

Douglas Sun

“Whatever Else, I’d Loved It There Too”
Persuasive Strategy in Michael Herr’s Dispatches

“Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.

—Edmund Burke,
*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our
Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*

CAMPBELL: There’s another emotion associated with art, which is not of the beautiful but of the sublime. What we call monsters can be experienced as sublime. . . . [One] mode of the sublime is of prodigious energy, force, and power. I’ve known a number of people who were in Central Europe during the Anglo-American saturation bombings of their cities—and several have described this inhuman experience as not only terrible but in a measure sublime.

MOYERS: I once interviewed a veteran of the Second World War. I talked to him about his experience at the Battle of the Bulge, in that bitter winter when the surprise German assault was about to succeed. I said, “As you look back on it, what was it?” And he said, “It was sublime.”

CAMPBELL: And so the monster comes through as a kind of god. . . . By monster, I mean some horrendous presence or

apparition that explodes all your standards for harmony, order, and ethical conduct.

—Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers,
The Power of Myth

In “Hell Sucks,” the first of three articles that he wrote for *Esquire* on the Vietnam War, Michael Herr bookends his account of the battle for Hue with passages describing his friendship with a shadowy American officer to whom he refers only as “the General.” The General is involved in covert operations of some kind—hence the need to keep his identity vague—but is nonetheless intimate with the American press corps in Saigon and drops in at Herr’s apartment from time to time. The closing passage of the article describes a conversation that they have not long after the beginning of the Tet Offensive, at a time when dead bodies, friend and enemy alike, are piling up. It is a wrenching experience for Herr (as it would be for any normal human being) to witness such suffering and destruction, and he tells the General so. The General is sympathetic. “Yes. Of course,” he says. “It’s terrible. . . . But . . . [i]f you hate this all so much, why do you stay?” (Herr “Hell” 1). Herr admits to his reader that this is a good question, that his friend had him there. He pauses to think it over. Then he replies, “Because, General, it’s the only war we’ve got” (Herr “Hell” 1).

This is a wonderful scene, and it is regrettable that Herr chose to leave it out when he padded and recast his Vietnam journalism into *Dispatches*. For it embodies the central point of the book: that the experience of war (and especially this war) is ultimately so overwhelming that it exceeds the bounds of ethics and logic; that is to say, to judge it in terms of right or wrong, good or evil, even in terms of making sense or not is to misunderstand it at some level. Instead, Herr’s experience of the Vietnam War seems to have opened him onto the ultimate mystery—the terrible, unfathomable, and unspeakably sexy mystery of life and death. For him, that is what makes the experience so compelling, the secret of its appeal. To use Joseph Campbell’s metaphor, becoming a part of the war is to come face-to-face with a monster that comes through as a kind of god, a power beyond human ken. It is sublime. At the same time, to

survive it is to become an initiate in a sort of cult, someone who possesses exclusive knowledge by virtue of the fact that he was there and got out with his life. It is this facet of the Vietnam experience that Herr addresses at the end of *Dispatches* when he says that after he returned home, "Some people found it distasteful or confusing if I told them that, whatever else, I'd loved it there too" (Herr 268).

It is also worth noting about this scene that it shows Herr at the top of his form as a literary journalist. He makes a point through narrating this incident, but only because his reportage captures and conveys plenty of significant bits of information that bear out that point: details that establish setting, action, mood, and character, orchestrated to bring out the awful sublimity of what it was like to be in Vietnam during this war. This wealth of concrete data brings out his vision of his subject by hooking our readerly imaginations, giving us material through which we can reconstruct action in context; this allows us to understand narrated action as Herr wants us to understand it. The very concreteness of the information that Herr accumulates through his reportage also lends it the quality of evidence. Because he can quote directly or describe an action with precision or give details of setting, his point appears all the more credible to us because, it seems, he has taken the trouble to record things accurately. This scene from "Hell Sucks" shows Herr doing what a literary journalist is supposed to do: make sense of a real-life external subject using factual information gathered through skillful reporting, then present that data to the reader, shaping it with literary methods of presentation to convey a point.

