"It Don't Mean Nothin'": Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism
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Reviewed work(s):
Source: College Literature, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring, 2003), pp. 30-50
Published by: College Literature
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112718
Accessed: 10/02/2012 21:06
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, the overwhelming majority of it written by the war’s veterans, who realized early on that this was not their fathers’ war. In fact, at least part of the reason for this prodigious outpouring (an ominous 666 novels according to John Newman’s Vietnam War Literature: Annotated Bibliography, 1995) of narrative and other modes of literary expression is the synergy generated by the creative opposition of two very different ways of interpreting and representing the Vietnam War. One is through the precision lens of mainstream realism-naturalism, while the other is the kaleidoscope of simulacra associated with postmodernism. 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.
The postmodern approach to Vietnam, however, also lays claim to Vietnam as a quintessentially postmodern event to be imitated in a postmodern manner. Thus the so-called “postmodern” representations of Vietnam are founded largely and problematically on the assumption that Vietnam was somehow a “postmodern” event-experience. As Michael Bibby puts it:

To modify the war as “postmodernist” implies that the war is yet another phenomenon of postmodernity. The war, in this sense, is read as exhibiting the traits of a general historical, cultural condition already identifiable. If we can attach a qualification to the name of the war, it must be because that which qualifies it supersedes it, gives it shape, definition, morphological precision. To term the war “post-modernist,” then, is to colonize the war under the cultural; to subsume it under a critical sign, a name for the various modes of cultural practices we have come to recognize as the postmodern; to restrict the war under this name; to repress its historicity in the name of a unifying signifier. (Bibby 1999, 148)

In other words, to call the Vietnam War postmodern is to impose a hegemonic unity on a set of often radically dissimilar concepts, ideas and experiences, hence contradicting postmodernism’s central logic of diversity and differentiation. Still, this is how the war has come to be regarded by many literary critics and historians and is an important part of their explanations of the emergence of postmodern Vietnam War fiction, which tend to view postmodern war fiction as a logical product of a postmodern war. But aren’t such explanations based ultimately on the same mimetic principle underlying literary realism? To begin to answer this question requires a critical examination of the postmodern “status” of both the war and its fiction.

Certainly the historical and political anomalies of the war became clearer as it dragged on from its almost indeterminate origin and are embedded in its many narratives, as are many of its incipient postmodern characteristics and concerns. Nevertheless, some writers, most notably James Webb, John DelVecchio, and Winston Groom, tried to accommodate Vietnam within the realistic-naturalistic, “war is hell” model of the American war novel, a tradition extending from Stephen Crane through Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos to Norman Mailer and James Jones. For these, the essence of the human experience of war is always everywhere the same, generally entailing a profound progression from innocence to experience involving some combination of fear, courage, brotherhood, sacrifice, and, at its most existential, an ultimate realization that one is a meaningless pawn in the larger (though equally meaningless) game of history. Vietnam was different only in terms of locale, participants, and technology.

Others, however, realized that their experiences in Vietnam demanded a very different kind of narrative paradigm. Strongly influenced by Joseph
Heller’s masterpiece of black comedy, *Catch-22*, these writers exploded the conventions of American war fiction to produce a diversity of works that demonstrate the multi-perspectival, relativistic nature of America’s Vietnam experience and the futility of any attempt to identify, much less communicate (especially via language), any fundamental meaning or truth attaching to or derived from the war. Their texts can also operate as subversively as the Viet Cong, as argued by Don Ringnalda in terms of “guerilla texts” (1994, 35), embodying what Michel Foucault calls “the insurrection of subjugated knowledges against the officially sanctioned reality principle” (1972, 82). As Tim O’Brien puts it in *The Things They Carried*:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted you feel some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. (O’Brien 1991, 89)

In other words, Vietnam squelches whatever remains of the Western meta-narrative of history that accommodates war as a possibly inevitable form of primal human collective behavior and the Enlightenment notion that, when properly controlled and disposed by reason, war can be used to accomplish worthy and beneficial ends, as in the case of democratic revolutions or as a means of last resort in resisting totalitarian forces. But what is it about the Vietnam War that calls these assumptions into question and that calls for a postmodern means of representation? Before proceeding further in this examination of the postmodern American literature of the Vietnam War, it is worth considering in some detail the evidence and arguments for viewing Vietnam as a postmodern phenomenon.

First of all, the Vietnam War was an important cause of the political tumult of the 1960s in America and Europe that, instead of the hoped-for political and social revolution, helped give rise to that polysemic, protean cultural phenomenon now known as postmodernism. This might be obvious, but in the theoretical labyrinths of postmodernism it is easy to forget that its origins are ultimately grounded in historical events. Indeed, the principal theoreticians of the postmodern—Lyotard, Foucault, Jameson, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and others—either participated in or were strongly affected by the turmoil of the 1960s, and their early expressions of postmodern theory appear in the shadow of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, as Michael Bibby has observed, their subsequent guerrilla war against the Enlightenment “project” resembles that undertaken by the subversive Vietnamese against the metacorporation America had come to be (1999, 160-61).
The Vietnam War helped create a Western counterculture that “believed that it was creating an entirely new society and culture, based on a new set of values, sensibilities, consciousness, culture, and institutions, which produced a rupture with mainstream, or ‘establishment,’ society” (Best and Kellner 1997, 5). This counterculture was instrumental in bringing an end to direct U.S. involvement in Vietnam, but when the larger revolution not only failed to materialize, and commodity capitalism thrived as it never had before, the counterculture dissolved into an array of identity politics and “lifestyles.” Classical Marxism was largely discredited by the intellectual left as just another metanarrative that didn’t work, but these new postmodern “theorists” retained and expanded its stringent analysis of the power, class, and economic motivations hidden by bourgeois values and ideals to form the most vigorous and thoroughgoing instrument of philosophical skepticism the world has ever seen, challenging the ultimate foundations of Western thought.

