Teaching Hemingway and War

Alex Vernon

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Teaching Hemingway and War

EDITED BY ALEX VERNON
TEACHING HEMINGWAY
Mark P. Ott, Editor
Susan F. Beegel, Founding Editor

Teaching Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*
EDITED BY PETER L. HAYS

Teaching Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*
EDITED BY LISA TYLER

Teaching Hemingway and Modernism
EDITED BY JOSEPH FRUSCIONE

Teaching Hemingway and War
EDITED BY ALEX VERNON
Teaching Hemingway and War

Edited by Alex Vernon

The Kent State University Press   Kent, Ohio
“Hemingway, PTSD, and Clinical Depression” by Peter L. Hays was originally published in his book Fifty Years of Hemingway Criticism (Scarecrow Press, 2014) and appears courtesy of Scarecrow Press.
Well the reason you are so sore you missed the war is because the war is the best subject of all. It groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get.

—Ernest Hemingway, letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, 25 December 1925

The title of this book is *A Farewell to Arms* and except for three years there has been war of some kind almost ever since it has been written. Some people used to say, why is the man so preoccupied and obsessed with war, and now, since 1933 perhaps it is clear why a writer should be interested in the constant, bullying, murderous, slovenly crime of war. . . . I believe that all the people who stand to profit by a war and who help to provoke it should be shot on the first day it starts by accredited representatives of the loyal citizens who will fight it. . . . If, at the end of the day, there was any evidence that I had in any way provoked the new war or had not performed my delegated duties correctly, I would be willing, if not pleased, to be shot by the same firing squad and be buried wither with or without cellophane or be left naked on a hill.

—Ernest Hemingway, “The Author’s 1948 Introduction to A Farewell to Arms”
Contents

Foreword

MARK P. OTT ix

Introduction

ALEX VERNON 1

Part 1: The Great War

The Violence of Story: Teaching In Our Time and Narrative Rhetoric

ALEXANDER HOLLENBERG 15

“Our Fathers Lied”: The Great War and Paternal Betrayal in Hemingway’s In Our Time

LISA TYLER 30

Connective Gestures: Mulk Raj Anand, Ernest Hemingway, and the Transnational Worlds of World War I

RUTH A. H. LAHTI 41

Character Construction and Agency: Teaching Hemingway’s “A Way You’ll Never Be”

PETER MESSENT 60

Part 2: The Spanish Civil War

Seeing Through Fracture: In Our Time, For Whom the Bell Tolls, and Picasso’s Guernica

THOMAS STRYCHACZ 77

Hemingway and the Spanish Civil War: The Writer’s Maturing View

MILTON A. COHEN 92

“What you were fighting for”: Robert Jordan On Trial in the Classroom

STEVEN A. NARDI 107

Teaching The Spanish Earth in a War Film Seminar

ALEX VERNON 122
# Part 3: Trauma Tales

Hemingway, PTSD, and Clinical Depression

**Peter L. Hays**

“Shot . . . crippled and gotten away”: Animals and War Trauma in Hemingway

**Ryan Hediger**

The Poetics of Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon*: Restaging the Experience of Total War

**Christopher Barker**

“In Another Country” and *Across the River and into the Trees* as Trauma Literature

**Sarah Wood Anderson**

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# Part 4: Ernest Hemingway Seminar

Introduction

**Alex Vernon**

Perceptions of Pain in *The Sun Also Rises*

**Josephine Reece**

A Farewell to the Armed Hospital: Military-Medical Discourse in Frederic Henry’s Italy

**Zack Hausle**

Pilar’s Turn Inward: Storytelling in Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

**Anna Broadwell-Gulde**

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Appendixes 238  
Works Cited 247  
Selected Bibliography 255  
Contributors 259  
Index 262
Foreword

Mark P. Ott

How should the work of Ernest Hemingway be taught in the twenty-first century? Although the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s have faded, Hemingway’s place in the curriculum continues to inspire discussion among writers and scholars about the lasting value of his work. To readers of this volume, his life and writing remain vital, meaningful, and still culturally resonant for today’s students.

Books in the Teaching Hemingway Series build on the excellent work of founding series editor Susan F. Beegel, who guided into publication the first two volumes of this series, Teaching Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms, edited by Lisa Tyler (2008), and Teaching Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises, edited by Peter L. Hays (2008). To promote their usefulness to instructors and professors—from high schools, community colleges, and universities—the newest volumes in this series are organized thematically, rather than around a single text. This shift attempts to open up Hemingway’s work to more interdisciplinary strategies of instruction through divergent theories, fresh juxtapositions, and ethical inquiries, and to the employment of emergent technology to explore media beyond the text.

Teaching Hemingway and War, edited by Alex Vernon, speaks to issues of intense interest to students and scholars today: war, trauma, loss. The expertise and insight Vernon displayed in his groundbreaking work Hemingway’s Second War: Bearing Witness to the Spanish Civil War (2011) is evident throughout this volume. These far-ranging essays explore Hemingway’s biography, his wartime wounding, the Great War, the Spanish Civil War, his short fiction, his novels, and his one film. This volume demonstrates that in today’s classrooms and lecture halls Hemingway’s work is being taught in more thoughtful and innovative ways than ever before. Indeed, the essays showcase the creativity, wisdom, and insight of authors from varied backgrounds united in their passion for sharing Hemingway’s work with a new generation of students.
In “Soldier’s Home,” a story from Hemingway’s first major book of fiction, *In Our Time*, Harold Krebs returns home from the Great War, having “been at Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Mihiel and in the Argonne” (CSS 111)—in other words, having fought in every major battle the Marines faced. In those actions, over a period of five and a half months, the Fourth Marine Brigade, attached to the Second Division of the American Expeditionary Force and generally maintaining a full strength of 8,469, took combat casualties of 2,232 dead and 9,056 wounded (McClellan 10, 65). Apparently escaping physical injury himself, Krebs witnessed a sheer devastation of bodies.

Back home, interpersonal communication fails him. He sits on the front porch of his childhood home, not quite back inside, not quite back out in the world, turning to a first-generation history of the war and finally learning about his own experiences. The story itself turns here, in this paragraph falling at its midpoint: “He looked forward with a good feeling to reading all the really good histories when they would come out with good detail maps” (CSS 113). For the first time Krebs looks forward, pleasantly anticipating a morsel of his future, the word good repeated a fourth time two sentences later.

Immediately after this paragraph we go inside, into Krebs’s bedroom with his mother, where the story’s dialogue begins. The prior narrative consisted of reflections and general descriptions of Krebs’s days and evenings. But when “he sat there on that porch reading a book on the war,” the narrative literally falls into time and place (CSS 113), landing into story, understood as a sequence of embodied actions and events. Hemingway synchronizes the
story’s grounding with the beginning of Krebs’s personal story’s grounding, a process whose necessity Krebs feels, as underscored by his preoccupation with the need for better maps. His desire for more complete historical narratives likewise expresses his desire for a more coherent personal narrative. The movement into history becomes the movement into the future as Krebs stumbles toward a more-or-less integrated self that can get on with it. He goes inside, confronts his family, and then—assuming we can accept the promise of the final paragraph’s conditional posture (“He would go to Kansas City. . . . He would go over to the schoolyard” [CSS 116])—reenters the world.

