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Violent Death as Essential Truth in *Dispatches*: Re-Reading Michael Herr's "secret history" of the Vietnam War

ONE DOES NOT READ FAR INTO THE LITERATURE OF THE Vietnam War before it becomes apparent that America's frontier mythology—the nation's belief in a Manifest Destiny, which John F. Kennedy revised as the New Frontier—played a key role in leading the US to military engagement in Southeast Asia. As Marine veteran Philip Caputo states in a preface to his memoir, *A Rumor of War* (1977, 1996), young men were

seduced into uniform by Kennedy's challenge to "ask what you can do for your country" and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us. . . we believed we were ordained to play cop to the Communists' robber and spread our own political faith around the world.¹

It was in Vietnam that the myths of Manifest Destiny and the New Frontier were shattered for a time, a process now threatening to repeat itself in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the early years of the Vietnam War, that far-away land promised Americans an errand into the wilderness that might reconcile what John Hellmann terms "the tension in American culture between the anarchic impulses of its individualistic ethic and the social ideals of its perceived communal mission."² The war would effect a "democratic balance of self-reliance and self-restraint . . .

a combined Enlightenment and Romantic ideal possessing a dark underside of passionate conflicts, longings, and anxieties.³ In other words, Vietnam promised Americans the chance to shed the trappings of civilization in this “dark” land, even as these very same Americans would bring civilization, bring “light,” to said darkness—a narrative akin to the Wild West of John Wayne melodrama. Of course, such a promise was not realized, but rather fragmented to such a degree as to indicate a funereal finality.⁴ This fragmentation, then, resulted from what Caputo terms the “knowledge of death, of the implacable limits placed on a man’s existence, [which] severed us from our youth as irrevocably as a surgeon’s scissors had once severed us from the womb.”⁵

If the experience of war in Vietnam severed America’s veterans, as well as much of the culture at large, from a mythic “womb,” then America’s entrance into a new Symbolic Order certainly proved a fruitful one from a literary standpoint. As Lucas Carpenter writes, “One of the many ironies of the Vietnam War is that the one war America lost gave rise to more and better literature—collectively—than any of America’s other twentieth century wars.”⁶ The Vietnam War’s fragmentation of America’s frontier myth proved a galvanizing force leading American authors, most of them veterans, in the search for means by which to narrate this fragmentation, as well as means by which to create new myths that might guide the nation forward. As most critics of the war’s literature have recognized, two aesthetic approaches to the treatment of Vietnam have arisen out of this search—one a realist aesthetic that harks back to traditional war literature, foregrounding verisimilitude, and the other a postmodern aesthetic that tends to immerse readers in an individual’s singular, subjective experience of the war, employing a deconstructive emphasis on dissonance both literal and psychic. As Carpenter states,

The former hinges on the meticulous mimesis of the human-as-animal experience of war as an intersubjective historical event, while the latter denies the possibility of such representation because it entails notions of objective truth and depends on Western historical metanarrative for its justification.⁷

Praise has been heaped on the realistic tales of the Vietnam War—works such as Caputo’s aforementioned memoir, Larry Heinemann’s *Close Quarters* (1977), and John M. Del Vecchio’s *The 13th Valley* (1982)—for their ability to engender what Hellmann deems an “ironic antimyth.” As Hellmann states, “Underlying their separate works is a common allegory . . . in which an archetypal warrior-

representative of the culture embarks on a quest that dissolves into an utter chaos of dark revelation.”⁸ The best of the postmodern narratives of Vietnam, in turn—texts that include Stephen Wright’s *Meditations in Green* (1983), Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story* (1986), and Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990)—have been credited with allowing unparalleled access to individuals’ truths of Vietnam, truths perhaps only able to surface in the absence of any paradigm that would assign to the war some level of “intersubjective” reality. As Philip K. Jason claims, in such narratives “the abandonment of clock-time structures for more experiential renditions of ‘what happened’ brings us fictional constructions that seem more capable of recreating the absurd and grotesque awareness” Vietnam War literature “needs to share.”⁹