The Vietnam War also embodied many of the historical contingencies that fueled the rise of postmodernism. First and foremost, it was largely a capitalist war fought to protect American political and economic interests in Southeast Asia by an American military organized and managed like a corporation working hand-in-glove with other American “businesses,” just what Eisenhower had in mind when he warned of an emerging “military-industrial complex,” the beginning of the postmodern partnership between multinational corporate capitalism and technology, or what Lyotard calls “technoscience.” Taking their lead from Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, formerly president of Ford Motor Company, commanding generals recast themselves as CEOs and the “body count” became their corporation’s product, its measure of success. South Vietnam was flooded with money, material goods, and American mass culture, a full dose of what Debord and the Situationists termed the “Spectacle” of Western consumer culture and Baudrillard called a culture of “surface intensity and pure meaninglessness” existing in a “perpetual present of signs” (1988, 63) in an attempt to seduce and addict Vietnamese society with the American way of life and pacify disgruntled American draftees who were already hooked on consumerism. Furthermore, because of the draft, the military was compelled to deal with such social issues as racism (largely ignored since Truman’s desegregation order in 1948), diversity, and drug use, as well as with anti-war resistance within its own ranks. Similarly, the United States was confronted with an alien Other that was both the “inscrutable” Oriental (and hence subject to the kind of devaluation Edward Said describes in Orientalism) and the dreaded Communist, unlike the South Vietnamese who were viewed condescendingly and imperialistically as a good, childlike people who needed the guid-
ance of Western civilization if they were to reap the rewards of liberal democracy. Ironically, many Vietnam veterans would experience themselves as Other upon their return to "the world."

Because the Vietnam War was the first war to be reported via television and where the media were given extensive and uncensored access to the combat, conflicting discourses claiming the "truth" about Vietnam and the war soon developed to explain the images flowing every evening into American living rooms, illustrating in the process postmodern conceptions of the arbitrary nature of the relationship between signifier and signified and the relativity of meaning. The daily press briefings by the U.S. military in Saigon, known to journalists as the Five O'clock Follies or Jive at Five, featured such tortuous, self-deconstructing rhetoric as "We had to destroy [the village of] Ben Tre in order to save it" (Herr 1968, 74). It soon became clear that "the means of production that secure power in postmodern societies are informational rather than industrial" (Grant 1999, 39) and information had gained hegemony over knowledge. As the nation continued in its transition to a post-industrial society, the U.S. government would never forget that lesson in postmodernism, as evidenced by the almost total control of war news and information during the Greneda and Panama "incursions," the Persian Gulf War and the recent bombing campaign against Serbia.

The Vietnam War was also permeated by American mass culture. The soundtrack of the war was rock and roll, but it was a rock and roll which, thanks to the psychedelic movement and the postmodern collapse of high and low culture distinctions, was experienced by many of its listeners as a cultural equivalent of the "serious" music by the West's canonical composers. Armed forces radio played rock and roll (subject to some censorship) almost nonstop, and American soldiers were never without their "sounds," buying expensive stereo systems from the amply stocked PX's along with refrigerators and television sets, for their barracks ("hooches"), at least in the principal base camps and installations in major cities. Armed forces television ran a steady diet of what the networks broadcast at home, and at most bases, large screen movies alternated with stage shows featuring go-go girls accompanied by Filipino and Korean rock groups covering (with a wide spectrum of success) songs by American groups, always concluding, it seemed, with The Animals' "We Gotta Get out of this Place." One of the most significant statistics defining the Vietnam War is that for every "grunt" infantryman carrying a rifle in the field, there were about ten "support" troops—also known as "housecats," "Remington Raiders," and REMF's (for Rear Echelon Motherfuckers)—living in comparative security in cities and base camps with almost unlimited access to cheeseburgers, pizza, beer, soda, drugs and prostitutes. Indeed, John Keegan cites sources claiming that "approximately
70 per cent of the men in Vietnam cannot be considered combat soldiers except by the loosest of definitions" (1986, 239). Still, because there were no front lines, a sudden, violent death or maiming could come to anyone at any time, a fact that fueled the paranoia we have come to regard as characteristic of the Vietnam experience and, when added to the already existing H-bomb paranoia of the Cold War, of postmodernism itself.

