

Correspondent Visions of Vietnam

by Mark A. Heberle

Jonathan Schell has noted recently that "More than a decade after its end, the Vietnam war refuses to lie quiet in its historical grave" (3). Adducing fundamental questions that remain unanswered, he goes on to address one in detail — why did the U.S. effort fail? — and focuses upon the inevitable political impotence of the South Vietnamese government to provide an answer. His own title, *The Real War*, implies a correction of previous definitions of the war's meaning, too narrowly centered on Americans in combat. Schell's essay implies that discovering and defining the truth about Vietnam remains an unresolved problem.

Nowhere is the problem of revealing the "real war" more tellingly dramatized than in a small but extremely significant body of semi-fictional works that combine journalism with storytelling. Each is the product of a writer who spent his time in Vietnam observing and reporting the war but later composed a fiction told from the viewpoint of a protagonist who is a reporter. In each, the central character is more or less identical with the author, and the work as a whole presents a picture of the war that not only attempts to reveal the truth about Vietnam but also contains within itself a paradigm of truth-gathering in the protagonist's own actions and thoughts. This radical focus upon defining the reality of the war by mimicking yet going beyond journalism enables each writer to combine objective reporting with subjective judgment and evaluation of the war itself, as well as flawed or inadequate understanding of its significance.

These works include Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, Robin Moore's *The Green Berets*, Takeshi Kaiko's *Into a Black Sun*, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*. The first two are foundation texts for all subsequent Vietnam literature, and the others consciously or unconsciously acknowledge their influence. But all of them blend fact with fiction in what we may call a correspondent vision, a work that attempts to correct mistaken reports about the war with a revelation of the truth.

The Quiet American transcribes Greene's own experiences as a correspondent in 1951-52 and 1954-55 for *Paris Match*, *The Sunday Times*, *Le Figaro*, and *The New Republic*. Fowler, Greene's protagonist, is an English reporter whose judgments recreate Greene's, but whose character transcends his creator's, just as Greene's novel transcends his journalism. Nevertheless, the formal organization of *The Quiet American* reflects the situation of the news report. Framed by the beginning and end of an official police inquiry that will discover nothing, Fowler's own investigation of the death of the American secret agent Alden Pyle takes the form of an imaginatively reconstructed journal of all his encounters with his friend and rival. In the process, he truthfully reports all the causes of

Pyle's death, including his own culpability, but his is a story that can never be filed publicly: "It wouldn't have done to cable the details of his true career, that before he died he had been responsible for at least fifty deaths, for it would have damaged Anglo-American relations, the Minister would have been upset" (21). In recreating what he knows about Pyle's life and death, Fowler presents the author's own political viewpoint, so that Greene's novel is also a correspondent's analysis of the war.

Until his betrayal of Pyle to the Viet Minh, Fowler is ethically detached from the war that he is reporting and that he understands so well. Such detachment arises from his own nihilistic existentialism, but it also characterizes his professional identity: he insists to Inspector Vigot that he is "not involved" enough in the war to care who is responsible for Pyle's death:

Not involved, I repeated. It had been an article of my creed. The human condition being what it was, let them fight, let them love, let them murder, I would not be involved. My fellow journalists called themselves correspondents; I preferred the title of reporter. I wrote what I saw. I took no action — even an opinion is a kind of action. (28)

Fowler realizes that there is no "third force" in the war, that one must choose between Pyle or Mr. Heng and his Viet Minh associates, but he has no more faith in either side than he has in God, and his situation in the middle is paradigmatic of the Western reporter's curious position: he tries hard to fully understand both sides, and just as hard not to judge between them. He must remain a noncombatant even while knowing what motivates the combatants. Fowler thus declines a French lieutenant's offer of his helmet during a patrol in Phat Diem (5), an offer that Pyle accepts (56); similarly, he refuses to take a rifle when he and Pyle abandon the government watch tower on the road from Tay Ninh (107), as well as his friend's subsequent offer of a sten gun which the American has ironically and ominously taken away from their South Vietnamese defenders.

