The Americans E.E.Cummings & Ernest Hemingway

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E.E. Cummings and Ernest Hemingway: the Americans

As unrestricted submarine warfare affected ships belonging to the United States a message to Congress spelt out the dangers ahead and that the time had come for America to join the Allies against Germany because the 'world must be made safe for democracy'. War was declared on April 6th 1917 and the following day a new Harvard graduate Edward Estlin Cummings volunteered for Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service, a Red Cross unit serving with the French army. Writing to his father the new recruit declared 'I'm glad to be out of here by the 1st of May, when everybody is to be tabulated on pink, violet, yellow, (and I dare say orange) cards, for the benefit of conscription. It will mean everything to me as an experience to do something I want to, in a wholly new environment, versus being forced to do something I don't want to & unchanging scene. I only hope I shall see some real service at the front.' The aim of this Bookmark is to bring into focus a different view of the war from the trenches and the Front: the France experienced by Cummings and his close friend, William Slater Brown, was that of the 'shell-marked and bullet-pocked walls and buildings in the serene little villages where they were stationed—Chevincourt with its ancient church and its winding, hilly, walled streets; Roupy, which was a ruin of rubble; Assevilliers, a crossroads near the Somme in the British sector' (Richard Kennedy). And, of course, the concentration camp at La Ferté-Macé, the Norman town in which Cummings was imprisoned for three months in *The Enormous Room*.

Censorship

Both Cummings and Brown were pacifists by belief and they despised much of the attitude of the other American officers who made up the Section Sanitaire XXI, the unit of fifty men equipped with twenty vehicles attached to the French army. Cummings was a widely-read young man who preferred the company of the ordinary French soldiers to that of his compatriots and his letters home detailed much of his grievance against the *chef de section*, a garage mechanic from the Bronx named Harry Anderson. However, it was the young ambulance-driver's friend William Slater Brown's correspondence home which caused both young men to be arrested as detractors from the war effort or, in the worst scenario, suspected German spies. Brown's letters back to his family had suggested that the 'French soldiers are all despondent' and that 'none of them believe that Germany will be defeated'. The censorship of correspondence which was activated throughout much of the war led to these letters being opened and examined. This in turn led to French security officials asking Anderson about these two young ambulance drivers, both of whom had also expressed an interest in joining the French army as aviators as long as they didn't have to kill Germans, and a three-page report was put together. On Sunday September 23rd 1917 both men were taken in for questioning and Cummings was asked if he hated '*les boches*' to which he replied 'No, I very much like the French':

> With a supremely disagreeable expression on his immaculate face the victorious minister of security pressed his victim with regained assurance: 'But you are doubtless aware of the atrocities committed by the boches?'
> 'I have read about them,' I replied cheerfully.
> 'You do not believe?'
> 'ça se peut.'
> 'And if they are so, which of course they are' (tone of profound conviction), you do not detest the Germans?'
> 'Oh, in that case, of course anyone must detest them,' I averred with perfect politeness.
> And my case was lost, for ever lost…
> 'I am sorry for you, but due to your friend you will be detained for a little while.'

Cummings was held for three months in a detention centre in Normandy and his experiences there, as recorded in his notebooks, were later written up into his first book, *The Enormous Room*, published in 1928 with an introduction by Robert Graves.

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A medieval world

The accounts Cummings gives us of his first experiences of the detention centre bear the hallmark of the nightmare world of the medieval painter Hieronymous Bosch:

> The darkness was rapidly going out of the sluggish, stinking air. I was sitting on my mattress at one end of a sort of room, filled with pillars; ecclesiastical in feeling. I already perceived it to be of enormous length. My mattress resembled an island: all around it, at distances varying from a quarter of an inch to ten feet (which constituted the limit of distinct vision) reposed startling identities. There was blood in some of them. Others consisted of a rind of bluish matter sustaining a core of yellowish froth. From behind me a chunk of hurtling spittle joined its fellows. I decided to stand up.

