"A Farewell to Arms": Memory and the Perpetual Now
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A Farewell to Arms is, as most readers readily perceive, a novel of memory. As James Nagel has recently emphasized, the portrait of Catherine Barkley is developed from the memory, the backward-looking vantage point, of Frederick Henry. Other critics, however, find still other potential in the memory pattern of Lt. Henry. Tony Tanner, for instance, focuses upon Frederick’s naive and wondering eye, positing Hemingway’s “faith in the attuned and operating senses and the unsurpassable value of the registered ‘now.’” 1 The value of Frederic’s memory, then, lies in its utter truthfulness to the empirical moment. Such veracity is valuable, according to Tanner’s interpretation of Hemingway’s motives, “because only thus could you preserve and bestow permanence upon those important moments when a man’s senses confronted the world and responded to it with maximum emotion and honesty.” 2 Earl Rovit and Gerry Brenner also note the novel’s emphasis upon memories of empirical experience, but see those recollections as indications of Hemingway’s experiments with a sort of “time seizure,” where individual images encourage “the illusion of ‘time suspended,’ caught and held and merged into that greater time which is timelessness.” 3 In their interpretation of the novel, however, Rovit and Brenner are less concerned with the workings of Frederic Henry’s memory than they are with the experiences that shape his development.

Two facts—that the events comprising A Farewell to Arms are memories, and that Hemingway clearly structures the novel around associations formulated in Frederic Henry’s mind—strongly suggest that
the novel is more than a recapitulation of the past. Readers who underestimate the power of memory in Hemingway's novel appear to operate from the assumption that the narrator deliberately or unavoidably distances himself from the events of his past and contrives to recreate the absent "now" or the moral dilemma that he met once upon a time. Logical and discrete boundaries divide past and present in the narrator's mind, according to this perspective, while he charts for readers the course and outcome of his development. This reading is at odds with the modern view of human consciousness as fluid. For, as modern writers interpret the workings of consciousness, memories and associations are shaped by the present as much as by the past. If past and present meld in the human mind and by extension in the mind of Frederic Henry, then the story of A Farewell to Arms is not grounded in his history, but in the "now" of his present. In fact, if the novel is interpreted as evidence of Frederic's "now" in continuous revision, then he himself is something of a work in process. In reconsidering the experiences of Frederic the character and in formulating associations based upon his memories, the narrator shapes his present, his consciousness, his very "I."

Both Hemingway and the narrator emphasize the process of consciousness by repeatedly mentioning the character's bafflement in the face of his experience, with the suggestion that at some point in the process of his thinking Frederic will be able to penetrate the mystery and communicate its meaning to a listener—or perhaps to a reader. When Catherine presses Frederic to tell her about the war, for instance, he feels temporarily incapable: "I'll tell you about it if I ever get it straight in my head." In a conversation with the priest, in which the priest remarks that Frederic cannot know about love "unless you have it," he makes a similar promise: "'Well,' I said, 'If I ever get it I will tell you' "(72). In A Farewell to Arms Frederic Henry attempts to fulfill his promises, sharing the intricate process of "getting it" with an audience that in his mind includes Catherine and the priest. The "it" that his consciousness embraces pulls together the past and the present along with the themes of love and war, and Hemingway's emphasis upon the process of "getting it" highlights the irrelevance of all debate over whether the novel is primarily a love story or a war story. A Farewell to Arms is foremost a story of the thoughts which are a thinker. To prove that Hemingway's novel is truly a work of inwardness, a saga of a consciousness taking shape, it is essential to counter the opinion that A
Farewell to Arms’s concern with so-called objective, empirical experience overwhelms any serious attempt that Hemingway might have made to trace the workings of consciousness. In addition, a critical truism, one that mourns the total absence of anything resembling an inner life in Hemingway characters, must be reconsidered.

Hemingway’s attention to the texture of empirical experience is undeniable in A Farewell to Arms, and yet the objective world is not truthful or necessarily worthy of reverence. Any reader of the novel must recognize that empirical experience is devastatingly ambiguous for Frederic Henry. From the opening chapter, with its description of artillery fire that looks exactly like harmless summer lightning, he escorts readers through a world where an unwary observer bases conclusions about reality upon raw empirical knowledge only at great risk. Weapons are camouflaged as trees and vines, and soldiers walk with their rifles and cartridge-boxes protruding before them, so that they appear to be carrying life rather than death. Later on, the dyed horse is a trap for the innocent at the Milan racetrack; the pretentious but incompetent doctors who examine Frederic are threats to those who rely upon their officious appearance; and the false spring that precedes the birth of Catherine’s baby deceptively portends life. Frederic sees his son only once and later learns that the child who appeared to be alive was dead. In a passage that seems trivial until understood as part of this pattern of deception, he explains that the eyes can easily misjudge the amount of liquor in a glass holding both whiskey and ice. “I would have to tell them not to put ice into the whiskey. Let them bring the ice separately. That way you could tell how much whiskey there was and it would not suddenly be too thin from the soda” (310). At one point during his convalescence, Frederic is an American dressed as an Italian being shaved by a barber who perceives him as an Austrian pretending to make innocent inquiries about the progress of the war. Camouflaging himself after his desertion, Henry masquerades as one of the wounded, as a soldier attached to a train transporting guns, as an American civilian traveling with his cousin, and finally as Catherine’s husband.