Although Fowler's delivery of Pyle to the Viet Minh is a climactic moral choice, it leaves him wholly unsatisfied, because he has no positive faith himself in the political cause that he assists. Trying to remain a noncombatant technically, he leaves the ultimate outcome to a God that does not exist for him, lets others decide the best way of "stopping" Pyle, and is ultimately dissatisfied with his loss of reportorial objectivity and detachment in reacting so forcefully to Pyle's mismanaged massacre of civilians: "I had judged like a journalist in terms of quantity, and I had betrayed my own principles; I had become as engaged as Pyle, and it seemed to me that no decisions would ever be simple again" (183).

Fowler's scorn for "journalists" might seem puzzling, but it

follows from his earlier definition of himself as a "reporter," simply recording observations, in contrast to other Western journalists with the pretensions of being "correspondents." Fowler's view of Indochina journalism is low through the novel, reflecting Greene's own: the French newsmen are propagandists, the Americans officious louts like Granger, who patriotically cites Stephen Crane as his model for making up imaginary accounts of the war (35-36). Military briefings and tours, which extend only to so-called victories, are a waste of time except for incidental amenities like the "best barman in Indo-China" (35). Military censorship or the Western reading public's own low tolerance for unfamiliar, complex, or disturbing news further limits the amount of truth that one may expect from journalism, as the fate of Fowler's accurate dispatch on "Operation Bicycleette" illustrates: "'Bicycle Bombs' made a good headline. All of them blamed the Communists. I was the only one to write that the bombs were a demonstration on the part of General Thé, and my account was altered at the office. The General wasn't news. You couldn't waste space by identifying him" (142).

The Quiet American is thus a satire on Vietnam journalism as well as a true reporting of the real situation, and Fowler is Greene's agent in fulfilling both purposes. His own definitive judgments about the war are fully revealed only to Pyle, as a corrective to the younger man's faith in the Cold War demonology of York Harding. Ironically, however, the mentor gains more wisdom than his student, directly opposing Pyle's futile terrorism yet gracefully yielding his mistress Phuong to the American after coming to respect her best interests through his conversations with his romantic rival. Fowler tries to educate Pyle through arguments that often reproduce Greene's own Vietnam journalism, and his utter failure to dissuade his friend from the obsession with Thé's chimerical third force may suggest the limits of war correspondence at its best as well as the strength of American cold war ideology.

Fowler is perhaps the most important target in Greene's critique of the correspondent vision. His refusal to go beyond mere "reporting" stems from a cynical repudiation of personal moral involvement in the war that belies his deepest instincts. "I hate war," he thinks to himself as he observes the slaughter of civilians at Phat Diem and the Red River (53, 148), but he never makes his protest effective either by leaving Vietnam or by incarnating his own judgment in his writing while moving from "reporter" to "correspondent": after all, the very critiques of the war that Fowler will only reflect to himself or reveal to Pyle were published by Greene, who must have had faith beyond his realistic expectations that they might help to bring peace to Indochina. Like many of Greene's protagonists, however, Fowler not only lacks faith in anything beyond himself but would feel threatened by it: "I had never desired faith. The job of a reporter is to expose and record. I had never in my career discovered the inexplicable" (88).

Greene's novel, set in 1951-52 before and after the death of France's best military commander, General de Lattre, has been the fundamental Anglo-American representation of the Vietnam war not only because of its priority and formal excellence, but also because of its visionary prescience: the opening scene, reporting the disembarking of "new American planes" (11), anticipates and identifies the U.S. role as merely supplanting the French as agents of futile Western interference in Vietnam; Pyle's misguided view of the Vietnam conflict as simply the local installment of a universal, Manichean struggle between Communism and the Free World anticipates the New Frontier justification for such intervention; his hope of finding a "third force" that would somehow be both independent of and dependent upon American support embodies the fatal contradiction of all the successive Saigon regimes after the American-supported downfall of the doomed Diem; and in Pyle's own ignominious death we may see the final outcome of American Vietnam policy.

The dark implications of Greene's vision leave little trace upon the first important American fiction of the war, Robin Moore's *The Green Berets*. Moore's account of the Special Forces' unconventional war against the Viet Cong in the early 1960s was intended to reveal both the nature and the formidable threat of Asian Communist guerrilla warfare and to justify the Green Berets' own counter-terrorism. In the conclusion of his book, Moore is thus both cautious and tendentious: "What the outcome in Vietnam will be is anybody's guess, but whatever happens, Special Forces men will continue to fight Communism and make friends for America in the underdeveloped nations that are the targets of Communist expansion" (348). This is the gospel according to York Harding, with Vietnam itself important in relation to a worldwide struggle that seems more important and substantial than the local situation. Moore's conclusion is fittingly entitled "Never Give Up," here not just a military slogan but also an imperative addressed to the American reader.

