On War

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Can William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) be considered war literature? It does not take place on a battlefield or a wartime home front. There are no soldiers, veterans, or their loved ones. There are not even any adults. Whether the novel is more informed by Golding's time living in cramped quarters as a British seaman during the World War II or by his years in a claustrophobic classroom teaching restless boys is unstated.

Golding's novel, about boys stranded on an island whose efforts at peaceful social organization collapse, is a popular classroom text because of, among other reasons, its provocative Hobbesian argument about humans as base, warring creatures. At its wonderfully teachable and devastating finale, when the boys are saved from their natural savagery by mature adults (representative of nurturing civilization), in the form of a warship, no less, a teacher might write and underline "irony" on the board. Thus, Golding seems to weigh in on the topic Azar Gat calls "the first and most commonly asked question when people ponder the enigma of war," the question of the connection between war and human nature. Throughout the ages, historians, philosophers, anthropologists, scientists, psychologists, politicians, theologians, public intellectuals, and military leaders have wrestled with the connection between war and human nature, as have poets, memoirists, diarists, dramatists, letter writers, fiction writers, journalists, filmmakers, bloggers, and video-game makers.

Whether or not video games, with their open-ended story lines, will one day be recognized alongside such texts as the *Iliad* (c. 750 BCE; English translation, 1611) and *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1928; *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929) as formative war narratives remains to be seen. The standards by which a text can be considered a war narrative are not irrevocably defined. While a story written by a veteran of ground combat is about as hands-on as a war narrative can be, it is

by no means the only type of story that qualifies as part of the genre. Stepping out of the trenches, for example, takes readers to stories of pilots and sailors. Leaving the battle offers writings by and about intelligence officers, medical personnel, prisoners and prison guards, and support soldiers sometimes an ocean away from the fighting. The veteran's tale, which does not necessarily require any recounting of the particular war in which the soldier participated, decidedly counts as war literature. War correspondents (journalists) have used their talents and their proximity to soldiers and the action to write powerful testimonials. Civilians caught in an area of military operations also have essential stories to tell (and the line between combatant and noncombatant is not always clear). Narratives of civilians away from the fighting (soldiers' loved ones on the home front, for example) also should be considered in a discussion of what makes a war narrative, as should antiwar stories, including, for example, the tribulations of draft dodgers and the lyrics of protest songs.

One must not forget literature written by nonparticipants. Some classics of the field, such as Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), and even Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) can be categorized as historical war fiction written by people who never experienced war firsthand. Crane was not even alive during the Civil War, yet few readers would exclude *The Red Badge of Courage* from the canon of war literature.

Books and screenplays written during wartime, but not necessarily about war, constitute their own brand of war literature. Sam Peckinpah loaded his 1969 film *The Wild Bunch* with a level of violence shockingly new to the western genre in order to speak to the war the United States was fighting in Vietnam. The SyFy Channel's *Battlestar Galactica* series (2004–2009) deliberately challenged its viewers to reflect on their ideas about the US war in Iraq; the show's "good guys" resorted to torture during interrogation; terrorist-style insurgent tactics, such as suicide bombings; secret military tribunals resulting in capital punishment; and genocide through biological weapons of mass destruction.

Given that the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union did not include any actual combat, even peacetime texts, with peacetime settings, can, in a certain light, be regarded as war literature. Susan Griffin's *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War* (1992), a first-person nonfiction account of being an American civilian in the second half of the twentieth century, proceeds exactly on the claim that simply being a citizen qualifies her as a Cold War veteran.

> I was born and brought up in a nation that participated in the bombing of Dresden, and in the civilization that planned the extermination of a whole people. We are not used to associating our private lives with public events. Yet the histories of families cannot be separated from the histories of nations. To divide them is part of our denial. (11)

Changez, the Pakistani protagonist of Mohsin Hamid's post–9/11 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, eventually comes to the realization that his job at an American financial company, for all intents and purposes, turns him into weapon, a soldier in pinstripes, because "finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power" (156).

Author Joshua Goldstein would contend that any narrative featuring peacetime (or otherwise) domestic gender roles could justifiably be taught in the war literature classroom. In organizing themselves for self-preservation, societies tend to define manhood in terms of the potential for soldiering and womanhood in terms of the support for and production of soldiers: "War is a pervasive potential in the human experience that casts a shadow on everyday life—especially on gender roles—in profound ways" (403).[1] Changez's relationship with his American "dream girl" could easily be read through Goldstein's idea. Just as the financial company that employs him, Underwood Sampson, bears the significant initials "U.S.," his girlfriend Erica bears a correspondingly significant name, as you cannot spell "America" without "Erica."

