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Patriotism and Treason in A Farewell to Arms

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley spoke for a generation embittered by its experience of the Great War and disappointed by the grim realities of the postwar years:

There died a myriad,
And of the best, among them,
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
For a botched civilization,
Charm, smiling at the good mouth,
Quick eyes gone under earth's lid,
For two gross of broken statues,
For a few thousand battered books.

(Pound 732-33)

But the young reporter who in 1922 wrote up his "old" Italian front for the *Toronto Daily Star* was not yet a follower of Ezra Pound's Mauberley. He was not yet showing disappointment at the way the Great War had been conducted, nor was he preoccupied with any of its disturbing legacies. His immediate disappointment derived merely from his discovery that the honored war dead had been removed from their original burial sites. They were no longer to be found buried in the battlefields where they had died. That the bodies had been removed nullified the young man's own original "feelings in the battlefields." Such places were no longer hallowed to him, for "the dead that made them both holy and real were dug up and reburied in big, orderly cemeteries miles away from where they died" (Hemingway [1922] 176). Notably, this speaker is still a young man, not the mature novelist whose fictional alter ego in *A Farewell to Arms* reacts matter of factly to the sight of the fallen dead, showing neither pity nor grief.

The twenty-three-year-old Hemingway had discovered on his journey to the battlefields of his youth that it took the buried dead to make “holy” and “real” the ground over which they lost their lives and in which they were at first buried. But men killed in battle, in the novel he published seven years later, mean something different to his disillusioned narrator. Frederic Henry interrupts his own editorial denunciation of war’s patriotic slogans and “big words”¹ to say: “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” (Hemingway [1929] 196). Thinking similar thoughts in an earlier time, a distinguished naturalist wrote: “To eat the vanquished, that’s good warfare, the only sort excusable. What I do not understand, nor shall until we tin the meat on the battlefield for food, is our wars between nations”—thus J. Henri Fabre, as he contemplates human warfare, having just described the outcome of a deadly fight between two scorpions in which “for four or five days, almost without a break, the cannibal nibbles at his murdered comrade” (405).

That Fabre might have been on Hemingway’s mind when he wrote *A Farewell to Arms* is further suggested when the much-admired scene in which Frederic Henry, playing indifferent god (but no messiah) to ants huddling away from the end of a burning log, throws “a tin cup of water on the log,” which perhaps steams the ants (1929 350), is read against Fabre’s account of the experiment in which he, god-like, exposes scorpions to fire (406-07). Fabre tests the notion that when confronted with fire, scorpions commit suicide. What he discovers instead is that when put to this dangerous test scorpions feign death. So, too, in a sense, does Frederic Henry “feign” his own death when he disappears into the river as he is being shot at.²

To his own version of Fabre’s modest proposal, Hemingway appends a different sort of wartime complaint. Frederic Henry speaks out against the decline and decadence of words in wartime. “There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity,” he says. “Abstract words such as glory, honor, 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" (1929 196). These sentiments seem to be a "response," as has been noticed, to comments made by a different "Henry"—Henry James—in an interview published in 1915 (Reynolds [1976] 60-62, Grebstein 206-07). An excerpt from James's interview was copied out, probably intended for use in *Farewell* as an epigraph:

One finds it in the midst of all this as hard to apply one's words as to endure one's thoughts. The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated like motor car tires; . . . and we are now confronted with a depreciation of all our terms, or otherwise speaking, with a loss of expression through increase of limpness, that may well make us wonder what ghosts will be left to walk. (quoted in Reynolds [1976] 60-61)

That James's complaint in 1915 still appealed to the author of *Farewell* a dozen years later is worth looking at. Many other Americans—John Dos Passos, Archibald MacLeish, and E. E. Cummings among them (Cowley [1968] 42)—anticipated Hemingway's belated say on the theme that war had laid waste to language, but James's so-called interview ("so-called" because he had written it himself) appeared when Hemingway was a sixteen-year-old high school student. From London, James had addressed an American audience, breaking his "rule of years," as the *New York Times* boasted, against granting interviews. He wanted to call on Americans to support the work of an American volunteer ambulance corps—started in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by one of the Nortons—that was already in service in France. His readers must have found it strange, to say the least, to find the author of *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* engaging in a form of war propaganda, but James found justification for his actions by speaking as Chairman of the American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps, an honorary post he had accepted in the early days of the war. The sentences from James's interview that Hemingway copied out occur toward the end of a piece touching on matters that go well beyond the financial need of Norton's volunteers. But it is only when James's remarks are read against the sentiments expressed in Hemingway's novel that they can be plausibly construed as expressing opposition to the war, for James's final

appeal, immediately following the sentences that impressed Hemingway, is not to put an end to war but for money to carry out a service made necessary by war. "All I want is to invite the public, as unblushingly as possible," James says at the last, "to take all the interest in us it can; which may be helped by knowing that our bankers are Messrs. Brown Brothers & Co., 59 Wall Street, New York City, and that checks should be made payable to the American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps" (Lockwood 4).³