As an historical event, then, the Vietnam War was at least a significant contributing factor to the dissent, disillusionment, and radical skepticism that shaped postmodern literature by virtue of its being, according to Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism*, “the first terrible postmodernist war” (1991, 44). Unlike such “modern” wars as World War Two, with the Allies’ clearly defined (at least on maps) front lines relentlessly advancing against the forces of fascism (interestingly similar to the Enlightenment project with its notion of progress and advancing truth pushing back the boundary of the unknown), the Vietnam War was instead a chaotic quagmire with no clear boundaries and no easily identifiable enemy, powerfully representative of the ambivalence and uncertainty characteristic of postmodernism. In the end, the longstanding Enlightenment metanarratives of nationalism, progress, and the liberating nature of liberal democracy used to justify the war took heavy hits from deconstructive analysis delivered by postmodern thinkers who were in the process of calling all metanarratives into question. They were also the first to recognize that the new alliance between capitalism and technology made it possible for capitalism to emerge victorious in the conflict of the narratives because, as Lyotard had argued, profit no longer need be legitimated by reference to a “grand narrative of progressive realization of individual liberty through the market, since it is justified immediately by sharing its sole criterion of success with a technology that has become the means of production of knowledge, information and power” (Grant 1999, 39). In short, the West’s experience of the Vietnam War helped create and define what Lyotard labeled “the postmodern condition.”

Nevertheless, critics and historians of American war literature are far from unanimous regarding the efficacy of applying the term *postmodern* to the literature spawned by the Vietnam War or even to the war itself. Tobey C. Herzog’s *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* claims that both the war and its literature are not substantially different from their historical counterparts and that the literature in fact conforms to the classic structure of war literature in its progression from innocence to experience to experience considered to aftermath. John Hellmann’s *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* asserts that the literature of the war is for the most part a reworking of the American myth of the Frontier and of the Frontier Hero, and Philip L. Melling’s *Vietnam in American Literature* places the literature entirely within the Puritan
tradition, saying that even those qualities claimed as postmodern are best explained within the context of American Puritanism. On the other hand, Philip D. Beidler in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* and Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* and Thomas Myers in *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* insist that the literature is best regarded as a product of a postmodern event and postmodern consciousness, or what Hutcheon describes as the postmodernist point where “documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody” (1989, 7), and that the literature always be considered within its postmodern context. To do so, however, is to force this extraordinarily diverse literature into a single category which, capacious as it is, cannot possibly accommodate even the majority of that literature and still do justice to the individual works themselves. While I am also of the opinion that a significant portion of what has come to be regarded as the canonical American literature of the Vietnam War displays many of the central concerns and qualities of postmodern content and style, among them relativism, diversity, parody, alterity, anti-hegemony, fabulation, self-reflexivity, and metafiction, I am aware that these characteristics are not postmodern in and of themselves but rather by virtue of their concurrence, configuration, and the ends to which they are put. Furthermore, these works do not imitate or represent the war in the classic manner of literary realism; instead they continue the experience of the war on its own diverse and relativistic terms. In short, I think that this “other” kind of war literature shares a striking family resemblance that can be more clearly and completely scrutinized through the lens of postmodern discourse than it has been to date because there is much more to be revealed about how this literature has shaped and been shaped by postmodernism, as I shall attempt to show by considering the work of Michael Herr, Stephen Wright, and Tim O’Brien. I have selected these writers both because they are canonical and because they exhibit most clearly the postmodern family resemblance of much of that canon.

To begin with, Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* is the work of a war correspondent, but it is not journalism in the ordinary sense of the word, i.e. an objective, detached reporting of the “facts.” Instead, it is a work of the so-called New Journalism, a hybrid form that, in typical postmodern fashion, blurs traditional genre distinctions. As developed by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and *The Right Stuff*, Hunter S. Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Truman Capote in *In Cold Blood*, and Norman Mailer in his account of the 1967 march on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War, *The Armies of the Night* (provocatively subtitled “History as a Novel, The Novel as History”), the New Journalism abandons all pretense of impersonal objectivity, substituting instead an intense subjectivity that, while includ-
ing what Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* calls “historical realmes” (1989, 87), also employs such devices of fiction as characterization, flashbacks, and interior monologue. Like most postmodern writing, it “implode[s] oppositions between high and low art, fantasy and reality, fiction and fact” (Best and Kellner 1997, 132). As Herr puts it, “Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it, all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding, taking its most obvious, undeniable history and making it into a secret history” (1968, 232).

Much of the texture and force of Herr’s narrative derives from his realization that this was a war permeated by American popular culture and perceived by soldiers and correspondents suffering “from a framework of consciousness almost indelibly stamped with various impressions, with mental and emotional constructs, shaped by long-term and repeated exposure to media versions of reality” (Stewart 1990, 190). As Jameson points out, Herr’s “language impersonally fuses a whole range of collective idiolects, most notably rock language and black language” (1991, 44). The Vietnamese countryside was referred to as “Indian Country” and John Wayne became a verb to describe heroic (or foolhardy) behavior in combat. As Herr says, “You don’t know what a media freak is until you’ve seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew there was a television crew nearby. . . . We’d all seen too many movies, stayed too long in Television City . . .” (1968, 223). But it was rock and roll that had perhaps the most impact, “a war where a lot of people talked about Aretha’s ‘Satisfaction’ the way other people speak of Brahms’ Fourth” (192), a war where you could hear Jimi Hendrix in the middle of a firefight. Michael P. Clark says that Herr’s narrative “emphasizes the mechanical apparatus of representation and its effect on the subject” to convey “a postmodern sense of the powerful influence of representational technologies over all aspects of individual identity, a influence so pervasive that it determines not only forms of consciousness but also one’s sense of the body and its place in the world” (1999, 25).

