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Robert Morgan

Hemingway and the True Poetry of War

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.
—John McCrae, “In Flanders Fields”

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On July 3, 1961 my dad and I drove
back from the pole bean field in
the pickup truck for lunch. It
was an extremely hot day and I
remember being bathed in sweat as we stopped at the mailbox. The
newspaper came with the regular mail in those days and when I opened

up the Hendersonville *Times-News* the headline blazed across the top: "Ernest Hemingway Dead at 61!"

I don't remember anything else about that day, except what I read in the news story. The feature article described the world's most famous writer as having been depressed and sick. It said he had been killed by a shotgun blast to the head, and it quoted his wife Mary as saying, "This in some incredible way was an accident." There was a picture of the author standing beside a huge marlin.

I was sixteen years old at the time and bound for college that fall. That was to be my last summer working in the beanfields with my dad, plowing with a horse, saving my quarters and sweaty dollar bills to buy books and pay tuition. I was going to escape the small farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina to study science at a university. In those "Beat the Russians" years it seemed necessary for all young people to study nuclear engineering or aerospace engineering.

Like any ambitious sixteen-year-old, I was interested in studying many things. I wanted to be a composer and I wanted to be a pianist. I wanted to study philosophy and higher mathematics. And I had wanted to attend West Point and become a pilot, but was told I was too nearsighted even to qualify for an appointment. I wanted to fly B-52s.

But the subjects I was most possessed by were reading and writing. Since the Henderson County bookmobile had begun coming to Green River Baptist Church the first Monday afternoon of every month when I was in the sixth grade, I had been devouring the arctic adventure stories of James Oliver Curwood and Jack London. I had read Dickens, and at the age of fifteen *War and Peace*, which I had seen advertised in the Sears & Roebuck catalog as "the greatest novel ever written."

But the greatest discovery of the year before I went away to college had been Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*. Wolfe was often mentioned in the newspaper in those days. He was a local legend, having grown up in Asheville just thirty miles away, and having written his famous book about Asheville. He was the most famous writer from North Carolina.

When I got *Look Homeward, Angel* from the bookmobile and began reading it in 1960, I felt it was the book I had been looking for. It was a book about me, and about how ambitious and thrilled and scared and "lost" I felt. Eugene Gant's parents seemed like my own parents. And his anxieties and frustrations and sense of destiny were my own. As so many other American boys had before and have since, I discovered a

version of myself in *Look Homeward, Angel*, and I became intoxicated with the elevated, rhetorical prose. I felt I had discovered a new poetry in the choral sections of the book.

Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?

...Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door.

This seemed to me better than Homer and Shakespeare combined. I didn't really know Homer or very much Shakespeare, but I was sure this was what was meant by epic writing and by tragic poetry. I read passages from the book so many times I had them by heart.

Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas.

Imagine my excitement when I discovered that Thomas Wolfe had been born on October 3, 1900, the same day on which I was born forty-four years later. Our kinship seemed even stronger than I had guessed before. No wonder the language and longings of the book felt so much my own. It seemed to me Thomas Wolfe had captured for all time the essence and the rage, the fears and the poetry of what it meant to be young and alive. After describing the long, slow, painful death of Eugene's brother Ben from consumption, Wolfe says on page 590,

We can believe in the nothingness of life, we can believe in the nothingness of death and of life after death—but who can believe in the nothingness of Ben? Like Apollo, who did his penance to the high god in the sad house of King Admetus, he came, a god with broken feet, into the gray hovel of this world. And he lived here a stranger, trying to recapture the music of the lost world, trying to recall the great forgotten language....

At the end of the novel, as Eugene Gant is about to set out for the world beyond Asheville, or Altamont, as he walks in the square at

sunrise after hallucinating that the stone angels in his father's monument shop have come alive and Ben has returned as a ghost to talk with him, he exhorts himself to set out on his journey, paraphrasing Stephen Daedalus,

I shall find no door in any city. But in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul, I shall find the forgotten language, the lost world, a door where I may enter, and music strange as any ever sounded; I shall haunt you, ghost, along the labyrinthine ways....