Three years later the eighteen-year-old Hemingway left the *Kansas City Star* to join the Red Cross for duty in Europe. Later on, of course, he would recognize the irony in the fact that in the midst of complaining that war destroys language, James pitches an appeal for funds that will contribute to the war effort.⁴ This Henry James, the author of the surprisingly engaged wartime essays collected posthumously in *Within the Rim* (1919), seems to differ altogether, in important ways, from the moral idealist who conducted his "curious search"—in T. S. Eliot's words—"often in the oddest places, like country houses, for spiritual life" (469). It is Eliot's high-minded moralist who reminds us of the author standing behind Frederic Henry's words. As Delmore Schwartz insists, "Although the hero deserts from the army, and although the abstract words have become obscene, it is nevertheless precisely glory, honor, courage, and sacrifice which are the true ideals and aims of conduct in all of Hemingway's writing" (1970 261). Schwartz shrewdly observes further that "Hemingway asserts traditional moral values often by an action which seems an inversion or violation of them." His example is Lieutenant Frederic Henry's "desertion" (1986 375).

Arguably, it is Hemingway's purposefully opaque, but never expunged, notions of idealism that lay the basis for a balanced consideration of Frederic Henry's peroration against words and factitious values. James's sentences could have served Hemingway most aptly as an epigraph to his novel about war and love, paralleling as they do Hemingway's personal attitude toward not the qualities of honor, glory, courage, and sacrifice but the abstract words obscenely evoking those qualities that are employed in attempts to justify, not only the destruction and waste of the years 1914-1918, but perhaps earlier and more greatly venerated American wars as well. What Henry objected

to, as Edmund Wilson ventured and Malcolm Cowley recognized, was “any phrase that begged for an emotional response” (Cowley [1973] 17). In fact, as Lieutenant Henry concludes of one of his men, “Gino was a patriot, so he said things that separated us sometimes, but he was also a fine boy and I understood his being a patriot. He was born one” (1929 196). Others, like Gino, might be patriots, admits the American officer, but he himself is not one even if he does not object when the priest calls him a “foreigner” and a “patriot” (1929 76).

In James’s wartime statement, Hemingway found not the inspiration for Frederic Henry’s disillusionment but literary corroboration. That the page containing James’s statement has its place among the sheets of the *Farewell* manuscript long after Lieutenant Henry’s “attack upon ‘sacred,’ ‘glorious,’ and ‘in vain,’” makes the matter, according to Sheldon Grebstein, “[one of] confluence and corroboration rather than influence” (207). For the source of his disillusionment lies elsewhere. It is likely that the American had “enlisted in a burst of enthusiasm,” as has been suggested, “he has since regretted” (Wylder 73). Like Hemingway and schoolboys of countless generations past, he was prepared to respond reflexively to the invocations to the great abstractions by schoolbook examples of virtuous and noble sacrifices made in wars fought under the aegis of such bombast. Even after he has left all fighting behind, escaping with Catherine into Switzerland, Frederic Henry cannot escape the lingering “feeling of a boy who thinks of what is happening at a certain hour at the schoolhouse from which he has played truant” (1929 262). He is also trying to play “truant” to the lessons learned in that “schoolhouse,” including those exemplified in the lives of Nathan Hale and Benjamin Franklin, say, or Benedict Arnold and Patrick Henry.⁵

Hemingway was well into his story of love, death, war, loyalty, and desertion before settling on a name for his narrator. Not until chapter thirteen does Hemingway reveal the full name of his hero. Before coming up with “Frederic Henry” he had been working with “Emmett Hancock” (with whom Hemingway shared initials [Oldsey [1977] 176]). “Hancock” had a precedent in his mother’s family, but its greater merit was that it was also a cultural marker for American patriotism, recalling the surname of the first signer of the Declaration of Independence. Yet just as “Hancock” would have taken us back to eighteenth-

century America, so does "Henry." Besides sharing a surname, Frederic Henry and Patrick Henry bear complete names that are comprised of two common first names. Hemingway's purposes are served by the fact that "Frederic and Henry are usually first names and therefore suggest the absence of a surname, the nominal tie to a family and biological forebears," Dewey Ganzel notes (579). So, too, was the historical patriot Patrick Henry well served in possessing a name comprised of two common given names, since he helped to foment and conduct an insurrection that freed the insurrectionists from the "family" power of a mother country and turned them into citizens of a new country. The twin themes of patriotism and treason are clearly present in Patrick Henry's biography, just as are the themes of loyalty and desertion in Hemingway's account of Frederic Henry's war.