It could be argued that none of the American postmodern Vietnam War texts has been better received than Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977). This book is the product of Herr’s decade-long efforts to compile a single work that would embody his experience of Vietnam as a war correspondent in-country from late 1967 into 1968. While in Vietnam, Herr wrote for such magazines as *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*, publications poised on the dividing line between mainstream and counterculture. Herr collected the articles he published in ’67 and ’68, his “dispatches,” and added to them material that includes introductory and concluding pieces to make *Dispatches*—a work of New Journalism originally published by Knopf. The text certainly is one that employs, with virtually unparalleled skill, the aesthetic imperatives that signify postmodernism—what Carpenter identifies as “relativism, diversity, parody, alterity, anti-hegemony, fabulation, self-reflexivity, and metafiction.”¹⁰ As such, for critics inclined to celebrate the postmodern Vietnam War aesthetic, *Dispatches* has become canonical. Philip D. Beidler refers to Herr’s text as a “remarkable American achievement of the poststructuralist principle of *writing itself* . . . a whole that finally is a triumph of . . . self-contextualization and mythic reconstitution.”¹¹ Maria S. Bonn calls *Dispatches* “a tour-de-force of the imagination, an energized transformation of experience into art . . . constructed out of sources as diverse as William Blake and Jimi Hendrix.”¹² And Matthew C. Stewart claims that *Dispatches*’s apparent honesty is a function of its assertion that “whole truths—unadulterated, unambiguous truths—may be in short supply even when they are assiduously striven for.”¹³

For all of this gushing, however, there is at least one aspect of Herr’s book that troubles critics again and again. The aspect to which I refer is Herr’s repeated insistence that the war, at least in part, was an *irreducibly* glamorous, glorious event. Such an insistence—Herr’s belief that “Vietnam was what we had instead of happy

childhoods,¹⁴ his depiction of American combat helicopters as “in my mind . . . the sexiest thing going” (9)—often leaves critics either reading past this element of the text, or asserting that for all of its worthy (i.e. anti-hegemonic, deconstructive) characteristics, *Dispatches* finally is a failure. For example, without referencing this attraction to violent death Herr evidences, Carpenter reads *Dispatches* as a work engaged in “confirming the postmodern conception of ‘the death of the unified self’ as elucidated by Lacan and other theorists.”¹⁵ On the other hand, troubled by Herr’s attraction to violence, Bonn sees the author and his book as succumbing to “the hypermasculinity and sexually charged violence of war.”¹⁶ There is a third critique, too, one that emanates from critics who take a more radical posture toward Herr. An example arrives in Jim Neilson’s reading of *Dispatches*, wherein Neilson writes that the very postmodern form of the book creates a level of self-reflexive insularity that “shifted concern away from the Vietnamese and constructed the war (as Hollywood would profitably exploit) as a quintessentially American rock-and-roll adventure.”¹⁷

What I wish to suggest here is that there is an alternative way to read Herr’s *Dispatches* that somewhat circumvents the dichotomous division of Vietnam War literature into realistic and postmodern camps. Such a reading, I believe, may account not only for the postmodern form of the text, but also its author-narrator’s attraction to violent death. I will argue that for all of its aesthetic experimentation, *Dispatches* is deeply essentialist. Rather than a self-reflexive work, or a work that, as Herr himself has stated, is really metafictional at its core—that-is-not-one,¹⁸ *Dispatches* engages in what Donald Ringnalda has identified as an archaeological quest. As Ringnalda points out, *Dispatches* “is an excavation down to the heart of war and the heart of those who wage it and observe it.”¹⁹ What *Dispatches* ultimately arrives at, however, are not the plural truths Ringnalda and so many other critics take from the text, truths akin to Michel Foucault’s attempts to access submerged and subjugated knowledges in his “histories.” Rather, the many voices and images and sounds one encounters in *Dispatches*—all the sensory detail that leaps from Herr’s pages until it threatens to and often does overwhelm readers—are but so many data streams shoveled aside. Herr excavates past these details until he uncovers the war’s Truth, its signified. This Truth is at once the destructive horror *and* reconciliatory allure, ironically enough, of violent death.²⁰ Violent death in *Dispatches* is not an act of non-meaning, some space of negation or deferral, postmodern or otherwise. Instead, violent death, while on the one hand an act of unmitigated destruction, nevertheless figures as that which promises to effect a Romantic reconciliation of opposites. Herr posits that for all of its horror, combat issues forth a degree of