This was the rhetoric with which I had been inebriated for many months, when I discovered the work of Ernest Hemingway in 1961. Oddly enough, I had just begun to read Hemingway a few weeks before his death. I had discovered several of the Michigan stories and had begun *A Farewell to Arms*. And I had begun to discover a new kind of poetry. Hemingway's prose was as powerful as Wolfe's, but in a very different way. Hemingway's diction was plain and spare, his sentences stripped down, his observations understated. I discovered that Hemingway could achieve his most powerful effects with quiet language and—something new to me—irony. After the tidal waves of Wolfe's language, it was a revelation and an education to read sentences such as these.

We were in the garden at Mons. Young Buckley came in with his patrol from across the river. The first German I saw climbed up over the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him. He had so much equipment on and looked awfully surprised and fell down into the garden. Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that.

And in the story "Indian Camp" Nicks asks his father, "Is dying hard, Daddy?" "No, I think it's pretty easy, Nick. It all depends."

I began to fall in love with a different kind of writing and a different kind of sensibility. Where Wolfe had celebrated emotion through overstatement and explicitness, Hemingway drove home the emotions by suggestion, by implicitness. For a young reader perhaps the most impressive thing about Hemingway's style is the way it evokes emotional

and spiritual depth under a surface of fact and control, even nonchalance. Hemingway's style and tone evoke a special sense of character, of integrity. To a young reader the style implies a rigor similar to science, to good newspaper and sports reporting, to the playing of dangerous sports, even when the voice is clearly English, not American.

It was a frightfully hot day. We'd jammed an absolutely perfect barricade across the bridge. It was simply priceless. A big old wrought-iron grating from the front of a house. Too heavy to lift and you could shoot through it and they would have to climb over it. It was absolutely topping. They tried to get over it, and we potted them from forty yards. They rushed it, and officers came out alone and worked on it. It was an absolutely perfect obstacle. Their officers were very fine. We were frightfully put out when we heard the flank had gone, and we had to pull back.

Reading Hemingway's stories I discovered how voice can evoke character, and how a few carefully chosen sentences can imply a whole world of attitude and experience.

Growing up in rural North Carolina, I attended schools so old-fashioned they required a lot of memorization and recitation. Beginning in about the fifth grade, we had to memorize poems as well as patriotic texts such as The Preamble to the Constitution and The Gettysburg Address, and say them before the class. I remember reciting "The Raven," "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," "Song of the Chattahoochee," as well as "Thanatopsis" and "To a Waterfowl." One of the poems we had to memorize in the fifth or sixth grade was Alan Seeger's "Rendezvous With Death."

I have a rendezvous with Death
 At some disputed barricade,
 When Spring comes back with rustling shade
 And apple-blossoms fill the air—
 I have a rendezvous with Death
 When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he shall take my hand
 And lead me into his dark land
 And close my eyes and quench my breath—
 It may be I shall pass him still.

I have a rendezvous with Death
 On some scarred slope of battered hill,
 When Spring comes round again this year
 And the first meadow-flowers appear.

God knows 'twere better to be deep
 Pillowed in silk and scented down,
 Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep,
 Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
 Where hushed awakenings are dear...
 But I've a rendezvous with Death
 At midnight in some flaming town,
 When Spring trips north again this year,
 And I to my pledge word am true,
 I shall not fail that rendezvous.

Along with learning Seeger's poem and "In Flanders Fields" and a few other poems from World War One, we were taught a little about the history of the war, the fighting in the trenches, the evil Kaiser. My teacher passed along to us as history propaganda stories about Germans marching through Belgium in 1914 and cutting off the right arms of all male children. She told us King Arthur was seen riding a white horse above the no man's land, leading the Allies to quell the Hun. She had been a little girl during World War One, but she described the Americans breaking the Hindenburg Line as though she had been there. In her version the war was a story of good smashing evil, of heroism and sacrifice. She also had us memorize Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier." Rupert Brooke was her favorite poet. She showed us a picture of him with his curly locks on both sides of his forehead, looking dreamy and romantic.

If I should die, think only this of me:
 That there's some corner of a foreign field
 That is forever England. There shall be
 In that rich earth a richer dust concealed:
 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
 A body of England's, breathing English air,
 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
 A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
 Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
 Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
 And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
 In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

The week after Hemingway's death *Life* magazine published a famous portrait of the grizzled author on its cover. Inside was a feature on the career of Hemingway, with many photos and a tribute by Archibald MacLeish. I pored over MacLeish's article until I knew much of it by heart. He talked about Hemingway's fame as an athlete, soldier and boxer, big game hunter and fisherman, enthusiast of bull fighting, fighter with the Resistance. He described the influence of newspaper editors, and Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein. This was the first time I heard the name Ezra Pound, who MacLeish quoted as saying about the young Hemingway in Paris, "The son of a bitch's *instincts* are right." He described Hemingway living in a garret in Paris in the early 1920s, writing sentence after sentence and revising them endlessly. He described Hemingway's style as carving walnut, tough and lean. He

Whittled a style for his time from a walnut stick
 In a carpenter's loft in a street of that April city.

