FOUR

Michael Herr's Spectral Journalism

> No one wanted to waste time on a line of work that was going awry, producing no stability. . . . Why go to all that trouble just to see chaos?
>
> The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined. . . . The pits and tangles are more than blemishes distorting the classic shapes of Euclidean geometry. They are often the keys to the essence of a thing.
>
> —James Gleick, *Chaos*

In a much-quoted passage from *Heart of Darkness*, the external narrator, just as he is about "To hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences," explains the difference between the way Marlow and other men of the sea tell stories:

> The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an epi-

> sode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (68)

This description sheds a great deal of "moonlight" on the story Marlow is about to tell; but it also sheds light on *Dispatches*, written by Michael Herr, another 1970s heir of Conrad's early-day literary journalist. Herr's reportage is as different from conventional journalism as Marlow's is different from conventional sea tales. The link between the two men became secure in 1979 when Herr did the voice-over for Francis Ford Coppola's version of Marlow—Captain Willard—in *Apocalypse Now*. More important, both men realized that what they had witnessed in the heart of darkness was simply beyond any kind of conventional storytelling, and perhaps beyond even *un*conventional storytelling. Their experiences had been altogether too dark or, because of what they revealed about Western behavior in Third-World countries, altogether too light. All "straight history" and straight anything became seriously compromised. In one of Herr's great lines for Willard, we hear "Charging a man with murder here is like handing out speeding tickets at the Indy 500." The only illumination Marlow and Herr did experience was the illumination of the disintegration of their confidently straight Western consciousnesses, like tracer rounds illuminating objects targeted for destruction. Herr suggests an analogue for this disintegration as he observes "the phosphorescence that gathered around rotting tree trunks and sent pulsing light over the ground from one damp spot to another" (269).

Instead of structuring episodes on a continuum, Herr moves pulsatingly from one "damp" critical mass to another. The episodes that Conrad's external narrator speaks of are like a tier of new cement blocks: coherent, self-contained parts of the larger structure. But for Marlow and Herr, all is *a*-part. Meaning is as elusive as the muddy serpentine Congo River or the ominous, unmappable Central Highlands of Vietnam. Instead of kernels, both stories are swirling strobes eerily illuminating the spooky shadows. Herr will have nothing to do with James Webb's "basketball" flares that impose day on night.

Thinking back on his experiences, some of which were "a translucent blur" (95), Herr says that everything stood in "a strange light; the light told the story, and it didn't end like any war story I'd ever imagined" (277). He says the experience of horror leaves one "changed, enlarged and . . . incomplete" (260)—like a glow bringing out a haze. And as the participle "enveloping" suggests, this glowing haze is a process in which experience past and experience present are interwoven. Neither storyteller relates a story that already exists—no more than Neumann's dispensary already exists. It comes into being as it is being told. To a great extent the process is the content. Their past experiences are less things in themselves than they are catalysts for a future act. As Paul Fussell says in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), "it is only the ex post facto view of an action that generates coherence or makes irony possible" (310). *Heart of Darkness* and *Dispatches* are ex post facto collages that provide Marlow and Herr their only way of knowing their horrifying experiences. As Herr expresses it, "Plant you now, dig you later: information printed on the eye, stored in the brain" (268). Or, "The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes. Time and information, rock and roll, life itself, the information isn't frozen, you are" (20).

Herr needed to immerse himself in time, memory, and the creative act in order to thaw himself out. "Immersion" would seem to be one of the primary earmarks of literary journalism. And both Marlow and Herr were immersed beyond their wildest imaginations. (Herr was so immersed that, as he ends his book, he says, "one last chopper revved it up, lifted off and flew out of my chest" [277].) But the crucial kind of immersion is the secondary one, after the fact, when the writer does not recollect, nor even recreate, so much as he or she correlates, creates, and images the fragmentary raw material of the first immersion. So Herr is not really speaking hyperbolically when he says of this first immersion in Vietnam, "I hadn't been anywhere, I'd performed half an act" (268). This brings up two paradoxes of Herr's and Marlow's literary journalism. First, the storyteller achieves immersion with distance—in both space and time. Herr wrote the greater share of *Dispatches* 12,000 miles from Hue and Khe Sahn—years after the fact. Marlow created his story aboard the *Nellie* more than 4,000 miles

from the Congo—again, so one can infer, a number of years after the fact. Conrad himself was thirty-two when he went to the Congo, forty-one when he wrote *Heart of Darkness*.

