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An "Uncompromising Allegiance to Obscenity and Evil;" *Dispatches*, the *Jouissance* of War, and the Responsibility of Spectatorship

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest morals of proper behaviour, nor restrain men from doing the things they have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if 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. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. *indirect*

participation of millions of Americans through the media spectacle enabled by television. This article will locate Michael Herr's *Dispatches* on an interventional level, as a representation and critique of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the media coverage of the war, and the responsibilities they placed on wider society. The existing criticism, as will be briefly indicated, tends to fall between the stools of either emphasising the literary genres of *Dispatches* in isolation (thus negating some of their ideological-political implications), or assessing the text in terms of the "New Journalism" paradigm *without* relating its particular journalistic form to its

antagonistic counterpart, the “conventional” journalism explicitly rejected by Herr. This reading will proceed through two theoretical optics, addressing the subjective

insofar as the existing criticism tends to ignore its inter-canonical links to the genre as a whole (that is, insofar as *Dispatches* is in part a literary text, it would seem worthwhile to assess it in the light of the U.S. literary war canon).

O'Brien's epigram above provides a useful focalising point for approaching Herr's technique, via its relationship to preceding U.S. war narratives. John Limon points to an "early" (*The Naked and the Dead, From Here to Eternity,* and *The Thin Red Line*) and a "late" (*Catch-22, Slaughterhouse Five,* and *Gravity's Rainbow*) paradigm of post-WW2 war fiction, and the epistemic break between the two paradigms is pertinent to several of Herr's strategies.

humorous strategies of *Catch-22* or *Slaughterhouse Five* tend more towards their "transformation" by way of the comic effect's critical distancing.

Herr's literary technique is clearly intended as subversive, and pointedly problematises the kind of cultural re-appropriations signifying "rectitude;" firstly (at the level of form) in its combination of genres and narrative positions—oral history, literary reportage, memoir, cathartic 'working through' of traumatic personal material—and secondly (at the level of content) in its steadfast refusal of idealism and its "allegiance to obscenity and evil" in representing the death and brutality of war, unadorned and un-"rectified." This results in a *series* of positions rather than a single one, and it is my contention that through analysis of the subjective trajectories implicit within—voyeurism, "acute environmental reaction," violent acting-out, and trauma—we can infer a strong sense of wider critique also. In essence, Herr utilises his narrative figure as a subjective medium to transgress and transcend the bounds of traditional journalism, and it is in this sense that I wish to address *Dispatches* as a literary work on its primary level. My working thesis is that Herr's narrative voice enacts a form of split subjectivity in a sharp distinction he establishes, between the observer/participant figure empathising with and attending the perspective of the "grunt" in the field, and the military bureaucracy and media networks who are approached through a much more editorial/critical perspective.

As *Dispatches* is specifically framed by Herr as a work of memory and/or cultural history assembled retrospectively in the mid-/late seventies, it is interesting in the light of its relationship to "standard" Military History. Until the revolution constituted within the field by John Keegan's 1976 book *The Face of Battle*, in the words of John Ellis "military history has been 'the Commander's tale' and the role of the 'poor bloody infantry' has been marginalized to a remarkable extent."[5] Herr's text

is notable by way of contrast, in its wide-ranging expression of the rigours of war from the point of view of the 'poor bloody infantry.' Insofar as *Dispatches* constitutes itself as historical, I would therefore contend that it posits itself as a "bottom-up" *re*-historicisation;[6] indeed, the profusion of oral material issuing from the 'poor bloody infantry' in Vietnam is partially to be credited with inviting the kind of Military History practised by the likes of Keegan and Ellis (note in this context that the oral histories produced by Vietnam were published in the 1980s, thus making *Dispatches* a pioneer in the field[7]). Contrary to the journalists who "talked about 'no-story operations…,'" Herr's narrative places the GI's own words as centrifugal to its movements:

> Those were the same journalists who would ask us what the fuck we ever found to talk to grunts about, who said they never heard a grunt talk about anything except cars, football and chone. But *they all had a story*

"utopian" register suggested here, there is a strong sense in which his narrative articulates the *repressed* aspects of the war within the grunt's stories (both in the sense of the trauma *they* repress individually, and equally importantly the "truth" repressed by the bureaucratic narratives of Vietnam), and the interventional *imperative* to oppose his discourse (and that of the GI) to "the standpoint of those who rule." So, while Philip Beidler fastens onto the centrality of the motif of "bearing witness," I am not sure if he assesses it correctly in the context of *Dispatches'* emphasis on the "stories" the grunts were "driven to tell" Herr, and their insistence that he relay them. In Beidler's words:

> "Witness" then becomes the enabling act of conscious and creative mediation between the thing experienced and the thing mythologized, the means by which reality itself is *realised* by honouring the role *myth* plays in its creation, just as myth is *mythologized* by honouring the role *myth* plays in its creation.[11]

It seems to me, in the light of passages such as "you go out of here you cocksucker but I mean, you tell it! If you don't tell it…," that Herr's act of bearing witness is firstly in debt to that kind of traumatised, insistent request *from the other*, a burden of responsibility quite separate from the poles of "reality" and "myth." After all, whatever the properties of reality, it cannot in itself sit up and beg one to tell its tale. As with many approaches to *Dispatches*, Beidler foregrounds its literary form at the expense of the contextual exigencies which can be seen to precipitate that form, and to denote in Herr's acts of witness a primary relationship between reality and myth is to obfuscate the properly ethical injunction which Herr repeatedly cites as a touchstone. Not only does Beidler's portrayal of the witness-actor neutralise the perspective of the soldier-subjects who implore him, it also neglects the subjective dimension of trauma operative in Herr's technique (as is discussed below).

Bearing in mind the kind of contradictions incumbent upon the average foot

here[15]—whereby the verbalisation of a comrade's death is overtly geared towards expressing its *futility* (Vonnegut's use of "so it goes" in *Slaughterhouse Five* is not dissimilar). The epistemic difference between the positionings enacted in *A Farewell to Arms* and *Dispatches* is instructive here. Henry's jaundiced, defeated humanism, and ultimate self-withdrawal into passivity, is starkly contrasted with the pathologies represented in Herr's grunts; in place of the retreat to Switzerland, *Dispatches* portrays the "acting-out" of cruel humour and violence *as an active response* to individual powerlessness.

In the same way that the euphemising of death for O'Brien involves a displacement of emotion through the off-handedness of the soldier's vernacular, the presence of an off-hand humour in soldiers' speech is a popular *leitmotif* in narratives of the common soldier. While a commonplace in many modern soldiers' histories, Vietnam narratives are particularly notable for the consistent black tone of humour adopted, and the verbal *habitus* of the grunts represented in *Dispatches* transpires as an ongoing reaction to the ambiguities of their position:

> There was a joke going around… 'What's the difference between the Marine Corps and the Boy Scouts? The Boy Scouts have adult leadership' Dig it! the grunts would say.…[16]

Dark humour was one of the key means by which the texts of the "later" World War II novel paradigm distanced themselves from their forebears, and Herr extends this move in two main ways, firstly in the directly represented speech of the grunts themselves. The recurrent black humour of the troops throughout *Dispatches* is directly linked by Herr either to the pointlessness, absurdity or outright brutality he witnesses:

> There was a famous story, some reporters asked a door gunner, 'How can you shoot women and children?', and he'd answered, 'It's easy, you just don't lead 'em so much.' Well, they said you needed a sense of humour, there you go...[17]

excitations of combat or the absurdity of the U.S. military bureaucracy. Herr's portrayal of the GI is therefore distanced from popular-culture and war-propaganda stereotypes by representing "opportunities" for death, terror and maiming, over and above those for valour or heroism: "Because, really, what a choice there was; what a prodigy of things to be afraid of! The moment you understood this, really understood it, you lost your anxiety instantly."[19] Far from a lantern-jawed, stoical, martial archetype, Herr's "typical" grunt is reduced to a Pavlovian stimulus-response where *praxis* in combat alleviates the organic tension pertinent to constant fear, by way of bodily hexis. Thus the "heroism" of the lone soldier's mythical machine-gun charge is tellingly reversed by Herr: "So you learned about fear; it was hard to know what you really learned about courage. How many times did somebody have to run in front of a machine gun before it became an act of cowardice?"[20] The "heroic" charge is here reduced to an almost automaton-like drive for fulfilment, not of the mythical ideals of culture, but a kind of self-negating adherence to the military machine; in Zizek's terms *Dispatches* repeatedly represents scenes where "the subject accepts the void of his non-existence."[21] The tales of Herr's "environmentally traumatised" Marines implicates the U.S. intervention along similar, masochistic/self-negating lines, conveying also a *subjective* dimension to that involvement which is key to analysis of Herr's positioning, with regard to both the GI and the wider military system.

Heroism, or at least the practical acts which are taken to constitute heroism in popular culture, is therefore given a particularly masochistic, reflexive slant by Herr. This must be balanced, however, with the sense of what Zizek calls "excess enjoyment," continually represented in *Dispatches*

> instant, but sometimes these feelings alternated so rapidly that they spun together in a strobic wheel rolling all the way up until you were literally High On War, like it said on all the helmet covers. Coming off a jag like that could really make a mess out of you.[23]

Herr's metaphor in this passage segues from the sexual to the narcotic and back again almost imperceptibly, from "humping the ground" to "High On War" to the "rapid strobing of love and hate in the same instant." The common denominator in its ontology is one which posits the modality of the *drive*, in the psychoanalytic sense of

extension from his descriptions of fear, and in the scenes he repeatedly depicts of soldiers expressing amazement that he is a "volunteer" correspondent: "what, you mean you don't *have* to be here?" Further, the insistent "you" of the narrative address confronts *Dispatches'* audience with their *own* investment in the "irrational places" visited.

As is often noted by critics, in the course of his opening chapter, Herr gradually broaches the boundary between voyeur and participant. His initial frame of reference for war and death is intensely voyeuristic-sexual: "You know how it is, you want to look and you don't want to look. I can remember the strange feelings I had when I was a kid looking at war photographs in *Life*…. I didn't have a language for it then, but I remember now the shame I felt, like looking at first porn, all the porn in the world."[27]

fragment, but this *passage à l'acte* has definitively shattered the illusion of Herr's passivity as a witness. The text almost instantly shifts temporal perspective from this "one last war story," to 1975 and Herr's traumatic dream of his array of "dead faces," strongly reminiscent of Yossarian's in *Catch-22*: "when I got up next morning I was laughing."

"catastrophic" consequences are replayed retro-actively through the temporal frame established by his setting the narrative in 1975.[36] The complex displayed in Herr's narrative positioning is between the traumas arising from *both* "watching" *and* "acting;" as both acts are mutually implicated, a sense emerges of Herr's *dual* complicity with the horrors he relates, with a strong element of guilt structuring the complex. On this basis it is difficult to concur with Beidler's proposition that "Herr's chief work in the book is the work of keeping his moral and mythic bearings in a world of war." Keeping one's morals would seem to be impossible bearing in mind the dual complicity of watching and acting (and the centred, "moral" subject would presumably adapt sufficiently well to what he has witnessed that he would not suffer the type of traumata of Herr's narrative voice); and Herr repeatedly undermines American mythologies of war as perpetuated by the master narratives (John Wayne, Cowboys and Indians, the omnipotence of technology, etc.).[37]