transcendence operative nowhere else in human experience. This transcendence entails the conjunction of creation and destruction, action and submission, will and fate, chance and pre-destination. This is the “secret history” of Michael Herr’s book (218); this is Herr’s “Inscrutable Immutable” (56), Herr’s answer as to why many of America’s warriors continued to fight with conviction long after their frontier myth broke down. Likewise, this answer constitutes a pertinent thesis as to how the promise of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan lures young American men and women overseas—even in another age of trauma for American myth—but one generation removed from the actions of their fathers and uncles and grandfathers, who fought and died on the battlefields of Vietnam.

That America’s frontier mythology did break down in Vietnam, thereby necessitating the emergence of new means of narrating war, is a central preoccupation for Herr—so much so that he begins his text with a portrayal of just that. In “Breathing In,” *Dispatches*’s long introductory section, the first image readers confront is a French map of Southeast Asia that hangs on the wall of Herr’s Saigon apartment. This document, Herr writes, is a “*really old map*” whose “*paper had buckled in its frame after years in the wet Saigon heat, laying a kind of veil over the countries it depicted*” (3, Herr’s emphasis).²¹ This veil figures as the now-buckling Western hold over Vietnam—the collapse of the West’s Enlightenment-spawned project of naming that which is foreign, a project that buttresses itself with technology-driven military might in an effort to achieve its ends. For the French, these ends entailed the construction of such a map, which “*divided [Vietnam] into its older territories of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina*” (3). Americans would eschew France’s three-part categorization of Vietnam in favor of the country’s separation into North and South Vietnam, the dividing line between them taking on a name—the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ—that never achieved its signified, given that the DMZ never became fully demilitarized. As such, Herr believes the American “map” of Vietnam to be as much an ill-fated Western conceit as was the French map. Later in the text, Herr clarifies as much in striking terms. For the Americans, who further subdivided South Vietnam into war zones whose boundaries made little sense on a topographical level, “It had been a matter of military expediency to impose a new set of references over Vietnam’s older, truer being” (92).

When Herr arrived in Vietnam in 1967, around the time of the Battle of Dak To, just months before the Tet Offensive of early 1968, “*even the most detailed maps didn’t reveal much anymore*” (3). The American attempt to bring light to the darkness had run aground, leaving reason and its substructure of empirical data malleable. That

is, by the time Herr arrived in-country, as he states, “*We knew that the uses of most information were flexible, different pieces of ground told different stories to different people*” (3). What is left for Herr as imposed Western structures fall apart, then, is not, as some critics would have it, a space of total indeterminacy—a space of endless signification. By 1967, what remain in Vietnam are the specter and actualization of violent death. It is Herr’s mission in *Dispatches* to unearth the Truth that is violent death, given that, as he writes, “*for years now there had been no country here but the war*” (3). In “Breathing In,” it is this knowledge that Herr opposes to the belief in American firepower held by “*an information officer in the headquarters of the 25th Division at Cu Chi*” (4)—a technocrat living on a firebase, it need be noted, the Americans built on top of a massive network of Viet Cong tunnels. This information officer tells Herr of the destruction of the Ho Bo Woods in an effort to defoliate the area and thereby eliminate cover for any VC and North Vietnamese Army troops that might be in the vicinity. Of this man, Herr writes,