In a sense, cultural historians of twentieth-century warfare have been following Krebs’s lead. If there is a subfield of literary theory devoted to understanding war, we can safely say it began with studies of the Great War, through works such as Paul Fussell’s The Great War and Modern Memory (1975), Eric J. Leed’s No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I (1979), and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War” (1983), followed in the 1990s by Samuel Hynes’s A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture (1990), Geoff Dyer’s The Missing of the Somme (1994), Jay Winter’s Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History (1996), and Joanna Bourke’s Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain, and the Great War (1996). World War I continues to serve as a cornerstone to which literary and cultural studies return, as seen in Vincent Sherry’s The Great War and the Language of Modernism (2004), Santanu Das’s Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature (2005), Steven Trout’s On the Battlefield of Memory: The First World War and American Remembrance, 1919–1941 (2010), and Beth Linker’s War’s Waste: Rehabilitation in World War I America (2011), four books appearing before the centennial. War trauma studies likewise really begin with the Great War.

In 2013, I had occasion to ruminate on a potential upper-level undergraduate course called Topics in Literary Theory: War Studies. One of my solutions involved class readings and work on World War I, followed by individual student projects examining texts from later wars in a particular contextual or through a specific theoretical trajectory—by linking, for example, war disability studies on narratives of the 1920s to a text from the 1970s. I also considered including a selection of Hemingway’s work alongside these scholarly studies. Conveniently enough for students of Ernest Hemingway and war, his initiation into twentieth-century war was the century’s own initiation. I can easily imagine a student, for example, bringing together Gilbert and Gubar’s “Soldier’s Heart” essay and Hemingway’s “Soldier’s Home” story with Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam
War story “The Things They Carried” (which also ends conditionally) and its companion story, “Love.”

Hemingway went to the Great War, as many soldiers do, straight out of childhood: “I was very ignorant at nineteen and had read little,” he relates in the introduction to the anthology *Men at War*, published during the Second World War. “I would have given anything for a book like this which showed what all the other men that we are a part of had gone through and how it had been with them” (*MAW* xiv). Hemingway was at the time engaging in his layman’s counterintelligence-gathering services for the United States out of Cuba, eventually turning his fishing boat *Pilar* into a clandestine patrol boat. He had already witnessed, and to various degrees participated in, the First World War, the Greco-Turkish War, the Spanish Civil War, and the Second Sino-Japanese War, and would in due course accompany the Allied invasion and liberation of Europe as a war correspondent.

Veterans of the Spanish Civil War were the first to enter Paris, with armored cars bearing the names of battles of the precursor war against European fascism, battles Hemingway had written about: Guadalajara, Madrid, Teruel, Ebro. He must have found this fact sweetly if bitterly apt. The first page of his introduction to *Men at War* attributes the cause of the World War II to the failure of the Allied powers in Spain, to “the Democracies’ betrayal of the only countries that fought or were ready to fight to prevent it” (*MAW* xi). Within a year, Philippe Lelerc, the French general responsible for sending the company into Paris, was on his way to Indochina, with propaganda posters heralding, “YESTERDAY STRASBOURG, TOMORROW SAIGON, JOIN IN!” Had Hemingway maintained his faculties and not taken his own life in 1961, one wonders how he might have responded to the United States’ role in the war in Vietnam. His compatriots from Spain certainly heeded that call: Robert Capa died there in 1954, Martha Gellhorn covered the war in 1966, and Joris Ivens might very well have invited him, in 1967, to work on *The 17th Parallel*—the Vietnamese war’s equivalent to *The Spanish Earth*—as, thirty years earlier, Ivens had invited him to journey to China to produce *The 400 Million*.

We should all be extremely grateful that Hemingway declined the 1938 China trip in order to write *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. This novel came to my mind on a visit to a Vietnamese museum lionizing the militia and villagers who created and inhabited the Vinh Moc wartime tunnel complex. Above a celebratory mural, in English, was inscribed the famous phrase from *Hamlet*, “to be or not to be.” This reference to the suicide soliloquy (as I had been accustomed to understanding it)—the same moment in the play which gave Hemingway
the novel’s working title of “The Undiscovered Country”—puzzled me until I ran across Samuel Johnson’s annotations to the soliloquy. It isn’t necessarily that Hamlet contemplates suicide, but, argues Johnson, that he knows that any action he takes against the king his uncle may well result in his death:

*Hamlet*, knowing himself injured in the most enormous and atrocious degree, and seeing no means of redress, but such as must expose him to the extremity of hazard, meditates on his situation in this manner: *Before I can form any rational scheme of action under this pressure of distress*, it is necessary to decide, whether, *after our present state, we are to be or not to be*. That is the question, which, as it shall be answered, will determine, *whether ’tis nobler, and more suitable to the dignity of reason, to suffer the outrages of fortune patienty, or to take arms against them, though perhaps with the loss of life.* (emphasis in original)²

For Jordan, the issue transcends the bridge mission at hand: is it nobler to risk death for the Spain of the Spanish Republic or to deny conscience’s call? Extratextually, the 1940 novel can be read less as a historical gesture than as a contemporaneous call for resolve by all those opposed to fascism, not just Spain’s defeated antifascists.

As my digressions and speculations indicate, readers of this volume do not need cursory information on Hemingway’s war experiences. We continue to enjoy new war-focused biographies, chiefly of Hemingway in the First World War—most recently Steven Florczyk’s *Hemingway, the Red Cross, and the Great War* (2013). We even have a book-length study of Hemingway’s weeks in China, Peter Moreira’s *Hemingway on the China Front: His WWII Spy Mission with Martha Gellhorn* (2007). We should hope, someday, for a solid literary biography of Hemingway’s Second World War involvement and writings, and for a study of his evolving relationship with war based strictly on his complete published letters. Students who need semester-friendly introductions have several solid print resources: Michael Reynolds’s “Ernest Hemingway 1899–1961: A Brief Biography,” in Linda Wagner-Martin’s *Historical Guide to Ernest Hemingway* (2000); Seán Hemingway’s introduction to *Hemingway on War* (2003); and the chapters on World War I, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II in *Ernest Hemingway in Context*, by Debra Moddelmog and Suzanne del Gizzo (2013).

Some of Hemingway’s short pieces can also help introduce students to Hemingway and war, perhaps connecting them more immediately and urgently than through fiction’s filter: his raw, pained preface to Luis Quintanilla’s *All the Brave*, written in Spain during the death throes of the Spanish Republic that he
supported so energetically, and his powerful article, “A Veteran Visits the Old Front,” in which Hemingway, who had just turned twenty-three, sounds like a much older man. In Men at War, he writes that “no mechanized vehicle is any better than the heart of the man who handles the controls. So learn about the human heart and the human mind in war from this book. There is much about them in here” (MAW xx). It is essential that students do not allow a lack of war or military experience to impede their critical imaginative interactions. What is literature for if not the sympathetic consideration of the unfamiliar?

