ABSTRACT

The Trauma Hero and the Lost War: World War II, American Literature, and the Politics of Trauma, 1945–1975 investigates the canonical dominance of trauma narratives in American literary representations of World War II, and works to understand the problem of the hero in American World War II literature as a question of the role of metaphor in wartime political imaginaries. Among the issues I consider are the trauma hero in war literature, the metaphor of the hero in Wallace Stevens and James Jones, representations of bomber crews as sacrificial victims in Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 and the poetry of Randall Jarrell, and the rejection of heroism in the comic poetry of Kenneth Koch.
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THE TRAUMA HERO AND THE LOST WAR:

WORLD WAR II, AMERICAN LITERATURE, AND THE POLITICS OF TRAUMA, 1945–1975

The war is the first and only thing in the world today.

—William Carlos Williams, Introduction to The Wedge (1944)
Sunday-school texts have ever been considered by sophisticated moralists the essential stimulus to ‘sin’—and I see no reason why the same fact should not apply to a Sunday-school simplification in dealing with the problems of war. On the other hand, let war be put forward as a cultural way of life, as one channel of effort in which people can be profoundly human, and you induce in the reader the fullest possible response to war, precisely such a response as might best lead one to appreciate the preferable ways of peace.

—Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form* (1938)

A true war story, we are told, is a story of trauma. A boy goes to war, his head full of romantic visions of martial glory, courage, and noble sacrifice, his heart yearning to achieve manly, heroic deeds, but what happens instead is an encounter with death. He sees, suffers, and even causes horrific violence. Such violence wounds the soldier’s very soul.

The youth, now a veteran, returns to the world of peace haunted by his experience, wracked by what Judith Herman calls the central compulsion of trauma and atrocity: the struggle between the need to publicly witness his shattering encounter with violence and the compulsion to repress it (1). He tries to turn his memory—the unassimilable reality of the traumatic event—into narrative, but finds his efforts blocked:
most people don’t want to hear the horrific truths that war has taught him; the political powers-that-be want to preserve the status quo and cover up the shocking reality of war; and it is simply impossible for people who were not there to understand. As Herman writes: “Soldiers in every war, even those who have been regarded as heroes, complain bitterly that no one wants to know the real truth about war” (8).

The traumatic violence of war destroys even language itself. James Dawes argues in *The Language of War* that “War impairs the human power to describe, define, or narrate. At the broadest level, war interrupts history…. War interrupts intersubjective evaluation and, at the most personal level, interrupts self-narration” (200). In an essay in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, Adam Piette writes: “War zones destructure any narrative that attempts to describe them with powers of menace capable of warping civilian space-time” (38). According to Mary Favret, in *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*, not only does war “not necessarily make sense,” but “war, even at a distance, works to dismantle the forms that prop up our sense of the world and our place in it” (15). Learning how war damages our very powers of sense-making, the veteran comes to learn that war’s truth is a truth beyond words.

The warrior’s most heroic battle occurs not on the field of combat, but after he has come home, when he strives to bear testimony to his experience. He has gone to Hell, confronted death, and returned with that most priceless of treasures: self-knowledge.¹ Through the fire of combat, the soldier learns truths about human existence that rend the illusory veils of modern civilization. As Chris Hedges writes in his best-selling, award-

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¹ For the most influential version on this universalist Jungian interpretation of the “warrior myth,” see Joseph Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, or later popular versions of this line of archetype-psychology such as Robert Bly’s *Iron John* and Robert A. Johnson’s *He: Understanding Masculine Psychology*. 
winning book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*: “War exposes a side of human nature that is usually masked by the unacknowledged coercion and social constraints that glue us together. Our cultivated conventions and little lies of civility lull us into a refined and idealistic view of ourselves,” a view which war shatters (12–13). Integrating this revealed knowledge into his life and testifying to that revelation before his community are the only ways the veteran can heal his wounds. Every war story, every true war story, is a story of trauma and recovery, a narrative that struggles to speak the unspeakable truth of war, to speak war’s unspeakability. As Margot Norris describes the struggle in *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*, “Because war is a world-unmaking event, a reality-deconstructing and defamiliarizing activity, one of the challenges of war writing is how to make its inherent epistemological disorientation, its sense of experienced ‘unreality,’ real” (24).

Unable to cope with this difficult task of narrativizing epistemological disorientation, some veterans remain stuck in their trauma for decades, compulsively reliving their pain. Others are able to turn their suffering into wisdom, or even literature. Either way, the veteran, like the Greek archer Philoctetes, is known by his wound. It is through the experience of trauma that we must understand the experience of war.²

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² In her book *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, trauma studies scholar Kali Tal schematizes the conventions of trauma literature through the work of Vietnam War poet W.D. Ehrhart: “Ehrhart is thus a perfect subject for an attempt to test the theory of the existence of a literature of trauma against an existing body of work. We should be able to locate in his work the ‘basic wound’ described by Chaim Shatan, and the ‘new, permanent, and adaptive lifestyle’ that Ehrhart generates in response to trauma. We should be able to find evidence of a retelling process that rebuilds Ehrhart’s shattered personal myths; of Ehrhart’s response to liminality and alienation; of his identity with a community of survivors. The permanent transformative nature of the traumatic experience should be obvious: Ehrhart’s journey from the normal world to the abnormal world of the war should lead him to perceive ‘a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre encounter with atrocity that it can never be purified again.’ Furthermore, the tension between the drive to testify, the impossibility of successfully conveying the experience, and the urge to repress the experience entirely should be a constant presence in his work. We should find examples of his efforts to contextualize his trauma, to connect it across history to other atrocities committed at other times. Finally, we should find evidence of Ehrhart’s struggle to prevent his own traumatic experience from
So speaks the myth of the trauma hero.

This myth is perhaps the single most important cultural frame for understanding the experience of war in America today. It informs our politics, shapes our news reports, and underwrites our history.³ It dominates critical and scholarly interpretation of war literature, war movies, and the visual culture of war. Fredric Jameson, for instance, in his discussion of war literature in *Antinomies of Realism*, argues that the narrative of “the existential experience of war” as a representative expression of “the fear of death and that somewhat different thing, the death anxiety” is “surely the quintessential form the representation of war will take in most people’s minds,” reducing the totality of human literature about war to some “seven or eight… situations which more or less exhaust the genre” (233, 235).

The myth of the trauma hero is certainly compelling: it claims to speak to deep psychological truths, makes a kind of intuitive sense, and, perhaps most important, makes the veteran a victim, rather than a perpetrator, of war. It is a myth that fits neatly with a post-Enlightenment, post-Romantic view of embodied, subjective truth, since it describes war as a subjective aesthetic experience rather than as a social or political one; it confers authenticity and truth-value on just that subjective experience, on *being there*; and it puts human suffering firmly in the category of evil while displacing the agency of those who cause that suffering. As Catharine Brosman notes in an essay on “The Functions of War Literature,” “What distinguishes literary expressions of war… at least in the modern period, is first of all the emphasis on the experiential dimension” (85). What’s more, the

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³ In Hal Foster’s analysis, trauma has been a central American cultural trope since the 1970s: “Across artistic, theoretical, and popular cultures (in SoHo, at Yale, on *Oprah*) there is a tendency to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma” (168).
subjective experience of war as it is represented within the trauma hero myth is an experience of transcendental revelation: through his experience, the warrior is given direct access to a higher order of truth.

The trauma hero’s revelation is predicated on the idea that subjective experience and physical presence offer a more robust truth-value and a greater moral authority than do history, eyewitnessing, or other kinds of accounts. Nevertheless, of course, and not without irony, the trauma hero’s claim to a truth beyond language is a claim made in language. The claim to a truth beyond the pale of civilized society is made in, for, and by civilized society. The truth that the myth of the trauma hero portrays as only being accessible outside the frame of social discourse is a truth constructed through social discourse. The “truth of war” has a history. So does the trauma hero.

I began to delve into the history of the trauma hero myth in 2007 because I was curious about how the United States’ wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were being represented in media and culture. Specifically, I was puzzled by the widespread focus on soldiers’ trauma and the heartfelt admiration expressed for veterans across the political spectrum, two things that seemed to be connected. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were corrupt, possibly illegal, and immensely destructive, of dubious merit even from a cynical perspective of realpolitik, yet our most resonant cultural narratives about the wars seemed to focus not on the systemic political failures the wars represented or the thousands upon thousands of Iraqi and Afghan lives that were callously destroyed, but rather on the suffering of individual American soldiers.

How this narrative worked can be seen in the story behind the cover of American veteran Brian Turner’s award-winning poetry collection, Here, Bullet (2005). The cover
offers an iconic image: a slouching soldier in battle gear staring at the viewer, standing alone against a harsh desert landscape. The image calls to mind countless images of battle-weary soldiers, at the same time invoking the tradition of the American Western through the figure of the solitary cowboy. The figure is Turner himself; his gaze challenges the reader with his “thousand-yard stare,” at once aggressive and wounded, guarded yet promising hard wisdom.

This image came from a photo that Turner had provided his publisher. Naturally, the photo needed to be edited. Most important, the zip-tied, hooded Iraqi prisoners that Turner and his men had captured needed to be erased. In an interview in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Turner describes the decision-making process at length, offering valuable insight into the process by which artists and editors collaborate in the production of war’s “truth”:

The editor at Alice James Books asked me to send along a number of photos so that, while she was editing, she could get a feel for the people that show up in the poems. She wanted a visual feel for the landscape, and I think she was trying to get closer to the material too. She came across one photo and said “this has got to be the cover,” but it was very contentious for me for several reasons…. The contentious part of the photo—and I struggled with this—on the cover just above my name in the lower half of the photo, between the photographer and me were three Iraqi prisoners. They were on their knees, their hands were flexcuffed behind their backs, and they had sandbags over their heads. Jackowski, he was my M203 gunner, he took the photo. The prisoner on Jackowski’s right had a leather
jacket on and we’d written RPG across his back because he’d fired a Rocket Propelled Grenade. In fact, Jackowski was in the center of a circle of prisoners—about ten or thirteen of them—and the stance that I have in that photo looks sort of like John Wayne. That photo looks like “I came over here to chew bubblegum and kick ass, and I’m all out of bubblegum,” as they say in the movies. It just wasn’t right for a cover photo, especially with the sandbags over the heads because that’s now synonymous with torture.

If I were someone walking into a bookstore—as we were talking about this during the editing process—I felt like some people would be repelled by that image. They would just think torture right off the bat, and this book isn’t about torture. There are books that need to be written about torture, and some of those are starting to come out, but my book isn’t about that. I wanted to invite people into the book rather than push them away (“Conversation”).

Turner and his editor worked together to shape an image of the Iraq war that focused on the American soldier, invoked the cowboy-hero tradition of John Wayne, and literally erased Iraqi bodies—and this for a book of lyric poetry published by a respected non-profit poetry press that had been founded with a feminist and socially progressive mission. The reality of the war itself was deemed too “repellent” for readers to handle, so a new truth was constructed, one that elided the history of torture and the Abu Ghraib scandal, eliminated troublesome Iraqis, and made the war more appealing—“inviting”—to American readers. Most poetry readers today would probably not think of words like “state ideology,” “propaganda,” “nationalism,” “the glorification of war,” or “lies” when
they think of Alice James Books or Brian Turner’s poetry, yet a nationalist war ideology constructed through erasure and deceit is precisely the frame in which Alice James Books presented Turner’s poems.

Now, I had met Brian Turner and he seemed like a sensitive, thoughtful guy. In some of his poems he tried to imagine his way into Iraqi points of view, and regardless of whether or not those poems were successful, they at least testified to a reflective, compassionate mind. Yet when it came to framing a representative image of the experience of war, he agreed to the callous erasure of Iraqi bodies because the truth of the photo was too “repellent” for readers to handle. What happened with the cover of *Here, Bullet* seemed symptomatic of a wider cultural phenomenon. What was going on here?

As I struggled to understand the motivation behind the process of ideological erasure and reframing I was witnessing in American culture, I began to see that it had something to do with the genealogy of trauma itself and how trauma came to be synonymous with war. Trauma as such has a long history going back more than a century, which history is sketched in Chapter 2 of this book, but the concept really only came to center stage in American culture in the 1970s, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the 1960s. As I followed out the history of trauma and its connection to American narratives about war, I began to see that the myth of the trauma hero had, at some point in American history, taken on a political function: in a way homologous to the way in which Brian Turner’s image was constructed on the cover of *Here, Bullet*, the myth of the trauma hero works to focus all our attention on the solitary war hero while erasing the bodies of the enemies and innocents that hero killed. I also began to understand that while the trauma hero came onto center stage in American culture during
the years of the Vietnam War, the importance of the trauma hero’s political function wasn’t in the work it did representing that war, which was generally regarded as a painful and regrettable conflict, but rather in the work it did to revise cultural narratives about World War II.

The historical, political, and cultural importance of World War II to American life in the twentieth century scarcely needs to be argued. Yet perhaps just because the changes World War II wrought were so pervasive, radical, and upsetting, it might be worthwhile to consider some of the event’s effects, large and small. Women entered the workforce en masse, suddenly experiencing wholly novel forms of financial and sexual independence. Sixteen million men were uprooted from their homes, stripped of their civilian identities, shuttled through a vast national bureaucracy, and sent across the country or across the world, in what became the greatest experiment in cosmopolitan mixing and mass indoctrination in American history. More than 400,000 of these men died; another 670,000 of them were wounded. African-Americans, though still segregated, served in military combat and support units, and migrated north and west to work in an expanding defense industry: Los Angeles, Detroit, Cleveland, and Philadelphia all saw African-American populations nearly double between 1940 and 1950. The material culture of American life was transformed beyond imagining: food production and consumption, housewares, automobile production, home building, highways, television, film, clothing, airplane travel, and music all underwent incredible metamorphoses between the 1930s and the 1950s. Millions of Americans experienced firsthand the terror and excitement of violence, killing, and death, and millions more were imaginatively and emotionally invested in what was perceived as an existential struggle
for the future of the world. Last but not least, the scale of American self-image was wrenched into a new frame as the United States took on leadership of “the West,” facing Soviet Russia in what would become a winner-take-all Cold War for global dominance, while unleashing the god-like destructive power of the atom bomb.

If we can say that World War II is a single event, it surely strains the imagination to conceive it as such. Even from a strictly American perspective, what World War II is and means have been contentious and difficult issues from the beginning, not merely because of political investments and predispositions, but also because the sheer scope of the event and its aftershocks remain difficult to assimilate. As Norman Mailer wrote in 1957, “The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it.”

Perhaps it still does, though not for lack of looking. Cultural and aesthetic representations of the war have struggled to come to terms with its staggering historical, ethical, political, and psychological complexity in a variety of ways, in poetry, novels, musicals, history, television mini-series, comic books, video games, and films that at their best work through the contradictions and tensions the event gives rise to. From Pearl S. Buck’s novel *China Sky* (1941), depicting American doctors caught in the Japanese invasion of China, to the competing series of first-person shooters set in World War II that appeared in the 1990s and 2000s, starting with the now-classic *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and leading into the blockbuster franchises *Medal of Honor* (1999) and *Call of Duty* (2003); from Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* (1948) to George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1977); from Chester Himes’s novel of a black shipyard worker, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go* (1945), to Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), which
reads 9/11 back through the firebombing of Dresden, the amount and variety of American
cultural production from the last seventy years that works explicitly, allegorically, and
sometimes unconsciously with and through World War II is overwhelming.

Given the tremendous richness and diversity of representations of World War II
produced in the last seventy-odd years, it seemed remarkable to me that a single narrative
strain—that of trauma—has come to dominate the war’s literary canon. The short list of
canonical American literary works “about” the war comprises the novels *The Naked and
the Dead* (1948), *Catch-22* (1961), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1968), and *Gravity’s Rainbow*
(1973), along with a wider array of poems best represented by Randall Jarrell’s “Death of
the Ball Turret Gunner,” Louis Simpson’s “Carentan O Carentan,” some of Robert
Lowell’s anti-war poetry, a few poems by Gwendolyn Brooks about black soldiers,
Marianne Moore’s “In Distrust of Merits,” and W.H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939.”
These are the works that remain in print, occupy the center of general literary discussion
about World War II literature, focus discussion in canon-setting works such as *The
Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, and serve as the ready-to-hand
examples of World War II literature for teachers and scholars of twentieth-century
American literature. These works are stylistically and topically diverse, yet except for
Moore’s complex meditation and Auden’s rueful lyric, they are alike in that they all take
as primary themes trauma and traumatic revelation.

When other works are discussed, they are typically dismissed as aesthetic failures,
as in Austrian Americanist Walter Höbling’s discussion of American World War II
literature in *The Cambridge Companion to War Literature*, where he lumps together all
the fiction not identified as “postmodern” (which I would argue is synonymous with the
post-traumatic—Hölbling names Heller, Vonnegut, and Pynchon, with brief mention of John Hawkes and William Eastlake) under the flattening category of “the mimetic mode,” tendentiously describing a great variety (and, indeed, the majority) of World War II novels as a “traditional,” “conventional,” and simplistically comforting:

The focus is on telling a “story” whose chronology more or less corresponds to the historical sequence of events. Characters conform to the tradition of psychological realism that encourages readers to identify with the protagonists, and the connection of events by means of chronological narrative and plot structure suggests that the sense-making of the fiction “story” is more or less identical with what took place. At the end, readers have a sense of closure and the feeling that the things that happen in this fictional world can be explained and understood (214).

Even ignoring the contempt oozing from Hölbling’s assessment, we’re left to puzzle out how this helps us make sense of such deliberately provocative, skeptical, and complex works as James Jones’s *The Thin Red Line* or Gertrude Stein’s *Wars I Have Seen*, or how it helps us understand the contradictions and dilemmas being worked out even in such “conventional” works as Herman Wouk’s *The Caine Mutiny* or Chester Himes’s *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. James Dawes, in his discussion of the American war novel in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, likewise consigns everything but Mailer, Heller, Vonnegut, and Pynchon to the slag-heap of mediocrity, with a few nice words later for Martha Gellhorn, and a discussion of Jones’s novels as “the perfect
embodiment” of the “generally unspoken but nonetheless palpable sense that [such] work is a lesser part of the American literary canon”: “A great deal of readable, competent work was produced and lavishly celebrated, but few of these novels marked new directions for literature and fewer still are given extended attention by literary critics today. It is a much smaller subset of works that is now widely taken as the most important art coming out of the conflict” (“The American war novel” 56). Scholarly discussion around the canon of World War I poetry is typically more nuanced, though Hölbling, like others such as Margot Norris and Diderik Oostdijk, tend to privilege the same handful of soldier-poets (Auden, Jarrell, Lowell, Moore, Simpson), ignoring the challenges posed by the war poetry of writers such as H.D., Diane DiPrima, Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, George Oppen, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Louis Zukofsky.

How are we to understand the fact that when it comes to a war in which the United States arose to victory as a global superpower, the canonical literary representations valorized as aesthetically worthwhile all tell stories of individual soldiers psychologically traumatized by violence? How did it happen that in the face of the overwhelming amount, variety, and complexity of representations of the experience of World War II, the narrow interpretive frame of trauma has come to dominate canonical literature about World War II? Reading across the war’s literary archive from Lincoln Kirstein’s ribald poems to Gertrude Stein’s meditative prose, from John Hersey’s documentary novels and novelistic reportage to Wallace Stevens’s complex considerations of the imagination of the hero in time of war, one can see that the majority of literary work explicitly concerned with World War II is actively misrepresented by the canon. Just as happened when Brian Turner and his editor went about constructing the
image that would represent the poetic truth of the Iraq War on the cover of *Here, Bullet*, a process of aesthetic reframing and erasure has washed out the complexity of World War II literature and replaced it with the image of a traumatized American soldier. Why and how did this happen? Even more important, what is this misrepresentative canon leaving out, marginalizing, and obscuring?

As my research turned from the War on Terror to World War II, I began to understand that one of the key things that the trauma hero myth has obscured is the way that writers dealing with World War II in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s struggled to make sense of the notion of heroism itself. The problem of the hero was a pervasive early twentieth-century concern, but for American writers as disparate as James Jones, Chester Himes, Marianne Moore, and Kenneth Koch, World War II turned the problem of the hero into a crisis at the heart of democratic society. Sidney Hook, Eric Bentley, Kenneth Burke, and others worried that the relationship between democracy and heroism was at best a troubled tension. Even more troubled was the conflict between the kinds of stories society told itself about its values: on the one hand, a story in which anything could be exchanged for anything else and everything was for sale, and on the other a story in which the most important thing you could do was sacrifice your life for your country. In Kenneth Burke’s view, “the need to change from a commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives to a collective-sacrificial-military nexus of motives” was the salient cultural issue facing the United States in World War II. At the heart of that issue was the problem of the hero: what a hero was, what a hero did, how the hero was represented.

This dissertation, *The Trauma Hero and the Lost War: World War II, American Literature, and the Politics of Trauma, 1945–1975*, investigates the dominance of trauma
narratives in the canon of American World War II literature and works to understand the problem of the hero such trauma narratives occlude. It is the argument of my project that as far as American literature is concerned, the central issues that American writers struggled with in their efforts to make sense of World War II have been cut out of the frame and erased. We no longer understand how World War II was a conflict within American culture, which means we’re unable to understand how that conflict was resolved—or how it might still be going on today.

In effect, World War II has been lost to American literature. We have lost the war in the first instance by reading American imperial triumph as trauma—by portraying victors as victims. As much as *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and the bomber poems of Randall Jarrell may have to say about individuals caught in horrific situations, they elide the fact that the United States came out of World War II an undisputed victor, its national territory all but untouched, having suffered far fewer casualties than almost any other major combatant nation. Canonical American literary representations claim a disingenuous affective solidarity with the dead, the losers, and the traumatized, disavowing the historical postwar reality of American dominance and privilege.

American literature has lost World War II in another way as well. Canonical and cultural prejudice have misrepresented the complex and sophisticated explorations of social transformation, global conflict, violence, and power relations that the full range of World War II literature offers. This has helped foster a misshapen sense of the literary and cultural history of the century: rather than understanding postwar modernism and postmodernism in terms of the rise of the military-industrial security state and American imperial triumph in World War II, we tend to read World War II and the postwar era back
through the generational trauma of the Vietnam War, looking at the most important historical event of the twentieth century as if through the wrong end of the telescope.

The primary organization of *The Trauma Hero and the Lost War* is thematic, though the arc of its argument develops dialectically. In “Part I: The Trauma Hero,” I raise the problem and delineate the conventions of what I call the trauma hero, considering traumatic revelation in modern war literature more broadly and analyzing the cultural semiotics of trauma as an inassimilable “Real” beyond language and social meaning. “Part II: Repetitions of a Hero” opens out to consider the problem of the war hero as national metaphor in Herman Wouk’s novel *The Caine Mutiny*, Wallace Stevens’s wartime poetry, and James Jones’s novel *The Thin Red Line*, paying special attention to the conflict between the systems of metaphoric exchange that Wallace Stevens called “the poetry of war” and “the poetry of a work of the imagination.” Though Jones’s novel and Stevens’s poetry, I am able to sketch out the real contradictions between capitalism and nationalism to which the trauma hero is eventually seen as the imaginary solution. In “Part III: The Bomber,” I examine the trauma hero’s manifestation in the “bomber lyric” of World War II, especially in Randall Jarrell’s poems and in Joseph Heller’s novel *Catch-22*, with James Dickey’s 1964 poem “The Firebombing” serving as a counter-example that has been criticized precisely for its failure to fit the trauma hero mold. “Part IV: Death in the Circus,” tracks how developing narratives of World War II and the national hero were re-interpreted and resisted during the Cold War and Vietnam War by New York School poet Kenneth Koch, following his career from his wartime poems as a soldier in the Philippines to his encoded writings as a veteran, and in his 1969 poem against anti-war poems, “The Pleasures of Peace.” Koch works against the
trauma hero narrative by striving to see war as comedy: not the tragic primal scene of national identity formation, but an absurd interruption of violence into peacetime life. As Dickey’s work serves as a foil that helps illuminate the complex canonization of the bomber as trauma hero, Koch’s serves as a foil that helps illuminate how agreement about what war means became compulsory within fields of literary production.

This dissertation traces the outlines of the development of the myth of the trauma hero and explores some of what that myth has occluded. As I look ahead toward expanding this dissertation into a complete book, work remains to be done to complete the overall argument and flesh out important aspects of World War II in American literature that have been overlooked. The role of the black sacrificial body in narratives of African-Americans’ bid for full citizenship through World War II, and the conflict between that claim for assimilation over against desires for black national or individual identity outside of American political structures, as dramatized in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry, John Oliver Killens’s novel *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1963), and William Gardner Smith’s novel *The Last of the Conquerers* (1948), have important things to tell us about how writers during and after World War II thought through the problem of the hero. The idea of the war as carnival is another important trope, all but ignored in literary scholarship, that can help integrate and make sense of works such as John Horne Burns’s novel *The Gallery* (1947), Martha Gellhorn’s novel *The Wine of Astonishment* (1948), and Lincoln Kirstein’s *Rhymes of a PFC* (1964). Lastly, my argument would not be complete without considering the relationships and resonances between the two texts that seal the canonical literary interpretation of World War II as trauma, Thomas

Critical engagement with war literature has taken a variety of forms since Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* was published in 1975. Aside from the almost doxological power of Fussell’s interpretation and the unavoidable problem of memory, more specifically collective memory, the two most important factors in the literary-critical consideration of war literature in recent decades have been trauma theory and, more recently, a salutary turn toward questions of representation, first effected in the wake of poststructuralist critiques of discourse, then strengthened through a deepening concern with material culture informed by media theory and comparative studies. Recent books such as *Media, Memory, and the First World War* (2009), by David Williams, arguing for the influence of cinematic technologies on World War I literature; Patrick Deer’s *Culture in Camouflage* (2009), which considers “war culture” in Britain from 1914-1945; *Authoring War* (2011), by Kate McLoughlin, which presents itself as a rhetorical analysis of tropes especially used in the literature of war; *War at a Distance* (2011), by Mary Favret, exploring the connection between poetry, journalism, and overseas military conflict in Romantic poetry (and since); the interdisciplinary collection of essays edited by Elena V. Baraban, Stephan Jaeger, and Adam Muller, *Fighting Words and Images* (2012), which explicitly foregrounds the problem of representations of war; and Paul K. Saint-Amour’s magisterial revision of the relationship between Modernism, total war, and encyclopedic form, *Tense Future* (2015), all do important work introducing new self-criticality into war studies, de-naturalizing the notion of war, and developing a wider understanding that cultural production around war is first of all cultural production.
Still, some of these books and even other earlier ones—such as Marianna Torgovnik’s *The War Complex* (2005), which argues that contemporary representations and collective memory of World War II are constructed through highly selective filters emphasizing American success and righteousness, James Dawes’s *The Language of War* (2002), presenting a Habermasian argument that language (meaning, for him, primarily legalistic structures and literary texts) lessens and ameliorates the proliferation and effects of violence in war, and Margot Norris’s *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* (2000), which aligns war with mortality, turning the question of what war means into the question of what death means—recoil from their own advances by reinscribing their properly cultural insights within an essentialist language of war predicated on the metaphysics of trauma and universalist notions of language. Perhaps the single most productive and frustrating effort in this line is McLoughlin’s notable *Authoring War*, in which she undermines her potentially transformative insights into the rhetorical and literary construction of various war-related texts by describing the rhetorical devices she analyzes as either ontologically necessary (because war itself resists depiction) or psychologically determined (by reading literary tropes as traumatic repressions). After opening a new way to view the production of literary culture about war in terms of its rhetorical and discursive machinery, McLoughlin backs off and returns to a simplistically mimetic (and purely heteronymous) model of literary production.

There is a dearth of studies specific to American war literature and World War II. Most often, the second World War is folded back into the first, folded forward into postwar writing generally (as in Morris Dickstein’s 2002 *Leopards in the Temple*), or lost in the null zone between Modernism and Postmodernism. The last dedicated study of
World War II in American fiction dates from 1969 and is focused primarily on combat novels. With poetry things are better. Recent interest in the “Middle Generation” of Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, and Berryman has not only brought increased attention to Jarrell’s own wartime work but prompted engagement with his fellow veteran-poets, many of whom (unlike Jarrell) actually served overseas. Diderik Oostdijk’s *Among the Nightmare Fighters: American Poets of World War II* (2011), for example, offers a survey focused on the “white, male, so-called academic poets who published their poems in the *Kenyon Review*, the *New Yorker*, and *Partisan Review*, and came to prominence in the 1940s and 1950s,” and makes a case for increased attention to the poetry of Anthony Hecht and Howard Nemerov. Looking beyond the “white, male, so-called academic poets,” some headway has been made, but not enough. Susan Schweik’s *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (1991) takes up some female poets’ response to the war, including Bishop, Rukeyser, Moore, H.D., Louise Bogan, and others, and Jennifer James discusses Gwendolyn Brooks and John Oliver Killens in *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II* (2007). The massive social changes promulgated in World War II that gave rise to both civil rights and equal rights (figured in Rosie the Riveter on one hand, and the Tuskegee Airmen on the other), while addressed by historians such as Kevin Kruse and James T. Sparrow, have yet to be fully elucidated in the literary culture.

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4 Marina MacKay’s *Modernism and World War II* is a vital contribution, of course, but strictly British in its concerns. Indeed, scholarly interest in British literature and World War II seems lively. It is an important task, given the relative contiguity of British and American literatures, to keep the two distinct, especially with regard to World War II. The primary reason for this is to resist reading American hegemony through British imperial decline, as Fussell does in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Indeed, the effort to read the assertion of American geopolitical dominance as a traumatic fall is exactly what I intend to historicize.
of the era. When it comes to queer World War II, an entire subfield lies unexplored, though Allan Bérubé’s *Coming Out Under Fire* is a good place to start (1991).

One central problem seems to be an unwillingness to take the literature of World War II on its own terms, or to be able to see the war itself in its moral complexity. World War II tends to be narrativized either as the “Good War” fought by the “Greatest Generation,” a mythic crusade valorized in popular media, or as an absurd, meaningless, traumatic violence in works such as *Catch-22*, “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. John Limon, in *Writing After War* (1994), argues that the “postmodernization of World War II” revised the literary representation of World War II by offering a paranoid, adolescent response to the problem of responsibility and violence—like the theorizations of certain post-war French theorists struggling to find a way out from under the shadow of collaboration and surrender, a perfect anodyne for a moral notion of American exceptionalism that cannot accept a cosmopolitan peace founded in blood. In many ways, how we “read” World War II has as much to do with our political-moral judgment of American geopolitical hegemony as it does anything else. It is on this point—collective responsibility for collective violence—that our postwar interpretations of World War II hang, and it is toward a deeper, long-term understanding of this problem that my intervention is made. Limon’s point is salient, but his explanation and interpretation are inadequate. If we read World War II through Vietnam, through World War I, or through both, as with Paul Fussell, we risk blinding ourselves not only to the richness of the archive, but to how that archive might be put to use to construct a more humane vision of the future.
The Trauma Hero and the Lost War is intended to offer a revision of the postmodern, posttraumatic revision of World War II by returning to the war itself and the cultural production around it. I mean to stake a claim that we must return to the war, in all its complexity and difficulty, not in repudiation or glorification, but by inhabiting its affective realms of terror, violence, responsibility, and ethical conflict. The title of this project is pointed: my interest is in tracing the genealogy of the myth of the trauma hero, and in exploring the politics of trauma in American war literature and its reception, but my interest is just as much in excavating the deeper conflicts at work in American World War II literature that our contemporary focus on trauma occludes.

It is my hope that The Trauma Hero and the Lost War can substantially revise the way we read World War II in American literature, and American war literature in general, shifting our sense of the legacies of modernism through and after the two world wars and reframing our understanding of postwar American literature. The stakes are historical and literary, but they are also political, for as long as we see war as something outside and beyond civilized discourse, a traumatic “Real” manifesting a truth beyond language, we can continue to obscure the violence foundational to American empire, global capitalism, and Western society, and as long as we confuse nationalism with liberalism, we continue to feed the unholy terror-engine of American exceptionalism. As much as this project is about recovering the “lost war” behind the image we’ve constructed of World War II, it is also about recovering what might not yet be lost behind the image of the war we live today.
PART I: THE TRAUMA HERO

The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him… who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma.

Chapter 1. Combat Gnosticism and the Old Lie

The theory of this program: Return to the traumatizing event. Remember it in detail. Think about it through therapy and by writing about it. Keep at it until you are thinking about what you did do instead of what you didn’t. Learn that truth is relative, and that there is the moment of trauma, and then the moment following the trauma of your first reaction, when shame and guilt can take hold. Healing is an act of persuasion.

—Dexter Filkins, Thank You For Your Service (2013)

In June 1917, after five months hard fighting on the front line, British lieutenant Wilfred Owen was sent to the rear to be treated for shellshock. While convalescing at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, he wrote the first draft of a bitter poem describing the death of a fellow soldier in a gas attack. This draft was dedicated “To Jessie Pope,” a widely published female civilian poet known for patriotic poems like “The Call,” which asks “Who’s for the trench—are you, my laddie?” Owen’s dedication, later amended “To a certain poetess,” was as facetious as the poem’s now-famous ending is ironic: the vividly depicted horror of a comrade’s choking death was intended to chasten pro-war civilians such as Pope, and to repudiate the “old lie” that “dulce et decorum est pro patria mori”—that it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.
Owen begins his poem in the perspective of marching soldiers, invoking a first-person plural collective speaker (“we cursed through sludge”) that shifts between subjective sensation and close description of physical suffering. Vivid images strike a scene as if out of Bosch: bent, knock-kneed men, haunting flares, blood-shod feet. Details such as men losing their boots and the caliber of the artillery rounds being fired at them help establish the speaker’s authority. The soldiers’ crippled passivity and mute endurance—they are described as lame, blind, drunk with fatigue, deaf—heighten their sympathetic appeal.

In the second stanza, the poem makes two important turns:

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime. . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning (Collected Poems 55).

The men come under gas attack and we helplessly watch one of them fumble with his mask and begin to choke to death. As that is happening, we move swiftly from the collective voice to the perspective of a particular set of eyes; our singular speaker bodies forth from the mass of men at the very instant that he, through the “misty panes” of his gas mask, sees one of his fellows die. This poem’s first use of the first person singular, its speaker’s originating enunciation of selfhood, arrives at the moment of death. In this
poem, as in the myth of the trauma hero more generally, selfhood forms in and through the encounter with mortality: “I saw him drowning.” The turn here through perceptual detail into the speaker’s subjectivity is pushed further in the next stanza’s free-standing couplet, where the death only just seen is replayed within the speaker’s unconscious, inside his dreams: “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.”

In the final stanza, the speaker turns from his dream to the reader’s—“If in some smothering dreams you too could pace / Behind the wagon that we flung him in”—indicting the one who doesn’t know, the one who isn’t haunted by obsessive nightmares replaying the moment of death. The details press on, one after the other, “hanging face,” “gargling blood,” “incurable sores,” but now instead of describing the scene itself, or even its memory, the speaker describes the dream you, the reader, would be tortured by, if you’d seen what he’d seen and felt what he felt. If you could see, the speaker tells Jessie Pope, if you could hear, if you knew what it was really like, then you wouldn’t write poems supporting the war. Indeed, as Owen’s amended dedication might be read as suggesting, “a certain poetess” lacks not only the kind of experience that would give her the knowledge to make judgments about war, she also lacks the kind of experience that would even grant her a recognizable self, personhood, a name.

The Latin tag ending the poem, from Horace’s *Carmina* III.2, “Angustam amice,” is translated by David West as “Sweet it is and honourable to die for one’s native land.” This tag stands in for what Owen is aiming to attack, to dispel, to discredit: the “old Lie,” which is not just Jessie Pope’s jingoistic verse or the easy bellicosity of civilians back home, but the classical education of the aristocratic officer caste leading the war, the
English public schools in which Horace was taught, and the very idea of war literature itself. The old lie, Owen suggests, is what you’ve read in your books, what you’ve been taught, what you’ve been spoon-fed. I know the truth, Owen claims, not because I read about it in school, but because I’ve seen it, heard it, and felt it. Owen asserts his authority to make moral judgments on the basis of both his sensibility, meaning his sensitivity to experience, and on the experience itself. According to his logic, what he’s seen and what he’s felt give him privileged access to moral truth, truth beyond anything civilians can ever hope to achieve.

The privileging of combat experience as a source of transcendental knowledge—the understanding of war as revelation—is a phenomenon that Yuval Harari argues has its roots in a complex shift in European culture, a shift from recording external deeds as evidence of valor to recording internal experiences as evidence of developing sensibility, a shift from seeing war experience as a testament to personal glory to seeing it as a moment of sentimental education. Harari, a historian best known today for his synoptic account of human civilization, Sapiens, has traced changing conceptions of military identity from the medieval era to the present through three books—Special Operations in the Age of Chivalry, 1100-1550; Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History and Identity, 1450-1600; and The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000—and more recent articles advancing his analysis of the distinctions between eye-witness accounts of war, in which the witness relies primarily on what they saw, and what he calls “flesh-witness” accounts of war, in which the witness relies primarily on what they experienced and felt. Harari’s analysis accords with that of other historians of war culture such as David A. Bell, Azar Gat, and
John Lynn, who identify the Napoleonic Wars as a period of epochal change in Western conceptions of war. As Bell writes, during this period “the very concept and experience of ‘the self’ in war was changing” (7).

Bell identifies three significant cultural transformations that gave rise to modern war culture. First, a change from accepting “war as an inevitable, and ordinary, facet of human existence,” to seeing it “as an exceptional, extreme state of affairs” (5-7). Second, the development of a notion of the “military” as a social sphere separate and distinct from civilian life (11). And third, the rise of “militarism,” which Bell defines as a belief in the moral superiority of military values (12). Bell elaborates on how these transformations have evolved in Western and, specifically, American culture:

As a result of these shifts, a culture of war that seems quite alien to us had given way, by the early 1800s, to one that remains highly recognizable today across the Western world and especially in the United States…. On the one hand, Americans today generally see war as an exceptional state of affairs—despite the fact that American forces have engaged in five major military operations in the last fifteen years and maintain bases in scores of countries. Americans frequently describe war as something civilized nations have outgrown. American politicians automatically denounce the country’s adversaries as criminal malefactors, threaten them with prosecution or even assassination, and never do them the courtesy of a formal declaration of war. But many Americans… also have an unabated fascination with war, considering it a test of their society’s worth. They treat members of the armed forces with respect verging on reverence and take for
granted that no one who has not been in combat can ever understand “what it is like” or how it changes a person (12–13).

Harari’s analysis in *The Ultimate Experience*, consonant with Bell’s, describes how revolutions in military technology and organization in the early seventeenth century helped create the conditions for detaching personal glory from military experience, while the growth of sensationalism, the “cult of sensibility,” and Romanticism combined with increasing literacy and a more professionalized, bourgeois officer corps in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to make “war-as-revelation” the predominant narrative for the individual experience of war (in the West). War reveals transcendental truths about existence, according to this Romantic narrative, and that revelation is only available through direct, physical sensation, or what literary scholar James Campbell calls “combat gnosis.” The Greek term “gnosis” traditionally means experiential as opposed to theoretical knowledge, and has connotations of secrecy and mysticism through its association with Hellenic mystery cults and later Christian sects. Campbell uses the term to describe a moment of revealed knowledge accessible only by direct, physical, sensory experience on the battlefield, such as the moment of vision Owen describes in “Dulce et Decorum Est”: “a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience” (203).\(^5\)

\(^5\) It’s important to distinguish between eye-witnessing and flesh-witnessing in relation to combat gnosis. Combat gnosis and flesh-witnessing don’t need to be exactly the same thing to be functionally synonymous, or for them both to be distinct from "eye-witnessing" as Harari discusses it: the point of both "flesh-witnessing" and "combat gnosis" is that one has an experience of war, including terror and pity and so on. It's not enough to just see it at a distance (eye-witnessing). If soldier x sees soldier y killed from a bunker three miles away, where he is in no danger himself, then no, soldier x doesn't possess "combat gnosis." Eye-witnessing may part of combat gnosis but cannot be sufficient, since combat gnosis is about embodied,
The evolution of the idea of war-as-revelation, “flesh-witnessing,” or combat gnosis can be traced in a series of illustrative moments from the Napoleonic wars to the present day. In all of the following examples, what I’ll be tracing is not only the idea of war-as-revelation itself, but also the various ways in which the revelatory authority of war experience is seen as being in conflict with other kinds of moral authority, as we saw with Owen’s “Dulce.” Consider the following well-known passage from Clausewitz’s 1832 treatise On War:

If one has never personally experienced war, one cannot understand in what the difficulties constantly mentioned really consist, nor why a commander should need any brilliance or exceptional ability. Everything looks simple; the knowledge required does not look remarkable, the strategic options are so obvious that by comparison the simplest problem of higher mathematics has an impressive scientific dignity. Once war has actually been seen the difficulties become clear; but it is still extremely hard to describe the unseen, all-pervading element that brings about this change of perspective (66).

For Clausewitz, the difference between eye-witnessing and flesh-witnessing is blurred—the two kinds of witness work against each other in subtle tension. Clausewitz’s language shifts back and forth between felt experience and visible evidence, as he begins with the question of personal experience, but then recasts that experience in terms of the purely visual: “Once war has actually been seen the difficulties become clear.” Yet Clausewitz felt experience, not merely visual experience. "Combat gnosis," like "flesh-witnessing," is all about physical proximity to death.
complicates the clarity of eyewitnessing with a qualification insisting on the “unseen, all-pervading element that brings about this change,” suggesting that in order to understand war, it’s not enough to just see it. In any case, the authority being attacked here (beyond seeing and feeling), is the authority of the scholar of war, the so-called “armchair general,” to whom “everything looks simple.”

Thirty-odd years later, in *War and Peace* (1869), Tolstoy offers perhaps the most iconic moment of war-as-revelation in Western literature. Tolstoy builds on Clausewitz’s distinction between the experienced and the inexperienced by forcing apart the poles of experience. It’s not enough to be *in* a war: the kind of experience one can have in war will depend on the kind of person one already is. In *War and Peace*, the moral authorities that come into conflict are within the cohort of aristocratic warriors, and the conflict falls out between a line officer and a field officer, in externalities, at least. In essence, the conflict is between different kinds of sensibility.

In Book I of Tolstoy’s novel, Prince Andrei Bolkonsky is wounded leading a charge in the Battle of Austerlitz, which the Russians would lose to Napoleon’s army. As dusk falls, the French emperor tours the battlefield, looking over the dead and wounded. Andrei is found lying in his own blood, barely conscious, barely alive, staring at the sky and (in Louis and Aylmer Maude’s translation) “unconsciously uttering a gentle, piteous, and childlike moan” (309). Prince Andrei hears Napoleon and his aides approach, and recognizes himself as the object of Napoleon’s sudden utterance: “*Voilà une belle mort!*” (“That’s a fine death!”). Until this moment, Andrei has admired Napoleon from afar as a great general, a great man, and a military genius. He has considered him his hero. “[B]ut at that moment,” writes Tolstoy, “Napoleon seemed to him such a small insignificant
creature compared with what was passing now between himself and that lofty infinite sky with the clouds flying over it” (310). We see, in the pairing of Andrei’s selfhood with the “infinite sky,” an exact figuration of the epistemological relationship that war-as-revelation offers between subjectivity and totality (which is in effect the relationship of a Kantian observer to the sublime). Andrei moans; Napoleon realizes he’s alive and calls for help.

Later, when Napoleon visits the field hospital where wounded Russian officers are being treated, the two encounter each other again. Napoleon and the Russians engage in a set of verbal exchanges that take place according to a ritualistic structure. Napoleon is expected to compliment the men on their bravery, and the wounded men are expected to assert their fighting spirit. This collective performance affirms that the opposed fighters are joined as men of courage and honor: it creates a sense of solidarity and security between the victors and the vanquished—they are all aristocrats and warriors, joined in a common caste if not in common cause. Prince Andrei refuses or is unable to participate in this ritual of mutual recognition, and his refusal is founded in the moral authority his traumatic revelation has provided him with.

Napoleon first demands to see the senior officer, Prince Repnin, then compliments Repnin on his regiment’s performance. Repnin responds formally, returning the gesture of compliment. Then Napoleon looks at the young man beside Repnin, an officer named Sukhtelen, smiles, and observes: “Il est venu bien jeune se frotter à nous” (“He’s very young to meddle with us”) (311). The youth responds with a conventional assertion of bravery that is belied by his wounded body: “ ‘Youth is no hindrance to courage,’ murmured Sukhtelen in a failing voice.” Napoleon admires the discipline in the
ritual structure of the riposte, paying no attention to the physical suffering evinced in the young man’s broken voice. Then Napoleon turns to Prince Andrei.

It is important to note how speech works in the exchange that follows. On the battlefield, Napoleon utters falsehoods (“That’s a fine death!”), which are to Prince Andrei no more meaningful than “the buzzing of a fly,” while Andrei speaks the pure sounds of being, performing a pathos that moves even their own performer: “He feebly moved his leg, and uttered a weak, sickly groan which aroused his own pity” (310). In this second scene, however, when Prince Andrei is brought out to complete the show of the prisoners, the manifest artifice of the military ritual forced on the wounded Russian officers by Napoleon leaves Andrei speechless. The conflict of moral authority at work here, staged in a moment of performative utterance where Andrei must respond to his Napoleon’s question, “How do you feel, mon brave?”, is inscribed at the level of language. There are no true words Andrei can use in this purely conventional situation:

So insignificant at that moment seemed to him all the interests that engrossed Napoleon, so mean did his hero himself with his paltry vanity and joy in victory appear, compared with the lofty, equitable, and kindly sky which he had seen and understood, that he could not answer him.

Everything seemed so futile and insignificant in comparison with the stern and solemn train of thought that weakness from loss of blood, suffering, and the nearness of death, aroused in him. Looking into Napoleon’s eyes Prince Andrei thought of the insignificance of greatness, the unimportance of life which no one
could understand, and the still greater unimportance of death, the meaning of which no one alive could understand or explain (312).

This epiphany, as readers of the novel well know, powerfully affects the course of Prince Andrei’s life, as it leads him to his rural retreat, and shapes his development, in the sense of his moral education or bildung. Prince Andrei’s battlefield wounding is staged as a moment of maturation, and, more important, of illumination. His trauma gives him access to a moral authority that overturns his old values and allows him to judge his former teachers, his former heroes, even the Emperor Napoleon. Prince Andrei can see Napoleon’s insignificance and vanity now, because of the physical revelation of his wounding.

The emphasis on physicality and embodiment accorded by representations of the revelatory truth of war later opens into a metaphysical bias against representation as such. In Hemingway’s novel of World War I, A Farewell to Arms, Lieutenant Frederic Henry delivers a famous denunciation of martial ideals and abstract language, founded in the moral authority of his earlier wounding, that makes this point explicit. Where Tolstoy staged the conflict of moral authority between a wounded, illuminated Prince Andrei and a vainglorious Napoleon, Hemingway stages the conflict of moral authority between two kinds of language: between what Lieutenant Henry calls the concrete and the abstract, but what are better understood as vocabularies of physical metonymy and social valuation.

The scene is set in a conversation between Lieutenant Henry and the Italian ambulance driver Gino, in an area of the front that had been taken back from the Austrians. Gino makes a comment about how the summer fighting “cannot have been

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates (185).

With Clausewitz, Tolstoy, and Owen, we can see how combat gnosis gives the soldier moral authority and access to truth that civilians (and Napoleon, presumably because he lacks interiority) do not have. The transcendental knowledge that combat provides, through the traumatic wound or encounter with death, is the criterion for determining who can speak the truth. For Hemingway’s Lieutenant Henry, the soldier’s truth becomes a formal truth as well: it determines not only who can speak, but also what
words they can use. Those words must be concrete, sensory, material, metonymic: place-names, regimental numbers, and dates must stand in for the battles that were fought there. Any social valuation at all, any judgment of character or worth, Hemingway implies is unspeakably offensive (“There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity”). War and combat can only be properly addressed by invoking the temporal and geographic markers by which those who were present will remember them.  

For Tim O’Brien, war can’t even be talked about. Upping the literary stakes, O’Brien pushes beyond Hemingway’s repudiation of idealism and abstraction to a repudiation of civility and truth as such. Whereas Hemingway still allows metonymic invocation to carry the dignity of battlefield presence, O’Brien refuses to allow any connection at all between social norms and combat. Where Hemingway insists on the concrete, O’Brien avows the obscene. “A true war story,” he writes in “How to Tell a True War Story,” from The Things They Carried, “is never moral” (68).

It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then

6 John Limon sees a conflict between metonymy and metaphor at the heart of Hemingway’s novel (and central to Hemingway’s writing about war generally): “The opposition of hyper-metonymic style and super-metaphoric war means that there can hardly be a truce between them; there turns out to be no separate narratological peace. The relation of war activities to peace activities must, there, itself be a warfare of metaphor and metonymy” (98).

7 Consider how this language filters into non-fiction accounts of war, as in Chris Hedges’s War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning: “We are humiliated in combat. The lofty words that inspire people to war—duty, honor, glory—swiftly become repugnant and hollow. They are replaced by the hard, specific images of war, by the prosaic names of villages and roads. The abstract rhetoric of patriotism is obliterated, exposed as the empty handmaiden of myth. Fear brings us all back down to earth” (40).
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 (68–69).

As with Owen’s poem, O’Brien’s story takes us in, voyeuristically, to watch a fellow soldier die, as evidence against “a very old and terrible lie.” *The Things They Carried* is presented as a series of reminiscences, partly fictionalized, partly “true,” from O’Brien’s time as an infantryman in Vietnam. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” he uses the dramatic moment of his comrade’s sudden death and his own vision of combat gnosis to explore the question of truth and representation in war literature.

On patrol in the jungle, two infantrymen, Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon, are playing catch with a smoke grenade. Curt Lemon steps on a booby-trapped artillery round, and it blows him up, into the sun, around and out, all over the trees. Like Owen, O’Brien revisits his vision of death again and again. Where Owen’s choking soldier comes back first as a dream, then as the reader’s dream (“If in some smothering dreams you too could pace”), O’Brien’s exploding Curt Lemon comes back and back and back in a fictional model of traumatic repetition.8

O’Brien’s story is structured through four main narrative engines. First, there is the simple story of Curt Lemon’s sudden death. Second, there is the frame that opens the story, which is Rat Kiley, his buddy, writing a letter to Curt Lemon’s sister about Lemon’s death. Third, taking up a significant portion of the middle of the story, is Mitchell Sanders’ tale of a listening post’s spooky encounter with “the mountains,” a sort

8 Like Snowden in *Catch-22*, a point to which we will return.
of ghost story reminiscent of Ambrose Bierce’s Civil War tales. Finally, connecting and commenting on these stories, is the narrator’s loose, tricky riffing on “How to Tell a True War Story.”

What O’Brien ultimately works toward, in this story and throughout *The Things They Carried*, is the assertion of an encounter with truth that transcends communicability, not only for the character, but also for the writer. The knowledge Tim O’Brien claims to have experienced in Vietnam can’t be understood or even discussed, but only felt:

For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can’t tell where you are, or why you’re there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity. In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true (78).

In effect, for O’Brien, a true war story is about the failure of language to communicate experience at all, which is essentially an assertion that the soldier’s truth is a mystic truth. Language melts into pure metaphor; the connections between referents and signs are lost. Illumination takes the form of a negative theology, apophatically denying that the
experience can be described, thereby denying both the truth of prior descriptions and the possibility that the experience can be understood through cultural expression at all.  

Confronting O’Brien’s total negation, Kevin Powers’s 2012 Iraq war novel *The Yellow Birds* flips the script by representing war trauma as the font of the Word: instead of negating the connection between language and reality, the experience of war offers transcendental communion with the realm of pure language. Through flashbacks, *The Yellow Birds* tells of Privates John Bartle and Daniel Murphy, a wartime George and Lennie who deploy to Iraq under the tyrannical rule of one Sergeant Sterling. While downrange, Murphy loses his mind and goes AWOL. Eventually Bartle and Sterling find his mutilated corpse. In the novel’s present, Bartle has returned to the US, struggles with PTSD, and is wrongly imprisoned by the military’s Criminal Investigation Division for his alleged involvement in an atrocity committed by Sergeant Sterling, who has in the meantime committed suicide. What redeems Bartle in the end is the novel itself, his story, his voice: the novel dramatizes the transformation of Bartle’s trauma into Powers’s poetry.

Powers’s literary ambitions are signaled in the novel’s first lines, a lyrical meditation on war that builds metaphor upon metaphor into a surreal montage of sensation beyond meaning, and extend from its tortuously elaborate sentences through its melodramatic plot to its hyper-conscious symbolism of hyacinths. Private Bartle’s narration is a perpetual cry of pain, a constant ache of swollen language that breaks into traumatic revelation at the moment he commits violence:

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9 On the question of apophasis, Harari notes “Medieval arguments about God between mystics and learned theologians bear a close resemblance to modern arguments about war between common soldiers and civilian experts,” “Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-Witnesses of War” (219).
I moved to the edge of the bridge and began firing at anything moving. I saw one man fall in a heap near the bank of the river among the bulrushes and green fields on its edges. In that moment, I disowned the waters of my youth. My memories of them became a useless luxury, their names as foreign as any that could be found in Nineveh: the Tigris or the Chesapeake, the James or the Shatt al Arab farther to the south, all belonged to someone else, and perhaps had never really been my own. I was an intruder, at best a visitor, and would be even in my home, in my misremembered history, until the glow of phosphorescence in the Chesapeake I had longed to swim inside again someday became a taunt against my insignificance, a cruel trick of light that had always made me think of stars. No more. I gave up longing, because I was sure that anything seen at such a scale would reveal the universe as cast aside and drowned, and if I ever floated there again, out where the level of the water reached my neck, and my feet lost contact with its muddy bottom, I might realize that to understand the world, one’s place in it, is to be always at the risk of drowning.

Noctiluca, I thought, Ceratium, as the tracers began to show themselves in the sifted twilight… (125).

Powers ascends from description to meditation, from simple declarations to disordered hyperbaton, from the concrete names of rivers now turned foreign to the abstract stymying of pluperfect desires (“until the glow of phosphorescence in the Chesapeake I had longed to swim inside again someday became a taunt against my insignificance”), and finally to esoteric Latin terms for bioluminescent plankton, deployed in a telling
inversion of Owen’s rhetorical move ending “Dulce et Decorum Est.” Where Owen marshals sense data to controvert Latinate literary authority, Powers takes flight from materiality into literariness. Where Owen inscribes a vision, Powers poetizes: “Noctiluca, I thought, Ceratium…”

For Powers, the conventional tropes of war lit are not a means of conveying truth, but the truth of war itself. The transformation of experience into literature is here characterized as a dissociation from one’s own embodied memory (“I disowned the water of my youth”), a process of evacuation in which concrete facts, Hemingway’s “names of rivers,” become not only interchangeable but also alienated, pure signs operating in a closed economy of literary signification in which Powers (or Bartle) is an interloper (they “all belonged to someone else, and perhaps had never really been my own”)—an economy we might read as the system of MFA programs and New York publishing circles that shaped The Yellow Birds and its reception. Powers’s climactic shift from experience to literariness rather than the other way around suggests that the conventions of traumatic revelation have become purely formal expectations of an audience more interested in war as myth than in war as reality.

Within the ideology of combat gnosis or flesh-witnessing, as we’ve been tracing it from Owen’s poem, through Clausewitz’s ambivalences, Tolstoy’s dramatic encounters between Prince Andrei and Napoleon, Hemingway’s hard-bitten, metonymic materialism, O’Brien’s obscenity, and Powers’s all-too-literary reversion, the fundamental truth of human existence, the meat, blood, and death of being, is represented as a truth surpassing language. Let’s return then to Owen’s moment of truth, his revelation with its strange dreamscapes, and consider on what that truth is predicated. First, there is Owen’s
authority as a combatant. Second, there is the “content” of the poem, the
phenomenological texture of the narrator’s encounter with death. Yet neither of these
sources of authority are immediately present, as the ideology of combat gnosticism (and
“realism,” as well) would have us suppose. In fact, the experience in question, Owen’s
“truth” contravening the “old Lie,” is mediated, constructed through an intricately shaped
literary artifact: a poem. Owen’s truth, “Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile,
iccurable sores on innocent tongues,” which claims a higher authority than a dubious
Latin tag, itself takes form as something merely literary.