It had been part of his job for nearly a year now to tell people about that operation; correspondents, touring congressmen, movie stars, corporation presidents, staff officers from half the armies in the world, and he still couldn't get over it. (4)

This telling and retelling of the woods’ destruction, Herr continues, “*seemed to be keeping him young*” (4)—“young,” that is, insofar as the man is infected with a distinctly American brand of “innocence” that makes the technocrat a metonym for what Herr calls the American “Mission” in Vietnam as a whole. This story masks the officer’s ability to see the Truth. This man believes the woods’ fate

really showed what you could do if you had the know-how and the hardware. And if in the months following that operation incidents of enemy activity in the larger area of War Zone C had increased “significantly,” and American losses had doubled and then doubled again, none of it was happening in any damn Ho Bo Woods, you’d better believe it. (4)

It is Herr’s task to move past this information officer’s story—the officer’s pledge of security through technological superiority and technology’s ability to create an insulating degree of distance between oneself and the Truth of the war.

Rather than accept distance, Herr and his text travel in search of violent death. It is for this reason that Herr identifies so strongly with America's killers in the field, as well as colleagues in the press corps equally interested in seeking out the war's signified. Those who are in the field, Herr shows readers, are not moving away from the Truth of Vietnam, they are moving toward it. We first see Herr's rejection of distance as he affords readers a portrait of a "4th Division Lurp" in "Breathing In." The Lurps, who spend their time "creeping up on VC base camps or around moving columns of North Vietnamese" (5), represent total immersion, on the American side, in the war.²² Herr's fascination with this particular Lurp, a pill-popping night-ambusher, is a fascination with being divorced from "the World" and its faith in reason and progress. The Lurp tells Herr, "I just can't hack it back in the World" (5)—tells Herr that "after he'd come back home the last time he would sit in his room all day, and sometimes he'd stick a hunting rifle out the window, leading people and cars as they passed his house" (5). The Lurp has seen what to Herr, early in the latter's stay in Vietnam, represents the worst the war has to offer:

This was his third tour. In 1965 he'd been the only survivor in a platoon of the Cav wiped out going into the Ia Drang Valley. In '66 he'd come back with the Special Forces and one morning after an ambush he'd hidden under the bodies of his team while the VC walked all around them with knives, making sure. . . . After that, there was nothing left for him in the war except the Lurps. (5)

Herr intuits that this man possesses the Truth, the depths, of Vietnam, for we learn that looking into the Lurp's eyes "was like looking at the floor of an ocean" (6). The Lurp attempts to share what he knows, telling Herr the following story: "Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened" (6). Early in his "tour," Herr cannot accept this story—cannot grasp that violent death is the war's signified, defying extrapolation, codification, amelioration, or mythic transformation. Herr writes,

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 dumb as I was. (6)

At this point, Herr has not ceased to try and fit the war and its Truth into a pre-set paradigm; his understanding, as the Lurp informs him, is as worthless as "Tits on a bull" (6). Herr is still "waiting for a helicopter to come and take me out of there"

(7). Yet the rest of *Dispatches* will take Herr on a journey forward into the war that also is a cyclic journey, one during which he eventually will return to this signified and see it for what it is. This is the essence of what Herr deems “the heavy heart-of-darkness trip” aboard the “collective meta-chopper” that is Vietnam (8, 9).

To frame this a bit differently, Herr’s Conradian journey to the war’s essence necessitates his stripping away of, his deconstruction of, the pseudo-truths belonging to the information officer, in favor of the Truth the Lurp knows. This creates a two-fronted quest for Herr: he must name and unravel American misreadings of the war, while he simultaneously embraces “the saturating strangeness of the place [Vietnam] which didn’t lessen with exposure so often as it fattened and darkened in accumulating alienation” (13). This movement along two fronts engages Herr in disabusing himself and readers of faith in the bizarre explanations of progress emanating from American officers—what Herr calls the American Mission’s “overripe bullshit . . . Hearts and Minds, Peoples of the Republic, tumbling dominoes, maintaining the equilibrium of the Dingdong by containing the ever encroaching Doodah” (20). Herr’s two-fronted quest also entails the author’s embrace of the other narrative of the war—the war’s “secret history” (218)—early in the text depicted as “some young soldier speaking in all bloody innocence, saying, ‘All that’s just a *load*, man. We’re here to kill gooks. Period’” (20). Furthermore, this double movement eventually will force Herr to collapse the distance between himself and death, thereby shedding his belief that, “I was there to watch” (20). Such a collapse implicates Herr and his readers—any readers inclined to couch the war’s Truth in some overarching myth, that of officialdom or that of postmodern negation and deferral—as agents in masking the war’s signified. As Herr states,