The second paradox is that both Marlow and Herr scooped their stories by delaying the telling. By abjuring deadlines and wire services (literally, in the case of Herr), they assured an exclusive for themselves. A voice within them repeated the words that the *Commercial Advertiser's* Lincoln Steffens said to his reporters: "Go on now, take your time" (317). To emphasize just how slow Herr was being in getting the "news" out, he calls his only in-country dispatch to *Esquire* "a lost dispatch from the Crimea" (226). Thus, it is paradoxically appropriate for Ward Just, Vietnam novelist and a former reporter for the *Washington Post*, to call Herr the premier war correspondent from Vietnam, even though Herr rarely corresponded with anyone back in the States. He waited and struggled almost ten years before he did.

What do we call his belated response? Even if we label it "literary journalism," which I think we can, there are some nagging questions associated with that label. First of all, literally speaking, Herr's book is not any kind of "journalism," if we go by the root meaning of the word, "daily." But there is a greater labeling problem: because of the fact-fiction tension that exists both in literary and journalistic circles, we've seen an awkwardness in deciding how to categorize certain books. This awkwardness is especially acute in the field of Vietnam War writing. Thus, memoirs such as Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* are often referred to as novels. This is not surprising; as Paul Fussell says, it is sometimes impossible to distinguish between a memoir and a first-person novel (310). And when it comes to *Dispatches* the lines separating fact, fiction, journalism, memoir, history, and autobiography become extremely blurred. Herr is the first to admit that his assignment in Vietnam was "vague" (227). The way he "wanders" (as in "vagabond") between categories is a clear manifestation of the word's literal meaning. And because "literary journalism" wanders between two perceived worlds, each of which is itself always evolving, it is a problematical appellation. It's impossible to pin an "MOS" on either Herr or his book.

One of the most profound problems in studies of the Vietnam War is the stubborn Euclidean assurance that fact and fiction are easily recognized opposites from two different worlds. Were it so neat. War has a way of blurring such tidy categories, but only when one stops hovering over the "landscape" at 10,000 feet, like Lieutenant Calley's brigade commander. If writers and readers would only accede to Colonel Vann's wishes and get out of the aircraft, as it were, they would then see that at 10,000 feet fact and fiction can easily trade places. Once on the ground, they will see the chaotic epistemological terrain for what it is—especially during the sanity-crushing experience of combat. Thus, in *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien finds himself forced to speak oxymoronically: "In a true war story nothing much is ever absolutely true." "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth"(88). O'Brien simply is echoing the thoughts of another fighter-writer—Robert Graves: "The memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare [in World War I] are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities" (32–33).

In a similar recognition of the slipperiness of the words "fact" and "fiction," William Eastlake has said that, for the Vietnam War, history is the fiction and fiction is the history. Paul Fussell quotes a World War II RAF flyer who expresses this same paradox. Having kept an accurate, detailed, truthful diary during the war, he now finds that "from all the quite detailed evidence of these diary entries I can't add up a very coherent picture of how it really was to be on a bomber squadron in those days. . . . No wonder the stuff slips away mercury-wise from proper historians. No wonder they have to erect rather artificial structures [like Major Holly's Monopoly board] of one sort or another in its place. No wonder it is those artists who re-create life rather than try to recapture it [or trace it] who, in one way, prove the good historians in the end" (311).

There is something almost explicit in the language of this flyer, O'Brien, Eastlake, and Graves—and most Vietnam War scholars and writers of all kinds seem afraid of going in after it. To get at the source of this fear, we need to return to the analogy from Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*. Yossarian would seem to be a model paramedic, as he cleans, packs, and wraps Snowden's hip wound. The hip wound is

not all that serious, so Yossarian can't figure out the relationship between such a minor wound and Snowden's deathly paleness. Finally he removes Snowden's flakjacket and his viscera comes sliding out. Similarly, the wound suffered by America in Vietnam is far more serious—far more radical—than we have admitted.

