active and productive" ("File" 4). Although Murphy's specific influence on Hemingway's art cannot be documented, they both shared an artistic vision which was nurtured by their relationship as well as by the stimulating artistic environment of postwar Paris. An assessment of Murphy's painting and Hemingway's writing during 1925 and 1926, a time when their relationship peaked, reveals again the importance to modernist art of this shared artistic vision to which Archibald MacLeish referred as the "conflagration" of the arts in 1920s Paris (78).

Murphy described this "conflagration" when he talked about the "fresh creative activity in every quarter" which "was in the air" ("File" 12). No matter how independent the artist, it was impossible not to be influenced by what the other artists of the day were doing: "Every exhibition, concert, new play or book was an



Gerald Murphy, Sara Murphy, Pauline Pfeiffer,
Ernest Hemingway and Hadley Hemingway and Bowblacks
Pantalone, Soap, Goggles

excitement in itself—and everyone interested (including the artists) attended them or was conversant. . . . To know Picasso, Braque or Brancusi was to know Léger, Mondrian and Ozenfant. . . . As Murphy concluded, "the creative artists, composers and writers in Paris at that time were nourished at the same source." ("File" 5). What most influenced both Murphy and Hemingway were the paintings of the day—the subjects of which one met everywhere. "In the cafés, on the street, in the music-halls, at the circus, at the 'Folies Foraines' in the factories and markets, everywhere in the world of the people one saw the objects and personages which were the point of departure of the paintings of the day. One saw the café table with its glass and *Le Journal* through the eyes of Picasso, Braque's pears and grapes in the market, Léger's rail-road signals in the freight yards. It was the era of the 'populo' in all the arts." ("File" 6).

Although many of the artists drew upon each other's work, it only indirectly, few could be accused of copying. Gertrude Stein told Hemingway that Wyndham Lewis had "missed what it's all about" because he was a copier. As Hemingway records it in *A Moveable Feast*, Stein called Lewis "the Measuring Worm." "He sees a good picture and takes a pencil out of his pocket," Stein said, "and you watch him measuring it on the pencil with his thumb. Sighting on it and measuring it and seeing exactly how it is done. Then he goes back to London and does it and it doesn't come out right" (110). If Stein's view of Lewis, which Hemingway came to accept, can be believed, Lewis did not "get it right" because he failed to use correctly what was "in the air" to inspire "fresh creative activity." Instead, he mimicked what was there, thus reducing his art to empty rather than invented form. This was not the norm for working artists, and particularly painters, in Paris, Murphy said. They "seemed to have more than enough nourishment and were too busy and intent on their own work" to get involved with "piracy" ("File" 11). "The twelve fifteen best painters of the contemporary school at that time," Murphy stated, "were out in the streams of things, none were caught in eddies or backwaters. Each exhibition of their work had freshness, each had marked progress. As independent as they were of each other their work took the same direction." ("File" 4, 5). That direction, according to Herbert Read, involved the attempt "not to reflect the visible, but to make visible . . . the reality that did not change, that was present beneath the bright but deceptive picture presented by the kaleidoscope of the senses . . . without any intervention either of the tidy mind or the untidy emotions" (8-13). "Face the thing freshly and see it freshly for what it was in itself," was the modernist artistic "motto" (Callaghan 19).

Although Murphy's admiration for the exactitude of the fifteenth-century painter Piero della Francesca inspired him to render everyday objects (a razor, a watch, a cigar box, a cocktail glass) in large scale and with meticulous precision, he first had to go through "a disciplined six months of covering canvases with forms which were to have no faintest resemblance to any real object" ("File" 3-4). Out of these abstract arrangements, Murphy would arrive at and then reinforce a motif. "Real objects which I admired had become for me abstract groups of shapes and colors and

Murphy had to discover these objects by stripping them bare, sometimes probing their interiors, and placing them in new and unexpected relationships to their surroundings and to themselves.

In *A Marvellous Feast* Hemingway similarly observes that writing was "wonderful to do" after he had learned "to break down" his writing, to "get rid of all facility and try to make instead of describe" (156). So as "to make visible" rather than "to reflect" human experience, he developed his theory of omission: "You could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood.... They will understand the same way that they always do in painting. It only takes time and it only needs confidence" (75). As Hemingway sought to write "one true sentence," he learned to cut out the "scrollwork or ornament.... and throw it away." Then he could "start with the first true simple declarative sentence [he] had written" (112).