This narrated conversation with the General is all the more remarkable and its absence from *Dispatches* all the more lamentable because Herr does not always rise to that level in his book. There are occasions when he will make an assertion of some kind, usually regarding the awful sublimity of the war, but without any kind of descriptive data to back it up. He gives us nothing that we can reconstruct through an act of imagination and therefore, no concrete proof that what he is asserting just might be objectively true. At moments like this, Herr's argument seems affected and melodramatic rather than convincing and moving. It has no content. As a result, *Dispatches* is an object lesson in the importance of precise

information, be it a quotation, significant action, or detail, to literary journalism. When he presents such concrete data, Herr conveys a persuasive vision of the Vietnam War as a real-life experience so overwhelming that it is beyond the power of language and logic to comprehend it; when such data is absent, his argument is hollow and we are inspired, more than anything else, to wonder, "So what's all the fuss about?"

No aspect of *Dispatches* shows the importance of concrete data more clearly than Herr's exploration of the relationship between descriptive language and the phenomenon to which it is being applied. It has no content when he simply tosses out unexplained slang and jargon as a substitute for description, as in this brief dissertation on the American military's ability to move things through the air: "Airmobility, dig it, you weren't going anywhere. It made you feel safe, it made you feel Omni, but it was only a stunt, technology" (Herr *Dispatches* 12). Here we have a colloquialism, "dig it," and another slang term, "Omni," that, from its capitalization, seems to have become sufficiently formalized as a figure of speech that it can be called borderline jargon. The former is just a throwaway and the latter obviously means "omnipotent." In using them, Herr implies that the Vietnam experience requires non-standard, specialized language to describe it. Such a point would presumably reinforce his argument that the experience can only be understood by a select few who have first-hand knowledge of it. But without concrete details on which to fix our readerly act of imaginative re-creation, there seems to be no experience for him to convey to us. He does not substantiate his own assertion. The language stales and it feels like Herr is tossing it off just to sound hip.

When he gives us concrete data that will allow us imaginatively to reconstruct action, speech, and situation, however, citation or quotation of slang or jargon becomes a way of demonstrating that the descriptive power of language was ultimately unable to encompass the Vietnam experience. Concrete detail, framed within the context of dramatic structure, allows us to reconstruct speech and action; we then pause and wonder just why someone said something or took an action at a certain point in time. For instance, in the "Hell Sucks" chapter of *Dispatches* (which is adapted from the *Esquire* piece of the same name), Herr describes himself riding toward the fighting in Hue in a truck full of Marines:

Going in, there were sixty of us packed in a deuce-and-a-half, one of eight trucks moving in convoy from Phu Bai, bringing in over 300 replacements for the casualties taken in the earliest fighting south of the Perfume River. We sat there trying to keep it up for each other, grinning at the bad weather and the discomfort, sharing the first fear, glad we weren't riding point or closing the rear. The houses we passed so slowly made good cover for snipers, and one B-40 rocket could have made casualties of all of us. . . . And there was a Marine correspondent, Sergeant Dale Dye. . . . He was rolling his eyes around and saying, 'Oh yes, oh yes, Charlie's got his shit together here, this will be *bad*. . ..'" (*Dispatches* 76-77)

Herr's scene-setting implicates us in terms of time and place. We become witnesses to a narrated action as we read this passage. When we get to the part about Sgt. Dye, we can reconstruct what he says through Herr's direct quotation. And when we "hear" him, we cannot help but wonder, "What does he mean by that, exactly?" Of course, having your "shit together" is a widely-recognized slang expression for being purposeful or well-prepared, but here, it seems as much a way of dancing around something too terrifying or overwhelming to comprehend in detail as much as an exploitation of a common frame of reference. The detail of setting about passing the houses that could provide good sniper cover creates a mood of certain but unseen danger. Here, the phrase functions as what one might call an indefinite signifier. Herr, by the act of quoting Dye without explanation, leaves us with the question of how the NVA and VC have "got their shit together:" Do they have recoilless rifles sticking out of every window? Have they acquired squadrons of ground-attack aircraft, unbeknownst to our side? Anticipating the battle he is about to enter, Dye obviously knows something but cannot or will not say exactly what it is. His vagueness suggests a failure of the expressive power of language in the face of something it cannot contain.

A bit later in his account of the Hue battle, Herr describes himself watching the fighting from a discreet distance as the Navy and Marines destroy the ancient Annamese capital in order to save it:

One Marine next to me was saying that it was just a damned shame, all them poor people, all them nicelooking houses, they even had a Shell station there. He was looking at the black napalm blasts and the wreckage. . . . 'Looks like the Imperial City's had the schnitz,' he said. (*Dispatches* 79)

Once again, here is a direct quotation that centers around a slang expression, although "had the schnitz" is less popular than having your "shit together." And again, Herr suggests that the speaker is using slang as a tangential way of getting at an issue because the issue itself is too overwhelming to be approached directly through language. Elsewhere in this chapter, Herr makes it clear that the destruction of Hue was terrible to behold and the unnamed Marine here seems to be under no illusions either. Direct quotation gives us a nugget of information on which to fix, and the continuous use of scene allows us to reconstruct the horrific context in which the Marine makes his remark. This match between a precise example of an indefinite signifier and the overwhelming context in which it is set suggests that Herr wants to show through this quotation that language inevitably fails in the face of a spectacle like the Hue battle.

