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“Which Ones are the Enemy?” The Military Writings of George Garrett

terrified helot fleeing before a Spartan advance. Garrett has said of war writing, “Clearly a crippling of some kind has taken place if it is necessary for each generation to begin at the beginning of human experience and, in spite of all previous knowledge and experience, to suffer the same series of shocks and disillusionments.”² Attempting to capture the relevant universal qualities of military life, Garrett’s martial writing uniquely works toward an understanding of recurring philosophical motifs rather than tunnel-visioned explanations of isolated martial experiences. And within the genre of American military fiction it is especially notable—albeit

altercation. Meditating on the haunting quality of World War I, Paul Fussell memorably observed the “obsession with the images and myths of the Great War among novelists and poets too young to have experienced it directly. They have worked it up by purely literary means, means which necessarily transform the war into a ‘subject’ and simplify its motifs into myths and figures expressive of the modern existential predicament.”⁶ Whether wanting for their lack of genuine experience or valuable for their more distant perspectives (or perhaps a little of both), military accounts related by authors removed from the event by a generation or more nonetheless underscore the far-reaching and evolving repercussions (as much imaginary as real) of conflicts across time.

Speaking to the interrelatedness of different wars and their various representations, Garrett once described in a lecture at the University of Vuchae tire a2(onb-2(a)l)-6(ect(ce d)-4(eh2B (6)Tj EM

the civilian social ladder: a college-educated man from New York and a barely literate Tennessean. Their relationship is best characterised by a remark Garrett makes in his notebooks: “They are the kind of curious friends the system of the Army creates, men who might never have met otherwise, men whose lives and backgrounds are utterly different.”¹⁷ At the centre of the story is a meditation on the ways in which civilian structures break down in the face of shared military rank and a jointly traumatic field experience. After the two men are nearly run over in the night by a wayward tank, the narrator recounts:

This was the accident, the sudden equalizing force of fear and the feeling that death had been near to both of us, that made Harry and me buddies. It just happened. We didn’t have to think about it or even be self-conscious about it; we were just friends from that instant. There was nothing to talk about anyway. Both of us had participated equally in an awful, incommunicable experience. Both of us, in a sense, felt that we owed our lives to the other.”¹⁸

Having mutually experienced a traumatic life-threatening event, the two men suddenly are transformed into brothers—beyond all considerations of civilian background, class, and education—in a way that is both powerful and “incommunicable.”

Reflecting the influential though often overlooked dynamic of military bureaucracy, the protagonists of “In Other Countries” are thrown together simply because the first letters of their last names are the same. Correspondingly, in an untitled, unpublished, story Garrett employs a character named David Barnstone who experiences a number of unusual experiences in the army simply because his last name places him at or near the head of most lines. In “The Other Side of the Coin” (1957) Garrett abstracts this concept of regulation-based chance to a more tragic arena, highlighting the ridiculousness of military procedure in the midst of death through the doomed

boy arrested for being a Confederate guerrilla. Not considered a threat by any of his captors, the boy is nonetheless executed out of malice in the wake of Lincoln's assassination, well after the

vacations counters the surreal hardness and brutality of the country at war. From his prosperous rational perch looking back, Peter recalls, “place and time were vague, distorted... nothing made much sense.”²⁴ Unable to reconstruct his wartime identity or even the time and place of his crime, Peter remains frustrated at his inability to reconcile his private horrific past with his identity in the present.

Similar incidents that focus on

The new thing (already old now in my lifetime) was the sending forth of American citizen soldiers all over the world where, quite aside from their duties, just by being there they came to know foreign people and languages and cultures, in bits and pieces, true, but more closely than even they could have imagined. We had been strictly local and were now bound to be global.

prostitution, especially with the nearby presence of the American military inevitably fuelling the business, the police periodically gather together as many hookers as possible and flog them severely, brutally mauling them without any real hope that the punishment will make them change their profession. Witnessing this hellish, chaotic spectacle, the story's narrator, an American serviceman, remarks,

In back rooms, in hidden corners, behind blank smiles, all over the world people are suffering and making other people suffer. The things God has to see because He cannot shut his eyes! It's almost too much to think about. It's enough to turn your stomach against the whole inhuman race.²⁹

Unable to interpret what he sees in terms of Austrian society or his military background, the narrator abstracts the event to the meaningless cruelty of all humanity, a dynamic that freely and consistently crosses all cultural barriers.

