CHAPTER II

ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S USE OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE, IN

A FAREWELL TO ARMS
II

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Physical violence is viewed as the individual attempting to come to terms with an external, physical environment which is necessarily hostile or at best, indifferent. A Farewell to Arms is examined as an example of Hemingway's use of physical violence.

Hemingway seems to hit upon violence as what was to become his major concern as a mature artist. In the pre-depression period he either was unwilling or unable to develop this material further. Instead, he appears to have decided to go back to the simplest form of violence, physical violence, and to examine carefully his subject and consciously develop his art to the point where he would eventually be able to handle the material as a major writer should.

As Hemingway published the novel A Farewell to Arms at the beginning of the Depression (1929) it is a hint that as an artist he has his own professional time table and his own rather unusual goals.
Within the literary context of the whole range of his own prose fiction, an examination of Hemingway's use of various kinds of violence reveals an artist whose place in the literary or philosophical milieu of the 20th century is firmly established if not generally disputed.

The first chapter in *A Farewell to Arms* ends with a two sentence paragraph clearly designed to introduce the dominant images of rain and sickness and to emphasize the relationship of the physical world to any complex concepts or values which may eventually derive from it.

"At the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with rain came cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it in the army." The winter, the permanent rain and the cholera are tangibles, which in the context of the readily identifiable army, cause the very palpable deaths of only seven thousand. In two short sentences, Hemingway has isolated the dominant physical nature of all that will occur in the love and death story to come.

War and physical wounding become a metaphor for existence in *A Farewell*. The pessimistic note of the essential meaningless of that existence is sounded at the initial meeting of Catherine Barkley and Frederick Henry.
"What is the stick?" I asked.
She was carrying a thin rattan stick like a toy
riding crop, bound in leather,
"It belonged to a boy who was killed last year."
"I am awfully sorry."

"He was a very nice boy.
He was going to marry me and he was killed in Somme."
'It was a ghastly show"
'Were you there?"
'No."

This conversation takes place early in Hemingway's first
novel about war, but it is closely linked with a much later
event in which Frederick Henry's struggles to achieve a satis-
factory moral resolution in _A Farewell To Arms_ lead him to
conclude that men's sufferings in life are pathetically frantic
and meaningless as the scrambling of ants on a burning log.
Catherine's willingness to give herself is ironic. Her decision
is made after he has died and it serves to heighten the tone
of hopelessness engendered by the novel's assumption of a
single, physical, hostile and godless universe.

"I wanted to do something for him. You see I did not
care about the other thing and he could have had it all. He
could have had anything he wanted if I would have known. I
would have married him or anything. I know all about it now.
But then he wanted to go to war and I did not know." I did
not say anything. "I did not know about anything then. I
thought it would be worse for him. I thought perhaps he could not stand it and then of course he was killed and that was the end of it." "I don't know." "Oh, Yes," she said, "That's the end of it." Hemingway through Frederick and Catherine, is going to try to come to terms with an external environment that seems, at best, indifferent. We are reminded at the outset that the wounds one may acquire in such an attempt will be both physical and final, regardless of the romantic milieu in which much of the action will take place.

Hemingway's concern in *A Farewell To Arms* is with the ultimate rejection or denial of arms, whether they be of love or of war. His method is to concentrate on the physical aspects of man's involvement with his universe. One of the results of this concentration is the debasement of patriotism and idealism. Man's violent struggle with the actual physical world around him requires all of his effort if he is to achieve any kind of workable compromise. The trappings of the more benign values are merely added weight. Frederick Henry realizes this long before he must cope with any violence at all. He wears an Astra 7.65 calibre to meet the requirement. He cannot shoot accurately with it. Still he wears it and is ashamed of it when he meets English speaking people.
There seem to be three tests for toughness in Hemingway's work: physical durability, the maintenance of stoic pose, and the power to confront death without morbid pessimism or specious piety. In *A Farewell to Arms* the emphasis is clearly on the first of these three. In the development of Hemingway's increasingly more sophisticated use of violence, the novel of 1929 is a preliminary step in a carefully planned artistic investigation. Frederick Henry seriously wounded by the explosion of a heavy mortar shell, retains sufficient control over himself to attempt to care for another soldier mangled by the same explosion. Later despite his shrapnel riddled legs, he makes love to Catherine in the hospital. This emphasis on physical endurance dominates this novel, but it is by no means an isolated instance in the Hemingway canon.

There seems to be a consistent attempt in Hemingway's early work not to deny death, but to minimise any glamour we might associate with it. The Hemingway protagonist attains a secular grace when in the very presence and full consciousness of death he behaves as though he would live for ever.

"I wish that I was with the British. It would have been much simpler."
Still I would probably have been killed.
Not in this ambulance business. Yes, even in this ambulance business. British ambulance drivers were killed sometimes. Well, I knew I would not be killed. Not in this war. It did not have anything to do with me. It seemed no more dangerous to me myself than war in the movies. I wished to God it was over though. May be it would finish this summer." This passage is offered long before we get the oft quoted "separate peace" incident following Frederick's dive into the river.

