

A Soldier's Displaced Intestine:
Frederic's View of the Body in *A Farewell to Arms*

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In the early part of *A Farewell to Arms*, we see a curious scene in which Frederic, whose duty is to transport the sick and wounded on the battlefield, meets a soldier dragging his intestine. The soldier has a hernia, and, as he later admits, has deliberately removed his truss to be released from further military service.

“What’s wrong with your leg?”

“It’s not my leg. I got a rupture.”

“Why don’t you ride with the transport?” I asked. “Why don’t you go to the hospital?”

“They won’t let me. The lieutenant said I slipped the truss on purpose.”

“Let me feel it.”

“It’s way out.”

“Which side is it on?”

“Here.”

I felt it.

“Cough,” I said.

“I’m afraid it will make it bigger. It’s twice as big as it was this morning.” (34)¹

The most striking aspect of this scene is Frederic's response to this soldier: "Let me feel it." This request to touch the intestine protruding from its normal position produces a bizarre impression on the reader. What purpose does the scene serve for the overall effect of the novel? We can never answer this question, unless we realize that this novel intends to show a changing perception of the human body during the first mechanized war.²

During and after the Great War, numerous war novels were almost "mass-produced" to describe the devastatingly atrocious ravages caused by the new scientific weapons of mass destruction. The new mode of technological and indiscriminate killing, widely different from the former romantic and chivalrous face-to-face confrontations, must have forced one to observe the body as something different from what it had been previously thought of: "Perhaps the most enduring image of the Great War [in these war books] 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" (Tate 78). People in those days must naturally have been influenced by this butchery of soldiers, and their former views of the body must irrevocably have been shattered once and for all. The aim of this paper is to show that this novel conveys the sense of collapse of the conception that was safely retained before the war. The close look at the vicissitudes of Frederic's view of the human body will make it clear that *A Farewell to Arms* is a story intending to describe the vast influence of the Great War on those who participated in it and on their general views of the body.

People's conception of the wound and the human body before the Great War

is eloquently expressed in Catherine's romantic notion of helping her fiancé: "...I remember having a silly idea he might come to the hospital where I was. With a sabre cut, I suppose, and a bandage around his head. Or shot through the shoulder. Something picturesque" (20). For her, the wound is "something picturesque" and does not have the weight of the reality as observed in the real battlefield. Her fiancé in her imagination retains the totality of his body and his body is by any means undividable into fragments. What she had wanted to nurse before she participated in the war is not the body of her fiancé, but his total being abstracted from the everyday experiences with him. At this stage, she has not been aware of the corporeality of the human body.

According to George Orwell, simply being on a field of battle will exert an influence on one's view of the body. In his essay on the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia*, he states as follows:

You always, I notice, feel the same when you are under heavy fire — not so much afraid of being hit as afraid because you don't know *where* you will be hit. You are wondering all the while just where the bullet will nip you, and it gives your whole body a most unpleasant sensitiveness.
(Emphasis is his, Orwell 44-45)

Since the body, under ordinary circumstances, somehow escapes becoming the object of our attention, Orwell's hypersensitivity to his own body, generated even before he sees the dead or the wounded, must naturally bring into consciousness the corporeality of his existence. The battlefield is, as it were, the arena of the embodiment of what is hitherto expelled to the realm of the unconscious. Exposed to the danger of being hit by a bombardment as an ambulance driver, Frederic also

must have felt the same sensation near the front.

Witnessing wounded and dead bodies leads to the further awareness of one's bodily existence and forces him to realize a vast gulf yawning between the previous notion of the body and the reality he observes. Hemingway records this realization in "A Natural History of the Dead," which was first published as a part of his essay, *Death in the Afternoon*. Recounting his own experience as an ambulance driver³ when he witnessed numerous dead bodies for the first time in a Milan munitions factory, he points out two unexpected anomalies that attracted his attention. First, he notices "inversion of the usual sex of the dead" for "it is a fact that one becomes so accustomed to the sight of all the dead being men that the sight of a dead woman is quite shocking" (CSS 336). Then, he concludes the episode with the comment: "the human body should be blown into pieces which exploded along no anatomical lines, but rather divided as capriciously as the fragmentation in the burst of a high explosive shell" (CSS 337). Both anomalies effectively remind us of the difference between the reality of actual killings one witnessed and the presumption about the dead body one had had in mind. The man and the woman being equally susceptible to mortal danger, being incapable of conceiving of the death of the latter should be regarded as too romantic a notion, as is Catherine's imagination about the wound of her fiancé. Moreover, the anatomical line, originally invented for the purpose of dividing the body into arbitrary categories to help people understand the bodily construction, somehow came to be perceived as a natural principle binding each bodily part into a whole. Having had those presumptions beforehand, the narrator and other soldiers involved are forced to think that the incident is paradoxically charged with "the quality of unreality" (CSS 337). It is, in fact, on the part of their notion that lacks the quality of reality