somewhere all the mythic tracks intersected, from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy, and where they did I believe that everyone knew everything about everyone else, every one of us there a true volunteer. (20)

When Herr finally engages the war on an experiential level, thereby enacting his complicity even as he attains knowledge of the Truth, so too do his readers.

As I stated above, to embrace his own complicity means for Herr an embrace of the grunt, the killer in the field. Herr attempts to connect with just this figure; he succeeds to the degree that, as he writes, “After a year I felt so plugged in to all the stories and the images and the fear that even the dead started telling me

stories” (31). As Herr argues—and I use the term “argue” here to highlight his overtly rhetorical stance—

It seemed the least of the war’s contradictions that to lose your worst sense of American shame you had to leave the Dial Soapers in Saigon and a hundred headquarters who spoke goodworks and killed nobody themselves, and go out to the grungy men in the jungle who talked bloody murder and killed people all the time. (42)

Herr’s effort to connect with the grunts necessitates the author’s journey through the kaleidoscope of sensory overload that spirals past him as he travels Vietnam’s meta-chopper. It is this kaleidoscopic data stream, which the grunts are living in the field, that serves as the material deconstructing Mission-myth both in *Dispatches* and in Vietnam itself. Herr figures this deconstruction as beginning with the Special Forces’ “adventure” into Vietnam in the 1950s as advisory personnel to South Vietnamese troops, an adventure that “became our war, then a war bogged down in time, so much time so badly accounted for that it finally became entrenched as an institution” (51). The war-as-sensory-overload renders “all the promise of good service on the New Frontier either gone or surviving like the vaguest salvages of a dream” (52). What is left as the New Frontier shatters is the Truth, and “you kept on or not at its pitiless discretion” (56). Herr does indeed keep on, keeps going until he can go no further, until, as he writes, “I wasn’t a reporter, I was a shooter” (68).

Herr’s two-fronted quest, one both deconstructive and profoundly essentialist, accounts for the centrality of the battles of Hue and Khe Sanh to the larger narrative. It is in the “Hell Sucks” section of *Dispatches* that Herr writes of Hue, while “Khe Sanh” follows “Hell Sucks” and constitutes the longest of the text’s six parts. Taken together, these two pieces comprise nearly forty percent of *Dispatches*. The battles at Hue and Khe Sanh took place in direct connection to the Tet Offensive and could be said to embody the Mission’s faith in firepower, as well as its deeply rooted desire for a conventional battle in which this firepower could be unleashed upon large numbers of enemy troops. To a certain degree, the battles satiated these desires, as allied forces made up largely of US Marines inflicted sweeping destruction upon enemy forces who were mostly NVA regulars. In fact, the Marines’ liberation of Hue—a city the NVA occupied for a time during Tet, thereby forcing the Americans to fight an urban battle to take it back—even featured American troops raising the US flag in a ceremony that marked victory near the end of the battle. Of course, this act called to mind an earlier generation

of Marines raising the American flag after taking Iwo Jima from Japanese forces in World War II. That said, Herr, who witnessed the fighting in Hue and Khe Sanh, uses these battles as evidence of the distance between Mission reality and Vietnam's Truth. For Herr, Hue and Khe Sanh—and the Tet Offensive more generally, an event that served as a crushing military defeat *and* sweeping political victory for enemy forces—figure as confirmation of Vietnam's refusal to fit itself into American mythology.