I read more Hemingway stories, and I read *A Farewell to Arms* and I reread MacLeish's article, and I began to think about writing in a new way.

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

Here was a voice that was firm and fresh and authoritative. But it was also poetic, almost hypnotic, in its repetitions and simplicity. The passion was caught in the restraint of the voice. And the tragedy of the story was caught in the tone of the voice from the first sentence. At the age of sixteen I was struck by the photographic quality of the writing, even the cinematic quality of it. Hemingway gave his narration the authority and seeming directness of a document. He was giving the facts of the story. I would later study modern poetry and see how he had put into fiction writing the tenets of Imagism in poetry as defined by Ezra Pound around 1912.

1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

Other tenets of Imagism as defined by Pound were:

An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.... It is better to produce one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works.... Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something...the natural object is *always* the adequate symbol.... Go in fear of abstractions.

There was already a model for the kind of precision and economy and rigor of poetic style in classical American literature, in the prose and much of the poetry of Thoreau. Thoreau had already shown how to communicate his passion, his commitment to accuracy, his white-hot allegiance to the truth of facts and expression in the simplest, most direct language. But of course I did not know that at the time.

And I certainly did not know that Thoreau had been influenced by the new art and technology of photography which had just become popular in America in the 1840s as he began work in his journals on the project

that would become *Walden*. I believe the impact of photography on writing has been greater than we generally recognize. I know photography had a profound effect on Walt Whitman's poems about the Civil War, and I know that Whitman's *Drum Taps* and Matthew Brady's photographs had a significant impact on the way later writers such as Stephen Crane would recreate battle scenes of the Civil War.

As a reporter Hemingway had taught himself to make words the pictures and work as pictures. The challenge photography had brought to writing, as early as Thoreau, was the authority of its seeming objectivity and neutrality. Photography caught and fixed the details, the truth, the naked eye might have missed or the brain forgotten. There was something clinical and factual and unarguable about a photograph. It was beyond mere opinion, subjectivity, interpretation. It was the truth. "The camera does not lie," became an adage.

"Prayer is the contemplation of the facts from the highest point of view," Emerson had said. "To the wise, therefore, a fact is true poetry, and the most beautiful of fables." "A fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows," said Thoreau.

The camera saw with a lens a hundred times the size of the human lens. And the photographic plate was a hundred times the size of the human retina. I believe that the poise and detailed rigor of Hemingway's description and narration were deeply influenced and inspired by the ethics and esthetics of photography. Hemingway's style occurs like a great vowel shift in modern writing, and the art of narration has never been the same since.

Besides the tone of voice and the plain, naked details, one of the things that struck me from the very first about Hemingway's writing was his willingness, even his commitment, to look directly at pain, at the source of pain. When Frederic Henry is wounded in *A Farewell to Arms* we are there, at the center of the experience.

Through the other noise I heard a cough, then came the chuh-chuh-chuh-chuh—then there was a flash, as when a blast-furnace door is swung open, and a roar that started white and went red and on and on in a rushing wind. I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind. I went out swiftly, all of myself, and I knew I was dead and that it had all been a mistake to think you just died. Then I

floated, and instead of going on I felt myself slide back. I breathed and I was back.

My feeling at the age of sixteen was that Hemingway had found a way to make writing in the old sense obsolete. He had made the writing almost invisible and the experience everything. The first time you read a passage you are hardly aware of the cadence or the texture of the sentences. I would discover later that this is the way much of the best art works. Art that is most successful conceals its art. It was a considerable art that could make me feel there was no art, only the facts and intense experience. But I understood the newness and power of what Hemingway was doing, as many millions of readers had before me.

When I talked about Hemingway to my friends in 1961 the word I used most often was "honesty." I was in love with the confessional frankness of the narrator in *A Farewell to Arms*. The brutal candor had its own kind of eloquence.