Critics have assigned various meanings to this disguise motif. Modern theories about the workings of human consciousness suggest, however, that the motif is evidence of a systemizing consciousness. In other words, Frederic Henry the storyteller combs through his memory, considers and reconsiders, and imposes a structure upon events so that he can make sense of them. William James refers to this process in Psychology, where
he describes the importance of creating a framework for memory: "the one who THINKS over his experiences most, and weaves them into systematic relations with each other, will be the one with the best memory." 6 Frederic's process of weaving involves interpretation, an actual re-creation of the meaning of empirical experience by the creative consciousness. The empirical experience of the war, then, is not strictly a part of his past, even though it belongs to his memory. That experience is also his present, the raw material and the product of the thinking, weaving consciousness, and is part of that consciousness in flux. The narrative resulting from Frederic's systemizing consciousness would of course include the framework—the disguise motif, for instance—to which memories cling and through which certain theories about experience are tested. Seen as evidence of the creative consciousness at work, the recurrence of the masquerade in the narrative takes on enormous significance. The disguises certainly demonstrate the unreliability of empirical knowledge, and they are bits of evidence that support Frederic's realizations about modern life's danger, irony, and duplicity. At the same time, they cling to his memory because he has succeeded in weaving them together with the theories that he has been in the process of composing. In other words, masquerades are both causes and results; as causes, they contribute to Frederic Henry's perception of the meaning of his experience and as results they appear prominently in A Farewell to Arms, having become inextricably entwined within the system of memory. William James explains that in this process of contributing to the formulation of conclusions and becoming caught up in memory, "every fact is connected with every other by some thought-relation. The consequence is that every fact is retained by the combined suggestive power of all the other facts in the system, and forgetfulness is well-nigh impossible." 7

The disguise motif can, then, be interpreted as evidence of the systemizing consciousness of Frederic Henry the narrator, who now imposes structure and meaning upon his past. Frederic's weaving of memories makes him aware that inevitable loss lies beneath the camouflaging strategies of both love and war, and his various tastes of loss become unforgettable because they have contributed to and become trapped in the structure that his consciousness has imposed upon memories of empirical experience.

Hemingway provides evidence of Frederic's continuously revising, interpreting consciousness when the narrator associates the death of his
son with his memory of ants that he once carelessly killed. He details the ants’ attempt to escape the fire that traps them, and then considers his own power to influence events.

I remember thinking at the time that it was the end of the world and a splendid chance to be a messiah and lift the log off the fire and throw it out where the ants could get off onto the ground. But I did not do anything but throw a tin cup of water on the log, so that I would have the cup empty to put whiskey in before I added water to it. I think the cup of water on the burning log only steamed the ants. (328)

The story of the ants provides experiential evidence for Frederic’s conclusion: “That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you” (327). But this evidence is not as significant as the association that Frederic Henry’s consciousness has constructed. This crucial association occurs in the present, in the narrator’s now; for Frederic, in juxtaposing the deaths of the ants and his son, offers no indication that the similarity between the two events occurred to him as he grieved for his son. Indeed, it is as if the resemblance between the ants on the one hand and his son, Catherine, and his comrades in battle on the other had only just struck him during the process of narration. This insight achieved by the creative, interpreting consciousness actually derives from a system of memories woven throughout the narrative, including the soldier with the rupture, who deliberately complicates his condition and finally wounds himself in the head, at Frederic’s suggestion, to escape the front. In spite of all the soldier’s efforts, he will undoubtedly go back to the line. Other doomed attempts at escape—the Caporetto retreat and the harrowing journey to Switzerland—appear prominently in the narrative with the sort of fine detail that characterizes the vivid memory of the ants, indicating that Frederic’s consciousness has been weaving memories into a pattern that prepares him for and impels him toward recognition: “. . . They killed you in the end. You could count on that” (327).

