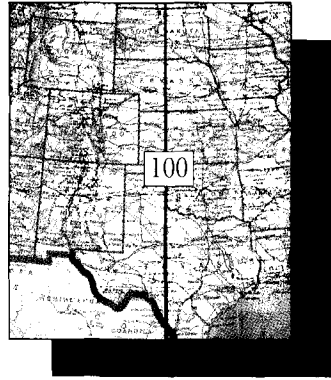


by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

## The Perfect Life

It is possibly a good thing that more writers are not sportsmen and outdoorsmen. The relationship between art and sport is a complexly curious one, since a case can be made for a sporting element in writing that is, of course, wholly cerebral (though not necessarily noncompetitive and nonviolent). In writing, as in the nonliterary arts, the artist, like the true sportsman, quickly discovers his chief adversary to be himself; not, like the hunter's quarry, the elusiveness of the artistic ideal. Also like the sincere sportsman, the dedicated artist-sportsman, or sporting artist, understands that the final object of all his striving and attention is not the ostensible one but something beyond it: the apprehension of material and spiritual realities accessible only through ritual, and art. This truth, which was undoubtedly known to the prehistoric hunter-artists who created the cave paintings in the south of France, has been largely forgotten by modern writers and hunters ("sportsmen"), who in recent times have divided themselves into tribes so alien to one another that they have difficulty in recognizing themselves as fellow human beings. Hemingway, when he is not being taught as an example of closeted fag literary genius, is dismissed as a "hunter-writer." And while contemporary successors to earlier hunter-writers like Fenimore Cooper, Theodore Roosevelt, William Faulkner, and Hemingway do exist, they find themselves increasingly at professional risk when they attempt to mix their twin identities in their work: exteriorly by a literary establishment that regards blood sports as beneath the dignity of literary persons, interiorly by the temptation of technique in a world that regards challenge and technique as all.

I encounter occasionally people—always hunters and sportsmen, never fellow writers—convinced that mine is the Perfect Life. From their viewpoint, I spend the larger part of my time in doing the things I like most to do—hunting, riding, camping, exploring wilderness, and traveling—and earn my living writing about these things, almost in my spare time. I have no desire to complain



of my life, to which I am attached and which I do, truthfully, live pretty much as I would wish to live it. It needs to be pointed out, however, that enviers see it only partially and back-to-front, since it would be far more accurate to say that I spend a relatively small part of that life acquiring the experience that provides me with the subject for my work, while devoting the much greater part to the attempt to give that experience a reality beyond what it had in the first place.

For the confirmed writer, nothing that he has ever seen or known is finally real until he has written it up—heightening, embellishing, and even fictionalizing where necessary, energizing and constraining by style; translating experience into art—and set it down on the printed page. Nations, regions, peoples, cities; friends, enemies, and lovers; fears, and hopes: none of these truly exists for the writer until he has had his way with it imaginatively and recreatively—only, more likely than not, to put it behind him forever. This is intended neither as a confession nor a boast, but simply as a statement of fact: the central fact, indeed, of the poor, arguably perverse, writerly life.

Its implication for the sporting writer is that he must, if he is to be the best he can at his art, make the conscious decision to ordinate art and sport, which is to say, to subordinate one of them to the other. And if he is a true and sincere artist, there will be no doubt in his mind as to which the subordinate activity, or commitment, will be. In this respect, nothing could be more untrue or unfair than to reproach Ernest Hemingway as a hunter-writer, by which his critics mean to suggest that he was something less

than a literary artist, rather a kind of mental mongrel. While nearly all of his life away from his writing table was concerned with the chase in one form or another, as a writer Hemingway never forgot that he was trying to write for the ages, not for men in barbershops thumbing the latest *Field & Stream*. This is only another way of saying that for Hemingway the true subject of *Green Hills of Africa* was not the hunt, and *The Old Man and the Sea* is not a fish story. Hemingway, though as much concerned with technique in sport, whether the "sport" in question was wing-shooting or the bullfight, as in writing, was not concerned with it at the same level, never permitting the technique of sport either to obtrude on or to become the subject of his work, as lesser sportsmen-writers have always been inclined to do. (It is true that his characters' concern for technique, like Hemingway's own, frequently points toward a deeper-lying concern with something else.)

While subordination is always required the degree of it is never fixed, not itself a question of technique but of artistry, which makes it essentially a personalized and individualistic adjustment. Faulkner, who spent his hunting trips to the Mississippi river bottoms listening to his companions talk while he (and they) drank, often without ever firing his rifle, wrote a very different sort of hunting story than Hemingway's. (Compare, for instance, "The Bear" with "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" or "Big Two-Hearted River.") With Faulkner, the hunt itself is made still more subordinate to the natural and social settings, as well as to the central theme of the work. For him, the reality of the hunt was the totality of the experience, lying well beyond the stalk, the range, the kill, the weighing up and measuring out.

