

The Road to the Natural Body: Technology and the Body in Hemingway's War Stories

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As Trudi Tate argues, the First World War is characterized by images of bodily fragmentation: “Perhaps the most enduring image of the Great War is of the male body in fragments — an image in which war technology and notions of the human body intersect in horrible new ways. Developments in weapons technology made it possible for unprecedented numbers of men to be blown apart in battle; many more were witness to such sight” (78). Moreover, fragmented and disfigured bodily parts were, by the hand of newly developed medical technology, patched together and compensated for by various devices such as artificial limbs and wheelchairs. These damaged bodies of soldiers and artificial repairs of them to recover the “natural body”¹ were widely observed during the war, and the application of this technological advance was extended to the bodies of a broader range of people in the interwar period as a mode of cosmetic re-forming of the body. Bodily technology, once having intervened in the bodies of soldiers in the war, incorporated the bodies of the general public into the system in which the body should be molded into the normative shape.

As Elizabeth Haiken argues, the technological development of cosmetic surgery was suddenly accelerated after the First World War, based on numerous case studies accumulated during the war to reconstruct soldiers' bodies.² Still despised by many as a means of fulfilling one's vanity by doing harm to a healthy body, the surgery to reshape the innately wholesome body to acquire a more “natural” and desirable appearance became gradually and steadily accepted and more widespread after the war. The sensational news that Fanny Brice, a famous comedienne and singer, had her nose straightened by the hand of a traveling quack shocked the public and at the same time made this doctor famous as a reputable beauty doctor, in spite of his poor medical background and career. Brice later said about this doctor: “I was the beginning of this guy's career [...]. I posed for him for ‘before and after’ pictures. He made a big nose on the ‘before’ picture. He

was crazy. . . . He'd cut you if you had dandruff" (Haiken 44). This "before" picture embodies the newly conceived view of the body that saw the body untouched by technology as "abnormal"; while the "after" picture showed a normative body established in society.

Hemingway was heavily wounded in the war and underwent a series of highly advanced medical operations, and he observed the prevalence of those technological inventions and improvements. It is no wonder that he had a keen awareness of the prosthetic conception and the mechanical view of the body in the 1920s and 30s when writing many war stories; in those stories, characters reminding us of their creator are repeatedly depicted when they are wounded in the battlefield and repaired through technological interventions into the body. We shall in this paper look at the intriguing relationship between technological developments, the wide popularity of practices of bodily re-formation, and Hemingway's works.

The prosthetic conception of the body is distinct in *A Farewell to Arms* when Frederic Henry declares that the knee that was operated on by a doctor is no longer his own but the doctor's ("My knee was stiff, but it had been very satisfactory. Valentini had done a fine job. I had done half the retreat on foot and swum part of the Tagliamento with his knee. It was his knee all right. The other knee was mine. Doctors did things to you and then it was not your body any more" [231]). His view of the body at this point of the story has been reshaped in the course of medical treatment: the bodily parts can easily be removed and replaced in the age of mechanized medical treatment. This new view of the body developed during the war, and gave rise to a normalizing force binding people to desire a "natural body." The scene of mechanotherapy described in this novel and in "In Another Country" should be marked as the most conspicuous representations of this ideological drive in the 1920s.

My knee did not bend and the leg dropped straight from the knee to the ankle without a calf, and the machine was to bend the knee and make it move as in riding a tricycle. [. . .]

In the next machine was a major who had a little hand like a baby's. He winked at me when the doctor examined his hand, which was between two leather straps that bounced up and down and flapped the stiff fingers [. . .].

The doctor went to his office in a back room and brought a photograph which showed a hand that had been withered almost as small as the

major's, before it had taken a machine course, and after was a little larger. The major held the photograph with his good hand and looked at it very carefully. (CSS 206–07)

The before-and-after photograph described at the end of the quotation above was a familiar strategy of cosmetic advertisement in the interwar period as is seen in Brice's comment above. The "after" photograph designates the normal body that everyone in society felt forced to pursue. However, bodily technology, by which the deformed body could be reshaped into a normal state, is a double-edged symbol: it fixes defects of the body, reshapes the body as desired, and sometimes decorates wounds as a sign of bravery; yet, at the same time, it always points out that the body is lacking something, that the body needs further reshaping, and that the body is not perfect. Armstrong argues thus:

The bodily part is knitted into a system of virtual prosthetics: a system which both exposes and remedies defects, implying a "whole" body which can only be achieved by technology; a whole which is constantly deferred. One practice which mediates between the negative prosthetics of replacement and the advertising / cosmetic system is cosmetic plastic surgery, developed between the wars with experience gained from battlefield cases. Rather than replacing a lost part, cosmetic surgery works on a "natural" body which it has declared inadequate, misshapen, or past its prime. (100)³

Technology posits the natural body as the norm of which everyone must make a model; thus, at once degrading and restoring the authentic status of the body. As is seen with the boy with "a black silk handkerchief across his face because he had no nose then and his face *was to be rebuilt*" (CSS 207; emphasis mine), the body, deviated from a norm that is firmly established within socio-cultural values, must primarily be fixed and re-incorporated into a "normal" state, whether it is possible or not. In the case of this boy, the normative body is defined by his family's social standing, and we are told that his body could never meet the demand of the normalizing force of his culture: "They rebuilt his face, but he came from a very old family and they could never get the nose exactly right" (CSS 207). Technology, for this boy, represents an ideological evaluative power over bodily status; even though technological advance succeeds in restoring his nose to a certain degree, we should admit that the very same technology humiliates the present state of his

body, always pointing out his being different from the “natural body” of the society to which he belongs.

Like the wound of this boy, the major’s diminished hand “like a baby’s” (CSS 207) can never function as an honorable sign of a brave soldier. He believes in neither bravery nor the machines he uses in his treatment, though he never fails to receive the daily course of mechanotherapy: “The major came very regularly to the hospital. I do not think he ever missed a day, although I am sure he did not believe in the machines” (CSS 208). He is in a sense trapped by the mechanized ideology like other soldiers in the story, in the sense that he is forced to take the treatment even though he is unable to find any hope in it. To undergo the treatment — to make an effort to acquire a “natural body” — is the foremost demand of society, and, in that sense, in this society machines control human behavior.

The major’s obsession with mechanotherapy reminds us less of the wartime medical situation than of the wide popularity of bodily re-formation at the postwar period, in which mechanical technology was all but omnipresent and ostensibly omnipotent. Advertising campaigns constantly attempted to invoke and exploit the anxiety about possible defects in the body untouched by technology. Numerous names of derivative bodily diseases were coined for the first time in the 1920s to precipitate anxious feelings about the possibility that people’s body deviated somewhat from naturalness: “A new pharmacopoeia of ‘diseases’ appeared: halitosis (bad breath), body odor (‘b.o.’), bromodosis (odiferous feet), homotosis (furniture in ‘bad taste’), acidosis (sour stomach), dandruff, constipation, and others” (Green 24). And Doctors also helped this normalization of the bodily status:

And as they [beauty doctors] moved toward a definition of plastic surgery that incorporated the cosmetic work patients desired, surgeons began to think about terms like *deformity* in new ways. Throughout the 1930s, surgeons used the term to denote an increasingly wide variety of conditions. “Bulbous, prominent nasal tips” were deformities, according to one surgeon. Another listed the conditions of “humprnose, pendulous breast, abnormally prominent ears, receding chin, moles or other small nevi of the face, lines and wrinkles about the eyes, jowls and neck.” According to another, “wrinkled forehead, baggy eyelids, donkey’s ears, wrinkled face, double chin, and various deformities of the nose, the most common being the hump and hook nose with or without the twist, and saddle nose” were all “deformities or disfigurements.”

(Haiken 122)

The meaning of “naturalness” and “deformity,” as it were, completely changed at this period, and the newly established norm of the body was propagated through the mass media.⁴