At the time of writing, Moore's assumptions were widely shared by Americans, and a straightforward journalistic record initially seemed the best vehicle for his transparent polemical purpose, as he explains in the preface: "It was to be a factual book based on personal experience, first-hand knowledge and observation, naming persons and places" (11). The rest of the preface explains and justifies his metamorphosis from journalist to fiction writer. Entitled "Badge of Courage," it inscribes Moore's book within the American tradition of documentary war fiction established by Crane. Moore insists that "*The Green Berets* is a book of truth" (11) and describes its form, nine stories rather than a report from Vietnam, as establishing a significant shape and context for the war more in keeping with his rhetorical purpose than conventional journalism: "Many of the stories incorporate a number of events which if reported merely in isolation would fail to give the full meaning and background of the

war in Vietnam”; he has “changed details and names,” but not “the basic truth” (11). In addition, Moore’s fictional veil covers up specific details in order to insure the security of Special Forces operations, he explains. Indeed, his collaboration with his subjects extends far beyond sharing their ideology and protecting their identities. Moore actually went through Green Beret training himself, and was a participant as well as an observer in the missions he covered during his subsequent “tour” in Vietnam from January to June, 1964. Fowler’s or Greene’s political detachment and non-combatant integrity would have been valueless for Moore, whose Cold War morality constitutes the lens through which he observes the truth about Vietnam.

In *The Green Berets*, the roles of correspondent and soldier literally merge, as Moore proudly and un-self-consciously reveals in the preface:

I was fortunate — at least from the standpoint of writing an authentic book — to be allowed to go into combat all over the country just as though I were a Special Forces trooper. In spite of the fact that correspondents traditionally are never armed, I never made a move without an automatic rifle — which accounts for the fact that I made it home to write this book. (11)

For Moore, “authenticity” and “truth” are synonymous, but underlying that assumption is an unquestioned faith in the validity of counterinsurgency assumptions themselves.

The author is an active participant or direct observer in seven of the nine stories that make up his collection, and narrates the other two as they were told to him by a participant in each operation. Once in Vietnam, he periodically insists upon full participation in operations, rejecting the idea of having himself evacuated if things get hot in the first story, significantly entitled “A Green Beret — All the Way,” and preferring insecure to secure outposts in the second story (77). At the end of the book the correspondent records his symbolic transformation into a combatant: “The proudest possession I own is the green beret given to me by an A team in a heavy combat zone.”

Of course, the true heroes are the real Green Berets, whose operations Moore details with unquestioning enthusiasm. As Philip Beidler has noted, *The Green Berets* presents a “Batman” war (39) — one of Moore’s favorite verbs is “zap” — a vision of successful American heroism derived from cartoons, spy films, and Westerns. Indeed, the first sentence of the collection initiates the process of conflating the real war with archetypes of American popular culture: “The headquarters of Special Forces Detachment B-520 in one of Vietnam’s most active war zones looks exactly like a fort out of the old West” (17). Ultimately, the most important reason behind the author’s decision to fictionalize his report on the Green Berets was probably unconscious, and it has determined the shape of the stories

comprised in Moore's book: by assimilating the often chilling details of counterinsurgency operations to popular melodrama, *The Green Berets* renders them acceptably familiar to a mass audience.

Although Moore presents only successful operations, their authentic detail is intended to help define the war as winnable but also brutal, tactically complex, and extremely difficult. As a result, he argues that the real truth about the war is not being presented publicly: "I couldn't have picked a less opportune moment to come to Saigon," he notes at the beginning of the fifth story:

South Vietnam's capital was about due for its second snowstorm of the year — the arrival of a jetload of high U.S. administration officials from Washington. Prior to their visit, blanket requests were issued for optimistic progress reports — which were then neatly transcribed to little white cards for easy referral at the briefing sessions. This was always a discouraging and frustrating time for field officers who were close to the unpleasant truths of daily fighting in Vietnam. (150)

Indeed, as Beidler has noted (37), Moore's narrative intermittently details aspects of the war that undercut its underlying optimism: the extraordinary determination of the Viet Cong, the contrasting indifference and venality of their Vietnamese opponents, and the mutual alienation of the South Vietnamese and their American advisors.