The most forceful of all the examples of indefinite signifiers in *Dispatches*—as well as the vaguest—comes from a Marine who accosts Herr as the latter is about to fly out of Hue:

he'd been locked in that horror for nearly two weeks while I'd shuttled in and out for two or three days at a time. . . . [H]e grabbed my sleeve . . . violently . . . His face was all but blank with exhaustion, but he had enough feeling left to say, "Okay, man, you go on, you go on out of here you cocksucker, but I mean it, you tell it! You tell it, man. If you don't tell it. . . ." (220-21)

Without a direct antecedent—and there is none here—you can't get a signifier any more indefinite than "it." The use of the word forces us to stop for a moment and think about what "it" is. We are forced to refer to the overall context in which Herr places this anecdote and only then does it become apparent that "it" is the experience of the war. This quotation occurs within the context of a scene that takes place in the midst of a prolonged battle. In turn, the scene is part of a larger work dealing with

the nature of the war of which this battle was a part. But again, the speaker is being vague when precision is possible. What emerges most clearly from this incident is the force of the Marine's emotion: his urgency, even rage, despite his apparent physical exhaustion, suggests the terrible stresses that must be balled up inside him. "It," then, fits Burke's definition of the sublime: a source of "the strongest emotion the mind is capable of producing." So the two strongest impressions that we get from this incident are of language used in an intentionally indefinite way and of intense emotion produced in someone who has participated in the thing that has been vaguely described. Together, they produce the single impression for which the Marine uses an indefinite signifier because "it" is something so overwhelming that language cannot cope with it. "It" is also a kind of secret knowledge, something that can only be possessed in whole by those who experience it first-hand, but which he is urging, even threatening Herr to communicate to the outside world. Quotation of indefinite signifiers is not Herr's only way of getting at the sublime heart of his subject; citing jargon in a context that shows it to be inexpressive has a role as well. At the beginning of the "Khe Sanh" chapter, Herr tells the story of a young Marine whose tour is up, but who finds it impossible to make himself board a plane that would fly him out of the beleaguered Khe Sanh firebase. The story in and of itself is a potent symbol of how addictive the experience of war can become, but Herr adds this kicker at the end:

Something more was working on the young Marine and [his sergeant] knew what it was. In this war they called it "acute environmental reaction," but Vietnam has spawned a jargon of such delicate locutions that it's often impossible to know even remotely the thing described. Most Americans would rather be told that their son is undergoing acute environmental reaction than hear that he is suffering from shell shock, because they could no more cope with the fact of shell shock than they could with the reality of what had happened to this boy during his five months at Khe Sanh.

Say that his legs just weren't working. It was clearly a medical matter, and the sergeant was going to have to see that something was done about it. (97)

Herr seems to come to a neat conclusion about the best way to describe the young man's condition at the end of the first paragraph of this passage: it's shell shock, he appears to say, plain and simple. None of this DOD obfuscation for Herr. But then he subverts that assessment by adding yet another description in the first sentence of the next paragraph: "Say that his legs just weren't working." Now, is that the best way to describe the Marine's condition? He does not say; indeed, who is to say at all, given that Herr winds up endorsing none of these explanations? He leaves us with a string of three possible ways of describing what was going on inside that young man, and he settles on no single one as accurate. Herr has found a particular individual who exemplifies a phenomenon and the fact that no one seems to have found a satisfactory way to describe that phenomenon is obviously significant. It suggests that language is not able to describe what the experience of war has wrought inside this particular soldier.

But perhaps the ultimate example that Herr gives us of how war is a thing beyond the power of the human tongue to articulate involves the direct quotation of the absence of language. It comes at the end of the strange tale of Tim Page, the freelance photographer who was badly wounded twice in Vietnam, only to return to the field for more action. After Page was wounded a third time, however, he left the war for good. He was crippled by shrapnel that lodged in his brain, and it was widely assumed that he was at that point, to use Commodore Andrew Foote's phrase, glad to be done with guns and war. However, while recuperating in Saigon, Page tells Herr that:

One day a letter came from a British publisher, asking him to do a book whose working title would be "Through with War" and whose purpose would be to once and for all "take the glamour out of war." Page couldn't get over it.

"Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do that? Go and take the glamour out of a Huey, go take the glamour out of a Sheridan. . . . Ohhhh, war is good for you, you can't take the glamour out of that. It's like trying to take the glamour out of sex, trying to take the glamour out of the Rolling

Stones.” He was really speechless, working his hands up and down to emphasize the sheer insanity of it.

“I mean, you *know* that, it *just can't be done!*” We both shrugged and laughed, and Page looked very thoughtful for a moment. “The very *idea!*” he said. “Ohhh, what a laugh! Take the bloody *glamour out* of bloody war!” (*Dispatches* 265-66)

Page is amazed at and exasperated with the idea that one could “take the bloody glamour out of bloody war.” But notice that he cannot articulate why war is so glamorous. One would expect Page to marshal some kind of argument to refute his would-be publisher here, a summation of why, as he puts it, “war is *good* for you.” Clearly, he is trying to do so. But all he can do is sputter. From Herr’s use of italics, we can deduce that Page’s very best, most forceful argument consists of merely emphasizing certain words in exasperation, and they are simple words at that: “*know. . . can't be done. . . idea!*” Tim Page, whom Herr has already described in this chapter on his press colleagues as a certified live wire, finds that when he must articulate the attraction that war holds for him, he is at an uncharacteristic loss. Direct quotation shows us how completely language fails him. It is as if the experience that Page wishes to capture cannot be contained by words, and so he clings to a few simple ones, hoping that his argument will carry the day if he invests those words with enough emotional force.

When Herr uses direct quotation to explore the relationship between the Vietnam experience and attempts to describe it through language, he can point up the vast gap between the bland vagueness of the language used and the overwhelming nature of the experience itself. The concreteness of direct quotation also helps persuade us of the validity of his argument. They are records of specific thoughts and actions by specific people; they are evidence that Herr isn’t just making this up, imagining the content of his argument instead of recording empirically valid insight. Framed as they are by scenes, these bits of information spark our imaginative re-creation of a described action and the circumstances under which it took place; this imaginative re-creation allows us to understand the action as Herr wants us to. The presence of such concrete external details also enables Herr to become a conduit between

us and an external reality, whereas in the first instance cited, his dissertation on airmobility, his use of slang and jargon seems like something he pulled out of his self-indulgent mind.

Herr's narrative stance as a privileged witness, a Vietnam "insider" who nonetheless has his narrative focus directed outward toward his subject for the benefit of his readers, serves him well when he tries to demonstrate the sublimity of war in another way—through esoteric anecdotes that are meant to jar us into comprehending the incomprehensibility of the incomprehensible. *Dispatches* is full of anecdotes; in a way, all it is is a collection of story-fragments grouped around a common theme. Herr must have come away from Vietnam with his skull crammed with stories and telling incidents engraved into his gray matter beyond erasure. Besides the fact that he witnessed so much, people were always telling him stories because he was a journalist. They assumed he needed something to write about, or just wanted their stories told. Many of these stories are easy to understand, like that of the Marine at Khe Sanh who calls out to Herr: "Hey man! You want a story, man? Here man, write this: 'I'm up there on [Hill] 881, this was in May, I'm just up there walkin' the ridgeline like a movie star and this Zip jumps up smack into me, lays his AK-47 fucking right *into* me, only he's so *amazed* at my *cool* I got my whole clip off 'fore he knew how to thank me for it. Grease one'" (Herr *Dispatches* 77). Peter Brooks has written that stories demand by their very nature that we make sense of them, and the self-aggrandizing point of this young man's tale is not hard to grasp.

But not every story is so easy to read. Herr's description of another Marine at Khe Sanh, a whimsical young private named Mayhew, begins with Mayhew singing the first line of the Oscar Meyer hot dog jingle over and over to amuse a companion. When he spots Herr's credential tag, he breaks out in song again: "I'd-a rather be—a Oscar Meyer . . . weenieeee," he sang. "You can write that, man, tell 'em all I said so" (*Dispatches* 123). So Mayhew's outburst can also be construed as a "story" for Herr to "write." But it makes no sense. One could argue that Mayhew really means that he would rather be anything than what he is now, but his actions elsewhere in this chapter suggest that he actually gets a charge out of being a frontline soldier. Besides, it is clear from his other actions in this scene that Mayhew is singing just to be a goof, and a famous advertising

jingle is something that could be pulled out of thin air and serve his purpose as well as anything. The contextualizing processes of scene-setting and interlocking significant information give us no clues, except to point up the absence of clues. So this particular story (such as it is) defies our need to find meaning in it. At the very least, it forces us to stop in our mental tracks and thinks about why Herr has included it if it is, in fact, indecipherable.