Cummings was both a visual artist and a very widely read young man. The visceral sense of physical life in La Ferté is complemented by references to Dante as we are introduced one by one to the range of inmates there. The new arrivals appear as on the shore of Acheron, 'singly or in groups, of *nouveaux* of sundry nationalities whereby our otherwise more or less simple existence was happily complicated, our putrescent placidity shaken by a fortunate violence.' Stirring the fetid air of this confinement each new arrival presents the possibility of company and both Brown and Cummings threw themselves into the social interaction of the centre. As if to emphasise the Infernal quality of the place the man in charge, *Monsieur le Directeur*, is seen as Apollyon, 'a Satan whose word is dreadful not because it is painstakingly unjust but because it is incomprehensibly omnipotent.'

In the hierarchical order of the camp immediately below the *Directeur*, 'the Demon', was the *Surveillant*, 'the most decent official at La Ferté', who appears as a more understanding figure:

> To me, at least, he was kind: to the majority he was inclined to be lenient…As a personality I therefore pay him my respects. I am myself incapable of caring whether, as a tool of the Devil, he will find the bright firelight of Hell too warm for him or no.

Next down the list was the *Secrétaire*, Monsieur Richard, the Cook, and the *plantons*, the guards themselves. All are cogs in the 'machine of decomposition' and it is here that one of Cummings's most profound thoughts about the nature of imprisonment is expressed:

> It struck me at the time as intensely interesting that, in the case of a certain type of human being, the more cruel are the miseries inflicted upon him the more cruel does he become toward anyone who is so unfortunate as to be weaker or more miserable than himself. Or perhaps I should say that nearly every human being, given sufficiently miserable circumstances, will from time to time react to those very circumstances (whereby his own personality is mutilated) through a deliberate mutilation on his own part of a weaker or already more mutilated personality.

What is so striking about *The Enormous Room* is the humour and humanity of its author. Cummings not only reveals an acute understanding of his surroundings but also hangs on tenaciously to the sense of the absurd that allows him to externalise the deprivations and casual violence that haunted the camp. The absurdity of what happens in war is highlighted by Robert Graves in his introduction when he writes of the British attitude towards prisoners in 1914 at the outbreak of The Great War:

> A digression about an English prison-camp. In an issue of *The Times* (Spring 1915), in the column headed *Through German Spectacles*, ridicule was poured on an account given to the Berlin Press by an exchanged German prisoner. He had described conditions at an internment camp at the Lancaster Wagon-works, alleging that in August, 1914, so great was the prevailing panic, he with 39 others, waiters from the Midland Hotel, Manchester, had been taken to Lancaster handcuffed *and fettered*, by a force of sixty police armed with carbines under the command of the Chief of Police. *The Times* protested that the fetters were a bit too much to believe. Well, they were

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> true, for I was the officer at the camp who took the criminals over and gave the befrogged commander his receipt.

Graves also concludes his introduction by drawing attention to an early poem by Cummings, placed firmly within the landscape of world of World War I, 'My sweet old etcetera..' It concludes

> my
> mother hoped that
>
> i would die etcetera
> bravely of course my father used
> to become hoarse talking about how it was
> a privilege and if only he
> could meanwhile my
>
> self etcetera lay quietly
> in the deep mud et
>
> cetera
> (dreaming),
> et
> cetera, of
> Your smile
> eyes knees and of your Etcetera).

The Fiction of History

Many of the great works of prose to arise out of individual experiences of the First World War are works of fiction. Whether it is Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* or Ford Maddox Ford's quartet of novels collected under the title of *Parade's End*, Cummings's *The Enormous Room* or Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* there is an attempt to grasp hold of the past experiences which are themselves in a constant state of movement. The irrepressible desire to communicate one's story makes one into a type of Ancient Mariner and yet we have the urgent need to make sense of the narrative continuity of our lives. In his fiction about the French novelist, Flaubert, Julian Barnes has referred to the fairground game of trying to capture the squealing greased pig of history: 'It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past often seems to behave like that piglet.' (*Flaubert's Parrot*, 1984)

The final chapter of *The Enormous Room* opens up with a deliberate blurring of fact and fiction:

> To convince the reader that this history is mere fiction (and rather vulgarly violent fiction at that) nothing perhaps is needed save that ancient standby of sob-story writers and thrill-artists alike—the Happy Ending. As a matter of fact, it makes not the smallest difference to me whether anyone who has thus far participated in my travels does or does not believe that they and I are (as that mysterious animal 'the public' would say) 'real'.