“Dulce et Decorum Est” began, in first draft, as a poem in 32 lines, in two
unevenly broken stanzas, one of eighteen lines and one of sixteen, and while much of the
rhyme and sense was in place with this draft, key revisions do important formal work.10
In the final version, we have a beautifully subtle manipulation that, like Owen’s much-
discussed pararhyme, deliberately stymies readers’ expectations through the use of form.
Taken as a whole, the poem looks like a broken double sonnet, and at 28 lines would be
just the right length. The shape of the first two stanzas reinforce that perception,
presenting a traditional octave and sestet in iambic pentameter, with an expected volta, or
turn, in line nine, in a traditional Shakespearean rhyme scheme—until, that is, the final
two lines of the second stanza, which should offer a closing couplet. What they do
instead is start a new rhyme, which leaps the stanza break to the third stanza, the poem’s

10 My reading of Owen’s poem is indebted to James Campbell’s deconstructionist critique (209-214);
Dominick Hibberd’s psychobiographical reading in Owen the Poet (114–116); and Meredith Martin’s
exegesis of Owen’s “formal reckoning,” in The Rise and Fall of Meter (171–176). While I follow Martin’s
close formal analysis, I nevertheless must differ on the question of interpretive emphasis. Martin reads
Owen’s formal operations as symptomatic of psychological trauma, and argues that the poem “illustrates in
its breaking of the Latin meter in the final line how neither English nor classical meter can withstand the
threats of modern forms of war” (174–175). In fact, these are literary operations occurring within a literary
tradition. Owen’s inspired manipulations of meter show how traditional techniques are bent to rhetorical
purpose. Where Martin reads Owen’s metrical play as “empowering” and even therapeutic, I cannot help
but see it as agonistic: there is an argument being made in the meter (176, et passim).
real pivot, where we shift from “reality” to “dream” and from experience to moral judgment. What these four lines enact is first the fracturing of expected poetic form, through the failure of the sonnet stanzas to end in a proper couplet, then its ghostly transcendence, its echoing repetition in the after-image of sensation, through the displaced freestanding couplet that completes the rhyme ending the previous sonnet. This is a subtle choice, and a purely literary one: it deliberately plays on the visual expectation set up in poetry readers by breaking what had been one long stanza into three stanzas of unequal length, turning what are aurally merely rhymed quatrains into the shaping and shattering of a sonnet.

Owen’s moves in these first three stanzas reverberate through the rest of the poem, which repeats the sonnet shape of the first two stanzas but with significant differences. The lameness, crippling, innocence, and stasis are thematically and imagistically repeated, as is the volta: the first eight lines of the last stanza present the dream vision, and the ninth line shifts us into summary judgment. But this stanza is only twelve lines long, ending in a singular trimeter line, breaking the pentameter flow, and where the closing couplet would speak resonates silence. Further, whereas the first “sonnet” gives us a conventional shape, this later stanza continues through the volta without breaking into a new stanza. On the page, the closing stanza of the poem is clearly presented as a broken version of the first.  

Owen’s care in the construction of his poem can be seen at the most fine-grained level as well as in the poem’s overall structure. We might consider, by way of example, the first few lines. Owen opens with a freestanding adjectival clause, “Bent double,”

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11 As Hibberd describes it, the “second half of the poem bears no resemblance to a sonnet and is held together only by its rhymes. The organization and clarity of the first half is replaced by confused, choking syntax and a vocabulary of sickness and disgust, matching the nightmare which is in progress” (115).
modified by a simile drawing a relationship between the as-yet-unidentified subject and “old beggars.” In the second line, we have to go through two more descriptive clauses, “knock-kneed,” “coughing like hags,” almost but not exactly paralleling the structure of the first line, before we get to the action: “we cursed through sludge.” Already in these first two lines, we can see the dynamic of repetition-as-deformation that will work through the poem. This is only the first half of the sentence, which continues over the next two lines in an unbroken relative clause. The meter works in tandem with the syntax: the first two lines’ tense spondees and inversions open in the second two to a regular iambic pentameter, which takes us back from the front. 12 The rest of the first stanza continues to formally enact, both syntactically and metrically, the lame, halting pace of the retreat being described: short, fragmentary sentences and clauses plod one after the other, bunching on spondees and limping through inversions, neither opening nor advancing the scene but rather intensifying the description of exhaustion to the point of hyperbole. At first bent, tired, and cursing, the men are now blind, lame, and deaf as well.

Consider also the sonic structure, especially through the center of the poem: the consonance in “dim” and “dream,”—“in all my dreams,” “in some smothering dreams”; the repetition of “green” in lines thirteen and fourteen, “green light,” “green sea”; the echo of the grammatical progressive from “coughing” and “haunting” in the first stanza, through “fumbling” and “stumbling” in lines nine and eleven, “flound’ring” in line ten, “drowning” in fourteen, then “guttering, choking, drowning” in sixteen, and “writhing,” “hanging,” and “gargling” in the final stanza; and of course the bald repetition of the

12 “Likewise, the soldier’s movements are calm and imperceptibly shuffling to a failed attempt at iambic pentameter, as if the spondaic opening of ‘Bént double’ and ‘Knóck knéed’ of lines 1 and 2 show the extra step each man must take. When the lines settle into five stresses, in lines 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8, the iambics are consistently irregular, alliterations causing frequent trochaic and spondaic substitutions” (Martin, 173).
rhyme-word “drowning” in lines fourteen and sixteen; all of which work to enact a sense of motion in stasis, something like that dreamy paralysis where you’re running but can’t move, something like the sense evoked in the central couplet of impotently watching someone die over and over again in an infinite loop: “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.”

And what about that Latin tag, which, as James Campbell notes, Owen wrings “for all the irony it can muster” (210)? Owen stakes everything on it, positioning the tag as the final ironic summation of the best that civilian authority can present. Here I have blood, death, gas attacks, obscenity, nightmares, and horror, Owen asserts, and the best you can offer are musty Latin platitudes. The conflict of authority being staged by Owen is as clear as the confrontation between Prince Andrei and Napoleon. Owen is claiming access to unassailable truth, made available through sensation and experience, that gives him an authority more powerful than those who mouth lying Horatian mottoes. Owen stages a conflict of literary authority between himself and Horace, between himself and the sonnet, between himself and Jessie Pope, in which the only person who is allowed access to the truth is the one who’s been to the war, seen it, heard it, and felt it to the point where the experience is inscribed in his very soul.

On second thought, though, Owen might have shown more care in picking his targets. It’s one thing to imply “a certain poetess” doesn’t know what she’s talking about when she talks about war, but it’s quite another to imply the same about someone who’d

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13 Also, Martin notes, “In each line in the first octave, the sounds double on either side of a real or imaginary caesura (bent/beggars, coughed/cursed, til/turned, toward/trudge, men/many, blood/blind, drunk/deaf)” (174).
14 As Campbell notes, “In order for the ethics of the trench lyric to work, the aesthetics must remain intact. If we are to take the trench lyric seriously, it must emanate from a passive sufferer who has cast off his passivity long enough to accuse. Any ironic tension resulting from the trace of this abandoned passivity is not the kind of irony in which trench lyric criticism has traditionally been interested” (212–213).
been a *tribunus militum*, a Roman military officer. While Jessie Pope had never known the terror of combat firsthand, Horace had.

What’s really going on in the poem from which Owen pulls his tag, the “old lie” written by that old campaigner Horatius Flaccus, who fought for Brutus in the Roman civil wars following the assassination of Julius Caesar? Having fought on the losing side, Horace was lucky to have survived and even luckier to have later found a place in Augustus’ court. The ode in question was probably written about twenty years after the Battle of Philippi in which Horace fought. Should we assume, with Owen, that Horace’s poem is an “old lie”? Or is it maybe something more complicated? Perhaps the poem is not even saying what Owen means the tag to say. Perhaps in some ways, Horace stands closer to Owen than he would admit; perhaps in others, Horace remains more radically different than Owen might have supposed.

Horace’s Ode III.2 is a complex meditation on masculine virtue, the difference between deeds and words, and the problems of fate and fame. In contrast to what Owen forces the tag to perform, what Horace actually has to say is more nuanced. Owen puts Horace’s line in the mouths of jingoists and makes it a propagandistic affirmation of ignorant patriotic fervor. Against the horrific revelation of death, the platitudes of archaic literary language are nothing more than empty deceit. Exterior form is trumped by interior revelation. For Horace, however, “the boy must be toughened by hard campaigning.” War, the materiality of human life, and the suddenness of death are not transcendental revelations, as they are for Prince Andrei, Lieutenant Henry, O’Brien, and Owen, but facts to which young men must become accustomed. What for these modern writers is a question of obscenity and deceit is for Horace a question of determining real
worth in the face of indifferent fortune and fickle public opinion. The brutal truth of war, which for modern writers comes as an epiphany, is for Horace a challenge to be confronted. Death is inevitable, and virtue shows in action, not sensibility; for Horace, a man’s character is not in the quality of his feelings, but in his deeds. It is sweet and honorable to die for one’s country because that action shows discipline, courage, dignity, and faith in a higher human ideal, in spite of death. In spite of the vanity and venality of public opinion. In spite of the materiality, contingency, and finitude of existence.

What we’re actually dealing with in Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” is not a contrast between true and false, as Owen would have us think, but a contest between literary authorities, which is to say moral authorities. What we see in comparing Horace and Owen are two different moral codes: one a stoic, martial ethos that sees truth as a function of action and death as a test of one’s character; the other a humanist, post-Christian ethos that sees truth as a function of feeling and death as a moment of spiritual transcendence. For Horace, the body reveals the soul through action. For Owen, the body testifies the soul through sensation.

Yet despite their differences, both poets recognize a distinction between the few who know the truth of war and the rest, the “vulgar throng.” As well, questions of gnosis, mysticism, and silence that would not be alien to Owen’s poetry are provocatively raised by Horace in the final two stanzas of Ode III.2. Horace first advocates hard training, then shows its value in the face of death and its enduring truth in contrast to changeable public acclaim, and then brings up the term “faithful silence,” fideli silentio, and alludes to the secret rites of mystery cults. It’s a strange turn: as Virginia Jameson notes, “The two

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15 As R.G.M. Nisbet and Niall Rudd soberly note, while “dulce has offended modern sentiment…. It has to be recognized that the ethos of most societies, including our own, has often been different from the individualism that now prevails in the West” (27).
stanzas (seven and eight) devoted to \textit{fidele silentium}, coming as they do immediately after the description in stanza six of the climactic ascent of \textit{virtus} toward heaven, constitute an anticlimax verging on a \textit{non sequitur}” (219). West, however, assures us that “It is a common characteristic of the \textit{gnome} in Greek poetry [that Horace takes as his model], particularly in Pindar, to be sudden, portentous, and oracular…. The vatic tone of this ending hits exactly that mark” (29). What Horace is actually doing here is a much-discussed question with a long history, well beyond my scope, but it might be helpful to note who is being silenced, by what, and why.\footnote{Readers interested in the interpretive history of \textit{Ode} III.2 are encouraged to begin with Lowell Edmunds, “The Reception of Horace’s Odes,” in \textit{A Companion to Horace}; R.G.M. Nesbit and Niall Rudd, \textit{Commentary on Horace}, Odes, Book III; Hans Peter Syndikus, “The Roman Odes,” also in \textit{A Companion to Horace}; and David West, \textit{Horace Odes III}.}

Owen’s revelation, according to the logic of his poem, gives him the authority not only to speak, but also to dismiss pro-war advocates like Jessie Pope. For Clausewitz, recall, only experience offers access to the “unseen, all-pervading element” that defines true knowledge of war. As for Prince Andrei, his revelation differs from Owen’s in that it must remain interior, spoken only through the space of consciousness offered by the novel, because the public arena staged by Napoleon for the expression of Andrei’s feelings is artificial, ritualistic, and false: the conflict is between interiority and sociality. With Hemingway, combat gnosis teaches that the experience cannot be discussed as such at all, but only represented metonymically through place names; interpretation is silenced in favor of the echo of presence. O’Brien’s revelation is presented through a combination of all these, and more: its truth gives him the authority to dismiss and judge others, like the “sisters who don’t write back” and those “who don’t listen,” but its revelation is so intense, it exceeds O’Brien’s capacity to describe it, in effect silencing the writer himself.
through the obsessive noise of post-traumatic repetition compulsion. The truth speaks itself as repetition through O’Brien’s tortured psyche. For Powers, finally, experience falls away, the truth of the body silenced by the transcendental shift to pure language.

Horace, in contrast, presents silence as a choice: the virtuous act of the faithful initiate. For Horace, silence is a way of keeping faith within a community of knowers. Betraying that knowledge mixes the pure and the impure, inevitably calling down punishment. Horace explicitly reveals a phenomenon our more modern authors obscure even as they re-enact it: the sanctification of violence.

The curious move in Horace’s Ode III.2 from hard campaigning to the Mysteries of Ceres draws an explicit analogy between the physical discipline needed to act with dignity amidst the slaughter of war and the mental discipline needed to maintain group cohesion among initiates. Horace’s poem presents truth on two levels: as it is enacted in deeds, and as it is shared among the elect. His ethos is ascetic, martial, and aristocratic, whereas the myth of the trauma hero is aesthetic, civil, and democratic. It would be a mistake to assume this difference in ethos—in the construction of truth-value—is a question of cultural progress, and that we have advanced from Horace’s more primitive

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17 Pamela R. Bleisch argues that lines 21–32 address the problem of Octavian’s apotheosis: through discretion and allusion to Callimachus and Simonides, Horace maneuvers delicately between encomium and piety, between praise and independence. “As the Augustan poets negotiate a new problem: ‘Who is Octavian? What do we call him? How do we think about him?’ they naturally and logically turn to the work of Hellenistic poets, who faced similar problems: the problem of a very new political order masquerading as one steeped in tradition, the problem of praising while maintaining personal integrity” (38).

18 Gregson Davis argues that the move from martial virtue to faithful silence isn’t a puzzle at all, but rather can be understood as a coherent poetic argument within the encomiastic tradition. The comparison between the toughened boy and the young coward is reprised in the comparison between the faithful initiate and the wicked betrayer of secrets. “Diametrically opposed to the integer is the type of the incestus or sceleratus, whom Horace would strenuously urge us not to place, so to speak, in the same boat. This negative example recalls an earlier foil figure in the poem, that of the vir fugax who was contrasted with the soldier embodying arete. The vehicle of interconnection between the two passages is the shared imagery of pursuit and flight…. Thus the earlier antithesis between the ideal puer (laudandus) and the vir fugax finds its ultimate counterpart in the disparity between the integer (laudator) and the sceleratus. From this point of view the poem can be seen as a coherent argument from beginning to end” (26).
barbarisms to a more sophisticated and humane understanding. In fact, the experience of war, as with any experience, is only understandable in the terms of the moral order through which it is apprehended. We can only comprehend an experience in the cultural forms which give it shape.

19 Syndikus is clear on this: “It has been argued that Odes 3:2 focuses primarily on military valor; but this interpretation is too reductionist and has the effect of attenuating the poem’s thematic unity. What the poet praises is, rather, the old Roman virtues in their interrelated aspects, in which plain living, courage, moral rectitude, and respect for the will of the gods inform a person’s entire life” (196).
Chapter 2. Traumatic Revelation

It is interesting how much more ‘psychological’ the modern soldier sounds than his predecessors. A victim identity, particularly if medically certificated, has taken a special place in contemporary society, inevitably shaping what a soldier thinks has happened to him.


War has never been a uniform experience. In the *Iliad*, we see that Achilles’s Trojan War is different from Hector’s, which is different from Hecuba’s, which is different from Agamemnon’s, which is different from Priam’s. The primitive, tribal war narrated by Homer differs from the Roman civil war fought by Horace, which differs from the medieval raids of the Hundred Years’ war, which differ from the colonial wars fought by Great Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which differ from the massive tank battles sprawling over the Ukrainian plains in World War II. The experience of the soldier differs from that of the indigenous farmer or scrabbling city-dweller whose land he conquers, which differs from that of the camp follower surviving on the war economy’s margins, which differs from that of the politician who makes their career from war, which differs from that of the civilian at home in whose name the war is fought. Even the experiences of two soldiers fighting alongside each other can differ widely. As Nathaniel Fick writes in his memoir of the 2003 invasion of Iraq:
Frequently, I found that my memory of a firefight was just that—mine. Afterward, five Marines told five different stories. I remembered turning left off the dirt road onto a paved street running west through Al Gharraf. I saw fire coming from buildings to the right and remembered a drag race of four or five kilometers out to the highway. That was my memory, my accepted truth of what had happened.

But the map showed the distance was only about fifteen hundred meters, less than half of what I’d estimated. Some in the platoon remembered armed men standing to our left as we made the turn; I never saw them. The domed mosque was burned into my memory, but only Colbert and Wright could remember seeing it as I described it. Person was adamant that we had driven across a bridge during our sprint to the highway. Not one other person in the platoon remembered a bridge, but there it was on the map (219).

War, like marriage and kinship, is a fundamental human activity with complex constitutive elements that take on a rich variety of forms and cultural expressions throughout human history. Despite the variety and complexity of the forms and expressions of these experiences, however, the predominant cultural narrative of the experience of war in American culture today is the story of trauma. PTSD is seen as the

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20 Wherever humans have appeared, so has mass, socially organized homicide. See Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization*, for an account of the archaeological evidence for primitive warfare and a thorough dismantling of the false notion that pre-historic or pre-modern humans were any less violent than humans are today. “[C]ross-cultural research on warfare has established that although some societies… did not engage in war or did so extremely rarely, the overwhelming majority of known societies (90 to 95 percent) have been involved in this activity” (27–28).
characteristic human response to the war experience, and the primary social roles the veteran soldier is asked to play are those of victim and witness.

Why do we remember and talk about the complex, difficult, variegated experiences of war, and many other complex, difficult experiences, as *traumas*? What *is* trauma, anyway?

The word’s Greek etymology tells us trauma is “a wound,” and until the late nineteenth century this is precisely what it meant: a physical injury to the body. Today, though, we speak of trauma in a much broader sense, as a psychological or cultural effect, mental-emotional suffering attributable to an external cause. It is generally accepted as being a psychological disturbance that overwhelms an individual’s ability to cope. One classic definition by Freud explains trauma as nothing but this psychological shock from being overwhelmed:

> Indeed, the term ‘traumatic’ has no other sense than an economic one. We apply it to an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way, and this must result in a permanent disturbance of the manner in which the energy operates (*Introductory Lectures* 275).

The clinical definition for a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder is at once specific and vague: according to the *DSM-V*, PTSD requires exposure “to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence,” but that exposure can take place through direct experience of the “traumatic event(s),” witnessing it happen to others, learning that it
happened to a close friend or family member, or “experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s)” (271). The final criterion, repeated exposure to details of traumatic events, “does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.” The clinical importance of attaching the final criterion to the context of viewing is obvious, in that it allows people who have to work with documents of trauma to claim such exposure as a work-related disorder, but we should note how arbitrarily and summarily this note sidesteps difficult questions about how “exposure” works, and whether or not trauma is “contagious.” If a paid employee working with electronic media documenting violence can be traumatized by that “exposure,” on what basis can we neglect the repeated traumatic exposure of teenage video-game players to the graphic violence of first-person shooters, or the exposure of millions of moviegoers to the “aversive details” of Hollywood’s blockbuster kill-fests? Even more troubling is the question of media: if pictures and movies can traumatize, what about text? Audio recordings? The *DSM-V* is silent on these questions.

“Trauma” in common usage has something of this ambiguous character, but rather more generally: it usually means something to do with intense emotions and often injury or death, though not necessarily. Moving to a new city or being yelled at by your boss can be “traumatic,” just as a friend committing suicide can be “traumatic.” Soldiers are traumatized not only by the violence they suffer but also by the violence they cause. Social theorists write papers about the collective trauma of the Holocaust and the

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21 Anyone watching the key scene of Werner Herzog’s documentary *Grizzly Man* (2005), where we observe Herzog listening to the audio recording of Timothy Treadwell being mauled and eaten by a bear, will probably suspect that repeated listening to such a recording ought to fit within the *DSM*’s criteria.
collective trauma of watching 9/11 on television.\textsuperscript{22} We joke that we’re “totally traumatized” by embarrassing and awkward social mishaps. Trauma is used vaguely as to the level and kind of suffering it describes, and it is rarely ever clear whether trauma is the psychological wound itself, the symptomatic aftereffects of the wound, or the event the does the wounding. Further, not only is trauma now, in the words of Derek Summerfield, conflated with everyday distress, but it is also used by various theorists as a synonym for history, evil, and death (“The invention of post-traumatic stress disorder” 97). According to Cathy Caruth, trauma “is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival” (“Traumatic Departures” 29). Applied equally to ostensibly scientific diagnostic criteria that could include events as disparate as the Holocaust, watching catastrophic events on TV, prolonged, repeated childhood sexual abuse, and somewhat distressing psychological disturbances, the word trauma seems to offer less a coherence of meaning than a convergence of multiple meanings, a fat word in the place of a very thin question mark. It is certainly some kind of “enigma,” though whether it is an “enigma of survival” remains to be seen. Freud, in his murky yet provocative speculation on trauma and the death drive in \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle} (1920), noted: “No complete explanation has yet been reached either of war neuroses or of the traumatic neuroses of peace. In the case of war neuroses, the fact that the same symptoms sometimes came about without the intervention of any gross mechanical force seemed at once enlightening and bewildering” (10–11). We are hardly any more enlightened or less bewildered today.

\textsuperscript{22} On this point specifically, see Allan Young, “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder of the Virtual Kind: Trauma and Resilience in Post-9/11 America” and two articles by Allen Feldman: “On the Actuarial Gaze: From 9/11 to Abu Ghraib” and “Political Terror and the Technologies of Memory: Excuse, Sacrifice, Commodification, and Actuarial Moralities.”
Neurobiological study hasn’t helped much, especially as it remains focused on repetitive stress response and fear conditioning. Most critically, no studies have been able to show any reliable neurobiological causal connection between traumatic events and PTSD. As the Institute of Medicine’s *Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Military and Veteran Populations* summarizes the problem:

The understanding of the neurobiology of PTSD continues to grow, but there is still much to be learned. A large part of this chapter [on neurobiology] has focused on studies, both in animals and in humans, that show correlations between a stressor or a risk factor and PTSD symptoms. This work is very important; however, causal studies are necessary to firmly implicate any neurobiologic mechanisms for PTSD risk or resilience, and at present, these studies are lacking (91–92).

The central difficulty in discussing trauma is that however else we might define it, the concept is also defined by the concatenation of meanings that we give to it. Trauma is, as C. S. Peirce might have said, a real vague. This is not to say that trauma is just and only whatever people say it is, but to recognize that however incoherent the idea might be, it is a thing in the world that is defined by that very incoherence. Consider Caruth:

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Pierce defines a “vague” proposition as follows: “A proposition is vague when there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or included by the proposition. By intrinsically uncertain we mean not uncertain in consequences of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker’s habits of language were indeterminate; so that one day he would regard the proposition as excluding, another as admitting, those states of things. Yet this must be understood to have reference to what might be deduced from a perfect knowledge of his state of mind; for it is precisely because these questions never did, or did not frequently, present themselves that his habit remained indeterminate” (II. 748).
Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language (Unclaimed Experience 4).

Caruth as much as asserts that we cannot know what trauma means, because the very idea of trauma consists, apodictically if only in part, of something that “remains unknown.” That is to say, the discourse of trauma insists that whatever phenomena are designated as “traumatic” are in some part, by definition, unknowable. Taking this into consideration, we can rephrase our question about trauma thus: What is this incoherence good for? This is the fundamental question of trauma to which we will return.

First, though, where did this incoherence come from?

Most genealogical accounts of trauma as a psychological phenomenon find its origins in the treatment of train-accident victims in the late 1800s. Patients developing neurotic symptoms inconsistent with any physical damage were diagnosed with “railway brain,” “railway spine,” “traumatisme morale,” and later “trauma neurosis.” In this way, and with related industrial accidents, the physical event of the “trauma”—the train wreck, the factory explosion—was seen to have persistent psychological effects in people otherwise uninjured. Some have argued that the idea of trauma has deeper roots, going back to the American Civil War and J.M. DaCosta’s studies on “Soldier’s Heart,” or
more generally to the development of the sciences of memory in the mid-eighteenth century, inaugurated, in Ian Hacking’s view, by Paul Broca and Herman Ebbinghaus.

Whatever its origins, the idea of trauma gained wider currency when Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, and Sigmund Freud, in developing their theories of neurosis and hysteria, expanded it to include psychologically disturbing events of various kinds. Whether it was being forced to sleep next to someone with a hideously ugly face (as was one of Janet’s patients) or being sexually molested, trauma came to be seen as an unassimilated event, a repressed experience that returned in the form of intrusive memories and neurotic symptoms. Freud later changed his interpretation of neurosis from the “seduction hypothesis” developed in accord with Janet’s ideas, wherein symptoms refer back ultimately to a specific event, to the “fantasy hypothesis,” which describes neurosis as a symptomatic fantasy developed in response to repressed desires, arguing that there is not necessarily any external traumatogenic event because sexual development is itself traumatic (Fassin and Rechtman 31–33). Trauma theorists such as Judith Herman typically see Freud’s turn as a betrayal of the truth of trauma and a surrender to patriarchal repression, and the argument about whether the traumatogenic event or the susceptible psyche is more to blame for neurotic disturbance is alive and well today.24

With World War I, trauma moved from the analyst’s couch to the historical stage.

The history of combat stress and shell shock in World War I and the importance of these...
for the development of the idea of trauma has been much discussed and is well known. Fassin and Rechtman, in their genealogy *The Empire of Trauma*, carefully describe that era’s conflicts over psychiatric treatment and diagnosis, most centrally the “weakness” vs. “illness” debate best exemplified in the treatment of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen by W.H. Rivers and Arthur Brock, and trace how after World War I and through World War II, combat-related neurosis came to be seen less as indicative of weak character and more as an illness brought on by environmental stress, even though it still carried a certain stigma. Despite the work of doctors such as Rivers and Freud, soldiers suffering what we now call PTSD continued to be suspected of psychological weakness or financial greed, and, while treated more humanely, were often refused the compensation and treatment that would have legitimated their status as victims.

Fassin and Rechtman point to the revelation of the Holocaust as effecting a change in cultural consciousness about the responsibility of the victim with regard to their circumstances, explaining the developing empathy for veterans of the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s as follows:

Things had changed so much since World War II that the average person could readily empathize with the confusion, fear, anxiety, and trauma of the young conscripts, with no discredit to them. Since the horrific discovery of the genocide of the Jews, the role of trauma in the moral economy of US society had legitimized compassion for such formerly silent sufferings (88–89).
They particularly identify the work of Bruno Bettelheim as central in forging a new paradigm of understanding trauma after World War II, a paradigm later elaborated and developed by Robert Lifton and Mardi Horowitz, among others, that added to the role of the victim the dimensions of being a *survivor* and a *witness*.

Thus it was in this dual role, of survivor and trauma victim, that Holocaust survivors were called on to testify to what happened to human beings in the death camps…. With the survivors of the camps, testimony to trauma—more even than the testimony of the trauma victim—was gradually recognized as offering ultimate truth about the human condition (75–76).

It was this combined social performance of survivor, witness, and victim of trauma that activist veterans of the Vietnam War took up and passed on to more recent generations. Trauma discourse matured in the 1960s and 1970s through the crucial confluence of feminist social agitation (witnessing the trauma of rape and sexual abuse), Holocaust-survivor testimonies (witnessing the trauma of the Holocaust), the efforts of American veterans of the Vietnam War to redeem their status after coming home from a dishonorable conflict (witnessing the trauma of war), and work by clinical psychiatrists to establish objective, “scientific” criteria for their field. In 1980, with the publication of the *DSM-III* and the clinical birth of post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma achieved the categorical social validity it carries today.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider how the specific, clinical, ostensibly scientific diagnostics for post-traumatic stress disorder found in the *DSM-III* were shaped
by political and social forces. “The task force that designed the new diagnostic category in *DSM-III* was comprised of psychiatrists who were particularly sensitive to the problems affecting Vietnam veterans,” write Fassin and Rechtman (88). The group included Robert Jay Lifton, Mardi Horowitz, Chaim Shatan, and Jack Smith, a former marine involved with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. These were not disinterested scientific researchers, but social activists with political agendas. Derek Summerfield, a British psychologist who has been criticizing post-traumatic stress disorder as a “pseudo-condition” almost since its inception, writes:

> The new diagnosis was meant to shift the focus of attention from the details of a soldier’s background and psyche to the fundamentally traumagenic nature of war. This was a powerful and essentially political transformation: Vietnam veterans were to be seen not as perpetrators or offenders but as people traumatized by the roles thrust on them by the US military. Post-traumatic stress disorder legitimized their ‘victimhood,’ gave them moral exculpation, and guaranteed them a disability pension because the diagnosis could be attested to by a doctor: this was a potent combination (“The invention of post-traumatic stress disorder” 95).

Fassin and Rechtman agree with this general analysis, and argue that this transformation allowed Vietnam veterans to take up the role of traumatic witness at the same time as it allowed military authorities to mitigate “some of the horror” in response to widespread American atrocities by “showing men now destroyed by what they had done” (92).
“While the new concept of trauma eschewed any valuation of the individual act,” they write, “it revealed the unbearable character of the event in general,” thus shifting moral responsibility away from particular agents to historical, structural, or institutional forces (95). As they argue elsewhere, “By applying the same psychological classification to the person who suffers violence, the person who commits it, and the person who witnesses it, the concept of trauma profoundly transforms the moral framework of what constitutes humanity” (21).

Since the 1970s, trauma’s functional incoherence has exploded into a vast concern, in academic discourses, international humanitarian aid programs, the mass media, human rights talk, political struggles, popular culture, and apparently our very psyches. Allan Young notes, “The worldwide prevalence of diagnosed cases of PTSD has grown enormously since 1980” (‘Post-traumatic Stress Disorder of the Virtual Kind’ 25). He also writes: “Epidemiological research conducted in the United States during the 1990s indicates that approximately 60 percent of adults have been exposed to traumatic events sufficient to produce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and that 10 percent of adults experience PTSD at least once” (21). Summerfield quotes UNICEF stating “unequivocally, that ten million children worldwide have been psychologically traumatized by war and that addressing this must be a cornerstone of their rehabilitation because ‘time does not heal trauma’ ” (‘The Social Experience of War’ 28-29).

We seem to be caught in some kind of long-term trauma epidemic—indeed, Shoshana Felman calls the twentieth century “a post-traumatic century” (13). Yet this epidemic is, according to some, only the recognition of our age-old human condition: Cathy Caruth writes that “history is the history of trauma,” and Bessel van der Kolk
writes that “Experiencing trauma is an essential part of being human; history is written in blood” (“Traumatic Departures” 34; “The Black Hole of Trauma” 3). Just as Freud turned from an understanding of trauma as requiring a traumatogenic event to an understanding of sexual development itself as traumatic, Freud’s heirs have turned trauma from a personal psychological response into a definitive characteristic of history, of human existence, or of memory as such.

The idea of trauma is held together by memory. If the traumatic event does not return, if there is no post-traumatic memory, whether embodied symptoms or flashbacks, then the event can’t have been traumatic. Allan Young points out that PTSD differs from most DSM classifications precisely in that “Its features are glued together by an inner logic” (“Posttraumatic Stress Disorder of the Virtual Kind” 22). According to Young, the logic of PTSD explains the entire shape and course of the disorder, and establishes “a point beyond which further justification is regarded to be unnecessary and unproductive.”

The logic of PTSD is as follows: An individual is exposed to a traumatic event and responds with fear. Afterward, the individual experiences persistent, intrusive memories of the event, manifest as flashbacks, dreams, or compulsive repetition of symptomatic behaviors. Because of the memory’s threatening character, the individual begins to respond with persistent hyperarousal. Persistent hyperarousal in turn provokes avoidance and numbing, by which the individual works to minimize and insulate against emotional triggers; compulsive repetition, by which the individual attempts to re-enact the traumatic situation in a way that offers some sense of control; or both avoidance and repetition at once. The disorder is manifest in the symptoms, which are caused by the traumatic event. The memory of the traumatic event gives the manifest symptoms

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25 In *DSM-V*, only “Acute Stress Disorder” shares a similar logic.
meaning. The manifest symptoms without the memory of the event, however, are “are not diagnostically specific. Most of them characterize other mental disorders (notably depression and other anxiety disorders)” (23).

A clinical diagnosis of PTSD requires a traumatogenic event. The symptoms without the event are not diagnostically specific; the event without the symptoms is just an event. Memory is the linchpin holding the two together. “Structurally,” writes Young, “PTSD’s memory logic is perfect…. Empirically, there is the problem of false positives, since it is difficult, and often impossible, to detect people whose clinical presentations mimic authentic (iconic) cases of traumatic memory. In the decades prior to the publication of DSM-III, the problem was regarded as salient. Today it is largely ignored” (22). Memory is notoriously fallible, suggestible, and subjective. It can also be easily misrepresented. Nevertheless, as Young notes, the empirical problem is largely ignored, and often even flatly rejected: it is a recurring assertion of trauma theorists such as Caruth, Herman, Lifton, van der Kolk, and others, that the flashback of traumatic memory is pure truth: undistorted, undigested memory. In this understanding, the traumatic event returns to experience unchanged by the human unconscious through which it is mediated.

According to the logic of trauma, it is the event that makes us suffer. As we have seen, symptoms without an event are not diagnostically specific—they belong to some other neurosis. Trauma is always a suffering originating from without. Something happens to us, and the inevitable point of return is that trauma addresses something real—that when something happens to us, something happens. Trauma is not seen as a discourse constituting certain social realities; it is seen as a discourse about what is real
beyond social reality. In a postmodern, late capitalist, cosmopolitan era of relativistic meaning and morality, trauma offers a moral construction of truth and evil—war, sexual abuse, the Holocaust—that functions precisely through its transcendence of discursive systems of meaning and coherence. As Caruth puts it:

The history that a flashback tells—as psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology equally suggest—is, therefore, a history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood. In its repeated impositions as both image and amnesia, the trauma thus seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence ("Recapturing the Past" 152–153).

The traumatic event, that is, is an encounter with the incomprehensibility of reality. This kind of language is essential to the discourse of trauma. Thus we begin to see that trauma’s incoherence is not merely part of its definition, its vagueness not merely a symptom of the need for more neurological research; rather, trauma is defined precisely by its incomprehensibility. The cultural work that trauma does is to mark certain kinds of human suffering as being beyond social comprehension, at once sacred and taboo, labeling them as “unspeakable.”

The realm of the unspeakable, the realm of trauma, is the realm of reality in its
obdurate existence beyond all possible linguistic mediation, or what Lacan called the Real: that which “does not deceive” (Psychoses 64).

It is important to note with Lacan, however, that while the Real remains a consistent structural feature of human culture, it is not always filled out “trauma,” which is a specific historical formation: “This function [of that which does not deceive]… is fulfilled in various ways according to the cultural region in which the constant function of speech comes to function. You would be wrong to think that the same elements, qualified in the same way, have always fulfilled that function.” While the cultural formation of the Real remains contingent and various, though, the discourse of the Real asserts its indubitability as its essential characteristic. Lacan sees the Real of the modern West as inhering in matter: “It need hardly be said that matter does not cheat, that it has no intention of crushing our experiments or blowing up our machines. This sometimes happens, but only when we have made a mistake. It’s out of the question that it, matter should deceive us” (Psychoses 65). Recall Owen: “If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood / Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, / Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—.” Recall Hemingway and “the concrete names of villages.” Consider O’Brien’s focus on obscenity and bodily truth: “It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (78).

In these terms, we can understand trauma as an encounter with the Real, with material existence itself, beyond all speech or social mediation. As Harari points out, “Traumatized soldiers are not possessed by some evil demon, and nobody argues that
what they saw and experienced in war is a lie. Their problem is exactly that they were
given a peep behind the curtain of ignorance that shields society from the harsh reality of
injury and death” (Ultimate 304–305). The traumatic encounter is by definition an
encounter with reality that exceeds the social order. “Trauma” is understood in its
incoherence as at one and the same time the traumatogenic encounter with the Real, the
Real itself, and the symptomatic remainder of the Real that subsists within the psyche
beyond the subject’s control, beyond the power of conscious language, beyond what
Lacan called the Symbolic.26

We must keep in mind, however, that at no point are we talking about reality
itself, but only ever how we talk about reality. That is, the Real only exists through the
Symbolic as an interpretable symptom, as behavior that “speaks.” What it says is “I have
touched truth; I have heard that fatum which does not deceive.” Words can always
deceive. We are all too well aware of the slipperiness of language. Hence the truth that
does not deceive must be formulated in such a way that it comes from beyond language.
The Real cannot speak itself, but speaks always through a mask or screen; it must remain
outside the closed system of the Symbolic. The mask may be the face of a god, it may be
the mask of madness, it may be the mask of the symptom. It may be the mask of trauma.
The discourse of the Real, in its relation to the Symbolic, is a discourse of that which
cannot be said.

In other words, “trauma” is the word we use for all the things we want to claim
that we can’t talk about, the things which we refuse to understand—war, sexual abuse,

26 As Lacan remarked, “Is it not remarkable that, at the origin of the analytic experience, the real should
have presented itself in the form of that which is unassimilable in it—in the form of the trauma,
determining all that follows, and imposing on it an apparently accidental origin?” (Four Fundamental
Concepts 55).
and the Holocaust serve as our primary sites of this “truth.” As Lacan puts it quite clearly, “what is refused in the symbolic order re-emerges in the real” (Psychoses 13). Not in reality, but in the Real: in another level of discourse, in another register of experience. Shifting focus from individual psychological trauma to historical and cultural trauma helps bring to light how this discourse functions, viz. Cathy Caruth’s claim, that the “historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experience at all” (Unclaimed Experience 17). This can and indeed must be right, but only if we understand “forgetting” as active cultural repression rather than as some inherent neurophysiological mechanism. As Caruth suggests, “Lacan’s reading shows us… that the shock of traumatic sight reveals at the heart of human subjectivity not so much an epistemological, but rather what can be defined as an ethical relation to the real” (Unclaimed Experience 92). Which is to say, the discourse of trauma is not an epistemological discourse shaping how we know reality but rather an ethical discourse defining which aspects of reality we choose to deem socially acceptable and which we choose to deem beyond the pale.

What this means is that we must understand “trauma” per se as a set of historically specific, socially constructed practices of interpreting experiential sense data, shaping memory, and managing cultural norms. Reflecting on the idea of combat gnosis, then, we must understand that what the experience of war offers is not a “peep behind the curtain” but yet another curtain, another cultural mediation of experience, and like all cultural mediations a semiotic practice through which social norms are constructed and maintained. “To put it another way,” in historian Joan Scott’s words, “the evidence of
experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems” (778).

Judith Herman opens her influential book *Trauma and Recovery* with this statement: “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*” (1). A traumatic event, she asserts, is inherently beyond signification, beyond the “social compact.” Nonetheless, the traumatized victim is compelled to signify: “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma.” In testifying to the truth of evil, horror, and death, the victim/witness heals herself and is able to return to the normative state of the social, while reasserting the fact that all these nasty traumas remain alienated from us, “othered,” yet now come under our power as *named things*: psychological events comprehensible within a medical discourse. Herman is more right than she seems to know in her description of the conflict between witnessing and denial as a “dialectic,” since the outcome of this conflict is not an overcoming but a kind of *aufhebung*—the dialectic of trauma results not in denial by witnessing, but rather in the social witnessing of denial.

The things we talk about when we talk about trauma are not “incomprehensible,” “unassimilable,” or even “unspeakable.” The murder of six million Jews, atrocities such as the massacre of innocents at My Lai or the bloodbath of the Somme, and the rape of children are horrific human deeds, but they are social actions and we have words we can use to describe them. We mark them as belonging beyond the capacities of social

27 I’m indebted to Jeff Dolven for directing me to Scott’s extremely helpful essay.
discourse because we refuse to believe that we’re capable of such actions; we refuse to accept that such behaviors belong to the social order. As Sharon Sliwinksi wrote during the recent war in Iraq: “In one sense, the disillusionment we may feel when thinking about the war in Iraq should be read as a resistance to knowledge that is simply too painful to acknowledge. We simply do not want to live in a world in which such dreadful events occur” (90). Precisely so. On this point Paul Fussell, writing about World War I, is illuminating and worth quoting at length:

One of the cruxes of the war, of course, is the collision between events and the language available—or thought appropriate—to describe them. To put it more accurately, the collision was one between events and the public language used for over a century to celebrate the idea of progress.

Logically there is no reason why the English language could not perfectly well render the actuality of trench warfare: it is rich in terms like blood, terror, agony, madness, shit, cruelty, murder, sell-out, pain and hoax, as well as phrases like legs blown off, intestines gushing out over his hands, screaming all night, bleeding to death from the rectum, and the like.

Logically, one supposes, there’s no reason why a language devised by man should be inadequate to describe any of man’s works. The difficulty was in admitting that the war had been made by men and was being continued ad infinitum by them. The problem was less one of ‘language’ than of gentility and optimism; it was less a problem of ‘linguistics’ than of rhetoric. Louis Simpson speculates about the reason infantry soldiers so
seldom render their experiences in language: ‘To a foot-soldier, war is almost entirely physical. That is why some men, when they think about war, fall silent. Language seems to falsify physical life and to betray those who have experienced it absolutely—the dead.’ But that can’t be right. The real reason is that soldiers have discovered that no one is very interested in the bad news they have to report. What listener wants to be torn and shaken when he doesn’t have to be? We have made unspeakable mean indescribable; it really means nasty (170).

If we revise Herman in terms of Fussell, then, we can say that some human actions are too nasty to admit. The atrocities that traumatize us are morally, politically, and aesthetically unpalatable.

Allen Feldman helps us see the ramifications of this in his critique of trauma in “Memory Theaters, Virtual Witnessing, and the Trauma-Aesthetic,” where he argues that “In academia, media, and human rights discourse, ‘trauma,’ due to its labiality, actually functions as an aesthetic concept” (185). According to Feldman, the trauma-aesthetic serves an episteme that enables participants in our contemporary liberal social order to repress their own complicity in the violence that very order perpetrates (186). In short, the traumatic victim, through their socially enforced witnessing (what Feldman calls “compulsory visibility”), serves as a scapegoat for the cruelty society refuse to accept as its own. The norm from which the traumatic is ejected is peaceful Western bourgeois liberal democracy, which in the imagination that accepts this norm is, like “man” itself in this view, however flawed, essentially good. It is a social order based on recognition of
individual rights, free speech, critical thought, and progressive social change. There is no rational place in this worldview for sexual abuse, the Holocaust, or war. As Susan Sontag points out: “Central to modern expectations, and modern ethical feeling, is the conviction that war is an aberration, if an unstoppable one. That peace is the norm, if an unattainable one” (74).

What is trauma? Trauma is our Real, beyond society, beyond the Symbolic, beyond language. What does trauma do? It allows us to maintain that certain human deeds and facts are not human—that they are outside the realm of the word, the law, the social contract. Why? Because such deeds and facts are fundamental to the very social order that denies them, but incongruent with its values and self-conception. Through the dialectic of trauma and recovery, we reassure ourselves that our social order is fundamentally just, our lives transcend their material conditions, and our institutions and practices retain the power to manage death and human violence.

“As a paradigm for the human experience that governs history, then, traumatic disorder is indeed the apparent struggle to die,” writes Caruth, yet through bringing this “struggle to die” into the social-symbolic order, by witnessing it, by bearing the wound as a symbol of truth, we deliver ourselves from its otherwise ineluctable rule (“Traumatic Departures” 33). The “traumatic” must be rejected and assimilated both: only by recovering trauma under the law of scientific-progressive talk therapy or artistic creation can we be “saved” from “the apparent struggle to die.” That is, if we make evil unspeakable in its essence, if the nature of trauma is that it cannot be spoken, then when we do speak trauma, we display our mastery of it. Cunning animal, modern human! By bringing what we had designated as “unspeakable” into the social-symbolic order, we
convince ourselves that we’ve gained power over the unnamable *simply by naming it*. Death becomes mere trauma. Genocide becomes mere trauma. War becomes mere trauma. The most hideous acts of torture and cruelty become mere trauma, which we can heal through art, science, and the therapeutic power of language. In Slavoj Žižek’s words, “the traumatic event is ultimately just a fantasy-construct filling out a certain void in a symbolic structure” (*Sublime* 191).

Trauma-and-recovery is a *fort-da* game that society plays with itself. The figure of this *fort-da* is not a ball-and-cup, as in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but rather the culture hero who goes through hell and offers transcendence in their return: the Holocaust survivor, the adult recovering from childhood sexual abuse, or the soldier who goes to war and returns to testify of what they’ve seen. The *fort-da* game we play with trauma is a game performed through the trauma hero, the one who takes upon himself the psychological trauma of confronting the Real in order to show that it can be witnessed and mastered, in order to uphold the collective fantasy that we might dominate life through language.
Chapter 3. “Thank God for the Atom Bomb”

Everyone who remembers a war first-hand knows that its images remain in the memory with special vividness. The very enormity of the proceedings, their absurd remove from the usages of the normal world, will guarantee that a structure of irony sufficient for ready narrative recall will attach to them.

—Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory (1975, my italics)

At stake in reading war as revelation and valorizing the trauma hero are not only serious historical questions about what specific acts of historical violence mean in American culture, whether from a Benjaminian-revolutionary or more conventionally humanist-progressive approach, but also more urgent questions about what political violence means to us broadly today, and what it will mean the next time we face a crisis of understanding such as the one that happened after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Questions of just war, ad bellum or in bello, will be framed and colored by our collective cultural understanding of ourselves as agents and subjects. Cultural narratives about war that highlight the status of combatants as victims, sanctify combat experience as a revelation of transcendental truth, and disavow the recognition of complicity in favor of moralistic denunciation serve and have served to obscure serious consideration of the responsibilities of power, to efface and marginalize the suffering of others (particularly
those targeted by our tragic victim-heroes), to justify aggression, and to excuse war

If this claim seems extreme, consider Paul Fussell’s argument justifying the
American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, “Thank God for the Atom Bomb.” In
1981, Paul Fussell published an essay in *The New Republic*, on the forty-second
anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, arguing for “the importance of
experience, sheer, vulgar experience, in influencing, if not determining, one’s views
about the use of the atom bomb” (14). Fussell goes on to claim that only those persons
who had directly experienced combat, only those who had “come to grips, face to face,
with an enemy who designs your death,” could possibly understand or be able to judge
the decision to use the atomic bomb on the civilian population of Japan. While Fussell
does, by the by, build a shaky case justifying the attacks, resting primarily on the
contested and highly dubious assertion that the use of the atomic bomb hastened the
Japanese surrender (an assertion discounted by the American Strategic Bombing Survey
in 1946), his main point is to assert the moral authority of his experience and his main
mode of argument *ad hominem* (which, to his credit, he admits). Fussell dismisses John
Kenneth Galbraith’s arguments because Galbraith worked in Washington during the war,
historian Michael Sherry’s because he was an infant in 1945, historian David Joravsky’s
because he was “on his way to the Pacific when the war ended,” and philosopher J. Glenn
Gray’s because Gray, who served in Europe as an intelligence officer and interrogator,
“experienced the war at Division level…. miles—*miles*—behind the line where soldiers
experience terror and madness and relieve those pressures by crazy brutality and sadism”
(21, 29–30).
By the time Fussell gets to J. Glenn Gray, his criterion of validity for experience has shifted significantly: though at the beginning, it was enough to have confronted an enemy who wanted to kill you, by the time he gets to Gray Fussell insists that only the front-line infantry soldier has the authority to speak about war. Yet Fussell doesn’t maintain this standard either, citing approvingly the belligerent pronouncements of several high-ranking military commanders, many of them British, whose wartime résumés included naval officer (Louis Mountbatten, John F. Kennedy, Jr.) and pilot (Air Marshal Arthur Harris, who flew with the RAF in WWI). Fussell is inconsistent, as indeed he almost must be, since his criterion is purely subjective. The moral authority of experience he invokes not only gives him the right to judge particular acts, but also the knowledge to decide who can speak the truth.

Given Fussell’s example, we can see now how literary arguments about the language of war can obscure an ontological presupposition that both gives any veteran the right to speak with unimpeachable moral authority and justifies any action in wartime, because war is eo ipso beyond civilian morality—hence Fussell’s position on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Michael Walzer challenges Fussell in a later issue of the New Republic, arguing that certain moral norms have applied and must be applied in war, and that Fussell’s logic of “anything goes, so long as it helps to bring the boys home” is a line of reasoning that leads to state terrorism and totalitarianism (39). Fussell responds by asserting that their disagreement is one of “sensibilities” (a key term for a scholar of the eighteenth century, as Fussell was, and all the moreso for a writer who puts such weight on “experience”), and that his main effort is to “complicate, even mess up, the moral picture,” by offering “a soldier’s view” (42–43). Fussell’s generosity and appreciation for
complexity only go so far, however; he ends his response by noting “that in 1945 Michael
Walzer, for all the emotional warmth of his current argument, was ten years old” (44).

For Fussell, as for Clausewitz, Tolstoy’s Prince Andrei, Owen, Hemingway, and
O’Brien, there is one truth above all others: the truth of experience. The soldier’s truth.
The rhetorical purchase such a claim exerts in contemporary society is significant. In
contrast to eye-witnessing and historical accounts, the authority of experiential truth
requires no corroboration. Unlike rational argument, it admits no procedural or logical
critique. Against philosophical or moral debate, it forecloses the possibilities of
abstraction, comparative ethics, and dialectical thought. What’s more, the mere fact of
experience becomes an explanation that obviates further analysis. As Joan Scott writes:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual
subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it)
becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about

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28 Harari’s analysis of the rhetorical power of flesh-witnessing is illuminating: “What has made flesh-
witnessing so useful politically is its two vital advantages over eye-witnessing. First, the extreme sensory
and emotional conditions of war weaken the authority of the eyewitness because they distort his or her
ability to observe and remember facts objectively. In contrast, they strengthen the authority of the flesh-
witness because it is precisely these conditions that the uninitiated cannot grasp. The distortion of factual
knowledge—the famous fog of war—is itself a key part of the war experience. Scholars who accumulate
facts often become increasingly removed from this experiential truth. With their neat maps and piles of
information they come to imagine combat as a geometrical game of arrows, numbers, and colored
rectangles, instead of the gory chaos it really is…. The other vital advantage of flesh-witnessing is that its
authority is not squandered by its usage. In order to prove that they, themselves, understand the experience
of war and have the authority to speak of it, soldiers need to describe the experience of war in shocking
detail. Yet they simultaneously remind the audience that these descriptions cannot transmit knowledge
because experience cannot be conveyed through words. For instance, a veteran of World War II
admonishes civilian readers of his memoirs that those ‘who haven’t lived through the experience may
sympathize as they read the way one sympathizes with the hero of a novel or a play, but they certainly will
never understand’ (Sajer 90). Consequently, whereas a person who hears many eyewitnesses gets a good
factual understanding of battle, a person who hears many flesh-witnesses gets only a good understanding of
his or her own ignorance. The more flesh-witness accounts civilians hear, the less authority they have. This
means that, in contrast to the eyewitnesses at a murder trial, the flesh-witnesses of war must be witness and
judges rolled into one. Nobody else is eligible for the role of judge” (“Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-
witnesses,” 220–221).
the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world (777).

The revelatory truth of war exceeds politics in a partisan, liberal sense. Tim O’Brien can use it to assert the ultimate horror of the Vietnam War as well as Paul Fussell can use it to justify the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It can be used to discredit propagandistic official narratives and it can be used to dismiss universal humanitarian ideals. Whether the revelatory truth of war makes the men who fight it martial heroes or victims of a remorseless bureaucratized state, it anoints them as bearers of a sacred gnosis, a knowledge born and borne in the flesh.

The trauma hero narrative, the story of the martyr who bears the psychological wound that both is and is caused by a revelatory encounter with truth, testifies to our persistent cultural sanctification of war. The trauma hero’s claim to revelatory truth supersedes the juridical, legislative, journalistic, scientific, and scholarly contests that establish consensus in secular liberalism, invoking instead a transcendental, mystic, subjective authority. “Here is indeed a traumatic subject, and it has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another: one can only believe it, even identify with it, or not,” writes Hal Foster (168). But the narrative also functions as a mechanism of displacement and substitution, a *fort-da* game that asserts the power of language over
reality, and, as we will see developed in the following chapters, a scapegoat function that purges a victorious, conquering society of blood guilt. The manifestly religious character of the trauma hero opens into questions of what might be called political anthropology, or political theology—questions about how the political imaginary of a culture is structured by religious, theological, and mythological concepts.

As we can see with respect to the argument between Paul Fussell and Michael Walzer about the use of the atomic bomb, the cultural and political stakes of how we represent war and the experience of war are quite high. At issue are several ongoing and contentious discussions: the meaning of violence in human life, the value and virtue of American power, the conflict between American national identity and imperial politics, and the problem of reconciling universalist human ideals with the military force necessary to sustain them. These discussions are dramatized and worked out through arguments between competing cultural authorities, arguments about who get to claim the mantle of authority—in effect, arguments about what heroism means in a society, and what kind of figure gets recognized as a culture hero. Before the trauma hero took center stage in post-Vietnam American war literature and late-capitalist American culture, other kinds of heroes inhabited other kinds of narratives. Indeed, for a long period—from before World War II to the middle sixties—what the word “hero” meant wasn’t clear at all. Far from being a simplistic Superman, Audie Murphy, or John Wayne, in fact, the hero in mid-century was a serious problem.
PART II: REPETITIONS OF A HERO

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience” (1844)
Consider mutiny. In 1944, in the middle of a typhoon, the captain of the warship USS Caine was relieved by his executive officer, Lieutenant Steven Maryk, under Article 184 of Navy Regulations. That article allows for such relief in “most unusual and extraordinary circumstances,” and Lt. Maryk believed such circumstances applied: that his commander, Lt. Commander Philip F. Queeg, had suffered nervous failure, and that Queeg’s derangement was endangering the ship. Queeg refused to step down, but with the support of the Officer of the Deck, Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Willie Keith, and a seaman named Stilwell, Lt. Maryk took command of the Caine and skippered it safely through the typhoon.

This fictional conflict of authority is the central dramatic event of Herman Wouk’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 1951 novel The Caine Mutiny, but it is certainly not the novel’s only conflict of authority. Authority is questioned, challenged, tested, and fought for throughout, and not only between men at war, but also between men and women, sons and mothers, differing accounts of the truth, and even between literature and reality—indeed, between different kinds of “literature,” different kinds of discourse. This last conflict is perhaps the novel’s most important, as suggested in the irony of Lt. Maryk relying on Navy Regulations, i.e., “the book,” as the justification for his rebellion against a petty despot whose entire leadership style is avowedly “by the book.” As Queeg tells his subordinate officers when he assumes command of the Caine:
Now, I’m a book man, as anyone who knows me will tell you. I believe the book is there for a purpose, and everything in it has been put in it for a purpose. When in doubt, remember we do things on this ship by the book. You go by the book and you’ll get no argument from me. You deviate from the book and you better have a half dozen damn good reasons—and you’ll still get a hell of an argument from me (127).