Also tricky in categorizing war literature are those war books written by authors who do not consider themselves war writers. Joseph Heller has said that *Catch-22* (1961), his darkly comic novel of air-force life during World War II, is not about the war at all, but uses the military bureaucracy to comment on the corporate and government bureaucracies he found so absurd and stifling in the 1950s. E. E. Cummings's semiautobiographical, but also surreally allegorical, World War I novel *The Enormous Room* (1922) has more in common with Franz Kafka than with most war writers. Tim O'Brien, one of the most celebrated American authors to fight in and write about the war in Vietnam, resists the limiting label of "war" as his subject. Life is his subject; people are his subjects. The Vietnam War happens to be the compact dramatic situation with which he is deeply familiar, the most convenient setting at his disposal. Readers do not engage war literature only to gain insight into war. As O'Brien maintains: "The environment of war it the environment of life, magnified" (23).

Catch-22 is a reminder of the importance of the context. Ernest Hemingway wrote *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) ten years after his World War II involvement, and the novel can be understood as a first-person retelling of Hemingway's war experience. Hemingway's Frederic Henry, then, is not only a veteran telling his war story but also a veteran informed by how he and his society have come to view the war after a decade's worth of reflection, personal and historical consequences, and war memoir models. One might validly ask how many years must pass before a veteran's novel about his or her war experiences loses something of its authentic authority and becomes a work of historical fiction. Another question can be raised about how to receive a novel written by a veteran set in a war in which he or she did not participate.

The literature of war resembles the literature of any other subject in that it is only a representation and not the thing itself. A war story includes a specific perspective, interpretation, and imposition of meaning. Even in memoir and autobiographical fiction, poetry, and drama, a gap always separates the tale—what it wants to tell—and the events

it actually describes. Nonfiction accounts are invariably partial in both senses of the word. Moreover, war narratives function in the context of other war narratives (the tradition of expressing war through stories). Readers learn a great deal from analyzing a single text in any genre about war. In addition, a great deal can be learned by regarding a text as it exists in conversation with other texts; to study this conversation is to study the intertextual connections between works.

Allusion is one form of intertextuality, an example of which can found in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), a domestic drama taking place around World War I, when a character storms about quoting Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854). Readers must ask why Woolf uses that particular allusion and what it is about Tennyson's poem and the battle it depicts that matters to Woolf's novel. Certain texts and writers receive sustained discussion—writers dealing with the subject of war who have followed Hemingway, for example, often feel obliged to deal with him in some way, given his prominence in twentieth-century American war literature. Intertextuality can also manifest structurally. As Paul Fussell observes in his indispensible *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That* (1957) is best understood with the knowledge that Graves deliberately and wryly loaded it with the elements of popular memoirs, at the expense of documentary duty, in order to make money (203–20).

Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), a work of nonfiction emerging from Herr's war reporting from Vietnam for *Rolling Stone* and *Esquire* magazines, has become something of a touchstone of contemporary American war literature. If book reviewers want to claim that a new nonfiction work about war is a masterpiece, they inevitably rank it alongside *Dispatches*, as reviewers did with both Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead* (a memoir of the Persian Gulf War published in 2003) and Dexter Filkins's *The Forever War* (2008), a journalist's account of the Iraq War. To further explore the idea of intertextuality, *Dispatches* can be examined as one node in a web of connections among several

works, including films. (Indeed, film has come to so dominate representations of war that it is impractical to speak of intertextuality in late-twentieth-century and early-twentieth-first-century war stories without mentioning examples from the genre.)

Dispatches deliberately includes war movies in its narrative. On occasion, Herr compares the war-in-the-head "fantasies" that soldiers and journalists bring with them (194), mostly garnered from films, with what they actually experience. However, he pushes this idea further, observing—as he perceives it—people in the war comporting themselves cinematically. Sometimes this happens in the presence of a television crew, with soldiers "actually making war movies in their heads" as they "run around during a fight" for the sake of the camera (209). The first fighting and carnage Herr witnessed struck him as quite "familiar . . . only moved to another medium," from celluloid to the battlefield. However, even after he understood the differences between how war is portrayed in film and the real thing, even after he had "unlearned" the preconceptions, "you couldn't avoid the ways in which things got mixed, the war itself with those parts of the war that were just like the movies" (209–10). His entire experience came to be viewed cinematically: "Life-as-movie, war-as (war) movie, war-as-life" (65). Tellingly, the films to which he refers in the passage about everything getting mixed up are adaptations of war novels: Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955) and Heller's *Catch-22*. Herr further mixes films with literature in the very way he conceives his own book:

> In any other war, they would have made movies about us [journalists] too. . . . But Vietnam is awkward, everybody knows how awkward, and if people don't even want to hear about it, you know they're not going to pay money to sit in the dark and have it brought up. . . . So we have all been compelled to make our own movies, as many movies as there are correspondents, and this one is mine. (188)

Elsewhere in the same section of *Dispatches*, references to "this movie" blur the distinction between his film-informed experiences and his cinematic vision of the book (206).