The prevalence with which military culture ushers in, either directly or indirectly, casual, absurd brutality reveals itself through a number of unlikely avenues and figures. For example, in "Crowfoot," an anecdote collected in *The Old Army Game*

in his appearance and actions, the story's protagonist, Floogie, is described as "goofy looking. Clumsy as a bear cub. Couldn't do much of anything right."³⁰ The scourge and brunt of his outfit, Floogie constantly separates himself from his brother soldiers in an effort to avoid the constant hassles of ridicule and bad camp assignments. Sleeping apart from the other men in his outfit, Floogie is accidentally left behind when his unit withdraws from a position during the night, and awakes to find a strong contingent of Chinese advancing on him. Thinking his comrades are still around him, Floogie puts up a valiant fatal fight which the rest of his unit can hear more than a mile away. Listening to Floogie's firing, the narrator imagines Floogie "crawling around the position in the dark. Feeling for his buddies and not finding anybody."³¹ Killed while single-handedly defending his position, Floogie becomes an unlikely hero. A modern knight in fool's clothing, he proves his mettle when death is imminent.

In the vignette "How the Last War Ended," a section from the story "Comic Strip" (1957), two opposing captains discuss "the utter absurdity of defeat" and "the marvelous shrug of the surviving."³² Against the accidental and incidental losses of people like Crowfoot and Floogie, military personnel who have endured such expenditures repeatedly find themselves meditating on these largely archetypal topics. Winning and losing, death and survival, are met with ambivalence and a weary "shrug," the process of achieving whatever end fate has dealt them having worn the participants to a perspective of uneasy doubt or, worse, apathy. Revealing the significance of the title "Comic Strip," writer Madison Smartt Bell explains, "Garrett evolved what he calls the 'comic strip' principle of narrative design as a way of arranging material that lacks conventional linear continuity... the relationships between panels can just as well be imagistic or thematic."³³ With their temporal and thematic ambiguity, war and military narratives

are ideal and frequent candidates for the comic strip technique, forsaking thematic closure and narrative resolution for brief and sometimes fragmented snapshots of archetypal military dynamics—an approach that seeks to capture the chaotic displacement and personal fragmentation often associated with war and the martial life.³⁴

Whereas Garrett locates his military fiction in different times and contexts, many of his comic strips and more traditional military narratives take place against a specific backdrop: the

still have themselves to laugh at and something real to cry about, who, having nothing to lose and being victims of the absurd dignity of the human condition, can live with bravado at least, and, if they have to die, can die with grace like a wounded animal.³⁶

Ridiculing the pomp of military class and appearance—neatness, West Point rigidity, paper-laden statistical efficiency—

all.” Although Riche has plenty to worry about and consistently makes his situation even more precarious, he views the adversity of life with a resigned, happy-go-lucky attitude, maintaining, “Whenever I feel like putting the blame on something I can always blame my good luck.”⁴³ In a

task is the difference between the officer's acute military language and the father's uneducated,

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piece of military writing, fiction is forsaken altogether for the autobiographical recounting of Austrians who fought for Germany during the Second World War being returned from Siberia in the 1950s. A young enlisted man in Austria, Garrett listens to a *gausthaus* owner's own internment account beforehand but remains unimpressed—"young and strong and (as yet) undefeated," he cannot "seriously imagine surrendering to anybody."⁶⁰ However, the ironies and hard lessons of history are closer about him than he initially imagines. As it turns out, it is to the very same *gausthaus* where he is drinking that a young Adolf Hitler, only a boy, would come to fetch beer for his father. In the poem "Some Enormous Surprises," the young Garrett/soldier figure reflects on Hitler as

this little pale-faced boy,
for whom [God] has arranged some enormous surprises,
beyond any kind of imagining, even myself,
drunk in this place, years from home, imagining it.⁶¹

Initiated into the place-bound complexities of history beyond his own time and country, the narrator can only wonder at its strange relation to himself. Later, the immediacy of the connection becomes unavoidable and overpowering when he witnesses the Austrian prisoners-of-war returning from Siberia:

I stand there knowing one thing for certain—that I am seeing
our century, our time, close and truly. Here it is and, even
among strangers, I am among them, sharing the moment of
truth whether I want to or not.