More to the point, there is the story that a hardened Army veteran tells Herr

. . . as one-pointed and resonant as any war story I ever heard, it took me a year to understand it:

“Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened.”

I waited for the rest, but it seemed not to be that kind of story; when I asked him what had happened he just looked like he felt sorry for me, fucked if he'd waste time telling stories to anyone as dumb as I was. (*Dispatches* 4-5)

Like Herr in his role as participant in this story event we, too, wait for an explication and are left just as bereft when none is forthcoming. As we read this passage, we play the role that Herr played then, while he, having since come to understand this anecdote by the time of his narrating, assumes with us the role that the soldier played with him. Here scene, direct quotation and self-focalized narration combine to allow us to reconstruct his experience of receiving the story. In between the time of the story and his time of narrating, Herr has become an initiate into the fearful mystery of war just as that veteran was, and it is his part now to relay that story to us. We may understand it a year after our time of reading or we may not. But we aren't going to get any more clues from Herr because that is all there is to the anecdote.

This story appears to have no point, and yet Herr assures us that it is “resonant” and to the point. It is an enigma to an outsider because it is not supposed to be unpacked by the conventional tools of logic and deduction that we use to understand unfamiliar stories. It forces us to stop in our mental tracks and realize its illogic, but that is the way Herr intends it

to work. The soldier who told it to him originally may have thought Herr was stupid for not getting it right away, but Herr, in his turn, must know from his own experience how the anecdote will play with an audience that is not prepared for it. He knows that it will stop us in our tracks because it did the same to him. In this sense, its function is not unlike that of a *koan*, a Zen parable or utterance that often seems nonsensical. The purpose of a *koan*, as described by the editors of *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, is to “wake up, shock and sensitize” the listener (de Bary 348). Its enigmatic quality forces the listener to “abandon his usual thought processes” (de Bary 363) and consider the possibility of entirely different ways of looking at the world. And so it is with this story from Vietnam: Herr’s point is the incident that the soldier told him is so utterly divorced from ordinary, everyday civilian life that ordinary, everyday ways of looking at the world must be discarded before it can be understood. Once we achieve such transcendence (that is, if we ever do), then we can begin to comprehend what happened in the war.

Two incidents, both from the “Khe Sanh” chapter, further illustrate this point. Neither of them are “war stories” told to Herr, like the taut masterpiece cited above, but they are telling incidents witnessed by him and which he tells to us. In one, Herr records an exchange between Mayhew and his aforementioned companion, who goes by the *nom de guerre* Day Trapper, as the three of them take cover from an NVA bombardment. Mayhew boasts that he is never scared, even under fire, to which an agitated Day Tripper replies:

“Oh no. Three nights ago you was callin’ out for your momma while them fuckers was hittin’ our wire.”

“Boo-sheit! I ain’t gettin’ hit in Vietnam.”

“Oh no? Okay, motherfucker, why not?”

“Cause,” Mayhew said, “it don’t exist.” It was an old joke, but this time he wasn’t laughing. (*Dispatches* 133)

“I ain’t gettin’ hit in Vietnam ’cause it don’t exist.” This wisecrack tells us something, of course, about how human beings can cope with intense fear by denying the existence of a threat. But although there is a discernible point to Herr’s inclusion of this incident, it also stops us in our mental tracks

for a moment because the wisecrack is superficially illogical: *What do you mean, Vietnam doesn't exist?* Thanks to Herr's use of direct quotation, framed by scene-setting in terms of a chronology of action, we "hear" this dialogue sequentially. It quickly builds to an expected payoff, but when Mayhew delivers that payoff, it doesn't make sense. The fact that Herr calls it "an old joke" makes it seem even more esoteric because a civilian reader would probably find it unfamiliar and not recognize it as such. In fact, it is an old *soldier's* joke. Therefore, it becomes a piece of secret knowledge, shared only by members of a privileged group. Like a Zen *koan*, this incident jars us; it suggests that logic will not work in comprehending the situation at hand and forces us to search for an alternative worldview that will comprehend it.