Michael Herr is one of very few writers to have removed the flak jacket. In his judgment, behind the sanitized columns of "factual" conventional print and the imperialistic sense-making stories on the six o'clock news was a "dripping, laughing death-face; it hid there in the newspapers and magazines and held to your television screens for hours after the set was turned off for the night, an after image that simply wanted to tell you at last what somehow had not been told" (233). To this day, conventional journalism and "kernelized" storytelling cover up a disemboweled epistemology. (The war in the Persian Gulf was an egregious example.) Herr realized that most people can't even see the wound because they are blinded by a habitual way of knowing.

On the other hand, everyone has taken note of the hip wound. For example, everyone has pointed out the wounds that truth was subjected to at the hands of Orwellian doublespeak, euphemisms, or what Herr calls "language fix" (43). But, as John Hellmann says of Herr,

> he sees a deeper gulf between the consciousness of Americans and the actuality of the war that from the beginning produced an artificial, fictive 'reality' conditioning the nature and course of the experience (143). . . . He experienced . . . an inability to comprehend the actuality before him as his consciousness seemed to protect him from the reality of the experience. Herr knows that if he is to capture the reality of the experience he must go beyond reporting, for the struggle is as much with his and the reader's consciousness as with the facts (144). Herr searches for a meaning, Hellmann goes on to say, not available in the fictive forms already imposed by one's culture upon the experiencing mind. (146)

Herr encountered the horror of a fictional world without an exit. Those obsolescent yet stubbornly kicking, fictive forms enable one to make assumptions no longer available to a writer of Herr's insight. Because the horror and the "hundred-channel panic" undermine everything—the ability to distinguish between fact and fantasy, reason,

logic, controlled linear time—it also renders inoperative those conventions that assume such controls, whether literary realism, formula journalism, or even literary journalism, as it is perceived by some. For, when the subject is war, especially one as insane and absurd as the Vietnam War, literary journalism too must give up more control than perhaps it is used to.

So, when Herr says, "I went to cover the war but the war covered me," he is admitting to the traumatic wound; he is admitting that his assumptions were disembowled, so the story he did get was that our linguistic certainties no longer obtain. The story he got was that Vietnam was a story. The term "nonfiction" lost its currency in a hurry.[1] Being "covered" by the war does not mean simply that Herr was overwhelmed by the war; it means he was *written* by it. The time-honored Western distinction between subject and object simply disintegrated. Herr says he was "debriefed by dreams" (277), and in Borgesian fashion he discovered that the dreamer (writer) dreaming a dreamed man (the story) is in turn being dreamed by another dreamer (the protean war itself and the myths that sent us there to fight it). This leaves him in a terrifying hall of mirrors where he must resort to gasping for ontological air and scrambling for an epistemological footing (the very predicament, as we will see, suffered by Amlin Gray's Reporter in the play *How I Got That Story*; 1979). In this hall of mirrors, there is no way Herr can maintain the ruse of using Webb's or Del Vecchio's "neutral camera." Finding himself in a situation where "a non-operation [is] devised to nonrelieve the non-siege of Khe Sanh" (166), what would he aim the camera at? What would he do for light?

1. In his novel *DelCorso's Gallery*, Philip Caputo explores this conflation of fiction and nonfiction in the field of photojournalism. Two photographers, DelCorso and Dunlop, have been at odds with each other for years, first in Vietnam, and later in the streets of Beirut. DelCorso accuses Dunlop of selling fraudulent photographs because he "doctors" them in all sorts of ways in the lab. Dunlop accuses DelCorso of being unartistic because he simply photographs the bald degradation of war. But Caputo would have us understand that both men change reality; it's just the means and timing that are different. Dunlop merely makes the changes later than DelCorso, who, on the scene, makes his modifications with shot selection, context, lighting, distance, lenses, and F-stops.

Thus, Herr carries literary journalism to new heights (or depths). After his many-year battle to write *Dispatches*, he came to understand that recognizing the conventions of hard journalism as just that is but one step. It is an important step to realize that the journalist needs to tap into the reservoirs of fiction and dream to get a truer story. Herr, however, takes two more steps, both of which will be elaborated on below: (1) he knows he is dreaming, and that "you could ask yourself whether you were sleeping even while you slept . . . cataloging the specifics . . . without ever waking" (148). That is, he does something far more radical than merely use dream structures as a rhetorical device to make "facts" meaningful—he experiences them; (2) he knows he is being dreamed in turn. In short, he knows that when the journalist's subject is the absurdity and bondage of an insane war, all linguistic structures are mere provisional conventions, as unlike reality as a menu is unlike the food it lists. Herr knows that trying to fine-tune our habitual epistemology to make it dovetail with the reality of Vietnam is like trying to modify a pick-ax for use in brain surgery. Finally, he knows that instead of a solid kernel within a nut, he has liquids changing into gases.