Hemingway’s own career authorizes all of us in this venture, as he did not participate in most of the military actions he writes about. Writing of The Red Badge of Courage, whose author was born after the American Civil War, Hemingway judges that “that . . . boy’s dream of war . . . was to be truer to how war is than any war the boy who wrote it would ever live to see” (MAW xvii), and he includes Stephen Crane’s novel in its entirety in Men at War. For all its preparatory research, Crane’s Civil War novel remarkably avoids the trap that, according to Geoffrey Dyer, catches most historical Great War novels of being “more precisely written about” than the survivors’ own memoirs and quasi-autobiographical fictions: “they almost inevitably bear the imprint of the material from which they are derived, can never conceal the research on which they depend. . . . they feel like secondary texts” (78–79). Crane refuses insistence on historical detail (he never bothers saying anything more precise than “rifle,” for example), giving the narrative a necessary looseness, yet also, because of his critical distance from the events, manages to structure and control it such that Hemingway praises it for being “as much of one piece as a great poem is” (MAW xvii). Hemingway learned from Crane to trust his imagination in locating his war stories outside his personal history, while bringing to bear what Crane couldn’t teach: a disciplined attitude toward drawing on his own experiences. Hemingway wrote what he knew but also what he did not know, and from that skillful concocting comes the magic. Hemingway’s great accomplishment in novels like A Farewell to Arms and For Whom the Bell Tolls is exactly this stirring together of experience and invention. As he writes, “Learning to suspend your imagination and live completely in the very second of the present minute with no before and no after is the greatest gift a soldier can acquire. It, naturally, is the opposite of all those gifts a writer should have. That is what makes good writing by good soldiers such a rare thing and why it is so prized when we have it” (MAW xxvii). Hemingway was never a soldier, though he spent enough time in combat zones to render this assessment an indirect, not-so-subtle, and deserved self-appreciation.
I was a soldier once, seeing combat in the brief Persian Gulf War of 1990–91 (the first U.S.-Iraq war), which was my path to Hemingway. In the late 1990s, before the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, I needed a dissertation topic. I realized that the Vietnam-era generation of veterans-turned-professors faced retirement, and at the time these were the scholars mostly carrying the torch of war literature. So I pursued a professional opportunity. If one commits to studying American war literature, well, one must work to some extent on Hemingway. What started as career strategy has become a joy.

The cliché that good texts always surprise you with new discoveries and questions I have found exceedingly the case with Hemingway’s oeuvre. Having written about and for years discussed with students the strange infusion of the martial with the maternal in A Farewell to Arms, having read the novel an untold number of times, how could I have missed until the most recent iteration of the Hemingway seminar this pregnant passage from the wounded soldier and expectant father?—“Valentini had done a fine job. I had done half the retreat on foot and swum part of the Tagliamento with his knee. It was his knee all right. The other knee was mine. Doctors did things to you and then it was not your body any more. The head was mine, and the inside of the belly. It was very hungry in there. I could feel it turn over on itself” (FTA 231; emphasis added). That particular class saw my first close reading of the novel’s pre-op enema passage, which strangely mixes spirituality, whoredom, mendacity, physical penetration, and Catherine’s scene-controlling submission. The conservation, seemingly inspired by her physical evacuation of Frederic, ends with the self-evacuation of her own ego: “There isn’t any me any more” (FTA 106). This same class also produced my first close reading of Robert Jordan’s fantasizing of taking Maria to a Madrid coiffeur in For Whom the Bell Tolls (345–46), which paves the way, just a few pages later, for her recounting to him her head-shearing by rapacious Falangists, an event he imagines resubjecting her to by having her tell the tale to entertain a crowd of pipe-smoking, presumably male, university students. The two tonsorial scenes we read somewhat in light of The Garden of Eden, a veteran’s tale rarely characterized as such.

Whatever resistance to Hemingway students might bring to my classes falls away quickly. I may be a victim of my own naïvely wishful thinking, but I find that embracing an engaged classroom attitude, proceeding as if, is more energizing and constructive than any alternative. The texts are so rich that the first discussion day shakes up dismissive ideas about his machismo, his autobiographical fiction, his love of war, his simple style. As an exercise in close attention, I have students date by year and season the opening chapters
of *A Farewell to Arms* in preparation for the first class. This exercise, together with a thirty-second lecture about Hemingway’s weeks with the Red Cross in Italy versus Frederic Henry’s years in the Italian Army (Steven Florczyk claims that the area in which Hemingway’s unit operated was so quiet that it “is unlikely that Hemingway would have been called upon to sit behind the steering wheel of an ambulance other than to pose for a photograph” [59]), begins to divorce writer from protagonist and introduces students to a different way to think about the writer’s style. Henry doesn’t know why he signed up; he treats Catherine rather callously; he doesn’t know why he didn’t visit the Abruzzi on leave as he had planned; and we don’t learn his full name in English until relatively late, after his wounding—and after the class’s first day’s reading. All of these easily identifiable signals help rouse the students’ curiosity. By the time we have reached Henry’s declaration of his farewell to arms, the students are ready to consider the moment’s ambiguity. Is this really a heroic commitment to pacifism, a specific rejection of the politics and strategy of the Great War, or merely a portrayal of a tired, confused soul’s understandable retreat into life’s simple pleasures of food, drink, and love? What on earth do we make of the shooting of the sergeant? Does this novel really express an uncomplicated relationship to war for its writer?

Upper-level literature students do not need as much guidance, as they are already primed to practice a hermeneutics of suspicion. When I begin courses for these students with *In Our Time* or *The Garden of Eden*, the genre experimentation of the former and the gender experimentation of the latter instantly engage them.

If this introduction appears to privilege the major novels (excepting “Soldier’s Home”), the essays that follow range widely among Hemingway’s stories, novels, nonfiction, and his one film.

Part 1 treats some Hemingway works of the Great War. Whatever particular interests drew you to this volume, I encourage you to read Alex Hollenberg’s essay on *In Our Time* as an excellent discussion of the art and ethics of reading, of the violence inherent in interpretation, that you might even assign to your students. It also provides a deft jolt to those of us, like me, habituated to unifying the stories for our students through Nick Adams’s consciousness. When Hollenberg argues that Nick’s repeated application of the word *tragic* to the future fishing of the swamp in “Big Two-Hearted River” indicates how he is already turning his own experiences into a text, I then wonder about the word’s pointing to tragedy as the genre that exposes and enacts the hero’s own flaws
and culpabilities. Accordingly, in the story’s swamp-as-war-memory metaphor, Nick defers thinking about not only what happened to him in war but also his actions, his behavior, and his responsibility, whatever they might be.

Lisa Tyler asks students to read the stories of *In Our Time* through the cultural context of the war’s generational betrayal, a betrayal that extended to a resentment of the home front generally. Her contextual evidence is chiefly from British literature, and though one might be quick to differentiate European disillusionment from America’s brief and victorious experience of the war, it would take little classroom time to establish a similar sensibility among some U.S. veterans by introducing a choice poem or two from Cummings (e.g., “next to of course god america i,” “my sweet old etcetera,” or “I sing of Olaf glad and big”) or even from Hemingway (e.g., “Killed Piave—July 8—1918,” “[All armies are the same . . . ],” “Shock Troops,” “To Good Guys Dead”). The misogynist ditty “The Lady Poet with Foot Notes” footnotes the line “One lady poet’s husband was killed in the war” with the vituperation, “It sold her stuff” (*CP* 77). Depending on the aims of the course being taught, one could easily take the idea of generational and home-front betrayal beyond that particular war. One could also challenge the idea of widespread veteran disillusion and aimlessness, as Trout so effectively does in *On the Battlefield of Memory* (2).