The "truths" of Moore's correspondent vision were sufficiently sensational in 1965 to make *The Green Berets* genuinely controversial: "a bloody, blazing account filled with revelations of a kind that never make *The New York Times*," according to a *Kirkus* reviewer. At the same time, its successful employment of thriller formulas made it a bestseller, and it remained the most widely known American Vietnam war fiction through the 1970s. Unlike *The Quiet American*, however, it has not aged well. Moore's formulaic writing hardly stands comparison with Greene's literary artistry, of course, but, more importantly, Moore's vision of the truth was less perceptive. When the film version was produced in 1968, attitudes among Americans and American correspondents had already changed so radically that a cold warrior journalist was implausible. Consequently, the Robin Moore role had to be displaced onto a vaguely anti-war correspondent played by David Jansen, who directly questions the Green Berets' anti-Communist ideology during an orientation at Fort Bragg and is only converted after observing Viet Cong atrocities in Vietnam. More curiously still, no correspondent wears the symbolic Green Beret at the end of the film, but rather a Vietnamese orphan does, an unwittingly ironic anticipation of Vietnamization; however, this final gesture suits the film's representation of the South Vietnamese as sterling, motivated, and willing allies, a distortion of one of the book's most significant and discouraging truths.

Like *The Quiet American*, however, *The Green Berets* is a seminal

work. Writing just after the end of the French Indochina war and the beginning of the U.S. war respectively, Greene and Moore both use correspondent visions to offer utterly opposed but equally definitive judgments about America's role in Vietnam: an immoral and destructive blunder for Greene, a righteous crusade for Moore. Journalism itself comes under critical scrutiny as each writer presents his own vision of the truth about Vietnam. For Greene, detachment and objectivity are the correspondent's greatest virtues, but they conflict with full moral engagement. For Moore, by contrast, the best correspondent is fully involved, putting down his rifle to take up his pen, and the reverse; his correspondent is also fully and happily engaged, morally. Both writers find journalism in general to be limited, misleading, or even false as a vehicle of truth, a judgment that in fact has determined their decision to use fictional forms for their reports on the war.

Subsequent Vietnam literature is overtly or covertly influenced by both works, including the later correspondent visions which acknowledge their presence but react against the certainties of both. Takeshi Kaiko covered the war as a special correspondent for the Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* in 1964-65, contributing weekly reports to the magazine *Shukan Asahi* and completing a "Vietnam War Journal" upon his return to Japan. His assignment is recreated in *Kagayakeru Yami* (1968) — "Shining Darkness" literally, but translated in 1980 as *Into a Black Sun*. Set in South Vietnam, this novel imitates a reporter's journal more directly than either of its predecessors: divided into two main sections headed "1964" and "1965," it records the correspondent's conversations with and observations of a wide array of Vietnamese and Americans, as well as fellow Japanese journalists. Descriptions of his daily life and actions build a richly detailed picture of life within the war as he moves from an American-advised ARVN camp (Chapters 1-4), to Saigon and Cholon (5-16), to a return to the camp and a disastrous jungle operation against the Viet Cong (16-17).

Like *The Quiet American*, the novel focuses upon the hero's internal struggle to make sense of the catastrophe unfolding all about him. Moreover, Kaiko's re-imagined self resembles Greene's in important ways, including professional detachment, disapproval of the American cause — represented by a Captain Wain — and a relationship with a Vietnamese mistress, To-Nga, that is intended to help him forget the war. Moreover, Kaiko explicitly includes Greene's vision within his own book during the correspondent's conversation with a former Viet Minh commander turned novelist:

"Have you read Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*?" the man asked, sipping his tea.

"Yes, I have."

"What do you think about it?"

“Good. It’s cynical, but it’s a good book.”

To the Vietnamese writer, however, Greene’s work got it all wrong:

“I gave him the material for the novel. After it came out, I realized that Greene didn’t understand anything about this country. It’s a novel written to please European readers. I was very disappointed with it. There’s a young woman who smokes opium in the book. I know her, too. I hear she’s in Paris now.”
(87)

Here as elsewhere Kaiko plays strikingly with the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, and one of the effects is to convince the reader that Greene’s novel is “really” inaccurate.