In addition to referencing war films, *Dispatches* looks at the western, through films such as *Fort Apache* (1948) and *Nevada Smith* (1966). Herr further invokes the American West when he labels as "frontier" (45) the military area of operation near the border between North and South Vietnam, and he quotes a military commander who refers to the war as a game of "Cowboys and Indians" (61). The soldiers with whom he partied in Saigon and Da Nang were "classic essential American types" (35), men who inherited the spirit of the American frontiersman and the Wild West maverick, men of action, violence, and isolation. In terms of intertextuality, this rhetorical move by Herr is significant both because he applies the argument from an earlier book and because the argument reappears in later narratives, such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008).

That earlier book to which Herr makes reference, Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence*: *The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*, appeared in 1973, four years before *Dispatches*. Though Herr derived much of his book from his wartime correspondence (1968–70), he substantially reworked the material for its publication in book form. Herr references Slotkin's book when he mentions being in Saigon and seeing *Nevada Smith*, with the actor "Steve McQueen working through a hard-revenge scenario, riding away at the end burned clean but somehow empty and old too, like he'd lost his margin for regeneration through violence" (60). Slotkin's book offers a cultural interpretation for the violence of American westward expansion, arguing that the national identity was continuously revitalized through that violence. Herr borrows from Slotkin's ideas and extends them, implying that their end result is the Vietnam War: "Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along" (49). Understanding Herr's conclusion equips readers formidably in efforts to understand *Dispatches*. A reader who accepts Slotkin's theory about the Wild West

might be inclined to accept Herr's corollary about Vietnam; a reader who does not accept Slotkin's theory will have little patience for Herr.

Regarding *The Hurt Locker*, one reason for its resonance has to do with its focus on improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the roadside bombs that, for many, symbolize the US soldiers' war experience in Iraq. Another reason the film has been hailed is because of its characterization of the main character, the wildly successful IED disposer Sergeant First Class William James, as the "classic essential American type," with which Herr populates his Vietnam memoir, and that is derived, ultimately, from western films; he is a lonely maverick who rides in to save the day, who cannot abide the domesticity of wife and child and a regular job, and who is last seen strutting alone, pistol on his hip, down an empty street in a small desert town toward his next potentially fatal encounter. At best, this final image of James is as forlorn as Herr's description of Steve McQueen's character in *Nevada Smith*. The movie even gives us a veritable circle-the-wagons ambush, when James and his team (and several British intelligence agents), surrounded by Iraqi insurgent snipers, take cover in an Arabian wadi (supplanting the Arizona gulches of a western film).

Herr's classic American types are crazy for the war (35), a proclivity that flirts with a more general craziness and that also applies to James. Such portrayals are also informed by the intertextual literary tradition of the war lover, a man absolutely necessary for military success but barely (if at all) suited for civilian life, who appears in narratives such as Oliver Stone's Vietnam War film *Platoon* (1986) and John Hersey's World War II novel *The War Lover* (1959). Such tales present a reincarnation of sorts of William Shakespeare's Hotspur, from *Henry IV, Part 1*, and Homer's Achilles. Such a character often has a foil, a man who is both duty-bound to join the fight and plenty competent despite his milder personality; the dramatic opposition between these split heroes plays out as a war waged for the soul of another character, an innocent, either a younger soldier or a beautiful woman.

Platoon pits the brutally effective, conscience-challenged, war-loving SSG Robert Barnes against the equally effective but moral Sgt. Elias Grodin; the new soldier Chris Taylor is the prize. The film opens with Taylor walking out of the plane and down the ramp on his first day in Vietnam, the fate of his soul very much in question. *The Hurt Locker* answers *Platoon* by having its war-loving protagonist walk off the helicopter and down a ramp on the first day of his next tour, but at the end of the film. The Elias Grodin and Chris Taylor characters (J. T. Sandborn and Owen Eldridge are their counterparts in *Hurt Locker*), are all but forgotten. (Though the professionalization of the US armed forces during the thirty years between the wars—including the move to an all-volunteer military—explains the transformation and promotion of *Platoon*'s SSG Barnes into *The Hurt Locker*'s Sergeant First Class James at least as much as some proposed commentary on human nature.)[2]