*Dispatches* is also postmodern by virtue of its metafictional reflexivity, its references to itself as writing and to the process of its writing. In fact, Herr himself has called it “a book about writing a book” (quoted in Hellmann 1986, 151), and Jameson says that *Dispatches* demonstrates why

the war cannot be told in any of the traditional paradigms of the war novel or movie — indeed, that breakdown of all previous narrative paradigms is, along with the breakdown of any shared language through which a veteran might convey such experience, among the principal subjects of the book and may be said to open up the place of a whole new reflexivity. (Jameson 1991, 44-45)
For Herr, the principal problems in writing the war are the sheer flood of information ("The input! The input!") and the fact that words were becoming detached from their referents, the signifiers from the signified, as post-modern theorists say.

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 being described. Most Americans would rather be told that their son is undergoing acute environmental reaction than to 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. (Herr 1968, 97)

Then there is

the cheer-crazed language of the MACV Information Office, things like "discrete burst" (one of those tore an old grandfather and two children to bits as they ran along a paddy wall one day, at least according to the report made later by the gunship pilot) "friendly casualties" (not warm, not fun), "meeting engagement" (ambush), concluding usually with 17 or 117 or 317 enemy dead and American losses "described as light." (Herr 1968, 237)

But these matters remain totally—and significantly—beyond the ken of those in charge, like Herr’s "hopelessly awkward" interview with General William C. Westmoreland, where "I came away feeling I’d just had a conversation with a man who touches a chair and says, ‘This is a chair,’ points to a desk and says, ‘This is a desk’" (1968, 231). Westmoreland obviously never read Saussure. No one in charge could see (or would admit to seeing) the aporia that results from linking "Winning Hearts and Minds" with "Search and Destroy," or, as one helicopter pilot put it, "Vietnam, man. Bomb 'em and feed 'em, bomb 'em and feed 'em" (9).

The resulting "proliferation of signs," to use Baudrillard's phrase, would include everything from the soldiers’ war names “(FAR FROM FEARLESS, MICKEY’S MONKEY, AVENGER V, SHORT TIME SAFETY MOE)” and slogans "(HELL SUCKS, TIME IS ON MY SIDE, JUST YOU AND ME GOD—RIGHT?)" that decorate their helmets and flak jackets to the ubiquitous photo albums assembled by infantrymen with the state-of-the-art cameras purchased from the base camp PX that "all seemed to contain the same pictures":

the obligatory Zippo-lighter shot ("All right, let's burn these hooches and move out"); the severed head shot, the head often resting on the chest of the dead man or being held up by a smiling Marine, or a lot of heads arranged in a row, with a burning cigarette in each of the mouths, the eyes open ("Like they’re lookin’ at you, man, it’s scary"); the VC suspect being
dragged over the dust by a half-track or being hung by his heels in some jungle clearing; the very young dead with AK-47's still in their hands ("How old would you say that kid was?" the grunts would ask. "Twelve, thirteen? You just can't tell with gooks"); a picture of a Marine holding an ear or maybe two ears or, as in the case of a guy I knew near Pleiku, a whole necklace made of ears, "love beads" as its owner called them; and the one we were looking at now, the dead Viet Cong girl with her pajamas stripped off and her legs raised stiffly in the air. (Herr 1968, 212)

Perhaps the best example of sign proliferation is a collage—a technique favored by postmodern artists because it emphasizes a logic of difference rather than unity—in an enlisted man’s quarters in Saigon:

It 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; pictures of John Lennon peering through wire-rimmed glasses, Mick Jagger, Jimi Hendrix, Dylan, Eldridge Cleaver, Rap Brown; coffins draped with American flags whose stars were replaced by swastikas and dollar signs; odd parts clipped from Playboy pictures, newspaper headlines (FARMERS BUTCHER HOGS TO PROTEST PORK PRICE DIP), photo captions (President Jokes with Newsmen), beautiful girls holding flowers, showers of peace symbols; 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 and one large, long figure that began at the bottom with shiny leather boots and rouged knees and ascended in a microskirt, bare breasts, graceful shoulders and a long neck, topped by the burned, blackened face of a dead Vietnamese woman. (Herr 1968, 87)

But as the note Herr sees on a thick intelligence report in a MACV office says, "What does it all mean?" (1968, 195) The answer, in true postmodern fashion, is Nothing and Everything. Many critics view Dispatches as a series of fragments reflecting the nature of the American experience in Vietnam that are processed and unified through the subjectivity of Herr himself, but this totalizing view flies in the face of Herr's essentially postmodern inquiry into the very nature of subjectivity and the subsequent realization that "the perceiving subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity" (Hutcheon 1988, 11). Consequently, I would argue that Herr as subject is just as fragmented as his narrative, confirming the postmodern conception of "the death of the unified self" as elucidated by Lacan and other theorists. According to Brady Harrison, Herr abjures the self in favor of "generating images of Vietnam that seize upon and then distort contemporary images of the war" that call into being the Baudrillardan "hyperreal," a "postmodernist screen projected with simulations rather than
representations” (Baudrillard 1988, 91). There is the Herr who hates the war, who loves the war, who observes as a reporter, who participates as a “shooter,” who is friend, who is enemy, etc., all those selves pervaded by the postmodern irony that calls everything into question by putting everything within figurative inverted commas. The closest he comes to a Truth is when he says that it took him a year to understand the koan-like war story told to him by a hardened combat veteran: “Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He dies before he could tell what happened” (Herr 1968, 4). We never find out what that understanding is, and the closest he comes to a totalizing metanarrative is the cryptic conclusion: “Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there.” But we are left to ask how and why.