Maryk’s rebellion against “book man” Queeg was inspired by yet another “book man”: Lieutenant Keefer, Communications Officer, who had been a writer before the war and spends his free time on the Caine working on a novel titled Multitudes, Multitudes. Keefer is a cynical, cheerfully subversive elitist, a self-satisfied intellectual who sneers at the men around him and at the bureaucracy in which he finds himself as manifestations of so much obstinate stupidity, and he is the one who first suggests to stolid, plodding Maryk that Queeg might not just be mean, stupid, cowardly, and dishonorable, but a dangerously paranoid psychotic to boot. Keefer’s a great success as a “book man”: he not only sells Maryk on the mutiny, but he also manages to sell Multitudes, Multitudes to a publisher.

But Keefer’s success as a “book man” is as ignominious as Queeg’s failure. Later, after Maryk’s trial and acquittal, Maryk’s lawyer Lieutenant Barney Greenwald names Keefer as “the author of the Caine mutiny,” at a party celebrating both Maryk’s acquittal and Keefer’s book deal, right before he throws a glass of wine at Keefer (442). This

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29 Willie Keith later describes Keefer’s novel as follows: “It doesn’t seem very original in thought or style—sort of a jumble of Dos Passos and Joyce and Hemingway and Faulkner—but it’s smooth, and some of the scenes are brilliant. It takes place on a carrier, but there are a lot of flashbacks to the beach, with some of the most hair-raising sex scenes I’ve ever read. It’ll sell like hotcakes, I’m sure.” (464).
insult follows a drunken, impassioned speech in which Greenwald excoriates Keefer, Maryk, and Willie Keith for their complacency and disloyalty. He begins by claiming that if he’d written a war novel like Keefer had, he would have made Queeg the hero (441).30 Men like Queeg, Greenwald goes on, were all that stood between “old Mrs. Greenwald” and the Nazis, while ambitious “sensitive intellectuals” like himself, Keith, and Keefer were busy enjoying their civilian lives. It’s personal for Greenwald: he’s Jewish, and “the Germans aren’t kidding about the Jews. They’re cooking us down to soap over there” (443). Greenwald admits that the mutineers are all guilty and says they should have been convicted, but he used “phony legal tricks” to get Maryk off because “the wrong guy was on trial”—it should have been Keefer. Greenwald, ashamed of himself for having disgraced Queeg and furious with Keefer for manipulating Maryk, splashes his “yellow wine in Keefer’s face.”

The portrayal of the novelist as an arrogant, narcissistic subversive, and this particular moment in which Greenwald publicly shames and insults Keefer for his disloyalty, might look like an attack on literary intellectuals as a type, and might suggest *The Caine Mutiny* is a celebration of blind military discipline. But reading the incident in this manner would require simplifying the novel’s complexities, eliding its thick allusiveness (references range from Kant to Conrad), and ignoring Wouk’s interest in the relationship between literature and reality. To the point, what Greenwald has to say about Keefer’s novel before the trial is much more equivocal than his later disdain:

30 Greenwald actually calls Queeg “Old Yellowstain,” the derogatory nickname given him by Keefer after one of Queeg’s more notable acts of cowardice, in which he ordered the _Caine_ to abandon the landing craft it was escorting and drop a yellow dye marker to mark their route.
“I’d like to read it. I’m sure that it exposes this war in all its grim futility and waste, and shows up the military men for the stupid, Fascist-minded sadists they are. Bitching up all the campaigns and throwing away the lives of fatalistic, humorous, lovable citizen-soldiers. Lots of sex scenes where the prose becomes rhythmic and beautiful while the girl gets her pants pulled down.” Greenwald saw Maryk’s mystified suspicious smile, and shrugged. “Well, I can tell, because war novels are coming out already and the war is still on. I read ‘em all. I like novels where the author proves how terrible military guys are, and how superior sensitive civilians are. I know they’re true to life because I’m a sensitive civilian myself” (353).

The issues of representation lurking behind Greenwald’s sardonic dismissal are key. As *The Caine Mutiny*’s central theme is the relationship between literature and reality, its central conflict is between the authority of literature and the authority of experience. This becomes more explicit as we turn from the various characters involved in the drama of the mutiny to the novel’s protagonist, Willie Keith, and its main narrative, which is the story of how Keith learns to be a leader and a hero. What Keith learns through the trials of war are judgment, discipline, and the limits of his ego, and he achieves this knowledge not through the deceptions and fantasies of literature, but through experience. He learns to read not books, but men.

Willie Keith begins the novel a “book man,” too, though, having recently graduated from Princeton, where “his academic specialty had been comparative literature” (2). As a young ensign aboard the *Caine*, he mistrusts the intuitive,
experiential authority of Lt. Maryk and Captain de Vriess, and is seduced by Keefer’s literary and intellectual glamour, a seduction that pulls him into rebellion against Queeg’s “by the book” tyranny. After their successful but pyrrhic mutiny against despotic “book” authority, Keefer eventually takes command of the Caine with Keith as his executive officer. Keefer shows himself to lack the moral fiber for leadership, though: when a Japanese kamikaze crashes into the Caine, he jumps overboard with his novel, leaving Keith to save the ship from disaster. Confessing his cowardice to Keith after the attack, Keefer compares himself with Queeg and Lord Jim (surely this novel’s primary influence), and complains about how much pressure it is to be in command (“It’s the loneliest, most oppressive job in the whole world”) (459).

Willie Keith, however, discovers that command suits him:

Even at anchor, on an idle, forgotten old ship, Willie experienced the strange sensations of the first days of a new captain: a shrinking of his personal identity, and a stretching out of his nerve ends to all the spaces and machinery of his ship. He was less free than before. He developed the apprehensive listening ears of a young mother; the ears listened on in his sleep; he never quite slept, not the way he had before. He had the sense of having been reduced from an individual to a sort of brain of a composite animal, the crew and ship combined. The reward for these disturbing sensations came when he walked the decks. Power seemed to flow out of the plates into his body. The respectful demeanor of the officers and crew thrust him into a loneliness he had never known, but it wasn’t a frigid
loneliness. Through the transparent barrier of manners came the warming unspoken word that his men liked him and believed in him.

He gave them fresh reason to do so in his first week as captain (477).

When the *Caine* is caught at anchorage in another typhoon, Keith conns the ship thirty straight hours, “maneuvering finely with his engines and rudder to keep the anchor from dragging.” The storm finally breaks and reveals “a dozen ships stranded on beaches and reefs all around the bay,” and Keith is recognized “as a hero” (478). In contrast to the narcissist Keefer or paranoiac Queeg, both driven to impose their fantasies on the world, Keith learns to subordinate his personal identity to that of the collective, and to become a sensitive reader of men and machines, with “the apprehensive listening ears of a young mother.” Command and heroism are here figured as requiring a kind of submission that demands feminized nurturing and receptivity. The student of comparative literature learns through experience to negotiate comparative narratives of reality.

*The Caine Mutiny* offers a dramatic exploration of some of the central problems of collective existence, but within a strictly hierarchical institution that seems alien (if not anathema) to liberal individualism. Social position and caste are fixed in the military, and movement within rank and role demands that individuals accommodate themselves to their objective responsibilities, which extend both up and down the chain of command. As we see in Wouk’s novel, a good captain is at once autonomous, as “the highest function” of a commander is defined as having the self-possession to resist panic and “to listen to nothing but the voice of his own judgment,” and heteronomous, as it is the captain’s responsibility to attend to the “composite animal” of which he is only a part,
and to carry out the orders given to him from his leaders (404). Keith’s skill as a captain, evidenced in his command of *The Caine* during the typhoon, arises out of the submission of his own ego to the demands of the ship. As Wouk writes, “He had the sense of having been reduced from an individual to a sort of brain of a composite animal, the crew and ship combined.” Keith shows his disposition for leadership and is recognized as a hero because of his willingness to sacrifice his individuality to collective needs.

What we see dramatized in *The Caine Mutiny* is the problem of the hero in industrial capitalism: the problem of making meaning in bodies over against making meaning in words, the problem of reconciling a structuring system of metaphoric exchange mediated by substance with a structuring system of metaphoric exchange mediated by signs, the problem of reconciling *wartime sacrifice* with *marketplace liberalism*. Writers struggling to make sense out of World War II tried to solve the problem of the hero in a variety of ways. Wouk in *The Caine Mutiny* tries to reconcile substance and sign by presenting the question of heroism in terms of reading: bad reading manifests cowardice in Queeg and Keefer, while good reading manifests heroic self-sacrifice by Greenwald and Keith. Wouk sets himself an easy version of the problem, though, since Keith’s sacrifice is merely feminization and receptivity, not death. As we will see, other writers and thinkers saw the problem in ways that made it much harder to dispense with.
Chapter 5. Examinations of the Hero in a Time of War

Unnamed, unknown, remain, and still remain, the bravest soldiers. Our manliest—our boys—our hardy darlings; no picture gives them. Likely, the typic one of them (standing, no doubt, for hundreds, thousands) crawls aside to some bush-clumps, or ferny tuft, on receiving his death-shot… and there, at last, the Bravest Soldier crumbles in mother earth, unburied and unknown.

—Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days* (1882)

The problem of the hero was a vital one in the middle decades of the last century. World war, the emergence of mass media and mass society, rampant nationalism, the attenuation of pre-industrial values, and the rise of totalitarianism all provoked anxious questions into value, truth, the ultimate good, and the relationships between the many and the one, the multitude and the representative, followers and leaders. According to Dixon Wecter, in his monumental 1941 paean to American heroism *The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero-Worship*, “Hero-worship answers an urgent American need” (1). Wecter’s solution was a stentorian great-man history of the United State from “The Pilgrim Fathers and the American Way” through “Lee: The Aristocrat as Hero” to “Gods from the Machine: Edison, Ford, Lindbergh.” In contrast to Wecter’s bloviating, Gerald W. Johnson’s *American Heroes and Hero-Worship*, published two years later, offers a much more nuanced and ironic account of the hero in American history, considering the
ambivalences and ambiguities in the lives of Andrew Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, William Henry Harrison, and Woodrow Wilson. One of Johnson’s central concerns is, rightly, historical reception and revision: how heroes are anointed heroes, and how they fade from the pantheon through no fault of their own.

In *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility*, published the same year as *America Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Sidney Hook looked at the problem of the hero from a more philosophical perspective, taking it up through questions of leadership, pedagogy, political action, the philosophy of history, and psychology. Whereas Wecter argued that the American tradition of hero-worship was politically healthy insofar as it differed from other forms, particularly Fascist and Communist ones, in its exceptionally individualist, informal, skeptical, and democratic (we might even say Emersonian) character, Sidney Hook saw the hero *per se* as a threat to American democracy: “If the hero is defined as an event-making individual who redetermines the course of history, it follows at once that democratic community must be eternally on guard against him” (229). Eric Bentley’s *A Century of Hero-Worship: A Study of the Idea of Heroism in Carlyle and Nietzsche with Notes on Other Hero-Worshipers of Modern Times*, published in 1944, also saw the hero as a potential danger to democracy, yet a more ambivalent one. For Bentley, the tradition of “Heroic Vitalism” was intimately bound up with fascism, democracy, and modern art, and the relationships between these different phenomena were complicated by the faith in meritocratic achievement that Bentley saw as democracy’s implicit ideal: “Our democratic faith is a paradox: democratic equality means to respect the individual and thus to notice individuality, to welcome variety, to revere superiority—which implies inequality…. Aristocracy is one of the goals of
democracy” (288). Wecter, Johnson, Hook, and Bentley are just the most direct and obvious examples of a concern that, once you open it to include issues such as celebrity, mass society, fascism, cinema, comic books, political philosophy, biography, and genius, can be seen flashing across the early twentieth century in everything from the avant-garde works of Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound to Superman and Batman in the funny pages, from the Frankfurt School to Life magazine. Not a new problem, to be sure, perhaps even a perennial one, but a problem with specific historical valences and investments through World War II and in the years following.

The history of the hero that Bentley and Hook relied upon traced the concept from its origins in Greek literature and philosophy to Emerson, Carlyle, and Nietzsche. The word itself comes from Homer (ὑρως, hērōs), referring first to those “major men” who excelled all others in some quality of strength, fortitude, courage, wit, or battle prowess. Thus heroism and aristeia, or excellence, were originally joined. The hero was more than a main character, though he was that too: he was an exemplar, a representative, a leader, and a figure of cultic worship. A few centuries later, the term came to have a more technical meaning restricted to demi-gods, which Plato punned upon in the Cratylus:

HERMOGENES. But what is the meaning of the word hero?

SOCRATES. I think that there is no difficulty in explaining, for the name is not much altered, and signifies that they were born of love.

H. What do you mean?

S. Do you not know that the heroes are demigods?

H. What then?
S. All of them sprang either from the love of a god for a mortal woman, or of a mortal man for a goddess. Think of the word in the old Attic, and you will see better that the name heros is only a slight alteration of Eros, from whom the heroes sprang. Either this is the meaning, or, if not this, then they must have been skillful as rhetoricians and dialecticians, and able to put the question (ἐρωτάν), for εἰρεῖν is equivalent to λέγειν. And therefore, as I was saying, in the Attic dialect the heroes turn out to be rhetoricians and questioners. All this is easy enough: the noble breed of heroes are a tribe of Sophists and rhetors (398:d-e).

Here Socrates wryly undermines the Homeric ideal of heroism as martial prowess with an etymological argument claiming that to be a hero means to be born of love, or better yet, to be a sophist. For Plato, as for us, the hero isn’t just an example, but a problem: the word itself is a field of conflict where social values are debated, and how we choose to define heroism becomes a choice about how we define the good. Socrates’s specious punning aims to supplant the doer with the speaker, the warrior with the philosopher.

From Achilles to the Sophist is quite a shift, and by the time we get to the pre-eminent modern theorists of heroism framing the mid-century discussion between Wecter, Johnson, Hook, and Bentley—namely Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Friedrich Nietzsche—the word’s meaning has shifted even further. Carlyle, whose catalogue of heroes included Mohammed, Dante, and Samuel Johnson, delineated the hero as follows: “They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns,

31 This is a pun that moves from rough homophony (eros/erwatan) to rough synonymy (eiren/legein). ἐρωτάν means “to ask” or “to question”; εἰρεῖν means both “to ask” and “to say,” and is a derivation of eros (as in “to love,” also “to vomit, to pour forth”); λέγειν means “to speak.”
and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain” (21). Emerson’s heroes included Goethe, Swedenborg, and John Brown, and his definition of greatness is notably more vatic than Carlyle’s: “I count him a great man who inhabits a higher sphere of thought, into which other men rise with labor and difficulty; he has but to open his eyes to see things in a true light, and in large relations; whilst they must make painful corrections, and keep a vigilant eye on many sources of error” (616). Nietzsche’s idea of the heroic is yet more complex, as much a matter of perspective as it is of capacity or achievement. From one point of view, heroes are “models, teachers, and comforters,” those “great moments in the struggle of the human individual” wanted for the “monumental” use of history, those overmen we might call Nietzsche’s practical or pragmatist heroes (“On the Uses and Disadvantages of History,” 67–68). From another perspective, a hero is nothing but an ex post facto fiction, as Nietzsche argues in Beyond Good and Evil:

And who knows whether what happened in all great cases so far was not always the same: that the crowd adored a god—and that the “god” was merely a poor sacrificed animal. Success has always been the greatest liar—and the “work” itself is a success; the great statesman, the conquerer, the discoverer is disguised by his creations, often beyond recognition; the “work,” whether of the artist or the philosopher, invents the man who has created it, who is supposed to have created it; “great men,” as they are venerated, are subsequent pieces of wretched minor fiction; in the world of historical values, counterfeit rules (408).
What Nietzsche’s perspectivalism brings into discussion of the problem of the hero is an understanding not only that heroism is a social attribution, or that heroes reflect a society’s ideals, but also that out of its need for ideals a society will create heroes using whatever material they have at hand—humans will make great men out of minor fictions, gods from poor sacrificed animals.

During World War II, the nimbly self-reflexive articulations of Nietzsche’s thoughts on the “great” and the “heroic” were doubtlessly difficult to hear amidst the thunder of war and shouts of propaganda. Indeed, insofar as Hitler and Stalin remain historical personifications of absolute evil for many American readers, it remains difficult to think of them as “poor sacrificed animals” or “subsequent pieces of wretched minor fiction.” You can’t have moral virtue or moral failure without moral agency, and to complicate the issue of agency with questions of historical revision, perspectivalism, and social construction is to ask for a kind of suspended judgment rarely available, especially in moments of crisis. A film such as John Ford’s The Man Who Shot Liberty Va[1962], for example, with its piercing critique of heroism, could not have been made during the war it implicitly comments on. The film’s argument that heroism is a dubious and ex post facto creation (“print the legend”) subverts the logic of sacrifice, and its ironic cross-casting of Jimmy Stewart as the bookish, feminized schoolteacher and lawyer, against John Wayne as the hypermasculine gunfighter, when Stewart served as a bomber pilot in World War II while Wayne stayed in Hollywood and made movies, mocks conventional American notions of masculine virtue. A much more characteristic heroic ideal during the war was Sgt. Bill Tyne, played by Dana Andrews in A Walk in the Sun (1945, from the book by Harry Brown, 1944), a reflective and solitary figure who is
forced to take command when others are unable or unfit to do so, and who through a combination of competence, toughness, and sensitivity is able to lead his men to the successful (if costly) completion of their mission.

Far more central to general intellectual attention in the 1940s than Nietzsche’s insights into aesthetics, history, and psychology were concerns about mass media and totalitarianism: the more pressing question was how heroes and leaders manipulated mass communication to promulgate their own worship. Thus Sidney Hook revises Nietzsche’s notion of the “monumental” use of history: “[T]echnical advances in communication, together with the new psychological methods of inducing belief, make it possible to create mass enthusiasm and worship of leaders which surpass anything evolved in Byzantium” (10). Unthinking mass indoctrination was not the only threat the hero posed to democracy for Hook. He also saw a kind of persistent power vacuum in operation because of the fact “that the overwhelming majority of people have little desire to assume positions of power and responsibility” (23). Inevitably, “a need will be felt for a hero to initiate, organize, and lead,” and that moment of need is a moment of danger (13). For Eric Bentley, though, it wasn’t a people’s need for leadership that was the problem so much as their capacities for choosing and judging their leaders. As he wrote:

The hero is a fact. He is a man to whom things do not merely happen but who makes them, or some of them, happen. The environment can accept or reject him, and a democratic people—which would be a very decisive part of the environment—can accept or reject him. Indeed this is probably the greatest
problem of democratic politics: to find peoples who can wisely accept or reject the leaders who come forward (286).

Bentley and Hook have notions of heroism and leadership that blend into one another with remarkable ease: A hero is a leader, and a leader must be heroic.

This conflation between leadership and heroism is not part of the definition we typically have of the hero today. We might define the hero today as a person marked as exemplary or excellent in some respect because of some deed on the person’s part involving risk or sacrifice, in distinction to mere celebrity, which requires neither. The psychologists Zeno Franco, Kathy Blau, and Philip Zimbardo define heroism as follows:

Our definition of heroism is as a social activity: (a) in service to others in need—be it a person, group, or community, or in defense of socially sanctioned ideal, or new social standard; (b) engaged in voluntarily… ; (c) with recognition of possible risks/costs… ; (d) in which the actor is willing to accept anticipated sacrifice, and (e) without external gain anticipated at the time of the act (101).

They go on to delineate four main categories of heroic activity, organized by whether the action involves physical peril or social sacrifice, and whether the risk involved is justified or unjustified. Their research suggests that the acts considered “most heroic” are typically those in which the risk involved is not justified by any anticipated reward. Also, their

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32 See Daniel Boorstin’s postwar account in The Image (45–76) of the rise of the celebrity and its effects on contemporaneous ideas of heroism.
research suggests that acts involving physical risk are almost always seen as more heroic than acts involving social sacrifice.

The most important insight of their study is that heroism is a social activity. Fundamentally, the role of the hero hasn’t changed much since Homer’s time: the hero stands as a representative agent for a social collective, an exemplar of a certain ideal. The hero may be more purely representative, in a democratic or aesthetic sense, in that his or her agency is regarded as enacting collective will or as portraying a collective identity, or the hero may be more sovereign, seen as an autonomous agent leading the collective through wisdom, skill, and force of personality. Yet one of the most interesting and puzzling facts about the hero is that he or she is never wholly sovereign nor wholly representative. A hero must act, but unless that act is socially validated and recognized as heroic, there is no hero. As Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo point out, “Heroism is a social attribution, never a personal one” (99). The personal qualities of a hero matter less than the performative and situational qualities that define heroism for any given collective at any given historical moment.

At the same time, the heroic act is itself not a collective act, but an individual one. The hero must singularly enact a collective’s notion of itself; he or she must author the collective’s identity. It is in this way that the hero performs a kind of Schmittian “sovereign decision,” defining a specific threat, defining the boundaries of a social unit, through an existential act of physical and social risk. The sovereignty of the hero lies at least in part in their assertion of an identity against a clear social enemy, internal or external. Yet it is only through the collective recognition of that action as heroic that the sovereign decision of the actor is legitimated.
The ascription of heroic quality to a deed or person is often highly contentious, both at the time and after. The rhetoric surrounding and justifying the trauma hero in contradistinction to martial heroes, for instance, the contest of literary authorities between Owen and Pope, Prince Andrei and Napoleon, Hemingway and “abstract words like honor,” should be seen as part of twentieth-century cultural debates over what and who a hero is. There is a social conflict in the competing values embodied by Sergeant York as against Lieutenant Henry; John F. Kennedy as against John Yossarian. More contemporary American examples of still contentious heroic validation might include Martin Luther King, Jr., Harvey Milk, Chris Kyle, Hillary Clinton, Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and Donald Trump.

One thing that’s important to draw from Franco’s study is the real diversity of kinds of heroism they identify: Franco, et al., identify twelve heroic types including, along with physical heroes such as soldiers and firefighters, the “Good Samaritan,” scientific heroes, martyrs, underdogs, religious figures, and others. Too often, critical readings of war literature have implicitly defined “heroism” in a narrowly physical and martial sense, without taking into account the various ways heroism works culturally, the various ideals for which various kinds of sacrifice have been recognized as heroic. This has led to terminological confusions, such as describing Catch–22’s John Yossarian as an “anti-hero.” The idea of the so-called “anti-hero” obscures a heroic spectrum running between corrupted heroes such as Oedipus or Achilles, where our sympathy and admiration are mixed with disapproval, and socially rebellious heroes, such as Jesus Christ and Gandhi, who risk social sacrifice for a certain set of values. The term anti-hero confuses the hero’s structural role with a putative set of beliefs invidiously defined (the
“heroic”), and serves an ideological rather than an analytic function. It is in this light that we might understand the trauma hero as embodying two kinds of heroism at once: not only does he face death or physical wounding, but he also stands opposed to the prevailing social order that has sent him to war. As we have seen, this conflation of physical risk and moral risk in present in the poetry of Wilfred Owen, for one example. As we will see, *Catch-22*’s Yossarian is another example: he not only risks his life as a bombardier, but risks social exclusion as a version of what Franco calls a whistleblower, or “bureaucracy hero” (i.e., one who stands firm on a principle despite institutional pressure to conform).

This discussion brings up a problem worth addressing, which is the relation between the reader and the hero, between an audience and a protagonist—which is in some sense the question of the relation between “hero” as a social role and “hero” as a term of narrative analysis. We are mimetic apes, but not merely and not simply. Strict emulation of the kind Plato warned against in *The Republic* can be rightfully dismissed as a reductive understanding of reception, yet we nevertheless remember and internalize stories and characters as models of life. Most alarmingly, while we do seem to have an intuitive grasp of the difference between actual and possible, there is no substantial structural-cognitive boundary in our minds between fact and fiction—once something has been imagined, it exists for us as a virtual reality to be actualized at any moment, no matter how farfetched or fantastic: space flight, submarines, cloning, money, race, a nation.

Our engagement with the protagonists of virtual reality narratives occurs via sympathetic identification and imaginative substitution. We at once observe them as
another person with whom we identify and imagine ourselves in their place. At the same time, we identify ourselves with the collective out of which the protagonist is abstracted, because we are *not* that protagonist, despite our sympathy and imaginative substitution. We are, rather, in the position of *judging* the protagonist’s behaviors in relation to social norms. Our sympathies engage more or less with the hero, more or less with the collective, depending on a narrative’s construction and our own receptivity or tendencies toward identification.

We all know the experience of reading a book and finding the hero unsympathetic because we fail to identify with his or her situation. With works that dramatize an unlikable, corrupt, or even explicitly “evil” hero such *The Sopranos* or *Richard III*, our emotional engagement depends on our not identifying wholly with the hero, but identifying with him in part while still largely identifying with the collective. Tragedy in the Hegelian vein, the conflict of ethical worlds we see in *Antigone*, for instance, arises when our sympathetic engagement is pitched at equal or near-equal levels between a protagonist and her social group, or between two competing protagonists. It is one of the great virtues of fiction (what we might call the virtual *epoché*) that it allows us to bracket our real-world social investments and role-play imaginative identifications with others, even with multiple competing identifications at the same time. These identifications change over time, of course, and across cultures, so that a contemporary American reader of *Antigone* will not likely identify all that strongly with Creon and his enforcement of civil order: rather than see Antigone as pitched in tension with Creon, they will likely see her as the play’s hero and him as its villain.
The blurring between “hero” as a term of narrative analysis and “hero” as a social role is definitive, not accidental. Our social reality takes shape in the narratives we reproduce, and vice versa, and figuration is key to that mediation. If, as Walter Benjamin asserts, “History decays into images, not stories,” then those images are typically images of heroes (and their counter-images, enemies) (Arcades 476). In Emerson’s phrase, “all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons” (“Self-Reliance” 140). But heroes are not only the resolutions and reductions of the past—they also embody the cultural values of their moment. Thinking dialectically, we might understand the hero as a form of social media, a social intermediary: the hero is the concretized metaphoric relation between a collective and its ideal. The hero connects a human to a specific community ideal by demonstrating that the ideal in question is worth human life; the hero makes the ideal real by staking his or her existence on it. A hero who dies for an ideal has realized that ideal in blood: he has transformed a mere word into physical truth, a sign into substance.33

Thus, just as leadership and heroism are closely related, to the point of broad synonymy, so are heroism and sacrifice. As Franco, et. al, point out, heroism is an act undertaken “with recognition of possible risks/costs… [and] in which the actor is willing to accept anticipated sacrifice.” Heroism is always predicated on the willingness to be sacrificed and on the possibility of sacrificial fulfillment. The foundational anthropological work of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss can help us see the intermediary role the hero plays through his or her risk or sacrifice: “We see what is the distinctive characteristic of consecration in sacrifice: the thing consecrated serves as an intermediary between the sacrificer, or the object which is to receive the practical benefits of the

33 The hero is literally “the actor of his own ideal” (Beyond Good and Evil 273).
sacrifice, and the divinity to whom the sacrifice is usually addressed” (11). The word “divinity” should not confuse us here, and lead us to assume the personification of an idea which is just the sacrificial and heroic function. Jimi Hendrix died for Rock and Roll, as Sylvia Plath died for Poetry and Martin Luther King, Jr. died for Civil Rights, and these sacrifices embody these “divinities,” making them human, visceral, and real for the communities that venerate them. What Hubert and Mauss help us see is the relation between what they call “the thing consecrated,” the “sacrifier,” and the “divinity,” but what might be better understood as the relation between a sacrifice, the collective, and its ideal. In this understanding, the sacrifice mediates between the collective and its ideal: it conjoins even as it differentiates, it consecrates even as it embodies.

In *The Savage Mind*, Claude Levi-Strauss elaborates this Maussian understanding of sacrifice in a way that reveals its constitutive metaphoric logic, that is, the way that it joins two unlike terms (collective and ideal, here “man and the deity”):

In sacrifice, the series of natural species… plays the part of an intermediary between two polar terms, the sacrificer and the deity, between which there is initially no homology nor even any sort of relation. For, the object of the sacrifice precisely is to establish a relation, not of resemblance but of contiguity, by means of a series of successive identifications. These can be made in either direction, depending on whether the sacrifice is expiatory or represents a rite of communion: thus, either of the person offering the sacrifice with the sacrificer, of the sacrificer with the victim, of the sacralized victim with the deity; or in the reverse order.
This is not all. Once the relation between man and the deity is secured by the sacralization of the victim, the sacrifice breaks it by destroying the same victim. Human action thus brings about an interruption of continuity, and, as it had previously established communication between the human reservoir and the divine reservoir, the latter will automatically fill the gap by discharging the anticipated benefit. The scheme of sacrifice consists in an irreversible operation (the destruction of the victim) with a view to setting off an equally irreversible operation on another plane (the granting of divine grace), which is required by the fact that two ‘recipients,’ situated at different levels, have previously been brought into communication.

So sacrifice is an *absolute* or *extreme* operation which relates to an *intermediary* object (225).

The hero (or sacrifice) establishes a metaphoric relationship between the human and the idea, between matter and spirit: a relationship at once of unity and separation. The relationship of the hero to each pole is metonymic, in that the hero is joined to either pole by similitude: the hero is human; the hero is ideal. But the relationship the hero-sacrifice *creates* is metaphoric, in that the two terms it brings together are unified precisely by their difference: Man and God, the People and the Nation. The Western tradition’s exemplary hero-sacrifice of the first relation is, of course, Christ; the exemplary hero-sacrifice of the second is the soldier.

On this point, we might bring together Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as “an imagined political community… imagined as both inherently limited and
sovereign” (6), and Carl Schmitt’s concept of the political as the distinction between friend and enemy, to see more clearly the sacrificial logics of political theology at work in modern cultural representations of the soldier. Consider Anderson on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier:

No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely because they are deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them, has no true precedents in earlier times… Yet void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly national imaginings. (That is why so many different nations have such tombs without feeling any need to specify the nationality of their absent occupants. What else could they be but Germans, Americans, Argentinians…?) (9–10).

The tomb of the Unknown Soldier memorializes the sacrifice of the soldier by the people to the idea or “divinity” of the nation. As Dixon Wecter wrote in 1941, of the ceremony consecrating the American Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Armistice Day twenty years earlier: “Stripped of ancestry and name, of rank and calling, of home and friends and creed, the Unknown Soldier became a pure symbol of devotion to country” (412). The sacrificial soldier realizes—makes real—the metaphoric relationship between a collective and its idea of national identity, and we might even go so far as to say that the sacrifice of the soldier creates the nation as such: at the same time as the soldier mediates between a
collective and its idea of national identity, the soldier defines that identity by his
opposition to its counter-image, its negation, its enemy.

By physically confronting an existential threat of collective negation, the soldier
materially and dialectically enacts that collective’s identity. In World War II, the
American GI was a tenacious, independent, rough-and-ready fighter dreaming of the
comforts of home, who stood heroically opposed to the technological threat of the hyper-
professionalized Germans on the one hand and the bestial menace of the swarming
Japanese hordes on the other. On the level of ideology rather than image, democracy
stood opposed to totalitarianism. As Kenneth Burke described the phenomenon in an
article on “War and Cultural Life” published in the American Journal of Sociology,
published while US marines were fighting the Japanese on Guadalcanal: “[T]he fascist
enemy, by his opposition to democracy as an ideal, called upon us to prize it out of sheer
dialectical necessity. Surely this roundabout assistance to the cause of democracy has, to
date, been Hitler’s major contribution to culture” (405).

But as Hook and Bentley worried, the relationship between democracy and
heroism is a troubled one. Even more troubled is the relationship between the cultural
logic of capitalism and the cultural logic of sacrifice. Hence we come back around to the
specific problem of the hero in World War II, understood as the problem of reconciling a
structuring system of metaphoric exchange mediated by signs with a structuring system
of metaphoric exchange mediated by substance. As Burke described it in “War and
Cultural Life,” the salient issue facing the United States in World War II was “the need to
change from a commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives to a collective-sacrificial-
military nexus of motives” (404). Burke elaborated on this in his 1945 book, *A Grammar of Motives*:

[F]or the conditions of a war economy, as for the conditions of warfare itself, we need a *collectivistic* motive, which will be shared by all except the war profiteers and the empire-builders of big business.

To say as much is to realize the magnitude of the problem. The orthodox philosophy of capitalism involves precisely the opposite kind of dialectic. In the capitalist dialectic, as per Adam Smith, individual aggrandizements are made synonymous with public benefits…. In the Adam Smith vision of peace, people would be too busy amassing things to stop and fight over them. And the more they amassed as individuals, the more this would add up as total wealth for the society as a whole. Here there would be neither need nor room for a concept of individual sacrifice for the collective good—individual and collectivity being in apposition, not opposition.

Yet under a war situation, i.e., under a war motive, you must so alter the dialectic that individual sacrifice equals collective good (397).

When the “commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives” comes into tension with the “collective-sacrificial-military nexus of motives,” intense disputes emerge around topics of leadership, authority, the hero, violence, race, gender, and even meaning as such: the opposition between capitalist individualism and wartime collectivism is an opposition of *systems of metaphor*, or *metaphoric relation*. The divergence and conflict between these
systems of metaphoric relation in World War II is visible in many areas of wartime and postwar American culture, but perhaps nowhere more finely elaborated than in the wartime poetry of Wallace Stevens.
Chapter 6. Theaters of War (Repetitions I)

The life of a poet begins in a struggle with all of existence. The point is to find something reassuring, or legitimizing, because he must always lose the first struggle. He is not justified in wanting to win immediately. My poet finds a justification in that existence absolves him in that instant when he wishes, in a sense, to destroy himself. His soul then wins a religious resonance. This is what actually sustains him, despite the fact that it never breaks through.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition* (1843)

Politics is the struggle for existence.

—Wallace Stevens, “Adagia” (1948)

In the spring of 1941, at the invitation of Henry Church, Wallace Stevens gave a subdued talk at Princeton University titled “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” The talk was elliptical, and considered a succession of mounted figures as illustrations and metaphors of Stevens’s main concern, which was the relation between reality and poetry, and specifically the pressure put on the poet by reality, namely the turmoil of a world at war. Stevens saw the news, “news incomparably more pretentious than any description of

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34 Allen Tate suggested Stevens to Church as one of the possible speakers for a series on poetry they were proposing to Dean Christian Gauss at Princeton. Church put the idea to Stevens in December, 1940. (*Letters* 382n5). Also see Brazeau for accounts of the talk by two Princeton undergraduates, Bernard Heringman and Frederick Morgan (198–199). They agree that the talk was staid and muted in its delivery (“It was as if he’d written a paper and read the paper”).
it, news… of the collapse of our system, or call it, of life… news of a new world… and finally news of war,” as destructive of the contemplation necessary to create the musical and connotative language of poetry (Necessary Angel 20). For this, for Stevens, in 1941, there was only one response: “A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree [of violence], with the knowledge that the degree of today may become a deadlier degree tomorrow” (27).

Within just two years, though, Stevens changed his tune.

Stevens was invited to Mount Holyoke College in August, 1943, to speak as part of a series of philosophical and literary discussions, Les Entretiens de Pontigny, organized by Jacques Maritain, Gustave Cohen, Jean Wahl, and Helen Patch. Pontigny-en-Amérique, as it was billed, was seen as the continuation-in-exile of a tradition of annual meetings of intellectuals that had been held since 1910 in Normandy, France. These Pontigny décades, begun by Paul Desjardins, had included Gide, Valéry, Camus, Sartre, Lytton Strachey, Walter Benjamin, and Edith Wharton, among many others. The 1939 session was interrupted when the Germans invaded Poland, and by 1940 the Wehrmacht were using Pontigny as an arms depot. According to Christopher Benfey, Jean Wahl’s vision for Les Entretiens de Pontigny was that “They should be, first of all, acts of intellectual resistance, the cultural counterpart of de Gaulle’s Free French in London. But they should also be occasions for French-American dialogue, sealing culturally an alliance crucial to the eventual liberation of France” (7–8). While Les Entretiens were conceived as acts of resistance, they were not acts of resistance against

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35 For this history of Les Entretiens des Pontigny, see Christopher Benfey’s introduction to Artists, Intellectuals, and World War II: The Pontigny Encounters at Mount Holyoke College, 1942–1944 (2–11). Alan Filreis also discusses the event in Wallace Stevens and the Actual World (98–115).

36 Wahl had been captured by the Nazis after the fall of Paris, tortured, and interned at a concentration camp at Drancy, but escaped and fled via Marseilles and Casablanca to America.
reality as such, as Stevens demanded of the “possible poet,” but acts of resistance against a specific political situation, a specific political enemy. Implicit within Wahl’s vision is a recognition of conflict and of a need to take sides, a recognition of the demands that the reality of world war had made upon intellectuals in Europe and America.

Stevens’s 1943 Pontigny talk at Mount Holyoke, “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” is more lyrical and esoteric than “The Noble Rider,” and while it is just as much concerned with the relationship between reality and poetry, it doesn’t speak of reality’s “pressure” or of the incessant “news.” Instead, Stevens shifts focus to his vision of the relations between poetry and philosophy, and, strikingly, redefines the role of the poet and his relation to reality. There is no more talk of “resistance” or “evasion.” Instead, Stevens pronounces that “it may be said that poetic truth is an agreement with reality” (Necessary Angel 54). The poet no longer stoically presses back against the “violence without,” but instead “merely enjoys existence” (56). Poetic truth is redefined as “the truth of fact,” and poetry as “the imagination of life” (62, 65). Even allowing for a sophisticated, dialectical account of the way fact and imagination create each other, which flashes through, implicit, in moments of his essay, the change in Stevens’s position is unmistakable: from resistance to acceptance.

The most persuasive explanations for this change remain Alan Filreis’s and James Longenbach’s painstaking historical readings of Stevens’s wartime poetry. Filreis argues that “The cause of such a major change of position is the Americanization of the world war…” (40). Specifically Filreis documents Stevens’s deliberate maneuverings between nationalist and formalist demands on poetry, his encounters with European émigrés such as Fernand Auborjonois, Jean Paulhan, and Wahl, and his genealogical investigations into
his Dutch-American ancestry as evidence for Stevens’s careful effort to negotiate with
the actuality of the world at war. As Stevens writes in his 1942 poem, “Of Modern
Poetry”: “The poem of the mind in the act of finding /What will suffice… has to think
about war” (Collected Poems 240). Between 1941 and 1943, as Filreis documents,
Stevens found himself in the middle of a debate about the role of poetry in wartime, with
friends and colleagues on both sides: must poetry address the war, or should it remain
focused on more autonomous issues of form and poetic tradition? Longenbach, in
distinction to Filreis, argues that Stevens’s effort was less to accept the reality of war than
to respond creatively to it, less “to find what will suffice” than “to construct a new stage,”
as “Of Modern Poetry” also asserts. The figure that will come to inhabit this new stage,
Longenbach argues, is a Chaplinesque tramp: “The man / In the old coat… [and] sagging
pantaloons,” as seen in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction (Collected Poems, 389).
Longenbach first finds this “image of the supreme fiction” in a moving reading of
Stevens’s earlier poem “The Man on the Dump,” and sees the image as an emblem of
Stevens’s “rehabilitation of the ordinary” (Plain Sense 261, 271).

While Filreis’s exhaustive archival efforts bring together Stevens and the “actual
world” in tremendous detail, there is an inner poetic logic at work in Stevens’s oeuvre
that nevertheless remains obscure in Filreis’s account. And while I am certain that
Longenbach is correct that Stevens’s greatest poems dramatize the failure of the
Romantic imagination, that, in Longenbach’s words, “we could best appreciate the power
of Stevens’s finest work by thinking of its point as the self-defeat of poetry,” I’m not
convinced that the “rehabilitation of the ordinary” is the best description of that defeat,
nor that the “man in pantaloons” is an emblematic or even ultimate “image of the
supreme fiction” (265). According to Stevens’s eponymous poem, the “supreme fiction” must give pleasure, it must be abstract, and it must change, and while the “man in pantaloons” may give pleasure (as it does in Chaplin’s The Tramp or in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot), it is not abstract but figurative, and does not per se change. And while Longenbach’s account does explain that aspect of Stevens’s work wherein “The poet represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself,” it doesn’t seem to do much to account for the “war between the mind and sky” that Stevens describes in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, or for Stevens’s obsessive insistence that the “supreme fiction” remain indefinable (Opus 164; Collected Poems 407).

We might best understand Stevens’s wartime poetry and his turn from “resistance” to “agreement” by reading them in the terms by which he himself framed them—in terms, that is, of a conflict between reality and the imagination—and by keeping foremost in mind one fact about the chronology of Stevens’s composition in relation to the chronology of the World War: the fact that Notes toward a Supreme Fiction was not the ultimate development of Stevens’s response to the war, even if that was how it was positioned in 1947, when it was published as the ultimate poem in Transport to Summer. Rather, Notes toward a Supreme Fiction—first published as a stand-alone volume in 1942—should be seen above all as one moment, and an early one, of Stevens’s complicated negotiation with the idea of war.

Notes is one engagement in Stevens’s “war between the mind and sky,” the resistance to reality described in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” and while the poem’s soldier and the poem’s poet are deemed equals in its coda, and even if the poet’s truth “depends” on the soldier’s, the poet’s war is the “war that never ends,” which
is to say, the eternal struggle to resist reality and to make art from that resistance. It may be that *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* is Stevens’s supreme effort in his war against reality, and twice over: not only as an original publication but also and even moreso as an act of willful revision when it was republished as the *summa* of *Transports to Summer*. If *Notes* was an act of resistance in 1942, we can read its 1947 positioning as a claim, even an insistence, that Stevens’s resistance never flagged. Yet between those two dates came Stevens’s battered recognition of sovereign reality, his submission to the dominant metaphor of the day, his acceptance of the world war and his loss of the poet’s war. We can see this acceptance and submission in “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” delivered at Mount Holyoke, but we can also see it in several of the poems written from 1942 to 1947 and collected in *Transport to Summer*. Stevens’s submission to war-time reality is most fully developed in his 1944 poem “Repetitions of a Young Captain.”

Before I turn to “Repetitions,” however, it would be worthwhile to clarify the stakes in this “war” that I’m arguing Stevens “lost.” The coda to *Notes* and the prose statement on the poetry of war at the end of *Parts of a World* both sketch a conflict between the poetry of the imagination and the poetry of war. The prose statement reads in part:

The immense poetry of war and the poetry of a work of the imagination are two different things. In the presence of the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of the imagination. And consciousness of an immense war is a consciousness of fact. If that is true, it follows that the poetry of war as a consciousness of the victories and defeats of nations, is a consciousness of fact,
but of heroic fact, of fact on such a scale that the mere consciousness of it affects
the scale of one’s thinking and constitutes a participating in the heroic (Parts of a
World 183).

The first thing to note in this prose statement is that Stevens formulates the problem that
war poses poetry here not as an opposition between poetry and reality, which is how he
characterizes it in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” but as an opposition
between two kinds of poetry, two kinds of making meaning. In one, the ruling force is
imagination, by which he means what he calls in one poem “the exhilarations of
changes”—the free play of metaphoric substitution homologous to and mimetic of
capitalist exchange. When Stevens wrote in his Adagias, sometimes in the early 1940s,
“Money is a kind of poetry” (Opus 165), we might understand this as an insight into how
both money and poetry function as open metaphoric relations within an economy of free-
floating symbolic mediation, formalized by Marx in the commodity exchange
relationship C=M=C, where C is any commodity or thing and M is the mediating
signifier, whether it be money, an empty jar in Tennessee, or an “obscure moon lighting
an obscure world.” You trade your labor for money, which you use to buy food.

By contrast, the poetry of war is the poetry of fact, “of heroic fact,” as Stevens
writes “of fact on such a scale that the mere consciousness of it affects the scale of one’s
thinking and constitutes a participating in the heroic.” Stevens seems to be claiming here
that the poetry of war is a way of making meaning out of human action, what he calls
heroic fact, that compels collective identification with that action. Stevens feels this
compulsion as something that threatens to overwhelm the free play of metaphor, as "consciousness" threatens to take "the place of the imagination."

The structuring logic of metaphoric exchange mediated by signs, what Stevens called "the poetry of the work of the imagination," stood opposed to a structuring logic of metaphoric exchange mediated by substance, what Stevens called "the poetry of war…. a consciousness… of heroic fact," and "a participating in the heroic." The substance in this system of metaphoric exchange is the "heroic fact" of the soldier’s body, and what it mediates is the relationship between a group of people and their concept of themselves as a collective, the imagined community of the nation.

As discussed previously, the hero as sacrifice realizes a metaphoric relation between the human and the idea, between matter and spirit, between a group of persons and a nation, a relationship at once of unity and separation, that we might formalize in the relationship $C=S=C_1$, where $C$ is the collective, $S$ stands is the sacrificial body, and $C_1$ is the concept. In this case, $C$, a bunch of people, become $C_1$, a nation, through the mediation of $S$, the hero. Remember that the relationship of the hero to each pole is metonymic, in that the hero is joined to either by similitude: the hero is one of the people; the hero embodies the nation. But the relationship the sacrifice creates is metaphoric, in that the two polar terms it brings together are unified in their difference: a church is and is not God, a people are and are not the nation. The sacrificial soldier realizes—makes real—the metaphoric relation between a collective and its idea of national identity. This is what Stevens means by "heroic fact… on such a scale that the mere consciousness of it affects the scale of one’s thinking and constitutes a participating in the heroic."
The conflict between these two structuring logics of metaphoric exchange, one mediated by signs, one mediated by substance, the reason why Stevens is afraid that the “poetry of imagination” will be overwhelmed by “consciousness of fact,” is because in the first relation the terms are interchangeable, free-floating, and available for poetic experiment, but not in the second. In the first relation, anything can serve as a mediating sign and anything can be exchanged for anything else. We might think of this logic as horizontal, chronological, and open to infinitely variable repetition. The second relation, however, is only meaningful if the terms are specific. A specific sacrifice must be made for a specific group to a specific concept. We might think of this logic as vertical, kairotic, and open to repetition only in a strictly formal sense, meaning as ritual. Sacrifice endangers free exchange because it threatens it with determination, or as Stevens writes in “The Motive for Metaphor,” with “the hammer / Of red and blue, the hard sound— / Steel against intimation—the sharp flash, / The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” (*Collected Poems* 288).

This 1942 poem, which in *Parts of a World* immediately precedes one of Stevens’s more anxious hero poems (“Gigantomachia”) and in which Stevens clearly opposes the poetic function as he sees it against the brutality of united definition as invoked by allusion to wartime propaganda (“Of red and blue”), might be read as a response to Kenneth Burke, who had himself been invited by Henry Church to give a talk at Princeton in 1942 and who argued against any kind of Stevensian “resistance” that art should be politically and polemically committed to framing an internationalist ideal (Filreis, 85–86). As Burke wrote in “War and Cultural Life,” “The need to think of global war and its counterpart, global peace, invites us to seek also a truly global attitude toward
all mankind” (409). One wouldn’t think Stevens would be opposed to a “truly global attitude,” but therein lies a complication in his vision of the relationship between “poetry” and “reality.”

While Stevens’s internationalist disposition is manifest and well-documented, it remained his whole life in tension with an isolation not so much political as visceral: Stevens never traveled to Europe or Asia, his richly cosmopolitan network of international contacts was constructed almost entirely through correspondence, and his reluctance to meet correspondents in person bordered at times on the neurotic (when his admirer and correspondent José Rodriguez Feo came to visit him from Cuba, for instance, Stevens took pains to avoid him). Even if Stevens’s imagination favored the exotic and the distant, he retained all his life a stubborn resistance to submitting that imagination to the “vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” of the “actual world.” As Lee Jenkins puts it, “Stevens may have been attracted, intellectually, to relativism and the provisional, but temperamentally he was drawn to unity, to closure, to the sealed world of the poem where the poet himself calls all the shots” (54). That sealed, narcissistic world could only be sustained through constant resistance. As Stevens asserted in his prose statement on the poetry of war: “The poetry of the work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact. It goes on everywhere, even in the periods that we call peace” (Parts of a World 183).

Malcolm Woodland suggests that Stevens’s struggle to separate the self and the world was perhaps his defining struggle. The “‘within/without’ figuration itself is crucial,” Woodland writes, and I believe that it is through this figuration that we might be able to begin to understand what Stevens meant by his enigmatic “supreme fiction” and
the great threat posed to that idea by the demands of American wartime nationalism (38).

In the final canto of the last section of Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, Stevens recapitulates the apostrophic mode of the prelude, and his address this time is not to an unnamed “you,” but to the world at large, addressed as “fat girl.” The subtle transformations and movements of this final canto have been much commented on, and indeed the delicate shifts from stasis to movement and back are well worth attending to. But what seems most important about this canto as the culminating and definitive moment of the Notes is that it presents a clear separation between the speaking I and the mute addressee. The fact that this relationship is gendered and embodied is important, but not as important, it seems to me, as the fact that it is impermeable: the I and “you” are distinct, separate, paired but unjoined.

Even if, as Frank Lentricchia argues, “the journey [Stevens] took to the interior he did not willingly take,” that interior remained his domain and he defended it assiduously—even as he came to see that his hermetic isolation was a fiction (218). As the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger put it in The Philosophy of ‘As If’ (1924): “The division of the world into Things-in-themselves=Objects and Things-in-themselves=Subjects is the primary fiction upon which all others depend” (77). What’s important in Vaihinger’s philosophy of “As If” for understanding Stevens isn’t the division of the world into subjects and objects, or even the Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal, but the idea that this division is a fiction, indeed the “primary fiction upon which all others depend” (my italics).

This “primary fiction” of a distinct phenomenological or even ontological division between subjects and objects can be seen as the primary structuring principle of Stevens’s
poiesis from *Harmonium* to “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself,” a principle deeply threatened in the early years of the 1940s by the collectivist demands of nationalist war culture. The existential confrontation of war welds an assembly of persons into a Nation through the heroic sacrifice of the soldier, blurring the boundaries between subjects and objects, within and without, creating a We that is an I and an I that is a We.

America’s wartime nationalist communion, “the hammer / Of red and blue, the hard sound— / Steel against intimation—,” provoked a deep anxiety in Stevens that is evident in his letters, his wartime poetry, and in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” It was in defensive reaction against the merging of subject and object, against the threatened dissolution of individual lives into national sovereignty, and against the wartime interpellation of the state, that Stevens erected his mightiest fortress of solitude: *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*.

Admittedly, according to Milton Bates, “there is no evidence that Stevens ever read the German philosopher [Vaihinger] or even heard of him,” yet a handful of Stevens’s readers (including Frank Doggett and Frank Kermode) have found “striking affinities” between Stevens’s poetry and Vaihinger’s work (202). Longenbach sees an affinity there too, but like Bates locates it in a broad sense of willful fictionality, a kind of “will to believe,” as Stevens put it in this aphorism: “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly” (Longenbach 287–288, *Opus* 163). This kind of Jamesian or Nietzschean pragmatic idealism is certainly a strong candidate for Stevens’s “Supreme Fiction,” but I’m inclined to think that rather than the “Supreme Fiction” itself, it is a condition for it, which Stevens as much said in a letter to
Gilbert Montague: “Underlying [Notes] is the idea that, in the various predicaments of belief, it might be possible to yield, or to try to yield, ourselves to a declared fiction” (Letters 478). More illuminating, I think, is a later letter to Henry Church where Stevens writes: “The chief defect of humanism is that it concerns human beings. Between humanism and something else, it might be possible to create an acceptable fiction” (484).

There’s something Heideggerian about Stevens’s misanthropic remark here, but more important than the misanthropy is the little word “between.” “Between humanism and something else” is vague twice over, but that the effort would be toward creating something somewhere in-between, between humanism and whatever else, perhaps most emphatically between “human beings”—something like an impermeable pane—fits with Stevens’s strenuous efforts to maintain the primary fiction of the autonomous self.

Whether or not anyone will ever be able to say definitively what Stevens meant by the “Supreme Fiction” and whether or not it was deliberately intended as a kind of apophasis, and even if Stevens tried to re-motivate its revolutions once the war was over, we can see how acute Stevens’s understanding of the demands made upon citizens’ consciousness by total war was. He perceives clearly that “the sign of the times,” the socially dominant metaphoric relation, is the hero’s sacrifice, and that this sacrifice is an enactment or creation of fact—the physical embodiment of national identity. We are one and all interpellated by the nation-state in the violent act of its rebirth. In wartime, even poets are called upon to participate in the heroic.

In the poem “Repetitions of a Young Captain,” Stevens gives in to this call, renouncing his protected solitude for an ephemeral, vulnerable moment: “Let this giantness fall down / And come to nothing” (Collected Poems 310). “Repetitions”
documents Stevens’s brief embrace of Whitmanian permeability and collective identity, when for at least the length of one poem Stevens identifies himself directly with a nation at war. This paean to civic nationalism is so formally recondite that it should rebuff the charge of propaganda, yet it is as much a nationalist lyric as Stevens would ever write.

The poem begins dramatically: “A tempest cracked on the theatre.” A vague image forms of clouds and lightning over a stage. “Tempest” so close to “theatre” strongly suggests Shakespeare, the Globe, the world-as-a-stage, and calls up of course Shakespeare’s meditation on theatricality in The Tempest, and the renunciation of theatricality when Prospero cracks his staff. The tempest also invokes the war, and the theater also alludes to Stevens’s earlier poem, “Of Modern Poetry,” where “the theatre was changed,” and “the poem of the mind” had “to think about war” and “construct a new stage.”\(^\text{37}\) Within this miniature proscenium of six words, Stevens’s characteristic dialectic of “mind and sky” erupts with an implication of thunder… and bombs. On the one side the Shakespearean theater, on the other the theater of war, and between them the illusionist glamour constitutive of the theatrical act, invoked by way of its most resonant emblem of abdication.\(^\text{38}\)

This portentous image of theatrical ruin opens into its later recollection in a series of repetitions and revisions that trouble our senses of place, speaker, and time.\(^\text{39}\) The

\(^{37}\) Noted by Jarraway (220) and Woodland (65).

\(^{38}\) Filreis, in his extremely helpful historical contextualization of this poem, suggests persuasively that the image opening the poem emerged for Stevens from conversations with the young Captain Fernand Aurborjnois, who used to stand on a balcony watching German and Italian bombers strike Algiers. Yet while Filreis’s elucidation of Aurborjnois’s importance as a source of inspiration for the poem is important, it is not definitive, and the opening image of the poem is certainly not “otherwise inexplicable” (29–36).

\(^{39}\) Filreis reads this section as a trope of traumatic memory (32–33), while Longenbach sees it as portraying the inability of civilians to comprehend the reality of war (232). The poem has not received much attention from readers, and what attention it has received seems perplexed. Filreis and Longenbach differ substantially in their readings, and while Woodland’s reading builds on Jarraway’s, it also diverges from it. Of them all, Filreis and Woodland are most helpful, though Woodland relies on a somewhat clunky gender
quick shifts in temporality and situation, from “It had been real” to “It was not now,” from “It was something overseas / That I remembered” to “something that I remembered / Overseas,” create a sense of intensity insensibly building, an abstract vibration of memory that ends with a powerful transformation: “The rip / Of the wind and the glittering were real now, / In the spectacle of a new reality.” These lines suggest that it is the destruction that was real, rather than the thing destroyed, positing an ontological primacy to force over substance: the ruin had been real, but was not now—only the tempest’s wind and glittering “were real now,” in the synthesis of spectacular reality.

The first two stanzas of the second canto repeat the theatrical image, but in a grotesque dumb-show of passive observers, a “glibly gapering” actor, and his partner, a “faintly encrusted… tissue of the moon.” The next two stanzas develop this masque into metaphorical description of actorly craft: “They polished the embracings of a pair / Born old, familiar with the depths of the heart, / Like a machine left running, and running down.” These actors working their art, “polishing embracings,” and sliding entropically into decrepitude, form an allegory of the poet and his muse (like the “Youth as Virile Poet” and “the sister of the Minotaur,” but degraded and grotesque), and depict the poetic act of creation as merely a kind of stagecraft, the mechanical repetition of a well-polished illusion.