Regeneration through Violence is not the only attitudinal source text for *Dispatches*. The other major literary work whose spirit Herr embeds in his story is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). As he does with Slotkin's text, Herr alludes to Conrad's book obliquely, in describing his journalist colleague Sean Flynn who "sometimes . . . looked more like Artaud coming out of some heavy heart-of-darkness trip, overloaded on the information, the input! The input!" (echoing Conrad's "The horror! The horror!," uttered by Kurtz), as Flynn will go missing in action on one of his free-spirited outings to cover the war. For Herr, the intelligence operatives and special-forces soldiers who pioneered the US entry into the war—the "spooks"—bore the spirit of "older adventurers who'd burst from their tents and bungalows to rub up hard against the natives, hot on the sex-and-death trail, 'lost to headquarters'" (50)—men exactly like Conrad's Kurtz. The spooks' "adventure became our war" (51) in both spiritual and realistic senses.

The American combatants Herr chooses to depict in his book lustfully embrace violence and killing in a manner deeply disquieting to readers who prefer to imagine their fellow citizens-turned-soldiers as

reluctant heroes. *The Hurt Locker* carries on the tradition of previous ruminations of war. By replacing human enemies with IEDs, the film converts Herr's bloodlust to adrenaline-charged wire-snipping. Reembodied as James, the Kurtz archetype has been tamed, contained in the body armor that protects him, as a mere technician. James's rejection of a robot's help insufficiently disguises the geekier aspect of this warrior's trade, and the racism that many critics see as endemic to US military operations (in this case, toward an Arab population) has similarly been smoothed over (though the diminished racism might reflect an increased professionalism of the US military). Herr fluctuates between romanticizing and judging what he sees as the bloodlust of the American military; *The Hurt Locker*'s judgment of its characters is less obvious.

Though *Dispatches* bemoans the absence of films about the war in Vietnam and undertakes to write itself as the movie of the war in book form, Herr, in fact, famously contributed to a film about the war in Vietnam, collaborating with Francis Ford Coppola on *Apocalypse Now* (1979), with characters and general plotline taken directly from Conrad. The passage about adventurers gone "native" and "lost to headquarters" is the film's premise, and the Kurtz character is based on "one man who 'owned' Long An Province, a Duke of Nha Trang, [and] hundreds of others whose authority was absolute in hamlets or hamlet complexes where they ran their ops until the wind changed and their ops got ran back on them" (50). The film's version of Kurtz (played by Marlon Brando), however, is an exaggeration, an imaginative amalgamation of the men Herr came across and Conrad's Kurtz. This piece of intertextuality, between Herr's book and the film, should further equip the reader in an analysis of *Dispatches*.

In addition to *Regeneration through Violence* and *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now* turns to Sir James George Frazer's work of comparative mythology, *The Golden Bough* (1890), to construct its mythic story. A ritual described in the book is used in the film, in a scene depicting the sacrifice of a water buffalo; also, Willard (Marlow)

goes "savage" to complete his mission of decommissioning Kurtz, thereby evoking Fraser's discussion of symbolic ritualistic killing used in ancient societies to replace the old king with the new. Thus, if *Apocalypse Now* has achieved status as one of the great films depicting the US war in Vietnam, one could make the argument that the intertextuality driving the film overwhelms the war setting, meaning the film is no longer a war film but a metaphor for something else, a statement on the human condition. However, the film's deliberate dependence on Slotkin's thesis, for example, does not prove that thesis; it only gives it dramatic, hypothetical form. Had the film unintentionally rewritten Slotkin, Conrad, or Frazer, one might be more tempted to ascribe a truth in this coincidental expression.

Naturally, given its status, *Apocalypse Now* has entered the intertextual lexicon of war narratives. *Jarhead* (2003), Anthony Swofford's memoir of the first US–Iraq war, the Persian Gulf War of 1990–91, famously draws a scene of the author's Marine unit, before deploying to war, watching *Apocalypse Now* and other Vietnam War films. Enthused by the violence, they whoop it up:

> [W]e yell *Semper fi* and we head-butt and beat the crap out of each other and we get off on the various visions of carnage and violence and deceit, the raping and killing and pillaging. . . . There is talk that many Vietnam movies are antiwar. . . . But actually, Vietnam war films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message. . . . Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man. (5–7)