An American sergeant stands in the swirling crowd with
tears rolling down his cheeks. He will be gone from here soon,
first miles, then years and years away. But he will not, because
he cannot, forget this moment or himself in it, his share of this
world's woe and joy, the lament and celebration of all living
things.⁶²

Moving from a position of youthful, present-bound indifference to one that recognises the

individual's irrevocable connection to human history everywhere, the young Garrett/narrator powerfully discovers his own tenuous relationship to time and human events, the crushing epiphany of which will stay with him forever.

The recognition of one's relationship to universal and timeless historical forces segues, almost inevitably, into an interest in one's family history. In "Uncles and Others" (1992), another autobiographical section from *Whistling in the Dark*, Garrett recounts his family's military involvement over the centuries as

usually paradoxical. Which is to say, even the most innocent and inexperienced of us, thanks to Tribal history, arrived

FBI agents fight it out, each believing that the other group is made up of Nazi spies. Which ones

- of Missouri Press, 1992), 101.
- ⁹ George Garrett Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University.
- ¹⁰ Casey Clabough, "William Hoffman's Fictional Journey: An Interview" (*The Southern Quarterly* 41.1, 2002), 85-86.
- ¹¹ Casey Clabough, unpublished interview with George Garrett, 9 July 2003 (hereafter Clabough interview).
- ¹² Robert Bausch, "George Garrett's Military/Army Fiction" in Paul Ruffin and Stuart Wright, eds., *To Come Up Grinning: A Tribute to George Garrett* (Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, 1989), 9.
- ¹³ Garrett Papers.
- ¹⁴ David Madden, "Continually Astonished by Everything: the Army Stories of George Garrett" in Ruffin and Wright, *To Come Up Grinning*, 48-49.
- ¹⁵ Fred Chappell, "Fictional Characterization as Infinite Regressive Series: George Garrett's Strangers in the Mirror" in Jefferson Humphries, ed., *Southern Literature and Literary Theory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 71.
- ¹⁶ Clabough interview.
- ¹⁷ Garrett Papers.
- ¹⁸ George Garrett, "In Other Countries" (*Prairie Schooner* 30.3, 1956), 293.
- ¹⁹ George Garrett, "The Other Side of the Coin" (*Four Quarters* 6.2, 1957), 25.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ²¹ Jeffrey Walsh, *American War Literature: 1914 to Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), 3.
- ²² George Garrett, *King of the Mountain* (New York: Scribner's, 1957), 109.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 112.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ²⁵ Garrett Papers.
- ²⁶ Garrett, *King of the Mountain*, 77.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.
- ²⁸ Garrett, *The Old Army Game* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1994), xviii.
- ²⁹ Garrett, *King of the Mountain*, 143.
- ³⁰ Garrett, *The Old Army Game*, 314.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Garrett, *King of the Mountain*, 101.
- ³³ Madison Smartt Bell, *Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft, and Form* (New York: Norton, 1997), 325.
- ³⁴ In addition to some of the American military novels mentioned in this essay, military/war films such as *Full Metal Jacket* frequently make use of the comic strip technique.
- ³⁵ Garrett, *King of the Mountain*, 127-128.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ³⁷ Garrett, *Which Ones Are the Enemy?*, 3.
- ³⁸ Garrett, *Going to See the Elephant*, 139.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ George Garrett, "By Love Possessed: The Pattern and the Hero" (*Critique* 1.3, 1958), 43.
- ⁴¹ Garrett, *Going to See the Elephant*, 139.
- ⁴² Garrett, *Which Ones Are the Enemy?*, 29.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 79.
- ⁴⁴ Garrett Papers.
- ⁴⁵ Garrett, *Which Ones Are the Enemy?*, 189.