The second incident occurs shortly thereafter in the narrative, when Herr describes a pesky NVA sniper who scattered machine gun fire across a part of the Khe Sanh perimeter. Neither small arms, nor artillery, nor helicopter attack could get rid of him. Finally, napalm was dropped on his concealed position. But when the smoke from the hideous liquid fire cleared, "the sniper popped up and fired off a single round, and the Marines in the trenches cheered. They called him Luke the Gook, and after that no one wanted anything to happen to him" (Herr *Dispatches* 134). This story also has a discernible point, an insight into how footsoldiers can relate to each other even when they are mortal enemies. But it, too, forces us to stop in our tracks because it seems at first to make no sense. When the Marines cheer the sniper, it seems like an illogical action: why would they be rooting for a man who presents a clear and immediate danger to them, who could kill any one of them incautious enough to show his head above the sandbags? The answer that Herr implies, by way of jolting us with this *koan*-like story, is that the experience of war operates by its own set of rules, and to understand those rules we must adopt an entirely new way of thinking.

So Herr develops theme in *Dispatches* in part by playing a sort of Zen master to us, administering his 'Nam *koans* in the hope that they will dissolve our rigid civilian ways of thinking and enlighten us. This high priest-teacher role is a function of reporting. He transcribes a quote or records a significant action—a concrete bit of information—and frames it within the

context of a scene to spur our imaginative recreation of speech or an event. Reading these “stories” as mini-narratives forces us to process that information sequentially, and they build toward that climactic moment that flummoxes us. In the case of the Army veteran’s esoteric tale, one could call it reporting on the cheap, perhaps, since he is basically recycling someone else’s narration, but it is reporting nonetheless; it is simply a way of pulling in information that the reporter himself would have no way of gaining as an eyewitness.

There is a third way in which Herr develops his argument. It consists of nothing more than simple descriptions that suggest that the war in Vietnam was a transcendental experience. These descriptions are not necessarily particular or concrete, and sometimes they refer only to sensations that whiz through Herr’s eternal soul, but they function as symbolic details. For instance, again in the “Khe Sanh” chapter, Herr describes a sensation or physical object in terms of both components of a binary opposition. He does this twice during a long description of the terrain around Khe Sanh, the Highlands of Vietnam, where

sudden, contrary mists offered sinister bafflement. . . .
[T]he silences were interrupted only by the sighing of cattle or the rotorthud of a helicopter, the one sound I know that is both sharp and dull at the same time. The Puritan belief that Satan dwelt in Nature could have been born here, where even on the coldest, freshest mountaintops you could smell jungle and that tension between rot and genesis that all jungles give off. (99)

Here are two binary oppositions reconciled in descriptions of single things: the single noise that a helicopter makes is “sharp and dull at the same time;” the single jungle reeks of both “rot and genesis” simultaneously. Strictly speaking, these descriptions are oxymorons, since it defies logic to assert that a thing possesses both a certain quality and the opposite of that quality at the same time. But, as we have already seen, Herr is trying to develop a vision of the Vietnam experience that cannot be properly understood using logic alone. These self-negating descriptions are not “mistakes,” but ways of getting at a transcendent experience. As Joseph Campbell put it:

Everything we know is within the terminology of the concepts of being and non-being, many and single, true and untrue. We always think in terms of opposites. But God, the ultimate, is beyond the pairs of opposites, that is all there is to it. . . . I and you, this and that, true and untrue—every one of them has its opposite. But mythology suggests that behind that duality is a singularity over which this plays like a shadow game. “Eternity is in love with the productions of time,” says the poet Blake. (49)

In other words, the material world in which we live is fractured into binary oppositions by its very nature, but the eternal dimension—God, if you will—is singular and whole. A way of getting at that singularity, then, is to reconcile the binary opposites of the material world so that they can be seen as two halves of the same whole. This is what Herr is trying to do with these descriptions: by folding opposites into each other to produce a singularity, he produces metaphors that suggest Vietnam was a preternatural experience, a way of opening out onto a transcendent reality. The God that Herr sees is the God of War, fell and horrific. It can be perceived in a detail as small as the “sharp thud” of a helicopter rotor, or it can come to you as you stare out at the pulsing, throbbing Vietnamese jungle and perceive that it reeks of the ultimate binary opposition—“rot and genesis,” death and birth.

