CHAPTER II

A FAREWELL TO ARMS: A STUDY IN ISOLATION

In America the Great War provided a curious combination of circumstances in that a particularly voluble group of young men went to Europe and were allowed to observe the war from what Malcolm Cowley has called a "spectatorial point of view". If these men were horrified by what they saw they were also frustrated by its inconclusiveness. What is more important, a greater proportion lived to tell about their experiences than was the case with the soldiers of the European armies. As a result the literature of protest was prodigious in America. The works of these novelists represented the war as it really was; the experience of the war lent them a realistic and horrifying style. The most enduring novels are those of Cummings, Dos, Passos, Faulkner and Hemingway, the men of whom it was said:

"If the war taught them bitterness, it was a bitterness tinged with longing and detached regret, a romantic distillation of other men's despair."

None of them served in a fighting army
and the real significance of their work lies else-
where; Vernon Parrington observed:

"With the cynicism that came with post-
war days, democratic liberalism was thrown aside
like an empty whisky flask; Clever young men (said)
that the first want of every man ..., is his dinner
and the second his girl." 3

The shock effect of the war on American
idealism and optimism was even reflected in con-
temporary typography in the consciousness of the
insignificance of human action; the letter i often becomes lower case as the point of view of
the narrator was lost in the general reductive
terror.

In these circumstances the war provided
a powerful metaphor not only to express the reaction

3. Parrington, Vernon - The Beginning of Critical
Realism in America III - Page 412
against post war conditions but also to embody the spirit of 'the lost generation'. The retreat from Caporetto and the subsequent events of *A Farewell to Arms* thus become symbolic of the outlook of the twenties: the collapse of the Italian forces resembles the collapse of the moral certitude with which America entered the war; the chaos of the retreat itself parallels America's frenetic search for new values in the twenties; and Lieutenant Henry's desertion and subsequent tragic loss of wife and child symbolise a sense of isolation expressed by many writers of this generation. But ultimately it was the aspect of the war as a mindless destroyer of human dignity that proved to be most debilitating, particularly to a generation that had gone to the war as they would to a picnic. The only lesson of the war is contained in the much quoted passage from *A Farewell to Arms*: "That was what you did, You died."  

*A Farewell to Arms* published in 1929 stemmed directly from Hemingway's experiences as a

4. A remark attributed to Miss Gertrude Stein

Lieutenant in Italy in World War I. Hemingway's response to World War I was the impulse behind perhaps his best fictional work. In his Introduction to *Men At War*, he said that this was the occasion for the loss of his illusion of immortality and his learning to hate the corrupt politicians whose corrupt policies led to the denouement in the great slaughters of Somme, Verdun and the Vittorio Veneto. It was a war of disillusionment with a personal climax for him in the summer of 1917 - the time of his wounding - but with a general emotional climax for him in the summer of 1918 - the time of the Caporetto disaster in Italy.  

Hemingway realised that the key to the war in Italy was the disaster at Caporetto. It defined the battle lines of 1918 and it coloured the entire Italian war effort. To write about the war in Italy, Hemingway realised he could not avoid Caporetto. He realised that the implications of Caporetto went beyond the battlefield and beyond even the national honour about which the Italians had become so hysterical. Ultimately Caporetto stood for the entire

war experience, and that experience was defeat. Nations may have won or lost at the military level, but the individual soldiers in the trenches experienced a kind of defeat that had little to do with occupied territories or victorious battles. It was an experience of defeat epitomised in struggles all over the world. On every front soldiers were experiencing what they would come to understand - that the war was a defeat, no matter who won.