“In Another Country” was written and published in this period of general fear of the bodily defects, and thus it is very likely that the situation described in the story evoked the nationwide popularity of cosmetic bodily re-forming, regardless of the author’s intention. The protagonist, indeed, narrates this story after the war — possibly in the mid 1920s in which the story was published — and sees the events from the vantage point of a decade later. When he says that “There was a time when none of us believed in the machines” (CSS 208), his statement suggests, on the simplest level, that their disbelief in the machines was only temporary, and that at least to a certain degree the machines worked out to fix their body like the boy with the black handkerchief if not restoring “naturalness.” Yet, the narrator’s statement cannot help suggesting the social situation in the mid 1920s, in which technology in a matter-of-course manner intervened in the human body under the name of salvation to help people acquire the desirable body. Surrounded by the overwhelming prevalence of mechanical technology, and exposed to the nationwide anxiety about his/her bodily state, contemporary readers must have certainly captured the current social milieu of the time. This statement of soldiers’ disbelief in the machines, when read at this particular moment, conveys the actual social situation of the time: *now* everyone believes in, or at least recurses to, the fascinating effects of medical technology.

At the end of the story, we find the following passage: “there were large framed photographs around the wall, of all sorts of wounds before and after they had been cured by the machines. In front of the machine the major used were three photographs of hands like his that were completely restored” (CSS 210). The before-and-after photographs, which exemplify the overarching ideology about the human body, were the most frequently adopted strategy in the advertisement of cosmetic surgery in the interwar period. The story thus, using the backdrop of the wartime hospital, dramatizes the mechanized culture of the postwar years rather than the time that the story describes. And the sad point of the story resides in the major’s being unable to escape from the trap of the ideology of technology, even if he knows that he can never be cured of the lack in his body and, more pathetically, of the lack in his heart caused by his wife’s death. His tragedy would

have been certainly shared by many contemporary readers. Deeply immersed in everyday advertisements concerning possible bodily defects and the reshaping of them, they must have projected their own situation onto that of the major during the war, and regarded his body dominated by the machines as somewhat like their own, entrapped by the insatiable and inescapable desire to acquire the perfect body that technology promised to give them.

The relationship between technology and the body is a recurrent motif throughout Hemingway's works, and his insistent attempt to dramatize it culminated in the writing of "A Way You'll Never Be." As Paul Smith mentions, the story "deserves a place among Hemingway's major stories" and is "One of his most original, even daring fictions," but "The critical history of 'A Way You'll Never Be,' with next to nothing between 1963 and 1982 and little since then, is something of an embarrassment" (275). The primary reason for this critical neglect resides in the seemingly ambiguous and incoherent structure of the story as shown in Nick's hallucinations. In the same way that Sheldon Grebstein calls this story "the rhetoric of hysteria" (118),⁵ critics, who generally have yet to notice the carefully wrought structure, confuse the narrative of the story and the hysteric tone of the protagonist's hallucinations. If we look more carefully at the first paragraph, we can appreciate a variety of elements foreshadowing the later development of the story and intertextually connecting to Hemingway's other war stories. The first paragraph reads thus:

The attack had gone across the field, been held up by *machine-gun fire* from the sunken road and from the group of farm houses, encountered no resistance in the town, and reached the bank of the river. Coming along the road on a bicycle, getting off to push *the machine* when the surface of the road became too broken, Nicholas Adams saw what had happened by the position of the dead. (CSS 306; emphases mine)

To reword the bicycle as "the machine" is rather curious; for, despite the fact that the bicycle functions as a vehicle without any problem, it is seen not from a functional but from a structural viewpoint (and "the vehicle," of course, should be the most appropriate word for substitution). The choice of this word reminds us of the tricycle in "In Another Country," by the use of which the protagonist attempts to reshape his deformed body; moreover, at the same time, correlating with "machine-gun fire"⁶ above to invoke an association between mechanical weapon,

medical technology, and the reshaping of the body. “A Way You’ll Never Be” borrows the wartime situation to dramatize the meaning of machines.

The following conversation between Nick and Paravicini, his old-time friend and superior in the army, describes how the presence of machines affects Nick’s life:

“How are you really?”

“I’m fine. I’m perfectly all right.”

“No. I mean really.”

“I’m all right. I can’t sleep without a light of some sort. That’s all I have now.”

“I said it should have been trepanned. I’m no doctor but I know that.”

“Well, they thought it was better to have it absorb, and that’s what I got. What’s the matter? I don’t seem crazy to you, do I?” (CSS 309–10)

According to Paravicini, Nick’s head, which was caved in when he was wounded, “should have been trepanned” — that is, a hole should have been made in his skull to release the pressure of hemorrhage lest it should damage the brain. Instead, the doctors who treated him considered that they should wait for the blood naturally to be absorbed without any surgical intervention. In this story, the body in disorder radically and repeatedly undergoes technological treatment, whereas the mind (or the brain), on the contrary, remains intact however severely it is damaged.