I had been driving and I sat in the car and the driver took the papers in. It was a hot day and the sky was very bright and blue and the road was white and dusty. I sat in the high seat of the Fiat and thought about nothing. A regiment went by in the road and I watched them pass. The men were hot and sweating.

Never had I seen anyone write so well of wounds, of hospitals, of the love of God and the fear of God. Frederic Henry was willing to talk about the things no one else was willing to talk about, that I was unable to talk about. And the poetry, the poetry of description, the poetry of voice, the poetry of implicitness, were incomparable. Nowhere is this better shown than in Henry's paraphrase of the priest's description of his home region of Abruzzi.

There were bears on the Gran Sasso D'Italia but it was a long way. Aquila was a fine town. It was cool in the summer at night and the spring in Abruzzi was the most beautiful in Italy. But what was lovely was the fall to go hunting through the chestnut woods. The birds were all good because they fed on grapes and you never took a lunch because the peasants were always honored if you would eat with them at their houses.

Critics from the very first have singled out the narrative of the retreat from Caporetto in *A Farewell to Arms*. Many consider it the finest writing about warfare that Hemingway ever did. The fresh, surprising detail, the pacing, the matter-of-fact telling of extraordinary events, create a sustained experience of threat and disorientation, uncertainty, and desperate longing that has been a model for later writers. This art is demonstrated nowhere better than in the scene where Henry shoots the sergeant.

“I order you to halt,” I called. They went a little faster. I opened up my holster, took the pistol, aimed at the one who had talked the most, and fired. I missed and they both started to run. I shot three times and dropped one. The other went through the hedge and was out of sight. I fired at him through the hedge as he ran across the field. The pistol clicked empty and I put in another clip. I saw it was too far to shoot at the second sergeant. He was far across the field, running, his head held low. I commenced to reload the empty clip.

Even more memorable is Henry’s description of his escape after he has been arrested as a deserter and is about to be shot himself. The desperation and drama of the scene are heightened by the tense understatement of the narration. This is one of the most important lessons later writers have learned from Hemingway: when events are dramatic enough, when the issue at hand is a matter of danger, even life and death, the simplest and plainest language will suffice. For the greatest effect, the language must seem to disappear and events unfold on their own. Of course it is a sleight, because the language is making the events unfold.

I looked at the *carabinieri*. They were looking at the newcomers. The others were looking at the colonel. I ducked down, pushed between two men, and ran for the river, my head down. I tripped at the edge and went in with a splash. The water was very cold and I stayed under as long as I could. I could feel the current swirl me and I stayed under until I thought I could never come up.

It is astonishing to think that Hemingway did some of his finest, most original writing when he was only twenty-four and twenty-five. He was

the age of our graduate students when he carved out this style in Paris. He had never been to college. He had never been to a graduate writing workshop. When the century was young he went off to the war and was wounded, and he worked for the *Toronto Star*. And he met Sherwood Anderson in Chicago. I believe the example of Sherwood Anderson is as important as many biographers have suggested, and perhaps even more so. For what was special about Anderson was that he was a kind of regionalist, a member of the Chicago Renaissance with Sandburg and Masters and Lindsay. But he was also very much of a modernist, a friend and supporter of Gertrude Stein. There is a jazz-like quality of improvisation in Anderson's short stories. His voices have both the realistic idiom and an air of expressionistic distortion. Anderson's best writing has a unique blend of regional inflection and flavor combined with an almost abstract musicality. However real his characters may seem, his language is clearly artifice.

One of the things the young Hemingway must have learned from Anderson so early is that stories are not actual events transferred to the page, but the seemingly real created through the artifice of language. Having understood that from the beginning, Hemingway was already ahead of most young writers, then and now.

I have found it interesting that Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* is described as an architecture student. Not a whole lot is made of this on the surface in the novel. But I think it is a significant connection.

A few years ago I thought of developing a course at Cornell that explored the inter-relationship of poetry and architecture from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century. It was easy to see how the Palladian fashion of Elizabethan building could be paralleled to the classical style of Fulke Greville and Ben Jonson and the school of Jonson. Jonson even collaborated with the designer and architect Inigo Jones. And I saw how the Baroque poetry of the Seventeenth Century could be compared to the architecture of Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor. Vanbrugh himself was a famous poet and playwright before he became an architect. And of course Pope was a friend of Burlington and wrote a famous poem to Burlington about neo-classical poetics and esthetics. Similar comparisons could be made between Romantic poets and both Greek Revival and neo-Gothic architecture.