Kaiko’s reference to his generic source cleverly combines praise with criticism, defining Greene’s ethnocentric limitations. But *Into A Black Sun* does not simply question Greene’s correspondent vision; it denies the validity of any such external perspective, including its own, which is Japanese, not simply “Asian.” The amount of information and variety of perspectives reported resist any simple truths or moral judgments, and Kaiko’s picture of the Vietnamese situation is filled with desperate contradictions. For example, To-Nga’s brother, Tran, admires Ho Chi Minh and his cause but deplores the brutal record of the North Vietnamese regime, which he details to the correspondent; he fears a Communist victory, yet he cuts off two fingers to avoid induction into the South Vietnamese army. The Americans are viewed with comparable complexity, Kaiko avoiding Greene’s sometimes puerile anti-Americanism; the correspondent both regrets and admires the violent energy of Captain Wain, whose name may well be an intentional homophone of the Duke himself, as John Clark Pratt has suggested (134). Thus, while the correspondent visions of Greene and Moore present their authors’ judgments of the war, Kaiko presents multiple judgments while refusing himself to judge decisively.

His title, “Shining Darkness,” reflects the novel’s epigraph from *I Corinthians*: “We see now through a mirror in an obscure manner, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I have been known.” As he goes about his job of observing the war, Kaiko’s correspondent can only catch glimpses of some final truth. They are not only obscure but also register a moral blackness for the outside observer. To recognize this darkness is to suffer a painful and uncertain illumination, however, like the correspondent’s experience when he returns to his room stunned by his witnessing the public execution of a child terrorist: “I had blocked out the windows with the blackout curtains, but I felt that I was looking at the sun behind eyelids that were almost clear” (135).

As a man privileged by profession and nationality to maintain a middle position that is denied to any Vietnamese, as a mere observer

of a confusing tragedy for others, Kaiko's correspondent comes to condemn himself and the place he occupies: "I was paid, had the money credited to my account in a Saigon bank, ate Cantonese food, and inexorably gained weight. The more havoc I saw, the keener my reports became — a hyena feasting on carrion" (61). In the final two chapters of the book, however, he abandons his inertia and the moral decay of Saigon, returning to the ARVN camp. His subsequent decision to go on a search and destroy mission with Wain and the ARVN battalion engages him directly in the war and is structurally analogous to Fowler's betrayal of Pyle. Despite its personal anguish and later ironic ramifications, however, Fowler's act of involvement is logical and politically inevitable, enabling Greene to dramatize his condemnation of American involvement; by contrast, Kaiko's persona risks his own life on a dubious mission that is part of an American war effort that he rejects. In fact, he abandons the detachment of Fowler's reporter to adopt a role closer to Moore's combat correspondent, a role he imagines for himself after his rejection of a weapon on an earlier mission:

Perhaps I had chosen the wrong battlefield. I might have been with the Special Forces, creeping into the night jungle to find an enemy and fight him hand-to-hand and hack at him with knives. A knife, or some wire. Yes, these might have allowed a fuller knowledge of what killing means. (35)

Though he again refuses a rifle on this final mission, by moving into the jungle he hopes to encounter directly the ultimate reality of the war that transcends the moral blackness at its center: the obligation to kill or be killed. But even before actual contact with the enemy, in the middle of the jungle, Kaiko's correspondent has recognized the meaninglessness of the war for him, whether in the jungle or in Saigon, whether he is a participant risking his own life too or simply a spectator: "Everything seemed futile in that corroding quiet, among those glaring shafts of light. ... I might return alive and weave some words together that shed some light on my motives and ambitions, but the effort would be as meaningful as froth churned out behind a ship" (193-94). The outcome is both meaningless and prophetic: the South Vietnamese battalion simply disintegrates under the fire of an invisible enemy, and correspondent, Vietnamese commander, and American advisor flee deeper and deeper into the jungle as the novel ends.