It is this concept of defeat which carries the action of *A Farewell to Arms*. Frederick Henry's desertion epitomises the experience of the individual regardless of nationality. The usual responses to the trauma of war and the sudden armistice are those in which the individual either tries to make a "separate peace" or else is permanently alienated from society by the enormity of what he has experienced (what we call shell shock today). Frederick Henry and Nick Adams (*In Our Time*) both try to make a separate peace. It is an attempt at the preservation of selfhood in the midst of chaos.
Frederick Henry's desertion is the most rational choice he makes and it becomes a radical political statement indicating the national goals that had failed to sustain the individual. Henry's desertion is not that of an American deserting on a "joke front", it is rather the conclusion of a war generation who had ultimately understood what the experience had meant. In the circumstances it is the tough minded individual who manages to survive the effects of the war. Lieutenant Henry moves from an enjoyment of the war as an aesthetic and intellectual stimulus to a rejection of it as a soul shattering absurdity beyond the comprehension of the human mind. But in many cases the protagonists in the World War I novels begin and end their participation in war on a purely selfish plane. There is the example of Krebs in Soldiers Home,7 who went away to war on such a motivation, experienced a great deal of action, spent time in the army of occupation and was in no particular hurry to get back to civilian life. The cynical outlook necessary for

survival in wartime made civilian life an absurdity reducing the violence of the battlefields to the level of the incomprehensible. Hemingway in his later works turned away from the limitless violence of the war towards the ritualised comprehensible violence of the bullring. In fact this task, the necessity to comprehend the nature of industrialised war and to show how the individual could act effectively in the face of it, was not accomplished until much later. In For Whom the Bell Tolls the value of an individual gesture was to be emphasised as opposed to the idea of "a separate peace", but in the novels about World War I, Hemingway and his colleagues saw the private peace as one acceptable solution in a situation larger than the human mind could grasp.

In the opening pages of the novel, Frederick Henry is the archetype of the all American young man - a nice guy. Like many others of his age and generation, he is insensitive to the suffering of others, slightly selfish and above all totally ridicules the possibility of his own death. "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 than
war in the movies." In fact at the beginning Frederick Henry is very much like a soldier in the movies. He is tough, young and attractive to women and wears his uniform with a touch of proud nonchalance. In the circumstances, he is particularly attractive to the local nurses, one of which he intends to ensnare. He has a vague, ill defined idealism common in the American youth of the twenties who had till then only heard about the war at second hand and not really experienced it. He is in other words, a perfectly normal young man - a normalcy which becomes the basis for satire directed both at the young protagonist and the reader. Henry at the beginning of the novel is egoistical and selfish, so also his perceptions are limited and detached. But his greatest fault, however, is his general lack of awareness, a deadly sin in Hemingway's ethics. In his characterisation of Frederick Henry it is interesting to note, that Hemingway actually depicts himself as he was in 1918. He maintains an ironic distance from the character, a distance which is not without a touch of regret and ridicule.

8. Hemingway, Ernest - *A Farewell to Arms* (Granada, 1977)
Early in the novel, the scene of the war is set in a manner "reminiscent of a quaint Italian operetta". Priest baiting in the officer's mess is juxtaposed with the bawdy activities at the Villa Rosa, while the war progresses like a game - the Italian infantry moving up and down, capturing and surrendering the same territory and the Austrian artillery bombarding Henry's station not seriously "but only a little in a military way".

Henry's perception of the outside world is abstract and dreamlike and parallels the emptiness within himself. His insensitivity is heightened in his feelings for Catherine, particularly in context to her recent bereavement. She has lost to the war the man she was to marry, as a result of which she is deeply wounded emotionally. But Henry's limited perception of her feelings leads him to think of her as nothing more than "a little crazy." He intends to use his charm to full advantage; to love her and to leave her.


"I knew I did not love Catherine Barkely nor had any idea of loving her. This was a game like bridge in which you said things, instead of playing cards."\(^{11}\)

The two major aspects of life in the novel, love and war acquire the same degree of flatness in Henry's eyes:

"We kissed and she broke away suddenly. 'No, good night please darling' ... we walked to the door and I saw her go in and down the hall. I liked to watch her move ... It was a hot night and there was a good deal going on up in the mountains. I watched the flashes on San Gabriele."\(^{12}\)

It is the Priest from Ambruzzi, however, who perceives Henry's latent capacity for commitment "... to do things... to sacrifice... to serve."\(^{13}\) But at the time, he drowns himself in a world of sensations in "the smoke of cafes and nights when the room whirled knowing that this was all and all and all and not caring."\(^{14}\) It is again the priest who perceives