Strictly speaking, these descriptions are rather less than concrete bits of information. They are not precisely fixed in terms of time and location. They are not records of speech, action, or significant detail. But then, Herr’s purpose here is to describe a more general phenomenon, and for that he doesn’t really need to be precise to be effective. This passage is a chunk from a discrete section of “Khe Sanh” that is meant to set the scene for the rest of the chapter by characterizing the terrain around the firebase. But in setting the scene for the whole chapter, this section makes a point all its own: that the Highlands of Vietnam are “spooky, unbearably spooky” (Herr *Dispatches* 99). To demonstrate this, Herr uses a story told to him by photographer Sean Flynn. But Herr must in turn set the scene for this incident—contextualize it—with general description, and he uses the binary oppositions as part of this

process. Within this section, then, the binary oppositions are meant to inflect our understanding of this incident; they are part of the windup to the pitch:

Sean Flynn . . . told me that he once stood on the vantage of a firebase up there [in the Highlands] with a battalion commander. It was at dusk, those ghastly mists were fuming out of the valley floor, ingesting light. The colonel squinted at the distance for a long time. Then he swept his hand very slowly along the line of jungle, across the hills and ridges running into Cambodia (the Sanctuary!). "Flynn," he said. "Somewhere out there . . . is the *entire First NVA Division*." (Herr *Dispatches* 102)

Indeed: spooky, unbearably spooky. The pitch itself contains precise information: time of day, location (more or less), identity of the actors, detailed description of action, direct quotation of speech. So within this section of the chapter, the binary opposites are part of scene-setting, tools for developing interpretive argument, not the argument itself. But as part of a larger whole, they function as symbolic details in that they carry densely-packed insights that feed into the larger point Herr drives at in *Dispatches*.

There is one last binary pair in "Khe Sanh," and it occurs in a passage in which Herr comes right out and describes combat as a supernatural experience:

It came back the same way every time, dreaded and welcome, balls and bowels turning over together, your senses working like strobes, free-falling all the way down to the essences and then flying out again in a rush to focus, like the first strong twinge of tripping after an infusion of psilocybin, reaching in at the point of calm and springing all the joy and all the dread *ever* known, ever known by *everyone* who ever lived, unutterable in its speeding brilliance, touching all the edges and then passing, as though it had been controlled from outside, by a god or by the moon. (*Dispatches* 144)

Here, two adjectives, dreaded and welcome, are opposed against each other and reconciled into one thing, the sensation

of being in a combat situation. Even more explicit are the mimetic sentence structure (the rush of clauses, trying to represent the rush of thoughts and sensations through his mind) and intentionally sloppy syntax (what does he mean by “touching all the edges and passing?” what edges? and passing what?) But that’s the point: there is no chance to pause and tidy up the details of thought at such a moment. In addition, he uses two main figurations: “like . . . tripping after an infusion of psilocybin” and “as though . . . controlled . . . by a god or by the moon.” The second simile, the reference to psilocybin, may seem gratuitous, a casual drug reference in a book with a number of casual drug references. The third simile in this passage comes right out and makes the point that we have seen Herr getting at more indirectly: that combat is an experience that can be described and understood in terms of encountering a supernatural power that has complete control over you and your environment. His reference to the moon reinforces this point; the moon has been figured at various points in human history both as a source of divine power and as a cause of madness, a loss of control over oneself. But on the other hand, psilocybin is a hallucinogen, the sort of substance heralded by those who believe in it as a way into a transcendental experience. The simile is apt, therefore: combat, like a hallucinogen, is a way of achieving another level of consciousness, a shamanistic trip that treads the line between mystical ecstasy and disabling breakdown. To put it in terms that Burke would recognize, war produces in those who have known it the strongest emotions of which the mind is capable of feeling; it is sublime.

These details can be considered significant data in that they are a composite reflection of Herr’s own emotional sensations while under fire. They are articulated through second-person point-of-view instead of the first-person, but it is not hard to see that this is simply an easy way to try to displace his own sensations onto his reader. A large part of Herr’s subject is not simply the external world, but what a particular external world—the world of war—does to the people who live in it day after day. He goes to external sources for information about this particular aspect: the “shell-shocked” Marine at Khe Sanh, Herr’s colleague Tim Page, and the Marines who give the rousing cheer to “Luke the Gook” are all examples that we have already discussed. But for the minutiae of the experience, the

gut-level details of what it's like to be under fire, Herr is as good a source as any. Also, his overall take on Vietnam assumes that there is an informational role for his personal experience. There is a very definite dividing line, he says, between the initiate and the outsider, those who have undergone the experience and those who have not. The knowledge that the initiate possesses is so secret and exclusive that the outsider must adopt an entire new way of thinking in order to comprehend it. Herr is an insider playing an intermediary role to bridge the gap between the two, and as such his own experiences become a fit topic for examination.