The civic detachment of Greene and Kaiko was impossible for U.S. journalists and writers during the war. Indeed, all accounts of the war by Americans, whether fiction or non-fiction, were absorbed into the great national debate about Vietnam that should have preceded rather than followed the American government's intervention in Vietnam, as Schell notes (29). Among the most powerful contributions to that debate were the five reports on the war in 1967-68 offered in Michael

Herr's articles for *Esquire*. The last two, "The War Correspondent: A Reappraisal" and "High on War," appeared in 1970 and 1977 respectively, after Herr had left Vietnam. They suggest that Herr's work is not journalism in the normal sense but a meditation upon the war in which its American participants are reincarnated to become part of our national consciousness forever.

Herr's final reflection, a lengthier version of the 1977 article, forms the first section of Herr's 1977 book *Dispatches*, which collects the earlier work but fixes it in a single piece of literature, a six-chapter correspondent vision founded on combat reporting but going beyond it to provide a higher order of truth, "the kind of mythical war that you wanted to hear described" (241). Michael Stephens has categorized *Dispatches* among those works that present "facts told in fictional modes" (169), and important studies have paired it with *Going after Cacciato* or *The Quiet American* itself, not simply to suggest the contrast between non-fictional and fictional representations of the war but to illustrate their interchangeability (Jakaitis, Taylor). Like Greene's or Kaiko's novels, *Dispatches* itself incorporates but transcends the writer's earlier journalism; indeed, the original version of "Hell Sucks," Herr's first report from the war, is formally closer to a conventional journalist's record (as well as more conventionally patriotic) than Herr's later account in *Dispatches*. Indeed, while acknowledging that his title suggests a series of newspaper bulletins, Herr himself has denied such a definition of his work: "It's a strong and resonant word [*Dispatches*]. A classic word. I'm a writer, not a journalist. The word is the complete opposite of the book itself. . . . I consider it a rather formal history like Gibbon" (Mitgang 63). Gibbon might seem a deliberately outrageous parallel, yet like his predecessor's meditation on another historical event, Herr's book lies somewhere between objective facts and invented fiction.

Like *The Quiet American*, *Dispatches* focuses upon the narrator's subjective reflections as he presents the objective reality that he sees, overhears, and feels. The true map of the war is an internal one located in the soul and imagination of the correspondent, and it belies the outdated historical record that hangs in his Saigon apartment or the artificial military schemata imposed upon the countryside by the maps of MACV. The titles of the first and last chapters, "Breathing In" and "Breathing Out," suggest that Vietnam was a vivifying but also life-threatening inspiration that can only now be released. Inscribed on his soul for eight years, the vision that has stirred him can be offered to all of us now that our long national agony has found its termination in history: "The war ended, and then it really ended, the cities 'fell,' and I watched the choppers I'd loved dropping into the South China Sea as their Vietnamese pilots jumped clear, and one last chopper revved up, lifted off and flew out of my chest" (277).

Herr acknowledges the truth of his predecessor's vision when he

tries to locate the origin of the American war:

Maybe it was already over for us in Indochina when Alden Pyle's body washed up under the bridge at Dakao, his lungs all full of mud; maybe it caved in with Dien Bien Phu. But the first happened to the French, and Washington gave it no more substance than if Graham Greene had made it up too (51).

Later references to Greene's criticism of correspondents (180) and the Graham Greene Milk Bar (183) make him something of a mentor to Herr and his close friends among the correspondents.

By contrast, the film of *The Green Berets* "wasn't really about Vietnam, it was about Santa Monica" (200), and Herr may have felt the same about Moore's book. Curiously, however, his method of discovering the truth resembles Moore's rather than Greene's: dressed as a grunt, he tries to experience the war as they do and identifies closely with the troops themselves: "But of course we were intimate, I'll tell you how intimate: they were my guns, and I let them do it" (70). Ultimately, inevitably, he becomes a direct participant: "We covered each other, an exchange of services that worked all right until one night when I slid over to the wrong end of the story, propped up behind some sandbags at an airstrip in Can Tho with a .30-caliber automatic in my hands, firing cover for a four-man reaction team trying to get back in" (71). Like Moore's, Herr's grunt's-eye view of the conflict enables him to provide an account of the war's truth impossible for the Dialsoapers back in Saigon, the military and civilian officials assigned to recording progress, and for the bulk of correspondents, too lazy, ignorant, or innocent to question or go beyond official briefings. By contrast, Herr has nothing to ask General Westmoreland, who has nothing to tell him: "I came away feeling as though I'd just had a conversation with a man who touches a chair and says, 'This is a chair' " (231).