In *A Farewell to Arms* a backward-looking consciousness shapes events into a manageable pattern of associations. These meaningful associations vibrate through the novel, often in unexpected ways. The most prominent consistently link the narrative to Frederic’s sense of his lack of control and power in a world relentlessly indifferent to human suffering. For instance, the rain, noted by innumerable critics as a symbol of doom, is a major strand in the large and delicate framework
of associations established by Frederic’s own mind. As he recounts his story, the rain triggers associations beyond Catherine’s premonition that one day she might be dead in it. The wetness of the recurring rain resembles his traumas, one after another: the immediate, warm wetness of his leg wound; the warm, sticky stream that drips down from the bleeding soldier lying above the helpless Frederic in the ambulance; the unrelenting flow of Catherine’s hemorrhage. This framework consistently supports Frederic’s feeling that his influence upon the outcome of events is negligible. The pattern of associations pieced together by the consciousness of the narrator explains the emphasis placed upon the small matter of inspecting the ambulances after a return from leave.

Everything seemed in good condition. It evidently made no difference whether I was there to look after things or not. I had imagined that the condition of the cars, whether or not things were obtainable, the smooth functioning of the business of removing wounded and sick from the dressing stations, hauling them back from the mountains to the clearing station and then distributing them to the hospitals named on their papers, depended to a considerable extent on myself. Evidently it did not matter whether I was there or not. (16)

Even the statues that look on as Frederic and Catherine meet at the British hospital are associated with Frederic’s helplessness. He ponders the marble busts, concluding that they “all looked like a cemetery,” and considers the individuals whom the busts memorialize: “I tried to make out whether they were members of the family or what; but they were all uniformly classical. You could not tell anything about them” (28). He is most impressed by the commonality of the statues. By the time he narrates his final good-bye to the statue-like Catherine, he is conscious that death, too, is “uniformly classical” in its commonality, and this association reinforces both his vivid memory of the inscrutable marble busts and his sense that he is no messiah with powers to prevent anyone from being cooked.8

A Farewell to Arms represents its narrator’s consciousness operating in the perpetual now; and, according to psychological theory which strongly influenced the moderns, Frederic Henry’s consciousness is Frederic Henry.9 William James argues that consciousness is a “stream” of thought and is the only “I.” As he dramatically concludes his chapter on the self, “The thoughts themselves are the thinker.” 10 The “thoughts” that James refers to are the results of sensory experience and include
perceptions, associations, imagination, reasoning, and memory. Two profoundly significant consequences emerge from James’ ideas. First, the traditional dichotomy between the thinker and the object of that thinker’s attention blurs if the thoughts are the thinker, since the “I” exists in reaction to the object of attention and that object’s reality rests entirely within the perceptions of the thinker. Second, conventional interpretations of the “I” as a stable, unchanging, or at least logically developing core of identity yield to the realization that the “I” is “a thought, at each moment different from that of the last moment, but appropriate of the latter. . . .” Thus the “I” is simply the result of the individual’s interacting with the empirical world or with his or her own thoughts.

This idea of the ever-changing “I” lends additional significance to the disguise motif and deflates claims that Hemingway characters, Frederic Henry among them, are actually selfless. D. S. Savage’s critique of Hemingway’s style articulates this view:

It is a style actually perfectly expressive of his outlook on life. In the flat, chaotic, elementary world into which we are introduced by Hemingway’s fiction, everything is objectivized: inwardness, subjectivity, is eliminated, and man is made into an object, a thing. This entire extrusion of personality into the outward sensational world makes his characters the inwardly-passive victims of a meaningless determinism. They inhabit a world which, because it has been voided of inwardness, is entirely without significance. The Hemingway character is a creature without religion, morality, politics, culture or history—without any of those aspects, that is to say, of the distinctively human existence.

Actually, however, no value judgment on Frederic Henry’s use of the masquerade is offered because Hemingway rejects the idea of a self whose significant feature is its stability. Nor does it necessarily follow, as the creative, constantly self-realizing narrator of A Farewell to Arms demonstrates, that writers who reject the conventional belief in the “I” as a fairly stable, coherently developing core of identity are depriving human beings of significant inner life. The human consciousness is a teeming current of sensory experiences and attendant perceptions, rich with memories and associations, that rival one another for attention of the “I.” A Farewell to Arms is not an empirical study of life on the Italian front, objectified by a selfless narrator. Rather, the novel chronicles an interpreting consciousness, a self, grappling with the intricacies of inwardness.
A particularly fascinating passage, in which Frederic Henry dreams of Catherine while he is stalled with his men during the retreat, is a brilliant depiction of the consciousness at work—interpreting, creating, fluid and unimpeded by irrelevant distinctions between past and present, thinker and object of thought.