Taking the first step, Herr points to the direct correlation between conventional fighting and writing in the Vietnam War: neither works. Earlier he says that "it would be as impossible to know what Vietnam looked like from reading most newspaper stories as it would be to know how it smelled" (98). Between Command, the Administration, and the conventional press, Herr saw a "cross fertilization of ignorance." As a result,

> the spokesmen spoke in words that had no currency left as words, sentences with no hope of meaning in the sane world, and if much of it was sharply queried by the press, all of it got quoted. The press got all the facts (more or less), it got too many of them. But it never found a way to report meaningfully about death, which of course was really what it was all about. (229)

Herr thus radically separated himself from those who were so enamored of their conventional symbols and interpretations that they kept up the practice of eating the menu instead of the meal. As David Eason points out, not even New Journalism is exempt from the practice of menu-eating. The difference between Herr's mode of journalistic immersion and that of the menu-eaters lies at the center of Eason's illuminating article, "The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience." Eason designates these two modes of New Journalism as "ethnographic realism" and "cultural phenomenology." Herr clearly operates in the second mode. Whereas the first mode assumes that the reporter can make sense of the world by putting new wine in old bottles, the second assumes a radical epistemological crisis. Whereas ethnographic realism is fine-tuning, cultural phenomenology is a total overhaul. According to Eason,

> Whereas ethnographic realism, like other forms of journalism, reveals the act of observing to be a means to get the story, cultural phenomenology reveals observing to be a vital part of the story. Observing is not merely a means to understand the world but an object of analysis. . . . Ethnographic realism represents style as a communicational technique whose function is to reveal a story that exists 'out there' [like a kernel] in real life. Cultural phenomenology represents style as an epistemological strategy that constructs as well as reveals reality. (57, 59)

Herr's immersion in the Vietnam War forced him into the overhaul mode of cultural phenomenology.[2] In Eason's language, it didn't take him long to experience "what it feels like to live in a world in which there is no consensus about a frame of reference to explain 'what it

2. Almost all other Vietnam writing partakes of the ethnographic mode. Irony in this writing remains selective, not radical. Snowden's hip remains the concern, not his abdomen. Literary devices, such as shifts in point of view and disruptions of linear time, seem more tactical than strategic. As we've seen, even in Ron Kovic's bitter memoir *Born on the Fourth of July* the irony is directed solely outward. Guilt is largely imputed, not confessed. Notice that whereas Herr says "you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did" (20), Kovic maintains a mythic continuity of wronged innocence. It is only those who defiled and reneged on the myth that he targets. Kovic engages in an intra-familial quarrel, an act visually manifested when at an anti-war rally he displays the American flag upside down. As an ethnographic realist, Kovic is angry over his disillusionment; as cultural phenomenologist, Herr uses this disillusionment as a terrifying opportunity to radically interrogate all of his and America's inherited belongings. As Peter Marin puts it, "All men, like all nations, are tested twice in the moral realm: first by what they do, then by what they make of what they do" (51). The power of *Dispatches* issues from Herr's unflagging willingnesss to take—and perhaps pass by failing—this second moral test.

all means' " (52). After hearing the much-quoted, inscrutable Lurp story early in the book ("Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened" [4–5]), Herr comes to the conclusion that his epistemological training had ill-prepared him for the wacky reality of Vietnam. He arrived in Vietnam believing that if something was inscrutable it simply needed to be restated. He was used to a language of "defoliation" that had imperialistic control over the formless and the inconclusive, a language that insisted on order when there was none. Herr discovered that the way Americans engaged in "language fix" found its perfect analogy in the motto of an Air Force defoliation outfit: "Only we can prevent forests" (163), an American mantra that in its figurative sense was not at all limited to the military's "five o'clock follies." In fact, as both Philip Knightley (*The First Casualty*, 1975) and Daniel C. Hallin (*The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*, 1986) point out, the editors of America's dailies and weeklies routinely "prevented forests" by ignoring their Vietnam correspondents whenever they happened to blow the whistle on the brutal farce of the war. However, even when these correspondents did try to tell the truth, they restricted themselves to ethnographic realism. Knightley informs us that even very late in the war most journalists never got beyond the "subversive" news that the United States was losing the war: "the correspondents were not questioning the American intervention itself, but only its effectiveness" (380). Almost everyone who had the power either to make or print "news" engaged in language fix, whether by outright lying or by arguing over tactics instead of the strategy of intervention. Either they claimed there was a light at the end of the tunnel or that the military was incompetently retreating from it.