Like Green and Moore, therefore, Herr is critical of the optimistic or unrealistic falsity of most Vietnam journalism, and like Moore he finds the real war in the field: "Some journalists talked about no-story operations, but I never went on one." The grunts "all had a story, and in the war they were driven to tell it" (29-30). Unlike Moore's, however, Herr's stories do not cohere in some definitive moral judgment or ideological choice that would represent the "truth" about Vietnam. Herr does not even presume to understand the Vietnamese — an act "like trying to read the wind" — and what he sees of the American war continually surprises him and escapes final objective meaning, as others have noted (Kuberski, Taylor). Nor does he assume the detached moral certainty that lies behind Greene's vision of the war. His viewpoint is closer to Kaiko's, his consciousness stunned by the contradictions of an experience that he finds both glamorous and obscene, vivid and exhausting. Like Kaiko, he finds a

darkness at the center of the war that he can never assimilate or accept, though he identifies it more precisely: sudden and meaningless death, which not only reappears again and again in the stories that he overhears or experiences, but also constitutes the atmosphere within which Herr and his subjects breathe and live. That reality persists as re-imagined truth long after his own assignment is over:

I was once in such a bad head about it that I thought the dead had only been spared a great deal of pain. Debriefed by dreams, friends coming over from the other side to see that I was still alive. Sometimes they looked exactly as I'd known them, but standing in a strange light; the light told the story, and it didn't end like any war story I'd ever imagined. (272)

Vietnam military combat correspondents have produced some of the war's most significant fiction, including John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley* and Jack Fuller's *Fragments*. Such works indirectly recreate material that their authors may have reported or experienced and clearly illustrate the resources of realism to combine fiction and non-fiction, as James Gibson has noted (470). Only Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers* provides a correspondent vision analogous to its predecessors, however: like the author, the protagonist is a Marine combat correspondent, and action in the novel is directly observed and experienced from his viewpoint. *The Short-Timers* seems little influenced by Greene's work and never refers to it, but its debt to Herr's is considerable. Both writers were in Vietnam at the same time and were in many of the same places, which partially explains the many similarities between them.

Hasford's opening epigraph is from *Dispatches* — "I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods" — and his vision abundantly and startlingly dramatizes the irony coiled in Herr's formulation. *The Short-Timers* details the experiences of boys whose training and combat experiences have turned them into werewolves before they have become men, and they respond with a dark playfulness. After killing "Commie rats" in their hootches at Phu Bai, the Marines bury them "with full military honors" (70) and sing the Mickey Mouse song to close the ceremony. The deaths of others are registered by jokes that allow the living to forget them and carry on. "Tanks for the memories," the protagonist says to a Marine medic trying to collect the mess left by an American tank that has squashed the correspondent's camera man; forced to perform a mercy killing of his best friend in order to save himself and the rest of the squad, he pronounces a final benediction over the corpse they are leaving behind: "Man-oh-man, Cowboy looks like a bag of leftovers from a V.F.W. barbecue. Of course, I've got nothing against dead people; why, some of my best friends are dead" (178-79). Hasford's correspondent is called "Joker," and, as Michael Stephens has

pointed out, *The Short-Timers* treats the war as a horrible joke, borrowing some of its tone from *Catch-22*. Read in isolation, such passages *are* funny, but in the context of the horrors catalogued in the novel they invariably keep the reader in a state of shock rather than amusement.

As it follows Joker's career from basic training at Parris Island ("The Spirit of the Bayonet") to reporting on the battle of Hue ("Body Count") to a jungle operation outside the Khe Sanh perimeter ("Grunts"), Hasford's book illustrates Herr's acid analysis of the Marines' well-deserved reputation for courage: "the Corps came to be called by many the finest instrument ever devised for the killing of young Americans" (108). Death was the ultimate truth about Vietnam for Herr, and Hasford's vision saturates us both extensively and intensively in its outward details. Each of its three sections ends with a gruesome, grotesque end for one of Joker's Marine comrades — a recruit, a camera man, and a grunt squad leader — each corresponding to the successive stages of Joker's initiation into the war. The title of the middle section describes the action of the novel generally, and it resonates with other Vietnam discourse: American attrition tactics, post-battlefield accounting for MACV (one form of military "reporting"), the title of an earlier Vietnam novel by William Turner Huggett. But Hasford's subject is largely Herr's, and *The Short-Timers* presents a correspondent vision of Herr's subject from the inside, since Joker must ultimately kill or be killed when he finds himself in contact with the enemy.