As is suggested at the first paragraph of the story, technology should be regarded as a double-edged symbol in that it connotes the possibility of its opposite use: mechanical weapons and technological medicine. As thus considered, Nick can feel safe without mechanical weapons by which he was wounded; while, on the contrary, his mind has still been wounded because of the lack of intervention by the latest medical technology. These contradictory values of mechanical technology well represents modernist writers’ ambivalent feelings toward technology. As Joseph Slade argues, American writers before 1945 could not discard negative values pressed upon machines (27). Having witnessed the overwhelming butchery of soldiers by newly invented technological weapons in the war, they could never have confidence in machines innocently, even though they could be used for humanitarian purposes. This ambivalent feelings toward machines produced in the mind of those who participated in the war a mixed feelings toward the recent prevalence of bodily technology. The possibility of re-creating the body, which

was repeatedly advertised in the period, was born in the First World War, and then, behind the development of cosmetic reforming of the body, people in those days irresistibly found the shadow of war technology both to save and to kill the life of soldiers. Since the author and his texts are inseparably bound up with this particular situation between two World Wars, the war stories written in this period could not be received as an independent work of art out of this cultural network of discourse about technology.

We can see this inseparable link of “A Way You’ll Never Be” with the historical situation most fully in Nick’s duty in the story: to wear the American uniform to make Italian soldiers believe that the American troops are shortly coming. He is, as it were, living propaganda to advertise the American soldiers. Yet his uniform, as he himself repeatedly insists, is just an imprecise reproduction (“The uniform is not very correct.” “Look at the uniform. Spagnolini made it but it’s not quite correct.” “Fix your eyes on the uniform. Spagnolini made it, you know” [CSS 311–12]). Nick’s propaganda is from the very beginning completely meaningless. And for Nick to reveal the falsity of the uniform and to emphasize its Italian designer is a fairly contradictory act in that he annuls by his own hand what he is trying to achieve. The essential falsity of advertisement is mentioned early at the beginning of the story:

[...] propaganda postcards showing a soldier in Austrian uniform bending a woman backward over a bed; the figures were impressionistically drawn; very attractively depicted and had nothing in common with actual rape in which the woman’s skirts are pulled over her head to smother her, one comrade sometimes sitting upon the head. There were many of these inciting cards which had evidently been issued just before the offensive. (CSS 306)

Like these postcards, however Nick’s uniform is “impressionistically” and “attractively” designed, it has “nothing in common with” the actual uniform of the American troops; thus, Nick’s existence itself is imbued with an impression of a fictional construction like an Austrian soldier in the postcards. It seems that this scheme represents the author’s reaction to the social milieu at the time: what people aspired to by being incited by everyday advertisement is merely a false image of the “natural body.”

Nick is self-conscious of his own inefficiency to advertise the normative body

of the American soldiers. Not only does he expose the fact that the uniform is incorrect, but also he defines the American as what he is not in his speech to the adjutant:

“Americans twice as large as myself, healthy, with clean hearts, sleep at night, never been wounded, never been blown up, never had their heads caved in, never been scared, don’t drink, faithful to the girls they left behind them, many of them never had crabs, wonderful chaps.” (CSS 311)

The figure of the American troops by Nick’s definition is a complete reverse of his own self-image. We know that he is not “healthy,” cannot “sleep at night,” was seriously “wounded” when being “blown up,” had his head “caved in,” and, as he admits, was “scared” enough not to participate in battle without “drink.” Extrapolating from this what-he-is-not list, we can justifiably assume that he has been to a brothel (thus, not “faithful” to his girlfriend if he has one) and suffered from syphilis (“crabs”). Too wide difference between Nick’s defective body and the normative body of Americans in his speech gives us an impression that the norm itself — the concept of the “natural body” — is merely a fiction and a verbal construction.