If there were no war we would probably all be in bed. In bed I lay me down my head. Bed and board. Stiff as a board in bed. Catherine was in bed now between two sheets, over her and under her. Which side did she sleep on? Maybe she wasn't asleep. Maybe she was lying thinking about me. Blow, blow, ye western wind. Well it blew and it wasn't the small rain but the big rain down that rained. It rained all night . . . Christ, that my love were in my arms and I in my bed again. That my love Catherine. That my sweet love Catherine down might rain. Blow her again to me. Well, we were in it. Every one was caught in it and the small rain would not quiet it. "Good-night, Catherine," I said out loud. "I hope you sleep well. . . . I'm sorry he makes you so uncomfortable." (197)

Frederic is freely associating here, influenced by the empirical experience of the rain and wind, and recalling the lyric ("Western Wind") about separated lovers. But which Frederic? A careful examination of his reverie reveals a shared consciousness, belonging to character and narrator. Frederic the narrator, recalling his dream, contributes new details, informed as he is by the more recent memory of Catherine's death. The phrase "stiff as a board in bed" revives the image of Catherine, statue-like in death and "between . . . two sheets, over her and . . . under her," as she appeared when Frederic saw her for the last time. These associations are of course unavailable to the character as he dreams, but they are inescapable for the narrator. The use of "he" to refer to Catherine's baby suggests that this dreaming consciousness is influenced by information stored in the memory of the narrator, for with this exception Frederic and Catherine refer to their unborn child as a girl, called "young Catherine." The references to stiffness between sheets and the baby who is indeed a boy strongly indicate that the narrator reinterprets the very consciousness of the character in a creative interplay of memory, association, and perception. Focusing upon the narrator's power to recreate his dream and, through the process of remembering and systemizing, to redefine it, he demonstrates the complexity of subjective experience. He realizes the individual's capacity to create meaning subjectively, a process antithetical to inner inertia. The dream illustrates William James's claim that the human consciousness is an unstable, vital, creative stream of thought.
The very fact that Frederic makes the effort to weave together his story also counters the theory that he is inert and inwardly lifeless. Indeed, one of the themes of his memories involves what might be called the ethics of effort. He remembers an early, drunken conversation with the priest, when he apologizes for not having visited Abruzzi and for disappointing the priest’s family.

He had written his father that I was coming and they had made preparations. I myself felt as badly as he did and could not understand why I had not gone. It was what I had wanted to do and I tried to explain how one thing had led to another and finally he saw it and understood that I had really wanted to go and it was almost alright. I had drunk much wine and afterward coffee and Strega and I explained, winefully, how we did not do the things we wanted to do; we never did such things. (13)

The narrator recalls his own unwillingness to make the effort required to visit Abruzzi and his feeble excuse that “we did not do the things we wanted to do.” Then, almost immediately and clearly operating in the now, he contrasts himself with the priest:

... He understood that I had really wanted to go to the Abruzzi but had not gone and we were still friends, with many tastes alike, but with the difference between us. He had always known what I did not know and what, when I learned it, I was always able to forget. But I did not know that then, although I learned it later. (13-14)

Frederic’s vocabulary of consciousness—“known,” “know,” “learned,” “forget”—is striking and indicative of the process that Hemingway emphasizes. The lesson that Frederic learned later, probably only as a consequence of the remembering essential to the telling of A Farewell to Arms, involves the ethics of effort and heroism. Travelling to Abruzzi is too troublesome for the man who has not yet truly experienced love and war. This uninitiated character contrasts dramatically with the man who later rows to Switzerland, travelling perilously in a small boat over thirty kilometers in a storm. Hemingway’s detailed description of Frederic and Catherine’s great effort establishes that Frederic is in fact doing what he wants to do. Like the priest, like Catherine in love, he learns to make the effort, despite the inevitable pain involved in loving or remembering. A Farewell to Arms is the story of his learning and, even more important, chronicles a consciousness in the process of becoming aware of what it has learned.

Looked at this way, A Farewell to Arms calls into question some of the most prominent interpretations of Hemingway’s work. Hemingway’s
decision to use a first-person narrator who obviously revises and recreates as he narrates challenges Tony Tanner's convictions that the empirically perceiving, naive eye is most significant and valuable in the fiction and that "only sensory evidence is veridical." 15 It is not easy to believe that empirical experience is an unambiguous teacher, for it is the revising, creative consciousness at work in A Farewell to Arms that establishes the framework of meaning. In fact, the whole idea of truthfulness becomes indefinable in light of Hemingway's reliance upon constructs of the mind. These constructs, the framework of memories and the process of consciousness, mark A Farewell to Arms as a novel of inwardness.

