

Headgear and Horses: Authorial Presence in *A Farewell to Arms*

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The many excellences of *A Farewell To Arms*—the poetic language, the strong sense of place, the control of rhythm and pace, the tension created by the retrospective first-person narration, the symbolic use of natural elements, the masterful ending—have been justly praised by the critics.¹ But it is in the smaller details that Hemingway's artistic control is most impressively evident: in such things as the military headgear the soldiers wear and the horses they bet on. Through his presentation of such seemingly insignificant details, the author subtly reinforces his portrait of Frederic Henry as someone who fails to understand himself, his past, and the two "others" with whom he was most intimately involved: his army and his beloved. Thus the author complicates his warrior-lover, deflating the sympathy which Frederic Henry, from his powerful position as narrator, attempts to extract from us, his audience.

The decisions we make about Henry's defection from the Italian army are central to our reading of the novel, but the anger and admiration evoked by this defection say as much about the readers' ideological biases, acknowledged or unacknowledged, as they do about what happens in the novel—which is that a defector is himself talking about his defection. Clearly, Henry himself would prefer those around him to approve his action. Catherine Barkley obviously does (the love affair could hardly survive her disapproval), and in order to ensure a wider range of approval, Henry narrates his adventures to us, carefully remembering only those details which disparage the army.² Thus, he indicates that he never admired the Italian army; he joined it merely because "I was in Italy . . . and I spoke Italian . . . I was a fool."³ From the beginning, it gave him only "a false feeling of soldiering" (17). Even in the middle of war, the Italian military is not a weighty concern: its soldiers lead "a sort of funny life" (26). Henry describes the Italians as unprepared for the Austrian attack (182-83) and so disorganized that the Germans can advance easily (211). He despises the Italian pistol and helmet he has

¹ See, for instance, Carlos Baker's remarks on this novel in *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); the standard essays Harold Bloom collected in *Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Chelsea, 1987); the special FTA issue of *The Hemingway Review* (Fall 1989); and the criticism cited in the following notes.

² The important question of how much time has elapsed between event and narration has attracted many critics. I share the majority opinion that the narrative was written quite some time after the action occurred, so that the events have been thoroughly filtered through memory. See, for example, Arnold E. Davidson, "The Dantean Perspective in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 3.2 (1973): 121-30, especially 127; Dale Edmonds, "When Does Frederic Henry Narrate *A Farewell to Arms*?" *Notes on Modern American Literature* 4 (1980): Item 14; James Nagel, "Catherine Barkley and Retrospective Narration in *A Farewell to Arms*," in *Ernest Hemingway: Six Decades of Criticism*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1987) 171-85; and Delbert Wylder, *Hemingway's Heroes* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969) 68.

³ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957) 22, 256. All subsequent references are to this edition.

been issued (29)⁴ and is embarrassed by the Italian army's salute (23). Even its support personnel are found wanting: wounded soldiers receive better treatment from foreign than from Italian nurses. As Henry twice points out, the American nurses in Milan are able to make a bed while the patient is in it, "an admirable proceeding" (85, 62) which spares the wounded soldier much discomfort. Not surprisingly, as Henry recalls it, Catherine's evaluation of the Italians and their military was equally negative: she explains to Henry that he hasn't really defected, because "It's only the Italian army" (251), and she finds that Moretti, the much-decorated "legitimate" Italian war hero, is "conceited . . . a dreadful, dreadful boy really . . . who bored everyone he met" and is clearly inferior to the more modest British heroes (124). Italians are exaggeratedly polite (130), which makes them, in Catherine's eyes, "awful" (131).

Henry's need to demonize the army leads him into simplification and generalization. The novel's priest rejects this stance: he distinguishes between the officers, whom he defines as "people who would make war," and the powerless soldiers, the "people who would not make war" though they bear the brunt of it (70-71). The distinction is valuable in that it presents a goodly chunk of the Italian army as deserving of sympathy and compassion, but Henry rejects even this simple a distinction. Needing to despise all Italians, he quickly changes the topic.

Hemingway, on the other hand, develops and refines the distinction. Authorial markers such as names and clothes differentiate the Italian soldiers from each other and from their officers. Robert Martin points out that "the names of individual ambulance drivers have greater significance within the structure of events than has been previously recognized," and Gwen Nagel "reads" the characters' clothes to uncover their "status and rank, occupation, region of origin, even number of wounds."⁵ The frequent references to military equipment—a subject which fascinated Hemingway all his life—posit additional distinctions which undermine Henry's wholesale rejection of the Italian system.