Swofford is not the first to propose the inherent impossibility of an antiwar film; literary narratives may suffer the same fate. However, if, because of their absence of the visual and their capacity to describe smells and express repugnance through language, they can accomplish what films cannot. Indeed as Susan Sontag has offered, reading is not watching; it requires more time, and more conspicuously invites contemplation—and "To paraphrase several sages, 'Nobody can think and

hit someone at the same time'" (118). On the other hand, because of its visual medium, the cinematic adaptation of *Jarhead* delivers irony in ways the book cannot. Instead of showing the Marines in their unit recreation room watching rented movies on a small television screen, the adaptation places them in a theater, so that audience members become part of the Marine audience as its watches the early battle scene in *Apocalypse Now*, during which US helicopters gun down Vietnamese in a riverside village. At the end of *Jarhead*, the Swofford character wanders desolately among the charred Iraqi vehicles and corpses; later, he regrets not having fired a single shot during the ground war, as the war turned out to be exactly what he and his Marine buddies had so roundly cheered while watching *Apocalypse Now*: destruction from the air.

Three Kings, a Persian Gulf War film that came before *Jarhead*, converses with *Apocalypse Now* in a scene in which a buffalo explodes as the result of the playful antics of the three soldiers chasing rumors of gold hidden in the Iraqi desert. If *Apocalypse Now*'s ritual slaughter of the water buffalo bespeaks that war's epic dimensions, the comical twist in *Three Kings* (1999) exposes its war as something of a joke (though this claim can be mitigated by noting the film's main intertextual reference, the World War II caper *Kelly's Heroes*, 1970). The animated film memoir (and later graphic novel) *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), redraws the postbattle surfing scene from *Apocalypse Now* with its own postbattle surfing scene on a beach outside Beirut. The blatant quotation, in its effort to communicate the spirit of the moment, is a bit distracting to those who recognize it. Nonetheless, one gains from the recognition. First, its apparent fictionality calls attention to the creative means by which the film expresses its nonfiction account. It reminds the audience, in other words, of the narrative's constructed perspective. Second, the surfing quotation, by incorporating a famous war film known for depicting the potentially intoxicating nature of barbarous violence, infuses the message of *Apocalypse Now*, attaching it to *Waltz with Bashir*'s equally horrific depiction of war (the film ends with the

revelation of a genocide-inflected massacre of civilians). Throughout, *Heart of Darkness* is the intertextual reference binding all of these depictions of war.

This introduction to war literature has focused primarily of films because many readers are likely more familiar with the films than with some of the literature and because the two mediums have become nearly inextricable. The inextricability demands that Herr's "war-movies-in-the-head" be rewritten as "war-stories-in-the-head." The fantasy, nightmare, and even mundane visions each individual has of war come from centuries of war narratives. Impressions come from the Bible, the Mahabharata, the *Chanson de Roland* (twelfth century; *Song of Roland*, 1880), *Beowulf* (c. 1000), Leo Tolstoy's *Voyna i mir* (1865–1869; *War and Peace*, 1886), and Ambrose Bierce's *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891). Readers have impressions from Wilfred Owen's war poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" and Randall Jarrell's war poem "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," among numerous novels, stories, poems, memoirs, plays, films, and other forms of media. New texts inherit the old and join the legacy to be referenced in future texts.

Literature has shaped the ways readers think about war, influencing the decisions people and governments make when confronting war, motivating actions during the war, and coloring the way one reflects on the war experience. The military truism that each new generation of war makers will initially repeat the strategy and tactics of the last war before it learns the nature of the new conflict finds a parallel in war literature, as each new text struggles to reconcile known methods of expression with the reality of new experiences.

The primary reason to read and write about war literature is to make sense of it: Talking and writing about war literature is an ongoing effort to create understanding such that anyone's contribution becomes another piece of dialogue in the rich and crucial intertextual conversation. These fifteen essays might seem inadequate to the vast body of war literature. Nevertheless, they put texts in conversation, and they are often in conversation with one another, in sometimes obvious,

sometimes subtle ways. The kind of questions the essays ask of their texts and the kind of thinking they propose about their texts model how scholars might approach pieces of war literature in order to make sense of them as well as enter in the conversation war literature in general.

Notes

1. Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Blood Rites*, locates the war passion in "the anxiety and ultimate thrill of the prey-to-predator transition" humanity made long ago (22), a transition that necessitated a clear assignment of gender roles.

2. James is first seen smoking in his darkened quarters, with music blaring, in a scene that perhaps intentionally echoes the introduction to Captain Marlow (named Willard in the film) in *Apocalypse Now*. The introduction of James, however, is an extremely mild, sanitized revisiting. He is comfortable in his skin, his war, and his job.

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