There is a sense in which the greatest sporting feat makes the least complete and satisfying literature, for the reason that the relatively narrow accomplishment tends to overwhelm the completeness of the larger experience. Modern writers in particular have been aware of the artistic dangers that result from an interest in what is exceptional at the expense of the usual (though James Joyce,

when drunk, used to beg Hemingway to tell him if his work were not “awfully suburban”). Ten years ago, I gave up reading the hunting magazines when it occurred to me that taking an eight-by-eight bull elk is intrinsically of no greater import than shooting a spike unless of course you happen to be a professional hunter, in which case you probably have scant interest (when it comes to writing up the story anyway) in how the cold felt when you got out of your bedroll that morning, the way first light seemed to have been breathed from the dark mountains, and the symbolic investment of your trophy. Certainly taking an eight-point mule deer requires much more knowledge, finesse, and stamina than taking a three-point does, and as a hunter I acknowledge and respect knowledge, cunning, and strength. But as a professional writer, I am just not all that impressed. Maybe it is because I am not helped. Besides which, I can turn three points to eight with five taps on the typewriter keys.

Anyone involved with sports knows plenty of sportsmen, and anyone knowing other sportsmen knows the tedium of being lectured on technique, and the latest technology developed to further it. The other weekend, dropping the horses off at a friend's paddock overnight, I was waylaid by the boyfriend of the friend, who insisted on rehearsing for me, at length, the utility of a new and different type of cross-buck, used to transport big game on horseback. I listened, but I wasn't interested, and I didn't listen very well. In fact, I cannot recall the name of the cross-buck, or what was supposed to be special about it. I solved years ago—for myself—the problem of how best to bring game from the mountains by buying a set of nylon panniers that fit over the saddle and a spider to hold them and the saddle in place on the horse; and I have no interest, whether intellectual or practical, in alternative means, which could only distract me from an appreciation of what I find significant and pleasurable in the experience of hunting elk. What is the use of solving a logistical problem in a way that is perfectly satisfying to you, if you are going to keep mulling alternative possibilities in your mind, and then go and try out some of them? The answer I suppose is a lot, if you happen to like gadgets and technology. But beyond the bolt-action rifle and the four-wheel-drive I am interested in neither, and don't want to hear about

them; gadgets, like prizes, being for little boys.

An avid fly-fisherman himself, Tom Fleming remarks that writers have no need of hobbies. His point is that hobbies are inherently as jealous as women and book critics; while writing, in one sense a kind of *ur*-hobby, benefits neither from competition nor distraction. Every hobby has its own technique, and the problem for the writer is less one of limited time and capacity to master several techniques than it is the limitations to his general enthusiasm, and also his ability to maintain various enthusiasms in balance. Moreover, if by hobbies one means gluing fragmentary parts of ship models together, or collecting stamps, or playing tournament golf, then the writer indeed needs none of these, activities of this sort being fundamentally exercises in self-removal—the state in which authors spend their entire working lives. What the literary man away from his work table requires above all is contact with the concrete world, and the best way for him to find it is in ritual forms of physical activity performed in a natural setting and in the company of his closest, most trusted friends, male or female. Michael Novak has extolled the joy of sports, by which he means team sports, and John Updike probably walks away from the half-finished page to shoot baskets. But what have mere games to offer the already experientially underprivileged writer, and what does a writer want with competition anyway? If he is a wise man instead of a jealous one, pious rather than envious, he must know that his is the least competitive of all trades, his sole competitors—if any—being dead men. The Greeks, who began the mania for competitive sports, have much to answer for on this score. As do the overseers of the playing fields of Eton, where the scions of the aristocracy would have been better instructed in giving the enemy the bayonet direct than in silly cricket and stupid rugby.

“It's a challenge!” people say, in this age of profound mass boredom induced by corporate careers and suburban living, as well as by trivial jobs that lack so much as the dignified physical exertion of scrubbing the floor. But, even if the challenge is actually a challenge, is it really worth meeting it?

It seems to me that a good test of the inherent worth of a thing or activity might be: Is it worth writing about? Putting this test to work, one could ask

whether war, an engine of catastrophic destruction and misery, may nevertheless be a significant endeavor? War, Hemingway thought, is the best subject for a writer, an opinion in which he is supported by many of the great works of literature from ancient times to the present: *The Iliad*, *War and Peace*, *The Red Badge of Courage* . . . *A Farewell to Arms*. Since a work of art can be finally no greater than its subject, we may conclude that war, horrific as it is, may nevertheless be a worthy human enterprise, which was the meaning of R.E. Lee's remark at Fredericksburg, that it is a good thing that war is so terrible, else we should grow too fond of warfare.

Similarly, one might inquire if repairing your car should be considered a significant activity of intrinsic merit. Since repair manuals, except at community colleges, do not count as literature; since to my knowledge the only work on the subject ever acclaimed as literature is *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (a book I never read, but which I doubt is really about maintaining motorcycles); since, finally, I cannot imagine reading—or writing—a literarily satisfying account of replacing a U-joint on my Ford pickup truck, I have to conclude that auto repair work is neither significant nor intrinsically important. The argument that, absent the U-joint, the entire drive-train will drop out of the truck, rendering it both dangerous and unfit for further service, is not a valid objection, as it implies that the automobile is of significant value to humanity, and to human civilization.

To return to the sportsman-writer, his life and his work. The artistic temperament is likely to insist on the importance of technique in every activity, not just its own particular art, and also of the challenge to which technique is applicable. This is why Thomas McGuane takes pride in training cutting horses as well as in writing novels, but it is not the basis of Ortega y Gasset's famous work in defense of hunting, which Ortega justifies on deeper philosophical grounds. Flannery O'Connor, no elk hunter herself, believed that only matters of the most crucial importance are fitting subjects for a novel. It is the responsibility of every conscientious writer to identify his proper subject, a thing he will find it impossible to do by getting his values, his priorities, and his life backwards.

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