Herr begins "Hell Sucks" with a brief description of Saigon under curfew during Tet, referring to South Vietnam's capital as a place where "there was a corruption in the air that had nothing to do with government workers on the take" (70). This "corruption," it would seem, is tangible evidence of the deconstruction of the Mission, which follows from Tet's "heat of heavy contact generated out until every American in Vietnam got a taste" (71). According to Herr, Tet turned the war by splintering the Mission's empirical bases. During Tet, he writes, "Vietnam was a dark room full of deadly objects, the VC were everywhere all at once like spider cancer, and instead of losing the war in little pieces over years we lost it fast in under a week" (71). Despite the fact that Tet resulted in allied military victory after allied military victory—so much so that after the offensive the VC were crippled as a fighting force—the scope of the action showed glaringly the extent of the political quagmire and combat horror into which America had thrown itself.²³ As Herr states, "Our worst dread of yellow peril became realized; we saw them now dying by the thousands all over the country, yet they didn't seem depleted, let alone exhausted, as the Mission was claiming by the fourth day" (71). The American military machine, Herr writes with acerbic irony, proves "devastating" and "versatile" during Tet, able to "do everything but stop" (71). Hence, once Herr has deconstructed the "reason" that drives this machine in the first few pages of "Hell Sucks," he immediately shifts the narrative to the Truth of violent death experienced by Marine riflemen on the ground in Hue. During "Khe Sanh," Herr will employ more or less that same narrative strategy.

Given this strategy, readers can conclude that Herr's depictions of the fighting at Hue and Khe Sanh are very much archeological projects, attempts to unearth the war's essence. Describing his descent into Hue, Herr tells of passing a fairly tranquil first night, then of seeing his first civilian casualties there, then living in relative squalor with the Marines, and eventually of seeing the fight itself—a crucible that steadies Herr's resolve and is preparation for seeing the Truth. After a time, Herr states, "I realized that the only corpse I couldn't bear to look at would be the one I would never have to see" (77). Once the seat of Vietnamese culture

and civic beauty, Hue was devastated during combat; what remained afterward was death, which Herr figures as a “fat Marine . . . photographed pissing into the locked-open mouth of a decomposing North Vietnamese soldier” (85). The same descent into death was the fate of Khe Sanh. Just as American officials looked to Hue for a set-piece victory, these same officials became fixated on Khe Sanh’s defense—so much so that the base “lodged itself as an obsession in the heart of the Command” (86). American military leaders, under direction from President Lyndon Johnson and fearing a rout akin to the Viet Minh’s defeat of France in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, pledged to defend Khe Sanh at all costs. Much of the American press, in turn, reported the story as if the battle would be a conventional one with which Americans in the post-World War II years could readily identify. Herr portrays the attraction of Khe Sanh as follows:

In its outlines, the promise was delicious: Victory! A vision of as many as 40,000 of them out there in the open, fighting it out on our terms, fighting for once like men, fighting to no avail. There would be a battle, a set-piece battle where he could be killed by the numbers, killed wholesale, and if we killed enough of him, maybe he would go away. (107)

No such victory transpired, although American troops did defend the base during a more than three-month-long fight that would not fully dissipate until mid-1968. Therefore, Khe Sanh became another victory-that-is-not-one for America. What remained as the promise of a decisive blow against Communist forces dissipated, were grunts killing and dying, a fact Herr depicts in “Khe Sanh” via the conversation between two young Marines named Mayhew and Daytripper. Mayhew goes against advice from his friend Daytripper and extends his tour, only to survive Khe Sanh and be killed during this extension—killed participating in a patrol forgotten almost before it ended. The Battle of Khe Sanh devolves into Mayhew, in the words of another Marine, taking “a fuckin’ RPG round right in the chest” for little discernable military purpose (166).