Murphy's nine-year search after "the thing itself" worked a subtle transformation in his paintings. He developed what William Rubin labels as a three-tiered progression from Precisionism to Cubism to sophisticated Surrealism, with "fantasy" being "an unintentional by-product of the quest for 'reality'" (17-18). Murphy's first paintings, *Engine Room* (initially called *Turbines*, 1922) and *Boatdeck* (1923) reflect the American Precisionists' interest in machinery. They also show that desire for an idealized state of absolute order which Cézanne sought when he embraced art as an ordering, structural principle for life. If Cézanne's "intention was to create an order of art corresponding to the order of nature, independent of his own confused sensations" (Read 20), Murphy wanted this too, but here it was the order of nature inherent in the interior and exterior workings of machinery. "I agree with Léger," he said, "that a painting should be an *objet* in itself and function as a machine, does" ("File" V). *Engine Room* depicts schematically the interior workings of a large turbine engine, and *Boatdeck* depicts in large scale (19' x 12') the exterior view of the smokestacks, wiring and ventilators of an oceanliner.

Murphy's second group of paintings, *Razor* (1924) and *Watch* (1925), are more Cubistic, and they lack modeling or shading. Here the flattened images are arranged to present starkly contrasting colors and a certain distortion due to the "Cubist device of representing elements of the same object from different angles" (Rubin 30). Murphy told his friend Philip Barry that he treated the razor "mechanically, in profile and section, from three points of view at once" (Rubin 30). With *Watch*, Murphy turned from the larger interiors of an engine, which he had reduced and simplified in *Engine Room*, to the smaller interiors of a watch, which he had enlarged and made more complex. He had completed the painting just months before he met Hemingway. When Hemingway saw *Watch* at the Grand Palais as Murphy was hanging it there for a special exhibit entitled "*L'Art d'Aujourd'hui*," he told Murphy that "the climax — and a good one — takes place in the upper-middle right hand section" (Murphy to MacAgy, letter of 14 November 1962).

In *Watch*, Murphy attempted to probe into the essence of the watch itself. Murphy said that he was "always struck by the mystery and depth of the interior of a watch, its multiplicity, variety and feeling of movement and man's grasp of



Razor, 1924

Dallas Museum of Art

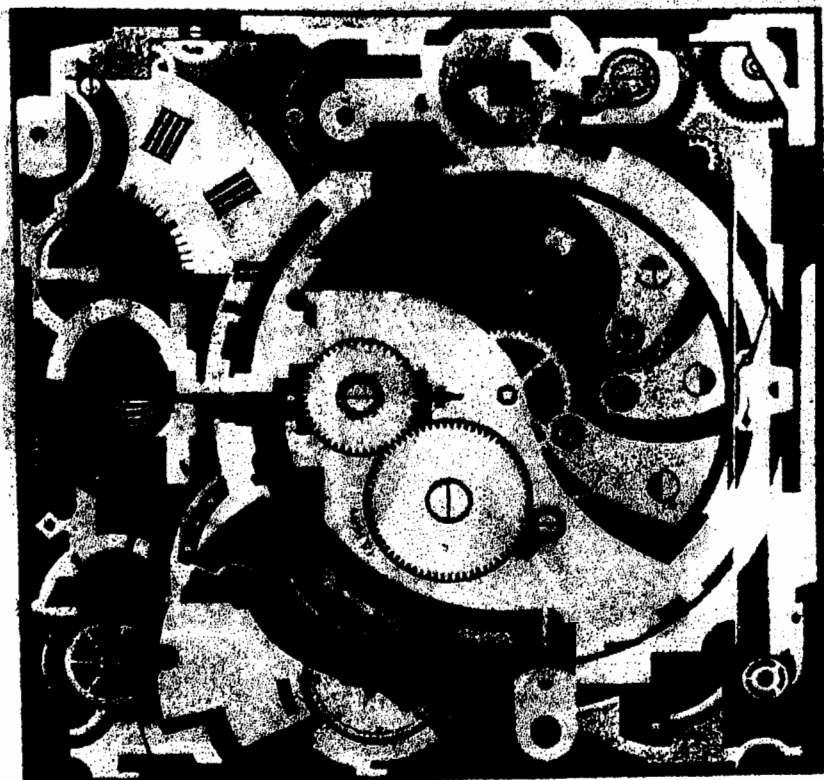
Foundation for the Arts Collection, gift of the artist

patches of black and gold, and the breakdown of the color and of the forms "constitutes a kind of proto-allover design." This design "becomes almost maniacal... in the multiplication and jigsawing of these forms" (Rubin 34-35). Pieces of the watch seem at times to interlock while also to overlap. Haylen Herrera notes how "scramblings of solid and void, hide and seek overlappings and disappearances and minute, subtle color variations... turn the regular and repetitive pattern of a watch into a complex, almost chaotic, and certainly fascinating, visual

