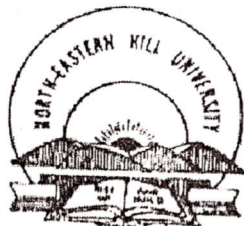


THE WAR NOVEL - HEMINGWAY AND AFTER
A STUDY OF THE NOVELS OF JAMES JONES,
NORMAN MAILER AND JOSEPH HELLER



GEETAM SARMA

*Submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy*



NORTH - EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
Shillong : India
August 2001

CHAPTER VI

THE TWO WARS – A SUMMING UP

The war novel has undoubtedly come of age as a means of literary expression. Yet, no single viewpoint can provide a complete perspective. Having evolved from the essentially subjective works of the First World War, the genre accommodates a wide range of individual responses to a collective national experience, encompassing memorialisation, reportage, analysis, critical commentary, outrage and expressions of the absurd. Though ideas and emotions dominate the genre's mode of presentation, both style and structure are important keys to interpretation. The experience of war brooks no distinctions, generously embracing all divisions of the social scale. Accordingly, the sociological and psychological implications of the war novel are indicators of the national mood and intellectual climate of its context.

Readers have always wanted to see the heroes as projections of their authors and critics have generally promoted the parallel. This seems to be particularly true of Hemingway whose presence has sometimes threatened to smother his writing. However, to read any of his works as biography is always dangerous, but to read A Farewell to Arms in this manner would be to totally misread the book. It is this aspect of merging fact, fiction and history that I have tried to focus in my chapter on A Farewell to Arms. The risk of reading too much fact into fiction is always there, but it is particularly true of the war novelist who inevitably has had direct access to the subject of his book. It is this pitfall that Hemingway has consciously tried to avoid. The text must stand alone. Whatever the author's intentions may have been, the work is self-contained within its own rationale. The misleading thesis that Hemingway is

always his own protagonist has clouded much of our response to him. As Hemingway has always maintained and I have tried to prove, the best part of the novel as he told his editor Maxwell Perkins, was invented.¹

My chapter on The Naked and the Dead attempts to focus on the thematic issues emanating from the novel of ideas. At this point it is necessary to go beyond the violence of the Second World War itself, to the issues that promoted it. Ideology was a key factor behind this war. Consequently we find here much of the conflict in the war personified through the characters and what they symbolise. The military structure as an embodiment of a totalitarian society appears as a dark inevitability to an author whose hope may be in political liberalism but who has come to accept regretfully a cultural drift towards authoritarianism.

In 1961, Joseph Heller's Catch-22, realised Mailer's 1948 nightmare of a totalitarian society gone mad embodied in the military bureaucracy. The madness, the chaos and the latent horror of such a situation is masked in a structure intricate and elusive to the casual reader. The layered structure of Catch-22 is meticulously constructed and it is as much technique as part of the meaning of the novel. Periodically throughout the book the real world of the laughing American boys slides abruptly into the surrealism of Yossarian's depressing vision of the true nature of modern war.

Writing of the need for historians to reappraise strategy and military policy in the nuclear age, C.Vann Woodward has said:

The historic service that Cervantes performed with mockery in 1605 when he published the first volume of *Don Quixote*, three centuries after the advent of firearms, cannot with safety be deferred that long after the advent of nuclear weapons.²

¹ Reynolds, Michael S. – Hemingway's First War (Princeton, 1976) Pg. 19

² Woodward, C. Vann – The Age of Reinterpretation, American Historical Review, LXVI, 13, Pg. 60

Perhaps it is not unreasonable to suggest that Joseph Heller is the Cervantes of the atomic age and Yossarian and Orr its Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Given the privileged position of the literature of war, it is not surprising that in women's wartime writings, we find some special variance on the anxiety of authorship. Women were rarely situated where they could create war poetry or war fiction. Even when women writers describe the wartime losses suffered as women – they are displaced, for the primary loss in war literature is always death, mourning inevitably takes second place. A historical perspective on gender relations, however, shows us, that during World War I women emerged from their nineteenth century roles to rise to the occasion – which demanded factory hands and munition workers. The war seemed to mark a step forward for the women's cause. Yet instead of allowing women to affirm their new found independence, post war notions of femininity in propaganda and the popular media were restrictive and frustrating. In this way potentially progressive social transformations culminated for many in what might be termed reaction formations.

If popular culture insisted on the anchoring polarities of gender, the literature of war allowed more latitude for probing definitions of masculinity and femininity. Both male and female authors challenged prevailing myths about their sex. But while men's writings passed directly into the canon of twentieth century war literature, women's wartime writing passed into obscurity and their expose of gender myths was submerged. Women's removal from the battlefield limited their direct critiques of the war supposedly waged on their behalf. Although the women who lived through the wars made little lasting progress, the momentary experience of gender destructions granted them an ironic view of it. Turned critical this irony of the first generation, became the feminism of the next.