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11. Ibid., Page 26-27
12. Ibid., Page 28
13. Ibid.; Page 57
14. Ibid.; Page 14
that even after being wounded Henry has not acquired a consciousness of the reality of the war — "still even wounded ... you do not see it. I can tell." 15 Henry does not perceive the terrifying irrationality of the war, the nature of its irrational violence which leaves no room for the preservation of the individual and his dignity. Henry's even casual commitment to the war has denied him his ability to love as well as his ability to react as an individual. The war has nothing to do with the victor or the vanquished. Its mindless progression is based on destruction irrespective of everything and everyone and therein lies the absurdity. Yet Henry seeks a purpose behind the war, an order behind the chaos, till suddenly the incident at the bridge allows the truth to dawn on him.

War in the novel not only becomes a fact of life but acquires a metaphorical meaning as well. It becomes a symbol for "mass - man", the bureaucracy, the propaganda and above all the indifference. Individual dignity is destroyed at the alter of general submission, and it is this aspect which becomes even more terrifying that the violence unleashed.

15. Ibid., Page 55.
It is not that Henry is impervious to the irrationality of the war, but at the beginning the impact of it is negligible to his insensitive mind. He does wonder a great deal about what is going on and what will happen in the end and gradually the reader begins to perceive the growing horror of the individual at the mass madness of the war. "There is no finish to a war." But even then Henry seeks a meaning in war, a meaning yet beyond his grasp. His general stance of commitment, even though perfunctory, is radically different from the driver Passini.

"... There is nothing worse than war (Passini said) Defeat is worse" (Henry replied)

Passini of course has a deeper understanding of the war, an understanding which dawns on Henry only when he is met by the chaos at the bridge.

"My knee wasn't there. My hand went in and my knee was down on my shin!"

But it is at the time of his wounding that

16. Ibid., Page 41
17. Ibid., Page 40
18. Ibid., Page 45
the first lesson of the war is learnt by Henry. There are, however, several absurdities linked with his wounding. Firstly, Henry and his comrades are not soldiers, they are ambulance drivers ready to carry the wounded to the hospital. Henry is wounded not while in combat, but in the mundane act of eating cheese. And the tragedy is, that is, Passini who so abhors war who is killed.

These ironic contrasts raise questions: what sort of game is war? What are the rules and who dictates them? The effect of the wounding on Henry and its psychological implications are, however, not explicitly stated in this novel. But for Hemingway himself this must have had very deep emotional implications, for this motif reappears in a much later novel *Across the River and into the Trees*. Here we have Colonel Cantrell, a much wounded older man than Henry but having gone through the same war and the same initial wounding.

"Finally he did get hit properly and for good. No one of his other wounds had ever done to him what the first big one did, I suppose it is just the loss of immortality, he thought. Well, in a way, that is quite a lot"
to lose.19

Henry's subsequent sojourn at the hospital in Milan is the beginning of a doomed love story. As his relationship with Catherine deepens, his links with the war gradually grow more tenuous. Ultimately he reaches a point where he cannot bear to read news of the war - the only words he can read are the baseball scores. In ironic contrast to Henry and his growing despair is the super patriot Ettore so taken up with the war that he is swept away by the glamour of the wounds and the medals.

"He's got five medals and, oh boy, aren't they great for making the girls think you're fine. But wound stripes are better ... ."20

On his return to the front Henry is met with a shock. The situation has degenerated drastically. The Austrian offensive has depleted his comrades both physically and psychologically. The same men had grown older and wiser in a period of months. The mood is summed up

aptly by the major when he says that Henry was lucky to have got hit when he did. The priest who had once blushed at the teasings in the mess room, now has become impervious to everything. He still prays, but there is no conviction in his prayers. He has seen too much death to believe in hope. But it is in Henry's encounter with Rinaldi, the surgeon, that the reality of the war is brought to sharpest focus. Rinaldi does not think, he operates - like a machine. He has been driven by the demands made on him by his profession to a point beyond physical and emotional endurance. He is a man at the brink of hysteria.

