

Style in *Dispatches* - recap

- Net result is that the novel appears to be a confused, random account using 'in-group' language that obscures any resolution
- Text mimics Herr's experience and that of 'grunts' in Viet Nam
- Reader tries to force text into coherent, linear narrative of the type to which we are accustomed just as Herr and 'grunts' try to make sense of their experience
- We begin to see that it is not possible to make sense of the Viet Nam experience in a conventional way
- Get a multiplicity of experiences and voices and we can't be sure where the truth lies

Oral History

- language of the combat veteran is an oral one
- Soldiers' oral accounts often conflicted with accounts of media and war bureaucrats

- Herr shows that there are always two accounts: one for public consumption and for the 'grunts':
- (150) vs. (63)
- Language becomes "one of the primary battle sites of the war" (Budra and Zeitlin 7).
- Obscenity is "a kind of insurrection against an official, sanitized account that shies away from the real obscenity of the war..."(Budra and Zeitlin 8).
- Herr maintains that the 'real' obscenity is the euphemism used to describe reality.

- As sign of his credibility, Herr notes that he can skip official briefings since he is not obliged to produce a daily or weekly report
- “No matter how highly placed they were, they were still officials, their views were well established and well known, famous. It could have rained frogs over Tan Son Nhut and they wouldn’t have been upset; Cam Ranh Bay could have dropped into the South China Sea and they would have found some way to make it sound good for you....” (216).
- Official view is suspect, in accurate, attempt to ‘spin’ the truth to support a particular agenda

- See that authentic experience cannot be conveyed in formal language
- Note that Herr's descriptions of the grunt experience is one of smells, sounds, bodily sensations which conflicts with dispassionate language of the official accounts.
- See multitude of stories; complexities of those experiences; the mistrust of unofficial, personal accounts and failure of official version to relate totality of experiences
- There was a need to “find a form and an expression for a very extreme experience.... We had to find this in order to save our lives” (Herr in Schroeder 40).
- Crucial to be able to formulate an account of one's experience

- However, not only Herr's account, but the oral narratives of the combatants may not be fully accurate
- But Herr also says, "Very few lines were literally invented" (Ciotti).
- Budra and Zeitlin: "fictional/non-fictional binary is a false one to be resolved dialectically in the direction of a new synthesis: oral narrative"(10).
- Such oral accounts may involve a "machismo that masks fear and lauds excess"(10)
- Herr says, "It doesn't matter that memory distorts..." (108).
- book has received praise as "finest documentation" of Viet Nam in the 1960s (DLB)

Dispatches as myth-busting

- Herr: *Dispatches* is “about acting out fantasy as much as anything. I had always wanted to go to war. I wanted to write a book” (in Ciotti 25).
- *Dispatches* is about confronting the myths of war and the hero and the ways in which Viet Nam confounds those myths

- “Ballad of the Green Berets” by Barry Sadler – biggest single hit of 1966
- Cultural example of the prevailing myth of war and masculinity

- Green Beret are portrayed as fearless
- born to die;
- elite corps,
- personal integrity
- interpersonal relationships trivial compared opportunity to defend the oppressed
- highest honour for a women is to raise another man who will die
- Song is narrative account where trajectory is to be tested, succeed and die with courage and honour

- One year later, Scott McKenzie sang *San Francisco*
- “Summer of love” and the Be-in of San Francisco

- Antithesis of *The Ballad of the Green Beret*
- No narrative line
- encapsulates a momentary experience
- Objective is to travel, “meet some gentle people” “with flowers in their hair”
- No one to save or defend
- Instead, you join a community, a “whole generation”
- Experience the “strange vibration”, the epiphany of a new way of being in the world
- Endless summer, a “love-in”
- No task to accomplish, no test of strength or valour

- Juxtaposition of the Green Berets and the flower children point out the intensity with which the myths of war and heroism had been invested by the public
- Where did those myths arise?

- “Oh man, do you realize that I just asked that guy back there to *cover us?*” (211).
- Herr discovers he has to confront received knowledge, the ideas of war and masculinity from culture
- (46) – mythopathic moment
- “I keep thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies.... (209).
- Begins to see the myth of war as a dangerous one

Persistent linking of sex and violence in the book:

- “His eyes were rolled up half into his head, his mouth was sprung open and his tongue was out, but he was smiling. Really a dude who’d shot his wad” (19).
- “But somewhere all the mythic tracks intersected, from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy....” (20)
- (63).
- Marines on R&R at China Beach are “limp in the wash of the tide” (164).