Ever since the young writers of World War I began producing their works of literary disenchantment critics have been concerned with the establishment of the war novel's aesthetic limits. The years immediately before and since the Second World War have compounded rather than alleviated critical confusion. The existence of a legitimate external cause prompted renewed attacks upon the "negation" and "defeatism" of the earlier writers; a necessary global conflict made the anti war bias of the early books seem in retrospect stylistically shrill and morally irresponsible. More recently there have been persistent attempts to see the first conflict in terms of the second, or as in the case of John W. Aldridge, to attack the literature of the second as lacking the "impact" and "discovery" of the first.³

In a period of technological, political and military chaos, students of war literature have indeed found that there is no "still point in a turning world"; that the heresies of one generation become irresponsibilities of another; that the various aesthetic dictums perfected by one generation are ridiculed by another and that the sacrifices and moral gestures of one generation become the cowardice and even the treachery of another.

The urgent necessities of World War II made the pacifism of much World War I literature intolerable on moral no less than aesthetic grounds. The World War II situation, in short was not synonymous with that of World War I. Young men in 1941 had few illusions as to the "creative" possibilities in modern combat. It was a long cry from either Crane's "ennobling experience" or the bold journey into World War I. It was difficult for both the World War I generation and the young men coming to maturity during the thirties to accept the change in political realities which gave to propaganda a new dimension of truth – especially since the truth itself was

³ Aldridge, John W. – After the Lost Generation (New York, 1954)

couched in almost precisely the same terms which had poured forth to justify the futile butchery of World War I. There was fear most certainly, but not fear of technological combat; technology again, had been assimilated as a normal part of war environment in the twentieth century. The fear came through a persistent expectation of futility. The young men of the first war had expected fulfillment and suffered the impact of futility; the World War II group expecting futility, were unwilling and unable to embark on yet another crusade. Only as it became clear that there was an external cause, that neither the futility of the first war nor the ambiguities of the Spanish Civil War could vitiate the new violence of fascism, were young men willing and able to stand and confront it.

Yet increasing political sophistication and the experience of a depression, with its inevitable focus upon social and economic problems, made a retreat into art or the search for "a moment of truth" in formalised danger appear rather extravagant gestures which nobody could afford in a changed historical context. All that remained unquestioned was the external cause, the necessity, temporary and therefore non ultimate of defeating fascism.

With nothing specific to rebel against, neither a false cause nor technology, and no clear pattern of ideology to rebel for, the serious fiction of World War II demonstrated a vast increase in technological sophistication: the new warfare, the machine itself was now part of one's normal environment, and no novelist could write of war without setting up his stage accurately. For these reasons, the attempt to view World War I novels through the context of the second war offers serious problems of historical relevancy.

But John W. Aldridge in After the Lost Generation, persists in seeing World War I as a parallel to the later conflict. Perhaps the most important aspect of war, the

sense of impact had long been assimilated in the first war, so that other subject areas had to be used in fiction of the later generation. In attacking the “journalism” or “futility” of World War II novels with World War I as a touchstone, Aldridge does not take into account the fact that ultimate or ontological examinations of combat – purpose, cause, individual choice, meaning of death – are possible only when men question the ends of war. The World War II writers, were in a position of agreeing with the goals of political and military leaders to wipe out fascism. Thus, their works focussed on other aspects of wartime life as there was a consensus on purpose. Hence the social problem of minorities and the plight of the intellectual, the ironic and skeptical portrait of military bureaucracy; the behaviour of soldiers in occupied territory seemed to provide much of the themes of these later novels.

For no World War II writer could be serious in making “a separate peace” – even for Hemingway this would have been unforgivable in the war against fascism. So too James Baldwin attacks “complaints that World War II failed to produce a literary harvest comparable to that which we garnered from the first,” remarking that such comparisons are due largely to nostalgia:

The adulation so cruelly proffered our elders has nothing to do with their achievementbut has to do with our impulse to look back upon what we now imagine to have been a happier time. It is an adulation which has panic at the root.⁴

For the new generation, the solutions of World War I masters no longer apply; their alternatives to despair have been rendered obsolete by their very simplicity.