Stephen Wright’s Meditations in Green, on the other hand, purports to being a novel but it displays many of the same postmodern characteristics and tendencies as Dispatches. The fractured point-of-view of the novel, for example, whereby Griffin, the central character, narrates some sections in first person, while other parts of the narrative, including some where Griffin remains the focus of attention, are narrated in an omniscient third person (who may also be some dimension of Griffin), indicates yet another instance of the dissolution of a unified self that is reinforced by the fifteen cryptic and fragmentary “meditations in green” which punctuate the narrative and are presumably Griffin’s interior monologues while practicing a New Age therapy that is supposed to make him more like a plant. In fact, the novel’s narrative point-of-view reflects a postmodern consciousness that, according to Jameson, lacks a sense of “the persistence of the ‘I’ and ‘me’ over time” (1989, 119–20).

Likewise, the uncertainty and ambiguity that are the hallmarks of postmodernism are central concerns of the novel. Griffin is an “image interpreter” for the 1069th Military Intelligence Group, whose primary mission is to locate the elusive 5th NVA Regiment, which seems to be simultaneously everywhere and nowhere until it materializes to overrun the camp in the apocalyptic conclusion of the novel. Griffin’s job is “to interpret the film, find the enemy in the negatives” (Wright 1983, 43) taken by the belly camera of a Mohawk observation plane, and “wherever he put circles on the film there the air force would make holes in the ground” (43). No one knows better than he the lies of the Army’s version of the war and the proliferation of signs and images that make locating a “reality” futile. He knows that he inhabits a Baudrillardan hyperreality where “the images of war substituted for the events of the war itself and appeared realer than real . . .” (Kellner 1999, 220). In an ongoing effort to find meaning in the war, Griffin tries changing his perspective by leaving his dark, air-conditioned cubicle in the Research and Analysis Quonset hut and experiencing the war “firsthand” from the ground and the air, from Saigon and the jungle. All he learns is a
dizzying, de-centering, and ultimately paralyzing relativism, which persists when he returns to the United States.

As in Dispatches, a collage is employed to symbolize the chaotic flow of images and other kinds of simulacra. In this case it is “The Board,” the back wall of a barracks where soldiers had been pasting anything they wanted ever since the base was built. The Board is a quintessential egalitarian, non-hegemonic postmodern artifact in that “there was no one in charge of The Board, no one to arbitrate questions of form, harmony, and taste” (Wright 1983, 120):

Griffin had proposed that when the war ended The Board be preserved under a coat of liquid plastic and left to the patient scrutiny of the North Vietnamese. What could they make of these inscrutable Occidentals? There would be much to ponder: presidents and penises, officers and orifices, history as an illustrated stroke book, from the ancient mamasan in conical hat and black latex to last year’s Playmate of the Year from whose glossy pink ass a stick of five hundred pound bombs dropped onto a football field mined with pizzas where one team marked AFL rushed another team marked NLF for possession of the oversized head of Mickey Mouse decapitated by the blades of a Cobra helicopter streaming rockets into the U.S. Capitol dome that was a beanie on the head of Ho Chi Minh. In the upper right where pigs grazed on the White House lawn under a rain of pubic bushes cut into the shape of hydrogen bombs and Jesus with golden halo and folded hands lay on his side in a pile of charred Asian dead from which rose the Statue of Liberty who was taking it stoically in the rear from Pham Van Dong’s dong. . . . (Wright 1983, 121)

Wright also includes references to American television and movies, most notably George Romero’s pop horror classic Night of the Living Dead, which is being shown in the chapel on the night the base is overrun by the North Vietnamese. Even more significant from the postmodern perspective, however, is the cinéma vérité “documentary” being shot by Weird Wendell and referred to simply as “The Movie.” The Movie attempts nothing less than to “embrace the complete complexity of the American experience in Southeast Asia. Wendell photographed indiscriminately, confident that form, like invisible writing exposed to a flame, would reveal itself beneath the heat of his talent” (Wright 1983, 164). When Griffin sees a four-and-a-half hour “rough cut” of the work-in-progress his criticism focuses on the film’s meaning: “I don’t know, maybe it’s me, but I couldn’t make any sense out of it at all. I mean, there’s no beginning, no middle, no end. There’s no coherence” (266). Wendell’s belief in his work remains constant, however, and in the end, as he lies dying in the final attack, he succeeds in erasing even the most fundamental distinction between art and life by having Griffin film his death and the holocaust around him: “‘Shoot, you mangy cocksucker, shoot me, shoot them, shoot the whole fucking compound. The War in Vietnam: The Final
Hours, huh?” (333). This is the domain, once again, of Baudrillard’s hyper-reality.