Henry too has seen enough of the war. Words such as victory, courage, honour and glory all sound hollow to him. He reaches a point where the only solace he seeks is oblivion in sleep.21

But it is the event at the bridge which leads to a radical turning point in Henry's thinking. All this while he had been a mindless automaton in the meaningless process of war. But it is the battle police at the bridge who symbolise the ultimate irrationality of the war game.

21. Ibid., Page 130.
"They were all young men and they were saving their country." They shoot everyone they question and neither the shootings nor the questions have any significance for they were "saving their country." Henry is faced here with two alternatives. On the one hand is the false rhetoric of victory, honour and courage and on the other the reality of terror, cowardice and death. The incomprehensible reality of the defeated Italians shooting their own officers becomes a symbol for the loss of all reason. Henry is faced with death, a death which like everything else has no meaning and quite suddenly a rational alternative does present itself. From disillusioned acceptance he chooses a way out and swims across the river to freedom.

But the knowledge that Frederick Henry acquires does not make _A Farewell to Arms_ an initiation story. Neither Henry nor Catherine is portrayed as an innocent in Europe at the beginning of the book. Neither expresses any ideals that have been besmirched by the war. The only object lesson is contained in the words — "That was what you did. You died."

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22. Ibid., Page 162.
However, rather than being a study in war, love or initiation, *A Farewell to Arms* is more aptly a study in isolation. Although Frederick Henry is not the hero in the conventional sense, he emerges as the central character in the novel as it defines his progress from group participation to total isolation which in reality is the main action of the novel.

At the beginning of the novel in the fall of 1915, Henry is part of a contingent of ambulance drivers in the Italian Second Army - a key link in the defences of the Italian front, which is an extension of the Western front in France. Italy in turn is part of an alliance which places Henry at the end of a long chain of command. But at the end of the novel, Henry is bereft of country, family and friend - he is totally isolated.

It is with his wounding that Henry's movement into isolation first begins. His wounds separates him both physically and psychologically from his comrades. His convalescence at the hospital separates him physically from his friends at the front while his wound gives an
added dimension to his experience of war unknown to his friends who have not been wounded. In Book II, his growing relationship with Catherine gives the couple a separate identity removed from the mass identity of the war. As their relationship deepens all the props that sustain Western civilization fail to sustain them.

The family, the military and the State fail to support Frederick and Catherine in the face of the "nada" that surrounds them. Organised religion has no meaning and comfort for the couple; in the pouring rain in Milan, Catherine refuses to take shelter in the Church for she says the Church will not do lovers any good. Catherine tells Frederick that he has become her religion. At the brink of death, she refuses to seek solace in God and rejects Henry's suggestions of seeing a priest, just as earlier Henry never seeks the Ambruizi country where religion has meaning. The priest in the officers' mess prays but his prayers lack his earlier conviction; he too has been disillusioned by the war.

Troop mutinies and references to a 'separate peace' coupled with the soldiers' criticism and frustration give evidence to the bankruptcy of the military. The soldiers' uniform which had earlier provided comfort gradually becomes a hollow symbol for Henry. The family too has no
meaning for either Catherine or Henry - they are essentially without family, two individuals caught in the crossfire of war.

But initially, Henry does not realise the extent of his growing isolation till his return to the front in Book III. His wound not only isolates him from his comrades but his feelings for Catherine further isolates him from group participation for he can no longer visit the Villa Rosa where his soldier comrades are entertained by the women of the house. During the retreat from Caporetto he is sustained not by his official obligations but by his love and desire to join Catherine. It is Catherine who sustains him throughout the maddening progress of the retreat.

When the retreat begins Henry is part of the Second Army. Soon after he leaves Gorizia his ambulances are separated from the main body of the retreat. Bogged down in the mud, the ambulances have to be deserted and Henry and his co-drivers have to make the journey on foot towards the bridge head. When one driver is killed and the other deserts, Henry is left alone to face the battle police at the bridge. Thus during the retreat, one sees the movement into isolation
acted out in the narrative. Here in Book III, the key chapter of the novel Hemingway has epitomised the progress into isolation, which is the central theme of the novel.