During World War I, we were able to be angry at the atrocities committed in the name of the Kaiser, but it was scarcely possible in World War II to be *angry* over the systematic slaughter of six million Jews In short, by the time of World War II evil had entered the American Eden, and it had come to stay ... And those panaceas and formulas (of the twenties) which have so spectacularly failed Have also failed this country and the world. The trouble is deeper than we wished to think; the trouble is in ourselves⁵

⁴ Baldwin, James – As Much Truth as One can Bear, New York Times, Book Review, Jan 14, 1982, Pg. 2

⁵ Ibid. Pg. 38

Given a broad belief in the validity of external cause, the World War II disillusion was deeper. This despair was not simply created by a sense of betrayal, but rather was part of inescapable political conditions. What Aldridge sees in World War I – an authentic “physical isolation and spiritual emptiness” – was in other words, far more characteristic of the negative writers of the second war.⁶ For while it is true that the World War I response might be defined by a sense of deprivation and loss, countering this sense were unlimited horizons of political, aesthetic and social discovery. World War I writers could turn their backs on social and military values because there were goals to face, even in expatriation; “nada itself was a means of cauterization rather than a vehicle of despair”.⁷

After World War I, young writers saw about them an edifice of sterile values and false rhetoric; their negation was active, corrective and for the most part socially directed. Aldridge underestimates this enormous social and aesthetic energy which gave to World War I negation its unique quality of enthusiastic anger and hopeful despair. In considering World War II negation on the other hand, he attacks their “spiritual emptiness” and utter lifelessness and sterility”. Just as Hemingway goes from repudiation of rhetorical patriotism in A Farewell to Arms to a statement of patriotic rhetoric in Men at War so too the negation and despair of World War I turned into the conservative reaction of World War II.

The blind alley of exile shaping World War I attitudes was no true exile at all, since the exile itself was explosive with experiment. Politically, there was collectivism; aesthetically there was enormous concentration on the practice of art as a discipline. One cannot certainly describe in terms of alienation alone a generation so

⁶ Aldridge, John W. – After the Lost Generation (New York, 1954) Pg. 17

⁷ Cooperman, Stanley – World War I and the American Novel (Baltimore, 1967) Pg.233

completely and delightedly involved in changing what it despised. In all spheres the World War I negation was corrective rather than existential, and the insistence upon breaking for the purpose of building had no parallel after the second conflict.

Unlike the second generation writers, however, the novelists of the First War could not use battle confrontation itself as a vehicle for the expression of aesthetic or social values, and this is perhaps the most basic contrast between the war writers of the two generations. Even Hemingway's "clear, never-wavering line.....from brute violence to mass violence to obsessive recollection of violence"; his "religion of safe conduct", of total insulation, of "simple drinking, simple thinking and simple fornication" – were all methods of avoiding rather than utilising war experience.⁸ Stripping down his language partly as a reaction against the over-fleshed rhetoric so characteristic of pre-war years, he stripped down the experience to be rendered by language as well, and the result was a focus upon ritualised violence and love. But violence and love were external to war always, were not and could not be accommodated to it; the war created nothing, not even a meaningful violence. The impact was simply too great. The novelist of the first war, unlike those of the later conflict, could not use war as a given condition for their books: it was necessary either to escape from it or to protest against it. World War II writers on the other hand, who had already assimilated technological impact and political ambiguities, while subscribing to an external cause, could neither escape nor protest and necessarily used war as an environment much like any other.

In The Literary Situation, Malcolm Cowley remarks of World War II that "most men in all services accepted the war as they might have accepted an

⁸ Ibid, Pg 236.

earthquake, and tried to do their best in the circumstances”.⁹ War in other words, was seen as a terrible but quite natural development; the possibilities had been assimilated, the horrors were expected. Failing to accept the earthquake, however, World War I writers could only function by destroying the framework of necessity, by protesting the catastrophe or withdrawing altogether – both methods equally external to the combat situation.

Hence Aldridge, when he remarks that World War II novelists “are faced with the same material from which Hemingway and Fitzgerald drew their artistic impetus, but are denied the artistic values which those men found in it,” neglects the fact that for the earlier writer war was either a target to be attacked or a nightmare to be eliminated; it was never, and could not be used as, an actual resource for dramatic development.

This emphasis upon similarities rather than differences relates directly to Aldridge’s attack upon the technical sophistication of the World War II group. “Technique,” he declares, “is the writer’s instrument for discovering his subject matter”¹⁰. It may well be, however that the reverse is (or should be) true; the subject or the writer’s experience, shapes the technique. Certainly the experience of World War I “discovered” both the anti-heroic technique in the novel of withdrawal, and the rhetoric of indictment in novels of protest. Once we realise the enormous change in the “material” of World War II writers, the reasons for what Aldridge attacks as their over-preoccupation with military technology and literary technique becomes obvious: theirs was a different narrative necessity, and their subject material itself encompassed

⁹ Cowley, Malcolm – *The Literary Situation* (New York, 1954) Pg. 36

¹⁰ Aldridge, John W. – *After the Lost Generation* (New York, 1954) Pg. 90

another world both particularly, in the actual combat experience, and generally in political, aesthetic and social attitudes.