about the body. These anomalies expose the essential inadequacy of the Western knowledge which people had taken for granted before this butchery of the human body; thus, functioning as a defamiliarization of our automatized sense of what we are made of. In short, soldiers in this war found the simple fact that they were made of flesh and blood, bones and intestines, not the assemblage of bodily parts tied together along the anatomical line.

However, the soldier's protruding intestine in *A Farewell to Arms* tells us more: that it is uncontrollability and deformation of the body that devastatingly damage our previous view of the body. If every part of one's body is well controlled and posited, the bodily foundation of our existence will be hidden from our eyes and remain in the realm of unconsciousness; while a wound or an illness immediately reminds us of our highly susceptible nature to bodily limitations. For Frederic, the soldier with the rupture, as an exemplar of such uncontrollability and deformation, gives rise to the sense of hitherto unnoticed corporeality of human beings. His request to touch the intestine displaced from its appropriate position is nothing but a manifestation of the impact he received, the impact leading to the collapse of his solid, stable, and sound view of the body he retained up to that point.

Later in the story, Frederic also experiences this same uncontrollability and deformation when he is badly wounded by an Austrian mortar shell. This wound must naturally deliver a fatal blow to his previous view of the body, and we shall hereafter focus on the wound and the process of his recuperation from the disabled state. After the bombardment, in recovering consciousness, he first notices Passini, his subordinate, beside him:

His legs were toward me and I saw in the dark and the light that they were

both smashed above the knee. 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. (55)

Passini's and Frederic's fear is not merely that of pain and death, but of the anxiety that the body is helplessly deformed, devastatingly deviated from its normal shape, and no longer managed by his will — the fear that the body, which has been without any doubt nothing but his own, is no longer his own. His identity has been heretofore based, though unconsciously, on the secure view of the body; however, once he loses that guarantee, he can no longer preserve the identity intact.

Below is Frederic's narrativization of his identity crisis caused by the enormous impact of his disfigured body:

My legs felt warm and wet and *my* shoes were wet and warm inside. I knew that I was hit and leaned over and put *my* hand on *my* knee. *My* knee wasn't there. *My* hand went in and *my* knee was down on *my* shin. I wiped *my* hand on *my* shirt and another floating light came very slowly down and I looked at *my* leg and was very afraid. (55-56, emphases are mine)

We should notice here that he uses the word “my” eleven times in no more than four lines. Though this frequency of first person pronouns is not especially unusual in English, what he is doing here should be considered a desperate attempt to reaffirm that the body is surely his own. His knee, disconnected from the place to which it belongs, not only causes him inordinate pain, but also reminds him of his corporeality, giving rise to the awareness of his existence as a bodily substance, and frightening him by the danger of losing his identity.

Though Frederic, who is the narrator as well, has been reticent throughout the novel as to his mental condition since he was wounded, we can surmise in the following quotation that the shock of this tragic event has a lasting effect:

Afterward it was dark outside and I could see the beams of the search-lights moving in the sky. I watched for a while and then went to sleep. I slept heavily except once I woke sweating and scared and then went back to sleep trying to stay outside of my dream. I woke for good long before it was light and heard roosters crowing and stayed on awake until it began to be light. I was tired and once it was really light I went back to sleep again. (88)

Frederic wakes up from a nightmare, presumably caused by a nervous breakdown following the experience of being hit by the bombardment. Failing in the attempt to avoid the nightmare, he has to lie awake till the sky brightens. A similar trouble in sleeping in the dark is all but universally recognizable in the Nick Adams stories written around *A Farewell to Arms*. For example, "Now I Lay Me" reads thus:

I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body. I had been that way for a long time, ever since I had been blown up at night and felt it go out of me and go off and then come back. I tried never to think about it, but it had started to go since, in the nights, just at the moment of going off to sleep, and I could only stop it by a very great effort. So while now I am fairly sure that it would not really have gone out, yet then, that summer, I was unwilling to make the experiment. (CSS, 276)