Writing of the sense of an ending in A Farewell to Arms, Bernard Oldsey notes the inherent, lively contradiction:

When the book is closed, all of the characters "die," no matter their fictive status. The magical advantage literature has over human life is that we can open the book again and all the characters will pop back into full-blown life. The truth is that all novelists create to murder, and in some instances murder to create. Hemingway reduces Catherine Barkley to the level of a cold piece of stone, but an artistically shaped stone. The Pygmalion myth is here acted out in reverse, and then put right again. For out of that "statue" of the penultimate line of A Farewell to Arms springs the entire warm and loving story that constitutes the novel, a story told years after its occurrence. Out of the dread nothingness of Catherine's death, which takes Frederic Henry and the reader to the edge of the abyss, is fashioned "what-is-in-totality" the novel.16

The end is only the beginning, then, and readers recognizing Hemingway's depiction of a remembering, systemizing, revising consciousness would have to share this view. For Frederic Henry—the creative consciousness of A Farewell to Arms—the end is only part of the process because there is no reason for his recollecting and revising to stop. Fortunately, they cannot rest at what Oldsey calls "the edge of the abyss" and "the point of nothing." Oldsey recalls John Barth's strategy of introducing Lost in the Funhouse with a Möbius strip bearing the message "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN ONCE . . . ." He posits a resemblance between this device and the ending that Hemingway chose for A Farewell to Arms: "Hemingway's novel dwindles to the nothingness of Catherine's death and then springs to full life out of the disruptive force of that nothingness and then again dwindles to the point of nothing . . . ." 17 Readers who
accept the idea that *A Farewell to Arms* is a novel of a consciousness in continuous revision, in a perpetual now, might extend Oldsey's claim beyond the cyclical pattern that he envisions. Frederic Henry will, of course, always remember Catherine, but his future memories and revisions, in the manner of Barth's Möibus strip, will have to include the narrative that his consciousness has fabricated in *A Farewell to Arms*. The process of recollecting, framework-building, and revising will continue for the incessantly interpreting self.

*A Farewell to Arms* is, then, evidence of a self that is already outdated, for the ending of the narrative is the starting point for additional reflection and revision. Ironically, Frederic Henry's promise that "If I ever get it I will tell you" is at the heart of the novel—a promise that the narrator attempts to keep but ultimately cannot. The systemizing, revising consciousness that is the self never "gets it" but is continuously in the process of getting it in this novel about inwardness. Despite the empirical evidence of arms and men, Hemingway's story is not an epic adventure. Rather, *A Farewell to Arms* resembles a lyric poem in its intensely personal and poignant depiction of a rich subjective world.

**NOTES**


2 Tanner 248.


4 Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929) 250. All subsequent references to *A Farewell to Arms* will be to this edition.


6 William James, *Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1910) 294. William James's ideas were, of course, widely known among modern writers. Ernest Hemingway may have first become aware of James's theories through Gertrude Stein, who had been profoundly affected by her studies with

7 James 295.

8 Eugene B. Cantelupe comments upon the statue image in "Statues and Lovers in A Farewell to Arms," Fitzgerald-Hemingway Annual, 1977: 203-05. He argues that statues are part of "the iconography of pain, love, death, and violence that supports the symbolic structure" of the novel (205).

9 The phrase "perpetual now" has been traced by Frederic I. Carpenter to P. D. Ouspensky. See "Hemingway Achieves the Fifth Dimension," in Hemingway and His Critics: An International Anthology, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961) 193. As used by critics such as Carpenter, the term refers to the intense empirical experience which becomes in Hemingway's fiction a moment suspended. I use the phrase to designate the time-frame of the consciousness in continuous flux. For if consciousness changes moment by moment, it operates only and constantly in the now.

10 James 216.

11 James 215.

12 Earl Rovit and Gerry Brenner argue that Hemingway uses the masquerade to comment on Frederic Henry's nonexistent self. See Ernest Hemingway: Revised Edition (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986) 83. Rovit and Brenner conclude that Frederic acquires a self by the end of the novel, and this growing selfhood is synonymous with gains in moral awareness.


14 William James discusses the ethics of effort in Psychology, where he writes: "If the 'searching of our heart and reins' be the purpose of this human drama, then what is sought seems to be what effort we can make. He who can make none is but a shadow; he who can make much is a hero" (458).

15 Tanner 232.

16 Bernard Oldsey, Hemingway's Hidden Craft: The Writing of A Farewell to Arms (University Park: Penn State UP, 1979) 91.

17 Oldsey 89.