Language, too, has become a play of meaningless signifiers, from the sign above the compound gate that reads “7 Days Without an Accident” and hasn’t been changed in anyone’s memory, to the endless reports with their meaningless words and numbers: “Behind the secured doors of the communications shack the stutter of teletypes was incessant day and night. The paper spilled out of the machines and rolled on the floor in long yellow tongues. Information. Incoming. Outgoing” (Wright 1983, 66). Griffin calls further attention to this rampant disjunction of sound and sense in the naming of military operations:

Clawhammer? The Secretary of the Army drops in for a twenty-minute visit and it’s Operation Clawhammer. What happens if the President comes calling, Operation Bootinyournuts? Who’ve they got thinking these gags up, chief cartoonist of GI Joe comics? Reminds me, you ever hear about Masher, Operation Masher for Christ’s sake, big First Air Cav sweep, even Johnson couldn’t stomach that, had to change the name to White Wing, same operation but now it’s White Wing. Holy God. What we need around here is an Operation Cream-cheese, a Project Lords A-Leaping, a Mission Negotiable. All these Greek and Roman and Nordic appellations for everything from a moon rocket to a general’s fart. How about Operation Sow’s Ear or Mickey Mouse fragmentation devices or the Saint Francis of Assisi surface-to-air missile? (Wright 1983, 271)

Furthermore, the word green in the course of the novel comes to demonstrate a dazzling spectrum of polysemy, including nature, death, possibility, and enlightenment, until it seems to hang suspended over the narrative as a signifier forever detached from a signified. Don Ringnalda calls it “the great god-devil in this novel” and likens it to “the all-consuming whiteness of Moby Dick” (1994, 51-52).

Similarly, the anti-authoritarianism which Linda Hutcheon calls “the basic postmodernist stance” (1988, 202) has at least some of its roots in the opposition to the Vietnam War and to what was termed the Establishment. At the 1069th the authority being challenged is the “Green Machine,” the Army itself which, with its rigid hierarchy and dependence on technology, is portrayed as an extension of corporate America. The base is frequented by “corporate tech reps from McDonnell Douglas and ITT” (Wright 1983, 66) and the General visits the base “to speak of the virtues of systems analysis, the sanctity of the data base, the effective utilization of common sense, he talked about the program, getting with it; he elaborated on progress, the correct tallying of figures, the latest consensus upon which everyone should clamber aboard or be left at the dock with the gooks” (137). Black soldiers segregate
themselves in their own barracks (called the "Voodoo Hootch" by white soldiers) under the leadership of a black militant named Franklin who harangues them about the racism of the Army. One unit commander is killed when his sabotaged plane crashes, and his replacement, Major Holly, in an ironic intertextual reference to Heller's Major Major, has a private tunnel dug from his quarters to his office to the latrine after he finds a hand grenade placed as a warning in the middle of his room.

Drug use, too, is another means of resisting authority as well as coping with both horror and boredom. Still, whereas Dispatches relates the widespread use of marijuana among soldiers and correspondents as part of the countercultural influence on the war, Meditations in Green moves on to drug addiction as a postmodern metaphor for the human as ultimate consumer commodity, a trope created by that proto-postmodernist William S. Burroughs and employed in roughly similar ways by Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Philip Roth, John Berryman, and other writers of a postmodern bent. Specialist Griffin moves from an innocent pot-smoking idealist to a tormented heroin junky whose addiction has anesthetized his moral sense. Griffin thought his war could be clean and simple, but in Vietnam the war was everywhere; no one escaped its corruption. "Marijuana lost its magic" (Wright 1983, 291) because "[s]hooting up was nothing more or less than fucking yourself, in a single act combining penetration and penetrated, roles united into one entity, the circle of desire completed, the mandala of technology" (301). The heroin provided both an alternative experience and a reassuring ritual:

I went to work. I picked up a cigarette. I emptied out about an inch of tobacco. I poured in the powder. Et cetera, et cetera. Smoke rings drifted across my face. I jumped through a hole. I was gone. I traveled. I knew the euphoria of metal, the atavism of the cell, white nights of burning ice, the derangement of flesh, the deliquescence of dreams, the clarity of death. I returned.

As his dependency increases, it becomes more generalized. As his friend Trips puts it: "You're just a general all-purpose addict, addicted to addiction. . . ." The reliable repetition of the drug high makes Vietnam endurable:

The war encapsulated him in peace. Events arranged themselves into machines of quiet harmony. Objects tended to rest in the serenity of ancient comprehension. All things simply slowed slowly slowing except the days, of course, and the days, they went zip. (Wright 1983, 301)

Unable to leave his habit or his memories in Vietnam, Griffin fails to make a satisfactory adjustment to civilian life, eventually embarking with his wartime buddy Trips on a desperate mission of revenge against their former sergeant.
Griffin’s addiction is finally a metaphor for the veteran’s attachment to the war, his inability to let it go.

Like most postmodern narratives, Meditations in Green refuses closure. The reader doesn’t know what happens to Griffin “in the end,” but several alternatives are strongly suggested. The reader can only assign the percentage of probability for each, hence subverting narrative convention just as the indeterminacy of quantum mechanics disastrously undermined the ordered reality of Newtonian physics.

Tim O’Brien is arguably the most accomplished of the Vietnam War novelists, a status due largely to the success of his bold, leap-of-faith forays into mostly uncharted realms of postmodern war fiction. However, his first book, If I Die in a Combat Zone, is a conventional realistic war memoir chron- icling how an All-American white boy from Minnesota named “Tim O’Brien” winds up “humping the boonies” in an infantry company whose area of operations included “Pinkville,” the collection of villages where the My Lai massacre had occurred a year earlier. The protagonist follows the customary war narrative progression from innocence to experience to disillu sionment, and has more in common with Nick Adams than he does with John Yossarian. Still, the frequent references to writing (“O’Brien” is a poet) and to High Modern writers like Pound, Eliot, Auden, and, especially, Hemingway, display a postmodern reflexivity and demonstrate his concern with establishing the “critical engagement with modernism rather than a simple turning away from it” that Steven Connor considers crucial to the postmodernist perspective (1997, 115). On the whole, however, the universe of the narrative is naturalistic, like the universes of Crane, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Jones, and the early Mailer. The emotion is intense, but nothing strains credulity.