Whilst Herr's trajectory within *Dispatches* is distinctly akin to "traversing the fantasy" in order to undergo "subjective destitution," the intention of the final section of this essay is to locate the structural significance of this process in ideological terms. Herr's partial sense of complicity serves, effectively, to announce his location within the field in the Bourdieusian sense of openly avowing the subjective avatars of his dis/position, and the interplay between his narrator's registers of *complicity* and *criticism* is fundamental in establishing the text's ideological stance. Herr's identification with the grunt is far from unambiguous, and he makes few efforts to idealise the men he "stood as close to… as possible without actually being one of them, and then I stood as far back as I could without leaving the planet."[38] Whilst his narrator shows an affinity with their camaraderie and their often-solicitous attitudes towards him, this is coloured by a frank acceptance and articulation of the inhumanity

of many grunts' actions: "Disgust doesn't begin to describe what they made me feel, they threw people out of helicopters, tied people up and put dogs on them. Brutality was just a word in my mouth before that."[39] Notwithstanding the unequivocal articulation of this skein of inhumanity, the most critical tone of *Dispatches* is seldom, if ever, directed at the GI:

> It seemed the least of the war's contradictions that to *lose* your *worst sense of American shame* you had to leave the Dial Soapers in Saigon and a hundred headquarters who spoke goodworks and killed nobody themselves, and go out to the grungy men in the d2(n t)-p/Tyn in the d2(n t)-010(qua)4(r)b3(e)4(t)-2(ha)4(t)-2(akhe)4(m( )

solution befitting American "know-how and hardware," a mechanised plague superintended with a boy-scout's diligence. On the other hand, Herr portrays officers whose sense of bloodlust eclipses that of the most atavistic foot soldiers, and which is entertained on a much wider scale:

> That night I listened while a colonel explained the war in terms of protein. We were a nation of high-protein, meat-eating hunters, while the other guy just ate rice and a few grungy fish heads. We were going to club him to death with our meat; what could you say except, 'Colonel, you're insane'? It was like turning up in some black looneytune where the Duck had all the lines…. Doomsday celebs, technomaniac projectionists; chemicals, gases, lasers, sonic-electric ballbreakers that were still on the boards; and for backup, deep in their hearts, there were always the Nukes, they loved to remind you that we had some, 'right here in-country'. Once I met a colonel who had a plan to shorten the war by dropping piranha into the paddies of the North. He was talking fish but his dreamy eyes were full of mega-death.[42]

Whilst Herr makes no suggestion that in instituting the infamous "body count" approach, the U.S. military came closer than any modern army to institutionalising and symbolically ratifying genocidal practices in its troops, the "dreamy mega-death" in Vietnam is clearly represented by *Dispatches* as issuing from the upper echelons of the military command-structure.

Herr's editorial reactions to this tend to be framed as humour in the face of the absurd, but it is important to recall that the presence of humour in *Dispatches* invariably indicates the "joke at the deepest part of the blackest kernel of fear" and death, alluded to previously. Colonels seem to attract the greatest portion of disdain, as when in Chapter Five Herr follows the description of one prepared to let a soldier die from heat exhaustion rather than order a medevac chopper, with the bizarre insistence of another in taking his Styrofoam cup. Herr's reaction is to "exchange the worst colonel stories we knew," from the "colonel who threatened to court-martial a spec-4 for refusing to cut the heart out of a dead V.C. and feed it to a dog," to the one

> fourteen VC and liberated six prisoners. You want to see the medal?[47]

The "tyranny of reason" is never more pronounced than when Herr addresses the bureaucratic offerings of the U.S. military's "version" of the war, and this receives his most critical treatment. Saigon, centre of most military communications, becomes a metaphor for the military-bureaucratic modalities that engender in Herr the "worst sense of American shame," and again it is worth citing at some length:

> Saigon, the centre, where every action in the bushes hundreds of miles away was fed back into town on a karmic wire strung so tight that if you touched it in the early morning it would sing all day and all night. Nothing so horrible ever happened upcountry that it was beyond language fix and press relations, a squeeze-fit into the computers would make the heaviest numbers jump up and dance.You'd either meet an optimism that no violence could unconvince, or a cynicism that would eat itself empty every day and then turn, hungry and malignant…. These men called dead Vietnamese 'believers', a lost American platoon was a 'black eye', they talked as though killing a man was nothing more than depriving him of his vigour.[48]

Contrary to the official reports which would speak of helicopters shot down "as an expensive equipment loss, as though our choppers were crewless entities that held to the sky by themselves, spilling nothing more precious than fuel when they crashed,"[49]

Herr's narrator bears witness, and whose prevalence establishes the text as adopting an *oppositional* stance with regard to the military bureaucracy's approach: "only

played an *active* role in transforming the raw material of MAC-V, often mind-numbingly trivial or euphemistic, into "legitimate" cultural narratives. While Herr's positioning as the intrepid combat reporter, stressing the dangers of his environment and close attunement to the ways of the combat soldier, carries a touch of self-aggrandisement—"Herr thus proposes that the central drama of *Dispatches* is his daring to enter deeply into his memories of the war"[53]—it is crucial to note that his positioning is frequently contrasted with the "hacks" who stayed in Saigon and "wrote down everything the generals told them." The fragmentary, oral-dialogical style of *Dispatches* similarly evolves in opposition to the bland linearity of official narratives, and Herr's stylistics should be read as oppositional in that sense, as well as forming a continuum with the "New Journalism" paradigm:

> 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, undeniablmfmfm it2üJMâ¤Ä LA ñ!¢ { " 53

destitution" he portrays extends this critique through his more *subjective* modality also. Herr's suggestion is that "it took the war to teach it, that *you were as responsible for everything you saw as for everything you did.*" This implies a certain *complicity* within his representation of the act of "seeing," and he makes a critical connection between the war as *spectacle* and the role of *spectatorship* in general, which is given a link beyond the obvious etymological one.[55] As his narrative gradually collapses the *false* distinction between voyeurism and participation—expressing the *active* role of the spectator—Herr comes to an understanding of the *productive* role of his position in engendering the various spectacular excesses he witnesses: "when a Colonel found out we were reporters he started to get his whole brigade cranked up to go out and kill people, and we took the next chopper out of there."[56] In another of his most famous passages, media networks in general are implicated in the soldiers' propensity towards self-negating acts in wartime:

> I keep thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. 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 that there was a television crew nearby; *they were actually making war movies in their heads*, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, *getting their pimples shot off for the networks*.[57]

While at the level of subjectivity Herr is shown to "traverse the fantasy" surrounding the act of killing, I would suggest that in his journalistic positioning there is a more culturally-specific fantasy being addressed, that of the "objective" observer whose spectatorship is strictly secondary to the events he witnesses. His evolution from voyeur to participant therefore transgresses primarily the *generic* bounds of the "conventional" journalist's position, and the frequency of his direct address to the reader extends this transgressive implication still further. As so often, in the passage

"contribute[s] to our understanding of the Vietnam war as, in part, a product of the American consciousness," it is also clear that the text makes next to no allowance for the consciousness of the Vietnamese people, and the unfathomable sufferings inflicted upon them. The Vietnamese appear sparingly in the text and we are never invited to attend their point of view in the same exhaustive way Herr portrays the common American soldier. [61] In terms of its entry into the cultural field, *Dispatches* is thus sited very much in the *American* field, and its antagonistic objects are approached very much within those limitations—in some way, repeating the Orientalising gestures of the men who instigated and prosecuted the war. On the domestic level Herr's soldiers may "literally get their pimples shot off for the networks," but to extend that analogy to the geopolitical field, millions of Vietnamese dead might be seen as being "literally" massacred on behalf of American "prestige."

If, to this day, American comprehension of what the Vietnamese call "The American War" is limited, if indeed, in Spanos's words, there is "some indefinable thin

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