The novel's military personnel have been issued standard helmets, caps, and gas masks. Early in the novel, Hemingway discriminates carefully between the military cap and the helmet.⁶ Less formal than the helmet, the cap is intimate and honest headgear. Regardless of rank, it indicates its owner's personal condition or situation. When the officers disport themselves at the whorehouse, for example, the prostitutes synecdochically play with the officers' caps (30), and the stretcher-bearers who are waiting for a tip hold their caps in their hands (83) in the quintessential servile attitude. When Aymo is killed, Piani carefully retrieves his cap and covers his face with it (214). Henry and Piani love and mourn the unwilling soldier who nonetheless did his best to be useful to his fellows: they treat both the dead man and his cap with respect, obviously associating it with him and

⁴ In contrast, Henry approves of the "Austrian sniper's rifle," which he displays proudly, hung over his and Rinaldi's beds. He describes it in sensuous detail: it has a "blued octagon barrel and . . . lovely dark walnut, cheek-fitted *schutzen* stock" (11).

⁵ See Robert A. Martin, "Hemingway and the Ambulance Drivers in *A Farewell to Arms*," in Wagner, *Ernest Hemingway: Six Decades* 195; and Gwen Nagel, "A Tessera for Frederic Henry: Imagery and Recurrence in *A Farewell to Arms*," in Wagner, *Ernest Hemingway: Six Decades* 190.

⁶ Headgear is a significant marker in civilian life as well: although Henry takes shirts and pants from Simmons, "I could not wear Sim's hat . . . I had . . . bought a new hat" (243).

not with the army whose "friendly fire" killed him. By the time Henry defects, then, the cap has been thoroughly established as a trustworthy marker of the large population of Italian soldiers whom there is no reason to despise. It is therefore significant to us, if not to Henry, that he loses his cap in the river when he deserts. At the time of the action, he is, of course, worried only about survival, not about his gear. But at the time of narration, he spends several sentences detailing the condition of his uniform (shoes, coat, trousers, shirt, and even underclothing), but spares only five words—"I had lost my cap" (227)—to a detail which authorial manipulation has made significant for us. The river left him his money and his uniform, but it took away the one item of military clothing to which the narrative discourse has carefully attached positive value. As James Phelan points out in another context, Henry is "someone whose values Hemingway questions rather than shares."⁷

In sharp contrast to the military cap, the Italian steel helmet obscures the individual, subordinating him to the oppressive war machinery: it is worn by "people who would make war." And indeed the Italian helmet is rejected by all right-thinking soldiers: it is ill-fitting (33), "uncomfortable and too bloody theatrical" (28). Italian helmets are useless encumbrances: "most" soldiers simply "slung [their helmets] from their packs" (33). Only the would-be deserter, the man with the hernia, wears his helmet (36), not a cap; he is a figure of derision, useless as a soldier, a burden to his fellows, and even incompetent as a defector. Within the Italian army, then, the soldier who is "one of us" (i.e., a reluctant soldier who nonetheless does the best he can) is insufficiently protected by his own army, and he knows it. But the Italian officers "all wore helmets," mainly because they had been issued "better fitting helmets" (33). The despised *carabinieri* wore either steel helmets or "the wide hat," which earned them the unflattering nickname "airplanes" (224, see also 222). The hated Italian battle police also "wore steel helmets," but of their victims, "Only two of us had steel helmets" (224), which they probably were not wearing. As an officer, Henry has a helmet, but it pointedly hangs—unused—in his room in Gorizia (11), an indication that he identified himself, at the time, with the more likable footsoldier. When it suits him, however, Henry "feels comfortable wearing the [officer's] uniform of the Italian army": it gets him into the better restaurants and exempts him from the entrance fee to San Siro.⁸ At different times and for different reasons, then, Henry did identify himself with various aspects of the Italian army. The identification does not bring him dishonor, because the Italian army is not, in this novel, an undifferentiated evil mass—in spite of Henry's later need to depict it as such.

The distinction between cap and helmet holds throughout the novel's uniformed personnel. The British ambulance driver who is clearly "one of us" wears a cap (163), but the Swiss soldier who makes Henry and Barkley nervous as they row to freedom "wore . . . a helmet like the Germans" (277). Because the German army is more consistently efficient and focused on destruction, its soldiers "all wore . . . helmets" and in that army the helmet, not the cap, represents the fighting man—"we could see the German helmets moving" (210-11). The helmet, then, repre-

⁷ James Phelan, "Distance, Voice, and Temporal Perspective in Frederic Henry's Narration: Successes, Problems and Paradox," in *New Essays on A Farewell to Arms*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 57.