O’Brien’s first novel, Northern Lights, is similarly realistic in subject, style, and tone, as it follows the return and slow recovery of a wounded veteran. As Philip Beidler has pointed out, Northern Lights incorporates elements from several Hemingway novels and stories (1991, 19) in a way that suggests that his dialogue with the High Modernist has become a father–son agon, as that struggle is defined by Harold Bloom in The Anxiety of Influence and Agon. O’Brien seems to become progressively more impatient with the self-limiting nature of realistic writing.

In Going After Cacciato, however, O’Brien modifies his perspective on the war via the postmodern technique of magical realism pioneered and developed by Borges, Calvino, Marquez, Cortazar and practiced in America by, among others, Barthelme, Pynchon, Vonnegut, Coover, Morrison, Reed, and Heller. But this is not the absurdist satire of Catch-22; instead, it is a romantic escapist fantasy juxtaposed with a painfully realistic recounting of the
Vietnam experience of Paul Berlin and his infantry squad, including several brutal combat deaths and the “fragging” of an officer who was attempting to impose his West Point version of a military metanarrative on his men. There are actually three strands of narrative: the fantasy of pursuing an AWOL Cacciato all the way to Paris, the all-too-real memories of Paul Berlin’s tour of duty, and the Observation Post episodes where he imagines the former to escape from the latter, trying to position himself at that point of detachment from reality where objectivity is possible but finding that such a “positionless” position is impossible to achieve, as postmodern theory tells us. As Herr puts it, “We all had roughly the same position on the war: we were in it, and that was a position” (1968, 241). Paul Berlin attempts to escape the grizzly, unrelenting realism of war by employing “the immense powers of [his] own imagination” (O’Brien 1975, 43) to construct alternate visions of reality: “Figuring how it would be, if it were” (41). This postmodern fabulation, Jameson says, is

no doubt the symptom of social and historical impotence, of the blocking of possibilities that leaves little option but the imaginary. Yet its very invention and inventiveness endorses a critical freedom with respect to events it cannot control, by the sheer act of multiplying them; agency here steps out of the historical record itself into the process of devising it; and new multiple or alternate strings of events rattle the bars of the national tradition and the history manuals whose very constraints and necessities their parodic force indicted. Narrative invention here thus by way of its very implausibility, becomes the figure of a larger possibility of praxis, its compensation but also its affirmation in the form of projection and mimetic reenactment. (Jameson 1991, 369)

For Berlin the dizzying possibility of narrative becomes “[a] truly awesome notion. Not a dream, an idea. An idea to develop, to tinker with and build and sustain, to draw out as an artist draws out his visions” (O’Brien 1975, 43). It gives rise to a perspectival relativism articulated by Li Van Hgoc, the North Vietnamese officer and former deserter exiled to the largest, deepest tunnel in South Vietnam: “So you see,’ said Li Van Hgoc as he brought down the periscope and locked it with a silver key, ‘things may be viewed from many angles. From down below, or from inside out, you often discover entirely new understandings”’ (O’Brien 1975, 114), or as Doc Peret explains to Captain Rhallon, a Savak investigator in Teheran: “‘Facts are one thing. . . . Interpretation is something else. Putting facts in the right framework’” (270). Rhallon agrees,

Each soldier, he has a different war. . . . In battle, in a war, a soldier sees only a tiny fragment of what is available to be seen. The soldier is not a photographic machine. He is not a camera. He registers, so to speak, only those
few items that he is predisposed to register and not a thing more. . . . So I am saying to you that after a battle each soldier will have different stories to tell, vastly different stories, and than when a war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers. (O’Brien 1975, 236–37)

Although Rhallon’s observation holds true for all wars, prior to Vietnam there was always the historiographic assumption that there was a larger event or event-category called a “war” that somehow contained all the individual experiences. For postmodernism there is no larger all encompassing category; there is only the unique perspective of subjective experience, multiplied by hundreds of thousands (millions if you count civilians) of simulacra rendered in an eternal now.

Cacciato himself is the ordering enigma of the novel, the aporia at its core. Like the mysterious Tristero that becomes the object of Oedipa’s quest in Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49, Cacciato becomes the focus of a search, a reason for being, and a means of validating the squad’s decision to leave the war, and also like the Tristero, he leaves a series of clues about his whereabouts. Cacciato is constructed through a system of representations: he is the “puzzle” that Major Li Van Hgoc sees underlying the war (O’Brien 1975, 119); he is a postmodern parody of the Fisher King, fishing with a bent safety pin in a rain-filled bomb crater in the “World’s Greatest Lake Country”; and he is the succession of snapshots in the photo-album he carries, images that include his family, their house, the family car, the cat, and “Cacciato smiling and shoveling snow, Cacciato with his head shaved white, Cacciato in fatigues, Cacciato home on leave, Cacciato and Vaught posing with machine guns, Cacciato and Billy Boy, Cacciato and Oscar, Cacciato squatting beside the corpse of a shot-dead VC in green pajamas, Cacciato holding up the dead boy’s head by a shock of brilliant black hair, Cacciato smiling” (147). Cacciato also represents possibility, especially the possibility of meaning, but like meaning, he is always tantalizingly just out of reach, “infinitely deferred,” as Derrida says.