This sense of the soul going out of the body suggests that the identity is seriously threatened. In Hemingway's works, the aftereffects of a physical wound are always represented by insomnia in dark places, as is seen in the quotation above. On the simplest level, Frederic seems to live a happy life in the hospital, looked after by Catherine's selfless devotion. There is, however, no denying that he stays up all night and goes to sleep after the day breaks, even if he pretends that this vigil is for the purpose of seeing Catherine alone at night. These clandestine meetings might be interpreted as a result of insomnia from which he is still in the process of recovering. Bearing this possibility in mind, we might reconsider their too romantic love affair as a vital therapy for Frederic to recuperate from the nervous damage of the bombardment. It is very likely that he has an acute need to be blindly in love with Catherine to compel himself to neglect the reality of his mental state.

After a successful operation on his knee, Frederic undergoes "treatments at the Ospedale Maggiore for bending the knees, mechanical treatments, baking in a box of mirrors with violet rays, massage, and baths" (117). Though the details of these "mechanotherapy treatments" are left unexplained in this novel, similar treatments are mentioned in one of Hemingway's war stories, "In Another Country." The protagonist taking a mechanical treatment is described thus:

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. But it did not bend yet, and instead the machine lurched when it came to the bending part. (CSS 206)

The therapy we find here is typical of the age during and after the Great War. Modern technology blew soldiers into pieces on an unprecedented scale, while

the very same technology could revive numerous patients who would have been dead in the previous age. Helped by the latest technology, such as wheelchairs, artificial bones, and prosthetic devices, terrible scars left in the bodies of soldiers easily became signs showing the great potentials of the mechanical technology. A scar, as Hemingway himself made use of it in real life, sometimes functions as a decoration for one's deed; or sometimes it is branded as a sign of the mechanized civilization, as is seen in Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. As Donald Mahon in Faulkner's *Soldiers' Pay* clearly shows us, a soldier who recovered from a severe wound is a spectacle in which others can see only what they want to see — such as fear, honor, stigma, and the like.

In the course of taking such treatments and being constantly shown their effects — “photographs ... of all sorts of wounds before and after they had been cured by the machines” (CSS 210) — patients gradually acquire a new view of the body: the view that the human body is an assemblage of dividable segments, which could be replaced by artificial artifacts.⁴ In short, patients are incorporated into such mechanical ideology of the modern medicine; and likewise Frederic's once disfigured body is reshaped through the body-as-machine view.⁵

Frederic afterward goes back to the front, and the Italian army is decisively defeated at the battle of Caporetto. In the confusion of the retreat, Carabinieri, to whom Frederic refers as “battle police,” execute officers for absurd reasons. Frederic also is sentenced to death, but has a narrow escape by diving into the Tagliamento River. After he secures his safety, he contemplates on his body as follows:

Lying on the floor of the flat-car with the guns beside me under the

canvas I was wet, cold and very hungry. Finally I rolled over and lay flat on *my* stomach with *my* head on *my* arms. *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. The head was *mine*, and the inside of the belly. It was very hungry in there. I could feel it turn over on itself. The head was *mine*, but not to use, not to think with, only to remember and not too much remember. (231, emphases are mine)

We should again notice articles and genitive case pronouns attached to parts of the body. The repetition of the pronoun “my” as is seen in the second line in this quotation is similar to what we observed in Frederic’s frightened meditation on the state of his wound shortly after the bombardment. However, the very important difference between both passages is that, here in this case, we can find his recuperation from the identity crisis once so keenly felt in his attitude. His paraphrasing from “my knee” in the second line to “his knee” in the fourth line, and his insistence that, once taking a doctor’s treatment, the part treated no longer belongs to the former owner of the part but to the doctor having treated it; these statements — the notion of the replaceable body — indicate that Frederic has already reshaped his view of the body to get over the identity crisis. He was, in a sense, both physically and mentally mechanized. According to the newly assumed view, it is not he but “the inside of the belly” that is hungry. Not he as a total being, but each part gathered together into his whole body moves, eats, and thinks. The genitive case pronouns in the first half of the quotation are naturally replaced by the definite

articles in the latter half. These two scenes of Frederic's meditation on his body are of great importance in that they record the shift of his view of the body. In the course of the hospitalization for several months, Frederic recovers his identity shaped through the body-as-machine view.