Ruth Lahti’s “Connective Gestures” offers two approaches to us and our students: a close reading of physical action and a transnational juxtaposition of texts. Pairing *A Farewell to Arms* with Mulk Raj Anand’s Great War novel, *Across the Black Waters*, “illuminates,” as she puts it, “the presence of ‘nation’ as a shaping force in both Hemingway’s and Anand’s texts, thereby encouraging students to think critically about how national power entangles itself in representations of war” (41). Anand’s novel is also of interest because Anand missed the First World War and instead bases the novel’s descriptions of that war on his months of International Brigade service in Spain. Peter Messent has found that a structuralist method can equip students to analyze a narrative. His examination of Nick Adams’s character in “A Way You’ll Never Be” through a consideration of Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* models for students the authority and indeed responsibility of all readers to adapt and refine, rather than straightforwardly apply, whatever critical apparatus we employ.

Thomas Strychacz conveys us from the Great War to the Spanish Civil War—from Part 1 to Part 2—by way of Picasso’s monumental *Guernica*. If compositionally the painting echoes the first-impression mishmash of *In Our Time*, it also brings students to a conversation about vision and power in *For
**Whom the Bell Tolls.** I reluctantly added this novel to my Hemingway seminar syllabus a decade ago, daunted by my own ignorance at that time about the Spanish Civil War. I could have used Milton Cohen’s essay, “Hemingway and the Spanish Civil War: The Writer’s Maturing View,” as a primer on the war and an introduction to Hemingway’s writing about it. Teachers in the same boat will find Cohen’s essay useful in choosing the best point of entry for teaching that war in Hemingway.

The next essay in Part 2 focuses on Robert Jordan. Inspired by James Gee’s *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, Steven Nardi turns teaching the novel into a low-stakes interactive game by having the class put Jordan on trial for needlessly endangering the lives of others to become “an enemy not only of the Spanish people but of the international community.” In addition to the terms of the Non-Intervention Pact and the slightly later 18 U.S. Code § 959 of 1948 (Enlistment in Foreign Service), we might provocatively frame a discussion in the spirit of George Monbiot’s contention that George Orwell’s service in Spain could have resulted in life in prison under the United Kingdom’s Terrorism Act of 2006, “for fighting abroad with a ‘political, ideological, religious, or racial motive’” (Monbiot). Part 2 concludes with my contribution on teaching the Hemingway and Ivens’ film *The Spanish Earth* in a war film seminar. This essay situates the film in the overall course design and offers my own critical reflections, for which the class meeting served as springboard and which pull together several of the course’s strands of discussion.

In a sense, Part 3 takes us back to where studies of war in Hemingway began, with the wound and trauma postulations of Edmund Wilson and Philip Young. In Moddelmog and del Gizzo’s recent book, *Ernest Hemingway in Context*, Peter Hays contributes a biographical piece, “Ailments, Accidents, and Suicide”; his essay in the present collection extends this discussion by ruminating on the overlapping postwar afflictions of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and the kind of wounding psychiatrist Jonathan Shay has termed *moral injury*. The title of Ryan Hediger’s essay, “Shot . . . Crippled and Gotten Away: Animals and War Trauma in Hemingway,” immediately brings to mind images from Hemingway’s “A Natural History of the Dead.” Hediger mentions this story and several others while focusing his attention on the rarely taught “Get a Seeing-Eyed Dog,” as well as on *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hediger concludes by turning student attention to “Barking at Death,” James Plath’s essay on Hemingway’s 1933 safari. Following Plath, Hediger quotes the experimental nonfiction *Green Hills of Africa* and posits that hunting animals in Africa helped Hemingway put
his wounding and mortality into a healthy perspective. Christopher Barker writes of a different salubrious 1930s animal encounter, and its companion experimental nonfiction accounting, in Hemingway’s bullfighting book. “The Poetics of Ernest Hemingway’s Death in the Afternoon: Restaging the Experience of Total War” also shares Ruth Lahti’s transnational approach by placing Hemingway’s works in juxtaposition to Ernst Jünger’s Storm of Steel. Earlier, I recommended all users of this book to visit its first essay; I likewise recommend visiting Sarah Anderson’s “‘In Another Country’ and Across the River and into the Trees as Trauma Literature.” Anderson’s cogent work gives us a solid case for incorporating the neglected novel into our teaching, especially in war or trauma literature courses. She also reminds us that war literature expresses the human condition, not just the veteran condition.

The three best final essays from that senior seminar class appear in Part 4 of this volume, both as evidence of what our students are capable of and as smart, provocative, well-written contributions to Hemingway studies in their own right. Josephine Reece’s disquisition on war and bullfighting in The Sun Also Rises warrants a reckoning-with by anyone working on the subject. Zack Hausle, a philosophy major, employs Michel Foucault’s idea of biopower “as a useful lens of analysis for understanding A Farewell to Arms” (209). Finally, Anna Broadwell-Gulde investigates the representation and valuation of Pilar’s oral storytelling in For Whom the Bell Tolls, a novel dominated by Robert Jordan’s unspoken storytelling.

Toward its end, the introduction to Men at War comments on its own rhetoric of wartime editorializing:

If matters of this sort intrude themselves into an introduction to a book of narratives of men at war, it must be remembered that we are at war and an impersonal, detached, and purely objective introduction could only be a literary curiosity. This introduction is written by a man, who, having three sons to whom he is responsible in some ways for having brought them into this unspeakably balled-up world, does not feel in any way detached or impersonal about the entire present mess we live in. Therefore, be pleased to regard this introduction as absolutely personal rather than impersonal writing. (MAW xxvi–xxvii)

Hemingway’s essay states baldly how it does what we want our students’ essays to do: Be significant. Matter. Like Hemingway’s anthology, Teaching Hemingway and War appears in a time of war for the United States, if at the close rather than
the opening. The ongoing civil war in Syria has drawn frequent comparison to the Spanish Civil War on the blogosphere. Fully one-third of the essays in the 2013 *War in Ernest Hemingway’s* For Whom the Bell Tolls offer comparative perspectives on contemporary wars. Several contributors to this volume remind us that we might see veterans in our classrooms, and that, these days, teaching war literature possesses a clear if unfortunate poignancy that is both pedagogically useful and ethically important. It matters.

It matters whether or not one’s nation or people—or any other nation or people—is at war. It matters because the world is still all balled up, and we citizens of it are responsible to one another. It matters because war literature isn’t just about war; it’s about people. Fascination with Hemingway’s biography, with his wartime wounding and consequent travels to wars in his person and in his writing, evidence as much.

Notes

1. The calculations of casualties are taken from the “Fourth Brigade casualties” chart in chapter 18 of McClellan, while those of brigade strength are drawn from chapter 1.

The Violence of Story

Teaching *In Our Time* and Narrative Rhetoric

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There are certain privileges in life, not the least of these is the ability to teach literature to a roomful of students who, had they been living a century ago, probably would have been conscripted into what was then the world’s bloodiest and most gruesome of wars. And even if they hadn’t, they would have known someone who had—someone who experienced atrocity, who was stuck in the mud of the trenches, who charged machine guns, who came home shell-shocked, or who didn’t come home at all. For most students, however, such images and words are not revelatory. They crop up in the weeks approaching Veterans Day and Remembrance Day, inundating us with a cultural narrative that is always tragic, at times heroic, and irreversibly slipping away—perhaps a little too quickly and a little too comfortably.