⁸ See Gwen Nagel 190.

sents those armies or sections of armies which the (authorial) narrative encourages us to dislike.

Henry finds the British gas mask superior to the Italian helmet. He wears the helmet because he has to, but he carries "an English gas mask . . . up to the posts. . . [because it was] a real mask" (29). His remark that "I've vomited into a gas mask" indicates that he was wearing it (and not the Italian helmet) at the time of danger. Rinaldi accuses him of bragging (77). Henry is not above bragging, nor is he, years later, above exaggeration and distortion. But his wholesale disdain for the Italian army is undercut by a narrative stance which can distinguish between the soldier or officer who wears a cap and the one who wears a helmet. Not all Italian military men are bad, not all defection is good. Henry needs to simplify and flatten out a painful situation, but Hemingway's manipulation of detail highlights the distinctions Henry prefers to gloss over.

Another easily overlooked detail, the San Siro episode, works, as the headgear works, to undercut Henry's attempt to gain our approval. The Japalac episode (Book II, Chapter XX) reveals Henry's lack of self-knowledge and the incompleteness of his growth; and it contrasts these weaknesses with Catherine Barkley's honest, clear understanding of herself and the war. Like his tendency to misrepresent the Italian army, Henry's inability to read Barkley correctly—and thus to modify his own inflated self-image—necessarily makes him a suspect narrator.

During World War I many valuable French race horses were sent away for safety, mostly to the south of France but sometimes to other countries. Such a horse might have been registered to run (illegally) under a different name in Italy.⁹ As an unknown, it would have attracted few bettors and paid handsome returns when it won. The Japalac incident not only reflects historic fact but also deflates the romantic patriotism which Henry assumes in "the men at the gate [who] let us in without cards because we were in uniform" (128). Actually, illegal activity thrives during wartime, and gambling concerns are eager to relieve everyone, even convalescing soldiers, of their money. The incident serves larger novelistic purposes as well: it encapsulates Barkley's and Henry's responses to the war, and it indicates that Barkley is far ahead of Henry in the process of disengaging from convention and society and making a separate peace. She is also more honest than he is, and "Frederic is out of his depth with her, just as he is out of his depth with the war."¹⁰

The four young people who go to the races at San Siro make the odd remark that "we *ought* to back" the French horse Japalac (128, my emphasis), as if this action carried moral significance. The remark follows a careful inventory of the characters' varying levels of awareness that something crooked is going on: "Crowell swore [the horse] was dyed. . . Catherine was sure his color had been changed. Ferguson said she could not tell. I thought he looked suspicious." At this early stage, all of them probably realize that "The racing was very crooked" (127),

⁹ Henry reads in the old newspapers that "They had stopped racing in France" and realizes "That was where our horse Japalac came from" (136). Even the "terrible lot" (127) of horseflesh which runs at San Siro is later evacuated to Rome "and there was no more racing" (133).

¹⁰ Phelan 58.

but even so, they don't mind profiting from it: "We all agreed we ought to back him" (128). After Japalac runs, Meyers's remarks indicate that there is more crookedness involved in the racing than just the dyeing of the horse and its running under a false name. The betting process is dishonest as well, and Barkley immediately recognizes that she and her friends have been taken in by it. The rigged betting neutralizes the profits that the illegally run horse might have provided: "'Then we won't get three thousand lire,' Catherine said. 'I don't like this crooked racing!'" (129). Ferguson echoes her remark ("It's crooked and disgusting") but Barkley goes far beyond this conventional response, dismissing it with "Of course" and acknowledging that "if it hadn't been crooked [i.e., if the odds hadn't been so long] we'd never have backed him at all." She rejects the comfort offered (probably by Henry) that "We'll get two hundred lire," and admits her greed honestly enough: "I would have liked the three thousand lire" (130).¹¹ She then distances herself from the whole system, preferring to "back a horse we've never heard of and that Mr. Meyers won't be backing." The whole process—being tricked into participation (by appearances, rhetoric, or romantic ideas), expecting victory, realizing that the whole undertaking can only result in loss (only the organized leadership can profit), abandoning it, and then embarking upon independent action (at which point they can see "the mountains off in the distance") even though it may be neither profitable nor triumphant—all this summarizes Catherine Barkley's experience of the war and her commitment to life and love outside society.