Readers, however, could be forgiven for regarding Herr's journalistic instincts as somewhat less than infallible. His reportage in *Dispatches* is, at times, unforgivably lax. When he fails to give us concrete details to stimulate our imagination and convince us that his vision is accurate, his stylistic mannerisms—the 60s slang, the drawn-out sentence structure, the frequent use of second-person point-of-view—seem affected and melodramatic. The emotion that he is so intent on invoking with his style isn't justified by the content that he presents. An excellent example of how Herr can let style overwhelm content occurs in "Breathing In," the first chapter of *Dispatches*:

Mythopathic moment; *Fort Apache*, where Henry Fonda as the new colonel says to John Wayne, the old hand, "We saw some Apache as we neared the Fort," and John Wayne says, "If you saw them, sir, they weren't Apache." But this colonel is obsessed, brave like a maniac, not very bright, a West Point aristo wounded in his career and his pride, posted out to some Arizona shithole with only marginal consolation: he's professional and this is a war, the only war we've got. So he gives the John Wayne information a pass and half his command gets wiped out. More a war movie than a Western, Nam paradigm, Vietnam, not a movie, no jive cartoon either where the characters get smacked around and electrocuted and dropped from heights, flattened out and frizzed black and broken like a dish, then up again and whole and back in the game, "Nobody dies," as someone said in another war movie. (47-48)

This insight does not fit precisely into his vision of Vietnam as a sublime and preternatural experience, but Herr is right in that this moment in his narrative ought to be “mythopathic” and an excellent symbol. But it tells us very little because he tells us so little about it. This is not meant to be a general description; it begs for precision. But where was this, when did it happen, who was in the audience and how did they react to the characters on the screen? The basic elements of setting the scene for human action—the when, where, and who, are absent. Without them, the event described is hazy and abstract. This leaves us with hard questions: is he making this up, perhaps hallucinating it? if it did happen, was he the only one who felt this flash of insight—and if so, is it then a valid insight? At this point, our attention is focused on Herr’s internal world to the exclusion of external reality and his narrative presence becomes opaque. And if this serves to illuminate his inner self more than it does an external reality, why should we even care about it? In this instance, Herr gives us no reason to become engaged with what he is telling us; he fails as a literary journalist.

The problem here may well be one of the variable gap between what Gerard Genette called story time and time of narrating. *Dispatches* is not a straightup collection of Herr’s work for *Esquire*; only three of the four central chapters—“Hell Sucks,” “Khe Sanh,” and “Colleagues”—were originally published there (and “Hell Sucks” in somewhat different form, at that) and the fourth, “Illumination Rounds,” appears to have been assembled from unused notes. The first and last chapters, “Breathing In” and “Breathing Out,” then, would appear to have been written closer to the time of the book’s publication in 1978 than to Herr’s actual stay in Vietnam a decade earlier. The difference between the bookend chapters and what lies in between them, then, could be called the difference between reportage and remembrance. The one is immediate and particular, the other general and abstract, with things described and narrated through the filter of time past. In both, the time of the story events described is the same, but when Herr is reporting the distance between story and narration is a matter of months, whereas when he is remembering the distance is a good ten years. Most of his problem with letting style get in the way of content occur in the chapters that depend on remembering instead of reportage. Without the immediacy of reportage, his

focus becomes fuzzy, the concrete becomes abstract, particulars become sloppy generalizations and Herr's efforts to argue his point are unconvincing. Herr's style is geared to producing strong emotion, a reflection of the sublimity of his subject, but when he fails to justify that emotion with particular bits of evidence, his mannerisms seem overblown and narcissistic. We just don't see what the fuss is about.

But when Herr is reporting and not remembering, *Dispatches* presents a view of ground zero of the Vietnam War that is both persuasive and moving. New Journalism guru and ringleader Tom Wolfe—himself a literary journalist of audacity and ambition—thought so as well. He found a spot for “Khe Sanh” in his canonizing anthology of the New Journalism and said of *Dispatches*, “I don't think anyone has yet equaled Herr in capturing the peculiar terrors of Vietnam” (101). And it may be that no one will ever equal Herr's reportage at those times when he truly rises to his subject. At its finest moments, when his reportage is good, Michael Herr gives us one of the most powerful evocations of the human experience of war in the history of American journalism. ■

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