To borrow another metaphor from Alan Watts, it was as if by the convention of perspective, American generals, politicians, and the media painted a doorway on an impenetrable wall (125). The Lurp story is but one instance where Herr banged his head against this illusory opening in the labyrinthine landscape of Vietnam. Herr learned from his headache, though; he largely separated himself from those who insisted that the opening was real: "My ties with New York were as slight as my assignment was vague" (226–27). Rather than pledging allegiance to an illusory world of nonfiction, he plunges

into a more promising world of self-conscious artifice—this is his second step. He calls *Dispatches* "My movie" (201). His many allusions to modern, existentialist writers such as Wallace Stevens, Stendhal, Proust, Graham Greene, Malraux, Camus, Conrad, and Heller are a tip-off that this book is indeed a new kind of journalism, one that ends up blurring all categories. *Dispatches* is a freewheeling collage of straightforward remembering, hallucination, irony, acid sarcasm, jump cuts, freeze frames, stream of consciousness, incongruous juxtaposition, realism, surrealism, Dadaism, and metafiction. It is a bulemic book that pigs out at the literary supermarket as it desperately tries to satisfy its appetite for a *real* opening in the wall. Finally, because Herr is acutely aware of "the fictive forms already imposed by one's culture upon the experiencing mind," his book is founded on a paradox: *self-conscious* artificiality engenders authenticity.

The discovery of the illusory door and the search for a real opening into his and America's consciousness form the foundation of Herr's counterepistemology. The "painted" door is much like the maps that Americans were obsessed with in Vietnam. Already noted is his cynical reaction to these maps hanging on the walls of military bureaucrats throughout Vietnam. As far as he was concerned, they were ignorance meticulously scripted so as to insure "clear communication" (98). And there we have it—thought and language used as a cosmetic (98); carefully treated hip wounds; Monopoly games played in swamps.

Herr's difficult time writing this book was caused by his search for a different kind of map, one that, instead of imposing order, truly followed the contours of Vietnam, the war, and America's complicity in the heart of darkness. *Dispatches* contains a number of analogies that serve as objective correlatives of Herr's recon mission. Late in the book Herr offers us the analogy of his book's "contour flying." He goes up in a Loach (a wasp-like, speedy, agile helicopter) with the First Cav's star flier:

> We flew fast and close to the ground, contour flying, a couple of feet between the treads and the ground, treetops, hootch roofs. Then we came to the river where it ran through a twisting ravine, the sides very steep, almost a canyon, and he flew the river, taking us through blind turns like a master. When we cleared the ravine he sped straight toward the jungle,

> dipping where I'd been sure he would rise, and I felt the sharp freezing moment of certain death. Right in there under the canopy, a wild ship-shaking U turn in the jungle, I couldn't even smile when we broke clear, I couldn't move, everything looked like images caught in a flash with all the hard shadows left in. (274)

This is part of the counter map that *Dispatches* offers us, and it's not one you can pin on your wall. In the words of James Gleick, this is the kind of map that "mirrors a universe that is . . . scabrous, not smooth" (94). At times the "language" of the map almost is like the Soldier's Prayer, not the standard one "printed on a plastic-coated card by the Defense Department," but the "Standard Revised, impossible to convey because it got translated outside of language, into chaos . . ." (60).

Subjected to a Dali meltdown, conventional time also fails to survive Herr's contour flying. In his own words, "I was leaking time" (277). "It became possible to take a journey first and then make your departure" (68). In fact he arrives in Vietnam long after he got there—on page 177. Herr underscores a cyclical vortex on more than one occasion. "There was," he says, "the terrible possibility that a search for information there could become so exhausting that the exhaustion itself became the information" (68). And of fighting the VC, "it was us looking for him looking for us looking for him, war on a Cracker Jack box, repeated to diminishing returns" (64). Everywhere, Herr denies himself the comfort of fixed-wing, linear flight. Early in the book he says, "It started out sound and straight but it formed a cone as it progressed, because the more you moved the more you saw, the more you saw the more besides death and mutilation you risked, and the more you risked of that the more you would have to let go of one day as a 'survivor' " (7).