A century ago, Moses Coit Tyler noted that Patrick Henry's speech to the second revolutionary convention of Virginia in 1775 had been "committed to memory and declaimed by several generations of American schoolboys, and is now perhaps familiarly known to a larger number of the American people than any other considerable bit of secular prose in our language" (113). "It is chiefly the tradition of that one speech," continues Tyler, that "lifts" Patrick Henry, "in the popular faith, almost to the rank of some mythical hero of romance" (113). Calling out for war against the English oppressors, Patrick Henry urges his fellow conspirators to take up arms:

If we wish to be free; if we mean to preserve inviolate those inestimable privileges for which we have been so long contending; if we mean not basely to abandon the noble struggle in which we have been so long engaged, and which we have pledged ourselves never to abandon until the glorious object of our contest shall be obtained,—we must fight! I repeat it, sir,—we must fight! An appeal to arms, and to the God of hosts, is all that is left to us. (quoted in Tyler 126)

Patrick Henry's great verbal gesture is not drained of its meaning by Frederic Henry's disillusioning later experiences, but the politicians and generals of the Great War have tested it sorely, turning "language inside out," wrote Dos Passos, taking

“the clean words our fathers spoke” and making them “slimy and foul” (quoted in Cowley [1973] 18). Frederic Henry bids farewell to the obscene use of words that had once given good honest weight just as surely as he bids his farewell to war, an act of desertion that turns Patrick Henry’s most famous sentiment on its head. “Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?” he asked, to answer: “I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!” (quoted in Tyler 128). Defying the Loyalists, he cries out: “If this be treason, make the most of it” (quoted in Tyler 65).

Hemingway quotes this last utterance in a letter, written during World War II, that looks at the case being made against Ezra Pound for treason. Pound was already under close surveillance by the State Department and the FBI for his anti-American, pro-fascist radio broadcasts in Italy. Hemingway writes to Allen Tate:

They must not hang the guy nor must he be made a martyr in any way. He ought to go to the loony bin, which he rates and you can pick out the parts in his cantos at which he starts to rate it. You must read the photostats of the son-of-a-bitch’s broadcasts so that you know exactly what he has said. It is a hell of a corvee to read through it all as it is absolutely loony drivel. . . . I think we have an absolute and complete obligation to oppose any hanging even though we all should have to get up on the scaffold with the rope on our own necks It is sort of a historical necessity and it would be as criminal to hang him as it was to hang Mrs. Suratt [the convicted conspirator in the assassination of Lincoln]. I suppose that last phrase will hang me but what the hell. What was it the old guy said; if this be treason make the most of it.” (1981 549-51)

With this reference to “the old guy” Hemingway aligns himself with Patrick Henry, whose own statement calls into doubt the absolute nature of what is called treason. Nick Adams, in one of the vignettes of *In Our Time*, provides a phrase for what his wounding has brought about for him—“a separate peace”—which is pretty much what Frederic Henry brings about for

himself when he deserts from a disorganized, retreating army whose police are somewhat arbitrarily and capriciously executing members of its own retreating army. Benjamin Franklin warned his fellow colonists that if they did not “hang together” they were sure to “hang separately.” But Lieutenant Frederic Henry, who had permitted one of his men to shoot a deserter, does not wish to “hang” with his fellow victims in retreat, preferring to take his chances on an unauthorized “separate peace” that will permit him to avoid “hanging” altogether. The Italian military would undoubtedly have considered the Lieutenant’s action treasonous, but Frederic Henry, Hemingway, and most readers would not.