The renunciation suggested in the first stanza by allusion to Prospero’s broken staff is replayed here as a fatalistic domestication ending in oblivion. The final stanza of
section II completes the elegiac turn: “It was a blue scene washing white in the rain, / Like something I remembered overseas. / It was something overseas that I remembered.” A “blue” scene, suggesting erotic nostalgia, “washing white,” fading over time, like a memory, “like something I remembered overseas”—or something overseas that I remembered. Here, Stevens’s reprise of the initial syntactical inversion effects a melancholy consonance, and the setting of the first formulation in its own sentence, in its own line, gives it a sententiousness effecting strong closure. The general sense of desuetude is tinged with erotic loss.

The sense of loss is compounded in the third canto, which opens with a scene of battle that puts the theatrical ruin of the first in diminishing perspective: “Millions of major men against their like / Make more than thunder’s rural rumbling. They make / The giants that each one of them becomes…” Against the allegorization of poetic production as mechanical stagecraft “left running, and running down,” the soldier enacts a collective identity that seems to be at first no more than pointless, sweaty vigor, merely “a giant sense / To the make-matter, matter-nothing mind,” until through conflict it takes shape as a fact. The hero has an existence “beyond / The finikin spectres in the memory,” and through his metaphoric “elevation” achieves a more substantial reality. The final lines of the canto, like its opening, contrast the poet’s position with the soldier’s, finding a similitude that disavows the difference insisted upon in the prose statement in *Parts of a World*, and suggesting an ambiguous relationship between the soldier and the poet-narrator, in which the poet-narrator is left wanting: “His route lies through an image in his mind: // My route lies through an image in my mind, / It is the route that milky millions find, / An image that leaves nothing much behind.”
The fourth canto sheds the “as if” of the supreme fiction through its recognition
“of the clear sovereign that is reality, / Of the clearest reality that is sovereign.” The
rhetorical question (“If these were only words... how should I repeat them...”) framing
the poet-narrator’s submission to “sovereign reality” obscures his admissions of
desperation and fear, and his anxious recognition of the sanctity of the soldier’s sacrifice
(“the adobe [sic] of angels”). For Stevens to sound the “heraldic-ho” of sovereign reality
is a step beyond the agreement between poetry and reality of “The Figure of the Youth as
Virile Poet,” two steps beyond the parallelisms of soldier and poet in the coda to Notes,
and a complete disavowal of the resistance offered in “The Noble Rider.”

And what has brought about this change? The remainder of the canto suggests the
reasons. First, the “constant” sacrifice of the unknown soldier, who leaves “as he is, / Yet
in that form will not return.” The question “But does / He find another?” asks pointedly
what this sacrifice might mean, and Stevens finds the reason for his “heraldic-ho” in the
answer—not a supreme fiction, but the “imagined community” of the nation: “If, as giant,
/ He shares a gigantic life, it is because / The gigantic has a reality of its own.”

The diminutions and recognitions of the poet-narrator in the previous cantos come
to a summation in the fifth, the poem’s longest. Here the dualities and contrasts
structuring the previous four cantos fall away, giving rise to a series of appositive,
anaphoric, deictic fragments, circling around “a few words”: namely, “there it is.” What
is “it”? Reality itself, or as Filreis put it, “national reality.” “It” is the “memorandum
voluble / Of the giant sense,” the “memorandum of the people sprung / From that
strength, whose armies set their own expanses,” the “gigantic” that “has a reality of its
own”—the American people as an American nation. “It” is “ Millions of instances of
which I am one”: the old, the roseate parent, the bride, the ensigns of the self, the drivers in the wind-blows, the men pulling into the sky, the slow-foot litter bearers, the soldier constantly stepping away, the complete society of the spirit when it is alone, without a word of rhetoric. Stevens’s poet-narrator—and, I’m arguing, Stevens himself—has not only agreed with reality, he has identified himself in and with it.

While the final canto begins with a typically Stevensian tweak, turning the invidious contrast between the private imaginariurn and gigantic wartime reality into a question of whether or not they might both be merely theatre, “theatre for theatre, / the powdered personals against the giants’ rage,” the poem of the mind seems to have found what will suffice, at least temporarily, and “the choice [forecast in “Asides on the Oboe”] is made.” The “blue” of the stage and the moon merges with the “gold-whipped reddened in big-shadowed black” of primary noon to reveal an orator in “tufted green.” Her vague “Secrete me from reality” merges with “That reality secrete itself” to become “Secrete us in reality.” The strictly separate “you” and “I” of Notes’s finale merge here, two years later, into an “us,” and the poem ends with a desideratum of vulnerable yet stoic collective responsibility, a call to poetry that fully faces the “pressure of reality” without evasion, resistance, or “mere rhetoric”:

Discover

A civil nakedness in which to be,

In which to bear with the exactest force

The precisions of fate, nothing fobbed off, nor changed
In a beau language without a drop of blood.

This is a remarkable attempt at reckoning with an unacceptable reality, and if it ends ambiguously, like many of Stevens’s poems, it none the less offers a clear lyric dramatization of not only process but an event, a turning point, a decision.

Stevens’s next and last major war poem, “Esthétique du Mal,” inhabits this same general stance with its complex heteronomy, maintaining both the sympathetic Whitmanian pluralism of “Repetitions” and its disposition to engage the “consciousness of fact,” but once the war passes Stevens’s work resolves back into a hermetic interiority, through which the closest possible engagement with reality is to see or hear clearly. At the perilous penultimate moment of Stevens’s submission to “national reality,” he peeked into the abyss: it really could all just be “theatre for theatre.” Instead he chose “reality”—“us”—whatever that meant, and it is clear from the last stanzas of “Repetition” that he knew it meant not only a recognition of his connection to the rest of humanity, but a renunciation of autonomous creative power: “Let this giantness fall down / And come to nothing. Let the rainy arcs / And pathetic magnificences dry in the sky.” While Longenbach reads Stevens’s placement of Notes toward a Supreme Fiction at the end of Transport to Summer as a recuperative act, from another perspective the repetition of his 1942 masterpiece looks like a desperate effort to pretend nothing had changed. Stevens repeats himself in order to re-affirm his self, and the isolate, autonomous individuality that was his supreme fiction.
The language of the existential individual already possesses an elaborate history with all kinds of stereotypes that it can be the task of representation to correct, disrupt, undermine or metaphysically challenge. That of the collective does not yet exist. Group, nation, clan, class, general will, multitude—all these remain so many linguistic experiments for designating an impossible collective totality, a manifold of consciousnesses as unimaginable as it is real. War is one among such collective realities which exceed representation fully as much as the they do conceptualization, and yet which ceaselessly tempt and exasperate narrative ambitions, conventional and experimental alike.


As regards narrative mimesis… it is clear that plots, as in tragedy, should be constructed dramatically, that is, around a single, whole, and complete action, with beginning middle, and end, so that epic, like a single and whole animal, may produce the pleasure proper to it.

—Aristotle, *Poetics* (ca. 335 BCE)

On August 7, 1942, the same day that the US 1st Marine Division began its initial assault on the Japanese-held island of Guadalcanal in the South Pacific, Wallace Stevens visited
a Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in Kingston, New York. In that church, he spoke
with a man he described as a “pleasant janitor with a red nose,” who gave Stevens a
pamphlet about the Kingston church containing an article written by a local justice, one
Judge Gilbert Hasbrouck (Letters 449). The article began: “Indeed, when Spinoza’s great
logic went searching for God it found Him in a predicate of substance.” Stevens found
this interesting enough to later remark on: “The material thing: the predicate of substance
in this case, was this church: the very building. Now, if a lawyer as eminent as Judge
Hasbrouck went to church because it made possible for him to touch, to see, etc., the very
predicate of substance, do you think he was anything except a poet?”

Ontology was an urgent concern. While Stevens had always been a philosophical
poet, the global war brought into American life by the Japanese Navy’s attack on Hawai`i
on December 7, 1941 and being waged across the world while he pondered Spinoza in
Kingston moved Stevens to more acute meditation on the relationship between that-
which-is, substance, and what is said about that-which-is or exists in it, the predicate of
substance, and furthermore to ask what this relationship has to do with poetry and war. In
the modern understanding of war, accidental qualities—that a soldier happens to be
American—are reinterpreted as essential and substantial ones through the act of bodily
sacrifice—that soldier is a dead American. In modern wartime death, the predicate
national identity, “American,” “Japanese,” “German,” or “Russian,” participates in the
substance of the body that is sacrificed to it. The idea behind the identity, the concept
being re-presented in death, takes on the reality of the human bodies which it consecrates.

Over the winter of 1942 to 1943, while Wallace Stevens explored the hero
function in his poetry, young Corporal James R. Jones saw the same ontological problem
play out in conflicting and confusing ways across the hills and jungles of Guadalcanal, where he was fighting with the 25th Infantry Division against tenacious Japanese defense. Twenty years later, Jones returned to reflect on and fictionalize his experience in his 1962 combat novel *The Thin Red Line*. Exploring the problem of the hero is essential to that novel’s project. It was written with the idea of representing a collective, the infantry unit “C-for-Charlie Company,” as its protagonist, and James Jones’s letters with his editor Burroughs Mitchell show him revising the manuscript to make sure no individual character took on too prominent a role. As Jones wrote Mitchell, he intended the book to be “a combat novel in a Proustian style” (*To Reach Eternity* 279). What’s more, as one might expect from a war novel, the analysis of battlefield heroics and reflection on how those actions are both seen at the moment and later turned into narratives are major aspects of what *The Thin Red Line* is about.

The road Jones took from Guadalcanal to *The Thin Red Line* was a long one. A Depression-dodging peacetime Army enlistee, Corporal James R. Jones deployed in December 1942 to Guadalcanal by sea transport from Hawai‘i with F Company, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division. His time at the front on Guadalcanal was brief. Three days into his first battle, on January 13, 1943, he was wounded by shrapnel from a mortar shell and evacuated. Ten days later, still wearing bandages over his head and one eye, he returned to his unit and was re-assigned as a clerk. One day while on duty at the command post, Jones walked off into the jungle to find a place to relieve himself. Squatting alone, with his pants around his ankles, he looked up to see a Japanese soldier charging him with a bayonet. Jones grappled with the man and killed him. Later, in March, after the fighting on Guadalcanal was over, Jones
was sent to the aid station for a twisted ankle. His ankle was so badly hurt that he was
sent to New Hebrides for surgery, then to New Zealand, San Francisco, and finally
Memphis, Tennessee for recovery. After some trouble, Jones was honorably discharged
in 1944, and he returned to his hometown of Robinson, Illinois, where, after a tumultuous
readjustment (through which he was helped by the attentions of a married, older woman
named Lowney Handy), he wrote his first novel, *They Shall Inherit the Laughter*. In
1945, Jones moved to New York City to attend NYU, and submitted his novel to
Maxwell Perkins at Scribner’s. Perkins passed on *They Shall Inherit the Laughter*, but
encouraged Jones to develop an idea he’d had for a novel about the peacetime army. That
novel eventually became *From Here to Eternity* (1951).41

The novel was a tremendous bestseller, but while critics spoke almost
unanimously of the novel’s narrative force, many also found the writing clumsy,
repetitive, and puerile. That didn’t keep Hollywood from turning into a blockbuster film,
of course, starring Burt Lancaster, Montgomery Clift, Deborah Kerr, Donna Reed, and
Frank Sinatra. The film won eight Academy Awards, delivered up images and moments
that became iconic for postwar American cinema (Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr
embracing on the beach on Hawai`i not least), and made Corporal Jones rich and famous.
Jones’s second novel, *Some Came Running* (1957), a 1,266-page story about a veteran
and writer named David Hirsh who returns to his hometown of Parkman, Illinois, was
universally panned. Critics found the novel tedious and incoherent, even unreadable,
especially because of the deliberately idiosyncratic spelling, punctuation, and syntax
Jones had adopted to convey stream-of-consciousness thought and realistic speech.
Nevertheless, the book sold well, and MGM made a superb and critically lauded movie

41 On biographical data, I am indebted to Frank MacShane’s *Into Eternity*. 
out of it in 1958, directed by Vincente Minelli and starring Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and, in a breakout performance, young Shirley MacLaine.

Early on in Some Came Running, David Hirsh has an idea for a combat novel. Jones’s elaboration of this idea is worth quoting at length:

His combat novel was to be a comic novel. A comedy. The writers after the last war had all written and written and written about the horrible horrible horrors of war until it had become a literary tradition. But nobody had ever thought of writing a comic combat novel. And really, if you could divorce yourself from imagining it was you, there was nothing funnier in the world than the way a man who’s been shot tumbles loosely and falls down. Unless it’s watching someone slip on a banana peel and break their arm. Besides, he knew why the old ones had written like they did. They pretended that horror stuff. It was not because they especially hated war or felt sorry for the men and animals who got killed. And it was not particularly because of fear, either, everybody was afraid when he was being shot at. The comical thing was how unafraid it made you to do the shooting. No, they had written like they did because their egos could not support this hated indignity of personal death, any kind of death, which they feared they might have to suffer and were so vain they could not stand the thought of. That, and also because they were hungry starved for sympathy. He knew, because he had felt that way himself. But your typical Infantryman’s vanity took quite another form. He had got a glimpse of that, too, when he killed his first three Germans and felt so pleased and powerful and Godlike. Once you’d killed a couple war wasn’t nearly
so horrible. He wanted to write a pleased delighted comical novel about killing and combat and bust up their old monopoly why should they have a monopoly on war? and at the same time force the human race for once to take an unvarnished unsugarcoated look at itself for a change. That was to be the theme of his combat novel, and its purpose, and the reason he wanted to do it was because he was as vain as they were, and because maliciously he would love it if he could just once make the human race for once look at itself. He would enjoy that more than anything else in the world. They would recoil in such shock and horror at themselves that foreverafter never again would the name of D. HIRSH be mentioned in polite society.

Except that he wasn’t going to write it.

Why should he write it? (145)

In *The Caine Mutiny*, literary authority is proved lacking in contrast to the authority of experience—reading people is more important than reading books. In Wallace Stevens’s wartime poetry, Stevens struggled to assert the authority of poetic truth against the authority of fact, but in the end capitulated, invoking “A civil nakedness in which to be, // In which to bear with the exactest force / The precisions of fate.” In *Some Came Running*, David Hirsh fantasizes about totally overthrowing literary authority, and shaming it to boot: “the laughable is one category of the shameful,” according to Aristotle, and D. Hirsh’s vision of writing a comic novel about war is a vision in which he would shame all humanity by making it see its own base nature (*Poetics* V).
The Thin Red Line both is and is not the comedy Jones had written Hirsch imagining. The novel does have moments of humor, and it does attend closely to emotions and affects considered at the time base, undignified, or immoral, such as jealousy, envy, bloodlust, rage, fear, arrogance, abjection, homosexual attraction, and vanity. But The Thin Red Line could really only be understood as a comedy in invidious distinction against tragedy, which is an anachronistic frame for understanding twentieth-century American novels. If it were necessary to map Jones’s novel onto classical genres, the form it resembles more than any other is the epic: in its unity of space and time, its roster of fairly static characters, its repetitions and transformations, The Thin Red Line rather resembles Homer’s Iliad. More centrally, Jones’s carefully drawn portraits of the men of C-for-Charlie company aren’t drawn with the flattening or distortion that we would need to recognize them as comic figures. In fact, while no character in the novel is drawn without flaws, nearly all of them are portrayed sympathetically, and even the meanest, most vicious men in Charlie company, like Private Doll and Charlie Dale, are presented at moments in the dignity of their own voice and their own self-understanding. This representational pluralism (or polyphony, in Bakhtin’s term) is one of Jones’s most striking achievements, and brings us to the novel’s central problem, which is the life of a collective: how a collective persists in its organic unity even as it changes through the disparate and divergent actions of its individual constituents.

The problem was one Jones deliberately set himself. As many readers have noted and as Jones himself asserted, the main character of The Thin Red Line is not an individual, but a collective: C-for-Charlie company. Jones told his editor Burroughs Mitchell that he conceived of the novel as “the story of an infantry company followed
through its initial combat (Guadalcanal) and its changes and reactions, and how it is
different afterwards” (To Reach Eternity 265). While many of the characters have richly
suggested interior lives and strong narratives of their own experience, there is no central
or unifying figure, no individual protagonist, to pull them together or put them into
symbolic order. 42 Indeed, when a friend of Jones’s commented that one of the soldiers,
Fife, was “emerging as a fine major character,” Jones changed the novel to give a key
scene to another, less important character, Bead (To Reach Eternity 288). The narrative
lingers with assorted rebels, martinets, despots, lovers, and heroes, but not one of them
occupies center stage for long. Further, Jones’s authorial voice in the novel is cold, clean,
measured, and ironic, moving in a register pitched somewhere between Stendhal and
Flaubert (both of whom Jones admired greatly). The point of view is Flaubertian as well:
written in a psychologically sophisticated free indirect discourse, The Thin Red Line takes
us not only into various characters’ conscious thoughts, but into their percepts, affects,
and judgments. The novel’s perspectival irony is highlighted by its epigraph and ending:
it begins with a dedication “to those greatest and most heroic of all human endeavors,
WAR and WARFARE,” and concludes with a disavowal of authorial truth, “Ahead of
them the big LCIs waited to take them aboard, and slowly they began to file into them to
be taken out to climb the cargo nets up into the big ships. One day one of their number
would write a book about all this, but none of them would believe it, because none of
them would remember it that way” (510). Given the novel’s polyphony, its fragmentary
and epic narrative structure, and the cool irony of its narrative voice, we ought best to
look for its center of meaning, what Roman Jakobson called a work’s “dominant,” not in
any single point, but in the relation of its parts.

42 This is in marked contrast to Terrence Malick’s film version, which centers on Witt.
C-for-Charlie exists as an assembly of men, as much as its Table of Organizations and Equipment exists, or the Company Roster prefacing the novel, a concatenation of disparate individualities, but it also exists as a single organism, a giant that “has a reality of its own.” Recalling Fredric Jameson’s concerns, expressed in this section’s first epigraph, that representations of collective totality are impossible, even “unimaginable,” we must wonder if indeed Jameson is right, and the task Jones set himself beyond that of even the most “Proustian” writer: can a writer represent a collective, and show “its changes and reactions, and how it is different afterwards”?\(^43\) Reflecting on our analysis of the hero as the mediation or metaphoric relation between a collective and an ideal, and between a collective and its own identity, we might ask what the role of the hero is in Jones’s novel. Can a collective be a hero? How would that even be possible?

We can begin to answer these questions by considering the novel’s representations of leadership, especially its “repetitions of a captain.” Leadership is a key topos in *The Thin Red Line*, and not only through specific leaders but through how different men move through various leadership roles. C-for-Charlie company has four commanders over the course of the novel. Three other leaders feature prominently, Lieutenant Colonel Tall, the battalion commander, Captain Gaff, who leads an assault team on a strongpoint and is awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, and First Sergeant Welsh. Many of the men who begin as privates are promoted to corporal or sergeant in order to replace men killed or wounded in battle. Focusing mainly on C-for-Charlie’s first captain, with a supplementary look at his replacement, Lieutenant Band,

\(^43\) Recall Jameson: “Group, nation, clan, class, general will, multitude—all these remain so many linguistic experiments for designating an impossible collective totality, a manifold of consciousnesses as unimaginable as it is real. War is one among such collective realities which exceed representation fully as much as the they do conceptualization, and yet which ceaselessly tempt and exasperate narrative ambitions, conventional and experimental alike” (*Antinomies* 257).
and the company’s final commander, Captain Bosche, will help elucidate how the collective organism in question takes shape, functions, and changes, while also illuminating some of the broader concerns in this chapter.

Captain “Bugger” Stein commands C-for-Charlie through the first two-thirds of the novel, from the company’s arrival at Guadalcanal through its first two major battles, an assault on a Japanese-held hill called “The Dancing Elephant,” and a reconnaissance-in-force through the jungle into the Japanese rear area. Stein is relieved by Colonel Tall following the second battle, despite C-for-Charlie’s success in both actions, because he refused Tall’s order the day before to send his men in a direct attack against a Japanese position. Tall didn’t think Stein was tough enough to command an infantry company: “I think you’re too soft,” Tall tells him. “Too soft-hearted. Not tough-fibered enough. I think you let your emotions govern you too much. I think your emotions control you” (336). Stein’s reaction to his relief is complex.

Stein was studying his own reactions. There was, he found, a quite strong desire to describe for the Colonel the actions he had accomplished today: the long march, the taking of The Trunk, how he had come to Tall’s aid and broken open a way in for him—and then to point out that yesterday, as if Tall didn’t know it, was the first time he had ever really been under fire, point out that today he had been much less concerned about seeing his men killed. Perhaps that was what Tall wanted him to say, in order to allow him to keep him? Or perhaps Tall didn’t want, did not intend to keep him in any case? But Stein didn’t say it. Instead, he
grinned suddenly and said something else. He could feel it was a pretty stiff grin.

“In a way, it’s almost a compliment then, isn’t it, Colonel, sort of?”

Tall stared at him exactly as though he had not heard what he said, or that if he had it did not apply to anything at all, and went on with what he obviously had already prepared to say. Stein did not feel like saying it again. Anyway, he was not sure—in fact, he did not believe—that what he had just said was true. He believed, with Tall, the opposite. It was no compliment (336–337).

Tall dismisses Stein with a promise to put him in for a Silver Star and a Purple Heart, and to see that he gets sent to Washington, D.C.

Stein’s concern for his men is evident, even though the troops call him “Bugger” behind his back because he “walked like he had a cob up his ass,” and even though he sometimes looks on them with condescension and even hate (11). The character and motive of Stein’s concern, however, is left open: it seems more an aspect of Stein’s dominant rectitude, his insistence on doing the “right” and “responsible” thing, than it does part of any genuine care or fellow-feeling. Stein himself wonders if he had “refused Tall’s order because he was afraid for himself, afraid he might be killed” (380).

The confrontation between Tall and Stein that leads to Stein’s being relieved develops out of contradictions between Stein’s rectitude and the demands of his role as commander. What I mean by his rectitude is best shown by his actions on the unit’s first night on Guadalcanal, when C-for-Charlie is ordered to bivouac. The company is caught in a torrential rain that floods their campsite and turns the earth to mud, whereon Stein

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44 “He hated them, all of them. You break your ass trying to look after them, be a father to them. And all they do is hate you for it, and for being an officer, with a hard, ignorant, stubborn endurance” (117).

45 “Men; men; he was losing all his men; men he had lived with; men he was responsible for” (211).
discovers that their eight-man personnel tents have not yet arrived from the ship. “Logically there was only one order to give, which was for the men to break packs and put up their sheltertents, and that was the order Stein gave. Logical or not, it was still an absurd order, and Stein was painfully aware of this” (56). While the eight-man tents would have allowed the men some comfort and protection from the rain, the two-man sheltertents the soldiers carried were two pieces of canvas, one carried by each soldier, buttoned together and erected on short poles, usually over a shallow slit trench. In a torrential tropical rain, these floorless, flapless shelters would have been useless for keeping the men dry or out of the mud. But standard operating procedure would have required the men to put them up, so that’s the order Stein gives. Long before the unit enters combat, this moment of quiet drama shows Stein grappling with the ethics of giving an order he knows is at once correct and absurd.

Stein’s ethical dilemmas only grow more dire once he leads his men into the fight. In the initial attack, Stein orders two platoons to “locate and eliminate the hidden strong points on… two grassy ridges” (189). Everything seems to go wrong almost immediately, as several men are killed and the two platoons are caught under heavy fire. One of the platoons manages to retreat back to cover, but the other remains pinned down. Stein, down the hill from the attack, has no idea what happened or how, and, when his commander Colonel Tall reaches him via field phone, Stein is certain he is going to be reprimanded. When instead Tall compliments Stein, telling him that he pulled off the “Best sacrificial commitment to develop a hidden position I have ever seen outside maneuvers,” Stein is bewildered (200). When Tall asks Stein for information, Stein responds that he doesn’t know what happened. Later in the attack, after another platoon
has been sent in, Stein and Tall have another conversation by field phone that devolves into mutual incomprehension, with Colonel Tall berating Stein and Stein responding in weak confusion. “What do you want me to do?” Captain Stein asks. Tall barks back “Get cracking, boy! Get cracking!”

As Stein turns from his field phone to consider himself as Colonel Tall and his staff see him from their Olympian view on Hill 207, he has a “horrifying vision” of what Stevens meant by “heroic fact”:

Stein had a sudden and unholy, heartfreezing picture, which transfixed him for a moment, bulge-eyed, of an identical recurrence up there now of the scene he himself had witnessed on Hill 207 two days ago. The same harassed, apprehensive Battalion Colonel with field glasses; the same diffident, but equally apprehensive little knot of eagles and stars peering over his spiritual shoulder; the same massed mob of pawns and minor pieces craning to see like a stadium crowd; all were up there right now, going through the identical gyrations their identical counterparts had gone through two days ago. While down below were the same blood-sweating Captains and their troops going through theirs. Only this time he himself, he Jim Stein, was one of them, one of the committed ones. The committed ones going through their exaggerated pretenses of invoking the cool calm logic and laws of the science of tactics. And tomorrow it would be someone else. It was a horrifying vision: all of them doing the same identical thing, all of them powerless to stop it, all of them devoutly and proudly believing themselves to be free individuals. It expanded to include the scores of nations, the millions of
men, doing the same on thousands of hilltops across the world. And it didn’t stop there. It went on. It was the concept—concept? The fact; the reality—of the modern State (222–223).

Here we have dramatized the philosophical-poetic problem Stevens explored in “Repetitions of a Young Captain” in 1944. Recall:

Millions of major men against their like
Make more than a thunder’s rural rumbling. They make
The giants that each one of them becomes

In a calculated chaos: he that takes form
From the others, being larger than he was,
Accoutred in a little of the strength

That sweats the sun up on its morning way
To giant red, sweats up a giant sense
To the make-matter, matter-nothing mind,

Until this matter-makes in years of war (Collected Poems 307).

Stevens is directly concerned here with the ontology of the political as “a giant sense” is made matter, or substance, as what he calls in another section of the poem “this being in a
reality beyond / The finikin spectres of memory” is created by young “blood-sweating Captains,” and his lyrical meditation on this subject is as troubled as Captain Stein’s is horrified.

Both Wallace Stevens and James Jones are deeply concerned with what it means to “participate in the heroic,” which for Stevens is a problem of how the soldier and poet each relate to what he sometimes calls reality and sometimes calls the “gigantic,” and for Jones is a problem on the one hand of the relation between the individual and the collective, and on the other of agency and free will. Just as Stevens sees Leviathan-like giants arising out of sweaty multitudes and the conceptual reality of “make-matter, matter-nothing mind,” Stein’s thought abstracts the repetitions before him out from a particular moment to the ontology of the political as such: “It was the concept—concept? The fact; the reality—of the modern State.” Stein’s swift shift from concept to reality, the dialectical collapse of the two into a question and answer caught in a parenthetical interjection struggling to sum up and define the scene of what Stevens described in “millions of major men against their like,” the move from concept to discrete fact then to totalized reality, re-inscribes the metaphoric relation of the soldier’s sacrifice as a scene of industrial horror. The concept realized and consecrated in all this mechanical butchery is nothing less than the “imagined community” of the United States of America.

But this moment of horror—the obverse if not the opposite of the sublime—offers no enlightenment or release. Stein must plunge ahead to the bitter end. As the attack wears on, he grows increasingly exhausted and strained, until finally, he refuses to obey Tall’s order “to attack, and attack now, with every available man at your disposal!”
Tall repeats his order, Stein refuses again, and Tall comes forward to take command himself. By the time Tall reaches Stein, however, the entire situation has changed.

What Bugger Stein and Brass Band could not know was that Sergeant Beck the martinet had, on his own initiative, knocked out five Japanese machinegun emplacements in the last fifteen or twenty minutes, all at the cost of only one man killed and none wounded. Phlegmatic, sullen, dull and universally disliked, an unimaginative, do-it-like-the-book-says, dedicated professional of two previous enlistments, Milly Beck came to the fore here as perhaps no one else including his dead superior, Keck, could have done (264).

When Stein tells Tall that the situation has changed, Tall asks him “And to what do you attribute the change?” Stein tells him “Sergeant Beck.” Tall says “Then you got my message to him.” Stein, for no other possible reason than his disposition to rectitude, throws away the chance Tall is offering him for absolution, the opportunity to wash away his disobedience. He says: “No, Sir. I mean, yes, Sir I did. It went forward with the new squads. But Beck had already sent his men off before they got there. Some time before” (267–268).

We ought to note the reference in the passage above to “doing it like the book says,” and to the ways that this scene alludes to and revises the drama presented in The Caine Mutiny. Jones is a writer much more in the American Realist tradition than Wouk is, and nowhere is this clearer than in this moment of crisis and mutiny. Rather than the moment of mutiny sidelining incompetent leadership, here it is the mutineer himself that
appears incompetent. Stein doesn’t understand how command functions and doesn’t know what to do. And rather than imaginative sympathy helping a young leader learn to read his men and his machinery, and to lead them sensitively through crisis, as with Lieutenant Willie Kieth commanding the *Caine*, what happens here is that the crisis is averted and the men are saved by “an unimaginative, do-it-like-the-book-says, dedicated professional.”

At this point Tall more or less takes over the attack. The next morning he sends C-for-Charlie around the back to “The Dancing Elephant,” where they surprise a party of Japanese soldiers and assault an encampment. In the second day’s action, the men anticipate Stein’s orders and take the initiative themselves, and Stein’s only real act as a commander is to keep his reserve platoon from joining in what basically becomes a Japanese rout (325–327). The point of all this is not to validate Tall’s relief of Stein, but to help explicate Stein’s role in C-for-Charlie company and Jones’s conception of leadership. During the attack on “The Dancing Elephant,” Stein made plans and sent them out to his lieutenants and sergeants, but the most important decisions were all made in the moment, on the line: Lt. Whyte’s charge, Keck’s retreat, Beck’s successful assault. As a matter of fact, Stein’s role in guiding the fighting on either day was minimal, and his only directly effective action was to keep his men from going into combat. When Tall calls him on the field phone, Stein is honest about this: he doesn’t know what’s going on, and other men, closer to battle, are making the decisions that affect the battle’s outcomes.

Stein’s role as a leader, however, as Jones sees it, is not to be honest or to make decisions. It is to show confidence. Stein recognizes this in Tall, though he doesn’t draw the connection to his own role as a commander:
Whatever else Stein could find to say about him, and Stein could find plenty, he nevertheless had to admit that with Tall’s arrival on the battlefield a change for the better had come over everything and everybody. Partly of course the change was due to Beck’s feat, whatever that was exactly. But it could not all be that, and Stein had to admit it. Tall had brought with him some quality that had not been here before, and it showed in the faces of the men. They were less in-drawn looking. Perhaps it was only the feeling that after all in the end not everybody would die. Some would live through it. And from there it was only a step to the normal reaction of ego: I will live through this. Others may get it, my friends right and left may die, but I will make it. Even Stein felt better, himself. Tall had arrived and taken control, and had taken it firmly and surely and with confidence. Those who lived would owe it to Tall, and those who died would say nothing. It was too bad about those ones; everybody would feel that; but after all once they were dead they did not really count anymore, did they? This was the simple truth, and Tall had brought it with him to them (269–270).

This is, in passing, a fine example of Jones’s use of free indirect discourse: The first three sentences are in the authorial voice, explicitly framing Stein as a discrete, objectified consciousness. The third sentence, with its “Stein had to admit it,” prepares us to enter Stein’s stream of thought directly. The next two sentences locate us within Stein, “here,” looking out at the men. But with the “Perhaps” of the sixth sentence, we enter into an indeterminate, indirect voice, blending Stein’s perspective with the author’s, so that by
the time we get to “And from there it was only a step to the normal reaction of ego,” we hardly notice that we’ve shifted out of Stein’s register into an omniscient authorial voice, which takes on a disembodied, universal particularity. Who else but the Unknown Soldier is it thinking “I will live through this”? With “Even Stein felt better, himself,” Jones signals a clear break back into the authorial voice, but the traces of Stein and the disembodied, universal particularity remain, lending a pathos to the otherwise almost unbearably callous “It was too bad about those ones.”

Stein is mistaken, though, in reading Tall’s confidence as a personal characteristic, some special quality the man possesses; on the contrary, Tall is simply performing his role as a leader, a figurehead, the actor of a heroic ideal. Later, the virtue of dumb confidence is explicitly illustrated by Jones’s depictions of Charlie Dale’s extraordinarily calm acts of courage and leadership under fire: “Actually, Dale was probably the calmest of the lot. Imaginationless, he had organized his makeshift squad, and found them eager to accept his authority if he would simply tell them what to do” (235). Perhaps Stein’s only truly confident act in the novel is his refusal to obey Tall’s order, and it is telling that Stein only acts with confidence in a situation where he is making a social sacrifice for a moral ideal. Stein’s moral courage here is admirable, but the problem is that even if it is a “right” action, it is the wrong scene. Stein’s ethical sacrifice is appropriate to the civilian world, the “commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives,” where life is valued because it is protected and protected because violence is taboo. It is not appropriate to the existential violence and sacrificial logic of war. The
theater of Guadalcanal has roles for men like Tall and Charlie Dale, and they thrive there. Stein is in the wrong theater, though, and is sent off-stage.\(^{46}\)

C-for-Charlie’s second commander, 1\(^{st}\) Lieutenant “Brass” Band, also fails as a leader, and is not only relieved, but reviled, though he shows confidence to the point of arrogance. Band leads the company on a long trek across the island and finally into an assault on the occupied village of Bunabala, called “Boola Boola” by the men. The orders Band is given for the mission include the guidance to operate as an “independent command” when out of radio contact. Band takes this as license, and neglects to report back to the battalion commander for the entire movement, despite being within radio contact the entire time. When higher command catches up with him, he is relieved of his command.

Band’s flaw is recognized and named by his men, who in this respect serve as a kind of Greek chorus: shortly after Band takes over, they start calling him “Glory Hunter.” After the attack on Boola Boola but before Band is relieved, there is a scene in which some of the soldiers are drinking and complaining about Band, and wind up egging each other on until finally one of the mortarmen, Pvt. Mazzi, is dared to go tell Band how they fell. Mazzi does so, standing in front of Band’s tent and calling him names, “marching back and forth and swinging his skinny arms, compounding insult and profanity with great artistry into an ever higher rising house of cards of his imagination,” until finally Band comes out to face his attacker (469). Band stands before his soldiers, drunk himself, wearing his helmet, which had been pierced by a bullet, as a symbol of his

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\(^{46}\) The men of Charlie company, however, recognize Stein’s concern for their lives and complain that he got a bad break. Nevertheless, aside from a brief flare of outrage on Stein’s behalf from Corporal Fife, who had been his clerk and had hated him with more and more personal passion than had any other soldier in the company, none of the soldiers was much exercised by his departure.
pride, but he doesn’t say anything. Mazzi keeps screaming: “You think that fucking hero helmet means anything alongside all the good men that are really dead?” (470).

Mazzi’s reference is specific: on the way to Boola Boola, Band had sent fourteen men out on an ill-advised mission to block a major Japanese travel route, and twelve of the fourteen died when a company of Japanese reinforcements came through. Ironically, Band becomes the commander that Stein thought Tall was: the blindly ambitious despot willing to throw away his men’s lives for personal glory. Yet even though Band understands better than Stein did the theatrical and situational demands of performing the heroic leadership role, he lacks Tall’s judgment and discipline. The sacrifices Band makes are not for the collective, but for his own gain, as the men recognized.

C-for-Charlie company’s final commander, Captain Bosche, is a stranger to the unit.47 He takes over during their last few weeks on Guadalcanal and leads them in training up for their next mission. He is all surface and voice: we do not come to know any of his thoughts or feelings except as they show physically or are articulated in speech. Bosche exudes professionalism.

He was a tough little guy, maybe thirtyfive [sic], tightly packed into his tailormade khakis. He wore a tight little belly that appeared at least as hard as the flat abdominals of most athletes. His brass belt buckle shone like a star. On his left breast was sewn a whole flock of ribbons amongst which were immediately noticeable a Silver Star and a Purple Heart with cluster. He had been wounded twice. He had seen action at Pearl Harbor. He was not a West Pointer. He had, instead, learned his soldiering the hard way, which was by experience….

47 Note the Teutonic register of the name “Bosche.”
Everybody liked him. Even Welsh seemed to like him. Or, if not like, at least respect him (488–489).

Bosche’s professionalism, earned “by experience,” mirror’s the unit’s own. Before the battle of Boola Boola, before Band’s awful roadblock, C-for-Charlie had achieved a professional benchmark: they had their first “boring” firefight. “It was tired, uninspired, nervousmaking work which everybody wanted to get over and done with.” The battle began as the company was chopping though the jungle.

Then a man in Bell’s point squad hollered and went down as machine-guns and rifles opened up on them. They were about fifty yards from the top of Hill 279 and open ground. The others in the point squad scattered and spread out. The second squad moved into line on the first squad’s left. The prolonged burst had ceased for several seconds. Now a second came. The wounded man lay crying and moaning. The third squad spread out on the first’s right. The tense-faced men lay and looked at each other and up the hill. All this had been without any orders, without a word even. Everybody knew his job (449).

In this action, even Band executes his duties competently, maneuvering his platoons around the enemy’s flank, looking for a hole in their defenses, then finally settling on a frontal attack. “They wouldn’t just charge, of course. They would work their way forward as far as they could, then give them a grenade shower, and rush” (450).
By the time we come to the end of the novel, C-for-Charlie company has gone through many changes. They’ve been blooded, they’ve killed, they’ve lost a fair number of men to death and injury. They’ve gone through three commanders. Many of the men who landed as privates have become noncommissioned officers, and one has been offered a commission. Several have been awarded medals, including a Distinguished Service Cross for “imaginationless” Charlie Dale.

Individually, few of them seemed to have learned anything or to have changed much. They have had no spiritual revelations like those of Prince Andrei, Wilfred Owen, Lieutenant Frederic Henry, or Private Bartle. The competent survivors had been competent when they arrived, and took on the roles vacated above them by the unlucky, slow, and incompetent. Witt stayed a talented soldier but a foolish rebel. Fife was the same angry, insecure young man when he left as he was when he arrived. Bell kept moving surely through each hour, his thoughts three thousand miles away. First Sergeant Welsh, granted the novel’s final moment of interiority, seems hardly to have been affected at all. “In his mind he was muttering over and over his old phrase of understanding: ‘Property. Property. All for property,’ which he had once said in rudimentary innocence arriving on this island” (510).

As a company, however, as a collective, they have undergone a notable transformation. The men move confidently in small units, fight competently and effectively, and have become used to killing and dying. The disparate parts of C-for-Charlie company have been forged into one unified, effective organism, “a single and whole animal,” capable of engaging with and destroying other such animals. C-for-Charlie company has been, at last—like their new commander Bosche—thoroughly
professionalized. “They know their jobs,” and their jobs are to be heroes on an industrial scale, throwing their bodies into the meat-grinder of modern war and killing the enemy. As Stein observed:

So this was it. The long-awaited, soul-illuminating experience of combat. Stein could not find it any different from working for one of the great law offices, or any of the large corporations. Or for government…. A little more dangerous to life and limb, but no different in its effect upon the reward-haunted, ax-fearing spirits of the workers (338).

In his way, James Jones has fulfilled David Hirsh’s dream of the comic combat novel, showing humanity to itself and controverting the false stories of the “old ones” from the last war. *The Thin Red Line* is no memoir of a fox-hunting life, but a depiction of the base, the selfish, and the crude, the undignified workers and managers in an industrial war machine. The lives of these workers are not illuminated by sonnets, and these men find no revelations in their dirty labor, traumatic or otherwise. If Jones’s prophecy at the end of the novel remains true, that no one remembers it that way, perhaps this is because we continue to feel the need to believe that war is something exotic, different, and special. We need to believe that it’s not just business as usual.

In *The Antinomies of Realism*, Fredric Jameson argues that representations of collective activity in war are “the abstraction of something else,” namely wage labor, and

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48 Carter is helpful on this: “The classical epic-tragic view of warfare asserts that each man’s death in combat (or at least each hero’s death) is meaningful and noble, thus enshrining the ego of the individual dead man and of humanity. The Jonesian comic view, however, generally depicts men’s deaths as pointless, stupid, absurd, and laughable…” (100).
especially capitalist division of labor (236–237). Jameson is explicitly talking about “war films (of the collective buddy type),” which are only one subgenre of the combat film, which is itself only one version of the modern war story. Jameson further asserts (somewhat tendentiously) that when narratives of war focus on leaders and institutions, that focus “initiates a shift of gravity towards the exterior of the experience of war, whether individual or collective, for the officers are ordinarily as much a part of the external environment of the soldier as the enemy itself, and are indeed equally often objectified into what gets identified as the bureaucracy of the state.” Jameson’s examples for his argument range from Schiller’s *Wallenstein* to Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory* (1968), and his argument turns on a swift and elegant handling of the problem of leadership in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, in which Jameson opposes “Tolstoy’s notorious loathing for Napoleon” against his “hero-worshipping portrayal of… Kutuzov,” then effects a kind of dialectical synthesis through Tolstoy’s portrayal of Prince Bagration’s leadership as performing a structural rather than an agential role.

The section of *War and Peace* that Jameson quotes illuminates the questions about leadership, heroism, and the collective that have been brought to the fore in the work of Wouk, Stevens, and Jones:

Prince Andrei listened attentively to Bagration’s colloquies with the commanding officers and the orders he gave them, and to his surprise found that no orders were really given but that Prince Bagration tried to make it appear that everything done by necessity, by accident, or by the will of subordinate commanders, was done, if not by direct command at least in accord with his intentions. Prince Andrei
noticed however that though what happened was due to change and was independent of the commander’s will, owing to the tact Bagration showed, his presence was very valuable. Officers who approached him with disturbed countenances became calm; soldiers and officers greeted him gaily, grew more cheerful in his presence, and were evidently anxious to display their courage before him (Tolstoy 194).

The structural function of the leader, as described by Tolstoy, Wouk, and Jones, is to be the still point in a turning world, in effect the collective’s ideal representation of itself as fearless, confident, brave, heroic. The role of the leader is to pretend to be a hero. The leader function’s overlap with the hero function, as the metaphor-physical mediation between a collective and its concept, is obvious once we put it in these terms. The leader performs the concept of the hero.

After looking at Tolstoy, Jameson turns from the question of leadership to the representation of atrocities, and eventually comes to argue that war is merely one more unrepresentable kind of collective activity. Reflecting on how the structural function of the leader as a collective’s representation of its heroic ideal maps homologically onto the structural function of the hero as the sacrifice mediating between a collective and its concept of itself, we can see that Jameson’s argument that representations of war are always displacing or veiling more fundamental structures of wage labor and his “suspicion that war is ultimately unrepresentable” are only valid if we ignore the structural function of the hero and how that function was a problem when it came to making sense of World War II (233). Jameson’s claim is in the end an ideological
assertion made in the face of the very evidence Jameson himself lays out. In fact, as we’ve seen, the concept of the collective is manifest in the blood sacrifice of its hero. Those who sacrifice their existence for the sake of a concept (such as the nation) give that concept a body. They make it substantial. They make it real. Moreover, in *The Thin Red Line*, *The Caine Mutiny*, and Wallace Stevens’s poetry, we can see powerful artists imagining collective life in its granular and conceptual complexity. With *The Thin Red Line* especially, we can see Jones’s representation of a collective as a collective, how it goes through collective experiences, “its changes and reactions, and how it is different afterwards.”

To tie some of these strands together, let’s look back. Wouk offered us a narrative of elitist *bildung*: the dilettantish Princeton graduate, Willie Keith, learns the skills and responsibilities of leadership in an administered world through the existential tests of war. His world is the same world as that of *The Thin Red Line*; it is made up of natural forces, machines, and willful, irrational *homo sapiens*, whose fates are made in the confluence of world-historical and petty-personal violence. Yet while *The Caine Mutiny* speaks entirely to the plutocracy and their precarious, even dangerous alliances with canonical, institutional, and managerial power (remember Keith’s lesson is ultimately one in how to read), and while something like *The Naked and the Dead* offers an analogue to Keefer’s crude and hypocritical bid for anti-authoritarian sympathy with his *Multitudes*, *Multitudes, The Thin Red line* speaks across class lines with a singular empathy and sophistication. *The Caine Mutiny* and *The Thin Red Line* are both stories where experience leads to professionalization, but Wouk depicts the professionalization of the aristocratic elite, while Jones, who sees war as a composite social situation contiguous
with the civilian order, depicts the professionalization of war throughout the ranks, on the shop floor, as it were, among the workers and their middle-class managers.

For both novels, the question of authority is pre-eminent: who makes the sovereign decisions of narrative and existential truth? In both *The Caine Mutiny* and *The Thin Red Line*, narrative and leadership are not only analogous but co-constitutive, in that both narrative and leadership are fundamentally performances (fictions) of positioning inadequate to the totality of conflicting forces that make up the universe, yet necessary all the same as ordering principles. And in both novels, authority is perpetually in conflict as different narratives compete for dominance. Glory Hunter Band’s self-narration of his heroism is contested by Mazzi’s public denunciation; C-for-Charlie company’s self-narration of themselves as grizzled, rebellious warriors—expressed in their growing beards after Boola Boola—is contested by the military’s narration of them as professional soldiers, when Captain Bosche makes them shave.

As Jones’s equivocal ending suggests, any narrative position is ultimately limited, yet notwithstanding the fact that (in Stevens’ phrase) the “squirming facts exceed the squamous mind,” the human being must and does behave “as if,” laying faith in its fictions (*Collected Poems* 215). In the end, however, some fictions bear more ontological weight than others: the concrete realization of concepts in blood sacrifice, the hero’s tale, provides a narrative authority against which no notional “Supreme Fiction” can compete. Hence Wallace Stevens’s deep anxiety about poetic authority in the 1940s: truth as a play of metaphors, consonant with a structuring logic of exchange in which words and money are the mediating terms and any thing can be substituted for any other thing, stands opposed by a definition of truth whose media are lives and blood. Blood sacrifice shifts
socio-economic relations from a horizontal differential of exchange, in which any two objects are unified in their difference through signs, to a vertical differential of exchange in which any two concepts are unified in their difference through bodies.

Whereas capitalism offers “material relations between persons and social relations between things,” modern war manifests conceptual relations between persons and material relations between ideas (Marx 166). The representations and narratives of war that reify these relations in symbolic structures, the songs that sing of heroes and war for all the ages, are best understood not as ideological in the sense Jameson seems to want to suggest, in that they obscure material relations, but ideological in an even stronger sense, in that they represent the social embodiment of conceptual reality. The problem Jones and Stevens grapple with is not that industrial war is unrepresentable, but that it is grotesque. The vision of industrial-scale blood sacrifice, “the concept… The fact; the reality—of the modern State” that so horrified Captain Stein, is nothing less than the dialectical contradiction of liberal capitalism, which is to say its truth.
The bomber will always get through.

—Stanley Baldwin, Speech to Parliament (1932)
Chapter 8. Jeder Engel Ist Schrecklich

Had Hegel’s philosophy of history embraced this age, Hitler’s robot-bombs would have found their place beside the early death of Alexander and similar images, as one of the selected empirical facts by which the state of the world-spirit manifests itself directly in symbols. Like Fascism itself, the robots career without a subject. Like it they combine utmost technical perfection with total blindness. And like it they arouse mortal terror and are wholly futile. ‘I have seen the world spirit,’ not on horseback, but on wings and without a head, and that refutes, at the same stroke, Hegel’s philosophy of history.

—Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (1951)

The image is simple. A silhouette comes “screaming across the sky,” “on wings and without a head,” a semi-divine, gleaming metal death-phallus. At the same time, the image is composite and fluid, sometimes singular, sometimes multiple: a squadron of ponderous Zeppelins, a single biplane, a Heinkel, a Lancaster, a V-1 Buzzbomb or silent V-2, a kamikaze Zero, fleets of B-17s, B-29s, Tu-22s, or B-52s, swarms of Tomahawk cruise missiles, stealth bombers, Scuds, ICBMs, a Boeing passenger liner and its twin, an MQ-1 Predator drone. The menacing image of the inhuman aerial predator is as alive today as it ever was, even if the shocking novelty of skies filled with silent missiles and bomb-dropping planes has been superseded by the internalized terror of hijacked 767s
and robot assassins. The world-spirit as killing angel has metastasized and multiplied since Adorno penned his grim observations about “Hitler’s robot-bombs” from the precarious safety of the Hotel Grand Abyss.49

The material technology manifesting this image was developed, as everyone knows, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Made possible by the invention of the airplane and the production of increasingly stable and compact explosive devices, aerial bombing was introduced to the world—and to an unlucky group of Turkish soldiers in Libya—by Italian Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti on November 1, 1911. Dropping hand grenades from his Taube biplane on a Turkish encampment at Ain Zara, Gavotti inaugurated a practice of mass killing at a distance that over the course of a century would destroy millions of human lives, transform the nature of warfare, and provide our age with some of its most indelible images of state power, technological sublimity, and human vulnerability. Recall the photograph of Phan Thi Kim Phúc burned by napalm and running naked down a highway near Trang Bang, South Vietnam. Think of the mushroom cloud over Nagasaki and the scarred bodies of the hibakusha. Google “Shock and Awe.”

The bomber has always been more than just a weapon: It has offered a vision of the future.50 Small bombers and Zepellins appeared in the First World War, General

49 Published in German in 1951 and English in 1974, Minima Moralia was written between 1942 and 1946 while Adorno lived in Los Angeles. “Hotel Grand Abyss” was Lukács’s derogatory phrase for the wartime exile of German intellectuals in California, coined in the 1962 preface to The Theory of the Novel (22).
50 The complex relationship between the techno-utopian imaginary opened by militarizing the atmosphere, from H.G. Wells’s The War in the Air (1907) to Billy Mitchell’s Winged Defense: The Development of the Possibilities of Modern Air Power—Economic and Military (1925), and the new optics of destruction manifested by the actual machinery can be traced in the history of the development of strategic bombing, the early years of science fiction, interwar journals such as Aero Digest, Flying, Air Progress, and Aerosphere, and, as Paul K. Saint-Amour argues, the very lineaments of Modernism. See, for example, Saint-Amour’s “Air War Prophecy and Interwar Modernism,” where he argues that early 20th-century bombing helped shape the urban cartography of the modernist novel. For a humane, formally innovative,
Giulio Douhet prophesied the importance of strategic bombing in his 1921 book *The Command of the Air*, and increasingly sophisticated aircraft were used for colonial control throughout the twenties and thirties, most notably by the British in Iraq. It is with World War II, though, that the bomber achieves its apotheosis as a technocultural assemblage reshaping the flows of human existence. The movement of state power into the air and the translation of atmospheres into loci of control entailed modifications in our species-life beyond mere warfighting, as the immanent logic of airborne explosives unfolded from hand-launched grenades to ICBMs and stealth bombers, from bursts of shrapnel as micro-local phenomena to vast weather systems made of fire engulfing entire cities. The most astonishing recent symbols of the power of human air power—the use of passenger jets as suicide bombs in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the use of unmanned drones to assassinate suspected terrorists—only deepen the mythic resonance inhering in the dialectical image of the winged destroyer.

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51. Peter Galison’s authoritative account (“War Against the Center”) of the importance of the US Strategic Bombing Survey and “self-targeting” to postwar American urban planning—and hence to the material conditions of postwar culture—is foundational here. Peter Sloterdijk argues that the “terror from the air” signifies a fundamental shift in human being-in-the-world: “The fact that the dominant weapons systems since World War II, and particularly in post-1945 US war interventions, are those of the air force, merely betokens the normalization of the state-terrorist habitus and the ecologization of warfare” (*Terror*, 53).

52. Indeed, Paul Kahn suggests that one effect of 9/11 was to shift all air travel into Carl Schmitt’s “state of exception”: “The contemporary war on terror represents the point at which conscription becomes truly universal, escaping even the formal structures of justification. Conscription can now occur to anyone at any moment: It is just a matter of finding oneself on the wrong airplane at the wrong time. At that moment, there is no further discussion, there is only the act.” (*Political Theology* 156). The drone strike which both
spiritual apothegm, “Every angel is terrifying,” is the inevitable epigraph to the century of the bomber (12).

Within the specifically American historical context, the bomber takes on an even more substantial role than the symbolic manifestation of Hegel’s world spirit. “The way trench warfare dominates the imagery of World War I,” writes Harvey Shapiro, “the fleets of bombers and the smoking cities dominate the imagery of World War II” (xxiii). Daniel Swift makes a similar point in his literary memoir, Bomber Country: The Poetry of a Lost Pilot’s War: “Bombing was to the Second World War what the trenches were to the First: a shocking and new form of warfare, wretched and unexpected, and carried out at a terrible scale of loss” (38). The mythic role of the bomber formed during the war, in advertisements, newsreels, and films such as the propaganda short Bomber (1941) (with commentary by Carl Sandburg: “An angel of death—/Death to those who mock at free peoples…”), William Wyler’s war-time documentary Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress (1944), and Mervyn LeRoy’s Thirty Seconds over Tokyo (1944), then was confirmed after the war in Wyler’s 1946 coming-home film The Best Years of Our Lives, which won nine Oscars and became the highest-grossing film since Gone With the Wind seven years before, and the much-lauded command drama Twelve O’Clock High (1949), with Gregory Peck.

From the desperate heroism of the Doolittle Raid and the apocalyptic horror unleashed by the Enola Gay to revisionist concerns with the Allied terror-bombing of German cities, brought out distinctly in Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) and Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2005), in the latter of judges and executes ex caelo, like the miraculous violence of God, is the image of sovereignty most apt to this new totalized state of danger.
which a tenuous parallel is drawn between the firebombing of Dresden and al Qaeda’s attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, the bomber exudes troubling power well beyond the 1940s. Consider, for example, the bomber’s unexpected but wholly apt appearance in “Mixed Feelings,” from John Ashbery’s landmark 1975 collection, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (42–43). That poem, a meditation on historical and cultural change, begins:

A pleasant smell of frying sausages  
Attacks the sense, along with an old, mostly invisible  
Photograph of what seems to be girls lounging around  
An old fighter bomber, circa 1942 vintage.  
How to explain to these girls, if indeed that’s what they are,  
These Ruths, Lindas, Pats and Sheilas  
About the vast change that’s taken place  
In the fabric of our society, altering the texture  
Of all things in it?

Ashbery’s Wordsworthian commonplaces, that quality Geoff Ward called Ashbery’s “unerring banality,” the plodding pondering of social transformation in “language really used by men,” such as the clichéd “vast change that’s taken place / In the fabric of our society,” stabilize the tenuous historicity of the photographic image amidst its several free-floating frames (Ward 102). Fixing on the “fighter bomber” connects the narrator to a specific historical moment (“circa 1942 vintage”), and poses the question of how he
might speak to the women in the picture from his vantage thirty-five years later. Between the narrator and “These Ruths, Lindas, Pats and Sheilas” lie the end of World War II, the atomic bomb, Korea, the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement, the assassinations of JFK, RFK, MLK, and Malcolm X, Vietnam, the 1960s, the Moon landing, feminism, Stonewall, and much else besides, including shifting mores with regard to gender roles, sexuality, and American geopolitical power. The seemingly simple world in the photograph, featuring girls “draped” on an “old crate,” a symbol of American military masculinity (though as innocent as its Donald Duck insignia nevertheless “fading… to the extreme point of legibility”), is now “old, mostly invisible,” yet conjured and sustained for the women, these “creatures (that’s the word) / of [his] imagination,” through the figure of the bomber. Even as the speaker tries to forget them, the women remain attached to the bomber as not just a moment but an axis of history, which in this poem reveals its immanent development as air power and environmental control “in the not too distant future / When we meet possibly in the lounge of a modern airport.”