"Death and the Violence that often accompanies it provide the most severe and intense test of character, the sharpest vision through which to study life." 

The seemingly objective reporting of violence and the note of contempt for death add unto the attitude so clearly revealed in A Natural History of the Dead. We get an attempt to share unblinkingly into the face of death and by so doing to dispel its terror and mystery. The great danger in such an attitude is that the contempt for death might insidiously develop into contempt for life, the stoicism might become callousness, the protagonist might become exactly the sort of psychopathic non-human he combats. Only the hero who is strong enough to stare death down, but not so strong as to be wholly immune to its grim appearance, is indeed heroic. To
attain the proper relationship with violence and death is therefore the most difficult and the final test and to pass the test is, in Hemingway's own words, from *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, like having immortality while you are still alive.

In *A Farewell to Arms* we see a man attempting to come to terms, on the most elemental level, with the physical violence and suffering he sees all around him. The Hemingway protagonist can, to a certain degree, take matters into his own hands when he has confronted enough violence and suffering. He can make his private peace; he has, at least retained the power to act. Frederick can dive into the Tagliamento. But it is also clear that Hemingway's investigation at least up until 1929, led him to the conclusion that that degree of action was inevitably limited. Frederick, after all, can do no more than walk back to the hotel in the rain after Catherine's death.

Along with the occasional humour, the abundant irony, and the seemingly inevitable note of despair there seems to be a perceptible moral aspect in Hemingway's work. What personal happiness can a man expect to find in a world
seething with violence? What values can one respect when ethical values as a whole seem universally disrespected?

Honesty turns out to be one of the few certain virtues a man can cling to. This honesty with oneself and in the description of one's relationship to the physical world in which he functions, becomes the personal code a man must develop if he is to glean any meaning at all from his existence.

Frederick Henry, early in the novel, is not as honest with himself as he will become after he experiences the physical violence and pain of the mortar barrage. The Italian drivers realise the true nature of the violence in which they are involved. The American Officer still hangs on to the prescribed cliche. "Tenente," Passini said, "We understand you let us talk. Listen. There is nothing as bad as war. We in the auto ambulance cannot even realise at all how bad it is. When people realise how bad it is, they cannot do anything to stop it because they go crazy. There are some people who never realise. There are people who are afraid of their officers. It is with them the war is made.

"I know it is bad but we must finish it"
"It does not finish. There is no finish to a war."
"Yes there is."
Passini shook his head. "War is not won by victory."
From this statement about the theory of war and physical violence it is but a few pages to the actual trauma from which all psychologically oriented explanations of Hemingway must begin. The description of the incident is more important than the incident itself. The use to which the author puts the act of physical violence is as important a clue to an understanding of his art as our comprehending the psychological import of the actual wounding of Hemingway the man at Fossalta. We are given an account of physical violence which is horrendous. The choice of seemingly objective materials is made with the artistic goal clearly in mind. The physical nature of the violence described is to be only a correlative for the hopeless and existential nature of an existence which perpetuates any violence as its norm. The passage is of a physically violent act, but it is not meaningless and gratuitous violence. It is symbolic violence which serves to reinforce the author's view at the time, and it is violence which clearly foreshadows the rain and human dislocation with which the novel will end.

The physical disintegration described in the passage about Passini's both legs wounded one leg gone and the other held by tendons and trouser and the victim calling upon Christ and Mary serves only to highlight what the conscious
artist saw as a much more comprehensive moral and social disintegration. Frederick Henry forsakes the arms of war with understanding of the issues and runs from something more all-inconclusive than physical violence alone.

Lincoln Kirstein in his article entitled "The Canon of Death," has stated, "Hemingway believed in the courage of immediate physical action above all other."

Though this is the accepted view, it is not the immediate physical action that Hemingway is concerned with; it is the overall artistic function to which that physical action may point.

If the pain of physical violence and sacrifice will benefit another, the violent act takes its artistic value from its result. If, on the other hand, the violence is an echo of an essentially chaotic existence, the value of the act as depicted in literature derives not so much from itself, its inherent nature, as from its function as a sign post. Hemingway's concern with physical violence transcends the simplistic approach presumed by many readers. As the wounded Frederick is taken in an ambulance, there is another worse wounded soldier above him. Blood drips over Frederick. The driver is indifferent to the condition of the wounded
soldier. The physical action is carefully described. The cosmic indifference which permeates the human condition is the subject to which the passage concerned carefully alludes. The apparent indifference of the orderlies seems to reflect the indifference of the universe in which they function.

"The two themes of love and war which are referred to in the ambiguity of the word "arms" in A Farewell to Arms" are developed together, with alternating emphasis, until at the extremity of one the hero escapes society and at the extremity of the other the heroine escapes everything."²

Both themes are reinforced, intensified and clarified by the physical violence, which seems, almost as a result of some metaphysical absolute, to accrue to them. The courses of the two themes run exactly, though subtly, parallel and Hemingway has managed to fuse them. Frederick Henry's renunciation of the arms of war culminates at the point in the story where he is riding the flat car which will take him to the arms of his love, Catherine Barkley. The love theme will end on exactly the same note of despair and will be punctuated by the same desperate image of the implacable rain. By the end of the novel the two stories are
as one. The point is made very clear lest there be any sentimental doubt about it, that life, both social and personal, is a struggle in which the loser (like the Winner) takes nothing. The ultimate act of violence is performed by the ultimate cosmic entity, the world.