In the last pages of the novel the movement into isolation is brought to its final culmination at Stresa. Here the lovers have abandoned the last of their friends and acquaintances. They have abandoned their duty to move on to safety. They are in Switzerland which, significantly, is a neutral country uninvolved with the war. Here in another country they are totally alienated from every one and everything familiar. And when Catherine dies in childbirth in Lausanne, doctors fail, just as earlier in the midst of war the priest failed to sustain the individual in the face of death. Bereft of wife and child, Frederick Henry is alone against the world. He has no hope, no belief, no person to turn to. He is the truly isolated man.

It is significant that Hemingway had written *A Farewell to Arms* in retrospect, and in this context his theme of growing isolation becomes even more meaningful. He had viewed the period between the war and the writing of *A Farewell to Arms*
with the eyes of a practicing journalist, as Philip Young remarks:

"Something in the evolution of Frederick Henry from complicity in the war to bitterness and escape has made him seem, though always himself, a little larger than that too. Complicity, bitterness and escape—a whole country could read its experience. . . . . . . . When historians of various kinds epitomise the temper of the American twenties and a reason for it, the adventures of that Lieutenant come almost invariably to mind." 23

When he expressed his disillusionment with the ideals the war claimed to promote and jumped into the river and deserted, Henry's action epitomised the contemporary feeling of a whole nation. Edmund Wilson says at the end of Axel's Castle:

". . . . . When the prodigious concerted efforts of the war had ended only in impoverishment and exhaustion

for all the European peoples concerned, and in a general feeling of hopelessness about politics, about all attempts to organise men into social units - armies, parties, nations - in the service of some common ideal, for the accomplishment of some particular purpose, the Western mind became peculiarly hospitable to a literature indifferent to action and unconcerned with the group. 24

Many writers began to identify themselves with James Joyce's hero Stephen Dedalus in his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in his proud revolt from Church and family, in his resort to" silence, exile and cunning" and in his dream of "forging in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." This last was a social purpose since Joyce himself was an Irish patriot as many of the American exiles were patriots; young men who had left their country in despair

but yet sought to redeem it. These exiles had a purpose in the sense that they wanted to expunge the language of what they often called "the big words". To comprehend the purpose behind this, one must realise that the horrifying reality of the war was often camouflaged behind grandiose words and sentiments in a verbal effort to mislead the people. Hemingway made famous this revolt through his classic statement against the big words in *A Farewell to Arms*:

"I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by bill posters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards
at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except bury it." 25

This revolt against big words and lofty sentiments took shape in a fresh new prose style of the post war generation, which distrusted any words which begged for an emotional response. Disgusted with the false sentiments of wartime, this generation was trying to write of simple things simply. This search for "clean words" became the most distinguishing facet of the new generation. What first took birth as a revolt against style later grew into the radical pacifism of the 1930s.

The connection between Hemingway and his hero is always intimate, and in view of the despair of *A Farewell to Arms*, it is perhaps not surprising that his next two books – both non-fiction – find the hero, Hemingway himself, now without disguise, at the

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end of his tether and in complete escape from the society he had renounced in *A Farewell to Arms*. The books are *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) and *Green Hills of Africa* (1935). The first is a book on bull-fighting, the second is a book on big game hunting. But both these books are really about death, a subject which by his own admission obsessed Hemingway for a long time. But more clearly than anything else, the books present a picture of man who had since the "separate peace" found himself completely rootless. The feeling is strong that he will have to find new roots, or re-establish old ones if he were going to write anymore good novels. This sense of isolation in *A Farewell to Arms* is however, brought to its logical conclusion in his next fictional work *To Have and Have Not* - "one man alone ain't got no bloody chance". But it is another war and another people that really brings him back to the world of other people and that happens in 1939 with the writing of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. 