Through complex gestures of fascination and disavowal, American poets and writers during and after the war fixed on the figure of the bomber as a powerfully overdetermined solution to the problem of the hero articulated by writers such as Kenneth Burke, Wallace Stevens, and James Jones. How the bomber embodies the problem of the hero, at once canceling out and raising up it contradictions, can best be seen through the paradox at the heart of the pre-eminent canonical American novel of World War II, Catch-22. That paradox is not, contrary to popular conception, the eponymous military regulation “catch-22,” but something at once more obvious and more interesting.
Joseph Heller’s 1961 novel, widely recognized as the most important American work of literature about the war and one of the great novels of the twentieth century, tells the story of Army Air Corps Captain John Yossarian, a B-25 bombardier, during his tour of duty in Italy. Yossarian’s story is told through a complex interweaving of flashbacks, repetitions, digressions, repressions, and displacements that circle elliptically and erratically around his memory of a fellow crewmember’s death. As sophisticated as the story is, however, the essential narrative is simple and familiar: Yossarian experiences a traumatic revelation of human mortality with Snowden’s death, then spends most of the novel striving to escape this knowledge: “He had decided to live forever or die in the attempt” (29). The novel’s eponymous “catch” is specifically invoked with regard to whether or not Yossarian has to fly more missions, though it generalizes to the human condition: Yossarian, fearing for his life, tries to fake insanity, because an insane pilot will be relieved from duty. Trying to avoid death, though, is the very *sine qua non* of sanity (in the novel’s logic). The more Yossarian tries to prove he’s mad, the more he proves his fitness for wartime duty.

Nevertheless, the “catch” is not, properly speaking, a paradox. The fact is that there is no escape from death—not even through insanity, not even to Sweden. Further, the desire to escape death is not the definition of sanity, but an expression of human will, and whether such an expression is “sane” or not depends entirely on its force and context: a recklessly self-destructive risk-taker may be as “insane” as a paranoid agoraphobic shut-in. Yossarian’s indomitable will to immortality is both comic and Christlike in its appeal, and his rejection of modern bureaucratic society inspiring in its contrarian logic, yet what is paradoxical about *Catch-22* is not that Yossarian offers yet another
traumatized hero striving to triumph over death. What is paradoxical about *Catch-22* is that its hero is a bombardier in an American B-25 bomber.

The great paradox of *Catch-22* is that the victim of traumatic violence at its center is also an agent of superhuman destructive power deployed by one of the most powerful military forces ever seen in an eventually victorious war against Fascist militarism. Men like Yossarian flying planes like his unleashed an apocalyptic violence on Germany, Italy, and Japan the likes of which the world had never seen. American and British bombers dropped almost 3 million tons of bombs on Germany, killing more than half a million civilians, while American bombers dropped 160,800 tons of munitions on Japan, killing 806,000 civilians (*USSB* 84, 92). Yossarian, as an American bombardier, is a representative figure of this almost unimaginable destructive power, yet his cultural role is not as an agent of collective violence, but its victim.

This paradox, central to the structure and function of the trauma hero narrative in postwar American culture, comes into relief in *Catch-22* through the extreme discrepancy between Yossarian’s objective role (bombardier) and his subjective function (trauma victim). The figure of the bomber in World War II literature brings into distinct relief this irresolvable contradiction motivating the trauma hero narrative. The very word itself, “bomber,” meaning both the superhumanly powerful war machine and the vulnerable human inside it, adverts to its dualism. In *Catch-22* and in poems such as Randall Jarrell’s “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (1945), the bomber stands as a symbol of the industrial state’s mass-produced destructive power, yet the human actor looking through the targeting reticule or gun-sight is portrayed as being as wounded and traumatized as the shrapnel-torn bodies of the soldiers and civilians burning below. What
appears most important to these works is neither a concern with the lives of the bombed, nor the authentic but troubling thrill of destruction, nor even the context of specifically American techno-political power (all of which do appear as subsidiary aspects), but rather how the young man-in-the-machine is an innocent, sympathetic, sacrificial hero: a trauma hero.

The bomber-as-trauma hero not only offers a sublation of the dilemma between industrialized warfare and liberal capitalism, between Burke’s “commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives” and the “collective-sacrificial-military nexus of motives,” but it also serves to at once obscure, disavow, and consecrate the violent origins of the postwar liberal order by turning society’s agent of violence into its scapegoat. Since the violent origins of the law in liberal capitalism are anathema to the principles of the law itself, the warfighter must be excluded from the state order, because his transgression of the killing taboo threatens the state monopoly on violence and exposes the violent foundations of the legal order. The soldier must be sacrificed to the law. This is accomplished by rewriting the war-fighter as not the agent of violence, but as its victim. “The veteran bears the burden of the state’s sacrificial violence,” in the words of legal scholar Paul Kahn (“Managing Violence,” 329). Heller struggles to reconcile the problem of American air power with the victimization of the bomber in a way that illustrates precisely how the trauma hero functions as a scapegoat for postwar liberalism. Guilt for collective violence is displaced onto its agent, who through traumatic psychological wounding becomes a surrogate victim in place of the enemy. This displacement effects a double purgation. Guilt over the traumatically wounded soldier takes the place of blood guilt, while the soldier is purged of responsibility for his violence by being transformed
into its victim. This symbolic scapegoating, I will argue, serves an important function in
the liberal political imaginary—that of obscuring the scandalously violent origins of the
peacetime political order.
Chapter 9. The Bomber Lyric

The bomb-sight adjusted destruction hangs
by a hair over the cities. Bombs away!
and the packed word descends—and
rightly so.

—William Carlos Williams, “To All Gentleness” (1944)

*The Best Years of Our Lives* opens with Air Force captain Fred Derry (Dana Andrews) working his way home from the war. After being snubbed at a civilian airline counter, Derry manages to catch a military flight in a B-17 with two other veterans, a sailor named Homer Parrish (Harold Russell) and an infantry sergeant named Al Stephenson (Frederic March). Derry, who was a bombardier over Europe, takes the two men up into the nose of the plane, his “former office.” The farms and orchards of the American heartland roll below, now seen through Derry’s uncanny eyes: homefront as hostile territory, overlaid with memories of flak, targeted through a reticule. McKinley Kantor’s blank verse novel, *Glory for Me*, from which *The Best Years of Our Lives* was adapted, lingers in this moment: “Dwelling in space where once the bombsight lay, / He held his nose above the Plexiglas, / And watched the wads of villages and farms / And larger towns” (20). As

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53 *Glory for Me* was inspired by an article in *Time* magazine about returning veterans (“The Way Home,” *Time* (August 7, 1944)). Belying the commonly held delusion that all returning veterans from World War II were greeted with kisses and parades, “The Way Home” tells a complex story of worry, confusion, and civilian indifference: “In another war there might have been brass bands at every stop. But in this
the film follows the bomber’s flight over home territory, dramatizing the vision of the returning veteran, for whom every landscape is a potential battlefield, it follows the three men to (fictional) Boone City, where they make their difficult readjustments to civilian life. Together they not only present the most iconic fighting figures of the war, soldier, sailor, and airman, but manifest with mythological density a tripartite self damaged by combat. Derry is psychologically wounded, haunted by nightmares of his burning bomber. Homer Parrish lost his hands when his aircraft carrier was sunk in the Pacific, and now greets the world with two mechanical pincers. Stephenson faces the problem of inhabiting competing ethical worlds, risking his pre-war career at a bank when the values he lived by as an infantry sergeant, including camaraderie, personal judgment, frankness, and courage, run counter to the bank’s more bureaucratic and commercial ethos. In addition to the three kinds of trauma portrayed, psychological, physical, and ethical, the men all face the problems of identity crisis and reconnection with community that are typical to veterans coming home. The Best Years of Our Lives (which title remains ironic throughout) ends on a note of prudently limited happiness, with Stephenson stable and adjusted to corporate realities, Homer married to his loyal fiancée, and Derry released from his loveless marriage, his degrading job as a soda jerk, and his traumatic nightmares, having found new love and a new job scrapping old bombers, work both appropriately masculine and obviously therapeutic. All three men are offered domestic contentment, dependent on their acceptance of feminized civilian restraint.

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54 Indeed, thanks to a genius bit of casting, Dana Andrews would have evoked for audiences his ersatz war experience as Sgt. Bill Tyne in A Walk in the Sun, which had come out the previous year.

55 Robert Warshow makes this point rather severely in his rather negative review of the film: “Since the starting-point of the story is the veterans’ need for ‘readjustment,’ the sexual relations of the characters form an unusually clear projection of the familiar Hollywood (and American) dream of male passivity. The
Despite its happy ending, and despite the perhaps sustainable charge issued by one critic that the film was a “a horse-drawn truckload of liberal schmaltz,” *The Best Years of Our Lives* was not only deeply resonant with popular audiences in 1946, but still offers real moments of insight and emotion, most relevantly for our discussion around the relationship between Fred Derry and his former role as a bombardier (Farber 15). Derry himself, through his identification with his old “office,” embodies the problem the trained practitioner of industrialized war faces returning to peace: a useless machine must be remade or get junked. After Derry loses his job, finds out his wife is cheating on him, and is warned away from his interest in Stephenson’s daughter, he returns to the airport seeking a military flight somewhere—anywhere—else. While waiting for the next plane out, he wanders into a boneyard, where dozens of aircraft fuselages sit stripped, partially disassembled, evacuated and immobilized. Line after line of gray skeletons stand against the horizon. Fred Derry is at once identified with the bombers, as they figure metonymically for both him and the war as a whole, and alienated from them, as what had once been the source of his identity and power is now gutted, impotent junk. As one man in one bomber in one field that indexes, in its mass-produced repetition, the totality of the industrial war machine, he sees himself as a replaceable part in a global system.56

He had thought he was a demigod, but in fact that identity was nothing but a moment in the network of wartime production. At the same time, the machines themselves both

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56 Adorno, in his mention of the film in *Minima Moralia*, points to the film’s occlusion of class in the way that it replicates the factitiously egalitarian ideology of commodified labor under late capital: “When, in the most successful film of the year, the heroic squadron leader returns to be harassed by petty-bourgeois caricatures as a drug-store jerk, he not only gives the spectators an occasion for unconscious gloating but in addition strengthens them in their consciousness that all men are really brothers. Extreme injustice becomes a deceptive facsimile of justice, disqualification of equality. Sociologists, however, ponder the grimly comic riddle: where is the proletariat?” (124).
recall the eerily insectoid grace of human technological power in one of its most titanic manifestations, and, as if the planes were gravestones, evoke the millions of human corpses produced by the war. This is the film’s moment of lyric individuality, when a single life comes to speak in its isolated self-reflection for an entire cultural moment, and Wyler concretizes this moment in an unforgettable image of Dana Andrews huddled disconsolately in the nose of a scrapped bomber, a singular human soul trapped in a mass-produced war machine.

Activating at once the glamour of the fighter pilot and the proletarian dehumanization of the replaceable machine part, recalling sublime skies full of killing angels, portraying the utter vulnerability of fragile metal skin at the same time as it invoked god-like destructive power, the figure of the bomber was central to American poetic responses to World War II. Such responses together form a coherent body of work we might identify as the “bomber lyric.” By introducing the term “bomber lyric,” I don’t intend to offer a theory of the lyric; I mean simply to mark out poems about bombers and the men who fly them as an identifiable poetic subgenre important to American literature from around 1941 to around 1975.

A bomber lyric need not offer a dramatic monologue, a poet overheard speaking to himself or to a silent auditor, as some modern definitions of lyric would demand. Many bomber lyrics do, of course, for example Richard Hugo’s “Spinazzola: Quella Cantina Là” (“I mix up things, the town, the wind, the war. / I can’t explain the drone. Bombers seemed / to scream toward the target, on the let-down / hum…”) (44). Other bomber lyrics are narrative, though, like Randall Jarrell’s “Transient Barracks,” which describes an airman’s return from abroad to his new duty station at an American airfield.
(“Summer. Sunset. Someone is playing / The ocarina in the latrine…”) (Selected 141).
Some are apostrophic. Many are elegies. What connects them all are their subject matter: the bombers and the men who flew them, the hybrid ontology of the machine and its human operator, and a deep, dialectical, and often implicit internal contradiction between power and vulnerability. It will be noticed at once that these three dualisms overlap; the bomber is the powerful machine, while the human is the vulnerable agent. Bomber lyrics are lyrics about bombers. This terminological tautology is exactly what must be articulated.

Scholarly work on World War II poetry, where it has not focused on high-canonical authors such as Elizabeth Bishop, Wallace Stevens, or W.H. Auden, has paid significant attention to bomber poetry, though usually without categorizing it as a distinct genre. David Vaughan, in his Words to Measure a War: Nine American Poets of World War II, though considering a preponderance of airmen and understanding that the poetry of the air war demands special consideration, sees the bomber as merely one subject among many. Diderik Oostdijk’s Among the Nightmare Fighters offers a similar view. While Oostdijk thematizes bomber poetry in his book, like Vaughan he doesn’t see the bomber lyric as a distinct genre. Daniel Swift’s literary memoir Bomber Country: The Poetry of a Lost Pilot’s War, which weaves sections discussing various poems having to do with bombing together with sections about his grandfather’s service as crewman in a British bomber, comes closest, arguing convincingly that the poetry of the air war is “a poetry specific to the Second World War,” and worth consideration as such (28). Bomber Country is informed by broad reading around the strategic bombing campaigns of World War II, mostly in Europe, and is illuminating on the literature arising out of the blitz and
the Battle of Britain. Yet it is just where Swift’s research leaves off or dissolves into
gesture that the deeper problems of the bomber lyric become visible. He writes, for
example: “The bombers who fly and do not return threaten our need for stories because
they thwart the possibility of an ending. The bombers who kill civilians in foreign cities
threaten our demand for goodness in our heroes, and it is for both of these reasons that
the poetry is theirs” (42). Swift clearly identifies the central paradox of the bomber
lyric—that is, the relationship between sacrificial violence and agential violence—yet
takes the paradox as if it were its own explanation.

Further, while Swift sees bomber poetry as a historical development reflecting
both new technologies of destruction and what he suggests is the war’s representative
setting, the bombed-out city, the emergence of the bomber lyric cannot wholly be
explained by weapons technologies (29, 38). It must also be explained by cultural
technologies: literary practice, ideology, and myth. American poets in the 1940s,
struggling between the imperial exhaustion typified by Auden and Eliot on the one hand,
and the fundamentalist avant-gardism embodied in the politically compromised work of
Ezra Pound on the other, confronted hypertrophied mechanization with an attenuated
humanism. Radical formal innovation no longer provided the impetus and justification it
had twenty years before. Leaning on tradition in a moment of crisis, some poets took up
the British trench lyric’s central figure of pathos: the passive victim of industrialized
warfare.

But to find the poetry in the pity, the subject must be pathetic. The stoic but hardy
infantryman of World War II, “fighting fighting fighting” in Guadalcanal and Italy (as in
Marianne Moore’s “In Distrust of Merits”), simply would not do. The terrified, immobile
men strapped into ball turrets and Plexiglas bomber noses, however, proved ideal. The similarities between the trench lyric and the bomber lyric reside in their shared appeal to a romantic poetic tradition, their shared depiction of war as an apocalyptic sublime, and their shared theme of human fragility. Both the trench and the bomber required men to suffer intense fire in essentially fixed positions with little recourse to action: while the bomber moved through the air, the physical bodies of the men inside were stuck, and while the gunners fought off Messerschmitts, there was nothing they could do about flak.

Drawing an explicit parallel between Ernst Jünger’s sense of weightlessness under artillery attack in the trenches of World War I and an American pilot’s description of night-bombing over North Vietnam, Paul Virilio writes: “Tied to his machine, imprisoned in the closed circuits of electronics, the war pilot is no more than a motor-handicapped person temporarily suffering from a kind of possession analogous to the hallucinatory states of primitive warfare” (War and Cinema 106). Patrick Deer, in his masterful study of British war culture, Culture in Camouflage, writes:

While the pilots of the Royal Air Force Fighter Command [in WWII] enjoyed their finest hour in a futuristic time and space, the flight crews of Bomber Command lived a position much closer to that of the Great War balloon corps. Casting a lethal gaze over the battlefield of the enemy’s cities, they were nevertheless trapped in a fixed, routinized war of attrition. Bomber crews carried an enormous psychological burden and suffered the highest casualty rates for any branch of services in the Second World War (63).
Deer’s statistics on the high rate of death relative to other branches of service apply only to the British military, but help indicate the relative intensity of the bomber’s war. The US and UK each lost approximately 79,000 airmen in the bombing campaigns over Germany, though since more American troops were involved worldwide, that number—though still large—accounts for a smaller overall percentage (“Over-all Report (European War),” USSB). There can be no question that crewing a bomber was a traumatogenic occupation, very probably more traumatogenic even than serving in the infantry, precisely because of its enforced passivity.

Yet the subjective trauma of the crewmember in no way disposes with the objective destructive power unleashed by the machine. Further, we should ask whether the mere fact of trauma is enough to explain the literary importance of the bomber, and, if so, what this fixation on trauma means. One thing is certain: by focusing on the suffering human inside the machine, the bomber lyric takes our attention away from the cities and bodies burning at the earth’s surface, focusing it on the traumatized killers raining fire from heaven.

Four poems from the 1940s, Walter Benton’s “Summary of the Distance Between the Bomber and the Objective” (1941), H.R. Hays’s “To an American Flyer” (1942), Robert Lowell’s “The Bomber” (1944), and John Ciardi’s “Reveille for my Twenty-Eighth Birthday” (1944), exemplify the bomber lyric’s dualisms. Consider Ciardi, who meditates on the bomber’s hybrid ontology: “I am the theorem of the pure believer: / The thumbs for switches and the hands for pliers / Moved on a diagram of nerves like wires.” His final lines consummate this merging of crewman and plane: “My hand the blueprint

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57 The US bombing of Japan, it should be noted, was much less dangerous, with approximately 2,600 casualties (Kerr 276).
that the lightning traced, / My wish resolved, mechanical and lean: / Decidedly hot, then numb as a machine.” With its techno-mythic opening, Benton’s “Summary” depicts the bomber as a metallic bird, an explosively organic machine:

The duraluminum dove dives—

How slenderly
space splits—the momentum doubles, multiplies,
the dynamite muscles flex for sudden violence!

Seen as an agent of power, the bomber is a marvel of technology and spirit, a “Phaeton,” a wonderment only conceivable through the most vatic and cosmological hyperbole. Benton writes: “behold the stark embodiment / of the millennia of mind.”

The bomber’s hybrid ontology is not always strictly cast in terms of machines and bodies; bomber lyrics sometimes frame their dualities in other mythologies and other metaphysics, typically in a romantic register, by allusion to the sparrow or lark of poetic inspiration, or more often to the primitive and metaphysical angels of Milton, Blake, and Rilke. Benton writes “Beautiful… beautiful to see against the sky / of flying birds—.” Hays calls his flyer a “singing spark” and a “pure and dangerous angel.” Often the bomber is posed as a kind of deity or demigod, a supernatural power beyond human reckoning. Lowell, in a poem redolent with religious imagery, frames his bomber as an ambiguously “godly” destroyer:
Bomber like a god
You nosed about the clouds
And warred on the wormy sod;
And your thunderbolts fast as light
Blitzed a wake of shrouds.
O godly Bomber, and most
A god when cascading tons
Baptized the infidel Huns
For the Holy Ghost,
Did you know the name of flight
When you blasted the bloody sweat
And made the noonday night:
When God and Satan met

And Christ gave up the Ghost?

Seen from below, the bomber shows its most medieval aspect: a giant crucifix spewing fire. This ecstatic worship of quasi-divine power fits uneasily with a lyric sense of human sympathy, and one way the essentially post-Modernist poets writing bomber lyrics try to square the circle is through irony, sometimes yoking disparate positions so extreme they barely hold together, as in Lowell’s vision of the “godly bomber” baptizing the “infidel Huns.” The discordant effect in the grotesque nursery rhyme of “tons” with “Huns” tips Lowell’s hand, if the hyperbole of the rest of the poem hadn’t already, revealing the savage perversion typical of the author of “Skunk Hour.” Benton’s ostentatiously banal
description of the bomber in the italicized final line of his poem, “bringing peace to many,” is similarly ironic.

Rather than ironizing the disjunction between human agency and divine power, however, most often the bomber lyric works to humanize the destroyer. Hays’s poem, for example, addressing the young man at the control stick or the bombing reticule, is an earnest appeal to a fearsome deity. He writes:

Half child, half god,

This is the season of temptation.

Reject your cruel immortality,

Pride in your bloody lightnings.

These flecks, these germs below

Are human as your hand. Be humble

As you prune the earth, your garden.

Lover of bread,

Strong male bee from stony hives—

No stingless drone—in mind and spirit

Store up honey of tomorrow.

Let sunrise shower you with wisdom,

Speak with a choral voice;

Fierce death you carry fill your heart

With life—
Oh pure and dangerous angel!

With Hays, the bomber is innocent, “half-child.” Benton, somewhat differently, sees the bomber in a line of human achievement including “Euclid’s theorems” and “Rembrandt, Beethoven, Steinmetz, Plato, Christ.” Ciardi’s poem represents the bomber as a technician whose métier is death: “Journeyman expert in the trades of kill, / Scholar of bomb and fuse…” These poems, even at their most metaphysical, struggle to contain the bomber’s awesome destructive power within a pre-industrial, humanist cultural framework (scholarship, classical music, and Renaissance rhetoric), at the center of which lies the bomber’s fragile body (“Fierce death you carry fill your heart / With life—
”).

While these poems illustrate well the tension between power and vulnerability embodied in the bomber, they do not exemplify the culmination of that contradiction, which occurs through the bomber’s sacrifice. Indeed, not all bomber lyrics go so far as to depict the bomber’s death, trauma, or sacrificial wounding, though many of the best known lyrics do, from Jarrell’s “Siegfried” (“…you have tasted your own blood.”) to Howard Nemerov’s “The War in the Air” (“For a saving grace, we didn’t see our dead, / Who rarely bothered coming home to die.”). One typical war-time sacrifice poem is May Sarton’s “Navigator,” written for Edmond Kennedy and published in The New Yorker in 1943.58

58 “The airman I wrote about is in North Africa—so he won’t come,” Sarton wrote to Juliette Huxley in January 1943 (Dear Juliette 121). Edmond Kennedy seems to have survived the war, actually, after being taken prisoner in Tunisia and held in Stalag Luft III (made famous by The Great Escape) and Stalag XIII-D Nürnberg Langwasser (ww2pow.info).
The lazy prince of tennis balls and lutes,
Marvelous redhead who could eat and have his cake,
Collector of hot jazz, Japanese prints, rare books,
The charming winner who takes all for the game’s sake,
Is now disciplined, changed, and wrung into a man.
For war’s sake, in six months, this can be done.

Now he is groomed and cared for like a fighting cock,
His blood enriched, his athlete’s nerve refined
In crucibles of tension to be electric under shock,
His intellect composed for action and designed
To map a bomber’s passage to Berlin by stars,
Precision’s instrument that neither doubts nor fears.

This can be done in six months. Take a marvelous boy
And knead him into manhood for destruction’s joy.
This can be done in six months, but we never tried
Until we needed the lute player’s sweet lifeblood.
O the composed mind and the electric nerve
Were never trained like this to build, to love, to serve.

Look at him now and swear by every bomb he will release,
This shall be done. This shall be better done in peace!
Sarton’s poem registers a complex mixture of erotic innuendo and moral chiding. While the ephebe is admired for his insouciant grace, embodying aristocratic ideals of connoisseurship, disinterested competition, and play, and his forced, too-rapid transformation into manhood is seen as a loss, the transformed man is nevertheless admired for his power. He is “enriched,” “refined,” potent, fearless, and capable of difficult acts of esoteric reckoning, yet all this potency is spent—even wasted—in sacrifice. The ephebe is transformed only to spill his “sweet lifeblood,” not for positive civilizational goals but for “destruction’s joy.” The final lines turn sententious, demanding that the reader look and swear. “This shall be done” opening the ultimate line suggests both an impotent ex post facto alignment of will with fact—deixis reclaimed as intention—and inaugurates Sarton’s final critique. The “this” refers back to the failure pointed to in the final lines of the previous stanza, and insists that it be rectified: the ephebe must be trained “to build, to love, to serve,” and “this shall be better done in peace.”

Sarton’s moral outrage at the poem’s end rings hollow against the eroticism of the prior stanzas (“knead him into manhood”), which hints at an investment in the sacrifice itself—the destruction of the beautiful boy—that exceeds her merely formal denunciation. The archaic, biblical tenor of the final lines sets them apart from the rest of the poem and suggest a failure of Sarton’s native idiom. The aesthetic power in this poem, such as it is, comes not from its moral but rather from the ephebe’s sensuality, his transformation, and the sacrifice of his “sweet lifeblood.” The vulnerable, beautiful boy locked into the god-like destructive machinery of the aerial predator exemplifies perfectly
the culminating narrative—and problem—of the bomber lyric: the aesthetic sacrifice of
the community’s agent of violence.
Chapter 10. “Pity the men who had to do it”

It is the first death which infects everyone with the feeling of being threatened. It is impossible to overrate the part played by the first dead man in the kindling of wars. Rulers who want to unleash war know very well that they must procure or invent a first victim. It need not be anyone of particular importance, and can even be someone quite unknown. Nothing matters except his death; and it must be believed that the enemy is responsible for this. Every possible cause of his death is suppressed except one: His membership of the group to which one belongs oneself.


The most well-known bomber lyric, perhaps the single most anthologized poem from World War II, the poem Karl Shapiro called “the most famous and the best war poem of anyone in the twentieth century,” is Randall Jarrell’s “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (“The Death of Randall Jarrell” 220–221).\(^59\) Jarrell was not a bomber crewman like John Ciardi or Howard Nemerov, but spent his war service teaching celestial navigation in Oklahoma and Arizona. His close contact with flight crew trainees spurred

\(^{59}\) Jarrell’s poem was first published in *Partisan Review* (Winter 1945), in the same issue as his famous critique of Marianne Moore’s poem “In Distrust of Merits.” See Schweik (31–58) for a thorough discussion of Jarrell’s attack, with special regard for its gendered aspects, and Christine Miller for an attentive, generous reading of Moore’s poem (which is too often thoughtlessly disparaged by critics unsympathetic to Moore’s complex ethical self-castigation). “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” also appeared in Jarrell’s 1945 collection *Little Friend, Little Friend.*
his vivid literary imagination to write from their point of view. In five dense lines of
loose, mainly trochaic verse, Jarrell produced an iconic, murmuring, self-elegizing lyric,
in the genre Diana Fuss calls a “corpse poem”—a spectral voice overheard speaking to
itself, looking back to take in the war, his job as a bomber crewmember, his birth, and his
death via a haiku-like succession of images.

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

The poem is nearly the sestet of a sonnet, which perhaps explains some of its
appeal. Its lines measure 11 beats, 12, 10, 11, and 14. The first line, dreamily
allegorical, opens the poem with a troubled rhythm destabilizing the surreal event it
describes: beginning with a soft trochee, the rhythm marks a caesura after the fifth
syllable, then slides into a turbulent metric upset that speeds us through an iambic “fall”
to a quasi-spondaic “into” and comes down hard on “State,” capitalized as if a
personification.

\  \  \  /  /  ||  /  /  ( )  /  /  

From my mother’s sleep  I fell into the State,

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60 This quasi-sonnet appearance is something it shares with that other iconic twentieth-century war poem,
Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est.”
The stress of “into” carries a tension—the second syllable of the word pulls at the ear to take its own stress, to separate itself off as its own preposition and a distinct step in the movement, yet it remains subordinate to the first syllable. This prepositional ambiguity does semantic work complicating the speaker’s “fall”: Did he fall “into” it, like a pit, or “fall in” to it, as you would with a crowd—or a military formation (“Fall in,” being a standard military command)?

Either way, the position of the speaking voice carries a clear judgment. The speaker’s mother, negligently dormant, has betrayed him. Birth, of course, is implied, so birth and fall are one. The birth is into the “State”: both the social world and history, both the collective and the faceless administration of mass society. Remembering that the poem is called “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” that it is about a specific and specifically wartime role, we must also see the “State” as the interpellation of wartime government (as in another Jarrell poem, “The State”). Once drafted, a person becomes a GI, “government issue,” a thing to be shuttled through systems toward the great death-making machine of the front. While “I fell into the State” perfectly expresses its conceptual meaning, it also alludes to and calls up the physical experience of appearing before a draft board or reporting for service. The transition from citizen to soldier is a fraught threshold, marking irrevocable shifts from peace to war, from freedom to totalitarian military discipline, and from the family to broader, nationalistic social identifications. Thus, from the passively innocent purity of feminine negligence, the speaker drops into not only sociality and history, but into the collective physical experience of modern industrial warfare.
This is the standard critical reading of the poem. As Leven Dawson writes, “The theme of Randall Jarrell’s ‘The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner’ is that institutionalized violence, or war, creates moral paradox, a condition in which acts repugnant to human nature become appropriate” (238). This so-called “dehumanization” of the soldier in the military is something Jarrell explores further in other poems such as “Port of Embarkation,” “The Lines,” “The State,” “Losses,” “The Sick Nought,” and “Siegfried,” but most despairingly in “Prisoners,” where he sees—avant Agamben—the prison camp as the nomos of the modern. In this poem, industrial existence is reduced to meaningless drudgery within an absolute (and absolutely violent) authoritarian regime trapping the oppressors as much as the oppressed: “The prisoners, the guards, the soldiers—they are all, in their way, being trained. / From these moments, repeated forever, our own new world will be made.” Didactic and tendentious, in stilted, complex rhythms playing on alexandrines and fourteeners (suggesting faintly mock epic), this poem dramatizes Jarrell’s basic view of the modern world and modern man. The dumb machinery of “our own new world” reduces men to inarticulate passivity, mere endurance, and eternal punishment, whether they are the prisoners in “soiled blue” or the soldiers in “soiled and shapeless green.” All their being is expressed in “their child’s, beast’s sigh—of despair…” Even the guard is mute, “yawning,” and no more than a tool: he is at one with the instrument of oppression, the “sights of the cradled rifle” identified appositively with his eyes.

The assimilation of the individual, the private, and the human into the social machinery of the mass industrial state was a major theme in Jarrell’s work. Stephen Burt has argued persuasively that Jarrell’s Wordsworthian valuation of the individual voice
against the perceived homogenization of institutional life is key to explaining many features of the poet’s work, from Jarrell’s tendency to mawkishness to his taste for dramatic monologues. One central feature Burt finds exemplifying this theme in Jarrell’s poetry is his avowed repudiation of power. Burt sees this repudiation embodied in Jarrell’s “talky, stuttery style,” arguing that “Jarrell’s ‘semifeminine’ tones and attitudes help him (in [Langdon] Hammer’s phrase) ‘disengage literature from power,’” and finds the repudiation dramatized by the subjects of his war poems (Burt 40–41). Burt’s argument relies on a point made by Langdon Hammer, who writes: “…the life Jarrell led and the poems he wrote both express his will to disengage literature from power—to identify himself and his writing with an innocent domestic world which is linked to childhood, fairy tales, and ‘femininity,’ and isolated from the culpable, public, masculine world of self-interest” (392). As Burt observes, Jarrell saw his fellow draftees not only divorced from power but oppressed by it: The Greatest Generation were for Jarrell a mass of dumb, inarticulate, and powerless “victims of the hypostasized social” (Burt 56). Jarrell’s letters describe his fellow soldiers as “ignorant of the nature and conditions of the choices they make” and “pretty well determined in the passive sense” (Jarrell Letters 150–151). Jarrell characterizes them elsewhere as “just like lumps of Cream of Wheat, almost indistinguishable from the Cream of Wheat” (107).  

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61 Jarrell here is comparing the vivacity of soldiers in a story by John Cheever with the reality, “that men so different, from such different places, can act so alike, and give you such an intolerable feeling of stupid loud dreary sameness.” Jarrell complains constantly through his letters while in the Army about how stupid the Army and his fellow soldiers are. As Langdon Hammer notes, “Because the audience Jarrell’s war poems project was either hopelessly atomized—a world of isolated victims—or as hopelessly monolithic as the State, it should not surprise us that Jarrell came to view the public and the State as one, or that he finally felt revulsion for the people he wished to address” (400).
A spectacle of power without agency, in which everyone seemed under compulsion and nobody seemed in charge, was exactly what many soldiers saw in the Army and the war…. That experience of powerlessness unites almost all the people in Jarrell’s war poems: the orphans, the gunners, MPs, POWs, refugees (57).

Burt’s point worth attending to further. There is certainly no obvious objection to Jarrell portraying “the experience of powerlessness” among orphans, prisoners, and refugees. Even if Thadeusz Borowski, Primo Levi, and Jean Améry have testified to how power functioned immanently and structurally even in the most appalling Nazi concentration camps, how prisoners replicated, internalized, and sustained the authoritarian hierarchies imposed on them, how agency in the camps wasn’t evacuated but rather negotiated through institutional channels, and how prisoners’ “individual” identities, in the face of some of the most brutal and demeaning socialization known to history, still found expression in their public roles in camp society, the myth of the zombified and wholly innocent prisoner (not to speak of orphans and refugees) as representative subject of state domination is dear to the modern Western political imagination and possesses authentic historical force.

Yet it is quite another thing to describe pilots, gunners, bombardiers, soldiers, police, and prison guards, especially those enlisted in one of one of the mightiest armies the world has ever seen, as powerless, “without agency,” or “pretty well determined in the passive sense.” Robert Lowell put the problem neatly enough in his 1951 review of Jarrell’s book *The Seven-League Crutches*: “The determined, passive, sacrificial lives of
the pilots, inwardly so harmless and outwardly so destructive, are ideal subjects for Jarrell.” (27). In this understanding, the objective being of bomber crews, soldiers, and pilots—destructive, murderous, awesomely powerful—is seen as completely divorced from their subjective existence. As actants, they kill thousands with the flick of a button; as persons, they are “determined, passive, sacrificial.” This division goes beyond mere alienation to suggest a wholesale mind-body split, in which the souls under consideration are simply not responsible for their deeds. For Jarrell, Lowell, and the strain of sentimental individualism to which they appeal, these men are not autonomous beings living their lives, but rather what James Dickey aptly described in his review of Jarrell’s war poetry as “collective Objects, or Attitudes, or Killable Puppets” (“Some of All of It” 346).

We don’t need a Foucauldian analysis of power relations or a Frankfurt School sociology to see here that the portrayal of agents exercising power as first and foremost victims of that power is both explicitly ideological and analytically deficient. Jarrell’s vision of a “spectacle of power without agency” is no more than the bedazzlement of a moral simplicity that refuses to see difference in strength, responsibility inhering in one’s social role, or the functioning of actual networks of agents exercising power through decision-making. Seeing everyone in the military (or modern industrial society) as no more than a function of structural prerogatives, “pretty passively determined,” is a shallow misreading of how subjectivity functions and disdains the question of ethics altogether. It is an essentially authoritarian view of social life, investing total sovereignty in leadership and institutions, and is the very view expressed by Nazi defendants at
Nuremburg who claimed that in committing their war crimes they “were just following orders.”

In the figure of the bomber, the trauma hero joins with what Richard Slotkin calls the “avenging angel” to become the sacrificial avenger. The “avenging angel” appears in Slotkin’s analysis of American cultural history as the agent of what he calls “regeneration through violence.” Slotkin’s painstaking analysis of the American myth of redemptive violence was first sketched in 1971, in an article for The Journal of Popular Culture, then elaborated over three volumes that trace the archetypal narrative from colonial America to the twentieth century: Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860 (1973), The Fatal Environment: the Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890 (1985), and Gunfighter Nation: the Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America (1992). The cultural myth that Slotkin describes has its roots in early American captivity narratives, and joins scenes of primal violence with Puritan ideology and Eurocentric racism in a seemingly inescapable pattern of victimization, vengeance, guilt, and scapegoating that forms one of the dominant narratives in American self-understanding.

This is the paradigm: the American in his pastoral country, troubled by an obscure malaise, a sense of weakness and threat, finds in the first assault on his world and values the concretion of all terrors and villainies, both cosmic ones and ones which are intimate parts of his own family or his own being. His world view polarizes, he suddenly perceives his role in the drama as that of victim; he purifies

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62 As articulated in the fourth Nuremburg Principle, "The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law, provided a moral choice was in fact possible to him” (Nuremburg Principles 375.).
and strengthens himself, feeding his wrath on the sense of his difference from his enemy and an exaggerated sense of being that enemy’s helpless captive. Then he ceases to be victim and becomes avenger, exorcising and destroying utterly all demons, all jungles where demons might lurk (“Dreams and Genocide” 51).

Slotkin traces the reappearance of this foundational myth again and again throughout American culture, in political speeches, popular novels and films, literary works, and historical accounts. One of the deepest continuities in American identity, this myth remains alive today, connecting *The Last of the Mohicans* to *Zero Dark Thirty*, joining Jonathan Edwards and George Zimmerman, and sounding the central motif of American empire: Remember the Alamo, remember the *Maine*, “Today is a day that will live in infamy,” “Aggression by terror against the peaceful villagers of South Vietnam has now been joined by open aggression on the high seas against the United States of America,” and, of course, 9/11.\(^\text{63}\)

One of Slotkin’s key points in the early article “Dreams and Genocide” and powerfully elaborated in *Gunfighter Nation* is that “The myth is cyclical, each exorcism leading to another more profound, more damaging” (“Dreamland and Genocide” 57). The first movement in the cycle is the ritual self-purification of the victim-avenger, the second movement the killing of the alien other, be they Iroquois, Filipino, African-American, Japanese, Vietnamese, or Afghan.\(^\text{64}\) The Puritan strain in this process motivates further

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\(^{63}\)The resonances between 9/11 rhetoric and early American captivity narratives were explored to some effect by Susan Faludi in her book *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*.

\(^{64}\)This particular mytheme may be merely a culturally specific version of a general human tendency toward xenophobic self-victimization. Consider René Girard’s point here: “This also contains a major discovery in anthropology: aggression does not exist. Among animals, there is predation, and there is doubtless genetic rivalry for females. However, among humans, the fact that no one ever feels they are the aggressor is because everything is always reciprocal. The slightest little difference, in one direction or another, can
cycles of purification and violence: “the role of the avenging angel provides satisfaction and relief—but only temporarily” (56). The next round is the re-victimization of the avenging angel as victim of his own traumatic violence. Then comes the avenger’s expulsion from civil society: Bearer of the mark of Cain, the soldier becomes the scapegoat for state violence. Consider Paul Kahn: “Is it the captured enemy who is sacrificed to the god or is it the member of the polity? The answer is both, for the ritual includes a symbolic exchange such that the former can substitute for the latter” (Sacred Violence 94–95). In Slotkin’s words:

Guilt is the root of dissatisfaction, the sense that they have participated in evil and thus shared the racial nature of the Indian, the gook, the devil; killing the devil assuages the guilt, but evokes emotions and leads to actions which are akin to the dark impulses that made one guilty in the first place. And in any case, the nature of the struggle is such that the identities of good gooks and bad gooks and the haunted soldiers themselves are confused…. So one returns from massacre alienated, psychologically still trapped in the jungle cycle of sin and exorcism…

trigger the escalation to extremes. The aggressor has always already been attacked. Why are relations of rivalry never seen as symmetrical? Because people always have the impression that the other is the first to attack, that they are never the ones who begin, though in a way they are always the ones. Individualism is a formidable lie. We make others understand that we recognize the signs of aggressiveness which they manifest, and they in turn interpret our posture as aggression. And so on. There comes a time when conflict breaks out, and the initiator places himself in a weak position. The differences are so small at the beginning, and fade away so quickly that they are not perceived as reciprocal to each other, but as always unique to themselves. To think, as Clausewitz seems to have done… about war as ‘the continuation of policy by other means’ is thus to lose sight of the intuition of war as a duel, in other words, to deny the notion of aggression and response to aggression. It is to forget reciprocal action that both accelerates and suspends the escalation to extremes, which only suspends it in order to further accelerate it later.” (Battling to the End 18).
Sin and exorcism—or trauma and recovery. Within the trauma aesthetic dominating contemporary American discourses on conflict, atavistic rituals of sin, guilt, and exorcism are transposed into techno-pathological terms of trauma, PTSD, and therapeutic recovery. The terms concerned remain morally inflected and do much the same psychosocial work, and are perhaps best understood through a combination of political theology, or the analysis of how secular political practices operate through theological concepts, and structuralist anthropology.\(^6\) As Paul Kahn points out, “We have to see that political truth, just like the truth of religious faith, does not arise out of a division between subject and object. Rather, political truth is constructed at the intersection of body and word. It, too, is a meaning performed on the basis of faith and tested through suffering” (*Sacred Violence* 31). The soldier—trauma hero—bomber is precisely this body tied to the cross of modern industrial liberalism.

When the revelatory interpretation of warfare in its traumatic mode meets with the foundational American myth of regeneration through violence, as developed by Slotkin, the role of the scapegoat in Slotkin’s schema is taken up by a new actor. The racialized “other” remains in the equation, but the enemy’s death no longer redeems the avenger. Violence *as such* now calls down the mark of sin, and the avenger, who has committed violence on a cultural mission, must now bear its stain alone. Since violence is taboo in civil society, the one who commits violence *for* civil society must be expelled from it—typically into the realm of trauma, or PTSD. In the new logic, the hunter becomes the scapegoat: he must suffer for the killing he undertook on society’s behalf.

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\(^6\) I favor the analysis of such cultural processes through structuralist and anthropological approaches to “theological” or “mythological” frames rather than through post-Freudian psychoanalytic frames of “fantasy,” since to apply psychoanalytic hermeneutics too readily to collective cultural practices is to risk hypostasizing individual psychological processes into collective dynamics and obscuring the real difference between how individual humans function within social groups and how social groups function as such.
Let us consider Randall Jarrell’s explicit meditation on the problem of the bomber as scapegoat, in “Eighth Air Force” (Losses 20):

If, in an odd angle of the hutment,
A puppy laps the water from a can
Of flowers, and the drunk sergeant shaving
Whistles O Paradiso!—shall I say that man
Is not as men have said: A wolf to man?

Jarrell establishes a quiet behind-the-lines scene of gentle domesticity, ironically capped by the allusion to Plautus. The next stanza explicitly marks the airmen who are the subject of the poem worse than mere killers: “The other murderers troop in yawning…” In this opening, Jarrell sets up a strong dramatic irony between two conceptions of the airmen: on the one hand, they are regular joes, almost boys, soft-focus masculine figures yawning, shaving, playing games, whistling arias, and fond of flowers and puppies; on the other, they are “murderers.”

In its last two stanzas, the poem turns from objective observation to the subjective judgment of a narrative “I” who appears as a combination of judge and condemned, dressed in allusions to Pontius Pilate. The Plautan irony opening the poem (“homo homini lupus est”) is rewritten as Pilate’s “ecce homo,” offering the wolfish bombers up as Christ figures. Jarrell ends the poem on a complex, arresting image, an image which has

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This likely refers as well to Marianne Moore’s, “In Distrust of Merits,” as mentioned previously. It is worthwhile considering “Eighth Air Force” in dialogue with “In Distrust of Merits,” as Schweik suggests (31–53), though unfortunately beyond the scope of this argument.
provoked much commentary and which deserves further consideration: “Men wash their hands, in blood, as best they can: / I find no fault in this just man.”

Cleanth Brooks admired this poem, and found it to be one of the “best instances” of what he saw as Randall Jarrell’s Miltonic “architectural quality, his ability to build the lofty rhyme” (26). It was specifically these last two stanzas, when the “brilliant resolving image” of Pontius Pilate is introduced, in which Brooks finds exactly the sort of intellectual-literary puzzling that was New Criticism’s bread and butter. Brooks is especially interested in the final line. It offers, admittedly, a provocatively paradoxical image—as Brooks points out, it is “thoroughly equivocal,” and “rich in possible meanings.”

It could mean: Since my own hands are bloody, I have no right to condemn the rest. It could mean: I know that men can love justice, even though their hands are bloody, for I love justice and there is blood on mine. It could mean: Men are essentially decent; they try to keep their hands clean even if they have only blood in which to wash them. But it could also be a cry of desperation: How can one expect men to keep their hands clean when so often they are given only blood in which to wash them? (30).

It is true that the line is equivocal and offers various readings. Given that the scene being invoked here is of Pontius Pilate “washing his hands” of the responsibility for sentencing Jesus, by which act he laid that responsibility on the angry crowd in attendance, a strange triangulation is set up. “When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a
tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: See ye to it” (Matthew 27:24). Within the logic of the poem, then, the narrator takes on the role of Pilate, the airmen Jesus, and the reader the angry crowd demanding a scapegoat. The narrator, claiming equal guilt and responsibility with the “murderers” for their deeds (“…since, a man, / I did as these have done, but did not die…”), turns to offer his fellow soldiers to the readerly crowd: “I will content the people as I can / And give up these to them: Behold the man!” As Jarrell writes in the notes to his 1955 Selected Poems, “The phrases [in “Eighth Air Force”] from the Gospels compare such criminals and scapegoats as these with that earlier criminal and scapegoat about whom the Gospels were written” (xiii). The role of the poet-narrator here is analogous to that of the imperial bureaucrat, seemingly powerful in their role of offering judgment, but in fact constrained between Caesar’s dictates and the irrational demands of the masses.67

Jarrell has remixed the order of the events in the Gospels, beginning with what came last, Pilate’s “ecce homo,” and ending with the washing of the hands and Pilate’s judgment, just as he involutes the order of words from Matthew 27:19, in which Pilate’s wife advises the Prefect to have nothing to do with Christ: “Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him.” This shift takes the emphasis off the triangular relationship between the readerly crowd, poet-narrator, and sacrificial soldier, and puts it on the act of judgment. Typical for Jarrell, he obscures manifest social relations and directs the reader’s attention instead toward an aporetic and largely artificial intellectual dilemma.

67 This fits with Karl Shapiro’s view of Jarrell as an “insider,” whose great internal conflict was “between his instinct for freedom and his desire for cultural asylum”—a man made by institutions who, with the great bad faith of the timid rebel, despised the institutions that made him (“The Death of Randall Jarrell” 195).
The act of washing the hands over a sacrifice comes from Jewish tradition, specifically Deuteronomy. If a man is found murdered but no one knows who committed the murder, then the elders of the city nearest the murder are supposed to sacrifice a heifer: part proxy, part scapegoat, part propitiation. “And all the elders of that city, that are next unto the slain man, shall wash their hands over the heifer that is beheaded in the valley: And they shall answer and say, Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it” (Deuteronomy 21: 6–7). In the story of the Gospels, Pilate is sending a clear signal to the Sanhedrin and the crowds at the trial, performed in the terms of Jewish ritual, that they are responsible for Jesus’s death, not he. As Matthew 27 continues: “Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children. Then released he Barabbas to them: And when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.” In “Eighth Air Force,” then, the poet-narrator is abjuring responsibility for judgment and sacrifice, turning it over instead to the readerly crowd. When the poet-narrator concludes “Men wash their hands, in blood, as best they can,” he is deliberately conflating his own role as Pilate with the role of the pilots and bombardiers doing the killing, at the same time invoking the disavowal of guilt by which Pilate laid responsibility for Christ’s crucifixion on the Jews of Jerusalem, which itself invokes the Jewish purgation of collective guilt through ritual substitution, as described in Deuteronomy. The poet narrator finds “no fault in that just man,” meaning both himself and the killers he speaks of. The blood of these “murderers” is on the reader, if it is on anyone.

Randall Jarrell is not the only person to have turned to the figure of Pontius Pilate to mediate the problem of historical blood guilt. As reported by Hannah Arendt, Adolf
Eichmann testified at his trial to his own “Pilate moment” in January, 1942. According to Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, SS Obergroppenführer Reinhard Heydrich had called various high-ranking Nazi officials together at Wannsee then “to coordinate all efforts toward the implementation of the Final Solution” (113–114). Eichmann was present as a functionary and sort of secretary. Arendt writes:

> Although he had been doing his best right along to help with the Final Solution, he had still harbored some doubts about “such a bloody solution through violence,” and these doubts had now been dispelled. “Here now, during this conference, the most prominent people had spoken, the Popes of the Third Reich.” Now he could see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears that not only Hitler, not only Heydrich or the “sphinx” Müller, not just the S.S. or the Party, but the élite of the good old Civil Service were vying and fighting with each other for the honor of taking the lead in these “bloody” matters. “At that moment, I sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling, for I felt free of all guilt.”

In light of the dubious appeal of Pilate as a figure of moral mediation, as illustrated by Eichmann’s self-serving testimony, we can begin to see what is happening in Jarrell’s poem when he transforms the hand-washing trope of disavowal into a symbol of the judge’s own identification with the scapegoat.

> We are presented with a vivid image, bordering on the grotesque, which gives Brooks “every qualification that is desired” (30–31). Brooks sees this moment as an expression of the poem’s fundamental conflict, between a sense of guilt and a “yearning
to believe in man’s justness,” and this superficial paradox seems at first sufficient. Yet what Brooks’s method does not address is the logic by which this seeming paradox functions or what purpose it serves. In the dream logic of “Eighth Air Force,” which mirrors the mythical logic of sacrifice, it is precisely the guilt that exonerates. The blood, in this case, is precisely what makes the condemned man just. It is what unites the poet-narrator and the sacrificial soldier, while separating them from the readerly crowd, who stand in for the civilian population. The “murderers” are both “just” and given up to the people, both sacred and sacrifice, precisely because their hands are bloody.

If, as Brooks avers, it is “One of the ‘uses’ of poetry… to make us better citizens,” then “Eighth Air Force” serves this utility well. In it Jarrell finds the “proper symbol” for “the very matrix out of which, and from which, our creeds are abstracted,” which is to say, the mythology of regeneration through violence and the figure of the sacrificial avenger (31–32). In it, the bomber crewmen are identified with Christ, and declared both just and faultless. The guilt for their murderous acts falls upon the crowd who sees them as murderers; the blood guilt redounds to the collective. But rather than be distracted by Brooks’s enigmatic paradox, we must follow the ritual substitution being enacted: *The soldier takes the enemy’s place as the victim of collective violence.*

A community projects its collective blood guilt onto the soldier it sent to do its killing, then reinterprets that projection as both a judgment against the soldier and its sense of responsibility for traumatizing the soldier. The soldier carries the blood guilt for the collective, but it is precisely this imposition that makes him the victim of collective violence. The soldier, by being transformed from the agent of collective violence into its victim, is thereby purified of his own blood guilt. At the same time, the soldier takes the
place of the original victim of collective violence: the dead enemy. Thus scapegoated, the soldier bears the stain of violence out of the community. The connection between the collective and its killing has been broken; the blood guilt of collective violence has been compartmentalized in the agent, transformed into traumatic suffering, and purged.

Kenneth Burke is helpful here on the “Dialectic of the Scapegoat,” from *A Grammar of Motives*:

[T]he scapegoat is a “charismatic,” a vicar. As such, it is profoundly consubstantial with those who, looking upon it as a chosen vessel, would ritualistically cleanse themselves by loading the burden of their own iniquities upon it. Thus the scapegoat represents the principle of division in that its persecutors would alienate from themselves to it their own uncleanliness. For one must remember that a scapegoat cannot be “curative” except insofar as it represents the iniquities of those who would be cured by attacking it. In representing *their* iniquities, it performs the role of vicarious atonement (that is, unification, or merger, granted to those who have alienated their iniquities upon it, and so may be purified through its suffering).

All told, note what we have here: (1) an original state of merger, in that the iniquities are shared by both the iniquitous and their chosen vessel; (2) a principle of division, in that the elements shared in common are being ritualistically alienated; (3) a new principle of merger, this time in the unification of those whose purified identity is defined in dialectical opposition to the sacrificial offering (406).
Jarrell’s poem helps us be “better citizens” by perpetuating a political theology in which the soldier is the scapegoat of liberal capitalist democracy, our “just” murderer. In excluding the killer from civil society, that is, we are able to perpetuate our faith in its lawful order, obscure its violent origins, and reaffirm the state monopoly on force which sustains it, all while personally disavowing the act of violence ourselves. Jarrell’s suggestive inversion of innocence in this poem, under the sign of Christ, by which he works to mark the soldier innocent and “the people” guilty, sustains both the separation of the soldier from the community (today invoked by the idiotic mantra of the “military-civilian divide”) and the soldier’s role as scapegoat, while the poet-judge as Pilate mediates this symbolic exchange.

For Jarrell, it is the soldiers’ innocence and guilt alike that exempt them from the civic order they kill and die for. Yet the economy of blood remains in place. The soldier suffers symbolic trauma so that we citizens might be symbolically absolved, all to symbolically mediate the physical violence at the foundations of society. Jarrell’s poem brings this economy of sacrifice to light with remarkable intuition. It is at this point that the soldierly enactment of the scapegoat function must be clarified and made explicit. Paul Kahn describes the situation well:

That there can be no social contract of well-being absent the pledge to engage in the violence of killing and being killed is a proposition that is both undeniable and

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68 Jeffrey Walsh notes the scapegoat function, but reads more ambivalence in Jarrell’s last line, finding a cynical irony in the bombers’ “justness”: “Contrariwise, the narrator recognises [sic] the criminal scapegoating process that socially exploits them as instruments, because they are also agent-victims, frightened, child-like, and even (according to an overriding equation, it is implied, which prefers ‘democracy’ to fascism) ‘just’ men” (158).
inexpressible. The veteran bears this foundational sin of the political community.

He embodies the symbolic exchange that maintains the order of law within the sacred time and space of the sovereign ("Managing Violence" 326).

The soldier serves in a state of exception. As the agent of sovereign violence, the soldier embodies the state of exception. In Kahn’s words: “The soldier’s body expresses the sovereign will not as a proposition of law but as a willingness to kill and be killed” (Sacred Violence 86). In this willingness, the soldier is the law beyond the law.

Reflecting on Abu Ghraib in 2006, anthropologist Alphonso Lingis observed that the soldier had become “the sole genuine hero, an individual integrally subordinated to order and utility, but at the same time superhuman in the savage and exuberant release of excess energies against a demonic enemy” (84). This is not a new phenomenon: the warrior’s violation of the killing taboo and the consequent stain of violence are precisely what marks him as at once sacred and polluted, and what has traditionally motivated ritual purification at the moment of his return to peaceful society. As Kahn shows, the figuration is not only itself double (sacred/polluted), but is constructed socially through a double practice: consecration and persecution, or heroic memorialization and scapegoating (Sacred Violence 158–169). The pathologization of the soldier as a victim of psychological trauma appears here in its proper social function: the stain of violence is a pathogen that must be expelled from the civic body.

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69 Consider Freud: “The savage, such as the Australian, the Bushman, or the inhabitant of Terra del Fuego, is by no means a remorseless murderer; when he returns home as victor from the war path he is not allowed to enter his village or touch his wife until he has expiated his war murders through lengthy and often painful penances. The explanation for this is, of course, related to his superstition; the savage fears the avenging spirit of the slain. But the spirits of the fallen enemy are nothing but the expression of his evil conscience over his blood guilt; behind this superstition there lies concealed a bit of ethical delicacy of feeling which has been lost to us civilized beings” (Reflections 59–60).
In light of a campaign of mass civilian conscription that transformed more than 16 million members of the body politic into war-fighters in World War II, the problem of the soldier’s constitutive claim to enact violence arises with some urgency. As William Waller wrote in his 1944 book *The Veteran Comes Back*:

> The veteran, so justly entitled to move us to pity or to shame, can also put us in fear. Destitute he may be, friendless, without political guile, unskilled in the arts of peace; but weak he is not. That makes him a different kind of problem. That hand that does know how to earn its owner’s knows how to take your bread, knows very well how to kill you, if need be, in the process. That eye that has looked at death will not quail at the sight of a policeman. *Unless and until he can be renaturalized into his native land, the veteran is a threat to society* (13, italics in original).