Hierarchy of masculinity:

- officers vs. grunts
- Marines vs. Cav
- Man vs. coward

- Killing held up as a genetic imperative:
- “In Saigon and Danang we’d get stoned together and keep the common pool stocked and tended. It was bottomless and alive with Lurps, seals, recondos, Green-Beret bushmasters, redundant mutilators, heavy raptors, eye-shooters, widow-makers, nametakers, classic essential American types; point men, *isolatos* and outriders like they were programmed in their genes to do it, the first taste made them crazy for it, just like they knew it would” (34-5).
- Cf Virginia Woolf’s comments in *Three Guineas*

Herr also confronts his personal anxiety as manliness

- “I never told that story to anyone, and I never went back to that outfit again either” (33) – but he does tell the reader
- Herr was not the ‘physical’ type – by his own admission, he says that “as a kid had every nervous tic and allergy possible” (Ciotti)
- Also, clearly not one of the athletes of whom he writes; one of the soldiers refers to Herr as “a heavy set fellow” (54)

At end of the book, he tries to debunk the myths outright:

“I could let you go on thinking that we were all brave, witty, attractive and vaguely tragic, that we were like some incomparable commando team, some hot-shit squadron, the Dreaded Chi, danger-loving, tender and wise. I could use it myself, it would certainly make for a prettier movie, but all of this talk about “we” and “us” has got to get straightened out” (219-220).

- Yet the impulse to record the events remains
- Impulse to be ‘one-of-the-guys’ and heroic remains

- *Dispatches* attacked by feminists as valorizing war as proving ground for masculinity
- I think such a perspective misses Herr's interrogation of masculinity and war
- The heroic trajectory is shown to be flawed
- The book lacks the obligatory heroic ending where the cavalry rides over the hill and saves the day
- Leadership is shown to be inadequate or entirely absent
- objective is uncertain
- Goal cannot be achieved
- Yet cost is high

Where are the women in *Dispatches*?

- “15,000 women served in-country during the war” (Budra and Zeitlin 20)
- Yet see few women in the book:
- *“... a little girl with a withered leg darting back and forth on wooden crutches faster than a dragonfly to sell her cigarettes. She had a face like a child dakini, so beautiful that people who needed to keep their edge blunt could hardly bear to look at her”* (36).
- “Those nights there was a serious tiger lady going around on a Honda shooting American officers on the street with a .45. I think she’d killed over a dozen in three months; the Saigon papers described her as “beautiful,” but I don’t know how anybody knew that” (41)
- (168)

- all three images portray women as deadly, alluring
- opposite of a soldier seems to be a siren or Medusa
- if violence and death are eroticized, then it is not surprising that they would also be configured as feminine in a heterosexual framework

- Book reveals the massive ‘unlearning’ of those myths and the confusion that results when the war does not conform to those established parameters
- “A lot of things had to be unlearned before you could learn anything at all, and even after you knew better you couldn’t avoid the ways in which things got mixed, the war itself with those parts of the war that were just like the movies....” (210)

- Herr suggests that the U.S. uses maps, construction of roads and bases, Agent Orange, napalm and even words to try and impose order on Viet Nam culture, geography and people
- Attempt to force the situation into a familiar paradigm, which does not exist, except in the movies
- Failure to come to terms with reality of Viet Nam is traumatic for many individuals

What happens when you return from Viet Nam and find a country that doesn't care?

- In any other war, they would have made movies about us too, *Dateline: Hell*, *Dispatch from Dong Ha*, maybe even *A Scrambler to the Front*, about Tim Page, Sean Flynn and Rick Merron, three young photographers who used to ride in and out of combat on Hondas. But Vietnam is awkward, everybody knows how awkward, and if people don't even want to hear about it, you know they're not going to pay money to sit there in the dark and have it brought up. (The *Green Berets* doesn't count. That wasn't really about Vietnam, it was about Santa Monica. So we have all been compelled to make our own movies, as many movies as there are correspondents, and this one is mine" (188).

- veterans return home wounded, psychologically or physically
- risked their lives
- Behaved honourably
- Yet shunned by population that was antagonistic to the war
- Refusal to acknowledge the veterans exist