Cacciato’s fate is indeterminate, as is that of Paul Berlin and the remaining squad members. The only closure offered is Berlin’s apparent realization that even the imagination has its limitations, that even though reality can be constructed in a myriad of ways, the here and now (i.e., history) can never be transcended. Going After Cacciato is a postmodern narrative that, like postmodernism itself, offers nothing in the way of competing metanarratives but its own subversion of existing ones, such as progress, nationalism, nature, and religion, just as it uses fabulation to deconstruct the conventional realism of the American war novel.
Obviously intent on exploring a diversity of perspectives in his attempt to “write the war,” O’Brien moves from fabulation to focus almost exclusively on metafiction in *The Things They Carried*, where he “sees himself metafictionally seeing himself as a writer” (Ringnalda 1990, 100). The book’s title page terms it “A work of fiction by Tim O’Brien,” but the central character is one Tim O’Brien who, like his “creator,” is a Vietnam veteran and writer. He also mentions *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, creating a point of intertextuality that further confuses fact and fiction. As for the rest of it, it may or may not have “actually happened,” and “O’Brien” may or may not have killed a North Vietnamese soldier. As he puts it in “Good Form,” which I quote in its entirety:

> It’s time to be blunt.  
> I’m forty-three years old, true, and I’m a writer now, and a long time ago  
> I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier.  
> Almost everything else is invented.  
> But it’s not a game. It’s a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I’m thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present.  
> But listen. Even that story is made up.  
> I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.  
> Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then, and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.  
> Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.  
> What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.  
> I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again.  
> “Daddy, tell the truth,” Kathleen can say, “did you ever kill anybody?”  
> And I can say, honestly, “Of course not.”  
> Or I can say, honestly, “Yes.” (O’Brien 1991, 203-04)  

Of the twenty-two “chapters” composing the novel, some are more or less complete narratives while others are soliloquies or asides to the reader. They range in style from the fabulation of “The Sweetheart of Song Tra
Bong,” the story of an All-American girl smuggled into Vietnam by her boyfriend where she discovers a real love of killing, to a parody of Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River” titled “On the Rainy River,” where O’Brien as Nick Adams decides that he will go to Vietnam because he would be “embarrassed not to” (O’Brien 1991, 62). These textual units could be rearranged with little change in continuity, and there is a strong sense in which they function as component parts of a postmodern collage or pastiche. One thing they have in common, though, is an ironic awareness of themselves as fragments of Vietnam experience constructed from both memory and imagination.

O’Brien is also aware of the “sliding signifiers” that words become when applied to the war:

I learned that words make a difference. It’s easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse; if it isn’t human, it doesn’t matter much if it’s dead. And so a VC nurse, fried by napalm, was a crispy critter. A Vietnamese baby, which lay nearby, was a roasted peanut. “Just a crunchie munchie,” Rat Kiley said as he stepped over the body. (O’Brien 1991, 267)

Language, however, prison house though it may be, is the only instrument he has with which to tell his stories, and the truth to which he aspires is purely subjective: “It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (O’Brien 1991, 86). As a forty-three-year-old writer, he knows that the stories structure how he sees himself and how he constructs his notions of self, both in the present and in the past. He is also operating within, in Hutcheon’s words, “the paradox of postmodernism. The past really did exist, but we can only know it today through its textual traces” (1989, 78). As O’Brien has it, “stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story” (1991, 40).

Finally, one can also observe the postmodern family resemblance I have delineated in William Eastlake’s The Bamboo Bed, Asa Baber’s The Land of a Million Elephants. Robert Stone’s Dog Soldiers, John Clark Pratt’s The Laotian Fragments, Larry Heinemann’s Paco’s Story, Gustav Hasford’s The Phantom Blooper, Loyd Little’s Parthian Shot, and William Merrit’s Where the Rivers Ran Backward, as well as in the poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa and Bruce Weigl, and the Vietnam plays of David Rabe. All of these writers, diverse as they are, demonstrate an acute awareness that their texts will conjoin in intertextuality to constitute the metanarrative by which the Vietnam War will be understood by future generations, accompanied by the irony of knowing how problematic postmodernism has made the factual grounding of history-writing. Linda Hutcheon in The Poetics of Postmodernism has labeled this kind of writing “historiographic metafiction,” a writing that she described in The Politics of Postmodernism as representing
not just a world of fiction, however self-consciously presented as a constructed one, but also a world of public experience. The difference between this and the realist logic of reference is that here the public world is rendered specifically as discourse. How do we know the past today? Through its discourses, through its texts—that is, through the traces of its historical events: the archival materials, the documents, the narratives of witnesses . . . and historians. On one level, then, postmodern fiction merely makes over the processes of narrative representation—of the real or the fictive and of their interrelations. (Hutcheon 1989, 36)

These writers are also ironically aware of how “unstable, contextual, relational, and provisional” (Hutcheon 1989, 67) historical meaning can be and therefore want to emphasize, with Lyotard, the narrative nature of historical knowledge, but they are “self-conscious about the paradox of the totalizing yet inevitably partial act of narrative representation” (78). They know that Vietnam will be known only by its textual traces and that to say, in the vernacular of the Vietnam veteran, “it don’t mean nothing,” is to mean everything.

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