But where my planning ran aground was in the Twentieth Century. If the most notable architect of the century was Frank Lloyd Wright with his "prairie style," where was the parallel in poetry. The obvious place to

look was the Prairie School of poetry, but neither Sandburg, nor Masters nor Lindsay seemed comparable to the originality and quality of Wright's buildings. It seems odd now that I did not think to connect Wright with that other famous former resident of Oak Park Illinois, Ernest Hemingway. For now I can see that the plainness and boldness, the radical simplicity, the seeming naturalness of Wright's early work in the Oak Park houses, did indeed have their counterparts in Hemingway's prose. The poet who paralleled Wright's designs was not Sandburg but Hemingway. And whether it was conscious or not, I have no doubt that the famous presence of Wright's architecture in Oak Park where Hemingway grew to manhood influenced his thinking about style and design, about art and about life. Hemingway set out to find the hard clean line in language that would match the hard clean line in Wright's buildings, and the bold clean lines of the new century. The difference was that Hemingway, coming two decades later, and having been to war, would apply those principles of design to the experience of war. And war would define much of the century just unfolding. As Pound liked to say, "The son of a bitch's *instincts* are right."

"Prose is architecture, not interior decoration, and the Baroque is over," Hemingway says in *Death in the Afternoon*.

To write the true poetry of war one must put down the facts of the war. But putting down the facts can take on an irony all its own. Just stating the facts of horror can numb the reader on the one hand, or take on a satiric edge on the other. It is this paradox of writing about war that Hemingway is addressing in his bitter parodic story "A Natural History of the Dead," originally a section of *Death in the Afternoon*.

Until the dead are buried they change somewhat in appearance each day. The color change in Caucasian races is from white to yellow, to yellow-green, to black. If left long enough in the heat the flesh comes to resemble coal-tar, especially where it has been broken or torn, and it has quite a visible tarlike iridescence. The dead grow larger each day until sometimes they become quite too big for their uniforms, filling these until they seem blown tight enough to burst. The individual members may increase in girth to an unbelievable extent and faces fill as taut and globular as balloons.... The smell of a battlefield in hot weather one cannot recall. You can remember that there was such a smell, but nothing ever happens to you to bring it back....

The first thing that you found about the dead was that, hit badly enough, they died like animals. Some quickly from a little wound you would not think would kill a rabbit.... Others would die like cats; a skull broken in and iron in the brain they lie alive two days like cats that crawl into the coal bin with a bullet in the brain and will not die until you cut their heads off.

What comes through in this satire, where the speaker has a supposedly clinical detachment, an educated, even British voice, reporting as a scientist on the appearance of corpses on a battlefield, is that even the facts won't give you the truth. The detailed description of the dead is one kind of ghastly truth, but far from the main truth of war, the experience of war. The irony is brutal, the story unsettling, the truth skewed, partial, the effect numbing.

A brutal, unsettling account of a soldier who has been gassed is given in Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est":

Dim, through the misty pines and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Sweet and decorous it is to die for one's country. Owen is probably the finest of all English war poets, and this poem is a landmark in the truthful poetry of war. It is dramatic and authentic. But its designs on the

reader are clear almost from the beginning. It is bitter and moralistic, and it tips its hand almost from the first line. It is a true poem of war, but portrays only a partial picture of war. Owen's poetry has a narrow, bitter intensity. It does not even attempt wholeness, the larger picture.

One of the most intense experiences of the soldier is the longing for home, for the home place. He may be dissatisfied when he actually returns there, as in the Hemingway story "Soldier's Home." He may find home completely different from what he remembered and imagined in the army. But home is what he thinks about while he is lying awake in a faraway tent or hospital or abandoned building. In "Now I Lay Me" the soldier never sleeps. He lies listening to the chewing of silkworms, as if he is forced to listen to the spinning of the Fates. The gnawing of the silkworms is the noise of entropy, of the universe being chewed up and broken down to waste.

It is often noted that most of Hemingway's fiction about war is not about actual fighting, not about combat itself. It is about romance set against the background of war. It is about the aftermath of war, and going home after war. War is the human condition. War is history. War is fate against which an individual defines himself. Much of Hemingway's best writing is about convalescence, about waiting, and about insomnia. Hemingway is the poet of insomnia. "The Gambler, the Nun and the Radio" is a great ode to insomnia, as is the story "A Clean, Well Lighted Place," as are many passages in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*. From "Now I Lay Me":

...all night you could hear them eating and a dropping sound in the leaves. I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living 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, just at the moment of going off to sleep, and I could only stop it by a very great effort.