Certainly it is dangerous to see the lack of impact in World War II fiction as due to some inherent fault of vision or art on the part of the novelists. Cowley, for example, while noting that “none of the World War II authors, not even Norman Mailer or James Jones, has had the separate impact for these times that Dos Passos and Hemingway had for the early twenties”,¹¹ recognises that “impact” depends upon the shock of the experience for the author himself, and the shock of the war truth for the reader. And for the authors no less than readers, the impact of the war had been shaped by what they had initially expected – a different order of expectation altogether from that of young men in World War I who had been suffering from “ideological battle fatigue” long before they had donned their uniforms.¹² For the experiences themselves have become less explosive, given the lessening of impact inherent to a situation, even the most exact rendering will produce less effect. It is a matter of what there is to be realised. And by the time of World War II, the situation of combat, the technological horrors of modern war no longer had the emotional resources they possessed earlier, so that for novelists and readers alike the material Aldridge attacks as journalism or sociology was necessary to supplement a situation which by itself had lost much of its meaning.

The scope of the subject matter and flexibility of technique in World War II literature which Aldridge sees as a precocious imposition of technology, journalism and sociology upon the aesthetic dimensions of the novel, is singled out by Cowley for special praise. The books of World War II, Cowley says,

¹¹ Cowley, Malcolm – *The Literary Situation* (New York, 1954) Pg. 31

¹² Hoffman, Frederick J. – *The Modern Novel in America* (Chicago, 1981) Pg. 171

.....compose a sounder body of work. Writers of the second war have been quick to master the tools of their craft. On the average, their books are not only more smoothly and skillfully written than most books of the nineteen twenties, but are also better reporting of "what really happened in action", to borrow a phrase from Ernest Hemingway.¹³

The war novels of the early twenties, however, gave less importance to what happened than to the emotional shock of what had happened; their's was a record of impact rather than an objective correlation of experience. It was not until the late 1920s and early 1930s when the emotional realities of the war had already been clarified, that novelists could exercise a tighter formal and linguistic control of their material. Even in the case of World War II novels, after the long process of assimilation, the early books were less objective and more rancorous than those written after 1950.

In the final analysis each generation of war writers was responding and writing for his own moment in history. And no one writer can be used as a touchstone for other writers of his genre. He stands alone speaking for his unique experience.

The range of works (however limited), included in this study attempts to show that the modern war novel employs almost every variant of style and structure. From the lyric romanticism of Frederick Henry's "separate peace", to the twisted jungle warfare of The Naked and the Dead and finally to the labyrinthian world of Catch-22 the war novel has come a long way. The world of Frederick Henry has apparently come full circle in Yossarian's world. For both novels are coincidentally set in Italy, both involve romantic interludes and above all else both Frederick Henry and Yossarian choose to desert. But these similarities exist only at a superficial level. The combat man has moved a long way from the romantic despair of the 1920s.

¹³ Cowley, Malcolm – The Literary Situation (New York, 1951) Pg. 37

Perhaps no other American war novel so captures the spirit of our age as does Heller's Catch-22. As Frederick J. Cook comments; "Mad? It certainly is. But with the all consuming passion of the warfare state for the tensions and gadgets of war, insanity has become no drawback to reality. It has, indeed become our way of life."¹⁴

Cook's suggestion that the values of the culture are insane is evident in Heller's fictional attitude. Walter Millis on the other hand hopes for the extinction of warfare:

Presumably the human race will in the future, as it has done throughout the past, find means of getting along somehow, probably for the better rather than for the worse. But just how it will do so seems impossible to predict; while the old certainty of the military action as the final answer to every problem – a certainty which has remained with us since the dawn of history – seems no longer available. It may be that for final sanctions in our human affairs we shall have to look toward other factors.¹⁵

Should Millis' hope concerning the extinction of warfare be realised, then of course the tradition of the American military novel comes to an end. Unfortunate in it's breeding ground of violence, death, destruction and totalitarianism, it includes nevertheless a number of works that are excellent both in terms of their achievement as art and as statements concerning American political and sociological situations. Even more unfortunate, however, is the probability that the tradition will be a continuing one. Barring the possibility of a war of ultimate intensity, it is certain that some men and women who participate in them will write about their experiences in fiction. For, if warfare continues to be inevitable, then inevitable too are man's attempts to represent and interpret it in art. Despite the nightmare of history, in the words that follow war there is always the hope that man may better understand the condition of his own humanity.

¹⁴ Cook, Frederick J. – The Warfare State (New York, 1991) Pg. 82

¹⁵ Millis, Walter – Arms and Men: A Study in American Military History (Boston., 1983) Pg. 64