worked for several months upon his separation from his first wife Hadley (Baker 186). This studio, which Murphy described as "a sculptor's studio" in a "single ground floor building with a ceiling 30 feet high," enabled Murphy "to attempt very large canvases" ("File" 4). It also seemed ideal for Hemingway as he continued to perfect his whittled prose in the grand manner during those months, that he was Hemingway wrote Murphy, back in America during these months, that he was "very comfortable" in Murphy's unheated studio but "about as happy as the average empty tomato can" (undated letter, Donnelly collection). Some of that unhappiness and emptiness, along with some of the studio's cold, restricted spaciousness, spills over into "Hills," a story which exhibits many of the same qualities as Murphy's *Watch*. "Hills," like *Watch*, establishes a sharp contrast of light and dark coloring, which unsettles more than it soothes. It also has a linear Cubism, which is both flat and multidimensional. In both works, it is the repeated coming together and jarring of inner and outer spaces that make "visible" their underlying truths. The creative tension which arises from this juxtaposition of exterior and interior detail generates the almost obsessive penetration into the "experience itself" which characterized Murphy's best work according to MacLeish (126), and also Hemingway's.

The opening paragraphs of "Hills" establish a pictorial framework in the form of spatial boundaries: the hills "long and white" across the back; the blinding starkness "on this side" leading up to the hills; the station "between two lines of rails in the sun." In "close against the side of the station" is "the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of ham-bone beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies." Then the picture's compositional center is brought into focus: "The American and the girl with him" sit "at a table in the shade, outside the building" (273). Throughout these opening paragraphs, a startling brightness contrasts with a softer play of lights and shadows. Hemingway has blocked in a flat still-life, until the couple begin to talk and the picture's interior spaces vie for attention. Increasingly, a tension develops as the exterior details attempt to hold at bay the interior reality which emerges between the lines of the couple's dialogue. Throughout, the girl looks to those physical things she might touch as a means of saving off her emotions. Like Frederick Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, she feels safer holding to life's tangible realities rather than recognizing those intangible thoughts and feelings which leave her too vulnerable in their wake.

A confrontation between the two is clearly imminent as the story opens, and although the couple's talk at first confines itself to "What should we drink?" the girl avoids the American's eyes by looking first "at the line of hills," then "at the head curtain," then once again at the hills (273). When the man brings up the issue they are both avoiding—the abortion which he envisions as an "awfully simple operation"—the girl immediately looks "at the ground the table legs rested on." He pursues the issue—"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before"—but she continues to look "at the head curtain," even putting "her hand out" to take "hold of the strings of beads" (273). While the man's vision takes form in the "flat



Watch, 1925
Dallas Museum of Art
Foundation for the Arts Collection, gift of the artist

off of each other—is what generates the painting's creative tension. The overall effect is one of containment and spaciousness, flatness and depth. "I seemed to see in miniature detail but on giant scale," Murphy said ("File" 4). His assessment of his own work applies equally well to that of Hemingway, particularly those stories such as "Hills Like White Elephants" which Hemingway told Murphy he regarded as pictures (Donnelly 6).

Hemingway wrote "Hills" roughly one year after he had met Murphy, and had seen *Watch* and discussed it after he had read *Watch*. (Donnelly 6)

them or that nothing will change—she physically moves toward the picture's perimeters, standing up and walking to the "end of the station." As she attempts to avoid the miniature negative reality which lies in the face of the man's empty words, Hemingway fills in three of the picture's exterior dimensions: the "fields of grain and grass along the banks of the Ebro" and the mountains, "far away, beyond the river." Over it all floats "the shadow of a cloud . . . across the field of grain," as she sees "the river through the trees." They continue to talk, the man urging her to "come on back in the shade" (276). Finally, when she does sit down again, she looks once more "across at the hills on the dry side of the valley," as the man looks "at her and at the table" and then at last "at the bags against the wall of the station" with their "labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights" (277). Throughout, the gradual accretion of selective and often repetitive tangible detail marks the picture's framework. Simultaneously, the interior intangibles—the couple's expressed and unexpressed thoughts and feelings—counteract this delineation to probe it and constantly redefine it.