The men—Crowell Rodgers, Henry, and even the experienced criminal Mr. Meyers—catch on more slowly; Barkley mocks their "touching faith" when she hears they have bet on another hot tip. Of course, the same thing happens again: the betting is rigged and the winning horse "did not pay anything." Barkley learns more quickly than the others and doesn't hesitate to discard false systems. She doesn't attempt to figure out or beat the system or to give it another chance; she simply abandons it and then undertakes separate, independent action. As Sandra Spanier convincingly argues, because Barkley "knows the world and has devised as best she can a way to live in it, she serves as mentor to Frederic Henry."¹²

In this episode, as in others, Henry follows her lead.¹³ The largeness of Barkley's spirit enables her to tolerate his slow progress through propaganda and falsehood and into independent action and self-awareness. She cannot know that his self-awareness, the culmination of which is his narration of *A Farewell to Arms*, will be incomplete. Although the change from warrior to lover to defector to narrator is impressive enough, Henry never achieves the independence of thought that Barkley displays throughout. He is an apt pupil but, as he himself recognizes, he "was always able to forget" (14). Henry's narration is basically self-serving

¹¹ Two hundred lire in 1917 equaled U.S. \$27.40 in Spring 1917, or U.S. \$683.70 in terms of January 1995. Three thousand lire in 1917 translate into \$10,254.24 in January 1995. See R.L. Bidwell, *Currency Conversion Tables: A Hundred Years of Change* (London: Rex Collings, 1970) 20; and *The Value of a Dollar: Prices and Incomes in the U.S. 1860-1989*, ed. Scott Derks (Detroit: Gale Research, 1994) 2. To translate Derks's 1989 values into 1995 terms, I multiplied by 150/124 (CPI for 1995/ CPI for 1989).

¹² Sandra W. Spanier, "Hemingway's Unknown Soldier: Catherine Barkley, the Critics, and the Great War," in Donaldson, *New Essays* 80.

¹³ Michael Reynolds, however, does not distinguish between Barkley's and Henry's differing levels of awareness, treating the two of them together as if they were equally wise. See *Hemingway's First War: The Making of A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 271.

and dishonest, but the Japalac episode, which seems to him disconnected from the war and which he therefore reports without distortion, contains an authorial rendering of the events of the novel: it deals with the timing and varying styles of their defections (from nursing, from war, from Italy, in that order) and hints at the happiness that independent action can bring (in the mountains). The episode does not touch upon Barkley's difficult labor and death, events which are unrelated to society or personality and against which no amount of courage or brains can prevail.

Headgear and horses demand careful reading. In this war novel, Hemingway naturally pays particular attention to military headgear, drawing fine distinctions which accumulate significance as the novel progresses towards Henry's climactic defection. Similarly, the horse is a rich symbol. According to one source, "the horse is both a life and a death symbol, solar and lunar. It also symbolizes the intellect; wisdom; mind; reason; nobility; light; dynamic power; fleetness; the swiftness of thought; the swift passage of life" and a dazzling variety of other things. More specifically, "The black horse is funerary and heralds death and symbolizes chaos."¹⁴ Horses carry positive value in William Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson, but are more ambiguous in Hemingway. The racing track, present both in his fiction and nonfiction, serves as the background against which he creates such different atmospheres as the idealized marital harmony of *A Moveable Feast* and the fatal corruption of "My Old Man." In Hemingway's world, races are frequently rigged, and it is not an exaggeration to say that "The fixed race is Hemingway's metaphor for existence."¹⁵ The San Siro episode, which occupies an entire chapter, reveals the main characters' varying responses to the "fixed" aspects of life with which the novel deals. In no small way, the race at San Siro recapitulates the whole novel, canvassing such issues as the dishonesty of war, the forgiveness necessary for love, and the psychological underpinnings of retrospective first-person narration.

Details about headgear and horses surface unobtrusively in *A Farewell to Arms*, usually in situations when the narrator's (and the reader's) attention is focused elsewhere: on Aymo, on climbing out of the river, on Barkley. Thus the detail, which the narrator sees as minor or insignificant, is offered simply as background. At these moments, when Frederic Henry seems to lower his guard, the authorial voice can and does sound more loudly than the narrator's, shaping the details into significant patterns. Through these details and patterns we can define the author's subtle attempts to guide the reader's reading of the narrative's narrator.

¹⁴ J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978) 85-86.

¹⁵ Reynolds 271.