How do we come to understand World War I in the classroom? How do we interpret the myriad experiences of war without reducing their integrity as experiences, without resorting to the platitudes that somehow make war even more distant and wholly *other* to ourselves? I’m not sure it’s at all possible to really *know* war unless you’ve been in it or are close to someone who has. Certainly, I’ve been fortunate enough to find safe harbor in the literary life, but I know several students who either plan to enlist in the military or already have. If we can’t fully know war in the classroom, then, together, we can at least begin to understand the ways narrative reconstructs its experiences and subsequently solicits our responses.

Such are the issues with which I wrestle when I prepare to teach Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*. To teach it is to engage in an implicit act of remembrance,
a reimagination of the many types of lives marked by war. I have taught this short-story cycle at most undergraduate levels: in American surveys, modernist courses, and advanced research seminars. And no matter what their stage of study, students are generally struck by the text’s formal properties. Indeed, *In Our Time’s* multiplicity of narratives—stories and interchapters—forces us to face head-on our assumptions of and expectations for narrative coherency. The text’s internal disjunction offers an especially productive opportunity to illustrate to students the ways in which an understanding of narrative technique is central to the text’s rhetorical effects. If I’m teaching freshmen or sophomores, I might initially ask them to describe the experience of reading such a form. If I’m teaching more advanced students, I will ask them whether they think Hemingway’s form makes an argument. In both cases, students (like many critics before them) will typically hone in on the issue of unity (for critiques of the book’s unity, see Barloon’s “Very Short Stories” and Trout’s “Antithetical Icons?”). Most argue that the stories’ very separation from one another is what begs connection—it is our responsibility, they imply, to show how the text thematically coheres. The point here is not to mire the students in a debate about the role of literary interpretation (not yet, anyway); rather, through this introductory questioning, it’s possible to suggest to students that such narrative patterning bears a specific relationship to the short-story cycle’s content. In other words, as students contemplate the structural complexities of *In Our Time*, they become enmeshed in the very difficulties, and perhaps impossibilities, of making clear sense of a world ensnared by the experience of war. From this perspective, the text becomes a world oftentimes absent of cause and effect, conventional narrative logic, and reason. And this absence begets an irrational world in which the inhumanity of war becomes, absurdly, “a most pleasant business” (*CSS* 64).

In a work that juxtaposes the dehumanizing violence of war with so many other forms of violence—the ritualized violence of bullfights, the state-sanctioned violence of executions, the self-inflicted violence of a father who cuts his own throat, the emotional violence that veterans enact upon themselves and others—I want my students to consider how language might also be violent and how Hemingway’s narrative might be suspicious of its own rhetorical power.

I begin to flesh out these ideas by introducing Hemingway’s theory of the iceberg, a concept of which many students will already have a cursory awareness: “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth
of it being above water” (*DIA* 192). What’s so provocative about this aesthetic theory, with respect to a discussion on the relationship between narrative rhetoric and war, is its implicit meditation on interpretive responsibility. To ask students simply what Hemingway means by this statement misses out on an important pedagogical opportunity. We can easily call attention to the surface meaning of this theory of omission, a minimalist metaphor arguing that removing language can actually strengthen the work. But if students have already begun to read *In Our Time*, they will likely intuit in this statement more than a mere imperative for how to write well and truly. And especially keen members of the class, without much prodding from me, will observe that it’s somewhat odd for an author (someone who makes his living from words) to suggest the possibility of narrative without much language.

Two points are essential to communicate to students at this early stage. First, such a theory has everything to do with Hemingway’s modernist context. He wrote *In Our Time* in the shadow of World War I. And as in every other war, leaders have had to use language to persuade others of the necessity of that war. If I have time, I quote to the class Frederic Henry’s self-conscious meditation from *A Farewell to Arms*, in which he expresses his embarrassment at “the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain” (*FTA* 184). Like Frederic, Hemingway’s iceberg theory implies a particular reluctance toward language: words can be disingenuous, and narrative has as much potential to lie as it does to communicate the truth of experience. The second (and related) essential point is that such an aesthetic solicits a mode of active reading. Insofar as Hemingway’s iceberg is a response to that sort of bombastic language that not only conceals truth but has no respect for it in the first place, the omissions and overwhelming reticence of *In Our Time* solicit readers to make inferences, to read into and reconstruct the text’s meaning for themselves. But before I send students off believing that they can make Hemingway’s text mean whatever they want it to mean (that old gem), I complicate my point. We can never know exactly what’s omitted—what a character like Nick Adams or Harold Krebs refuses to say or even think. That knowledge is only ever an imperfect reconstruction, a *feeling* of those things, never the things themselves. The iceberg is thus as much an entreaty for responsible reading as it is a strategy for writing. We slowly become aware of the immediate need to interpret and the way the text simultaneously limits that act.

Students intuitively recognize narrative’s power, even if they cannot perfectly articulate it. They know how it can be used to label, to categorize, to mark, as well as to insult, to degrade, and to hurt. As an act of interpretation, narrative
imposes, or at least attempts to impose, a particular set of values upon the world. Does a soldier who “run[s] the searchlight up and down . . . two or three times” to silence screaming refugees (CSS 11) bear any resemblance to the reader who searches for enlightenment and enlightened readings? I think so, uncomfortable as the thought is. When we teach students to interpret, we teach them to be creative, but implicit in such an act is the imposition of oneself upon the otherness of the text. In interpretation—in the reading of narrative—there is thus risk: the risk of overextending the self, of overwhelming the other and turning it into a mere instrument of our own rhetorical purposes. To begin to think of the parallels between violence in stories and the violence to stories is no easy task, but it is an essential exercise, especially for those students who are trying to deepen their understandings of how texts operate through the interpretive demands they make upon their readers.

This certainly takes time, and when I teach In Our Time, I typically spend about six hours of lecture and moderated discussion gradually building students’ awareness of the text through three key frames: contextual, structural, and stylistic. Within each of these smaller modules, I attempt to show students not only how Hemingway’s text describes a world consumed by war and its effects but also the ways its discourse responds to and challenges that world.

Context in Letters and Language

My contextual argument focuses specifically on the language of soldiers. I show students real examples of soldiers’ letters home during World War I. Fortunately, these are readily available all over the internet, and a quick search will produce some fascinating results. Because I teach in Canada, I’m partial to the Canadian Letters and Images Project, which has assembled an impressive collection of letters, diary entries, and poems from more than 280 World War I soldiers. What’s especially encouraging is the number of new blogs and websites arising not from institutional sources but from the descendants of soldiers who have reconstructed detailed personal histories of their ancestors. Through many of these sources, I’m able to find both transcribed and scanned copies of original letters, the latter being especially important because they make censorship immediately palpable for students. Just seeing these soldiers’ letters, and the extremely low-tech forms of censorship enforced upon language, obliges students to encounter the very limits of narrative expression during the war. I show them, for example, a “letter” written on 8 June 1917, by Robert Quick, a ship’s cook serving on the USS Pueblo, which is not much of
a letter at all. Rather, it is a form full of ready-made statements that instructs soldiers to “place a cross opposite expressions you wish to use.” The options are not especially expansive. Quick was fortunate enough to mark “I am well,” “Glad to know you are well,” “Love,” and, perhaps most telling, “I regret that owing to the censorship regulations, I am unable to give any further news or information.” I then show students another letter, from 29 June 1915, this one actually written out in long form by Douglas Maclean, a member of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in Gallipoli. As with any literary text, we read this slowly and closely, and it manifests as a compelling testimony to the exigency of narrative expression during wartime as well as to the frustrating silences imposed on such expression: “Dear Father, I suppose there is not much that I can write that will pass the censor’s hands but I have been lucky enough to acquire a piece of paper and envelope and might as well use them.” And Maclean was right—about a quarter of the second page of his letter is crudely scribbled out by a black pencil.