While he lies awake in the dark Nick thinks of fishing whole trout streams a pool and a shallow and a log at a time. He thinks of finding the bait he would use, grubs and insects, grasshoppers. When he cannot fish mentally he says his prayers. He tries to pray for everyone he ever knew,

and he tries to recall everything that ever happened to him. He recalls his house and backyard, and the time his mother burned his father's arrowhead collection. When he can neither remember or pray he lies awake in the dark listening to the silkworms. One night he has a long conversation in the dark with a fellow soldier who urges him to marry.

The testimony of those who have been to war is that the experience has far more to do with waiting, with worry and boredom, than with actual combat. "Now I Lay Me" may be Hemingway's finest war story. It is certainly one of his best. The brilliance of the story is in the way it shows, by reflection, by indirection, how the experience of danger, how the proximity of death, strip away illusions. The soldier in the story occupies his mind through the dark hours by remembering and reliving his favorite memories of trout fishing in all the streams he has known. He distracts himself by praying for all and by trying to relive his youth in detail. And he distracts himself by talking with his fellow soldier John. But all the time in the background the silkworms are chewing away and dropping excrement on the leaves below. They are the cosmic noise he is trying so hard not to hear. They are the second law of thermodynamics, the impersonality of nature, the inexorable breakdown of all toward shit and nothingness.

I believe a fine paper could be written on the use of grasshoppers in this and some other Hemingway stories, notably "Big Two-Hearted River" and "A Way You'll Never Be." There is a great deal of loving detail in all the stories about catching grasshoppers and using them for bait in trout fishing. In "Now I Lay Me," Nick Adams says,

Sometimes the stream ran through an open meadow, and in the dry grass I would catch grasshoppers and use them for bait and sometimes I would catch grasshoppers and toss them into the stream and watch them float along swimming on the stream and circling on the surface as the current took them and then disappear as a trout rose.

That is one of the memories that sustain him through the long, sleepless nights. And in "A Way You'll Never Be" a wounded and shell-shocked Nick Adams, speaking compulsively and hysterically, says, "If you are interested in scars I can show you some interesting ones but I would rather talk about grasshoppers. What we call grasshoppers that is; and what are, really, locusts. These insects at one time played a very

important part in my life....”

Nick goes on to describe in great detail to the alarmed adjutant the look of grasshoppers and how they are used for trout bait.

“...the medium-brown is a plump, compact, succulent hopper that I can recommend as far as one may well recommend something you gentlemen will probably never encounter. But I must insist that you will never gather a sufficient supply of these insects for a day’s fishing by pursuing them with your hands or trying to hit them with a bat.”

Nick continues with his breathless lecture on the proper way to catch grasshoppers, as though he were instructing troops. Driven over the edge emotionally, he keeps returning to the scenes and lore of his childhood. It is a scary performance, and one of the most dramatic, and one of the most memorable scenes in all Hemingway’s stories about war.

Even greater attention is given to the catching and use of grasshoppers as trout bait in “Big Two-Hearted River” where we see Nick after he has returned from the war, physically recovered but still healing emotionally. In some of the finest descriptive writing Hemingway ever did he tells how the grasshoppers in the burned over tract of forest are now black.

...he noticed a grasshopper walk along the ground and up onto his woolen sock. The grasshopper was black. As he had walked along the road, climbing, he had started many grasshoppers from the dust. They were all black.... They were just ordinary hoppers, but all a sooty black in color.

As the burned over wilderness suggests the world severely damaged by the war, the black grasshoppers suggest the damaged men who have survived the war. In what was once the paradise of the river woods, only the sooty grasshoppers have survived. “Big Two-Hearted River” shows Nick’s true homecoming.

Inside the tent the light came through the brown canvas. It smelled pleasantly of canvas. Already there was something mysterious and homelike. Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though.

After sleeping well that night in the tent, Nick goes looking for trout bait the next morning.