At the end of the novel, however, he cannot sustain this notion of the body when he observes the Cæsarian section Catherine undergoes. Her operation is carried out under "the bright small amphitheatre," into which nurses are running to watch the operation, laughing: "We're just in time. Aren't we lucky?" (324). Having an operation with her privacy lost, she is treated not as a human being, but as a thing — as a machine: thus, the operation is charged with the peculiar aspect of repairing the machine. At first, Frederic cannot go into the amphitheatre to watch the operation, but he finally observes the last stages of it.

I thought Catherine was dead. She looked dead. Her face was gray, the part of it that I could see. Down below, under the light, the doctor was sewing up the great long, forcep-spread, thick edged, wound. Another doctor in a mask gave the anæsthetic. Two nurses in masks handed things. It looked like a drawing of the Inquisition. I knew as I watched I could have watched it all, but I was glad I hadn't. I do not think I could have watched them cut, but I watched the wound closed into a high welted ridge with quick skilful-looking stitches like a cobbler's, and was glad. (325)

His sense of security in looking at the doctor's "quick skilful-looking stitches like a cobbler's" indicates his body-as-machine view. The sight of this operation might remind him of the soldier's intestine he witnessed at the front. Catherine's

womb was also displaced from her belly no more than a few minutes ago, and the deviation from the normalcy is being fixed by the hand of the medicine.

At the end of the novel, Frederic unsuccessfully bids farewell to his dead lover: “It was like saying good-by to a statue” (332). As long as he shares the mechanized view, dead Catherine is no more than a lifeless “thing,” or the assemblage of machine parts. As perhaps we might notice in his rejection of a doctor’s offer to ride him to the hotel (331-32), and of nurses’ presence in Catherine’s room — “You get out. . . . The other one too.” (332) — it is very likely that Catherine’s death in effect might produce in him some hesitation to take for granted what once fixed and shaped the foundation of his identity — the medical ideology. While the soldier’s intestine protruding from his body triggered Frederic’s reconceptualization of the body, Catherine’s womb removed into the outside of her body evokes his skepticism in the medical view because of this unacceptable reality of Catherine’s death. As the intestine once disturbed the automatized view lacking a full awareness of his own corporeality, the womb subverts the body-as-machine view, which dismantled and destroyed Catherine’s body.

It should be concluded, from what has been said above, that the soldier’s intestine in the early part of the novel foreshadows Frederic’s initiation into the corporeality, followed by the incorporation into the medical ideology. Frustrated at the end of the novel, Frederic in deep distress represents the general perplexity of the transition period in which the public notion of the human body was replaced by that of the medical ideology. That Frederic’s physical and emotional rehabilitation eventually reaches a standstill portrays values conflicting one another in the appalling devastation wrought by the Great War and in the rapid progress of medical science. *A Farewell to Arms* is a story of a backward glance from more

than ten years after the war, a glance at the confusion and disorder in which people were completely at a loss what to do to sustain their identity threatened in the overwhelming turbulence of the war and thereby the violent shift of values.

Notes

*This is the revised version of the paper presented at the Conference of Tenri University Association of the Americas Studies held on November 16, 1999, at Tenri University.

¹ The page references to *A Farewell to Arms* are given parenthetically.

² Indeed it gradually is coming to be accepted that this novel focuses on Frederic's view of the human body as a central theme, as we can see from the fact that many critics of *A Farewell to Arms* have recently attached greater importance to the motif of the body. See, for example, Michael Reynolds, "*A Farewell to Arms: Doctors in the House of Love.*"

³ Hemingway had a similar experience to Frederic's in the First World War. Both participated in it as an ambulance driver, and was severely injured in a bombardment. Though based considerably on the author's wartime experience, the fictional character in *A Farewell to Arms* should clearly be distinguished from Hemingway himself. See the introductory essay by James Nagel in *Hemingway in Love and War: The Lost Diary of Agnes von Kurowsky*.

⁴ The doctor from Atlanta in *Soldiers' Pay* well represents this view: "...the human machine can only be patched and parts replaced up to a certain point" (Faulkner 129).

⁵ We should notice later in the story that, looking into a mirror, Frederic states an impression of his own image as "looking like a fake doctor" in a doctor's white gown (319). He also substitutes for a doctor when giving Catherine anesthesia (317-23). All these details are of course out of necessity, yet, in deeper levels, they might symbolize Frederic's incorporation into the medical ideology.

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