In the absence of any believable metanarrative of grand military purpose, then, Americans are left to confront the Vietnam War’s Truth on their own terms. (Or to recoil from doing so, of course). As Herr shows in “Illumination Rounds,” which follows “Khe Sanh,” what is left in confronting the Truth, once the Mission has been deconstructed, is an act of existential personal courage. This act is a coming-into-being made all the more difficult because of the levels of mythic and technological mediation that distance most Americans from violent death.

As Herr writes, “It took me a month to lose that feeling of being a spectator to something that was part game, part show” (168). It takes Herr a while to shake the fantasy of an errand into the wilderness and to realize that Vietnam is “not a movie, no jive cartoon either” (46). Such an act of courage also becomes difficult given the overload of sensory detail that characterizes the American experience of Vietnam—the very same detail that acts to deconstruct the Mission. Nowhere in *Dispatches* does Herr better describe this overload than in his depiction of a collage crafted by an American door gunner named Davies. This collage figures as the postmodern rewriting of the map that hangs in Herr’s apartment; the collage is multivocality rendered silent by the image’s tyrannical insistence on fixing time, on walling off narrative possibilities. Herr states that the collage

included glimpses of burning monks, stacked Viet Cong dead, wounded Marines screaming and weeping, Cardinal Spellman waving from a chopper, Ronald Reagan, his face halved and separated by a stalk of cannabis . . . coffins draped with American flags whose stars were replaced by swastikas and dollar signs . . . Ky standing at attention and saluting, a small mushroom cloud forming where his genitalia should have been; a map of the western United States with the shape of Vietnam reversed and fitted over California . . . (176)

A number of critics have mistaken this collage as Herr’s Truth of Vietnam—his Truth-under-erasure, as it were.²⁴ To my mind, this collage is but another obscuration, not Mission-speak but its obverse, a metanarrative that insists the Vietnam War’s reality is but all of its details, all of its sensory data, no one signifier any more or less relevant than another given the absence of any final signified. Herr will suggest otherwise, moving past this bit of mystification—Vietnam-as-acid-trip—to an essential Truth that is much more profound.

In “Colleagues,” the last lengthy section of *Dispatches*, Herr spends a good deal of energy offering portrayals of his war-correspondent friends. Herr opposes this group of gung-ho reporters to those journalists who worked “for organizations that were ultimately reverential toward the institutions involved” in running the war and selling it to the public (214). Part of the reason Herr does so, I believe, is to justify his love for the war—his belief that covering the war, for all of its brutality, was a worthy experience. Yet a more pressing rationale for Herr’s strategy here, however, is a need to establish an authorial ethos-by-association, to suggest that he, given what and who he has seen operating in-country, is in a position to reveal the

essence of the conflict. In short, Herr wishes to make clear that he was not one of the reporters who “took the [Mission’s] diversions seriously enough to report them” and thereby “legitimized them” (214). Instead of that story, he wishes to tell “a story that was as simple as it had always been, men hunting men, a hideous war and all kinds of victims” (214). Obsessed with Vietnam’s “facts,” its data streams, the mainstream press “never found a way to report meaningfully about death, which of course was really what it was all about” (215). Herr wishes to reveal this “simple” story, this Truth of the war.

What Herr uncovers through his efforts is, as he writes, “a dripping, laughing death-face” extant “in back of every column of print you read about Vietnam” (218). The “death-face” is horrible, to be sure; but, as Herr clarifies, it also is a kind of “freedom and simplicity” (245). Despite its embodiment of irrevocable destruction, the death-face is a transcendent escape from ambiguity into a realm of absolutes—life and death, kill and be killed, hero and coward. It is this element of transcendence that renders combat and its promise of violent death a series of “highs” for Herr; combat becomes “a place where no drama had to be invented, ever” (245). The death-face, the war’s essence, is not dissonance, then; it is the absence thereof. As Herr writes, “Under Fire would take you out of your head and your body too, the space you’d seen a second ago between subject and object wasn’t there anymore, it banged shut in a fast wash of adrenaline” (63). This is the signified with which *Dispatches* leaves readers, the collapse, in combat, of the subject-object distinction in a moment of transcendence—what Herr quotes his journalist friend calling “the bloody *glamour* . . . of bloody *war!*” (249). And it is in bringing readers to this high that Herr, more than any other American who has written of Vietnam, is able to uncover why war is intensely attractive to some even in the absence of a metanarrative that might obscure its essence.

