

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Perhaps the clearest distinction that could have been drawn between Fitzgerald and Hemingway is that little interchange about the rich, inasmuch as Fitzgerald was distinguishing between a novelist of manners like himself who had a sharp eye for the differences seated by social standing, and a lyricist, a poet of sensory experience, whose distinctive voice would have an indelible effect upon English prose. It's hard to recapture the revolutionary force of that famous style today, the original impact of Hemingway's verbal craftsmanship, because it has been so widely imitated. Those imitations include Hemingway's later works, as he tapered off. It looks so easy and obvious, but it wasn't at the time. Now, given the linguistic distinction between *la langue écrite* and *la langue parlée*, it had been Mark Twain who brought the American-English vernacular into the literary language, as Hemingway himself acknowledged in *Green Hills of Africa*. Let us turn for a moment to the opening page of *A Farewell to Arms*.

In the late summer of that year [that year being 1916; he sounds quite vague, but he is actually pretty specific] we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, [the drought is going to be emphasized] and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves on the trees.

It looks quite vague, but it's quite immediate because he is really pointing. He is showing us, not telling us. He is saying, "Look! Voilà! Voici!" Then, as he goes on, he uses a very impersonal exposition: "there was...there was fighting." Note the substantive. He is not telling us about individual fights this time, not saying "I fight, you fight".

There was fighting in the mountains and at night we could see the flashes from the artillery. In the dark, it was like summer lightning, [there's a metaphor for you, there will not be too many] but the nights were cool and there was not the feeling of a storm coming.

This is completely negative, the registering of a sensation that is not there. Sometimes, of course, it is there; but what he's saying is we didn't expect it. "Sometimes in the dark we [we're getting closer here: first-person plural] heard the troops marching under the window and the guns going past pulled by motor-tractors. There was much traffic at night and many mules on the roads with boxes of ammunition...," and so on. Please observe the differences between there and here, between then and now. We are looking back in this chapter. "There was fighting [very abstract] for that mountain too, but it was not successful, and in the fall the rains came, [here comes the contrast, since we have been talking about dryness] the leaves all fell from the chestnut trees and the branches were bare and the trunks black with rain. The vineyards were thin and bare-branched too and all the country wet and brown...," and so forth. "There were mists over the river...."

Verbs sometimes give force or give color, but not with Hemingway. "There was, there were; it was, *il y avait*." And the nouns are very often unmodified. They do not have adjectives: "mists over the river", "clouds on the mountain", "trucks splashed mud on the roads" [here at least is a colorful verb], "troops were muddy and wet," and so forth and so on. "...The two leather cartridge-boxes bulged forward [there's another colorful verb] under the capes so that the men, passing on the road, marched as though [another rare metaphor here] they were six months gone with child." And that is not only a metaphor; it is a symbolic omen for the dénouement of the book. "There were small grey motorcars...", "...there was an officer...," so on, etcetera, more mud, and finally two generals and a glimpse of someone who goes by so fast you hardly know, but it might be the king. If it is, he makes it a rather anticlimactic appearance. "He lived in Udine and came out in this way nearly every day to see how things were going, and things went very badly. [Here we come to the real purport of this chapter.] At the start of the winter came the permanent

rain and with the rain came the cholera." And then the last sentence of this short introduction: "But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it in the army." Bitter irony.

This prelude, then, conveys a lull, a standstill in the battles, along with all the dryness and then the active element of rain being hoped for and expected. Indeed rain will set the rhythms throughout the novel, contrasting with the aridity of the countryside. Such an atmosphere is emphasized in the film on which Hemingway collaborated with Joris Ivens, *The Spanish Earth*. Then the second chapter begins: "The next year there were many victories." We are still looking at them from a distance, not participating. "The mountain that was beyond the valley and the hillside where the chestnut forest grew was captured," and so forth; "we crossed the river in August and lived in a house in Gorizia [a part of Austria contested by Italy] that had a fountain and many thick shady trees in a walled garden," and so forth. "Now the fighting [still the abstract substantive form] was in the next mountain beyond and was not a mile away. The town was very nice and our house was very fine." Those adjectives convey no visual impression whatsoever, but are purely subjective. You go with the narrator, who becomes the observer, and finally becomes yourself: I was the man, I suffered, I was there. And such words as these do not really mean anything by themselves, unless you posit an emotional relationship. When the narrator says of the heroine, "She had a lovely face and body," that doesn't give you a picture of her, but it tells you how he felt about her.

Considering the structure, you will notice that Hemingway does not use complex sentences. He uses extremely simple declarative sentences, and they tend to be long –sometimes simply because he links them together with a device that the rhetoricians used to call polysyndeton, many "ands". I counted one sentence of 166 words which included twenty-one "ands", and among those words only twenty were not monosyllables.