Hemingway's "Hills" and Murphy's *Watch* demonstrate the importance to modernist art of both visible and invisible spaces, and particularly the latter. The role of invisible space is more readily identifiable in painting than in writing, and a was Hemingway's literary adaptation of this artistic principle that made him the father of modern American prose. The artist can paint by relying entirely upon negative space. As such, he shades in everything that is not there—the space which surrounds objects. When he has filled in all the spaces, the objects stand out in visible contrast, now defined in counterreaction as negative white spaces. The invisible has now created the visible. The writer must inevitably work in the opposite direction, using the visible to illuminate the invisible. As Hemingway recognized, it was precisely what he chose to make visible that determined the dimensions of those negative spaces. When Murphy was filling his canvases "with forms which were to have no faintest resemblance to any real object," he was essentially working from the principle of negative space—using the invisible to see what would then become visible. The objects which gradually emerged always came as a surprise, and they were seen fresh and for themselves.

During the years when their relationship was viable, both Hemingway and Murphy forged in their works an American style which was brasher and starker, grander in its implementation of visible and invisible spaces, than its European counterpart. Although both Hemingway and Murphy were "in the stream of things," each worked independently and cherished a mutual desire not to have his work discussed openly. "It made me feel sick for people to talk about my writing to my face," Hemingway said (*Feast* 127), and Murphy noted how he "preferred to avoid criticism" of his paintings and that he "never had visitors at [his] studio which was about as cozy as a garage" ("File" III). When Murphy would go to work, which he did regularly during the years he painted, he would close the door to his studio firmly, making it clear that he was to be left alone. Only after a work was essentially complete did Murphy and Hemingway feel it "safe" to discuss it, and even then the discussions were cautious, sometimes references in letters sandwiched between breezy rat-chat. After Murphy had gone to America during the fall

of 1926, Hemingway wrote him to say: "It is swell that Gerald is working so well and I will be pretty excited to see the stuff" (undated letter, Donnelly Collection). The following summer, Murphy told Hemingway that he was "working all the time" and felt that he had "knocked one or two things on the nose. Before I die," he added, "I'm going to do one picture which will be hitched up to the universe at some point. I feel it now and can work quietly" (18 June 1927, Miller, "Part II," 3). Hemingway, in turn, read various versions of his manuscripts out loud to Murphy, beginning with *Torrents of Spring* and then *The Sun Also Rises* (*Feast* 209). In 1927, Hemingway also gave Murphy the galley sheets for *Men Without Women*, the collection of stories which contains "Hills Like White Elephants." Murphy openly praised the stories: "They're superb, and varied, and simple and free of any bunk that you can mention. And the sensibility of them all . . . Every time I read them something builds up before me piece by piece. I don't know what, but it's all I want" (16 October 1927, Miller, "Part II," 7).

Labels such as Primitivism and Cubism are apt for both Murphy's and Hemingway's work, as is the label Precisionism. Precisionist painters portrayed machinery as an embodiment of the order and control that man might seek for his personal life. Although Hemingway did not use machines in his work explicitly, the implicit comparison is there when he shows people trying to respond to life in a machine-like, orderly way so as to deal with the emotional complications over which there is no real control ultimately. Also implicit in the Precisionist's renditions of machinery, and in Hemingway's work, is the underlying recognition that the well-oiled, smoothly clicking machine could at any point break down and lose control, perhaps permanently. Murphy's *Watch* is fraught with the sense that if the carefully arranged interlocking parts were disrupted even slightly, it would all go haywire. Hemingway's works convey a similar creative tension which emerges because of this conflict between order and impending chaos held delicately at bay.

When Hemingway said that he wanted his art to be truthful, to put things "rightly and not describe," he was in keeping with the highest tenets of modernism. He worked to eliminate the "scrollwork" as he attempted to integrate what he knew with what would be true for his art. This presented him with the artistic dilemma which Cézanne recognized. How does the artist keep the artistic rendition "rooted in the nature of things and not in the individual's subjective sensations, which are always 'confused'" (Read 16)? This struggle to approach objectively what is inevitably subjective creates the artistic tension which can sometimes go awry when the necessary balance is lost. Hemingway believed that the artist could capitalize upon his personal experiences in order to transform them into art, making them into something separate but equally alive. He came to criticize those artists/friends who did not adequately draw upon their personal hurt to enliven their art. As he wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald on 28 May 1934, "you especially have to be hurt like hell before you can write seriously. But when you get the damned hurt use it—don't cheat with it. Be as faithful to it as a scientist" (*Letters* 408). In Hemingway's best work, he took what he knew and through the transforming potential of art made the factual experience even truer in the fictionalizing of it. His work did not reflect the experience—it made it visible.