A second analogy has to do with where Herr spent his time in Vietnam. He eschewed the light of civilization in the official press clubs of the major cities; he stepped outside, way outside, into the tangled geography of Vietnam and his imagination. Herr was afraid of the dark, but he knew that if he was to "report" this war, that is where he had to spend his time. He knew that "hiding under the fact-figure crossfire there was a secret history, and not a lot of people felt like running in there to bring it out" (51). Herr didn't feel like it

either, but he did it. And he did it by refusing to use what James William Gibson both figuratively and literally means by "the old trails" (11), which led only to the destruction of serious intellectual and artistic inquiry, just as the literal trails ominously ensured the likelihood of ambushes, Bouncing Betties, and assorted booby traps.

Like the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols (known acronymically as LURPS) that spent many days at a time observing the enemy in the darkness of the far reaches of nowhere, so Herr's LURP book pushes itself and the reader off the old trails and away from the artificially cleared landing zones of convention. *Dispatches* avoids the blunder of giving cover to the guerrillas; instead, it explores the cover. The book is a deep-recon probe (without fire support) into murky questions about who we are and how we know. Herr replaces the language-fixing, laundered narrative of old-trail realism and conventional journalism with a camera dropped in the bush, where it catches the weird, secret subtext of the war (224) and its "smaller, darker pockets" (205).

Someone once said that in Vietnam a grunt learned to live in the bush; a LURP learned to *be* a bush, so thoroughly did he cut himself off and meld with his surroundings. Herr's book is a bush. No Vietnam book so completely follows the eight parallels between bush fighting and writing as Herr's. From being an "underground," "night-time," paradigm-breaking, "scrounging" operation to turning the reader's "claymores" around, *Dispatches* is different in kind, not degree, from most of the war's fighting and writing. It is not so much about the Vietnam War as, in frightening ways, it is about the war. In both form and content, *Dispatches* is serpentine, unpredictable, chaotic, and hot—as different from conventional war stories as the "purple haze" and tortured notes of Jimi Hendrix's "Star-Spangled Banner" are different from the surfboards and happy harmonies of the Beach Boys.

Both Herr and the LURPS realized that rather than throw the book at the enemy (which America did, with both its technological arsenal and its "language fix"), they needed to throw the book away. It was obsolete—"Pentagon" pegs in amorphous holes. Conventional writing was as inappropriate as conventional fighting. It makes no sense to set up ambushes, as it were, or to go out on sweeps and search and

destroy missions when the enemy has in fact already tunneled beneath your base camp, shining your boots by day, satchel-charging you by night.

Late in *Dispatches* (which appropriately occurs earlier in his Vietnam sojourn than previous parts of the book), a grisly experience provides us with another analogy of Herr's search for a new map: "They were bulldozing a junction into Route 22 near Tay Ninh and the old Iron Triangle when the plows ran into some kind of VC cemetery. The bones started flying up out of the ground and forming piles beside the furrows, like one of those films from the concentration camps running backward" (267). Herr's "film" runs backward. Like Marlow, he travels back in time to the debris of his first immersion. Both men needed to make a decision regarding what portion of their former idealistic selves needed to be exhumed from the dark center of their consciousness. Appropriately, Herr uses the term "triage" frequently. Obviously he is fascinated by the concept. Like a doctor sifting through battlefield casualties, deciding who will have to be left to die and whom he will attempt to save, Herr sifts through language and epistemology, deciding which fictions of the American consciousness need to be saved by deconstruction. Like the city of Hue, which, according to what may be the most important sentence in *Dispatches*, "had been composed seemingly of destruction and debris" (259), Herr's book is composed of the fallout of a shattered epistemology.[3] And frankly, not much survives Herr's triage; what's left is