Together, we observe the many forms of censorship that soldiers endured and the historical conditions that prevented these young men from being able to tell their stories adequately to their loved ones. Following this activity, we discuss how much of In Our Time exposes the very inadequacy of language itself to describe experience. Frequently, when characters try to speak, we realize the difficulty they have in conveying their emotions or explaining the traumas they have faced. I suggest, moreover, that this reticence is not a trait exclusive to the male veterans that populate Hemingway’s text—Nick Adams, Krebs, the kitchen corporal, and the others. Just as often it is refugee mothers, or the American girl from “Cat in the Rain,” or Krebs’s sister Helen, whose stories remain poignantly untold but nonetheless scratch at the text’s traumatic surface, and, in their numerous iterations, refuse to go gently. Because such silences manifest as a limit to the knowability of experience, imposing a unifying source for the trauma becomes an ethically risky interpretive venture. The task is not simply to figure out what’s not said—as if there’s some code to break, or key to unlock these texts—but rather to understand how these narrative silences work to place us in a parallel state of confusion, anxiety, or even desperation.

An effective way to shift the conversation from the historical reality of censorship to the ways that narrative’s limitations are constituted through the text is to spend some time analyzing chapter 2. Because the passage is so brief, this exercise offers students a great opportunity to practice and experiment with their close reading skills. I also hand out, as a companion piece, Hemingway’s 1922 Toronto Star dispatch, “A Silent, Ghastly Procession,” upon which he based his
vignette. As a relatively straightforward entry point, I ask students to note the differences in the way the two texts narrate the same event. Such an exercise is particularly useful for encouraging more cautious students to participate as we linger on the concrete particulars of language without immediately launching into the more abstract philosophical arguments that can, understandably, be intimidating. One of the key ideas I suggest is that Hemingway’s literary writing does not simply mimic reportage. Though his style focuses on the reduction of language, we quickly observe that Hemingway’s modernism is something quite different from journalistic standards of the time. Whatever he might have learned from the style sheet of the Kansas City Star, he also learned what not to do. In that respect, students will identify a major difference in how the two texts are introduced. Whereas the Toronto Star dispatch familiarizes the reader with moderately lengthy sentences that answer the who, what, when, where, and why of the story, chapter 2 of In Our Time employs tight declarative sentences that bear more relation to imagism than journalism. Indeed, students also note that the dispatch is much more emotive and sentimental. By using and repeating adjectival and adverbial supplements (“staggering,” “silent,” “blindly”), Hemingway pushes into the territory of the melodramatic, while many note a certain condescension in the description of “brilliant, peasant costumes” (BL 51). I neither confirm nor deny this interpretation, but I do build upon it by asking the class to consider the major perspectival difference between the two texts. The dispatch is by no means disinterested, but it does employ an outsider’s perspective of the refugees; we read from above and look below. Although we are told the procession is “never-ending,” we are also told where it will end—“There is only Macedonia and Western Thrace to receive the fruit of the Turk’s return to Europe” (BL 52)—and so that initial qualifier appears overwrought and potentially disingenuous.

My purpose here is not to criticize Hemingway’s early journalism but to show how the mitigation of this external focalization in In Our Time changes the narrative’s function. Thus, I compare with the class the endings of the two pieces, asking them how their narrative techniques diverge. In the Star, Hemingway writes: “Nearly half a million refugees are in Macedonia now. How they are to be fed nobody knows, but in the next month all the Christian world will hear the cry: ‘Come over into Macedonia and help us!’” (BL 52). But chapter 2 of In Our Time concludes as follows: “Women and kids were in the carts crouched with mattresses, mirrors, sewing machines, bundles. There was a woman having a kid with a young girl holding a blanket over her and crying. Scared sick looking at it. It rained all through the evacuation” (CSS 71).
The interchapter builds up to a powerful image of agony and fear without ever blatantly editorializing on that fact. Moreover, we are offered neither distance from the event nor the comfort of full knowledge that such focalizing distance can sometimes include. We cannot see exactly who is “scared sick.” The omission of the grammatical subject makes the scene partly unknowable to readers, while at the same time it solicits our participation in the tragedy through the inferential activity that such omission requires. The simplification of the grammar in this sentence produces a recalcitrance that causes the reader to hesitate over a straightforward reading that would identify the girl as the one who is scared sick and not, for example, an anonymous narrator-observer.

In its reworking of old material, this fictional narrative implicitly underscores the rhetorical violences we can perform when we make stable narratives out of the most senseless, incoherent, and dehumanizing of situations. Hemingway’s style here solicits from the reader a hermeneutics of indeterminacy, where access to the other is simultaneously offered and withheld. We cannot fully witness or extricate ourselves from the terrible scene. Like the soldiers’ censored letters, which blatantly dramatize the limitations of language imposed within a wartime context, the narrative technique brings us uncomfortably close to such terrible moments but also suppresses knowledge and interpretive mastery over the experience.

Structural Parataxis

As students begin to understand the ways *In Our Time* responds to its wartime context, they seem to find Hemingway’s choice of genre even more provocative. After several hours’ worth of lecturing and close reading, I find it useful to revisit students’ initial misgivings over the short-story cycle’s disjunction. To prepare for this module, I ask students to submit a short reading response to Peter Donahue’s “The Genre Which Is Not One: Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, Difference, and the Short Story Cycle,” an essay that argues for the “un-fixed nature” of Hemingway’s chosen genre (161). Through this assignment, students begin to recognize that genre is more than a vessel for ideas; it shapes narrative logic. In advanced seminars, I also assign Stephen Clifford’s “Hemingway’s Fragmentary Novel: Readers Writing the Hero in *In Our Time,*” as it provides both some compelling revisions of the ‘Hemingway hero’ and a prolonged meditation on how the text’s pluralism interacts with the values readers bring to the process of interpretation. I begin our conversation by asking a simple question. Is there a central character in this text? The obvious answer is Nick
Adams, but I push students to consider that (a) Nick Adams is not present in many of the narratives, (b) in several cases where we might assume that a protagonist is Nick, that assumption is never fully substantiated by the text, and (c) that since the larger storyworld of *In Our Time* encompasses a multiplicity of voices, focusing primarily upon Nick’s experiences risks imposing textual unity at the cost of fully attending to the experiences of those others. It is here that students begin to recognize that the ways in which we approach a text as readers, and the interpretive work we do upon it (not only to find meaning but to make meaning), have particular consequences.

If first-time readers are ready to make the cycle’s disparate narratives connect to each other through certain thematic links, my line of questioning asks them to consider not only what meanings are missed in that search for unity but, more importantly, how that search may violate the text. I imagine that when instructors ask their students if the narratives of *In Our Time* have anything in common, the most frequent answer they will receive is “violence.” This is a great answer, but perhaps not for the reason students will expect: Hemingway’s omissions, both within and between stories, are tantalizing, begging to be filled in, and yet that process of filling in necessitates interpretive force. It means turning the unknowable into the knowable, compelling a recalcitrant text to connect with itself. Hemingway’s genre brings the potential power of interpretation to the fore and thus more fully implicates us within the consuming violences of “Our Time.”