At some point, Hemingway considered calling Frederic Henry’s story *Patriots Progress* (Oldsey [1979] 15, 16), a title that not only points to the ironic fact that the progress Hemingway’s patriot makes takes him away from his fellow soldiers in an act of separation that turns into desertion. If his is not the traditionally fraternal progress made in the army, neither can it be legitimately considered to be the kind of spiritual progress made by John Bunyan’s Pilgrim. While Frederic Henry is no turncoat—he does not go over to the enemy—he does abrogate his contract with the Italian army and people when he dismisses his enlistment as nothing more than an agreement that either party may rescind at will if its real or imagined conditions are not met. The Italians will shoot him because in their eyes he has behaved unpatriotically. All bets are off at the point when the patriot Henry turns aside all considerations of loyalty. As in Hemingway’s imagined war on the Italian-Austrian front in 1917, so, too, in Virginia 135 years earlier. The question of Patrick Henry’s patriotism depends on one’s point of view. Adopt the British point of view and we are talking about his treason. To the American upstarts, however, he is a patriot. Benedict Arnold is his mirror image. To the British, after his “desertion” at the West Point heights, Benedict Arnold ceased being a traitor fighting for the Americans but a repatriated patriot. Thus the making, for the Americans, of an eponymous traitor. *Farewell* can thus be read (among other possibilities) as an investigation into what constitutes patriotism as well as its boundaries. I find it interesting that in naming his hero Hemingway passed up, say, Nathan Hale, who regretted that he had only one life to give for his country, but chose instead

Patrick Henry, who challenged his enemies to make the most of his treason, if that was what it was.

In a similar sense, Patrick Henry's words can be applied as well to Henry James. Arguably America's most notorious expatriate in his time, James was sharply criticized when in 1915 he became a British subject. He saw his action as a patriotic gesture that publicly showed his support for the English people as well as his protest against American reluctance to enter the war on the Allied side (White 372-74). As Hemingway himself wrote sardonically in the 1950s (though he got the historical sequence wrong): "We would have to check the dates but I think I was wounded badly before Henry James received the O.M. for his patriotic sentiments. One of my grandfathers always told me that patriotism is the last refuge of thieves and scoundrels" (1981 810-11). Perhaps it was because Hemingway also distrusted James's patriotism that he persisted in linking James to *Farewell*. "Thursday—Commenced writing a new novel," reads an entry in his so-called "Ernst von Hemingstein's Journal." "It is to be called A Farewell to Arms and treats of war on the Italian front which I visited briefly as a boy after the death of Henry James. A strange coincidence. Some difficulty deciding how the book will end. Solved it finally" (quoted in Scafella 213). Curiously, that solution, too, reflects the hidden historical dimensions of *Farewell*. While Hemingway ultimately drew on the actual circumstances surrounding the birth of his second son for the closing of his novel—"Pauline had a very bad time—cesarion (can't spell it) and a rocky time afterwards," he wrote to his editor (1981 280)—the birth of his son also inspired him to rename the narrator of his book that, in the summer of 1928, stood at chapter thirteen in the writing. This is the chapter in which the hero's name is first revealed as Frederic Henry. Or was it because the author had discovered the "right" name for his hero that he and Pauline called their first son Patrick? ■

Notes

1. The subtitle of Lewis's 1992 study is *The War of the Words*.
2. Waldhorn suggests that Frederic Henry's parable of the ants is derived from *The Professors Like Vodka* (1927), a novel by

Harold Loeb, who was Hemingway's real-life model for Robert Cohn of *The Sun Also Rises* (86-87).

3. James had ventured into propagandizing for his own particular war cause within weeks of the outbreak of war. In the fall of 1914 Macmillan published, at a penny, James's pamphlet, *The American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps in France*. Buitenhuis calls James's decision to allow himself to be used for war propaganda the author's "great sacrifice" (61). In his introduction to *Men at War* (1942), Hemingway writes: "the last war, during the years 1915, 1916, 1917 was the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth. Any writer who said otherwise lied. So the writers either wrote propaganda, shut up, or fought. . . . The writers who were established before the war had nearly all sold out to write propaganda during it and most of them never recovered their honesty afterwards" (xiv-xv). James died in early 1916.

4. In 1942 Hemingway wrote: "The only good book to come out during the last war was *Under Fire* by Henri Barbusse. He was the first one to show us, the boys who went from school or college to the last war, that you could protest, in anything besides poetry, the gigantic useless slaughter and lack of even elemental intelligence in generalship that characterized the Allied conduct of that war from 1915 through 1917" (xvi).

5. "An Appeal to Arms," Patrick Henry's address to the Convention at Richmond in 1775, appears in *Swinton's Fifth Reader and Speaker* (1883), 365-69.

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