3. This idea of composition from decomposition is a motif that "crops" up in the books of several Vietnam War writers. Already noted is Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green*. In *Del Corso's Gallery* Philip Caputo says of a journalist by the name of Harry Bolton that he "followed wars the way a migrant worker follows harvests" (37). But as with Stephen Wright, the motif is particularly insistent in the work of Herr and Tim O'Brien. We've already seen that Herr uses the word "furrows," which one can readily free-associate with farming, John Deere tractors, New Holland implements, fresh milk, and double-yolked eggs—all of which Herr puts in the context of mass slaughter. This same bizarre contextualization occurs in O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, where the title character earnestly fishes for walleyes in the putrid water of bomb craters. All of these composition/decomposition motifs point to one thing: the construction of new fictions often involves the self-conscious destructive revision of old fictions, just as the Vietnam War forced destructive revisions of conventional journalistic credos.

the same sobering, humbling truth discovered by Marlow—namely, that there is a horrible heart of darkness within the soul of all mankind. Herr expresses this in the famous concluding line of his literary journal: "Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there" (278). Just as Marlow realizes that all of Europe went into the making of Kurtz, so Herr discovered that all of America went into the making of the Vietnam quagmire.

In a sense, it was only by not corresponding in the conventional sense that Herr became a correspondent—the premier radical one of the war. Herr's book is an archaeological dig that seeks correspondences between the historical strata of American consciousness. Herr finds them, and the *all* of "we've all been there" serves to take out of isolation the most recent stratum, namely, the war itself and those who found themselves physically in it. By taking his time, Herr discovered time in a much broader, more meaningful sense. To paraphrase and ruin the end of Yeats' poem "The Second Coming," Herr was able to see that America was self-vexed to nightmare by a rocking "Captain America Complex" (Robert Jewett). In his slow time Herr has seen the almost imperceptible movements of the rough beast, its hour come round at last, as it slouches towards Vietnam to be born, once again.

In Herr's words, Vietnam was the place where America's "mythic tracks intersected" (19). Thus, when Herr dates the beginning of the war, he goes way back:

> Mission intellectuals like 1954 [when the Vietminh captured Dien Bien Phu] as the reference date; if you saw as far back as War II and the Japanese occupation you were practically a historical visionary. "Realists" said that it began for us in 1961, and the common run of Mission flack insisted on 1965, post-Tonkin Resolution, as though all the killing that had gone before wasn't really war. Anyway, you couldn't use standard methods to date the doom; might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to form a containing perimeter; might just as well lay it on the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils. (51)

Finally, as he nears the end of his book, Herr underscores the correspondences between the American mythos and the war: "there's

been nothing happening there [Vietnam] that hadn't already existed here, coiled up and waiting, back in the World" (268).

The admission that "we've all been there" is Herr's third step, the most disturbing step of the book; for it asserts that Herr's irony is inclusive, not selective. His archaeological dig discovers an entrenched, coiled complicity much too democratically pervasive for comfort. Thus, when he says that you were responsible for what you saw (not just did) in Vietnam (20), he is acknowledging that Americans, including the reporters and photographers, were entangled in a script written long before the beast arrived in Vietnam.

Herr's confession of self and collective guilt may well have had its genesis in yet another analogy, the collage of Davies, a flipped-out door gunner "scrounger" that Herr met in Vietnam. As in *Meditations in Green*, the collage here[4] acts as an artistic analogue for *Dispatches* in that it sees around America's fictive consciousness and thereby also sees the incoherent coherence within the officially unrecognized chaos. Scrapping the Newtonian linear order that we brought with us to Vietnam, Davies' collage is a hip spatial emblem of cultural phenomenology, a nonlinear equation that lumps together grotesque "coefficients." Herr says "years of media glut had made certain connections difficult" (223). Davies' collage is a microcosm of Herr's book in that it does make these difficult connections, connections which all the Major Hollys and Henry Kissingers would no doubt consider junk. And, again, they'd be right. Nonetheless, this junk is often a courageous, self-deprecating expression of Herr's and America's complicity. Among the collage's startling juxtapositions: a created-in-Hollywood Ronald Reagan and the narcotic cannabis; the procreative genitalia of machismo and the destruction of bombs; Cardinal Spellman and a Huey gunship; patriotism and money; the myth of the warrior hero and hog butchering; the beautiful ugliness of "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" (187).

4. For additional discussion of the role of collages as artistic analogues in Vietnam War literature, see John Clark Pratt, quoted in Timothy Lomperis' book *Reading the Wind: The Literature of the Vietnam War*, 90f.

