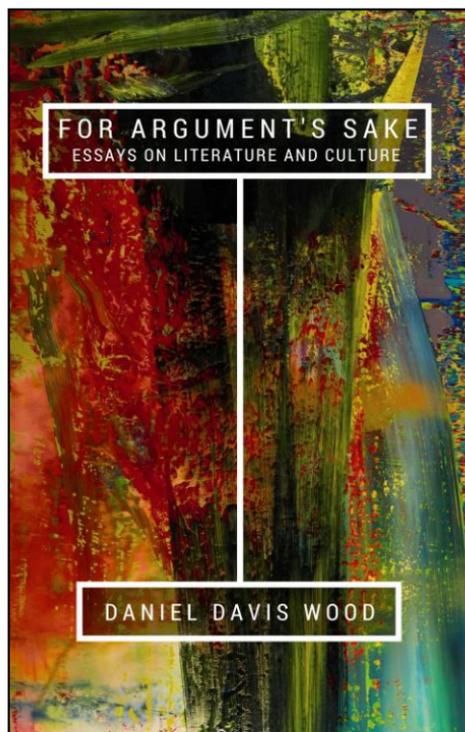


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THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA AND SOMEONE ELSE

DISCERNING THE NARRATORIAL PERSONA OF
ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S FOCALISING CONSCIOUSNESS

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BY NOW IT HAS BECOME A CRITICAL HABIT TO LAUD *THE OLD Man and the Sea* for the remarkable clarity of its prose. In 1954, when Ernest Hemingway received the Nobel Prize in Literature, Anders Österling, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, praised the novella for its “unique combination of simplicity and precision” (‘Ceremony Speech’). Ten years later, Hemingway’s posthumously-published memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, revealed the author’s struggles to write fiction by first setting down “one true sentence... [one] true simple declarative sentence” (7), and since then critics have attributed the aesthetic power of *The Old Man and the Sea* to its prosaic simplicity, its descriptive precision, its declarative ‘trueness.’ For example, in a recent collection of essays on the novella edited by Harold Bloom, David Timms expends great energy accounting for its “singleness and clarity” (86), while the 2011 edition of Harvard University’s *New Literary History of America* allows Keith Taylor to wax lyrical on the same qualities. “[Hemingway’s] exquisite novella,” writes Taylor, “brought together his old theme of man’s defining and ultimately tragic encounter with the natural world and the stylistic clarity he had learned in writing [his] early stories” (‘Paradise’). Today, the Vintage Classics edition of the novella blurbs a *Guardian* review which declares that “[t]he writing is as taut... as the line on which the old man plays the fish.” Appreciation of the novella, then, is significantly derived from the seeming objectivity it achieves — the apparently total third-person omniscience — via its extreme stylistic naturalism, its ‘true simple declarative’ prose, and the total absence of any stylistic peculiarities and narratorial interjections that would imply the presence of an overt narratorial persona.

But, of course, *someone* narrates *The Old Man and the Sea*; and even if the narrator does not reveal much about itself or refer to itself in the first person, its presence is made perceptible via its practice of focalisation — that is, the ways in which it draws the reader’s attention to certain aspects of the old man’s ordeal while leaving

other aspects unexplored (see Genette 185-205). Such focalisation is necessarily the result of a series of decisions that *this* aspect of the old man's experience deserves attention while *that* aspect is worth glossing over; and, as such, focalisation implies the presence of someone who has made those decisions. To see this focalisation in action, consider a remark made a little under halfway into the novella. The old man, we are told, "knew no man was ever alone on the sea" (39). While the remark claims to say something about the old man, the fact that the remark is made at all reveals the truth of what is said. Who makes the remark? Who is out there at sea with the old man and close enough to him to know what he knows? Whose is the focalising consciousness of Hemingway's novella, of which the narratorial voice is the intelligible mask? The old man cannot be alone on the sea because he is observed by someone who relays his actions and thoughts to readers and occasionally makes remarks about them — someone who stands between us and the old man and thus muddies the ostensible clarity of his story.

Who exactly is that someone? If it remains impossible to attribute a fixed identity to the focalising consciousness of *The Old Man and the Sea*, it is certainly possible to discern its personality. The first thing to be said of it is that it possesses an intelligence superior to the old man's intelligence and also superior to our intelligence as readers. It knows more than what the old man knows, and it knows more than what we know, and it knows that the old man sometimes knows more than we know, and so it attempts to bridge the gaps between our knowledge and his. This is made evident in the opening paragraph of the novella:

He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. (5)

In translating the word *salao* into English, the focalising consciousness presumes that we as readers do not understand Spanish and then endeavours to help us overcome the language barrier. And it continues to undertake such endeavours throughout the novella, either translating the old man's Spanish thoughts into English or expressing his thoughts in English via free indirect discourse and then translating them into the original Spanish. When the old man experiences a cramp in his hand, for instance, we are told that "he thought of it as a *calambre*" (40), and later, when he decides to eat a dolphin fish, we are told that "[h]e called it *dorado*" (49). In a similar vein, the focalising consciousness also explains things to us that we could not know unless we, too, were fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico. The old man, for instance, "rowed over the part of the ocean that the fishermen called the great well because there was a sudden deep of seven hundred fathoms where all sorts of fish congregated" (15), and, later, "the fishermen called all the fish of [a particular] species tuna and only distinguished among them by their proper names when they came to sell them or to trade them for baits" (24). There is mediation at work here — explanations and explications designed to facilitate the reader's understanding of the old man's social context on land as well as his ordeal on the seas — and that mediation implies a mediator, the focalising consciousness, which has made the judgment that its audience requires such mediation.