Having tested the waters of some complex ethical negotiations and abstract thinking regarding the responsibilities of interpretation, students need to be brought back to solid critical ground. I therefore suggest to them that the genre is a version of parataxis writ large, a *structural parataxis*. If parataxis is a technique that emphasizes the separateness of each individual sentence and limits causation—where that which comes before is not actively constructed as having a causal relationship to that which comes after—*structural parataxis* implies that there is no clear causative line between the cycle’s narratives, that characters do not simply recur, and that the interchapters do not specifically illuminate what comes between them. Indeed, when we look closely at *In Our Time*, its structure reiterates the very transience of coherence. Students may notice, for example, the prevalence of mothers and babies in the cycle’s earlier sections. But to impose a straightforward connection between the mother of “Indian Camp,” who undergoes a caesarean performed with a “jack-knife” and “nine-foot, tapered gut leaders” (CSS 69), and the refugee woman of chapter 2, the reader must willfully forget the very fact of their difference—the historical
and geographical differences between Adrianople and Michigan, the Karagatch road and Ojibway woodlands. Such diversity of historical experience is accentuated by the cycle’s parataxis, and together these elements implicitly resist our gestures of symbolic assimilation or, rather, assimilation-by-symbol.

To emphasize the potential integrity of each narrative is to ask students to contemplate how we use others (texts, characters, people) as instruments for our own rhetorical purposes. From this perspective, the interchapters are not merely positive transitional moments—connectives that inform our reading through a process of mapping on similarities—but spaces of friction, where interpretation is halted in the moment, where we are made hyperaware of the differences between figures we would assume to be compatible, and where our own critical attempts to explicate the text force us to perform the very difficulty of understanding difference. Faced with a cycle whose structure is especially representative of a plurality of experiences, whose narration even of “war” is fragmented into different wars, times, regions, and voices, students grapple with the fact that a single narrative arc cannot (and, perhaps, should not) contain such plurality. To better consolidate this structural argument, I quote to them from William James’s *A Pluralistic Universe*:

> Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism or the doctrine that it is many means only that the sundry parts of reality may be externally related. . . . Things are “with” one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word “and” trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes. “Ever not quite” has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness . . . However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity. (321–22; emphasis in original)

Such pragmatism may come as a shock to some, but for others James’s idea of the “and,” with its explicit critique of conceptual perfection, bears a productive relationship with Hemingway’s generic choice. To conceive of *In Our Time*’s separate interchapters as a series of “ands” that constitute its structural parataxis is to recognize the particularity of each narrative experience and resist the conflation of those particular experiences into universalizing and generalizing interpretations. And yet the interchapters, as James would intuit, are “with” the other narratives in many ways. They are both conjunctive and disjunctive, connecting themselves to other narratives and insisting on the limits of that connection.
This foray into Jamesian pluralism helps students articulate the ways in which the cycle’s structural representation of war complicates our desire to understand war. Such attention to the nontotalizing rhetorical effects of the text’s structure stimulates many students to think about the potential violences of an interpretation that would conflate certain characters’ narration of war into the experience of war: Nick’s “separate peace” on the Italian front (CSS 105), they note, is not the same as Harold Krebs’s involvement at Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Mihiel, and the Argonne. Students begin to recognize the value-laden assumptions implicit in their initial desire to unify the text, and instead see the war—as the text—as a multitude of oftentimes unshareable experiences.

Of Style and Soldiers

As we move forward, I begin to pay more prolonged attention to particular narratives, and as edifying as it might be to give every story and interchapter its due, time’s winged chariot doesn’t stop even for English professors. Still, this is why teaching In Our Time can be so rewarding—its narrative variety all but ensures that the text you teach one semester won’t be the same text you teach the next. If, up to this point, I have tried to render the cycle in fairly broad strokes, in this module I focus on the ways certain stories interact with the text’s structural arguments. I also remind my students of what it means to think of narrative as a form of rhetoric, a concept that, in most of my courses, I tend to reiterate until it sticks. I use James Phelan’s definition from Experiencing Fiction, which stresses that narrative is the action of “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (3). Because this definition is straightforward, students can easily digest it, but it is also valuable because it highlights that narrative is an interactive communicative experience between tellers, listeners, context, event, and function. Such interactivity is key because it reminds students that their interpretations must account for narrative discourse. That is, attending to the nuances of how a text is constructed helps us sort out the judgments and values expressed through that particular telling.

In “Soldier’s Home,” for example, we examine how Hemingway handles focalization to represent Krebs’s sense of loss. Krebs’s story is one of a traumatized interior. Home late from the war, having missed out on the pageantry that greeted other soldiers returning to the United States, he withholds himself from others, hardly speaking because he senses no one will listen to him unless he exaggerates his experience: for Krebs, talking about the war means lying about it. Still, more provocative is this story’s implication that even efforts to
“This book is a story of violence, the kind that is not made gentle by being in stories.” Krebs craves a return to a smooth life, a life without complication: “All of the times that had been able to make him feel cool and clear inside himself when he thought of them; the times so long back when he had done the one thing, the only thing for a man to do, easily and naturally, when he might have done something else, now lost their cool, valuable quality, and then were lost themselves” (CSS 111). Students will readily pick up that this passage is focalized through Krebs’s consciousness, and when I ask about the consequences of such focalization, they are prepared to answer because of earlier work we’ve done on context and structure. The passage is, in a sense, unreadable: we cannot perfectly know the “something” that Krebs has lost. And the word thing, students point out, is especially ironic. Despite Krebs’s gesture to a concrete and observable reality—a “thing” he can hold onto—that reality is lost, not only to him, but to the reader as well.

I push this conversation a bit further, so as not to rest merely on the idea of ambiguity. What Krebs wants, I point out, is a certain simplicity of life where he can look at the “patterns” of girls’ clothing and get a girl without having “to work to get her” (CSS 112). But Hemingway’s style communicates a larger structural irony. Hemingway represents Krebs’s consciousness through a cadenced, rhythmically predictable, and paratactic style. In one paragraph, the anaphora “He did not want” is repeated five times (112–13), producing an aural and tonal simplicity and an accretion of negatives that signify a person who can no longer expend the constructive effort of imagining other people (girls) as real. Krebs’s vision of the ideal simple life may be at odds with the simplicity of the text. Where we actively attend to the protagonist and at least try to intuit dimensionality, Krebs cannot do the same thing for the girls he putatively desires. This type of stylistic argument is beneficial for students because it amplifies the deleterious effects of Krebs’s wartime experience. As he is unable to interpret the reality of others beyond their surfaces, he is essentially other to the close reader. In turn, this may help to account for certain sympathetic readings of Krebs’s mother. If Hemingway’s style conditions us to recognize the limitations of Krebs’s mode of reading others, then that style may also solicit skepticism toward the silences that Krebs’s focalization imposes on his mother. As conversation continues, students find themselves able to make larger contextual connections as well. They note, for example, that Krebs’s postwar trauma is exacerbated by the text’s “loss” of words themselves, insofar as it limits the reader’s ability to reconstruct the depths of his experience.