The trick was to rely upon sensation to convey excitement. To catch, as he put it in *Death in the Afternoon*, which discusses writing as well as bullfighting, "the sequence of motion and fact" that makes the emotion and gives the impression. Impressionism sometimes

becomes expressionism. For example, when he does not say "the drunken soldiers were dizzy," but instead says "the room whirled," he is taking part in the sensation directly. You might recall an example which appeared in *The Great Gatsby*; Nick Carraway's first impression of Daisy and Jordan, when the wind has blown their skirts up, and it now looks as if they were descending from the ceiling of the room.

We stick pretty much to a first person point of view, sometimes even shifting to the second person for directness as here: "you did not love the floor of the flat car, but you loved someone else" [he is talking to himself, of course]. The narrative is heavily seasoned with conversation: the tender tough dialogue of the lovers; a good deal of kidding, which is a very American form of joking by teasing; the black humor, which is laughing in the dark when one is under strain, and very appropriate here for that reason. For instance, when carried to the hospital, Frederick almost insists on their amputating his leg because he would like to wear a hook. Or the whimsy, when he thinks about growing a beard and says, "Well, you know, that will give me something to do." Much of the language sounds as if it were translated from the Italian; and Hemingway can go much farther than that, in what might be called the Anglo-Hispanese of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Indeed, when the book appeared, there was a very amusing parody by E.B. White in the *New Yorker* entitled "Thou Tellest Me, Comrade," using language that sounds quite archaic in a modern English context. Hemingway had a gift of verbal mimicry which he employed for characterization: for example when echoing the speech of the rather blimpish British major.

With Ernest Hemingway we meet another Middlewesterner. The son of a physician, he was born and grew up in a suburb of Chicago, but spent his summers hunting and fishing in the woods of northern Michigan, a peninsula between the Great Lakes. He catches this experience in the Nick Adams stories particularly, and I think most effectively, in what can hardly be called a story at all, but is a pure presentation of that kind of sensuous experience, "Big Two-Hearted River". He did not attend a university; he became a writer, as so many of our best writers have done, by becoming a journalist, a reporter in

the fullest sense of the term, first in Kansas City and then in Toronto and finally abroad.

When the first World War came, in spite of his athleticism, he was not declared fit for military service, so he enlisted to serve in the Red Cross ambulance corps as a driver. Consequently he became the closest kind of spectator in the Italian campaign, perhaps the most disillusioning part of the war. He was wounded, and fell in love with a nurse at the hospital, Agnès Von Kurowvsky, an American of European background who appears as Catherine Barkley in the novel. Apparently, as she herself has remembered, it was no more than a slight flirtation. She was twenty-six, and took a maternal attitude toward this kid of nineteen; but later, looking back, he developed this casual encounter into the tragic romance of *A Farewell to Arms*.

Hemingway moved to Paris after the war, having made the first of his four marriages. He was not yet ready to write a war novel. He wrote poems and the sketches and stories that were brought together in his first volume, *In Our Time*. That book is remarkable, however, not only for the stories, but for the little sketches in italics—sometimes less than a single page—that interlace the stories. One of them, in particular, has relevance for our novel. It describes the experience of being wounded in the war, with a companion who prefigures the Italian friend, Rinaldi. Together they agree to make a "separate peace." This will be the end of the war for them.

Hemingway's first significant novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, would become a kind of handbook for the understanding of what Gertrude Stein would be calling, "the lost generation"—those expatriates, in Paris whom Hemingway takes for an interlude to the bullfights at Pamplona. That marked the beginnings of the powerful attraction that Spain and Hispanic cultures would exert on him throughout his life. As a dedicated Hispanophile, he would be active on the margins of the Civil War, and would set down his recollections in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In 1954, he would be awarded the Nobel Prize.

But it was in 1929, a decade after his initiation to World War I that he was ready to chronicle his part of it in fiction. Now fiction has registered the experience of war heroically in epic and romance; but that is pretty far, of course, from anything that anyone would be likely

to experience today. In those old days, prowess could be manifested by single combat in which individuals stood out; whereas the development of modern weaponry, and of vast conscripted civilian armies since the Napoleonic period, has changed all that. Accordingly a tone of ironic disillusionment has crept into war fiction, ever since the works of its great masters Stendhal and Tolstoy. In *A Farewell to Arms* there is a brief conversation with the Italian count, who speaks good English but gets a title wrong, when he is talking about a recent war novel by H.G. Wells called *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*. Mr. Britling is a British civilian, and the book is about how the war sounds as if it is at home. But the count, slightly mixed-up, calls the book *Mr. Britling Sees Through It* –and seeing through the experience of war has been the trend of modern novelists.