A recurrent ironic joke among Hasford's grunts is the irrelevance of popular cultural representations of the experience they are going through: "Is that you, John Wayne? Is this me?" Joker thinks to himself as he is dressed down by a colonel in "starched barracks cover" after the correspondent has been through the hell of Hue. There are many such references to the legendary American hero; indeed, the first scene in Vietnam finds Joker and his fellow soldiers watching *The Green Berets*, "a Hollywood soap opera about the love of guns. ... the audience of Marines roars with laughter. This is the funniest movie we have seen in a long time." Indeed, *The Short-Timers* is a startling contrast to Moore's vision of dedicated, patriotic, and victorious Americans certain of their mission, accompanied by a combat correspondent who shares their beliefs. Joker is a true soldier-reporter, going beyond Moore's involvement as a combatant, but he presents a world of absurdity and waste in which traditional ideals (e.g., "Marines never abandon their dead or wounded") are treated ironically or abandoned and must be replaced by more bitter realities ("I'm glad it's him and not me"). The inability to articulate experiences that are difficult to understand or accept is mutually understood by the warriors themselves in the repeated, automatic codes that the Marines use to register what they have learned: "There it is," "Payback is a motherfucker," "Get some," and the rest. In

one of his few moments of meditation, Joker considers how he has come to deal with death as he guards Rafter Man's mangled body: "After my first confirmed kill I began to understand that it was not necessary to understand. What you do, you become. The insights of one moment are blotted out by the events of the next." The Marines kill their enemies effectively but without feeling that they are doing it for any positive purpose. In fact, they admire and respect the North Vietnamese as effective killers like themselves and can even cheer an N.V.A. grunt who brings down an American gunship (125-26).

The utterly desolating vision offered by Hasford becomes his "true" report on the war, avoiding the attempts by earlier writers like Greene or Moore to judge it or, indeed, to understand it at all in any discursive sense, avoiding also the official accounts required of him as a Marine combat correspondent. That journalism is recognized as an untruth within the novel itself, as even Joker's supervising officer recognizes: "In war, truth is the first casualty. Correspondents are more effective than grunts. Grunts merely kill the enemy. All that matters is what we write, what we photograph. History may be written with blood and iron but it's printed with ink"(52).

Written in the present tense, Hasford's account has the immediacy of a personal journal, but the frequent use of "we" as the central viewpoint makes it representative of the grunts' otherwise unarticulated testimony as a whole. By presenting it, Hasford allows Joker to reject his professional role in order to render a true account. At the same time, he also suggests in the correspondent's brutal and detached tone, as well as his rejection of understanding, a crippling of vision that the war has made almost natural in the soldier. Ultimately, Joker's account combines the cynicism of Greene with the direct combat involvement of Moore. And curiously enough, despite his rejection of Moore's ideological premises and false tone, Hasford's novel is as cartoon-like as *The Green Berets*, its American characters as uniformly cynical and nihilistic as Moore's are cheerfully and energetically committed to their cause.

Full Metal Jacket more successfully conveys Hasford's vision to the screen than was possible with Moore's *Green Berets*. The screenplay, written by both Hasford and his mentor, Herr, softens the novel's bleakness slightly, and the film encourages us to feel some sympathy for its characters, a reaction that Hasford's novel nearly stifles. Unlike *The Green Berets*, the film retains the correspondent viewpoint fitfully in Joker's intermittent voice-over, just as Fowler's perspective was imitated in the film of *The Quiet American*. Such a narrative would be less possible with the visions of Kaiko and Herr, whose correspondents' imaginations are as much the theater of conflict as the war outside: both works dramatize the difficulty or impossibility of understanding the war as much as they present a true account of its contradictions. Nonetheless, all five of these writers who went to Vietnam to cover the war found, as Herr did, that the war covered

them as well, imposing upon each a vision that conflicts with conventional journalistic accounts or official explanations.

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