Under conditions of total war, mass conscription by the state turns the citizen into a soldier. The job of the soldier is to kill. At the same time, as Kahn points out, the state-as-sovereign has the right to demand a sacrifice. Indeed, it is precisely by giving himself up to sovereign power that the soldier participates in that power: in being willing to *be* killed, he is granted the power *to* kill. The veteran returns to civil society living a contradiction, on the one hand a citizen submissive to the state’s monopoly on force, on the other hand an agent of that very monopoly.

The irresolvable contradiction between the role of the soldier as agent of state violence and the role of the citizen as participant in state contract, and the contradiction
between soldier as sacrifice and citizen as embodiment of popular sovereignty, cannot be resolved “rationally” (by group therapy, for example, or a better VA), since the roles themselves are symbolic and can only be managed in symbolic terms. The trauma hero is an attempt at such symbolic management, and so is the bomber lyric. These contradictions are managed by the symbolic expulsion of pathogenic violence: through its projection into a legendary past of memorialization (the “Good War”), or through its repudiation via a scapegoat mechanism of victimization (the naming of the trauma hero). Either way, the claim to violence is redefined as existing beyond the bounds of the social contract.

Disturbingly, Hannah Arendt’s description in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* of how Himmler and other Nazi leaders helped salve the conscience of the men they directed to murder Jewish civilians looks remarkably like a version the trauma hero narrative, especially in the way that it shifts the focus of suffering away from the victims of violence and onto its perpetrators:

What stuck in the minds of these men who had become murderers was simply the notion of being involved in something historic, grandiose, unique..., which must therefore be difficult to bear. This was important, because the murderers were not sadists or killers by nature; on the contrary, a systematic effort was made to weed out all those who derived physical pleasure from what they did. The troops of the

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70 Kahn writes: “Memorialization is one way of managing contact between law and sovereign violence. Scapegoating is another. The scapegoat bears the sins of the community, taking onto himself symbolically that which the community can neither do without nor acknowledge as its own. He is both polluted and sanctified. The sin must be cleansed. Memorialization refuses to see killing and being killed as anything other than sacrifice. Scapegoating sees the killing but pushes the killer out of sight. Where memorialization is not possible, scapegoating is necessary” (*Sacred Violence* 162–63).
Einsatzgruppen had been drafted from the Armed S.S., a military unit with hardly more crimes to its record than any ordinary unit of the German Army, and their commanders had been chosen by Heydrich from the S.S. élite with academic degrees. Hence the problem was how to overcome not so much their conscience as the animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering. The trick used by Himmler—who apparently was rather strongly afflicted with these instinctive reactions himself—was very simple and probably very effective; it consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So that instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders! (105–106)

Or, more explicitly with the trauma hero, manifest in Heller’s Yossarian, Jarrell’s airmen, and the bomber lyric: What horrible things killing did to me!

The dialectical power of the figure of the bomber, and hence of the bomber lyric, is that it embodies both the image of state power and the figure of the traumatized scapegoat soldier with such intensity. The stakes of this begin to come into focus when we realize that the bomber serves as a scapegoat not merely for collective violence, but for collective atrocities. While the Allies in World War II had nothing like the SS-Einsatzgruppen, promulgated nothing as horrific as Auschwitz or Buchenwald, war crimes were still widely and sometimes systematically committed by British and American forces. Some of them by the men in Jarrell’s Eighth Air Force.
As Arendt herself noted, “the saturation bombing of open cities and, above all, the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki clearly constituted war crimes in the sense of the Hague Convention” (256). It is generally agreed now by informed observers that the targeted Allied strategic bombing of German and Japanese civilians during World War II, called at the time “morale bombing” or “terror bombing,” constituted atrocities and very probably war crimes under the standards established by the victors after the war. It is in this context that we can come to a more comprehensive perspective of the stakes involved in the revelatory interpretation of war and its politics, as discussed before with regard to Paul Fussell’s “Thank God for the Atom Bomb.”

If the firebombing of Japan and Germany were atrocities, then our “bomber lyrics” are atrocity poems. If the firebombing of Japan and Germany constitute war crimes under international norms, then the work of Randall Jarrell, John Ciardi, James Dickey, and Richard Hugo offers not a poetry of witness, but a poetry of war crimes. To sympathize with Adolf Eichmann or the Nazi Einsatzgruppen, to portray them as victims of circumstance or state power, would surely be unacceptable to our sense of morality. Yet creating sympathy with men responsible for murdering thousands of unarmed civilians is one of the central effects of the bomber lyric and much canonical American literature of World War II. Presented as victims of abstract forces such as “the State” and “War,” protagonists such as Heller’s Yossarian and Jarrell’s Gunner are absolved of responsibility—as are we. As scapegoats, Yossarian and the Gunner bear the stain of sin.

71 It should be noted that in Europe, the atrocity bombing of civilians was primarily carried out by the RAF. The USAAF in Germany followed a policy of daytime bombing, specifically targeting industrial, logistical, and military targets; it was the RAF under Air Marshal Harris who made a policy of nighttime raids on residential centers. In cases such as Dresden, however, where the railyards targeted by the Americans were directly in the city center, and in Operation Gomorrah, the eight-day-long firebombing of Hamburg, where American bombing contributed to the firestorm, guilt and innocence cannot be quite so neatly apportioned. In East Asia, however, AAF General Curtis LeMay’s strategy was essentially one of racial extermination.
and murder, and bear it symbolically out of the community. Kurt Vonnegut dramatizes this way of thinking neatly in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when Air Force historian Bertram Rumfoord speaks with firebombing survivor Billy Pilgrim:

> “It *had* to be done,” Rumfoord told Billy, speaking of the destruction of Dresden.
> “I know,” said Billy.
> “That’s war.”
> “I know. I’m not complaining.”
> “It must have been hell on the ground.”
> “It was,” said Billy Pilgrim.
> “Pity the men who had to *do* it.”
> “I do” (198).

Most important, what this reading exposes in Jarrell’s “Eighth Air Force” is the ethical problem at the heart of how the postwar democratic-liberal order conceptualizes World War II: the question of how citizens in a mass-industrial commercial republic attempt to manage the conflict of liberal humanist values with the military violence that makes the practice of those values possible. To put it another way, if one of the historical conditions for the possibility of progressive humanist liberal politics was the firebombing of civilians in World War II, how could we possibly affirm those political values while also taking responsibility for the horrific violence that made them possible?
Chapter 11. Firebombing

James Dickey’s “The Firebombing,” which juxtaposes the air campaign in Japan against a suburban American landscape, offers an opportunity to think through the problem of collective responsibility for and complicity with state violence along a different route than Jarrell’s scapegoating and disavowal. Dickey’s poem became a target of condemnation when it was published in the mid-1960s, in fact, for just this reason. In comments on Dickey’s 1965 volume *Buckdancer’s Choice*, in which “The Firebombing” was published, Robert Bly describes the book as “repulsive,” sadistic, and “middle class” (170, 180). Bly goes so far as to call Dickey “a toady to the government” and “a sort of Georgia cracker Kipling” (187). Bly is explicit about his expectation that there be a scapegoat in his war poem, and incensed that Dickey does not provide one:

> If this were a poem scarifying the American conscience for the napalm raids, we would feel differently. But this poem has no real anguish. If the anguish were real, we would feel terrible remorse as we read, we would stop what we were doing, we would break the television set with an ax, we would throw ourselves on the ground sobbing. We feel no such thing. The poem emphasizes the picturesque quality of firebombing instead, the lordly attractive isolation of the pilot, the spectacular colors unfolding beneath, the way the fire spreads (181–182).
As Bly has dimly realized in the midst of his moralizing, the poem’s tense contrapuntal energy, the troubling pull that sustains its narrator, is precisely the “picturesque quality of firebombing”—the disconcerting pleasure humans take in watching destruction. Bly’s problem is less with Dickey, perhaps, than with Kant’s dynamic sublime, but he is right to bring up the question of imaginative sympathy. How aesthetic pleasure relates to and works against imaginative sympathy is one of the central problems of Dickey’s poem. Consider:

One is cool and enthralled in the cockpit,

Turned blue by the power of beauty,

In a pale treasure-hole of soft light

Deep in aesthetic contemplation,

Seeing the ponds catch fire

And cast it through ring after ring

Of land: O death in the middle

Of acres of inch-deep water! Useless

Firing small arms

Speckles from the river

Bank one ninety-millimeter

Misses far down wrong petals gone

It is this detachment,
The honored aesthetic evil,
The greatest sense of power in one’s life,
That must be shed in bars, or by whatever
Means… *(Poems* 186)

This turn from description to reflection, the ethical recognition that aesthetic detachment alienates us from other people and even works against imaginative sympathy, comes deep into Dickey’s long, complex, sometimes brilliant poem. It cannot be dismissed as easily as Bly would like, whether as an ethical statement or as a poetic one. Dickey’s lyric, whatever its faults, takes up the question of mass violence and guilt from a position of agency and action, with a nuanced sense of responsibility. Looking at “The Firebombing” in comparison with Jarrell’s bomber poems will help us open up the ethical ramifications of the bomber lyric, consider the lyric’s historical contexts, and reveal further what is at stake with the portrayal of the bomber as essentially “determined, passive, sacrificial.”

Dickey prefaces his poem with two epigraphs, one from the book of Job and the other from Günter Eich, in German. After surviving World War II and an American prison camp, Günter Eich went on to be a part of the *Trümmerliteratur* (Debris Literature) movement, comprising writers who sought to reconstitute German letters after the war, often through “clear-cutting literature” (*Kahlschlagliteratur*), a deliberately flat writing style that took as models existentially-inflected modernists such as Camus, Hemingway, Sartre, and Steinbeck. Along with Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll, Peter Weiss, Peter Handke, and Ingeborg Bachmann, Eich was also a member of Gruppe 47. His career was built on spare, minimalist, materialist lyrics exploring themes of trauma, guilt,
existential confrontation, and the political role of the writer. His poem “Dreams,” from which Dickey takes his epigraph, ends with the speaker urging the reader to “Be ornery, be as sand, not oil in the thirsty machinery of the world!” (179).

To open “The Firebombing” with a quote from a German, in German, is to create a sense of uneasy equivalence between American and German behavior during the war, especially since Eich’s wartime work writing partisan radio plays for the Nazis undermines the sincerity of his later anti-authoritarian exhortations. This sense of equivalence is accentuated by Dickey’s staged opposition of personae. When “The Firebombing” was published, Dickey was well-known as a “war hero,” having spun a legendary autobiography around himself in which he was a maverick bomber pilot who’d flown “over 100 missions” in the Pacific, survived a plane crash, shot down Japanese fighters, participated in firebombing campaigns, and even witnessed the immediate aftermath of Nagasaki. None of this was strictly true—Dickey had flown 38 missions as a radar operator in a P-61 Black Widow, never personally bombed or shot down anyone, and was nowhere near Nagasaki when it was annihilated—but readers of the day nonetheless took Dickey as the larger-than-life heroic war poet he pretended to be.72

For this John Wayne of the air to ventriloquize, by way of citation, Eich’s guilty lament was to set up the Wehrmacht soldier as dopplegänger to the decent, well-meaning American GI. More telling even is what Eich’s lines say: “Denke daran, dass nach den grossen Zerstörungen / Jedermann beweisen wird, dass er unshuldig war.”—Keep in

72 In her attentive reading of “The Firebombing,” for example, from 1974, Joyce Carol Oates sees Dickey’s claimed war experience as central to the poem’s meaning: “This stranger is, or was, Dickey himself, who flew one hundred combat missions through the South Pacific, the Philippines, and Okinawa and participated in B-29 raids over Japan…” (91). For biographical data on Dickey, I rely on the judicious, clear-sighted Henry Hart.
mind that after the great destructions, everyone will testify that they were innocent.\textsuperscript{73} The irony in these lines and the equivalence established between Eich the German and Dickey the American call into question the innocence of Dickey’s narrator, Dickey himself, and by extension the entire American war effort.

The second epigraph, from Job, “Or hast thou an arm like God?” opens further ambiguities in its invocation of divine might. The particular reference at work here is a scene Job’s abjection and humility before the omnipotence of Jehovah, who is chiding Job for questioning his fate.

Then answered the Lord unto Job out of the whirlwind, and said, “Gird up thy loins now like a man: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous? Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him?” (Job 40:3-9)

At the same time as this epigraph bespeaks humility, that humility is subverted by the invocation of power in the question: the fact is that if we asked this question of the bomber pilot who is the subject of Dickey’s poem, the answer would be a resounding “Yes.” We don’t need to turn back to Lowell and Hays to recall the heavenly might of the bomber, and Dickey’s readers didn’t need to turn back to World War II to be reminded of the God-like reach of American air power.

\textsuperscript{73} Michael Hofmann translates the lines as follows: “Remember that, following great destructions, everyone will provide an alibi for himself to prove he had no part in them” (171).
In late 1964 and early 1965, public discussion of Johnson administration policy in Vietnam focused on the problems and virtues of strategic bombing. *The New York Times* reported on the use of napalm by American bombers and on allegations that military leaders had deliberately targeted civilian centers, as the US Air Force ramped up what would eventually become the largest bombing campaign in history, Operation Rolling Thunder, a 44-month air attack against North Vietnam dropping almost a million tons of bombs on “strategic” military and civilian targets, eventually killing at least 70,000 civilians, perhaps as many as twice that.74 Dickey’s writing of “The Firebombing” predated these events: the poem was completed in 1963 and first published in *Poetry* magazine in May 1964, before the Gulf of Tonkin incident or Operation Rolling Thunder.75 Nevertheless, the context in which the poem appeared in *Buckdancer’s Choice* in 1965 doubtlessly shaped its reception and must, in turn, shape our reading of it. As Eric Suarez argues in his thoughtful monograph, *James Dickey and the Politics of the Canon: Assessing the Savage Ideal*: “James Dickey’s career shows us how the Vietnam milieu not only shaped the critical community’s responses toward war and violence, but also influenced the different directions literary criticism took in the sixties and seventies” (79). *Buckdancer’s Choice* won the National Book Award in 1966 and was reviewed widely. Joseph Bennett in the *New York Times* went so far as to say that “The Firebombing” was “one of the most important long poems” written after World War II. The poem must be read at once as a revisionist return to Dickey’s war and in relation to the contemporaneously developing conflict in Vietnam.

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74 Notably in a series of articles by Hanson Baldwin. Journalist Peter Grose reported the use of napalm in Vietnam by Americans as early as May 3, 1964, also in the *New York Times*.
75 John Ullman, a student of Dickey’s at Reed College, recalls him reading a version of the poem in the spring of 1963 (Hart 294).
It was precisely in this wise that Robert Bly laid into the poem: “[Dickey] is teaching us that our way of dealing with military brutality is right: Do it, later talk about it, and take two teaspoonfuls of remorse every seventh year. In short, if we read the poem right, we can go on living with napalm” (183). In fact, as carefully reading even just the opening epigraphs shows, Dickey’s poem presents a more complicated and provocatively ambiguous lesson. Whether his intent is “anti-war” or not, Dickey suggests that we should see the American bombing of Japan—and by extension, Vietnam—as an act of destruction comparable to Nazi aggression. Dickey seeks in “The Firebombing” to explore, not denounce, the feeling of godlike potency in laying waste to whole cities. By portraying and owning his narrator’s youthful pleasure in the aesthetics of destruction, he imbues the narrator’s concerns for home, family, and safety with a rueful pathos unavailable to the traumatic victimization we find in such poems as Bly might advocate, those that “scarify” the American conscience. Contra Bly, it is precisely in Dickey’s enunciation of power’s heady affects that he’s able to position a convincing critique of its effects. At the poem’s end, when Dickey shows us his narrator today looking back without regret, unable to see the neighbor at his door as “nothing not as / American as I am, and proud of it,” he restages the mirroring of the poem’s opening, enacted through the Eich citation, only this time as a failure of vision: “It is that I can imagine / At the threshold nothing...” (my italics).

If “The Firebombing” is a poem of witness, it is the witnessing of power—something like the sublime—and Bly has missed the poem’s movement because he’s been too focused on the expectation of experience behind it and on the proper lesson that a right-thinking reader would expect Dickey to offer. Bly blames New Critical “academic
jabber” for “brainwashing” readers into thinking that Dickey is writing as a persona, which he sees as a wholesale misapprehension because “Mr. Dickey is not standing outside the poem…. There are no personae. The New Critical ideas do not apply at all” (185). But Bly is mistaken in assuming that the poem is autobiographical, or even properly personal. Not only did Dickey never pilot a bomber over Japan, or personally drop any bombs on anyone, the city on which his narrator drops his napalm was never bombed by Americans. Beppu survived the war unscathed. The narrator of the poem is unquestionably a mask, the events imagined, the conflict allegorical. “The Firebombing” is not a confession, but an imaginative lyric about the aesthetic pleasure of war and the failure of imagination.

Which issues, for Dickey, are posed as ethical concerns. Following the spacious and unstable framing of the epigraphs, the poem proper begins with yet another set of ironized citations, this time by way of allusions to Marx and Engell’s famous dictum from *The Communist Manifesto* and the opening lines of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*:

> Homeowners unite.

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76 Dickey did engage, as a radar operator, in two “practice bombings” of Japan. Using one-thousand-pound “demos” with phosphorous igniting devices, Dickey’s unit bombed huts in a rural area near Fuchu. See Hart for further discussion of the biographical facts behind “The Firebombing” and Dickey’s poetic confabulation (108-111).

77 “I think lying, with luck sublimely, is what the creative man does,” Dickey once said in an interview (*Self-Interviews* 32).

78 “It might be argued that Dickey is our era’s Whitman,” wrote Joyce Carol Oates in 1974, “but a Whitman subdued, no longer innocent, baptized by American violence into the role of a ‘killer/victim’ who cannot locate within his society any standards by which his actions might be judged” (78). Compare this with Robert Duncan’s short review of *Two Poems of the Air* (including “The Fireboming”) from *Poetry*, 1964, which highlights the role of fantasy in Dickey’s poesis: “The firebomber has no creative freedom but must carry out the bombing mission as his fantasy demands; the sea bird must carry out his migration driven by instinct and directed by the stars, stronger than any self-creation; the poet carries out the story-idea his fantasy demands; immune by the superior orders of military command, mating instinct, or the story to tell, from that ‘kiss in the brain,’ the angel or messenger brings, from the creative ground of image, meaning and self, the real world is” (19).
All families lie together, though some are burned alive.

The others try to feel

For them. Some can, it is often said (*Poems* 181).

The poem’s problem is thus neatly posed. The normative call to universal humanitarian ethics, grounded in Dickey’s understanding of personhood as being constituted by owning property and manifest in confraternity, is undermined by violence. The response of the collective to suffering is one of imaginative sympathy, a kind of affective labor, which the narrator suggests is only rarely achieved. With the antithesis built into “Some can, it is often said,” Dickey’s narrator implies a kind of ideology of sympathy, a conventional assertion of “feeling,” even if it only exists for a few, that sustains itself through regular repetition. The narrator also implies that he does not “feel / For them,” since it is an action he attributes to others and that dubiously. The central conflict driving the poem is thus posed as being a conflict between normative expectations of universal humanitarian ethics and a lived emotional reality founded in national identity. 79 This is a genuine conflict, and Dickey’s dramatization of it through the figure of the bomber brings it to life with impressive power.

Dickey positions the lyric moment of poetic narration against a memory from twenty years before, the super-position of which structures the large-scale movement of

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79 Paul Kahn describes the conflict so: “We Americans are still deeply wrapped up in this debate over the foundations of the political community: reason or identity? When, for example, we argue about whether to extend the privileges of the welfare state to immigrants—legal or illegal—the question is whether we should think of the individual from the perspective of universal need or from the perspective of membership in a historical community. Are individuals seen, in the first instance, as bearers of rights or as possible friends and enemies? The discourse of rights quickly moves to the level of the universal: human rights. That of friends and enemies insists that in politics there is no such universal perspective” (*Political Theology*, 20).
the poem. With a handful of swift metonymic gestures, we’re brought from the suburban opening to a runway at night in the South Pacific. Sensuous memory-imagination is brought to life by the minor askesis of dieting: “Starve, and take off // Twenty years in the suburbs…” gives way to “cowl flaps and the tilt cross of propellers…” The narrator bodies forth with a “snap,” coalescing out of “my somewhere among these” planes into another doppelgänger, “some technical-minded stranger with my hands.” This is the narrator’s history-double, the “other self” of an alienated past, but also, perhaps, a recognition by Dickey that the pilot is, in fact, another man, a man whose experience he is imagining his way into. Perhaps that man is Dickey’s actual pilot, Earl Bradley, who described his experience bombing Fuchu to Hart as follows:

Jim and I would usually announce our departure from an area by strafing these boats, so it seemed natural that we would do the same with the napalm, which we did on these two trial missions. I always maintained a detached state of mind when we did things like this, but Jim… placed himself, mentally, into the scene… [and] imagined what it must have been like to have been on those boats or in those houses when they were attacked…. All I remember were huge fires behind us as we sped away at low altitude (110).

Given that Dickey’s position was in the rear of the plane, facing backward, he would have had a prime view of the destruction their test bombs caused.

Then we’re off, lifting into a gentle, vividly imagined flight. We remain within the lovingly lingering description of night flight for many lines, firmly in the dream of the
past, until the narrator comes around to his target, at which point we are reminded of the narrative frame and the ethical question opening the poem:

Rivers circling behind me around
Come to the fore, and bring
A town with everyone darkened.
Five thousand people are sleeping off
An all-day American drone.
Twenty years in the suburbs have not shown me
Which ones were hit and which not.

This provokes a substantial turn, a

Haul on the wheel racking slowly
The aircraft blackly around
In a dark dream that that is
That is like flying inside someone’s head

This stuttering simile is at once an admission of Dickey’s own imaginative leap—he is most definitely flying “inside someone’s head”—and a restatement of the problem of intersubjective sympathetic imagination. The doubling characteristic of the poem, figured initially with Eicher, Job, and a “stranger with my hands,” is restated here between now-self and past-self, and performed in the repetition of “that that is / That is…” This
doubling is performed again in the next line, “Think of this think of this,” which recalls the “Denke daran” of the Eich quotation in the epigraph. Dickey completes his turn by bringing us back to the present of the poem’s narration, “I did not think of my house / But think of my house now.”

Back in the future, the narrator gently laments his domestication with a punning suburban plaint (“Where the lawn mower rests on its laurels”) that paints a picture of desuetude and sexual decline, even impotence, with a typically Dickeyan note of repressed yet aggressive homoeroticism:

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eating figs in the pantry
Blinded by each and all
Of the eye-catching cans that gladly have caught my wife’s eye
Until I cannot say
Where the screwdriver is…
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Despite this long decline out to pasture, however, and amidst all the symbols of capture, enervating leisures, paraphernalia of feminine domesticity, and banal demands of workaday life, Dickey’s narrator still possesses a power at once violent and erotic:

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I still have charge—secret charge—
Of the fire developed to cling
To everything: to golf carts and fingernail
Scissors as yet unborn      tennis shoes
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Grocery baskets  toy fire engines
New Buicks stalled by the half-moon
Shining at midnight on crossroads  green paint
Of jolly garden tools  red Christmas ribbons:

Not atoms, these, but glue inspired
By love of country to burn,
The apotheosis of gelatin.

The narrator’s imagination here reveals itself as it revels in its violent ecstasy. In defense against the suffocating detritus of his Ozzie & Harriet pastoral (including a pair of oddly “unborn” fingernail scissors), the narrator mixes memory and desire with gasoline and gelatin, laying waste to everything he fought for. “The apotheosis of gelatin” presents the culmination of a complex involution. Against his suburban impotence, Dickey’s narrator retains his “secret charge,” which can “cling / To everything” and burn it to waste: semen as napalm.

What is puzzling is the syntactical logic of the three-line stanza: “Not atoms, these, but glue…” refers us back to the many items, the commodities and clutter that make up bourgeois life. They are not atoms, not separate, discrete objects. Rather, the things that make up domestic life are the very “glue” that holds domestic life together. And they are “inspired / By love of country to burn…”—not destroyed, that is, by the narrator’s war-semen, but “inspired,” fed from within, made incandescent by the narrator’s patriotism. The “secret charge” both “clings” to everything and inheres in
everything: the narrator’s memory of destructive power at once threatens his existence and lights it up, makes it luminous, vivid. Finally, it is not clear whether the genitive in the final line is possessive or descriptive: whether, that is, it is the gelatin that achieves apotheosis by burning up as napalm, or whether it is the narrator’s apotheosis that is achieved through gelatin, through his memory of napalm’s power.

Dickey turns back to the memory-narrative of the night flight with one of his unfortunate lapses into strained diction (“Behind me having risen the Southern Cross…”), and reaches wildly for symbols, heft, and volume as he approached the poem’s climax. The eroticization of the bombing run is made explicit:

…my hand turns whiter
Than ever, clutching the toggle—
The ship shakes knobs
Fire hangs not yet fire
In the air above Beppu
For I am fulfilling

An “anti-morale” raid upon it.

But after the build-up to the money shot, the actual destruction is an anti-climax. The only clear victims are dogs and cattle; the people of Beppu remain abstracted and vague, the devastation notional (“showing / The bathhouse upside down”). Overwrought description (“As I sail artistically over”) suggests a failure of imagination that is the
poet’s own, not the narrator’s, yet when we return to the narrator’s estimation of the trauma-value of his memory, Dickey portrays his narcissistic affective inflation with clear and memorable images:

Holding onto another man’s walls,
My hat should crawl on my head
In streetcars, thinking of it,
The fat on my body should pale.

That the fat on the narrator’s body should pale, that his very skin should physically react to the outrageousness of the violence he committed implies, of course, that it does not. He does not—react, that is. We are reminded here of the poem’s central problem: the failure of sympathy. Dickey turns again to survey the sweep of destruction his narrator has burned across Japan, and brings us to one of the poem’s key moments, mentioned earlier, the recognition of aesthetic detachment as alienation (“It is this detachment, / The honored aesthetic evil, / The greatest sense of power in one’s life, / That must be shed in bars, or by whatever / Means…”). Dickey marks this as the center of the poem, and the crux of his dilemma, inscribing another stuttered repetition along with a merging of opposites:

I swing
Over directly over the heart
The heart of the fire. A mosquito burns out on my cheek
With the cold of my face…

Cold, the narrator passes through heat. The power of aesthetic detachment is precisely in the distance it takes from the fire, its cold range from other humans burning with life and burning to death. Even though Dickey’s narrator recognizes this fact, and knows he should repudiate that distance, he chooses instead “Letting go,” as “letting go / The plane rises gently.” The narrator ascends into “safe zones” as “dark forms / Glide off” him, and when something threatens his rise, his decision is to “Leave it leave it clinging and crying.” In the continued conflation of sex and bombing, the “it” turns out to be a woman, or death, or the death of a woman, or rather all three, and more: an inseminated woman. With his “bombing-seed,” Dickey offers an almost exact sexual inversion of the “bomber-womb” in Jarrell’s “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner.” The narrator’s napalm-semen

…consumes them in a hot

Body-flash, old age or menopause

Of children, clings and burns

eating through

And when a reed mat catches fire

From me, it explodes through field after field

Bearing its sleeper another

Bomb finds a home
And clings to it like a child.

Having accepted aesthetic distance and its “sense of power,” having owned the “secret charge” that will sustain apotheosis, the narrator says goodbye to the “grassy mountains.” Such verdant, rounded shapes are common symbols of femininity in Dickey’s work, no more so than here. They are “left,” “let go,” and Dickey’s narrator ascends into chivalric-ecstatic union with the sky, decked with streamers, “myself streaming also / My body covered / With flags,” lifted aloft “Forever… / Forever in a turn / For home that breaks out streaming banners.” The vigor of Dickey’s self-regarding orgy is dazzling, and it’s no surprise to find that he was known among his fellow airmen as a vain, primping narcissist given to hours spent staring at his own reflection—“Wholly in position to admire.”

There is a humanizing note of campy self-awareness in the beginning of the next stanza (“O then I knock it off / And turn for home”), and Dickey takes us gently through the rest of the return flight, through what it seems should be the denouement, back “To where Okinawa burns, / Pure gold, on the radar screen…” Yet despite the fond memory of the bombing raid’s “happy ending,” the narrator remains trapped in the present, still subject to his lusts, still too weak to resist them, and still isolated from sympathetic connection:

still hungry,

Still twenty years overweight, still unable

To get down there or see

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80 “In a camp where personal hygiene was usually treated with perfunctory efficiency, Dickey’s grooming habits were considered narcissistic and bizarre. He regularly lifted self-made barbells in front of his mirror, flexing his biceps so he, as well as others in his squadron, could admire them” (Hart 90).
What really happened.

As we come to the final stanzas, returning to the suburbs, we return to the ethical dilemma posed at the opening of the poem, but with a difference. We face the same claim to universal humanitarian ethics, the same problem of violence, and the same question of imaginative sympathy. Now, however, we confront the dilemma alongside the narrator, who sees the question through his experience of bombing Beppu. At that moment, watching the Japanese burn below him, the narrator rejected sympathetic imagination in favor of a “detachment, / The honored aesthetic evil…,” that viewed things from a Kantian-rationalist distance. Moreover, the narrator remembers the bombing raid as a vivid, exhilarating sensuous adventure, erotic, intense, and transformative. Today, he remains subject to the same desires, even though he now knows better what they cost: his “secret charge” gives him a power proportional to his distance, because it is the power of imagination, yet it is a “cold” power, a strength the narrator remains skeptical of, because its distance disconnects him from other humans. He begins the penultimate stanza doubting his ability, despite whatever effort, to invite the Japanese of Beppu into his home. He sincerely doubts his ability, that is, to imagine confraternity across the threshold of difference.

The doubling with which the poem began recurs again, only this time the vision in the mirror proves imagination’s limits: the narrator tries to imagine another, but can only see himself. Dickey’s awkward construction here highlights the object of his imagination, not the act, and undermines our sympathy with the narrator. The phrasing of the line “It is that I can imagine / At the threshold nothing / With its ears crackling off” poses a
discomfiting challenge: It is not that the narrator cannot imagine someone, it is that he can imagine nothing, a “nothing / With its ears crackling off.” The primary meaning here of course is the obvious one, despite the stilted diction, that the narrator is incapable of imagining one of the Japanese victims of Beppu at his door. Yet behind that another, more troubling meaning wavers: that the narrator can imagine a victim at his door, but that victim is to him precisely nothing, no thing, a non-entity that provokes no emotional response and is undeserving of sympathetic engagement. A something that is a nothing, a someone who is nobody. This problem is touched on by fellow poet John Ciardi in his reminiscences in Studs Terkel’s oral history “The Good War”: “We were in the terrible business of burning out Japanese towns. That meant women and old people, children. One part of me—a surviving savage voice—says, I’m sorry we left any of them living. I wish we’d finished killing them all. Of course, as soon as rationality overcomes the first impulse, you say, Now, come on, this is the human race, let’s try to be civilized” (200). Dickey’s poem dramatizes the inner dialogue Ciardi describes.

Given Dickey’s thematization of race in Buckdancer’s Choice (in the controversial poem “Slave Quarters,” for example), we should be attentive to how the failure of imaginative sympathy staged in “The Firebombing” is not only gendered but racialized as well. It is definitively nationalistic. After all, Dickey’s narrator is explicit about the fact that he can imagine

...nothing I haven’t lived with

For twenty years, still nothing not as

American as I am, and proud of it.
The patriotism that “inspires” the commodities of the narrator’s suburban life to burn in “an apotheosis of gelatin” is the boundary of his imaginative sympathy. The question of universal humanitarian ethics—and the issue of atrocity, for that matter—is reduced to local, physical identity: “Absolution? Sentence? No matter; / The thing itself is in that.” “Absolution” and “sentence,” and the universalist ethics they invoke, are presented as abstractions that do not touch reality; they are “no matter,” not material. By the same token, the surviving Japanese of Beppu are for Dickey’s suburban narrator nothing but imaginative conceits. They are “nothing at the door,” they are “No matter.”

The central problem of the poem is exactly the disconnection Dickey sees between abstract humanitarian ideals and existential human materiality: “the thing itself is in that.” As befits a poem directly concerned with the somatic, sensual experience of war and the memory of that experience, this judgment sides with a phenomenological, existentialist understanding of human collective identity. In effect, Dickey’s narrator decides on matter: the thing itself, “my neighborhood, right or wrong.”

This would seem to put paid Bly’s accusations of Dickey’s jingoism, except for the fact that the poem is fictional, and the sententious judgment on which it ends is that of a persona, not of Dickey himself. The narrator’s ironies, the opening quotations, and the moments of self-awareness, self-doubt, and self-judgment within the poem all work to frame and destabilize the final lines. If the poem doesn’t lift them to the level of outright or explicit critique, it develops them within a complex and sophisticated context that both allows them their provocative spur and restrains the careful reader from accepting them as the “last word.” “The Firebombing” remains a tough, thoughtful, and lively
exploration of the problems it sets up: the claim to universal humanitarian ethics, the
aesthetic pleasures of war, the affects and effects of power, and the all-too-human failure
of imaginative sympathy.
The bombers reminds us of what Leonardo Da Vinci expected of man in flight: that he was to ascend to the skies “in order to seek snow on the mountaintops and bring it back to the city to spread on the sweltering streets in summer.”


Dickey offers us a “murderer” as nonchalant as the men in Jarrell’s “Eighth Air Force,” but strips Jarrell’s pious judgment (“I find no fault in this just man”) to its ethno-nationalist core. Dickey’s provocative move is to refuse judgment, which keeps his firebomber from—exactly as Bly argued—“scarifying the American conscience” by proxy. In Jarrell’s poem “Eighth Air Force,” by contrast, the blood on the bombers’ hands is implicitly “washed clean” not by their rude humanity, but by the very blood itself. The men are sacrifices, scapegoats, passive victims of an institution (an “architectural quality”) that evacuates their agency, responsibility, and complicity precisely through their act of bearing guilt. In order to help underline their innocence, the men in “Eighth Air Force” are portrayed as children—playing with a puppy, “as puppies,” playing games, goofing off, totally lacking any adult sexuality or personal aggression. As Helen Vendler noted in her 1969 review of Jarrell’s *Complete Poems*,...
“The secret of his war poems is that in the soldiers he has found children; what is the ball turret gunner but a baby who has lost his mother?” (38).

Characterizing American soldiers as innocent children is a common enough trope. Paul Fussell and Kurt Vonnegut both called World War II a “children’s crusade.” Yet as Dickey has dramatically illustrated, the men who fought World War II were not motherless babies. They were not children. They were adults, soldiers, citizens. Indeed, in contrast to the widespread infantilization of soldiers in anti-war literature, it should be remembered that the single most dangerous animal in the world for human beings is the young adult male human. As anthropologist Scott Atran observes: “Across the world, about 80–90% of all human killing is committed by males aged 14–35” (229). Jarrell’s “murderers” may have been young, foolish, callow, or callous, but it is delusional to see them as innocent babes.

If the men who do the killing in war are not responsible for their actions, then no one is, not even the sovereign power that sent them to kill. Furthermore, Randall Jarrell’s portrayal of soldiers as passive victims is not only sentimental, ideological, and unethical, but hypocritical. Jarrell didn’t sympathize with his fellow soldiers or think them innocent; he was contemptuous of them and thought they were violent racists. “99 of 100 of the people in the army haven’t the faintest idea what the war’s about,” Jarrell wrote. “Their two strongest motives are (a) nationalism, pure nationalism… and (b) race prejudice—

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81 It’s worth considering Atran’s further evidence: “In The Descent of Man, Darwin noted that most human violence is committed by young men. Across the world 80–90% of all human killing is committed by males aged 14–35 (Wilson and Daly 1988; Buss 2005). In the US, for example, men were responsible for 88% of all homicides between 1976 and 2004, and nearly three-quarters of these involved men killing other men. The peak period for murders in recent US history was between 1990 and 1994, when the homicide rate exceeded nine people killed per 100,000…. In those years, the number of killers ranged from 23–30 per 100,000 for male teens aged 14 to 17, 34–41 per 100,000 per 100,000 for young men aged 18–24, and 15–18 per 100,000 for men aged 25-35 (Hellmuth 2000). These trends closely follow trends for killing in war, except that in war nearly 100% of the killing is by men.”
they dislike the Japanese in the same way, though not as much as, they dislike Negroes.” (Letters 103). Whether or not this observation is accurate (and it likely was) is beside the point. What it shows is that Jarrell himself saw these men not as passive or childlike, but as agents motivated by real passions: nationalism and racism. These motivations almost never show up in Jarrell’s poetry. Only by suppressing what Jarrell himself sees as 99% of American soldiers’ “strongest motivations” is he able to construct his passive child-soldiers, object-subjects, and “killable puppets.” Only by denying what he perceives to be the actual psychological drives of most of his fellow soldiers is he able to fashion the pathetic victims of his war poems. Dickey, by contrast, offers a more complex and complicit account of soldierly psychology and, more important, refuses to turn his killer into a victim of conscience, even if his poem is rendered just as imaginatively as Jarrell’s.

If we want to understand the human experience of war, we must come to terms with numerous difficult and unpleasant facts. One of them is that no agent of violence can be deemed innocent or faultless—even if that agent is drafted against their will to fight in a war ultimately considered just. We must understand the soldier first, foremost, and always as an agent of state power. Hence soldier’s stories must be read in light of their complicity with that power. Jarrell’s efforts to excuse the men engaged in bombing the German people on the basis that they like puppies and opera, or because they are mortal, is of a piece with the ideology of the trauma hero, which turns the soldier into a victim of their own violence.

Which brings us back to the opening of “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” dramatizing exactly this. Recall the first line of that poem: “From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State.” The second line, “And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze,”
reprises the soft trochaic opening and its midline caesura, and extends to a full twelve syllables, moving at a firm rhythm. The first beat is softened; the second beat, on “hunched,” is followed by a swift offbeat pair winging us on; and the alliterative “fur” at the line’s end is stressed, ending the poem with a spondaic punch that calls up (distantly) the alliterative stresses of Anglo-Saxon hemistichs.

This line initiates two important transformations. The first is that the abstractions from the opening line metamorphose into animal bodies: the State now has a belly, the “I” is now furred. From the conceptual we move to the somatic. The second transformation is that the State is now identified synechdochally as the bomber: the “belly” is, of course, the belly of a plane. The title of the poem still in our minds, “belly” will call up “ball-turret” and position us “hunched” there with the speaker. The State has taken shape as a vaguely animal flying machine. In addition to these transformations, Jarrell offers an elaboration of the birth metaphor via a strange obstetric transplantation: the speaker has gone from “mother’s sleep” to the State’s “belly,” he is “hunched” as if in a fetal position, his fur is “wet” as with blood and afterbirth. There is something stillborn about this shift, something Frankenstein, yet the hunched, furred innocence of the speaker calls upon our most animal sympathies. The speaker has been powerfully infantilized, and it is already all but impossible to think of him as in any way responsible for his fate.

The passivity of the speaker persists throughout: his only actions are to fall, hunch, wake, and die.

The third line is the poem’s pivot. First, the rhythm shifts from softly trochaic to the predominantly iambic beat that will carry us through line four. Also, this line shortens from the previous eleven and twelve-beat meters to a clean pentameter, as it joins the
abstraction and concreteness of lines one and two into a powerful allegorical image: “Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life…” The strong caesura after “earth” inscribes the vertiginous altitude the line portrays, and the imagery works another turn on the birth metaphor being developed, so that now the “fall” is a kind of launch into space, away from the maternal earth, and birth an exile from “its dream of life.” The suggestion here is that of being cut-off from the umwelt of organic being, alienated from the phenomenological consciousness of animal vitality. This line pivots too by providing two adjectival phrases preceding the noun they modify in the next line, thus activating a grammatical suspense that only adds to the line’s sense of airy summiting. As Leven Dawson points out, this line also alludes to Shelley’s elegy for Keats, “Adonaïs,” stanza XXXIX (238):

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep —
He hath awakened from the dream of life —
‘Tis we, who lost in stormy vision, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in mad trance, strike with our spirit’s knife
Invulnerable nothings.

“He has outsoared the shadow of our night,” opens the next stanza of Shelley’s poem, highlighting for informed readers the ironic contrast between Shelley’s Adonaïs and Jarrell’s Gunner. Adonaïs is freed from our false existence of “unprofitable strife” and corporeal finitude into a higher unity with Nature and the Eternal, while the Gunner is
bereft, exiled from earthly life into an ungrounded, marginal death. The one awakens to immortality, the other to “the nightmare fighters.” Shelley’s essentially Christian, spiritualized world of “Nature” has been replaced by an apocalyptic vision of corruption, in which birth is abortion, waking death, and ascent isolation.

The next line puts paid to the suspension of the prior. “I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.” The Gunner comes alive amidst combat and threat. This line retains the iambic rhythm of the prior, sustaining its modulation, and at eleven syllables manages a strongly pentametrical shape. The three hard, glottal /k/s in the first half of the line perform an onomatopoeisis of anti-aircraft fire, and their harsh contrast against the previous sibilants and fricatives helps physicalize the shift from vague, dreamy unconsciousness to the crude terror of reality.

Which is where we end: the crude terror of reality resides at last in the inescapable materiality of the human body, its finitude, its meaty meaninglessness. Jarrell’s last line reverts to the trochaic rhythm of the poem’s first half, which rhythmic recapitulation combines with the final rhyme (froze/hose) to bring a sense of closure, yet it is the longest line of the poem and extends further than the ear has any sense it ought to. The closure offered is flattened. The extension of the line past the pentametrical norm established in the prior two lines has an effect of draining rhythmic energy at just the moment where convention would have it intensified. This attenuation is strengthened by the iambic substitution ending the line, which creates a double offbeat at just the position of the expected (if it were pentametrical) final foot (“out of the turret”).

The reduction of the human to mere matter, and, what’s more, waste, is the poem’s revelatory offering. As we have seen, this is the central trope of the trauma-hero
narrative: the encounter with the Real. Consider appositely the key moment of *Catch-22*,
the revelation that unveils for Yossarian the nihilistic, absurd truth of war, the primal scene avoided, returned to, avoided again, and finally remembered: Yossarian’s witnessing of Snowden’s death.

But Snowden kept shaking his head and pointed at last, with just the barest movement of his chin, down toward his armpit. Yossarian bent forward to peer and saw a strangely colored stain seeping through the coveralls just above the armhole of Snowden’s flak suit. Yossarian felt his heart stop, then pound so violently he found it difficult to breathe. Snowden was wounded inside his flak suit. Yossarian ripped open the snaps of Snowden’s flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden’s insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out. A chunk of flak more than three inches big had shot into his other side just underneath his arm and blasted all the way through, drawing whole mottled quarts of Snowden along with it through the gigantic hole in his ribs it made as it blasted out. Yossarian screamed a second time and squeezed both hands over his eyes. His teeth were chattering in horror. He forced himself to look again. Here was God’s plenty, all right, he thought bitterly as he stared—liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach and bits of the stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch. Yossarian hated stewed tomatoes and turned away dizzily and began to vomit, clutching his burning throat. The tail gunner woke up while Yossarian was vomiting, saw him, and fainted again.

Yossarian was limp with exhaustion, pain and despair when he finished. He
turned back weakly to Snowden, whose breath had grown softer and more rapid, and whose face had grown paler. He wondered how in the world to begin to save him.

“I’m cold,” Snowden whimpered. “I’m cold.”

“There, there,” Yossarian mumbled mechanically in a voice too low to be heard. “There, there.”

Yossarian was cold, too, and shivering uncontrollably. He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gazed down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden’s secret. Drop him out a window and he’ll fall. Set fire to him and he’ll burn. Bury him and he’ll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden’s secret.

Ripeness was all (439–440).

Snowden’s “secret” is the impetus for the entire novel and for Yossarian’s frantic effort to escape the human condition. As with Jarrell, Heller’s vision of the truth of war is a confrontation with the fact of mortality. For Heller, “ripeness was all,” just as for Jarrell, birth is death.

“The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” begins with a birth into the nightmare of the State and ends with an abortion. The infantilized, furry Gunner is finally washed out of the plane’s “belly.” The attenuated rhythm of the poem’s final line works the meter-making side of the argument, which, as I have suggested, is that the Gunner is a passive, child-like victim of the State’s military-industrial machinery, allegorically expressing the
archetypical truth of modern war: that our warriors are not heroes but victims, deserving neither admiration nor censure, but pity. Finally, Jarrell’s view is important not because it is ideological, a misrepresentation, or strange, but because it is so widespread. As James Dickey writes of Jarrell’s war poems, “They have all the attitudes that most people think ought to be shown by poets during wars. Can you imagine a poet loving war, or not pitying the individual soldiers?” (“Some of All of It” 346).

Can we even imagine a poet accepting war, sympathizing with the powerful affects opened up by collective violence, and exploring them as fit subjects for aesthetic contemplation? These questions open the central question of war literature more broadly. Must all war literature be “anti-war” literature? From the way the canon of modern war literature has been formed, one would have to think so. Yet the fact remains that war is a subject, and “anti-war” is a position. To think that a poet must hate war and pity individual soldiers means that we do not want the poet to tell us the truth. What we want from such a poet is neither knowledge, nor an exploration of the human condition, nor art, but ideology. The expectation for ideologically correct production is powerful, as we’ve seen with Dickey and Bly, and different writers respond to that expectation in different ways. Sometimes the demands to meet expectations are so strong, so crassly hypocritical, and so fraught, especially in years of on-going conflict and repression, that the best an artist can do is to reflect back to an age its own violent obscurity.
A meaningless violence seems to plague the world
Which world cannot get rid of.

—Kenneth Koch, *The Duplications* (1977)
Chapter 13. Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips

How many selves are there in a war hero…?

—Frank O’Hara, “In Memory of My Feelings” (1956)

“Somewhere in the Pacific…” A lonely voice sings out across the vastness of empty space: “Someone’s rocking my dreamboat, / I’m a captain without any crew. / We were sailing along, so peaceful and calm, / suddenly something went wrong…” Song and singer would both have been immediately recognizable to contemporary audiences watching this Warner Brothers Merrie Melodies cartoon in 1944: the song had been a hit single for African-American R&B quartet The Ink Spots three years before; the singer, Bugs Bunny.

For a languorous twenty-five seconds opening the cartoon, the “camera” slowly pans along the horizon. White puffy clouds mass against the sky. The sea is a calm blue field. Yet while the panning is slow and the singing almost wistful, a distinct tension is building—the camera is panning somewhere—and a moment of national trauma is being invoked. The opening verse of “Someone’s Rocking my Dreamboat” sounds like a doo-wop gloss on December 7, 1941, even though the song was released weeks before the attacks (by the Four Tones and the Eddie Bel Trio in October of that year, then in the hit version by The Ink Spots the following month):
Someone's rocking my dreamboat,
someone's invading my dream.
We were sailing along,
so peaceful and calm,
suddenly something went wrong.

Although ostensibly a love song about stymied romance (it ends: “But with love as my
guide, / I'll follow the tide, / I'll keep sailing 'til I find you”), the obvious resonance of the
lyrics with public perception of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines
helps explain the song’s tremendous popularity. In 1942, the song was covered by Bennie
Goodman, Artie Shaw, and others, and also featured in Juke Girl, an Ann Sheridan and
Ronald Reagan picture about exploited farm laborers in Florida, inspired by The Grapes
of Wrath.

We can see through this pop song that in the extended historical moment
following the Pearl Harbor attacks, that kairotic day “when everything changed,” the past
had been changed as much as the present. The Depression, with its labor battles between
workers and bosses (like those dramatized in Juke Girl), the rise of Communism and the
corollary rise of American anti-Communism, race war in the American south, lynchings
and the KKK, and twenty years of global political and economic crisis including
American military interventions in China, Central America, and Russia, were now, in
contrast to open war, a prelapsarian, Edenic life in a “dreamboat. . . peaceful and calm.”

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82 It's worth pointing out here that James Jones’s From Here to Eternity (1951) offers a take on Pearl
Harbor that operates very much against the grain of the mainstream ideological narrative of the event as
dramatized in “Rocking My Dreamboat.” In Jones’s novel, the pre-war era was a time of bitter class
conflict, and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the opening of a carnivalesque time of class and social
The elision of temporal deictic in the final line of the verse, where one would expect a “when” marking the interrupting event in relation to the preceding past progressive “were sailing,” heightens the dramatic emergence of the transformative (or “traumatic”) “something” as a break in time itself: “suddenly something went wrong.”

Bugs, though, doesn’t sing this verse. He grafts a later verse into the opening, turning “someone’s invading my dream” into the more appropriately anarchic “I’m a captain without any crew.” Thus already, in the very opening of the cartoon, story writer Tedd Pierce and director I. Freleng have signaled what will come to be a persistent tension within the cartoon’s narrative: Bugs’s contingent “enlistment” in a war that seems to have nothing much to do with him, against the individualist commitment to urban, cosmopolitan, anarchic pleasure that Bugs Bunny embodied. Even while invoking the commitment to national identity forged in the trauma of Pearl Harbor, Bugs distances himself from it, insisting on his personal integrity through subverting well-known popular lyrics (“captain without any crew”), and, as the “camera” zooms in on the crate he’s floating in, reflecting on his predicament with the sophisticated irony of someone who can read the kinds of stories he finds himself in without ever fully submitting to them: “Eh, just killing time until the island that inevitably toins up in this kinda picture inevitably toins up.”

Remarking on “this kinda picture,” Bugs gives his audience a semiotic wink: they both understand that Bugs is an actor and a celebrity, which is to say a performer, and they both share a familiarity with generic conventions. They both share an understanding,
that is, that narratives—and hence human experiences—can be interpreted through formal categories distinguishable by coherent, iterable features, and that those narratives can be slipped into and out of by skilled actors such as Bugs Bunny. Bugs’s comment doubtlessly refers specifically to Hitchcock’s *Lifeboat*, a shipwreck film set during the wartime North Atlantic that came out in January, 1944, and shipwreck and “South Seas” films such as *Little Robinson Crusoe* (1924), *Isle of Fury* (1936), *Typhoon Treasure* (1938), *Swiss Family Robinson* (1940), *Typhoon* (1940), and *The Adventures of Martin Eden* (1942). More important than the expectations of any specific situation, though, or “picture,” is Bugs’s own ironic adaptability to a variety of situations and genres. Indeed, Bugs’s dispositive adaptations to the dangers of being hunted in the forest, being turned into dinner in a fancy Hollywood restaurant, or in this case fighting the Japanese army are exemplary of what Sianne Ngai identifies in *Our Aesthetic Categories* as the “absolutely elastic subject,” the subject characterized by the aesthetic category she calls the “zany” (174).

In Ngai’s description, the “zany” bounces from precarious situation to precarious situation, meeting each new challenge with a manic mutability. The “zany,” while having a history going back to Renaissance Italy, is especially contemporary for Ngai in that the zany dramatizes the instability of worker identity in post-Fordist capitalism, an understanding seen most clearly in the postwar sitcom *I Love Lucy*, which “turns on the doggedly persistent, comically strenuous efforts of Lucy Ricardo to break into the world of artistic and cultural production she reverently calls ‘showbiz,’ ” efforts that take ceaselessly new forms as Lucy strives to adapt to the constantly shifting demands of the marketplace:
either by picking up a new skill, like French or ballet, or by taking on a temporary job involving some kind of affective service work: selling and then unselling salad dressing on television; babysitting and managing child talent; working as a magician’s assistant; opening a women’s dress boutique; competing in a game show. And if not by taking a job in retail or services, then by impersonating somebody with one: hot-dog vendor, hotel bellhop, celebrity chauffeur (175).

As is often the case in twentieth century popular culture, mass media (“showbiz”) here offers itself as an allegory of the fundamental condition of labor in late capitalism: The essential requirement of the labor market is that the laborer be adaptable, fungible, willing and able to conform themselves to the demands of production and institutional culture. This requirement transgresses traditional boundaries even Marx could once depend on, such as those between work and play, between alienated labor and mere performance, and between male work and female work. As Ngai writes, “Zaniness is the only aesthetic category in our contemporary repertoire explicitly about this politically ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupation performance, acting and service, playing and laboring” (182).

Bugs Bunny, however, as distinct from Ngai’s examples of Lucy Ricardo, Richard Pryor in The Toy (1982), and Jim Carrey in The Cable Guy (1996), occupies what we might call the privileged autonomous fantasy zone of the zany. As a self-sufficient being whose only needs are carrots (which he seems to be able to find anywhere) and his rabbit-hole (which he makes himself and can deploy without regard to
the laws of physics), Bugs retains a magical, autochthonous freedom in a world of necessity, making him reminiscent of philosophical tricksters such as Huckleberry Finn and Diogenes the Cynic. Just as these figures are perpetually threatened by capture, Huck by the white-washed world of Aunt Em, Diogenes by the Athenian polis that killed Socrates, Bugs is typically threatened by mainstream American culture as embodied in the Babbit-like Elmer Fudd. Bugs’s god-like power consists in his ability to turn the tools, practices, and institutions of American conformism against its most persistent agents. As Sam Abel writes, “By slipping in and out of a variety of roles, without effort and simultaneously maintaining his own persona, Bugs becomes the critic, the rebel, at once in and out of the social norm. He manipulates identity as a weapon, defiant of the social expectation of identity stability” (193). Whereas Lucy’s zany adaptability is (abjectly) comic because she so persistently fails to sell herself to showbiz, Bugs Bunny uses the zany mutability that post-Fordist consumer capitalism demands and offers as a way to stymie the be-Fudd-eled managers and operators who take its ideological claims for ontological truth.

Presently, however, as Bugs makes landfall on the island that “invertedly toins up,” he finds himself threatened not by the Babbitry of Elmer Fudd, but by the Japanese army. In the cartoon under discussion, “Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips,” the spirit of American individualism is uneasily enlisted in a race war against a gibbering barbaric enemy. This 1944 Warner Brothers cartoon was one of many racist wartime cartoons, for instance the 1943 Looney Tunes cartoon “Tokio Jokio,” which presents itself as recovered “Japanazi” propaganda, mimicking a travel film about Japan, mocking Japanese stereotypes such as excessive politeness and the adoption of Western dress. In all these cartoons, the
Japanese are almost invariably bucktoothed and bespectacled, with thick lips, giant ears, and bulging eyes. Other notable cartoons in this vein include “You’re a Sap, Mr. Jap” (1942) and “Scrap the Japs” (1942), both featuring Popeye, and “Commando Duck,” with Disney’s Donald Duck (1944). These were only a few of the vast panoply of propaganda cartoons produced during the war, including a feature-length Disney cartoon on the virtues of strategic bombing (Victory Through Air Power, 1943) and a series of War Department films created by Chuck Jones, Fritz Freleng, Theodore Geisel, Frank Capra, Mel Blanc, and others (the Private SNAFU films). Cultural historian Thomas Doherty notes in Projecting the War that “In 1943, 94 percent of Disney’s work was war related” (68).

While directly commissioned and regulated work such as the Private SNAFU series and Disney’s training films were clear productions of state ideology, however, independent productions such as Fleischer’s Popeye cartoons and Warner Brothers’ Merrie Melodies weren’t always on message. In multiple studies of print cartoons during the war, the Office of War Information found that while “there had been a noticeable increase in the number of stories on the fighting and gags on shortages and rationing… the messages contained in the cartoons were not compatible with the OWI’s desired themes” (Barkin 115). While “Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips” does offer properly nationalist stereotypical racist caricatures of the Japanese, Bugs’s queer, ambivalent guerrilla action against the Imperial Army hardly seems designed to inspire patriotism. If anything, the cartoon suggests that the Japanese share deep sympathies with the cartoon’s American audience. What’s more, its ending is practically seditious: given a choice between
“rescue” by the forces of American military-industrial might and capture by the erotic *promesse de bonheur* of a native female islander, Bugs would rather go AWOL.