Obviously these seemingly disparate correlations are testimony that a whole lot more than containing Communism was going on in Vietnam. Herr engages in no self-righteous posturing; indeed, he admits more than one wishes to the alluring correlation of eroticism and violence, like being in a firefight and "undressing a girl for the first time" (144), or intensely hating and loving the war, almost simultaneously (66). One feels uncomfortable with Herr's oxymoronic connections. But that's the whole point: the mythic die that stamped America's Vietnam into existence is so deeply rooted in what man loves to loathe that it is very hard to part with.

If the content of Davies' collage reveals a great deal about the counterepistemology of Herr's cultural phenomenology, so too does its placement within *Dispatches*. First of all, as I've said, it appears in a book which itself is a collage of colliding memories and free associations as he crisscrosses Vietnam in the omnipresent oxymoronic "saver-destroyed, provider-waster, right hand-left hand" collective meta-chopper (7). Second, it appears in the middle of a frenzied collage-like section called "Illumination Rounds." In it, in the space of twenty-one pages, "dipping where [we're] sure he would rise," Herr rapidly fires off sixteen vignettes that seemingly do not correspond with each other. The reader feels as if he were caught in an L-shaped ambush. This section would likely make writers of straight history squirm, because it offers them no kernel, no hook, no linear progression, no angle—actually, far too many angles. But as Thomas Myers has said, these vignettes

> bring momentarily darkened history into view. As the fading suggestion of each image hangs in the textual air, he launches a new one to bring the reader closer to the historian's problem of focusing on and correlating within individual imagination the plenitude of suggestions, of dealing aesthetically with the nonstop accumulation of quick glimpses and possible correspondences. (163)

Myers' point is well taken. However, he does seem to position Herr in the ethnographic realist mode. That is, he implies that Herr's way of writing is a *means* or a tactic to remedy "the historian's problem." More likely, it is a strategy, not a tactic. Herr doesn't react to "contact," he initiates it. Like the hit-and-run operations of the VC, his vignettes are designed to harass the master narrative that America

tried to inscribe on Vietnam. This is why Davies' collage is the heart of *Dispatches*. As a collage within a collage within a collage, it aggressively undermines the wishfulfilling linear power of narrative. Thus, for Herr, the historian's problem isn't a problem at all. Instead it is an asset that takes him to a more revelatory epistemological track. Relinquishing Webb's "basketballs," he learns to see in the dark. The only real problem, Herr believes, is the assumption that an understood confusion is unacceptable. Those who deluded themselves and the American public with the narrative consolations of a confused understanding drove him into "mad, helpless rages" (154).

These consolations were offered like placebos to the gullible throughout the war. But nothing enraged Herr more than the reassuring doubletalk that characterized the Khe Sanh fiasco. Rewriting a time-tested narrative, General Westmoreland declared that Khe Sanh was "'a Dien Bien Phu in reverse'" (173). In so declaring, he not only inscribed a narrative, but also turned it into a victorious one. Running for more than eighty pages, the "Khe Sanh" chapter of *Dispatches* seems to have broken Herr's ethnographic realist back. Immediately following it he begins the cultural phenomenology of "Illumination Rounds." Responding to the military's narrativitis, he envelopes his "map," like "a glow bring[ing] out a haze," with the apparent chaos of Davies' collage. In doing so, he urges us to stop looking for easy exits from the war, and to stop banging our heads on the painted doors we forget we painted. The war is too metastasized in American culture to allow an "early out."

One final correlation in the collage needs to be looked at, for it not only brings us back to America's love of maps; it also goes a long way toward summing up what Herr discovered in his struggles as a cultural phenomenologist. In one part of the collage Davies has superimposed a reversed Vietnam over a map of California, the shape of which resembles a mirrored Vietnam. Rather than continuing the mistake of seeing Vietnam in our own image, this cartographical countergesture would have us see our image in our own Vietnam, an "East-West interface, a California corridor cut and bought and burned deep into Asia" (45). It would have us demystify the most recent progenitor of the mythic die: the fiction-making capital of the world—Hollywood—the repository of the male, frontier mythology,

forever "facing west," as Richard Drinnon puts it, making "movies," defoliating and sanitizing whatever gets in the way.

To paraphrase David Eason, Davies' gesture would have us admit the disorienting truth that in America's trillion-dollar Vietnam movie, we all were actors, not audience. This is the spectral, hazy opening that Herr would have us develop the courage and humility to walk through.