Among his earlier stories, a moving catharsis comes at the end of “The Indian Camp”. After having found himself a close witness of an acutely painful Indian tragedy, Nick Adams somehow breathes fresh air again with the feeling that he will never die. It is the typical youthful reaction. Insofar as it was Hemingway’s, that notion would be changed by the shell-burst in the midst of battle and “a roar that started quiet and went red”. Note that the senses are getting mixed up here. Then a rushing wind:

I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind. I went out swiftly, all of myself and I knew I was dead and that it had all been a mistake to think you just died. Then I floated, and instead of going on I felt myself slide back. I breathed and I was back.

It goes on:

In the jolt of my head I heard somebody crying [he is now thinking of others]. I felt somebody was screaming. I tried to move but I could not move. I heard the machine guns and rifles firing across the river and all along the river. There was a great splashing and I saw the star-shells go up and burst and float quietly and rockets going up and heard the bombs, and all this in a moment, and then I heard close to me someone saying, ‘Mamma mia! Oh, mamma mia!’ I pulled and twisted [he is thinking of someone else now; not merely himself] and got my legs loose finally and turned around

and touched him. It was Passini and when I touched him he screamed. His legs were toward me and I saw in the dark and the light that they were both smashed above the knee [the same kind of injury, but much more serious than Frederick's]. One leg was gone and the other was held by tendons and part of the trouser and the stump twitched and jerked as though it were not connected.

Frederick tries to help:

I unwound the puttee and while I was doing it I saw that there was no need to try and make a tourniquet because he was dead already. I made sure he was dead. There were three others to locate.

And then Frederick thinks of himself again:

I sat up straight and as I did so something inside my head moved like the weights on a doll's eyes and it hit me inside behind my eyeballs. My legs felt warm and wet and my shoes were wet and warm inside. I knew I was hit and leaned over and put my hand on my knee. My knee wasn't there.

Like *War and Peace*, *A Farewell to Arms* alternates between being a war novel and being a love story. After the hospital interlude in Milan, when Frederick is discharged, he goes back to the front and to what may have been the least heroic episode of the first World War, the retreat of the Italians and their defeat by the Austrians and Germans at Caporetto in 1917. This low point was one of the factors that led to the entrance of the United States into the war the following year. Frederick's participation was with this rear-guard action and its resulting demoralization, which together form the descriptive set-piece of the book. The officers are tired of war; the soldiers cry "Evviva la Pace!" and "Andiamo a casa!" And the narrator decides to go -what in the American army is called AWOL- absent without leave. He makes his separate peace when he plunges into the river Po, and thereafter makes his flat-car escape between Venice and Milan.

Hemingway was particularly apt in choosing the titles for his books, and thereby set a style of literary illusion especially for Anglo-American literature: a title which conjured up the subject by referring to something that had been written before. *The Sun Also Rises*, for example, is from the Bible, an unusually suggestive passage in the book of Ecclesiastes. From the same passage you find other novelists

choosing their titles: Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* or Henry James' *Golden Bowl*. Again, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway chose a powerful phrase from a sermon of John Donne's. In the case of *A Farewell to Arms*, he had found in *The Oxford Book of English Verse* a charming little poem by George Peele. When Sir Henry Lee who had been Queen Elizabeth's champion at tournaments, was retiring after many years, and this was his farewell—not to real arms, of course, but to such courtly ceremonials. Incidentally, that was not Peele's title: it was first used when the poem was reprinted by the editor of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, Arthur Cooch. Hemingway was not a very wide reader. He easily could have found the Donne selection in *The Oxford Book of English Prose*. However, he was an exceptionally perceptive and selective reader, with a sharp eye for the telling phrase. Another phrase which he borrowed from Marlowe for one of his stories, "In Another Country" reminds us that so many settings for Hemingway's fiction were in other countries: Italy and Austria and Switzerland in *A Farewell to Arms*, France and Spain in *The Sun Also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in Spain, incidentally, and some of the other stories in the Hispanic Caribbean, where he passed much of his later life.

The young American, Frederick Henry, had been a student in Rome when the war came, and Catherine Barkley, the British nurse, had lost her British fiancé during the war. Their meeting place is appropriately a hospital, where life and death come together, and which has consequently been the setting for some of the most significant modern novels. One thinks of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* or Solzhenitzyn's *Cancer Ward*. Therein we follow the stages of Frederick and Catherine's love affair. When they see another pair of lovers, and Frederick says, "Oh! They're like us," Catherine contradicts him, "No, nobody is like us." Wherever it springs up, love is unique.