The manifest problem the cartoon stages is an old one in American political mythology: trouble in paradise. Almost as soon as Bugs makes landfall, after a brief, hyperbolic paean to the idyllic splendors of the “inevitable island,” the air erupts with explosions and the sound of cannons. The sudden terror of war sends Bugs leaping into a haystack, an amorphous mass of non-identity that soon transforms into a hybrid war machine: as Bugs pokes his head out, the haystack rises, revealing human arms and legs. One of the arms sets a military cap on Bugs’s head, putting him “in uniform.” The haystack-Bugs hybrid machine sneaks along the beach, then stops, pulls out a mirror, and “looks” at itself. Out of the amorphous defensive confusion of non-being arises identity as difference—though the precise mark defining difference remains troublingly in question. A buck-toothed, eyeglass-wearing Japanese soldier pokes his head out of the haystack and confronts buck-toothed Bugs, wearing *his* hat. The hostility with which the Japanese soldier reacts exceeds the situation. The audience knows, intellectually and ideologically, that the soldier is aggressive because he’s Japanese, yet this mirroring moment of identity trouble, when the Japanese soldier sees Bugs confronting him in his own uniform, suggests that the Japanese soldier’s aggression arises less out of an essential hostility and more out of a desperate claim for his own threatened identity. The soldier snatches his hat back and goes at Bugs with a machete, screaming in gibberish mock-Japanese that, while uncannily reminiscent of some of Warner Brothers’s other hyperactive, speech-impaired characters (Daffy Duck, for one), marks him definitively as Bugs’ Other. He and Bugs may look alike, and even be able to share the same uniform
and a kind of haystack-softened identity, but they most definitely do not speak the same language.

Almost as soon as this difference is established, however, it is once again threatened with collapse. After a brief physical comedy bit involving Bugs and the soldier trading a bomb back and forth (in which the soldier, expectedly, gets the worst of it), Bugs confounds renewed attack by throwing on the costume of a Japanese General. The Japanese soldier responds with stereotypical abjection, falling to his knees and bowing repeatedly, begging forgiveness, though not in mock Japanese this time, but in dialect “Engrish”: “Oh regretterabr incident. Oh not unknowing honorabr Generar. Oh excuse please. Oh not knowing make hari kari.”

Bugs, confident in his zany powers of infinite mutability and assured in his ironic detachment from generic convention, relaxes into the self-satisfaction of chomping a carrot. In revealing the mark of his brand (his magic autonomous phallus), Bugs reveals himself as himself to the soldier who, it turns out, is a fluent consumer of American celebrity and, what’s more, a fan. The soldier turns to the audience in an aside, giving them a semiotic wink that both identifies him as wise to the situation and establishes a sense of identity between him and us, the audience, as consumers of American culture: “That not a Japanese generar. That a Bugs Bunny. I see in Warner Brother Reon Schresinger Merrie Merody Cartoon Picture. Oh yes, he no fool me.” Even while the Japanese soldier’s racial identity as marked by language prevents him from conforming entirely to American expectations (you could call it the “shibborreth”), his fluency in American culture (he even knows the name of Merrie Melodies’ producer) marks him as
assimilable and, therefore, dangerous. Turning the tables, the soldier stands up and starts chomping his own carrot, mimicking Bugs with a wry, “What’s a up, honorabr doc?”

This scene mirrors the mirroring scene just before, but now instead of the Japanese soldier being threatened by Bugs’s ability to take on any identity, Bugs is threatened by the global dissemination of his own celebrity. As much as Bugs’s power within the cartoon world relies on his mutability, his power as a commercial product in “reality,” in the world of war, relies on his easy branding and identification, which can be turned against him by the global horde of consumers. This turns the dialectic of the zany that Ngai identifies in *I Love Lucy* from a valence of abjection to a valence of terrible, uncontrollable potency, offering less an allegory of the American worker than one of American commercial imperialism. Ngai writes: “The dialectic between social inflexibility and flexibility in comedy famously noted by Bergson is thus played out here in the oscillation between the character Lucy Ricardo (always straining unsuccessfully to be many things at once) and the actor Lucille Ball (whose consistency becomes visible across that very multiplicity of roles) staged in episode after episode of *I Love Lucy*” (179). Likewise, though with a difference, while the power of America’s commercial imperialism resides in capitalism’s ability to melt all that is solid into commodities interchangeable through the metaphoric relation C=M=C, that commercial imperialism remains indissolubly identified as a nationalist project. Bugs Bunny’s infinite mutability can’t transcend his American branding.

It is now Bugs Bunny’s turn to be horrified by the collapse of difference and the confusion of identities, so he flees and resorts to playing on the perceived strength of American industry against the stereotypical notion of Japanese consumer goods as being
shoddy and poorly made. Bugs disembowels the Japanese soldier’s fighter-plane by tying its rear to a tree, and then dispatches the soldier—now parachuting to safety—by handing him an anvil, shouting “Here’s some scrap iron for Japan, Moto.” Bugs has asserted the primacy of American steel over Japanese silk, and, once again confident, is next seen painting a “kill flag” Rising Sun on a palm tree.

American commercial expansion takes Bugs ever deeper into Japanese culture, however, and he now runs smack into a Sumo wrestler. Bugs, supremely confident in his American industrial might, paints a bigger kill flag on the palm tree, then marches off in a fighting stance to meet the wrestler. The two lock arms and circle, then the Sumo wraps Bugs up into a neat knot. The importance of industrial-grade steel notwithstanding, Bugs’s power has never been in brute physical strength, but in his adaptability: his willingness to cross borders and transgress boundaries of sense, good taste, physics, and even gender. And it is to drag that Bugs now turns, coming onscreen lipsticked and made up as a geisha in wig and kimono, extruding his racially marked buck teeth, and coyly flirting with the Sumo until the wrestler is seduced, eyes closed, lips puckered for a kiss, when Bugs whops him with a hammer.83 This queer moment exemplifies one of the most powerful modes of Bugs Bunny’s zany adaptation, or, as Sam Abel reads Bugs Bunny, his most powerful manifestation as a “camp hero par excellence… nemesis of the straight world view… [and] iconoclast of traditional gendered role-playing, merrily shattering all types of expected masculine and feminine behavior” (184).

83 “The central element of the camp formula here is that Bugs invariably takes on the role of seductress; he is not only pretending to be a woman, but a highly sexualized woman. In direct defiance of Susan Sontag (and long before her famous analysis of camp), Bugs in drag reveals the intensely political nature of camp. In Chuck Jones’s formula, camp is drag, drag is sex, and sex is power” (Abel 196).
The “Yellow Peril” remains a threat, however: barely has the Sumo hit the ground when Bugs is alerted to a convoy of Japanese troop transports heading for his “inevitable island.” “Japs!” he shouts “Hundreds of ‘em. This calls for strategy. I’ll have to put on my thinking cap.” His ultimate response to the problem is uniquely American: when we next see Bugs, he’s driving a “Good Rumor” ice cream truck, hawking chocolate covered ice cream bars that, in a cutaway x-ray shot, are revealed to be disguised hand grenades. Not even the Japanese army can resist mass-produced American ice cream, and Japanese soldiers are soon thronging all around Bugs’s truck, waving wads of cash and gibbering mock Japanese. The irresistible poison of junk food wipes out all the Japanese but one, who comes running after Bugs shouting: “Just you one minute, just one minute, you no get away from me, you wait. . .” So powerful is the promise of consumer satisfaction, however, that the soldier doesn’t want revenge: abjectly, he wants more. “I got a free one,” he says, holding up an ice cream stick reading “Good for Free Good Rumor.”

Bugs indulges him, crooning “business is booming” to the accompaniment of an off-screen explosion. Ultimately, Bugs overcomes Japanese aggression with the same tricks of metaphorical slippage he uses against American conformism: zany mutability, masquerade, distraction, cultural fluency, technical mastery, drag, and the ability to turn consumer desire against itself. While Bugs’s use of metaphorical slippage functions as a strategy of resistance to capture by the self-same capitalist system that makes such slippage possible, however, when deployed to the South Pacific, the slippage bears an uncanny resemblance to James Jones’s depiction of industrial warfare on Guadalcanal. When the American trickster is conscripted as a war hero, he turns the irresistible seductions of consumer capitalism into a weapon of empire: Bugs Bunny ultimately “nips
the Nips” by selling them ice cream. He has established his difference and superiority by establishing mastery in the buyer-seller relationship. While the Japanese soldiers are slaves to consumption, even when it destroys them, Bugs knows what he’s selling and recognizes his “Good Humor/Rumor” as a strategy of domination.

Bugs is next seen surrounded by trees painted up and down with kill flags. The music has gone lyrical. Bugs has cleared paradise of its savages, tamed the Orient, and seemingly won if not the war, at least this battle. “Now as I was saying, what a beauteous Garden of Eden. So peaceful, so quiet...” he moons—then grimaces. “And if there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s peace and quiet! Get me out of here! Peace and quiet nuts!”

Suffering the fate of the all-devouring self-consciousness in isolation, Bugs flips out, desperate for another Other. There are no more Japanese to kill, no more Nips to nip, but a representative American war machine shows up, a US ship in the distance, and Bugs raises a white flag, “surrendering” to the necessity of enlisting in the war machine, compensating himself for his capture by reinterpreting Paradise as a prison: “You think I want to spend the rest of my life on this island?” He then turns to notice a sari-wrapped female island rabbit. “Hm,” she purrs, promising another kind of capture, “it’s a possibility.” Bugs lowers his flag, howls, and flings himself after the female island rabbit, pursuing her as she flees over the horizon. The promise of war’s excitements, it turns out, is no competition for the pleasures of peace.

“Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips” seems at first blush an example of straightforward racist propaganda. On closer examination, however, we can see that the cartoon is an ambivalent exploration of the problems that arise when a comic trickster whose zany power resides in his capacities for substitution and metamorphosis, and whose identity
inheres in a campy, ironic attitude toward his own celebrity status, finds himself in a
certain “kind of picture,” namely a war film. We might understand director Isadore
“Fritz” Freleng’s meditation on identity and difference in “Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips” as
an anxious mediation on the disjunct between what Wallace Stevens called the “poetry
of war” and the “poetry of the imagination,” an assimilationist attempt to harmonize
ethno-nationalist militarism and liberal capitalist cosmopolitanism by re-interpreting war
as a cultural conflict that will ultimately be won by the side with the more appealing
consumer goods. But this harmony isn’t really sustainable, since commerce as conquest
winds up eliminating (whether through genocide or absorption) the enemy Other that
made trade possible in the first place. The logic of imperialism of whatever stripe
demands constantly new islands, new markets, new fields of conquest, which Bugs
rejects in favor of an Edenic sexual pastoral. The cartoon’s originary politics of violent
differentiation out of anamorphic similitude are finally subsumed in the (admittedly
fudged) comic integration of racial and sexual difference. “Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips” is
a comic response to war if for no other reason than that it ends with the promise of
marriage.

Comedy and war might seem to have little to do with each other, but the question
of whether a hostile confrontation is comic or belligerent depends in one sense only on a
question of scale: hence the comedy in Bugs Bunny’s characteristic declaration, “You
realize, of course, this means war!” Comedy seems funny and irrepressible, but is
ultimately a mode of closure and recuperation. The pleasure in comedy comes from a
shared sense of collective identity in setting norms and rejecting abnormality. As Freud
observes in Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, “Every joke calls for a public of
its own and laughing at the same jokes is evidence of far-reaching psychical conformity” (185). Freud goes on:

Here moreover we have arrived at a point which enables us to guess still more precisely what takes place in the [joke’s audience]. He must be able as a matter of habit to erect in himself the same inhibition which the first person’s joke has overcome, so that, as soon as he hears the joke, the readiness for this inhibition will compulsively or automatically awaken. This readiness for inhibition, which I must regard as a real expenditure, analogous to mobilization in military affairs, will at the same moment be recognized as superfluous or too late, and so be discharged in statu nascendi by laughter.

Note the military metaphor. Aggression begins with a readiness to enact the law in blood; it becomes humor when we realize the law has been transgressed ex post facto and find ourselves complicit in its transgression. John Limon builds on Freud in his analysis of Lenny Bruce in Stand-up Comedy in Theory to further elaborate the work comedy does in establishing community:

The audience—by means of its laughter, by means of its metalaughter—comes together as a community, under this pressure, to assert its right not to do community work. (It demands to be outraged in order not to be outraged.) Joke work does the work of suburbanization, since the moral method of suburbia is to
The comic hero can be a scapegoat or a clown, a fool or a god, seemingly critiquing social norms but in fact strengthening them by acting out the shame of their breaking: with Lucy Ricardo, for example, it is her lack of moderation that makes her comic; with Bugs Bunny, it is his absolute self-sufficiency and pride. Lucy is abjectly comic, Bugs divinely. Rather than being the object of laughter, however, the comic hero can also serve as a kind of cultural police, directing shame at worthy targets of collective derision, as when Bugs mocks Elmer Fudd’s muddling conventionality.

War as a social practice is like comedy in that it serves to define collective identity by exclusion and negation, though its end and its methods are different. Where comedy creates subjects through the collective recognition of certain behaviors or characteristics as shameful, worthy of laughter, war creates subjects through the collective recognition of other groups as existing outside the moral order, worthy only of destruction. As discussed previously, in liberal capitalist society war as such is interpreted as a phenomenon existing outside of the moral order, so the soldier is called upon to mediate between the collective and its enemy object by taking on the burden of being the destroyer, or “sacred avenger,” and bearing the stain of moral evil, or “trauma.”

The trauma hero is the pre-eminent way contemporary liberal capitalist society tries to manage the conflicting demands of ethno-nationalist war and commercial cosmopolitanism. The comic hero, as exemplified by Bugs Bunny in “Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips” and, I will argue, as seen in the postwar poetry of New York School poet
Kenneth Koch, offers another strategy of managing the problem of war, but one that
gives short shrift to enthno-nationalist demands for sacrifice. In turning the epic to mock
epic, the heroic to the comic, Koch’s poetry, like James Jones’s novel The Thin Red Line
and “Fritz” Freleng’s Bugs Bunny cartoon, works to represent war and the heroic not as
sacred moments of nationalist kairos or transcendental revelations, but as iterations of the
merely profane, as nothing more than shameful moments of violent transgression.

In “Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips,” marriage supersedes violence as the founding act
of pastoral life. In The Thin Red Line, the invasion of Guadalcanal is seen as an episode
of industrial violence in which heroism, nobility, and valor are relentlessly integrated into
capitalist production. In Kenneth Koch’s comic war poem “To World War Two,” the
experience of war is portrayed as a youthful fling with an obsessive, narcissistic,
destructive lover, something to be survived and looked back on with chagrin. Koch’s
poem was first published as “To the United States Army,” in Poetry magazine (January
2000), but it was written as part of an autobiographical series of apostrophic poems
finally published as New Addresses, in which it appears between poems of childhood and
a poem signaling the advent of perhaps Koch’s most important relationship, his
connection with New York (“To Living in the City”). That poem, a paean to life in
postwar New York, ends with Koch sending his parents back to his hometown of
Cincinnati while a woman waits for him upstairs in his Greenwich Village apartment. He
reflects:

This was farewell

To being anywhere else. I
Wanted you. We’ve
Been together every night
Now, almost, for fifty years (Collected Poems 606).

When we compare this with the end of “To World War Two” (“All you cared about was existing and being won. You died of a bomb blast in Nagasaki, and there were parades.”), the comic deflation of war in Koch’s poem and its supersession by Koch’s new life in New York is eminently clear: Koch’s New York is the urban version of Bugs Bunny’s tropical pastoral.

Yet even if, for Koch, World War II was superseded by what came after, his actual process of coming to terms with the war may have involved as much repression as supersession. One of the fascinating aspects of Koch’s career is that while his experience as an infantryman in the Philippines during World War II deeply marked him, that experience remained obscure in his published work, at least until New Addresses (2000).

Koch is widely read and often admired as a comic poet, but he is less often considered a war poet, in part because of his efforts to displace and decenter the role of the war in his life, in part because the ideological and poetic commitments of his interpreters predispose against historicist and psychobiographical reading, and in part simply because Koch’s life and work haven’t yet received enough attention. What’s more, making sense of the politics of the New York School poets has been difficult and contentious since the beginning, as John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, and Koch worked to distinguish their poetry from that of other more polemical coteries in the 1950s and 1960s, and as readers, students, and scholars worked to make the New York School
poets’ particular virtues legible in the face of detractors and hostile critical apparatuses. As we come around to a fuller understanding of the way politics and history seeped into, informed, and were topics of the poetry of O’Hara and Ashbery, we’re more and more able to see the poets of the New York School in their full historical, cultural, and political registers.

While Koch’s life as a soldier remained obscure throughout much of his career, it was nevertheless a significant shaping force in his poetry, drama, and fiction. As I will show, Koch’s experience as an infantryman in the Philippines inheres in his poetry in countless coded or abstracted references (for instance repeated references to the Pacific ocean, the number 96 (alluding to the 96th Infantry division), episodes of sudden violence, exotic Asian jungle locales, and close-knit bands of nomadic professionals). It also influenced some of the central efforts of his career: his early struggles to develop a style of poetic sense-making resistant to historicist and psychological interpretation, his fascination with romantic and nationalist heroes, and his middle-period reworking of epic and mock epic forms. Looking more closely at Koch’s lifelong effort to turn his experience of “meaningless violence” into poetry will help us see not only how World War II deeply marked postwar culture in ways not necessarily obvious or self-evident, but also help us understand the changing politics of literature in the 1960s.
Far off from there now glide from
Blue to blue-white the sky-piranha chain
Of Ninety-Six, which anyone would hide from
Who knew the eating habits of these predators,
Sea-homnivores of sky.

—Kenneth Koch, *The Duplications* (1977)

In Koch’s apostrophe to World War II, written fifty-five years after the war’s end, poetry and war stand opposed. Poetry is salvific and escapist, promising immortality; war is a grinding death machine.

One, in a foxhole near me, has his throat cut during the night
We take more precautions but it is night and it is you.
The typhoon continues and so do you.
“I can’t be killed—because of my poetry. I have to live on in order to write it.”
I thought—even crazier thought, or just as crazy—
“If I’m killed while thinking of lines, it will be too corny
When it’s reported” (I imagined it would be reported!)
So I kept thinking of lines of poetry. One that came to me on the beach on Leyte
Was “The surf comes in like masochistic lions."

I loved this terrible line. It was keeping me alive. My Uncle Leo wrote to me,

“You won’t believe this, but some day you may wish

You were footloose and twenty on Leyte again.” I have never wanted

To be on Leyte again,

With you, whispering in my ear,

“For on and win me!” …

As machines make ice

We made dead enemy soldiers, in

Dark jungle alleys, with weapons in our hands

That produced fire and kept going straight through (Collected Poems 604).

Things seem clear enough looking back, but at the time the distinction between poetry and war was less clear. Koch had been writing poetry for years and he didn’t stop when he was drafted. Army life became a subject, as did, through his deployment to the Philippines and evacuation to Guam and Saipan, the violence and terror of war. In Koch’s archives at the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library, dozens of pages of poetry and prose testify to his efforts to make sense of the war in writing. A few of these poems became his first publications, in Poetry and the Kansas City Review, though most have remained unpublished. Nevertheless, Koch kept all this old war writing in his files. The poems, autobiographical sketches, and meditations vary in quality, though they all exude the intensity and immediacy of a talented writer grappling with an overcharged experience.
One of the best poems from the archive, and an example of the darkness of tone in much of Koch’s writing in this period, is this short work, “Advice to a Soldier”:

Hunt sex in the forest with eyes like crazy coals;
be wolf-like; scatter your brain like a fountain:
logic is hardly necessary with quick-triggered decision
slung over your shoulder.

Enjoy April fiercely; claw the heart of each hour;
let your hands be telescopes in the black sky of sensation:
the pleasures of the intellect die a terrible death
in the lonely barracks.

Hate clouds, hate rainbows; nail your heaven tight to the ground:
love rocks, love trees; batter them with your fierce fists.

Struggle, hate, love; claw, gore, kill;
be a God-colored giant in the forest of yourself
until the world splits like a ripe watermelon
and you lie down and fuck death.  

84 A later draft features the variant last line: “and you lie down and rape death” (Box 1/9). Koch’s archive at the Berg library comprises mainly two collections, one 1939–1995 and the other 1932–2007, totaling almost 200 linear feet (473 manuscript boxes). Other material remains scattered at the Berg and elsewhere.
It’s impossible to know when precisely this poem was written. Very probably Koch wrote it during his time as a clerk on Saipan, well after his months in combat on Leyte in the Philippines, and after he escaped almost certain death on Okinawa, when infectious hepatitis left him too sick to land with his unit. Poems such as this from Koch’s time in the war give new weight and spooky resonance to his later work, both the material that overtly treats the war and the material that doesn’t. It’s only by attending closely to the risks, dangers, and horrors of Koch’s time on Leyte that we can fully understand the gravity of lines from “To World War Two” such as “I’m glad you ended. I’m glad I didn’t die. Or lose my mind,” and the stakes of his willful, zealous commitment to “the pleasures of peace.”

Pfc. Jay Kenneth Koch had been born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on February 27, 1925. He grew up there in what seemed a fairly happy middle class midwestern Jewish household. His father Stuart owned a clothing store, and his mother, Lillian Loth Koch, was a housewife. Kenneth wrote poetry and stories, and also drew a lot. In 1937, at the age of twelve, he made an anthology of poems, drawings, jokes, observations, and clippings called *An Emergency*, about the Ohio River flood that year. Koch went to Walnut Hills High School, where his interest in writing poetry flourished during his junior year there under the mentorship of one of his teachers, Katharine Lappa (a year he later called an “inspired afternoon”). His early poetry shows strong rhymes, a favoring of ballad form, cartoonish narratives, and lots of attention to his domineering mother. In 1942, the year he was a student of Lappa’s, his poetry turned surreal, morbid, and fervid, sometimes even perverse, suggesting the influence of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Poe. Koch’s poems of 1943 continued to explore paradox, bright, garish imagery, and fabulist
narratives. In addition to the influence of the French poètes maudits, the Romantic strain is heavy in Koch’s early work, along with the explicit influence of William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Patchen.

Koch spent one semester at the University of Cincinnati before he was drafted on June 14, 1943. He went through basic training at Camp Hood, Texas, then was sent in November to the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago to study engineering as part of the Army Specialized Training Program, an advanced program designed to expedite the movement of particularly intelligent or capable draftees into technical and leadership roles “by sending qualified soldiers to colleges chosen by the War Department for terms of prescribed study in fields where the Army’s own training facilities were inadequate” (as described by Louis E. Keefer in his history of the ASTP, Scholars in Foxholes (27)). “The curricula would focus on engineering, foreign languages, dental, and veterinary studies.” The ASTP actually had more demanding qualifications than Officer Candidate School did, even though the ASTP men were enlisted, not commissioned (52). 85 Such high standards were necessary, given the rigorous curriculum: “Besides being highly accelerated—more than double the normal college pace—some of the ASTP curricula involved such always-demanding subjects as physics, chemistry, and various advanced courses in mathematics” (96). Over that winter while in school, Koch kept writing poems. There crept into his work a maudlin, tin-tasting woundedness, and a strange antipathy toward sex. One of the better poems from this period is his “Retreat, Chicago, November 1943”:

85 One of Koch’s fellow ASTP recruits was Henry Kissinger, who studied engineering at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania (Keefer 99)
It was important that smoke
Like potato gas rose
Above the sunset, spilled,
Incredible liqueur across
The darkening sky, against the corner
Of Comiskey Park.

The streetcars
Bouncing redly full of people
Replace it in vitality
Now that the sun is gone,
Now that the whole sky is smoke.

While studying engineering, Koch also took a course with the linguist (and later Senator) S.I. Hayakawa, who was on faculty at Illinois Institute of Technology from 1939 to 1948. Later in life, Koch reminisced to his assistant Jordan Davis that the paper he wrote for Hayakawa was on the language of law; he recalled that the opening line, “The law is a leathery word in the air,” caught Hayakawa’s attention. Hayakawa is most famous today for his book *Language in Thought and Action*, an important and popular book on semantics and cognition, which was based on an earlier book, *Language in Action*, published in 1941 as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. *Language in Action* had been written to enlighten people about the dangers of propaganda and to popularize the general semantics theory of Alfred Korzybski, with whom Hayakawa had studied at

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86 Conversation with Jordan Davis. For more on S.I. Hayakawa, see Gerald W. Haslam and Janice E. Haslam, *In Thought and Action*. 
the Institute for General Semantics. Korzybski’s most pointed theoretical insistence was that the sign is not the referent, or in the phrase he coined: "The map is not the territory” (Language in Action 194). The influence of Korzybski and Hayakawa’s General Semantics on mid–twentieth–century American culture has yet to be fully addressed. In an essay for io9, Lee Konstantinou called Korzybski “probably the most important influence on science fiction you've never heard of,” citing the impact of General Semantics on the work of Robert Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, Frank Herbert, and Philip K. Dick. General Semantics offered a complex, historically minded philosophy of language that sought to redefine the human relationship to culture as such, primarily by recognizing the socially constructed, contextual nature of language and ideas. As Korzybski and Hayakawa see it, we create ideational “maps” of the world in language that can never fully describe the world and often woefully misdescribe it. Their efforts were generally directed toward inculcating a critical detachment toward language use, sometimes suggesting such awkward yet earnest fixes as attaching index numbers to every use of nouns, since “no word ever has exactly the same meaning twice” (Language in Action 195).

Hayakawa, however, a published poet and working poetry critic who was originally trained as an English professor, was interested not just in the critique of language but in its practice, in how poets could “create new ways of thinking that bring us to terms with a changing world” (Language in Thought and Action 142). In an insightful essay on “Poetry and Advertising,” from Poetry magazine in 1946, Hayakawa worried the problem of how the modern poet was to do their work in a linguistic world awash in advertising. Comparing the “disinterested poetry” of art with the “venal poetry”
of advertising, while still recognizing their common practice of “giving an imaginative, or symbolic, or ‘ideal’ dimension to life,” Hayakawa reads the “difficulty” of modern poetry as an effort to evade venality and the language of commerce (“Poetry” 206). The essay ends with a call for a renewed understanding of poetry “as one of the most important of the communicators and creators of the values a civilization lives,” to be arrived at, interestingly, by a denial of poetry as a space of autonomous linguistic production, and a recognition “that the problems of modern poetry are inextricably interwoven with the character of the semantic environment in which the disinterested poet is compelled to work, which in turn compels an examination of the technological, the sociological, the economic beliefs and practices that create that environment” (211–212).

Koch’s time thinking with S.I. Hayakawa about the relationship between language and society was brief. ASTP enrollment peaked in December 1943, at around 140,000 men, then underwent severe cutbacks in March 1944, as part of the military’s effort to address a manpower shortage in the Pacific (Keefer 70, 157–188). What was needed was infantry to pit against Japanese defenses. As Koch later wrote, “It was a time of general confusion / Of being a body hurled at a wall,” and the US Army needed bodies to hurl. Fewer than 40,000 men were designated to stay in ASTP; most were transferred to infantry divisions on the west coast. Koch was assigned to the 96th Infantry Division, then training at Camp White, in the Rogue River Valley of southern Oregon.

The unit to which Koch and many of his fellow ASTPers were sent was already a close-knit community of men toughened by long months of training in the Oregon desert, with a strong esprit de corps. ASTPers often had a hard time integrating into their units, and this was the case with the new men at the 96th. Keefer notes: “Several unit histories
written just after the war describe how [the ASTPers] arrival sometimes created problems of group assimilation. Not infrequently the ASTPers’ ill-disguised sense of superiority helped create tensions” (219). The 96th Division’s unit history, The Deadeyes, recounts: “The termination of the campus program [ASTP] and their transformation into infantrymen was initially a bitter disappointment to many of the men affected and they, in turn, were welcomed with reservations by the now hardened infantrymen of the 96th. There was a degree of antagonism between the two groups until Leyte” (9). In the spring of 1944, probably not long after Koch arrived, the 96th was designated as an amphibious assault division and tagged for deployment to the Pacific Theater. In April, the division deployed to California for amphibious training, stationing at Camp San Luis Obispo and practicing amphibious landings at Camp Callan near San Diego, then consolidating at Camp Beale in the Sacramento Valley to prepare for embarkation at San Francisco, and finally deploying to Camp Stoneman to stage in mid July (Deadeyes 9–10). While the unit was at Camp Stoneman, two ships exploded at Port Chicago, killing 320 sailors and civilians (mostly African-Americans) and provoking the “Port Chicago mutiny,” a strike by port workers in response to being ordered back to work in the same dangerous conditions.

A few days later, on July 21, the 96th sailed out from San Francisco on five steamers. They spent three weeks in Oahu in logistical preparation and jungle training, then set sail in the second week of September, ostensibly headed for Eniwetok and Yap, a tiny Japanese-held island about a thousand miles east of the Philippines. Once the division was underway, the division commander, General Bradley, let the men know their

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87 Donald Decker, in Love Company, his memoir of serving in the 96th Infantry, remembers being issued a “Jap Hunting License” some time around April, when the unit went “Hot” (30).
actual mission: they would be leading an amphibious assault on the island of Leyte in the Philippines under the command of General Douglas MacArthur.

Military organization follows a strict hierarchical division of command, intended to make a massive conglomeration such as a division both strategically maneuverable and tactically flexible. The largest effective maneuver unit was the division, the smallest was the squad; a full-strength US infantry division in World War II would usually number around 15,000, while the number of men in a full-strength infantry squad would be around 10. Three squads plus leadership and heavy weapons make up a platoon of 40 men, three platoons plus company HQ and heavy weapons make up a company of about 150 men, three or four companies plus battalion HQ and various attachments make up a battalion of between 600 and 800, three battalions plus regimental HQ and various attachments make up a regiment of between 2400 and 3000, and three regiments plus numerous other units make up a division. Corps comprise multiple divisions; Armies comprise multiple corps. For ease of control, the maneuver units in a division are usually organized into “combat teams,” in which various support units and attachments are organized under the command of each infantry regiment. Koch was an infantryman in E Company, 2nd Battalion, 381st Infantry Regiment. Koch’s regiment, commanded by Col. Michael “Screamin’ Mike” Halloran, was the core unit in the 96th Infantry Division’s Combat Team 1.

The 96th Division landed at Leyte on October 20, 1944. Leyte is a long, mountainous island, with the island’s main ridge running roughly north-south along the western coast. East of the mountains, the land descends through rough, hilly jungles and

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88 Letters and poems from the period sometimes identify him as belonging to E Company, sometimes to F Company. The two units would have operated closely enough together, we may assume one unit for the sake of simplicity.
miles of low-lying swamps before finally reaching the sea. The main city Tacloban lay in
the northeast corner of the island, and the American invasion targeted the eastern beaches
along the northern third of the island from Tacloban south to the town of Dulag: X Corps
would take Tacloban while XXIV Corps (including the 96th Infantry Division) would
advance inland along the southern flank between the coast and the mountains. The battle
front assigned to the 96th Division lay between a line of hills ascending northwest inland
from Liberanan Head to 1400-foot-high Catmon Hill, the highest landmark overlooking
the beaches, and the town of Dulag to the south.

The 382nd and 383rd Regiments led the amphibious assault, while Koch’s regiment
(the 381st) was held in reserve. The landing went smoothly, with the 96th meeting little
initial resistance. This was due to the fact that the primary lines of Japanese defense lay
well back of the beaches, in the towns west of the swamps (Tabontabon, Tabugnon, and
San Vincente) and in the line of hills between XXIV Corps and X Corps: Liberanan
Head, Labir Hill, and Catmon Hill. Over the first few days of the invasion, most of the
96th Division bogged down in the inland swamps, and a series of inconclusive fights left
the Japanese in control of the high ground around Catmon Hill.89 1st Battalion, 383rd
fought through Japanese fortifications to take Liberanan Head on October 22, then held it
against fierce counterattack. On October 27, a company-sized combat patrol (B Co.,
1st/383) advanced onto Labir Hill but was repulsed by Japanese machine-gun and mortar
fire. Nine men were killed and thirty-three wounded.

89 An analysis by Major Claudius M. Easley, Jr., at the US Army’s Infantry School at Fort Benning,
concluded that General Bradley’s lack of reconnaissance and his stiff-necked commitment of the main
mass of his soldiers to slow, pointless slogging through empty swamp was a grave error. Luckily for the
96th Division (and Koch), Japanese resistance in the area was so light that General Bradley’s tactical
blunder wasn’t fateful.
The next day, the 381st arrived with orders to take Catmon Hill. The 381st had been released from 6th Army reserve on October 25, and on October 28 advanced in a pronged assault on Labir Hill. 1st Battalion attempted to take Labir Hill from the eastern, seaward side, but were repulsed by heavy sniper and machine-gun fire. Koch’s battalion, the 2nd, moved up to the positions held by the 383rd Regiment and, with the support of a massive barrage of artillery fire (“In twenty-four hours, the artillery alone fired 5000 rounds of high explosive”), took Labir Hill without opposition (Deadeyes 33).

“Just after dark on October 28th,” Donald Decker recalls, “a typhoon struck the island, accompanied by torrential rain,” turning the battlefield to mud and turning the men’s foxholes into frigid tubs of filthy water. “Winds were reported up to 70 miles per hour” (99). According to one reminiscence from Captain John E. Bryers: “That was about the most miserable night we ever spent. The only thing that could have made it worse would have been cold, and that came the next night from the winds atop the hill” (Deadeyes, 33). As Koch wrote mordantly in “To World War Two,” “The typhoon continues and so do you.”

The next morning (October 29), 45 tanks from the 780th Tank Battalion delivered direct fire into the last Japanese positions on the eastern side of Liber Hill, supporting 1st Battalion’s assault on the seaward approaches. Meanwhile, Koch’s battalion set off early in a cold wind, assaulting up the ridge to the peak of Catmon Hill, to find that the Japanese had largely abandoned their positions. They were able to take the top of the hill, against only minor resistance. The two battalions dug in and spent the next two days hunting down stragglers and blowing up Japanese caves.90

90 “In the entire CATMON HILL area covered by the 381st Infantry, a total of 53 pillboxes, 17 caves and numerous smaller emplacements were destroyed by demolition” (Easley 31).
In *The Last Avant-Garde*, David Lehman recalls Koch describing his part in the assault as a tale of comic absurdity:

“We were supposed to take a hill, Catmont [sic] Hill, where the Japanese had just wiped out a battalion of US soldiers,” Koch recalled. “Luckily the Japanese had left. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here. I had my bayonet fixed. I was very lazy and had the rifle slung over my shoulder. My bayonet hit a hornet’s next, and a stream of hornets went after me. I screamed and fell down. My glasses flew off, I knew not where, in the dense jungle foliage. We were thirty feet in the air, walking on the tops of trees. The only person behind me in the company was a hillbilly corporal from Oklahoma. ‘C’mon Cock’—they all pronounced my name *Cock*—‘get your fuckin’ ass outta here.’ ‘But my glasses…’ ‘I don’t care about your mother-fuckin’ glasses. Get up or you’re dead.’ He was right.” Later Koch reported to the commander of the company, “the only one in the whole battalion who called me *Coke* instead of *Cock,*” and explained that he couldn’t see without his glasses. Might his next combat assignment be deferred until a replacement pair could be obtained? “Sorry, we’re under strength,” the commander of F Company replied. “Dismissed.” “But—” “Dismissed!” “So I fought the whole campaign without being able to see,” Koch explained. “I don’t know what he thought I’d accomplish. Maybe he thought I’d write another *Iliad*” (42).

Ron Padgett remembered Koch telling the story slightly differently, though still as a comic routine. According to Padgett, there were no hornets, but Koch had gotten
whacked in the face by a branch while his platoon trudged through the jungle up the hill.

Koch yelled to the corporal in front of him that he couldn’t see and the corporal said over his shoulder, “We’ll see you back at the camp, Cock.”91 Jordan Davis recounted that Koch said a malicious sergeant broke his glasses.92 Another version of this story turns up in one of the poems in *New Addresses*, “To Carelessness”:

> You led me to sling my rifle
> Over my shoulder when its bayonet was fixed
> On Leyte, in the jungle. It hit a hornets’ nest
> And I fell down
> Screaming. The hornets attacked me, and Lonnie,
> The corporal, said “Soldier get off your ass!” (*Collected Poems* 601).

This incident and Koch’s casting it as a comic routine calls to mind the story of the hornets’ nest in Norman Mailer’s 1948 novel *The Naked and the Dead*. In Mailer’s novel, a solitary patrol is making its way up a mountain into the Japanese rear, driven by the merciless will of Sergeant Croft. Having struggled and suffered casualties and strained to complete what turns out to be a pointless mission, they are nearly at the crest of the mountain when the Sergeant accidentally kicks a hornets’ nest. The riled hornets attack, sending the platoon screaming and racing down the mountain, bringing the patrol its final defeat (699–700). What becomes in the novel a deliberately anti-climactic climax was based on an actual event experienced by Mailer on one of the few (or perhaps the

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91 Conversation with Ron Padgett.
92 Conversation with Jordan Davis.
only) patrols he went on while serving in the 112\textsuperscript{th} Cavalry Regimental Combat Team, which landed on Leyte in November.\footnote{According to Mailer’s biographer Mary Dearborn, the patrol in question took place on Luzon, near the Agno River (42).}

The 112\textsuperscript{th} Cavalry was first assigned to relieve the 1\textsuperscript{st} Cavalry Division guarding the American rear at Caragara Bay, but at the end of November was ordered into the central mountains of Leyte, headed for Mount Minoro. Elements of the 112\textsuperscript{th} soon ran into a fortified Japanese position that brought the unit’s advance to a dead halt. For about two weeks, from November 24 to December 9, the 112\textsuperscript{th} faced off against the Japanese, sending probes and patrols to try to find a weak spot in the defenses, until they were finally relieved by the 7\textsuperscript{th} Cavalry, which through artillery, flamethrowers, and relentless advance finally took the Japanese positions on December 18, winning a Presidential Unit Citation for the attack (Prefer 165–167). The 112\textsuperscript{th} assisted in cleanup operations on Leyte through December. It was then attached to the 1\textsuperscript{st} Cavalry Division and deployed with them to Luzon on January 27, 1945, where it stayed until after the Japanese surrender.

As Mary Dearborn interprets the actual story of Mailer’s encounter with the horns’ nest in her biography, \textit{Mailer}: “It was a quintessential army experience: a futile mission, the men defeated by something other than the expected enemy, decidedly anticlimactic. Yet it struck Mailer the writer in another way as well: the men were ready to lose their lives in battle, but they didn’t want to be stung by hornets. There was a kind of elusive nobility in the incident that moved the novelist” (43). Comparing the different ways that Koch and Mailer tell their similar war stories (jungle fighting in the Philippines, a mission up a mountain that turns out to be pointless, facing the unexpected
threat of nature rather than the enemy) can help us see how authors with different sensibilities not only reconstruct their wars differently, but even experience similar events differently.

For both authors the hornet attack is deflationary, ironic, and comic in a broadly Aristotelian sense. For Mailer, though, the hornet attack was symptomatic, even emblematic, of the oppression and stupidity of military culture as against the essential nobility of the trapped individual: Mailer’s interpretation is tragic insofar as the conflict between individual and system ends in irreconcilable failure. For Koch, his hornet episode is an example of his own inappropriateness within military society, and is understood as one side of a comic fate that damns and saves beyond moral logic, as in the last lines of “To Carelessness,” which recuperate Koch’s carelessness through the carelessness of an anonymous Japanese soldier:

Later that same day, I stepped on a booby trap
That was badly wired. You
Had been there too.
Thank you. It didn’t explode.

From October 30, when the beachhead was declared secure, to November 8, the 96th was mainly involved in “mopping up operations,” which is one of those military euphemisms that makes the awful sound bearable. “Mopping up” in this case meant combat patrols through swamps and jungles, long marches up and down steep ravines in tropical rain and typhoons, ambushes and assaults on Japanese positions, and generally
living like an animal, on constant alert for the enemy, who is both prey and predator. As Davidson writes: “The story of these… patrols is not one of fighting as it is one of hard marches up and down steep trails, of leeches by the thousands, of dysentery, dengue fever and jungle rot, of laboriously packing supplies on tired backs.” (Deadeyes 69). Donald Decker recalls: “Men were being sent to the hospital daily from Company L as a result of being wet almost all of the time…. As for myself, I could tell I was losing weight, probably 10 pounds already, but for some reason I had not become sick, except for dysentery. I could not fail to notice that my fatigue pants and shirt had started to rot apart” (110–111).

For Koch, a slight, anxious young man now all but blinded by his lack of glasses, that period must have been nightmarish. Imagine being in a strange jungle, far from home, full of people who meant to kill you—and imagine that all you can see around you is blurs of color and shadow. Faces would blend into each other, roots blend into the ground, and enemy soldiers into trees. Objects would take shapes imposed by the imagination. Staying alert in the combat environment is the infantry soldier’s primary occupation and his only hope of staying alive. Without his glasses, Koch would have been worse than useless, incapable of protecting himself and a danger to his fellow soldiers. Koch had been so desperate, he later told Ron Padgett, that anytime he heard firing while out on patrol he would fall to the ground and start shooting wildly into the jungle.94

While the 96th was “mopping up,” 60,000 Japanese reinforcements had made it through the gantlet of American air power and landed at Ormoc Bay on the western side of Leyte. In order to keep the Japanese forces from advancing through the central

94 Conversation with Ron Padgett.
mountains, the 96\textsuperscript{th} was ordered to guard the passes coming down into the Dagami heights. This was rough terrain: there were no roads. It was, in Davidson’s words:

characterized by a succession of ridges, separated by gorges up to four hundred feet deep. At places there were vertical drops of two hundred feet on the steep banks. Obviously, such ground could only be crossed by foot troops, and supplies had to be hand-carried forward of the battalion bases. The ridges were covered by reed grass about eight feet tall, and often the troops were forced to cut their way through. There were trails that wandered aimlessly from one native hut to another, and on the bigger ones the Japs had dug spider holes every twenty feet (Deadeyes 55).

On November 8\textsuperscript{th}, the 2\textsuperscript{nd}/381\textsuperscript{st} moved west, with F Company and elements of G Company moving up onto Malgnon Ridge, where they encountered Japanese fighters. The two companies withdrew and dug in, occupying a bivouac formerly held by the Japanese. Another typhoon hit the island that night, pelting the men, filling their foxholes with rain, and confusing some Japanese soldiers who, not knowing their unit had pulled out, wandered into the American perimeter and were killed (in one case, after being first mistaken for an American). On November 11, F and G Companies attacked Japanese emplacements north and west of Buri, taking minor casualties.

The next morning, November 12, Koch’s company (E Co.) joined the other two companies in the Dagami Heights and moved west with them deeper into the mountains. Davidson offers an extended description of the firefight that ensued. Since this battle was
one of the most significant engagements Koch would have participated in, Davidson’s
description is worth quoting at length. It’s perhaps illuminating to keep in mind here that
Koch describes himself in “To World War II” as being armed with a BAR, or Browning
Automatic Rifle. The BAR was effectively a light machine gun, assigned one or two to a
squad, best used for area and suppression fire rather than individually aimed shots—the
perfect weapon for a half-blind, frightened private.

E Company received some sniper fire and T/Sgt. John Karpinski and S/Sgt.
William B. Dentino, with half the 2d Platoon, went after the snipers. Before
moving very far they were pinned flat to the ground. Other squads pushed forward
to help them; they too were pinned down. Company H observers tried to aid them
with mortar fire when the telephone line was cut. Pfc. Earl J. Fouts took forward a
new wire. Then it too was cut, so Fouts exposed himself again to lay another wire.

Pfc. LeRoy R. Crandall, Jr., kept going forward time after time with litters
to evacuate the wounded until, on his sixth trip, he was killed. Pfc. Gerald S.
Abrego, who led a few other men up to cover the heroic soldiers who were aiding
the casualties, fired his BAR from the hip until struck down and killed by an
enemy bullet. The H Company medic, T/5 William B. Webber, ran from man to
man with his white hair waving in the breeze—“Doc” was to [sic] busy to bother
with a helmet.

Lt. Jack Blair stayed in a forward foxhole adjusting mortar fire. He would
put it directly on a Jap machine gun, and while the Japs were busy ducking, would
leap up and drag some wounded man into his foxhole. He thus saved many lives, and somehow found time in between to shoot four Japs.

Company F was in reserve, but sent forward several BAR men to aid the beleaguered soldiers of G Company. S/Sgt. Harold Lowe fired so furiously he burned out three BARs. S/Sgt. Lloyd E. Dodd, helping Lieutenant Blair direct the mortars, found himself an unwilling target for a hidden sniper. Suddenly he saw one of the slugs go through a leaf, so he moved his eye to it, and sighting through the hole was able to spot and kill the Jap who was firing at him while hanging by his feet from a tree branch.

Capt. Samuel H. Brown moved his aid station up to where the fighting was hottest and, under constant fire, treated the wounded brought in by dozens of litter bearers that came from all units not actually fighting. Chaplain Sigmund Rovinski was with him, and ignoring the gunfire which ricocheted from every direction, moved from man to man giving aid and comfort.

Before the fight could be brought to a climax the battalion was ordered back from the ridge, and was replaced by the 17th Infantry of the 7th Division. It had been one of the stiffest battalion engagements (Deadeyes 45–47).

“What would Anne Marie Goldsmith / Have thought of me,” Koch later wrote, “If instead of asking her to dance / I had put my BAR to my shoulder / And shot her in the face.”

After being relieved, the 381st passed into the Sixth Army Reserve and spent about a week in the rear on more mopping-up patrols and guard duty. On November 23, though, the 381st was sent back into the Dagami Heights against heavy Japanese
defenses. 1st and 3rd Battalions were thrown into direct assault on the Japanese positions, while “Screaming Mike” Halloran’s 2nd Battalion was sent probing along the north flank for a pass through to Ormoc. Company E set up a forward base near Mt. Lubi, out of which they sent patrols looking for Japanese units or for a clear trail west. They failed to find a pass (it turns out there wasn’t one), but on November 29, a platoon on patrol found a Japanese emplacement. The next morning E Company moved up to attack, then set up an ambush along a trail across a stream. They occupied this ambush site for about a week, until being relieved on December 7, killing more than 60 Japanese soldiers without a single casualty (Deadeyes 57). “As machines made ice,” Koch later wrote, Easy Company made “dead enemy soldiers.”

This was Easy Company’s last major engagement on Leyte. They were pulled back to the base camp, where they supported Company G’s holding the ambush site for the next few weeks. Although this was a break from front-line combat, it wasn’t soft, and it wasn’t made any easier by a historic typhoon (Typhoon Cobra) that swept through the Pacific on December 18, sinking several ships in the 3rd Fleet (dramatized in The Caine Mutiny). Just after Christmas Day, when General MacArthur declared organized resistance in the Philippines over, Easy Company were sent back to the ambush site for three days (December 27–30).
Then the whole battalion was pulled off the line and deployed to a bivouac at Patok, a small mountain village northwest of Dagami, where they lived in some comfort in Filipino-built shacks. They built a small airstrip there for evacuating casualties by air (Deadeyes 71). Koch was probably able to catch up on his reading and writing a bit here. Perhaps he even found kindred spirits among all the “hillbillies” to talk about poetry and art with: the 96th Division newspaper, The Deadeye Dispatch, featured doggerel from soldiers, and one special issue, The Deadeye Features, closed with a surrealist back page like something out of Man Ray. The text, which references Gertrude Stein, Objectivism, and Kant, perhaps ameliorated Koch’s feeling of alienation and his sense of being surrounded by hicks.95 This period of relative peace and

95 The text reads: “NOW AND THEN HUMANS DO THINGS JUST FOR THE SHEER JOY OF DOING THEM EVEN THOUGH THEY ARE SPENDING ENERGY THAT THEY MIGHT OTHERWISE
light duty came to end on February 8, when the 96th Infantry Division received its orders for Okinawa. On February 10, the division was relieved of all tactical responsibilities in order to free it up for preparation and training, and on March 25, 1945, LSTs with the 381st and 383rd Regiments of the 96th set sail for Okinawa.

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SLEEP OUT OF THEIR BEING. THIS PAGE IS THE OUTCOME OF A HIDDEN DESIRE TO BE MORE THAN WHAT we ARE, TO GIVE MORE THAN THAT WHICH we HAVE, TO EXUDE THAT WHICH IS BELOW THE SURFACE OF... ourselves IN ORDER TO INSPIRE IN DERE [SIC] READER A HEIGHTENING OF PERCEPTIONS. ....... we SELL NOTHING, BEING NOT SALESMEN BUT PHILANTHROPISTS; we ASK NOTHING BUT ARE GLAD TO RECEIVE THE SCALDING COMMENTS OF THE MULTITUDE WHEN IN THE FOXHOLE THE MIND IS HIDDEN BY our FANTASIES. we ARE, THEREFORE, OBJECTIVISTS TRYING TO RELAX, PRESENTING KANT TO CHICO MARX, SILK HOSE TO CHICKEN PIE: THUS we ARE SURREALISTS OF THE OUTWARD IMPRESSIONIST SCHOOL COMBINING REALISM WITH ROMANTICISM. .... we ARE THE EMBODIMENT OF MODERN CARTOGRAPHY, BEING TO SANITY WHAT AN ORTHOGRAPHIC PROJECTION IS TO A GERTRUDE STEIN TONE POEM... we ARE MORE THAN DELIRIOUS... we ARE A PERSONIFICATION OF THOR’S FANTASIES ROLLED IN MUD, AS WE CARRY THE STARS AND STRIPES ON TO VICTORIOUS BATTLES AND CONQUER THE BLACK DRAGON!” From Deadeye Features (January 20th, 1945).
On April 1, 1945, both Easter Sunday and April Fool’s Day, the 381st Regiment of the 96th Infantry Division assaulted the beaches of Okinawa. The initial landing was relatively easy, but the invasion soon descended into some of the most horrific fighting of the entire war, on par with Stalingrad or the sack of Berlin. E.B. Sledge, whose memoir *With the Old Breed* follows the 1st Marine Division through the campaigns on Peleliu and Okinawa, called the fighting on Okinawa “an appalling chaos” (227). He described the indescribable horror of fighting up and down muddy ridges covered with maggot-filled corpses:

> We didn’t talk about such things. They were too horrible and obscene even for hardened veterans. The conditions taxed the toughest I knew almost to the point of screaming. Nor do authors normally write about such vileness; unless they have seen it with their own eyes, it is too preposterous to think that men could actually live and fight for days and nights on end under such terrible conditions and not be driven insane. But I saw much of it there on Okinawa and to me the war was insanity (282).

The 381st was one of the main regiments in the campaign across Okinawa, fighting with Sledge’s 1st Marines and involved in the assault on Mount Shuri, with Easy Company right in the lead. The regiment suffered severe casualties.
Pfc. Koch, though, never landed: the night before landing, he’d been diagnosed with infectious hepatitis and sent to the rear. Infectious hepatitis (hepatitis A, or jaundice) and hookworm were common among the soldiers on the Philippines because of the humid jungle conditions and primitive sanitation. It was, for Koch, an act of grace. After the war, in the spring of 1946, he suffered nightmare flashbacks of the night he spent on the ship off the beaches of Okinawa, waiting for word to come whether or not he would be forced to land. As he wrote in his journals:

That is what I thought about last night: the unbelievable moments off Okinawa when the doctor was making SURE I had jaundice and therefore couldn’t make the landing. . . . I lay terrified and confused in my comfortable Cincinnati bed. It was actually hard to persuade myself that I WASN’T on the ship off Okinawa waiting for the word just then. The nervousness never went completely away till I fell asleep (“May 14, 1946”).

From Okinawa harbor he was sent to Guam, then to Saipan, where he was reclassified as a clerk-typist and assigned to work in the headquarters. At some point, Koch was issued new glasses. Autobiographical sketches in his papers suggest that he broke these new glasses on a retraining course on Saipan, and had to get yet another new pair. These autobiographical sketches portray a grim vision of the absurdity and institutional horror of Army life.

96 “A Day for History” begins: “The first thing I did on V-E day was go on sick call to get some glasses made. I had broken my only pair on the Battle Reconditioning Course here at the replacement depot and didn’t want to go back to Okinawa without any. I knew what it was like to be without glasses in combat as I had broken my only pair in the first week of the Leyte campaign.”
Koch remained at Saipan until he was sent back the US for discharge in January 1946. While on Saipan, Koch took a course in calculus at an extension school set up by the Army, Marianas University, and had a love affair—apparently never consummated, since she was an officer—with a Red Cross nurse from Willamantic, Connecticut named Bettye Schreiber (“Diary 24 & 25 April 1946”). As well, Koch received news of a friend’s death on Okinawa, which inspired the following short poem:

Elegy for Jim Gellar

Killed by the men of his company,
Age twenty, not yet particularly
Anyone or anything, but meant to be
Someone or something, believer
In platitudes, unmoulded changer
Of platitudes, free in potential,
Bound for the present, bourgeois
Torn from the comfortable world,
Transported into chaos, killed
By accident, Jim Gellar,
Twenty, unattached and unassigned—

The heartless elegy for my dead friend

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97 Bettye Jane Schreiber, born 1921, graduated from University of Connecticut in 1941 with a degree in English. Her picture can be seen in the 1941 UConn yearbook, the *Nutmeg*, available online through the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center (http://doddcenter.uconn.edu/asc/collections/nutmeg/).
Ends at its beginning:

Dead but remembered Jim,

Transition from the unripe actuality

To the dead and certain certainty.  

In a short autobiographical note in his papers, which formed the basis for his application essay to Harvard, Koch reflected on his military experience thusly:

My reactions to my army experiences were various and at the present time I find it impossible to be completely objective about them; I can, however, give certain of my emotional and intellectual responses to the experiences.

I wanted to get into the army for several reasons: I felt it my duty to take some part in fighting against whatever threatened the United States, although at that time I had only the blurred and over-simplified radio-newspaper conceptions of what the war was all about; secondly, I wanted to avoid the social ostracism which I felt would come as a result of not being in service.

The regimentation and physical strain of basic training were wholly new to me, difficult, and unpleasant. This unpleasantness was assuaged, however, by the feelings of comradeship and of being a strong young man in uniform….

When assigned as a rifleman in the infantry, I felt the army had done a masterful job of misclassification which I resented. Again this unpleasantness was

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98 James M. Gellar is listed among the 381st Regiment’s casualties on Okinawa (*Deadeyes* 251). According to the National Gold Star Registry, he was from DuPage, Illinois. According to “Findagrave.org,” he is buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii, and was killed on May 13, 1945, one day short of his twentieth birthday.
ameliorated by the esprit de corps of the company and the feeling of immediacy of value to the war effort which I possessed as an infantryman.

The sudden feeling of fear of death and confusion as to meanings and purposes made the period which began with leaving the States and ended with the landing on Leyte take on a nightmarish quality. Once in action, fatigue, hunger, and other physical discomforts, added to the fact that my job was to kill or be killed made it almost impossible for me to think of anything besides day to day survival, devotion to the men of my company, and the alleviation of pain and discomfort. With the end of the campaign came unbelievable relief.

When I was evacuated from Okinawa and again when I was reclassified on Saipan I had mingled feelings of extreme joy at being spared and guilt at leaving my friends. Life was very pleasant, by contrast, in the headquarters unit, although tedious.

All things considered, I would say that aside from my formal schooling in ASTP I gained very little from being in the army in the States, but that my combat experiences broadened and matured my outlook a great deal ("Autobiographical Fragment").