Ernest Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms*, published in 1929, is a fictionalised account of the author's experiences in Italy during 1917 and 1918 where he was severely wounded as an ambulance driver on the Italian front. From its opening pages the novel presents the reader with the recognisable contours of the landscape of war:

> The forest of oak trees on the mountain beyond the town was gone. The forest had been green in the summer when we had come into the town but now there were the stumps and the broken trunks and the ground torn up, and one day at the end of the

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> fall when I was out where the oak forest had been I saw a cloud coming over the mountain. It came very fast and the sun went a dull yellow and then everything was grey and the sky was covered and the cloud came on down the mountain and suddenly we were in it and it was snow. The snow slanted across the wind, the bare ground was covered, the stumps of trees projected, there was snow on the guns and there were paths in the snow going back to the latrines behind trenches.

There is a Biblical simplicity and directness to this writing, a clarity of narrative that conveys the ominous combination of human actions and natural occurrence. This novel will be both a 'Farewell' to the 'Arms' of European conflict and, as the story uncloses itself, a 'Farewell' to the 'arms' of a love affair which had the temerity to flower in the snow.

One of the most compelling aspects of this novel is Hemingway's ability to make us realise the ordinariness of warfare: battles are fought by ordinary men. At one point the narrator, Frederick Henry (a fictionalised version of Hemingway himself) is talking with the Roman Catholic priest about whether the war will ever end and whether the peasants will survive:

> 'Many of the soldiers have always felt this way. It is not because they were beaten.'
>
> 'They were beaten to start with. They were beaten when they took them from their farms and put them in the army. That is why the peasant has wisdom, because he is defeated from the start. Put him in power and see how wise he is.'

It is this sense of futility and repetitiveness that makes the narrator question words like 'sacred' or 'glorious' when confronted with assertions that warfare has not been 'in vain':

> I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it.

The literary background to these thoughts is of course the soliloquy spoken by Falstaff on the eve of the battle of Shrewsbury in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I* where he ponders thoughts about the word 'honour':

> What is honour? A word. What is in that word 'honour'? What is that honour? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it.

The importance of seeing this modern warfare, which the world had never experienced before, against a human background of individual love and loss is there of course in Hemingway's title, *A Farewell to Arms*, taken from a 1590 sonnet by George Peele. Similarly, when Frederick Henry, the *tenente* as he is referred to, is escaping from the approaching Austrian armies his thoughts are with his love, Catherine, who is far away. The most appropriate expression for his sense of fear and isolation is, for Hemingway, the late medieval song 'Western Wynd':

> O western wynd, when wilt thou blow
> And the small rain down can rain
> O Christ that my love were in my arms
> And I in my bed again.

As Frederick Henry makes his escape across country in chapter 28 of the novel he thinks of Catherine who is pregnant with his child:

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> 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. You knew it rained down that rain. Look at it. 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.

The day-to-day ordinariness of life acts as a continuous background to this novel and the effectiveness of the contrast between historical placing and this continuity of existence can be felt when, every now and again, Hemingway presents us with some historical detail. As Frederick Henry and Catherine escape into Switzerland, after the *tenente* has come close to being executed by the Italians for supposed desertion of his post, the couple take a train to Lausanne from Montreux and find a hotel:

> The windows of the room looked out on a wet garden with a wall topped by an iron fence. Across the street, which sloped steeply, was another hotel with a similar wall and garden. I looked out at the rain falling in the fountain of the garden.
> Catherine turned on all the lights and commenced unpacking. I ordered a whisky and soda and lay on the bed and read the papers I had bought at the station. It was March 1918, and the German offensive had started in France, I drank the whisky and soda and read while Catherine unpacked and moved around the room.

The moving quality of this fictional autobiography is precisely those details which Hemingway captures with clarity and the manner in which they act as the foreground to what seems like a war that will go on forever. In chapter 19 the *tenente* reflects that 'nobody was whipping any one on the Western front' and that perhaps 'wars weren't won any more'. Rather like Bertolt Brecht's great play about the Thirty Years War, *Mother Courage and her Children*, there is a feeling that as this First World War dragged on through 1917 and into the spring of 1918 it was like all wars and 'Maybe they went on for ever.'

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