Hemingway's muscle-flexing *machismo* has been a target for feminist criticism, and with some justification. He has been accused of creating heroines who tend to be pin-up girls or clinging types. Yet Catherine is one of the most touching of them; and when you read his memoir, *A Movable Feast*, you can see how her affectionate language

with him echoes that of his first wife, Hadley Richardson. When Frederick talks to Count Greffi, the count asks him, "Are you *croyant*?" and the answer is "At night." I think that perhaps betokens Hemingway's religious attitude, which comes out too in Frederick's conversations with the sympathetic priest. Frederick prays for the still-born child, and even wishes that it had been baptized. For Hemingway, born a Protestant and briefly converted to Catholicism, religion was an attitude rather than a theology.

A Farewell to Arms has five sections, like *My Ántonia* in that respect; and it alternates themes in those sections, the first taking place "that year", which means "back there". This is the period of waiting and getting the war started. Then the second part, with the wounded hero falling in love, those three months in the hospital. And then the third, going back to the war again, and the climax which is an anti-climax at Caporetto. Then the fourth: "that fall", and Frederick's defection, the lovers coming together, and a domestic idyll in an Alpine chalet. And ultimately the fifth in a Swiss village and at another hospital.

There are two hairbreadth escapes in this sequence: the first from the army to the river and the flatcar, and the second with the lovers to Switzerland. And there are the two hospitals: the one where they meet and the one where it is her turn to suffer the child's abortive birth, when Frederick's internal monologue echoes Catherine's dying agony. Pain is no less acutely rendered than pleasure in Hemingway's prose. When the gas is given to Catherine as an anaesthetic, she can only murmur from time to time, "Give it to me," with a subliminal echo of their sexual relationship.

The clear stamp of Hemingway's humor is to fight against overwhelming odds for lost causes as stoically as possible. The lesson claimed to be learned from those Spanish bullfighters was "grace under pressure". Rinaldi, the Italian lieutenant, who is a doctor, sums up this attitude after he declares, "I'm only happy when I'm working."

'You'll get over that,' says Frederick.

'No, I only like two other things. One is bad for my work, and the other is over in half an hour or fifteen minutes, sometimes less.'

‘Sometimes a good deal less,’ says Frederick wryly.

‘Perhaps I have improved, baby,’ [He should be speaking Italian here, *bambino*] ‘But there are only the two things and my work.’

‘You’ll get other things.’

‘No, we never get anything. We are born with all we have and we never learn.’

Hemingway originally wrote a conventional ending for this book: certain generalizations summing things up, and telling you a little about what happened to the main characters; what Dickens used to call “a prize-giving”. It was Fitzgerald who did him the great service of persuading him to change the closure. Frederick is speaking in the hall with the doctor who tells him that there is nothing left to do:

‘Can I take you to your hotel?’

‘No thank you. I’m going to stay here a while.’

‘I know there’s nothing to say,’ says the doctor. [This is nothing that can be put into words; words have failed at this point.] ‘It was the only thing to do, the operation proved-’

‘I do not want to talk about it,’ I said. He went down the hall. I went to the door of the room. ‘You can’t come in now,’ one of the nurses said.

‘Yes I can,’ I said.

‘You can’t come in yet.’

‘You get out,’ I said, ‘the other one too.’ But after I had got them out and shut the door and turned out the light it wasn’t any good. It was like saying good-bye to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain.

And thus, in the rain again the book closes with Hemingway’s justification for the famous passage I referred to the other day: the conclusion glimpsed at Caporetto, that now no longer means much, rhetoric is shown up by reality. “I did not say anything,” Frederick told us on that occasion, readjusting his response.

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 billposters 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 to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow, were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.

This, then, was Hemingway's meditated response after ten years, thinking back to his personal experience of war against the public propaganda that had lead up to it, the rhetoric that all too often obscured it. More directly, shortly afterward, he had registered his reaction in one of the imagistic poems written in Paris while he was still aspiring to be a poet and digesting his misadventures. These lines of free verse were composed in 1922:

"To Good Guys Dead"

They sucked us in; /King and country, /Christ Almighty, /And
the rest. /Patriotism, /Democracy, /Honor, /Words and phrases,
/They either bitched or killed us."

This is more of a poster than a poem, or what we might even call an anti-poster. It presents raw material, undigested reaction against war propaganda, and tries to spell out the difference between words and things, thereby to sharpen our feeling for reality. Turning to prose five years later, prose far less prosaic than that poetic effort, Hemingway did not need to *tell* it. He was then able to *show* it: what are slogans, and proclamations and posters, as compared with meat and drink or life and love or war and death? But that is precisely the question that Cervantes had raised and had answered by using words to deconstruct themselves.