The American troops depicted in Nick’s speech are an ideal norm every American must pursue; while Nick’s body is a damaged, defective product to be repaired. Assigning the role of a social norm to Nick’s “unnatural body” seems to us at odd with the cultural drive to regulate what the body should be, and hence subversive of the bodily ideology. All these pieces of textual evidence considered, we might perhaps easily leap to a conclusion that the author’s ambivalence toward technology and its reshaping of the body, certainly shared by many contemporaries, is embodied in this story as Nick’s self-contradictory behavior. If so, the story functions as a mockery against the idea of the “natural body” in society.

Yet the possibility of subverting the dominant ideology is, at the last instance, co-opted. Nick, at the end of the story, hurries back to his bicycle (=the machine).

“*Ciao*, said Nick. He started back along the sunken road toward where he had left the bicycle. In the afternoon the road would be shady once he had passed the canal. Beyond that there were trees on both sides that had not been shelled at all. It was on that stretch that, marching, they had once passed the Terza Savoia cavalry regiment riding in the

snow with their lances. The horses' breath made plumes in the cold air. No, that was somewhere else. Where was that?

"I'd better get to that damned bicycle," Nick said to himself. "I don't want to lose the way to Fornaci." (*CSS* 315; emphasis original)

Though we are not given a clear reason, the bicycle (=the machine) at the beginning of the story could not enter the place of Nick's wounding. The setting of the story somehow refuses to admit the machine, and the place is obviously characterized by the absence of machines. In Nick's mind, it is not tanks or even infantry regiments equipped with mechanical weapons but a cavalry regiment with lances that is most appropriate for this place which is surrounded by full of nature. Given this fact, his sudden urge to hurry back to the bicycle seems to mean his need to go back out of the place without machines to the place dominated by mechanical technology, and conveys the impression that he might be repaired through technology. By describing Nick's return to the machine-dominated world, the whole story suddenly begins to take the aspect of a bildungsroman, in which the protagonist comes to terms with the cultural value judgment, is reshaped as an ideal citizen of the society, and supports the overarching cultural drive.

Regardless of the author's intention, the text conveys to contemporary readers the sense of conform to the governing force of the culture, and functions as a covert educational tool going hand in hand with abundant advertising campaigns of the day. It is certain that Hemingway and many of his contemporaries shared the skepticism toward mechanical technology, but, as we have seen, this skepticism itself must have been represented in the text as an obstacle to be overcome.

Notes

*This is the revised version of the paper presented at the 14th General Conference of the Hemingway Society of Japan held on October 10, 2003, at Sugiyama Jogakuen University.

¹ By the term, the "natural body," I do not mean the innate body unmolded into any socio-culturally defined normative shape. In that sense, the body cannot be natural, for any human body cannot help receiving the influence of the ideal figure generally conceived as the most desirable in that culture. The "natural body" in my argument is the very concept of that desirable shape accepted in the society — the body that looks natural to the public eye.

² According to Haiken, "Although French, British, and American surgeons worked together during the war, plastic surgery grew after the war only in the United States. [...] American surgeons [...] returned from the war eager to build the specialty (and by the beginning of World War II would claim about sixty practicing plastic surgeons — more than ten times as many as Britain, and almost twice as many as the rest of the world combined)" (34-35). About the rapid development of plastic surgery in the interwar period, Colonel Cantwell in Hemingway's *Across the River and*

Into the Trees indicates through his own body: “He [Cantwell] looked at the different welts and ridges that had come before they had plastic surgery, and at the thin, only to be observed by the initiate, lines of the excellent plastic operations after head wounds” (107).

³ Regarding the relationship between bodily advertisements and representations of wounded soldiers, see also Richards, Marchand, and Goodrum and Dalrymple.

⁴ Pauline’s letter to Hemingway quoted below shows us that she was under this influence of social normalization of the “natural” body: “Am having large nose, imperfect lips, protruding ears and warts and moles all taken off before coming to Cuba [...]” (Kert 247).

⁵ See, for other examples, Rovit, Baker, and Waldhorn.

⁶ We should notice here that machine guns were used almost for the first time in the Great War. According to *The Encyclopedia Americana*, “The Browning machine gun [one of the first machine guns put to practical use] and Browning automatic rifle (BAR), although perfected by 1900, were not produced in sufficient quantity to see extensive use in World War I. [...] An estimated 92% of all World War I casualties were inflicted by machine guns.”

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