Portrait, 1928 (Destroyed)

Courtesy of William and Honoria Murphy Donnelly

This Murphy seemed increasingly unable — or unwilling — to do during the last years that he painted. His works became more analytical and more stylized, threatening "to descend to 'good taste'" (Rubin 30). Some critics aptly emphasize the cerebral quality of Murphy's paintings, and Murphy himself noted their coolness and detachment — "intimate but not personal," he said in summary of his work (Rubin 10). As demonstrated in one of his final paintings, *Portrait* (1929), he had arrived at a solution to the artistic objective/subjective dilemma in a way clearly different from Hemingway's. Indeed, he had phased himself out of the work entirely while ironically making himself its thematic focus. The almost three-foot square canvas bears stylized images of Murphy's footprint, three thumbprints, a large, severed eye, a mouth, and a small linear profile, and each image is in a separate box and lined up against various renditions of measuring sticks. Tomkins describes how this starkly segmented collage represents a "sarcastic comment on Cubist 'displacement'" (156), an idea upon which Rubin elaborates: "In the very degree of their displacement, these constituents of a self-portrait present one of the most detached and impersonal images an artist has ever made of himself" (42).

Fernand Léger had once warned Murphy that the artist either has "a comfortable life and lousy work, or a lousy life and beautiful work" ("File" 9). By 1930, Murphy had basically shifted from the latter to the former. He had "sought to



Hemingway and Sara and Gerald Murphy

Wyoming, Fall 1932

Courtesy of William and Honoria Murphy Donnelly

America on the French Riviera during the 1920s. Thereafter, back in America, his struggle to attain this elegance and perfection intensified in the face of the harsh blows life dealt him, particularly in the deaths by illness (one protracted) of his two sons during the 1930s. Although Hemingway recognized Murphy's personal pain and the "bad luck" involved in the deaths of these boys (as he described it in an excerpted portion of *Fiesta*), he could not, as an artist, justify any choice in life that excluded art as the number one priority. His repeated credo was that, above all, he must write, and when he could not write, he might as well die. Despite the extenuating circumstances which prompted Murphy to quit painting by 1930 (which included the first son's illness followed by the threatened failure of the family Mark Cross Company in New York), Hemingway could never condone such artistic betrayal, and Murphy too was defensive about his decision to make life arduous rather than to create art out of life. He stashed his paintings in garages and refused to talk about his art, even to his closest friends, although he did say when pressed that the world had too many second-rate artists and did not need one more (Donnelly 225). After Murphy's work was rediscovered in the 1960s, just a few critics agreed with Murphy that his work was good but not great — "exercises inspired by a life of art rather than art itself," as Gerrit Henry described it in 1974 (122-24).

In the final analysis, as far as Murphy and Hemingway were concerned, art was a life. Life, in other words, was art.

relationship. By the time Murphy had quit painting and both artists had returned to live in America, Hemingway seemed unable to forgive Murphy the direct role he had played in encouraging his divorce from Hadley, over which Hemingway let himself feel a lifelong remorse. Hemingway implicated Murphy outright in *A Moveable Feast* as one of the "understanding rich who have no bad qualities" until "they have passed and taken the nourishment they needed." They leave everything dead behind them (208). Hemingway added in an excised portion of the manuscript that these rich "had backed me and encouraged me when I was doing wrong. But how could they know it was wrong and had to turn out badly when they had never known all the circumstances?"

When Murphy had urged Hemingway to act "cleanly and sharply" in leaving Hadley, he stressed the necessity of this if Hemingway were to protect his talent—"that thing in you which life might trick you into deserting" (letter of September 1926, Miller, "Part I," 138). Murphy was arguing that Hemingway's art must take precedence over human relationships which had become too intrusive, an argument which carries a certain irony in retrospect. If Hemingway did indeed cut clean from Hadley, he did so from Murphy as well, along with most of his artist-friends from the 1920s. By 1932, Murphy would describe his non-relationship with Hemingway in a letter to Archibald MacLeish: "In spite of [Hemingway's] love of approval, there is the Sanctum to which he has admitted a few. This has grown on him . . . to the point of open inattention, which is no longer as hurting as it used to be" (September 8, Miller, "Part II," 11).

NOTES

- 1/ During 1962, MacAgy was preparing a manuscript on Murphy's art which finally appeared in 1963 as "Gerald Murphy: 'New Realist' of the Twenties." Murphy corresponded with MacAgy's this time, and MacAgy's questions to Murphy regarding his art and life in France during the 1920s generated two particularly rich hand-written responses from Murphy. One response is twelve pages (numbered in arabic) and the other is ten pages (numbered in Roman numerals); both are in the "Gerald Murphy File." Throughout this essay, these two pieces are identified according to Murphy's own numbering systems.

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