He found plenty of good grasshoppers. They were at the base of the grass stems. Sometimes they clung to a grass stem. They were cold and wet with the dew, and could not jump until the sun warmed them. Nick picked them up, taking only the medium-sized brown ones, and put them into the bottle. He turned over a log and just under the shelter of the edge were several hundred hoppers. It was a grasshopper lodging house.

All day Nick fishes and catches trout. It is a satisfying day. The man who once could not sleep while he listened to the silkworms gnawing, who could not control his hysterical talking, is at ease along the river. He decides not to go into the swamp but to stay in the open country, fishing with grasshoppers. In the symbolism of the story, this suggests that he does not want yet to analyze the emotional trauma, does not want to go deeper into his mental problems. He prefers to heal himself by doing again the things he once did for pleasure. "Big Two-Hearted River" may be Hemingway's most perfect story. The descriptive writing is as good as any in Thoreau. It is a model of the poetics of sticking to the facts while suggesting a world of emotional and intellectual complexity, and implying the drama of history, of war, beyond the horizon.

But why all the fuss about grasshoppers in this and the other stories? Why would an author famous for shooting rhinos and catching giant marlins pay so much attention to grasshoppers? Certainly the descriptions show his gift for vivid, intimate observation of the natural world. And to the disturbed soldier at war grasshoppers symbolize the world of childhood and nature he has left behind. I want to address this question by thinking about the popular connotations and associations grasshoppers have. Perhaps the most famous poem about grasshoppers is La Fontaine's "The Grasshopper and the Ant," translated here by Marianne Moore.

Until fall, a grasshopper
Chose to chirr;
With starvation as foe
When northeasters would blow,
And not even a gnat's residue

Or caterpillar's to chew,
 She chirred a recurrent chant
 Of want beside an ant,
 Begging it to rescue her
 With some seeds it could spare
 Till the following year's fell.
 "By August you shall have them all,
 Interest and principal."
 Share seeds? Now what is worse
 For any ant to do?
 Ours asked, "When fair, what brought you through?"
 "I sang for those who might pass by chance—
 Night and day. Please do not be repelled."
 "Sang? A delight when someone has excelled.
 A singer! Excellent! Now dance."

In this ancient fable the grasshopper is seen to be the hedonist, the irresponsible no-account who sings and fiddles while the ant prepares against the winter and the hard times to come. The grasshopper is the classic ne'er do well, the bohemian, the poet, if you will. And think of the ant in *Proverbs*: "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise."

But also, remember the famous scene with ants in *A Farewell to Arms*. We see what happens to the ants in the fire.

Once in camp I put a log on top of the fire and it was full of ants. As it commenced to burn, the ants swarmed out and went first toward the centre where the fire was; then turned back and ran toward the end. When there were enough on the end they fell off into the fire.... 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.

The ants are consumed without knowing they might just as easily

have been saved by the indifferent Henry. But if they had been grasshoppers they would have flown out of the flames and lived to sing another day.

It seems to me that the grasshoppers symbolize to Hemingway not just childhood and pastoral innocence, but also anti-puritan rebellion and relish of the present moment. The grasshoppers sing and die. They do not try to store up treasures for old age. Their treasure is every moment of every day lived before the cold and darkness come, before they are caught and eaten by a trout. They have the courage, and the wisdom, to live in the present. In a society where art itself is frowned upon, where wine has been declared illegal, the grasshoppers may suggest art and joy and the courage to pursue pleasure, or at least the nonchalance to ignore the mean and the timid, the moralistic smallness of middle-class society. The grasshoppers have a special meaning for the soldier who can't sleep, and the soldier who speaks compulsively, manically, and the soldier who returns to the wilderness scarred and still healing.

He washed the trout in the stream. When he held them back up in the water they looked like live fish. Their color was not gone yet. He washed his hands and dried them on the log. Then he laid the trout on the sack spread out on the log, rolled them up in it, tied the bundle and put it in the landing net. His knife was still standing, blade stuck in the log. He cleaned it on the wood and put it in his pocket.

Nick stood up on the log, holding his rod, the landing net banging heavy, then stepped into the water and splashed ashore. He climbed the bank and cut up into the woods, toward the high ground. He was going back to camp. He looked back. The river just showed through the trees. There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp.

The grasshoppers suggest freedom, escape from the confines of a pinched, restricted life. The grasshoppers suggest survival of the impractical, the poetic freedom to sing and fly. That is the greatest lesson the soldier may have learned. That, I believe, is Hemingway's truest poem of war.