Notes

1. Phillip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (1977; Rev. ed. New York: Holt, 1996), xiv.
2. John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 56.
3. *Ibid.*
4. I use the term “indicate” here, given the Reagan-era revision of the war into a “noble cause,” a revision that may have been a major factor leading to America’s current entrenchment in a Middle Eastern quagmire.
5. Caputo, xv.

6. Lucas Carpenter, "'IT DON'T MEAN NOTHIN'": Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism," *College Literature* 30, no. 2 (2003): 30.
7. Ibid.
8. Hellmann, 102.
9. Philip K. Jason, *Acts and Shadows: The Vietnam War in American Literary Culture* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 19.
10. Carpenter, 36.
11. Philip D. Beidler, *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* (Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1991), 272, author's emphasis.
12. Maria S. Bonn, "The Lust of the Eye: Michael Herr, Gloria Emerson and the Art of Observation," *Papers on Language and Literature* 29, no. 1 (1993): 29-30.
13. Matthew C. Stewart, "Style in *Dispatches*: Heteroglossia and Michael Herr's Break with Conventional Journalism," in *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, eds. Owen W. Gilman, Jr., and Lorrie Smith (New York: Garland, 1990), 190.
14. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977; Rpt. New York: Vintage, 1991), 244. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically, in the body of the text.
15. Carpenter, 39.
16. Bonn, 38.
17. Jim Neilson, *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics and the Vietnam War Narrative* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998), 142.
18. For Herr's circuitous discussion of the composition of *Dispatches* and his time in Vietnam more generally, see Michael Herr, Interview, *Vietnam, We've All Been There: Interviews with American Writers*, by Eric James Schroeder (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 33-50.
19. Donald Ringnalda, "Unlearning to remember Vietnam," in *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, eds. Owen W. Gilman, Jr., and Lorrie Smith (New York: Garland, 1990), 67.
20. Tobey C. Herzog is one of the few critics who seem attuned to the ramifications of this ironic element of *Dispatches*. Herzog writes that over the course of the text, Herr "discovers that accompanying his fear of death and disgust for the absurdity and brutality of the Vietnam War is his growing infatuation with the violence, destruction, and beauty of war." As such, in *Dispatches*, "the irony is that the war seems to have turned out better than expected." In *Innocence Lost: Vietnam War Stories* (London: Routledge, 1992), 86, 88.
21. Any italicized words, phrases, or sentences that appear in quotations I draw from *Dispatches* are Herr's. Herr makes frequent use of italics, often emphasizing or setting apart long sections of text, so to avoid confusion I have introduced no emphases of my own in quoting his work.

22. The term “Lurp” refers to US Army soldiers who performed long-range reconnaissance patrols (the Marines had their own separate reconnaissance capabilities). These soldiers also were known as “LRRPs” or “LRPs.” In Vietnam, the Lurps were an all-volunteer force derived mainly from the Army’s airborne units. By 1969, the Lurps had been reorganized as Ranger elements attached to various outfits. For an outstanding battlefield diary of a former Lurp, see Gary A. Linderer, *The Eyes of the Eagle: F Company LRP in Vietnam, 1968* (New York: Ivy, 1991).

23. For a cogent analysis of the paradoxical nature, for the Americans, of the Tet Offensive, see Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (1983; rev. ed. New York: Penguin, 1997), 528-581.

24. For example, Bonn reads the collage as evidence of Herr’s employment of “heteroglossia” in the interests of allowing “the voices of the many combatants that he comes to know” to be “heard.” In Bonn, 34.

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