“Soldier’s Home” is also a valuable story to teach because of its proximity to the interchapter preceding it. If Krebs alludes to the obscure “something else” of his wartime experience (CSS 111), I ask my students whether they think the
interchapter helps to explain what that omission may be. In other words, does the interchapter elucidate the story and give us a sense of what soldiers such as Krebs had to endure? Is it a saying of the unsaid? Written from the perspective of a soldier under bombardment at Fossalta, it is certainly visceral. But I like talking about this narrative with my students because it also contemplates the ethical limits of storytelling. The protagonist prays to Jesus as he is shelled, promising that if he survives, he will tell the world about Him. But after the onslaught, the soldier visits a prostitute and the narrative ends with one of In Our Time’s most provocative sentences: “And he never told anybody” (CSS 109; italics in original). I explain to my class that this story operates as a mode of imagistic witnessing, a concise and penetrating depiction of trench warfare. And yet I also point out that this final line imbues the text with a certain paradoxical quality only possible in fiction: this soldier refuses to tell the personal story that we have just, somehow, been told. Here, my students encounter the ethics of narrative silence, which implicitly asks how a character’s choice not to tell a story interacts with (and sometimes works at cross-purposes to) the reader’s need to understand. Robyn Warhol’s work on the “antinarratable,” or tellings that are proscribed by social convention (224), may provide extra fodder for class discussion. And Adam Zachary Newton’s argument, that to attend to the hermeneutic ethics of a text is to learn “the paradoxical lesson that ‘getting’ someone else’s story is also a way of losing the person as ‘real’” (19), may further inspire students to think about the consequences implicit in the twin acts of telling and listening.

Once I’ve put these complex issues out into the ether, I go back the text. When I ask students to comment upon the way chapter 7 handles perspective, the closest of readers will notice the shift from third-person singular—“He lay very flat and sweated and prayed oh jesus christ get me out of here”—to first-person plural—“We went to work on the trench and in the morning the sun came up and the day was hot and muggy and cheerful and quiet” (CSS 109). Subtle as it is, the switch from “he” to “we” marks the narrator not as heterodiegetic (a noncharacter narrator) but homodiegetic (a character narrator). What the “we” implies is actually quite dramatic. Whereas readers will expect certain types of narrators to be able to access the consciousness of a protagonist, a narrator who is part of that character’s world (in this case, a fellow soldier) would not have such interior access. In other words, Hemingway’s small narrative dramatizes the communication of this desperate soldier’s consciousness as a product of another soldier’s imagination. When I ask my students, Why do we tell stories? —an unfairly loaded question—they generally assume that the reason is to gain an understanding and sense of the narrator’s
world—to know the other. And yet, chapter 7’s narrative paradox shows us that the process of understanding and knowing someone inevitably involves imaginative leaps, a reading into and reconstruction of otherness that is not necessarily sanctioned by the person whose experience it is.

In this way, my lectures proceed through an exciting discussion of the intersection of narrative ethics and war. Is it possible to narrate such trauma without reducing it? How does one describe an experience for which words were never enough? There are a host of pedagogical pathways that an instructor may take at this point. I sometimes linger over “A Very Short Story,” to show how Hemingway mobilizes romantic tropes in order to undercut them; in its depiction of Luz, a nurse who falls out of love with a young soldier after the Armistice, the story demonstrates the banal pain that comes from holding on too tightly to heroic narratives after the war. I also like to return to “On the Quai at Smyrna,” both to remind students that the cycle reaches far beyond World War I and to show that Hemingway’s handling of the second person perspective—“You remember the harbor” (CSS 64; emphasis added)—emphasizes the scene as a singular experience even as it simultaneously suggests the possibility of sharing that experience with an interlocutor. “Quai” beckons us to move in and out of soldiers’ experiences, enacting moments of commensurability and incommensurability, understanding and disgust, implicitly asking us how judgment is constituted in the midst of empathy.

After exposing themselves to the many hostilities of In Our Time, several of my students tell me that they find some sanctuary in “Big Two-Hearted River.” Much like Nick Adams himself, they are comforted by this storyworld, which juxtaposes so sharply against the rest of the cycle. Hemingway’s famous declaration, in A Moveable Feast, that “the story was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it” can help to consolidate this point (75). But how safe a narrative space is it? I point out that the larger cycle, in a sense, conditions our responses to this final story: we are prepared by the rest of the text to intuit war’s violent reach almost everywhere, not only in “the burned-over country” that Nick leaves behind (CSS 163), but also in the “satisfactory hiss” of a mosquito conflagrated by Nick’s match (169); the grasshopper, hooked so precisely by Nick, spitting up “tobacco juice” (175); and the trout offal “tossed . . . ashore for the minks to find” (180). Even the story itself is fractured by chapter 15, the story of the hanging of Sam Cardinella, who loses control of his sphincter muscle just after a priest tells him, “Be a man, my son” (171). Here, violence manifests as a mode of narrative interruption and threatens to become a perpetual fact of modern experience.
The clearest sign that this narrative operates as something more than a safe space, however, is the swamp, where “the fishing would be tragic” (CSS 180). When I ask my students why Nick refuses to fish the swamp, I ask them to focus on diction. Why does Hemingway repeat the word tragic in two consecutive sentences? I want them to think about the connotations of such a literary word amidst the Michigan backcountry. Tragic defamiliarizes because it shows Nick to be an interpreter of his world. He begins to read his setting metaphorically—as a literary text rather than the literal world. If, for Hemingway, “learning to suspend your imagination and live completely in the very second of the present minute . . . is the greatest gift a soldier can acquire” (MAW xxvii), then Nick’s language here is an attempt to identify a new, “writerly” version of himself away from the war. Despite the swamp’s threatening presence, the literary diction signals a shift away from the intense focus on the material world (eating, fishing, sleeping), and suddenly toward a world of imaginative possibility. The swamp is described as a space “smooth and deep” that “it would not be possible to walk through,” and where there is only a “half light” (CSS 180). This lack of clarity—of enlightenment—signals the swamp as unknowable, as a form of otherness. It represents a potential threat to the sense of cohesion and strength that Nick has found alone within the forest. If he is beginning to find a stable sense of self, the swamp is a reminder that such self-contained stability is only temporary. He must at some point allow others and otherness to become a part of his experience again. Thus, by conceiving the swamp as text, Nick begins to recognize the necessity of engaging with unknowability, of reading and interpreting others, even if such engagement bears tragic risks. In turn, this line of thinking can prompt students to nuance their own ideas about the text. Instead of only asking how the text critiques violence, they begin to observe how In Our Time reimagines responsibility to and for the other. It is a responsibility that involves a recognition of both our desire to connect and the inevitable limitations of that connection, of our proximity and our dislocation from the text’s violently plural space.

These strategies for teaching In Our Time are by no means exhaustive, but I’ve found that they encourage students to think deeply and critically about the ways narrative responds to its context and the ways such responses are constituted through the interpretive work we perform upon texts. Moreover, to teach this short-story cycle is to teach not only how a range of actors came to experience modern warfare but to show students that the violence of war also occasioned new modes of storytelling that cast doubt on the capacity of narrative to function as an instrument of knowledge. This early Hemingway
work demonstrates a radical suspicion of its own raw materials—of language itself—and how we marshal those materials for particular rhetorical purposes. If the undergraduate classroom offers a safe creative space where we, along with our students, can tease out the implications of our close encounters with textual otherness, *In Our Time* reminds us that such encounters are never fully estranged from the world beyond the text, and that to interpret is to also participate in the violence of story.