But the focalising consciousness does not stop at simply translating the old man's thoughts. Crucially, it also recognises itself as a translator and thus demonstrates the self-awareness of a sentient entity. When the old man says, in despair, "*Ay*," the narratorial voice informs us that "[t]here is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood" (73-74). Yet the failure of the focalising consciousness to translate certain phrases is not restricted to phrases that are impossible to translate. Sometimes, the focalising consciousness simply refuses to translate, as when we are told that the old man "thought of the Big Leagues, to him they were the *Gran Ligas*, and he knew that the Yankees of New York were playing the *Tigres* of Detroit" (44). *Gran Ligas* is translated but *Tigres* is

not; and although *Tigres* may not require translation insofar as we can easily infer its meaning, there are other phrases for which a translation is not forthcoming even when we cannot as easily infer their meaning. At one point, for instance, the old man thinks to himself: "This is the second day now that I do not know the result of the *juegos*" (44) and then he thinks: "*Un espuela de hueso*" (45), and there is no translation in either instance.

The focalising consciousness, then, discloses and withholds information at whim — which is to say that, far from being merely an external observer or impartial recorder of events, it has a verifiable personality, and to some extent the shape of the narrative reflects the rigours of that personality. Indeed, there are other instances in the novella in which this personality more clearly shines through the ostensible objectivity of the prose.

For instance, the prose contains a number of descriptive similes that seem to have come from someone other than the old man, that do not reflect what we know of his existing sentiments and his prior experiences, and that therefore raise the question of their source. We are told that the sail of the old man's boat, furled around his mast, "looked like the flag of permanent defeat" (13). Who is it, exactly, that makes this comparative assessment? We are told as well that clouds clustered together in the sky were "white cumulus built like friendly piles of ice cream" (40), that "the fish's eye looked as detached as the mirrors in a periscope or as a saint in a procession" (66), and that an enormous shark "came like a pig to the trough if a pig had a mouth so wide that you could put your head in it" (77). Who exactly makes *these* comparative assessments? Who determines the similes? Who is familiar enough with piles of ice cream, the mirrors in a periscope, a saint in a procession, and a pig at the trough to determine that the clouds, the fish's eye, and the shark respectively resemble these things? And to whom do we attribute the prosaic lyricism of the moment at which the old man first catches a glimpse of his enormous fish? The fish, we are told, "jumped in the air, true gold in the last of the sun" (48), and "jumped again and again in the acrobatics of its fear" (48), but surely those words are

much too poetic, too self-consciously literary, to have originated in the simple mind of the old man himself.

So in addition to the personality it reveals via the selection and translation of narrative details, the focalising consciousness also positions itself in relation to both the old man and the readers of his narrative, and makes itself known as an entity in possession of far greater knowledge than either one. Sometimes, in fact, this positioning and this possession of greater knowledge are made startlingly obvious, if not quite explicit. We are told that the old man “was too simple to wonder when he had attained humility” (4), presumably by a wiser entity that has passed judgment on him, “[b]ut he knew he had attained it and he knew it was not disgraceful and it carried no loss of true pride” (4). And, further, the focalising consciousness reveals that it knows more than the old man knows when it tells us, as he gazes into the night sky, that “[h]e did not know the name of Rigel but he saw it” (50); and, too, the focalising consciousness reveals that it presumably knows *better* than the old man when it remarks upon his attempts to contort himself into a more tolerable sitting position in his cramped skiff. The new position, we are told, “actually was only somewhat less intolerable” than the last, but the old man “thought of it as almost comfortable” (29). Thus, when we receive no clues as to the actual nature of the fish that devours the old man’s bait — “It could have been a marlin or a broadbill or a shark,” he muses (32), entirely without interjection or clarification from the focalising consciousness — we must acknowledge that we are being played and toyed with much like the fish at the end of the old man’s line. The focalising consciousness could tell us exactly what sort of fish steals the bait, and it wants us to know that it could tell us, but it chooses not to tell us for reasons only it can know. Just as the old man unspools and then revokes the line with which he catches the fish, the focalising consciousness of his narrative discloses and withholds certain details from its readers.

As above, the old man “knew no man was ever alone on the sea” (39). By the end of the novella, we, as readers, know that to be true — although, unlike the old man, we at least can discern the persona of the entity in whose company he is not alone. The result,

however, is that *The Old Man and the Sea* is a more complex text than we have been led to believe by claims of its ostensible clarity. It offers less an example of true, simple, declarative prose than a highly subjective impression of the old man's ordeal, conveyed by a focalising consciousness whose calm and reserved narratorial voice offers only a *semblance* of clarity.

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