Frederick says,

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too, but there will be no special hurry."

For Hemingway love and war must always partake of violence and death. This view of war is rational, but the approach to love is one of almost obsessive pessimism and despair. It is a dark view of existence of man damaged and alone in a hostile violent world, of life and love as one long war which we seek out and challenge in fear and carefully controlled panic. In A Farewell To Arms this, hostile and violent world is all pervasive. Ferguson, a nurse who works with Catherine, reluctantly aids the lovers.
She voices disillusionment.
"Will you come to our wedding, Fergy? I said to her once. "You never get married." "We will," "No you won't."
"Why not?" "You'll fight before you marry." "We never fight."
"You've time yet."
"We don't fight." "You'll lie then. Fight or die.
That's what people do. They don't marry."

In Hemingway's careful investigation of people fighting and dying we come to realise how prophetic Ferguson really is.

Frederick Henry's development after his physical wounding is from adolescent optimism to an unfortunate but inevitable mature pessimism. Hemingway does not take the protagonist any further, never has him come to terms with the violence and disintegration of his external world, but the American volunteer has at least cause to realise the fatuousness of his previous cliches. The priest from Abruzzi, who initiates this dialogue with Frederick as the latter is recuperating from his wounds, is reluctant to give up his faith in a benevolent universe. He has been changed by the events of the past summer, but he has not suffered the physical pain that Frederick has endured and, consequently, he has not reached the level of despair and hopelessness about the war which is steadily becoming Frederick's attitude.
In *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway seeks to come to terms with the violence associated with war and the violence he sees associated with love. What choice one has if he is involved in a war directly and physically and yet he is gradually coming to realise the futility of his pose and the meaninglessness of his actions? Does he choose a personal pact of non-involvement or does he play the social role as it was written for him? During the retreat from Caporetto, but before Frederick makes his decision about dropping out of the war and into the river we see physical violence operate on a very personal level. The two sergeants who are his drivers in the retreat refuse to cut brush to extricate one of the stalled vehicles. The sergeants wish to make their separate peace by abandoning Frederick and his men. Frederick is forced into what will become one of the most ironic situations in the novel. He must perform a physically violent act against some one who is making the same decision that he himself will make very soon afterwards. The essential absurdity of the act serves to throw into relief the essential absurdity of the context in which it is performed.

"I order you to cut brush," I said. They turned and started down the road. "Halt," I said. They kept on down the muddy road, the hedge on either side. "I order you to
halt, "I called. They went a little faster. I opened up my holster, took the pistol, aimed at the one who had talked most, and fired. I missed and they both started to run.

I shot three times and dropped one. The other went through the hedge and was out of sight. I fired at him through the hedge as he ran across the field. The pistol clicked empty and I put in another clip. I saw it was too far to shoot at the second sergeant.

The irony of war reaches its height, of course, when we realise that Frederick and his retreating Italian drivers are being shot at and killed by their own army. Frederick is the first to see the absurd situation clearly. "We are in more danger from the Italians than Germans. The rear guard are afraid of everything. The Germans know what they're after." Aymo is killed by the frightened Italians and Bonello gives himself up in the chaotic retreat.

The last farewell to the arms of war for Frederick Henry is initiated by a carefully controlled crescendo of physical violence. A Carbiniere grabs him and pulls him out of the retreating column by his collar. Frederick kicks them to set himself free. From here it is a short run, a tripping dive and a cold swim to the world of love and its own attendant violence.
Frederick has, however partially, come to realise that the only reasonable approach he can take to the violently unreasonable world around him is to withdraw from it. "You were out of it now. You had no more obligation. Anger was washed away in the river along with any obligation."

The parallel nature of the themes is reflected in the similarity of the violence involved in each farewell. In the first farewell to the arms of love the emphasis is on the physical aspect of violence as a reflection of a violent and senseless void within which all men must attempt to function. In the last 13 pages of the novel, one sees most clearly Frederick Henry's desolation and the nihilism which is left to him.

Violence functions as a means of advancing the themes and philosophical concepts that are central to the works. In For Whom the Bell Tolls the physical violence of the civil war is always there for the reader to consider, but now that violence is carefully placed in a subordinate role.

Every Hemingway critic mentions the existence of violence in the author's work. Violence is an integral, artistically functional and meaningful part of Hemingway's fiction. Prior to 1952 the standard critical view was that the writer wrote about violence just because he was a violent man. This
attempt to see Hemingway as a primitive, has often seriously hindered a full appreciation of Hemingway as a novelist. It assumes that the presentation of violence is meaningless, glorified or gratuitous.
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