After getting out of the Army yet before matriculating to Harvard in the summer term of 1946, Koch was footloose. He spent some time living in Greenwich Village, visited Boston to apply to Harvard, and went back to Cincinnati. Judging from journals in his papers from that period, it was an emotional time, fraught with existential angst and survivor guilt, and complicated by his transitioning from Army life back to civilian life.
Within a few months, though, he landed on his feet—among other veterans, other aspirant young men offered a shot in the upper ranks of society through the social-mobility experiment of the GI Bill, and among a whole new generation of poets and writers. As Brad Gooch describes Harvard’s 1946 fall incoming class:

This sizable influx of veterans, constituting 71 percent of all students and pushing the total enrollment of Harvard College up to a record 5,435, radically changed the appearance of the Ivy League campus that third week in September. The traditional prewar Harvard ceremony of seventeen-year-old beardless youths arriving in the Yard from select preparatory high schools in the Northeast, dressed in white bucks, unloading Vuitton bags from the backs of their convertibles, was lost in as surge of new, and often older, faces searching for their assigned rooms in squat red brick dormitories toward the north end that were reserved for veterans…. Double-deckers were moved into dorms to accommodate the extra roommates, although even then a certain number latecomers were forced to sleep on cots, shipboard fashion, in the Indoor Athletic Building basketball court. Lines formed everywhere—to eat, to cash checks, to receive Veterans’ Administration book authorizations. As the term began, seats on windowsills or in aisles were at a premium at choice lectures. The school newspaper, the Harvard Crimson, predictably kept referring to this turbulence as a “siege” or “invasion” (95–96).

In those years, Cambridge and Harvard were the locus of an incredible intellectual ferment. Central currents in American life over the next half century had their fount there,
and key cultural and political players jostled through the veteran-packed halls and quads, sometimes as professors or invited speakers, sometimes as students. The postwar years were a massive historical pivot, and Harvard was, for a moment, a point on which the world turned. One of the most important speeches in the twentieth century was delivered as a commencement address on June 5, 1947, for instance, almost a year exactly after Koch arrived on campus: Secretary of State George Marshall’s unveiling of the European Recovery Plan.

Marshall’s speech was, according to the later reflection of Joseph M. Jones, a State Department official who served under Marshall, one of three marking “a dazzling process which within fifteen weeks laid the basis for a complete conversion of American foreign policy and of the American people toward the world” (8). These three speeches were Truman’s address to Congress on March 12, 1947 announcing the Truman Doctrine, an explicit policy of political and economic intervention across the globe in defense of US interests, understood broadly as the preservation of open markets and democratic structures of governance and framed as the containment of totalitarianism; Dean Acheson’s speech to the Delta Council in Cleveland, Mississippi, May 8, 1947, which asserted the need for the US government to engage in certain kinds of trade regulation in order to ensure the survival and vitality of Western European economies, and was, in Gary Wills’s words, “meant to forestall attack from free market advocates in presenting economic regulation as an anti-Communist measure” (77); and Marshall’s commencement address. Wills, in his concise and bracing book *Bomb Power: The Modern Presidency and the National Security State*, sees these three events as key moments in what he calls the “annus mirabilis”—1947—in the development of the
complex interlockings of unitary executive power, the burgeoning security-intelligence state apparatus, the newly dominant military-industrial complex, and a permanently militarized society, all taking shape around the central fact of executive control of nuclear weapons. This development, Wills argues, metastasized American empire into global hegemony and created the national security state we live with today. Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, and John Ashbery were all students at Harvard then, soon to be friends. Were they by chance in Harvard Yard that day? Did they hear Marshall’s speech? The point is immaterial: they became poets in the militarized, Cold War world Marshall helped create.99

Harvard after the war was both a postwar pastoral and a nerve-center of the developing national security state, and the moment must have seemed at once a utopian opening of unimaginable possibility and a shockingly repressive closure and purgation in reaction to the war just past, in fear of new wars looming in the future. As Paul Goodman described the period in an influential essay, “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900–1950”: “One would not call the aftermath of World War II buoyant and confident of progress. Probably one could not even call it an age of anxiety, as the ‘thirties were anxious.

99 Marshall’s audience extended well beyond the confines of Harvard Yard, but even if it had been restricted to campus, the speech would have been heard by an impressive array of future elites: among the graduating class in 1947 were media magnate Sumner Redstone and future US Secretary of Defense Elliot Richardson (law school); historian Bernard Bailyn; writers Anne McCaffrey (Radcliffe), Richard Wilbur, and Tom Lehrer (all with Master’s degrees); actor Jack Lemmon; economist Robert Solow; and future US Attorney General Richard Kleinidienst. Students on campus at the time included William Rehnquist (AM 1950), Robert F. Kennedy (1948), James Schlesinger (1950), Daniel Ellsberg (1952), future Senator William Hathaway, Henry Kissinger (1950), Paul Volcker (1951), and Samuel P. Huntington (PhD, 1951). As Gooch notes, it wasn’t only the future political and economic elite that Harvard was nurturing, but the literary elite as well: “Among the poets studying at Harvard in the late forties were Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, Donald Hall… and Adrienne Rich. Fiction writers included John Hawkes, Harold Brodkey, John Updike, and Alison Lurie,” as well as Edward Gorey (97). Poets who came to Harvard to read between 1946 and 1950 included “Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Dylan Thomas, Edith Sitwell, Robert Frost, Archibald MacLeish, and Stephen Spender,” plus T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden (97–98). Faculty included John Ciardi, Delmore Schwartz, F.O. Matthiessen, and both Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.
Rather, from the clinical point of view, one sees the phenomena of shell-shock, a clinging to adjustment and security of whatever quality, and a complete inability to bear anxiety of any kind, to avoid panic and collapse” (371). Within five years, F.O. Mattheissen will have killed himself rather than be outed as a communist and homosexual, the Rosenbergs will have been executed, a war fought in Korea, Soviet atomic and hydrogen bombs tested, the McCarthy trials come and gone, the US national security state blooming in full flower, and the Cold War in full swing. For a time of supposed peace, the postwar years were a fraught and precarious half-decade.

As Koch, Ashbery, and O’Hara set about beginning their careers as poets at Harvard in deliberately “avant-garde” fashion, the problem of the relation between politics and poetry was at once live and unmanageable—indeed, it was oppressively present. As Donald Pease described the moment: “In the reconfigured cultural field that emerged after World War II, the fantasy of American exceptionalism assumed the vantage point of the superegoic Gaze” (23). Whether understood as the social demand in capitalist culture for the lyric’s “virginal” autonomy, as per Adorno’s “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” or through Paul Goodman’s more psycho-social understanding in his essay “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900–1950,” so important for O’Hara’s thinking, in which “advance-guard” writing is at once making a normative claim, rejecting the norms of a community which refuses its claim, and seeking to create a new community that accepts its claims, the dialectic of lyric voice and social discourse was in the immediate postwar period subject to intense political pressure, even danger.

In the embarrassment of Pound’s fascism and the aridity of Eliot’s anti-semitic Anglicism, the dominant strain of American Modernist poetry revealed disturbing
sympathies with reactionary and totalitarian thought. Restrained formalists around Cambridge such as Wilbur, Eberhardt, Schwartz, and Ciardi, however accomplished their work and however moving it can be when read as individual responses to a world gone hopelessly out of control, must have seemed to jaded ex-GIs like Koch and O’Hara not merely complicit in the new repression, but actively obstructionist. Williams, Auden, and Stevens represented, at their best, lyric projects uncorrupted by the war but all the same from another era, out of date in their responses. While Williams’s objectivist or imagist valence retained an appeal, the apocalyptic Romanticism of *Spring and All* would have seemed grotesque in the radiant light of Hiroshima. Auden’s ironic, Augustan desuetude offered one possibility, but only if it could be translated into a new register for a triumphant global empire, something Ashbery didn’t accomplish until *The Double Dream of Spring* in 1970. And there was no going back to Wallace Stevens’ “complacencies of the peignoir,” or even the old “motive for metaphor,” not with the atomic bomb, the red scare, and the Cold War. The tension between the two systems of making metaphor that so troubled Stevens during World War II—the poetry of the imagination against the poetry of war—remained active: free exchange, in an unrelenting postwar consumerism, stood over against national, embodied mediation by blood.

More disturbingly, with the economic imperialism of the Cold War (as exemplified in the Marshall Plan), Stevens’s two kinds of poetry seemed to have grown together in a horrific hybrid. Just as Bugs Bunny enlisted consumer capitalist production to fight a race war against the Japanese, American cultural and economic production was enlisted to fight an ideological war against the Russians. As Koch’s teacher in Chicago, S.I. Hayakawa, noted in 1946 about the effect of advertising on poetry: “[N]ever in
history has it been so difficult to say anything with enthusiasm or joy or conviction without running into the danger of sounding as if you were trying to sell some thing” (“Poetry,” 209). In the fraught postwar environment, the things you risked selling as a poet weren’t just refrigerators and new cars, but a surging American nationalism and its attendant security apparatus. How an American poet might carry on the dialectic of individual identity and collective discourse in this almost totalitarian atmosphere was a serious problem for anyone beginning writing in the late forties and early fifties.

The stifling air so choked John Ashbery that he remembers not being able to write at all: “In the early 50’s, I went through a period of intense depression and doubt. I don’t know why. It did coincide with the beginnings of the Korean War, the Rosenberg case and McCarthyism. Though I was not an intensely political person, it was impossible to be happy in that kind of climate. It was a nadir” (“How to be a difficult poet,” 20). John Shoptaw argues convincingly that Ashbery’s response to this was to develop a poetics of evasion, misrepresentation, and cryptographic dissimulation: “During these volatile years, misrepresentation was not only an aesthetic principle but a survival tactic” (5). Yet Ashbery’s own narrative suggests a direction less through misrepresentation than through pure language, a new understanding of the relation between signal and noise, music and silence. As Ashbery recounted to Richard Kostelanetz: “I was jolted out of this [depression] by going with Frank O’Hara—I think it was New Year’s Day, 1952—to a concert by David Tudor of John Cage’s ‘Music of Changes.’ It was a series of dissonant chords, mostly loud, with irregular rhythm. It went on for over an hour and seemed infinitely extendable. I felt profoundly refreshed after listening to that. I started to write again shortly afterwards.” As Adorno understands the process of poetry, however,
doubtlessly reading it through the very same tradition of avant-garde “noise” music on which Cage was building, it is this very submission to language as language that opens up lyric poetry to mediation:

The unself-consciousness of the subject submitting itself to language as to something objective, and the immediacy and spontaneity of that subject’s expression are one and the same: thus language mediates lyric poetry and society in their innermost core. This is why lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing, when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with the inherent tendency of language (“On Lyric Poetry,” 43).

Of course, Ashbery didn’t randomly come across Cage’s work in 1952. He and Koch had been exploring avant-garde poetics together since 1946. David Lehman recounts Ashbery introducing Koch to the work of Alfred Jarry and saying “I think we should be a little crazier” (51). Around 1950, Koch introduced Ashbery to the work of proto-Surrealist Raymond Roussel, who would become a major influence on the poet. Both poets, soon along with Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, and others, were looking for ways out of and around the forms of subjectivity demanded by the postwar national security state culture, searching for a way to open up a channel of language neither reliant on prewar conventions nor assimilable to debased political and commercial discourses.
Kenneth’s Koch’s first serious attempt at a solution in this vein was his surrealist revision of Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” the long poem “When the Sun Tries to Go On” (written circa 1950 but not published until 1969). This poem dramatizes the problem of how a poet might “try to go on” between the degraded language of advertising and the repugnant language of American imperialism by turning to pure language, words-as-words, in a way inflected by Korzybski and Hayakawa’s general semantics, French surrealism (especially Max Jacob, Pierre Reverdy, Paul Eluard, and proto-surrealist Raymond Roussell), and the similarly heady attempts of his friends, John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara. Yet even while Koch works toward a lucid insensibility across the poem’s “brightness and hardness of language,” he cannot help but signify (“Biographical Essay”). Consider the first stanza:

And, with a shout, collecting coat hangers
Dour rebus, conch, hip,
Ham, the autumn day, oh how genuine!
Literary frog, catch-all boxer, O
Real! The magistrate, say “group,” bower, undies
Disk, poop, Timon of Athens. When
The bugle shimmies, how glove towns!
It’s Merrimac, bends, and pure gymnasium
Impy keels! The earth desks, madmen
Impose a shy (oops) broken tube’s child—
Land! why are your bandleaders troops
Of is? Honk, can the mailed rose
Gesticulate? Arm the paper arm!
Bind up the chow in its lintel of sniff.
Rush the pilgrims, destroy tobacco, pool
The dirty beautiful jingling pyjamas, at
Last beside the stove-drum-preventing oyster,
The “Caesar” of tower dins, the cold’s “I’m
A dear.” O bed, at which I sued to sneer at.
Bringing cloth. O song, “Dusted Hoops!” He gave
A dish of. The bear, that sound of pins. O French
Ice cream! balconies of deserted snuff! The hills are
Very underwear, and near “to be”
An angel is shouting, “Wilder baskets!” (On the Edge 3)

Beginning with and dilating on a “barbaric yawp” of being, an exclamatory “shout” for “wilder baskets”—a call for more radically organic forms to contain the collected “coat hangers” on which our public personae hang—the first stanza iterates a series of conflicts between material reality and social convention. The question of authenticity and the problem of form are posed in the first lines: while “collecting coat hangers” identifies the activity of the poet (gathering lines), “Dour rebus” disdains the formalism of contemporary academic verse as it is opposed to both “conch,” curvy, feminine, and natural, and “hip,” the same but also “hep,” jazzy, black, in the know. “Hip” connects to “Ham” through blackness—the line of Noah’s descendants from his son Ham, cursed for
seeing his father’s nakedness, were thought in Christian and Jewish superstition to be black—and also suggests transgression through its reference to non-Kosher pork (remember Koch was Jewish). This line of thought is let go without being abandoned as Koch turns to the weather in a move both deeply poetic and ostensibly ostensive, “the autumn day,” invoking Shelley. “Oh how genuine!” he exclaims.

What is this strange, “genuine” lyric beast at once organically feminine and conventional? The “Literary frog,” or “catch-all boxer”—boxer here suggesting underwear, a hidden constraint, not clothing from the coat hanger or what you show the world, but a loose form at work under the surface, and this one a kind that can “catch all”: a poetry diaper, as it were, to contain Koch’s erupting logorrhea of the real: “O / Real!”

Koch riffs on this tension through the next several lines, working to find a way to join the terms, worrying the question: “can the mailed rose [i.e., conventionalized nature] / Gesticulate?” It must: “Arm the paper arm! / Bind up the chow in its lintel of sniff.”

Koch, a life-long stutterer, struggled against his own body for language; here he struggles against given forms to find an autonomous expression. Per Adorno: “The highest lyric works are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language itself acquires a voice” (“On Lyric Poetry,” 43). With French ice cream and hills that “are / Very underwear,” Koch manages some kind of resolution between “nature” and “convention,” though only recuperable through the revolutionary imperative to make new grammatical forms: “near ’to be’ / An angel is shouting, ‘Wilder baskets!’”

The poem continues in this vein for 99 stanzas of 24 lines each (2,376 lines in total), making a mockery of sense, of poetry, and of the epic. _When the Sun Tries to Go_
On is best understood, indeed, as are most of Koch’s longer poems, as a mock epic. Yet in generating nonsense to mock sense, Koch’s poem can’t help but generate its own sense. The poem alludes to the war and postwar New York, names Ashbery, Larry Rivers, and Jane Freilicher, references various literary works including plays by Shakespeare and The Dunciad, and much else. While parsing this long, rebarbative poem is beyond my scope here, my point is that there is sense to be made, here and in all of Koch’s work: as we consider how Koch worked to make sense of his experience at war, including fighting the Japanese, having friends die, and coming to terms with his own mortality and fear of mortality, we can understand Koch’s making nonsense as a strategy of resisting the politics of trauma and the politics of the Cold War security state both, working rigorously to integrate the idea of violence into a comic, redemptive understanding of the universe. Alan Nadel argues persuasively in Containment Culture that the pervasive “normality” projected across American culture in the 1950s was a fantasy symptomatic “of the trauma caused by witnessing a Great Depression, a Second World War, an ascent to atomic power, and a fantasy-like economic boom in less than one generation,” and if we take this as basically correct, we can understand Koch’s coded, evasive, comic poetry as a resistance to the recuperation of this trauma as trauma, which is to say as an originary “primal scene” of identity formation (xi). Almost as if he

100 Freud on jests is illuminating here: “And with this the second preliminary stage of jokes sets in—the jest. It is now a question of prolonging the yield of pleasure from play, but at the same time of silencing the objections raised by criticism which would not allow the pleasurable feeling to emerge. There is only one way of reaching this end: the meaningless combination of words or the absurd putting together of thoughts must nevertheless have a meaning. The whole ingenuity of the joke-work is summoned up in order to find words and aggregations of thoughts in which this condition is fulfilled. All the technical methods of jokes are already employed here—in jests; moreover linguistic usage draws no consistent line between a jest and a joke. What distinguishes a jest from a joke is that the meaning of the sentence which escapes criticism need not be valuable or new or even good; it need merely be permissible to say the thing in this way, even though it is unusual, unnecessary or useless to say it in this way. In jests what stands in the foreground is the satisfaction of having made possible what was forbidden by criticism” (Jokes, 158).
were taking for his guiding light Adorno’s apothegm that “To write poetry after
Auschwitz is barbaric,” Koch began writing barbaric poetry, in the oldest sense of the
word—foreign, gibberish, a kind of Language poetry avant-la-lettre—in the radical
tempt to achieve a broad and comic enough view of the world that even barbarism
could be recuperated, and even nonsense sing.
Over the arc of his career, Koch’s poetry moved from obfuscation to clarity, from antic misdirection to bittersweet simplicity. We might identify several roughly discrete stylistic phases, throughout each of which, however, Koch continually experimented with different forms and approaches. Even in his earliest efforts, Koch wrote different styles and kinds of poems, moving from antic mock ballads to turgid, violent stream-of-consciousness prose poems. Like Bugs Bunny, Koch’s extensive and various efforts at literary production, from plays to fiction to poetry of all kinds, recalls Ngai’s category of the “zany.” As Ngai writes: “[Z]aniness seems to promote a sense of character as nothing but a series of projects and activities. It is precisely this continuous succession of activities that constitutes this aesthetic of action’s form. Ngai argues that just as the urzany, the *commedia dell’arte* “zanni,” was a provincial whose whole existence centered on adapting to a new urban environment, “an itinerant servant, modeled after peasants forced by droughts, wars, or other crises to emigrate from the hills near Milan to Venice in search of temporary work,” the more contemporary zany is a comic exaggeration of the serial adaptation forced on workers by consumer capitalism (192).
Kenneth Koch’s trajectory, that of a suburban Jew from Cincinnati passing through the ASTP program and the US Army to Leyte and Harvard, then France, the postwar Greenwich Village art scene, and finally Columbia University, replicates modernism’s conventional narrative of the provincial moving into the metropole, but through the antic transformations of Ngai’s zany. Rather than “silence, cunning, and exile,” Koch underwent an astonishing series of transformative interpellations. As distinct from John Ashbery, who has come to represent innate and transcendent poetic genius (Koch called him a “mystery genius”); Frank O’Hara, whose career not only dramatizes the archetype of the too-early death of the young Romantic poet (Chatterton, Keats, Shelley), but also offers a vision of poetry as quotidian leisure gloring in its own amateur everydayness (like Stevens and Eliot, O’Hara had a dayjob); and James Schuyler, whose pastoral isolation, career failures, and mental health issues give him the role of the Proustian invalid, Koch worked his way into the realm of poesy through Herculean production, self-induced inspiration, and teaching. Koch is the zany New York school poet, for he is above all the worker-poet. In an interview with Jordan Davis, he said, “That’s another thing I’m sad about, another little harbor, that I’m not a total mystery genius. Of course that’s like a sumo wrestler being unhappy that he’s not a god…”

The years from 1943 until 1952 we might identify as Koch’s formative period: this included his time in the Army, his education at Harvard and Columbia, his first trip to Europe (on a Fulbright), a few memorable affairs he had there (the sources for “In Love with You,” The Burning Mystery of Anna in 1951, and other poems), and the early years of his friendship with John Ashbery. Koch’s work from 1943 to 1952 exhibits
strong tendencies and bold possibilities, but is still grappling with other voices and struggling with subjects that remain beyond his control. While Koch’s earliest influences (Shelley, Dos Passos, Cummings, and Baudelaire) remained touchstones, Patchen and Williams now resounded heavily, as did Yeats for a time while Koch was at Harvard, and his work shows traces of encounters with Joyce, Jarry, Stevens, and others, including the poets Koch studied under at Harvard, Delmore Schwartz and John Ciardi. Koch’s unpublished war poetry stands out strongly in this period.

With his Fulbright year in Aix-en-Provence (1950–1951), things begin to change: the next period—which we might call (partly after the way Koch himself referred to it) the abstract surrealist period—starts to take shape with his long poem When the Sun Tries to Go On, which opens a Whitmanian trope Koch will return to again and again: the creative power of the sun, the artist as sun, Koch-as-Whitman-as-sun. It’s worth recalling Whitman’s vatic lines from part 25 of Song of Myself: “Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me, / If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me.” This trope features in a contemporaneous work, “Sun Out,” from Koch’s 1953 Poems, published by de Nagy with prints by Nell Blaine, and can be seen repeatedly in Koch’s work. The problem Koch began to solve by combining Whitman and French Surrealism, especially Breton and proto-surrealist Raymond Roussel, was how to “send the sun-rise out” of him transformed, encoded. He took Wallace Steven’s dictum from “Man Carrying Thing,” that “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully,” to a new level of asperity, risking meaning for gains in feeling, sense, and linguistic dynamism. 1952–1953 marked a turning point: Koch came back to New York from California, where he had met his wife-to-be Janice Ellwood, published his first book
(with Tibor de Nagy) and fell in with the New York School scene circling around Frank O’Hara. Koch had known of O’Hara at Harvard—the younger student had cut a figure on campus, especially as he flounced about with proto-goth Ted Gorey—but was ambivalent about O’Hara’s work when Ashbery first introduced him to it. Koch’s 1950 “Vienna conversion,” the ecstatic revelation he experienced of O’Hara’s genius while reading one of his poems in Europe, became a minor legend in the New York School, and the two began a correspondence that in 1952 blossomed into rich poetic friendship.

In 1957, while in Florence finishing his doctoral dissertation on the influence of American poetry in France, Koch began reading Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* and, inflamed by the long poem’s swift narrative vitality (and procrastinating while working on his dissertation), he began writing *Ko, or a Season on Earth*. With *Ko*, Koch opened a new phase of narrative possibility in his work. While *When the Sun Tries to Go On* is an attempt to write a bardic Whitmanian epic-of-self in a post-Modernist fashion, *Ko* turns the epic back from Romanticism to Romance, yet now rewritten through Roussel, surrealism, Pope, and Swift: that is, as distinct from the efforts of poets like Charles Olson, Jack Spicer, John Berryman, or Louis Zukofsky to carry on Pound’s project of writing “the tale of the tribe” in regionalist, individualist, confessionalist, or objectivist modes, and even distinct from what we can now understand as O’Hara’s efforts to write “the tale of *MY* tribe,” or Ashbery’s more ambivalent understanding that said “tribe” only exists in the fantasias of isolated individuals, Koch turned to mock epic as a way to speak and tweak the American tribe at the same time.

*Ko* was published by Grove in 1959. The period from then until 1975’s *The Art of Love* might be distinguished from Koch’s abstract surrealist phase by calling it the
narrative surrealist phase. Koch still worked to displace and obscure meaning, but the possibility of narrative flow came more and more to the fore, and then, through narrative flow, structural flow. This is the period when Koch wrote two of his most important books, *Thank You and Other Poems* and *The Pleasures of Peace*. Important poems such as “On the Great Atlantic Railway,” “In Love With You,” “The Circus” (I), “The History of Jazz,” “Fresh Air,” “The Railway Stationary,” “Sleeping with Women,” “A Poem of the Forty-Eight States,” and “The Pleasures of Peace” are characteristic of this period.

While Koch still resists interpretation, narrative flow and biographical reference begin to reveal the process of encoding. Giorgio Finogle, for example, in “The Pleasures of Peace,” is clearly a kind of analogue Allen Ginsberg. To take another example, “The History of Jazz” must in some way be about Koch’s ASTP teacher S.I. Hayakawa, who, besides being an influential exponent of general semantics, was an amateur historian of jazz and wrote a long article titled “Reflections on the History of Jazz.” When we get to the end of this poem, breaking out of the “history,” we come face to face with S.I. Hayakawa himself, called “Don” by his friends:

Dick looked up from his blackboard.

Had he really written a history of the jazz age?

He stared at his television set; the technicolor jazz program was coming on.

The program that day was devoted to pictures of Madeleine Reierbacher Playing her saxophone in the golden age of jazz.

Dick looked at his blackboard. It was a mass of green and orange lines.

Here and there a red chalk line interlaced with the others.
He stared attentively at the program (Collected Poems 103–104).

Koch separated from his wife, Janice, in 1971 (to be divorced in 1978), and with The Art of Love’s poem “The Carnival” (II), a new directness and self-reflection enters into his work. As Mark Halliday observes, this poem should be understood as a key turning point in Koch’s career: “Suddenly, in 1975, when Kenneth Koch was fifty years old, a current of elegy emerged in his poetry, with ‘The Circus’ (II), and this current flows through each of his remaining books” (361). The long period from The Art of Love to his last books can be seen as Koch’s mature period, where all of his abilities are in operation but toward new autobiographical and didactic ends. Through the decades following the 1960s, Koch shifted from the manic rebellion of “Fresh Air” to the strange wisdom of “The Art of Love” and “The Art of Poetry,” a wisdom that culminated in the Koch’s late, elegiac masterpiece New Addresses.

While the arc of Koch’s career generally moved from obscurity to clarity, some of Koch’s earliest published poems were strikingly autobiographical. The November, 1945 issue of Poetry featured three poems by Koch, sent to the magazine during his convalescent stay on Saipan: “Poem for My Twentieth Birthday,” “Ladies for Dinner, Saipan,” and “The Trip from California.” The first poem refers obviously to his twentieth birthday, February 27, 1945, on Leyte. It is a somewhat stolid and formal lyric account of the movement from innocence to experience, juxtaposing an image of crosses in an American military cemetery against “palm trees stalking like deliberate giants,”

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101 These poems helped Koch get into Harvard but, funnily enough, not on their own merits. One of Koch’s recommenders, Murray Seasongood, a lawyer and Harvard alum who claimed to have been on the Advocate staff with Wallace Stevens, highly recommended Koch on the basis of some of his favorite lines—which just happened to be from “There’s Margaret,” a poem by Dorothy Alyer that was printed beneath Koch’s poems.
marked by the somewhat self-piteous repetition of “for my birthday.” The second poem is situated during Koch’s time on Saipan, describing Koch’s emotional reaction to a visit of what seem to be USO women (or perhaps female celebrities), his “sudden secret anger at the wellmade symbols of sex, / Fear and rage for the unbelievable flesh.” The third poem is positioned last of the three so as to suggest the passage that most Pacific theater soldiers made through California on their way home, but since Koch didn’t make that passage until January 1946, it must refer instead to his passage west, toward the front, in 1944. In this poem, the feeling of going through California is described “as though you could place your hand in a ripe fruit and withdraw a beautiful afternoon.” The not-quite fixable image of “placing your hand in a ripe fruit” portends later Kochian images of impenetrability or blocked penetration, and the bright yet surreal whimsy of withdrawing from the fruit “a beautiful afternoon” is characteristic.

Despite Koch’s success in publishing these poems, he must not have been satisfied with them, since he never reprinted them. They do seem somewhat conventional, but Koch may also have been put off by their direct address, especially once he got to Harvard and felt the need to distinguish himself from teachers and elders such as John Ciardi, Delmore Schwartz, and Richard Eberhardt. Another early published poem, from the Winter 1944 issue of the University of Kansas City Review (under the name Jay Kenneth Koch), is more along the lines of the work Koch developed in the 1950s. It is called “Physics Lecture.”

Enclosed by the mirror’s ineluctable glass

the man, the animal, gropes,
stretching out hands of custard
for images fuzzily ubiquitous
clasping in woolly hands volumes
of beautiful words spelling only
this moment’s repeating, the ultimate seeking. . . .

The sphynx of solitude
poses always the same gray question.

Watch the man, the animal, he seeks
the one true sokratic conclusion, the absolute
reflection, converging in the point
where the revolving air tells him God sits
feeding diamonds to death (109).

In this vivid *ars poetica*, in contrast to his other early poems in *Poetry*, the reigning metaphor doesn’t operate in an otherwise mimetic frame, but warps the frame itself. It is the frame itself. As Koch learns to bend his metaphors, shift more rapidly from one to another, and allow the metaphoric relationships to float free of signification, we can see this kind of work transform into something much more radical, or as Koch wrote in his postwar notebooks: “Lines of poetry which are actually meaningless on the surface level but which stay in the mind as sort of growing curve—” (“May 26, 1946”). Koch’s connotations grow increasingly tenuous, counter-intuitive, and cloaked, until his language
becomes a shield that bends against and resists interpretation, a surface that hides depths.

Such is the case with “Sun Out.”

Bananas, piers, limericks!
I am postures
Over there, I, are
The lakes of delectation
Sea, sea you! Mars and win-
Some buffalo
They thinly raft the plain,
Common do

It ice-floes, hit-and-run drivers,
The mass of the wind.
Is that snow
H-ing at the door? And we
Come in the buckle, a
Vanquished distinguished
Secret festival, relieving flights
Of the black brave ocean (*Collected Poems 5*)

“Sun Out” was first published in Koch’s 1953 Tibor de Nagy collection *Poems*, and now stands as the first lyric in Koch’s *Collected Poems*. In some ways, it is a perfect
emblem of early Koch: it invokes Whitman, begins with a list and ends with an enigma, its language is relatively plain yet seemingly random and only sometimes syntactical. At first, it’s difficult to tell whether the poem is even intended to make sense, though there is a clear emotional movement from excitement to sadness or elegy. When read in the context of Koch’s war experience, though, the poem reveals itself as a coded, cubist meditation on commitment and valor in the South Pacific. With careful and informed reading, there is enough evidence to strongly suggest that “Sun Out” is persona poem from the point of view a Japanese Kamikaze pilot.

The first official kamikaze attacks of the war, in which Japanese pilots deliberately crashed dedicated planes into American warships, happened during the invasion of Leyte, on October 25, 1944. In the days leading up to those attacks, though, desperate Japanese pilots had already begun turning damaged planes into missiles. One of the most dramatic examples of this was on the morning of October 24. At around 0820 that morning, a squadron of Japanese bombers attacked support ships anchored off the beaches of Leyte. The ships opened up with their anti-aircraft guns, and a damaged bomber crashed into a troop carrier (LCI(L) 1065) with a furious explosion. The troop carrier caught fire and sank; thirteen men died in the attack. Minutes later, another bomber dove into the fleet tug Sonoma ATO 12, which was then tied up to the supply ship Augustus Thomas. The suicide attack sank both ships. It is probable that Koch saw these first attacks, since his regiment had been held in reserve until the 25th and didn’t leave the beach until the 27th. It is certain he would have heard about them. The kamikaze attacks remain notable today; at the time, they were shocking, terrifying evidence of Japanese

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102 I rely here on Reilly, Kamikaze Attacks of World War II, 117–122.
fanaticism. As former intelligence officer William Owens recalls in his memoir of the Philippines:

In Dulag [on Leyte] in the middle of an afternoon I heard a plane coming from over the mountains, coming directly toward us at less than a thousand feet up. It was Japanese but not a Zero. It was coming at an angle that would take it directly into a troop ship anchored offshore. It came closer, so close that I could see the pilot’s face, the set of his jaw, the white ceremonial scarf around his neck. His machine gun was strafing troops and dumps, so near that I could see where the bullets kicked up dirt. With a whistle of wings cutting through wind he crossed the beach. He kept on target and with a crash of metal on metal went nose first into the transport. Flame and smoke rose, first from the plane and then from the ship. Soldiers swung themselves over the rails and into the water. In a few minutes no more came over the rails. In a few minutes more the steel plates amidships were a shimmering red. A funeral pyre, the ship was gutted to the waterline. If sacrifice was a way to Yasukuni, the pilot had made it. Soldiers who reached the shore would not talk to me. They wandered in a daze, their words disconnected mutterings of fear and grief and hatred.

A plane had been traded for a ship, one life for hundreds of lives, in a kind of action for which Americans had no understanding, no psychological defenses, nothing but angry determination to kill, kill, kill, and never take a prisoner. American soldiers relied on man and machine and vaguely perceived principles of loyalty and morality in a world in which the individual counted. Japanese soldiers
lived and fought and died under strict thought control, their minds filled with memorized slogans such as “Liberalism and individualism are the dirt which must be removed,” teachings dutifully set down in diaries and repeated in assemblies of any size (49).

Koch’s poem’s title, “Sun Out,” invokes (in addition to Whitman) the “Rising Sun” of the Japanese flag, and as well the directed energy of attack, the unity of the kamikaze pilot with the Japanese nation, and Japan’s then–imminent defeat: the “Rising Sun” is going out and it is also streaming out, life by life, into the world. The Kamikaze is the Sun, becomes the Sun, is one with the Sun: he goes “out” to meet his death. The first stanza drifts in and out of a mock “Engrish,” the kind of off-kilter homophonic disarrangement Koch first claims to have noticed while learning French in Aix-en-Provence. The first few lines in particular, though, are less aural than imagistic or rebus-like. “Bananas” alludes to both the tropics and the shape of Japan. “Piers” invokes the beach from which Koch would have seen the Kamikaze attacks, the maritime character of the war in the Pacific, and the stereotypical Japanese dialect pronunciation of banana “peels” (with its shibboleth “l” sound). “Limericks” suggests a kind of poetry known for its rigorous formal conventions, much like Japanese tanka, renga, and haiku. This is an apt connection: according to historian Ivan Morris, the names of the sub-units of the Kamikaze Special Attack Force were taken from a classical Japanese patriotic death poem (289–290). The exclamation mark at the line’s end suggests the kind of

103 “When I first went to France I was 25 years old. I knew French but not very well. I read a lot of French poetry and enjoyed reading it, even though I didn’t entirely understand it. And I was interested in this quality that a work of literature could have, that it could be so exciting and at the same time slightly incomprehensible. I wanted to get this kind of quality into my own work, the excitement and mystery of a language that is not entirely understood but that suggests a great deal” (“Biographical Essay”).
nationalist fervor you’d expect a kamikaze to have, a commitment to willed action above and beyond the normal order. Read: Japan!

The next line, “I am postures,” very likely connotes the sense of ritualized Japanese social practice, such as bowing. The “I” indicates the speaking voice, the kamikaze pilot. The rest of the first stanza remains difficult to parse, though the “I/you” relationship is clear, “mars” may refer to war, and the phrase “winsome buffalo” surely refers to the carabao, the swamp-loving water buffalo indigenous to the Philippine islands that, from above, would appear as tiny brown squares in green sea, “thinly raft[ing] the plain.” “Common do” may be “commando.”

The opening lines of the second stanza most strongly suggest the kamikaze itself, or “divine wind”: the ships are the ice-floes (invoking the HMS Titanic and shipwreck generally) and the kamikazes are the “hit-and-run drivers,” the “mass of the [divine] wind.” “Is that snow / H–ing at the door?” dreamily dramatizes the moment of impact in the perspective that blends the identity of the speaker with the American sailors manning the kamikaze’s target. H–ing may mean “Hell–ing,” as expletives were often written in that period with a dash, “helling” is a homophone of “hailing,” and the kamikaze’s impact, with its fireball and explosions, would be “hellish” or a “helling”: the Kamikaze is for a moment seen as a storm knocking at the door. The last few lines, after the clotted semiotic and semantic tensions of the first stanza, unfold in an almost stately series of clauses. “We,” meaning Kamikazes, “come in the buckle,” that is, the buckling steel of the ship’s hull broken open by the kamikaze’s impact, “a vanquished distinguished / Secret festival, relieving flights / Of the black brave ocean.” The kamikaze pilots are distinguished at the very moment they are vanquished: their glory comes from self-
sacrifice. In the penultimate line, “relieving” is a near-homophonic dodge for “reliving,” and the last two lines very probably refer to the historical origins of the name “kamikaze”: it came from the name of the typhoons that scattered invading Mongol fleets in the 13th century (1274 and 1281). The kamikaze pilots with their desperate actions were relieving pressure on the Japanese defense of the homeland precisely by reliving “flights / Of the black brave ocean.”

Understanding “Sun Out” as a persona poem about a Kamikaze pilot helps us see Koch’s mock epic Ko, or a Season on Earth, in new light. It is, after all, a mock epic about a Japanese athlete who leaves Japan to play baseball in America and who plays it as well or better than any of his American peers. The most salient reading of Ko, or a Season on Earth, is to see the poem as allegorizing the problem of the institutionalization of poetry, first as a conflict between study and practice, and second as a dialectic of individualism versus conformity played out in the containment of the boundary-transgressing Japanese pitcher Ko, whose pitches are so powerful they threaten to destroy the game. As Mark Silverberg points out, “Ko wants to move beyond the world of ‘academic baseball,’ which he studies under Professor Inyaga…. Likewise Koch, the only Ph.D. among the New York School poets, has set himself the goal of moving beyond the academic strictures placed on poetry at the time” (148). John Paul Tassoni reads Ko as being not only an effort to recuperate a sense of poetic play from the drudgery of dissertating, but more importantly as being about the struggle to maintain autonomous freedom as play against totalizing capitalist structures of co-optation. In light of Freud’s comments on student ‘rags,’ Bierschwefelen, and Kneipzeitungen in Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, Ko-as-anti-dissertation is easily understood as an attempt by
“the student… to rescue his pleasure in freedom of thinking, of which he is being more and more deprived by the schooling of academic instruction” (155). This reading must be in the main correct, yet nevertheless Ko remains inflected by the racial politics of World War II and questions of heroism and national identity.

Ko should be considered alongside those plays of Koch’s that offer cartoonish, subversive, or openly parodic representations of masculine heroism.104 In the early play Pericles, a character asks “O Pericles / what is a leader?” to which Pericles responds obliquely “How we have grown, dears, since we’ve / been from Greece!” In Bertha, Bertha the Queen of Norway leads her nation in endless pointless wars, even giving up Norway to barbarians just so she can conquer it again. In The Election, a satire of the 1960 US Presidential Election, Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy are portrayed as junkies addicted to votes. George Washington Crossing the Delaware portrays Washington as a manic simpleton. Numerous other plays, including several from One Thousand Avant Garde Plays, present heroes from literature, classical myth, and sometimes popular culture, including Popeye, Byron, and Agamemnon, as absurd, poetizing buffoons. Koch’s concern with the idea of the hero goes back to his juvenile writing, but after World War II, a new sense of the hero as something absurd comes into his work. A note in Koch’s diaries from 1946 illustrates this change:

Silk milk descends in streamers from the tufted ceiling. Oh who shall call me Hero who’ll meander past Leander?

Cowards die many times before their death, Life expectancy of hero

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104 “Caricature, parody and travesty (as well as their practical counterpart, unmasking) are directed against people and objects which lay claim to authority and respect, which are in some sense ‘sublime,’” writes Freud (Jokes, 248).
Said Julius Caesar taking a breath, Is zero

(“April 25, 1946”)

We might consider this in relation to Frank O’Hara’s comments on “the hero,” from an essay on his war experience he wrote for an English Composition course at Harvard in 1948, “Lament and Chastisement”:

For my generation there is no hero, only the man aggregate of conflicting psychological tensions. The hero who saves his fellows is the man not strong enough to let them die; the coward is the man brave enough to let other men die when he could save them. we killed the great Japanese architect and the great German scientist the great Italian musician dropped death on Hiroshima killed killed killed and yes I hate us for it killedkilledkilled we saved our not-worth-saving world rampant with the injustice cruelty and hate which bred us;

we owe ourselves what?
nothing?
nothing;
we are guilty?
no guilty?
no
guilty (as the heart bleeds dawn-grey with the only killing remorse the
pain for that we could not not do)?

yes (128–129).

Both O’Hara and Koch reject the martial hero, but O’Hara’s later autobiographical poems
dealing with the war, namely “In Memory of of My Feelings” and “Ode to Michael
Goldberg(‘s Birth and Other Births),” work to recover a Romantic conception of the
bourgeois hero whose succession of selves tell a story of progressive enlightenment, in
the one case, or who identifies with a repressed minority as the embodiment of human
liberatory potential, in the other. Koch rejects this progressivist narrative.

Koch not only works to make the singular hero comic, he also subverts the
generic conventions of the heroic team, a key trope in World War II films and action
films more broadly, by feminizing and parodying the military platoon in “The Circus” (I),
Ko, and the novel and play The Red Robins. ¹⁰⁵ This last work bears a particularly odd
specific reference to Koch’s war, in among the South Seas/Far East pseudo-military
adventurism that seems to be an obvious parody of the Philippines campaign: the hero
and villain of The Red Robins are, curiously, Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny,
respectively. Some argument could certainly be made for understanding their opposition
in mythological terms, but the clearest explanation has to do with dates of life-and-death
importance to Koch during the 96th Infantry Division’s campaign in the Philippines.

¹⁰⁵ Another parodic military platoon poem is the late, unpublished “Z Company on the Move Again,” which
imagines a septuagenarian Koch getting back in touch with his fellow soldiers and trying to organize a re-
enactment of their fight against the Japanese Army. In one draft, the negotiations break down. In another,
Koch’s regiment chases the Japanese to Lake Como in Italy, where they find that Japanese have founded a
theater troupe. A Japanese actor dressed as a soldier invites them to join in, and they all become actors. It’s
a rather pleasant, whimsical little poem.
General MacArthur declared organized Japanese resistance on Leyte finished on December 25, 1944, and the 96th Infantry Division landed on Okinawa on April 1, 1945, which was April Fool’s Day… and Easter. Hence, in The Red Robins, Santa Claus stands in as a generally benevolent quasi-military authority, an ersatz MacArthur, while the Easter Bunny is a purely malignant force, the Japanese Army at Okinawa, or, more abstractly, Death itself.

Koch not only subverts the idea of the hero and the heroic team in his work, but he also undermines the conventions of the war story or the war poem. Like “Sun Out” but more explicitly, “The Islands” is a coded war poem (Collected Poems 150–155). “The Islands” was first published in the fifth (and final) issue of Locus Solus, in the winter of 1961–1962, then appeared in Koch’s 1962 collection Thank You and Other Poems. The jacket copy of that volume reads in part: “The poems deal with subjects ranging from the biography of an imaginary jazz musician to the diary of a contemporary painter, from the pleasures of love and weather to the horrors of military life on a tropical island.” It is highly probable that this poem is a response and riposte to Frank O’Hara’s 1958 poem “Ode to Michael Goldberg (’s Birth and Other Births),” especially its recollection of sexual transgression in the South Pacific—not O’Hara’s transgression, but that of an Afro-American cook killed for messing around with a native woman:

in New Guinea a Sunday morning figure
reclining outside his hut in Lamourish languor
and an atabrine-dyed hat like a sick sun
over his ebony land on your way to breakfast
he has had his balls sewed into his mouth
by the natives who bleach their hair in urine
and their will; a basketball game and a concert
later if you live to write, it’s not all advancing
towards you, he had a killing desire for women (Selected Poems 135).

O’Hara’s narrative is oblique but straightforward. The black soldier’s death is presented as grim punchline (“a killing desire for women”). It comes into the poem as a sentence of castration and death in punishment for sexual desire, and resonates in the closing lines of the poem, which dramatize “a barque of slaves” turning on their captors, heralding a hero “born in pain” who “will be the wings of an extraordinary liberty.”

In contrast to O’Hara’s stark anecdote of racially marked violence and sexual transgression, Koch offers a much cloudier story involving a young native woman named Sylvia, her father, two different Army officers (a Major and a Colonel), an Army sergeant named Leonard, an “unidentified sixteen-year-old boy,” plus a child or young man named Voss, a pilot (perhaps a reference to the title character of Patrick White’s 1957 novel about a Prussian explorer in the Australian outback), the narrator, and his friend Harry. Even more minor characters drift in and out of the disjointed, polyvocal narrative, in which shifts of time, location, perspective, and speaker happen line to line, within lines, often without explicit marking: Andy, a king, a captain, Eddie, a consul, a Lieutenant Governor, a “Chinese miss / Named ‘Jolie,’” and someone named “Lillian Liberty” all show up and disappear without explanation.

106 Gooch describes the background for this incident in City Poet (82–83).
The poem is grim, sordid, unpleasant, and confusing, resisting legibility through marked and unmarked polyvocality, seemingly unrelated asides, a confusion of characters, elision, parataxis, and misleading homophony. Yet at the same time, it contains moments of surprising and surreal beauty: “The sea lilac of angry fudge,” for instance, or “She was a silver / Blade and he was like a hammer / Roses cannon dawn.” The loose, colloquial inflection of the main voice gives the poem the character of a dramatic monologue, while the play of other voices creates a not unpleasant sense of aural collage, while the repetition of “joss,” “Voss,” and other long “o” sounds create a melodious through-line. Poetry resistant to interpretive closure is nothing new, but there’s something special in what Koch is doing here in that “The Islands” is explicitly narrative: the resistance to closure creates a kind narrative suspense, a sense of mystery and rumor, that heightens the poem’s mood, which is that of a shameful episode being recounted for entertainment. The lack of closure and clarity also prevent strong identification with any of the characters and suspends moral judgment—what it evokes is a feeling at once of fascination and repulsion.

A kind of colonialist horror story like something out of Conrad by way of Max Jacob, “The Islands” recalls the Lieutenant Cable/Liat storyline from *South Pacific*, in which the native girl Liat is offered by her mother in engagement to the Princeton-educated Lieutenant Cable, who rapes her then abandons her. Yet where the Rodgers & Hammerstein/Steinbeck storyline can be played for a tragic, star-crossed love story, the tale in “The Islands,” so far as it is legible, is a story of a murder undertaken in revenge for promiscuity. The poem ends:
Roses, bridge, her forehead

Even a great one

The cow drops

Memory of her name no I white rose I

Send me back you see

Never, Dad

Soldered up

for repeal

Meanwhile she was running

Wonder how those

Tout-blankety native girls—

Voss!

Your own mother

No, boy, I’m not going

To sit around while that  !

Am Lieutenant Governor

Greaseball!

Kill him!

Dropped into the sea

When they unwrapped it

Found her earrings

and his cloth

“Maple leafs” as well as
The naked body of a sixteen-year-old boy

Completely defaced with scratches

Like a “torpedo”

“When I think that that might

Have happened to me”—

Sunlight

Crutches

Someone named “Lillian Liberty”107

Vile old iron ways

The story seems to be that of a promiscuous native woman, perhaps named 

“She was tan and brown and slippery”—who takes a succession of foreign 

lovers. An early affair with “the consul” leaves her pregnant, and the child, “Voss,” 

grows up to fight for the US Navy “At Sarapatee.” After the consul leaves the islands “to 
go back to Zululand,” the woman becomes the lover of the pilot telling the story 

(“Couldn’t keep bringing those / Carpenter tools / every day / Back to the plane…”), then 
takes up with “the Major,” who she often leaves “Covered with bruises and / Slashed—.” 
The story implies that Sylvia is sexually promiscuous, and “Then / The Colonel took 
her.” The Colonel seems ambivalent, preferring gambling to sex (“that / Green cloth on 
the tables / ‘Better than native girls’”). The poem’s end suggests a confrontation of some

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107 “Lillian Liberty” is likely a coded reference to Marjorie Main, an MGM character actress adopted by the 96th Infantry Division as their “Occupation Girl.” Honored as “A Fighting Gal for a Fighting Division,” especially for her role as a brassy, pistol-packing mail carrier in Jackass Mail (1942), which the unit watched overseas, Marjorie greeted the unit on its arrival stateside in Los Angeles (Deadeyes 236–246).
kind over Sylvia’s behavior, perhaps between father and son, the consul and Voss, though
the use of “Dad” may be figurative: half-native Voss, working with the US military, may
see or call the Colonel “Dad” as a gesture of general respect. What the issue at stake is
remains unclear—incest is implied (“Voss! / Your own mother”)—and the poem ends
with a dead youth being dragged out of the ocean to expressions of relief and shame.

Stories of raped, mistreated, and murdered natives, grim or funny, debased stories
of sexual assault and degradation—these are the war stories that don’t often make it into
the books, unless they’re propaganda about the horrors inflicted on innocents by the
enemy.108 “Our boys” would never do that, or when they do, as with Steinbeck’s
Lieutenant Cable, it’s a tragic love story. Koch’s poem doesn’t expose the horrors of war,
though—it implies, suggests, displaces, and obscures them. It gains power in doing so,
but at the risk of misrecognition, and also with the end result of making something “vile”
take shape as poetry. Yet what finally takes shape is a metaphor for Koch’s experience of
war as a whole—the experience of fighting in World War II is allegorized as an affair
with an exotic, promiscuous, demanding, murderous lover, an affair whose only
mementoes are a bit of shiny metal, a bit of fabric, a young man’s destroyed body, and a
sense of guilty relief. Read in light of the much later apostrophic lyric, “To World War
Two,” Koch’s strategy of evasion and allusion in “The Islands” grows clearer: the poem

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108 William Owens described the civilian population of the Philippines after the American invasion as
“disoriented, dispossessed, disillusioned, in many cases angry, bitter, sullenly silent over what had
happened to them. Not since the Aguinaldo insurrection against the Americans had there been fighting in
Leyte. Never had there been so much death and destruction.... The fighting over, refugees drifted away
from the beach camps back to their rice paddies and nipa palm huts. In monsoon rain they waded barefoot
in mud and water, scantily clothed, sheltered by banana palm leaf umbrellas. On patrol to población and
barrio, to church and government building, I saw the sadness of families as they returned home. Sometimes
there was nothing left—not a house, not a carabao, not a pig, not a chicken—the crops ground to slush
under the treads of Army vehicles. They searched in grief for what they had lost, the grief greater if the loss
included death. I saw sadness change to despair at what lay before them. They could build a new hut in a
few days, but the rice and banana crops were lost for the season. Without rice there was only starvation. I
walked among them, sympathized with them, all the while feeling alien among people who had been under
the same flag with me for forty years” (55–56).
is a surreal rewriting of World War II as a dream of eroticized violence. “The Islands” is, in the end, a powerful and disturbing war poem, shocking, shameful, and seductive, a surreal Orientalist noir unlike anything else written by an American about World War II. Within a few years, though, as media coverage of the Vietnam War turned Koch’s memories of the Philippines into a prime time horrorshow running nightly on the network news, Koch would repudiate the approach he took in “The Islands” and disavow wholesale the depiction of war and its horrors, claiming instead as his field of poetic production the celebration of “the Pleasures of Peace.”
Chapter 18. Peace Which Is Only a Negative Quality

We who seem to me strangely efficient esthetically to move in this present day
We are engaged in murdering thousands of people
In a stupid way which has no adequate reason and here a woman is killed her
son’s little face burned away and we Americans go to sleep
Every night and wake up to this same situation of having finer feelings

—Kenneth Koch, “Driving Up the West Side Highway” (1968?)

On August 4, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson presented deliberately misleading, false
evidence of a North Vietnamese attack on two American destroyers patrolling the Gulf of
Tonkin, the USS Turner Joy and the USS Maddox. This evidence was used to justify the
escalating commitment of American military forces to prop up the unpopular and
unstable government of South Vietnam, a vestigial outpost of nineteenth-century
European colonialism. Johnson orated:

In the larger sense this new act of aggression, aimed directly at our own forces,
again brings home to all of us in the United States the importance of the struggle
for peace and security in southeast Asia. Aggression by terror against the peaceful
villagers of South Viet-Nam has now been joined by open aggression on the high
seas against the United States of America. The determination of all Americans to
carry out our full commitment to the people and to the government of South Viet-
Nam will be redoubled by this outrage (“Report on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident”).

There were around 23,000 US troops and advisors in Vietnam at the end of 1964. By the end of 1965, that number would expand to 184,000. By the end of 1966, 385,300 American soldiers, Marines, airmen, and sailors would be deployed. The peacetime military draft that had been instituted after World War II had made minimal demands on the American population through the 1950s and early 1960s (except during the Korean conflict), but by 1965 it had touched the lives of millions of Americans and was provoking widespread resistance. This resistance merged with student activism on free speech in Berkeley and elsewhere, resonated with a Civil Rights movement that had been going strong for a decade, gave a moral base to widespread revivalism in spiritual values, and granted an existential motive to youth-oriented revolutions in mass media and the culture industry. By 1968, resistance, riots, and reaction had grown so intense and divisive that many observers wondered if the United States would survive.

In the midst of all this change, on July 25, 1966, Frank O’Hara was hit by a dune buggy on Fire Island and, after some hours of suffering, died in a hospital. John Ashbery, who had spent most of the past decade in France, wrote a brief memorial to his dead friend in Book Week. The memorial note, printed above O’Hara’s poem “The Day Lady Died,” laments O’Hara’s relative neglect as a poet, comparing him to John Wheelwright and speculating that the neglect O’Hara suffered was due to his radically individualist originality. Riffing on the tradition of American sui generis poetic personae from Emerson and Whitman through Dickinson and Eliot, Ashbery positioned O’Hara’s “culte
"de moi" in contradistinction to “committed poetry,” the “underground,” the Beats, and every kind of coterie. While Ashbery’s point was to accentuate O’Hara’s singular gifts, his lofty tone winds up sounding derisive and even snide:

“Too hip for the squares and too square for the hip” is a category of oblivion which increasingly threatens any artist who dares to take his own way, regardless of mass public and journalistic approval. And how could it be otherwise in a supremely tribal civilization like ours, where even artists feel compelled to band together in marauding packs, where loyalty-oath mentality has pervaded outer Bohemia, and where Grove Press subway posters invite the lumpenproletariat to “join the Underground Generation,” as though this were as simple a matter as joining the Pepsi Generation, which it probably is (6).

Ashbery’s analysis of the rush to groupthink in the 1960s no doubt had a real target, and is understandable when considered in light of Ashbery’s formative years in the containment culture of the late 1940s and early 1950s—his crack about “loyalty-oath mentality” is especially raw. But Ashbery’s Paris-via-Cambridge disdain for the “lumpenproletariat” and his blindness toward the real generational and cultural shift going on as Baby Boomers grew into young adulthood made him seem out of touch, cranky, and elitist.109

It’s just this touch of snobbery that made Ashbery’s celebration of O’Hara’s Whitmanian individuality seem in the eyes of Louis Simpson an objectionable case of “a

109 As well, as Geoff Ward helpfully points out, “a number of things are not quite right here” in Ashbery’s blithe elision of the real political valences in O’Hara’s work, especially with regard to race and civil rights (136).
poet sneering at the conscience of other poets.” Simpson, a Pulitzer–prize winning poet (and both a fellow student and former colleague of Kenneth Koch’s at Columbia), had spent the 1960s as an English professor at Berkeley, where antiwar protests seem to have struck a sympathetic nerve in him. Simpson had been drafted out of Columbia University in 1943 and served as an infantryman with the 101st Airborne Division, landed on D-Day, fought in the Battle of Carentan (June 10–15, 1944), saw action across France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, including fighting in the Battle of the Bulge, and was wounded twice (Moran, 22–23). Simpson suffered “complete delayed combat fatigue” after getting out of the Army and was hospitalized for six months in 1946 following a nervous breakdown (Moran 24). He began to write poetry as a therapeutic practice: “I found that poetry was the only kind of writing in which I could express my thoughts. Through poems I could release the irrational, grotesque images I had accumulated during the war; and imposing order on these images enabled me to recover my identity” (“Dogface Poetics,” 157). His war poems, the best known of which is “Carentan O Carentan,” are typically simple and direct in a way that would have seemed old fashioned in 1914: in ballad meter or blank verse, they tell ironic stories of battle through clear images and clean, unadorned language. Though his poems show a subtle use of meter and careful construction, they are (perhaps deliberately) unsophisticated, and seem untouched by cinema, radio, modern music or art, or literary Modernism: plain fare, well made.

Simpson criticized Ashbery’s memorial to O’Hara in passing, deep in the middle columns of a conversational, earnest, avuncular “state of the arts” piece for The Nation surveying what the kids are up to these days in their poems circa April, 1967. After first making the two-anthologies division that had even then been de rigueur in reference to
mid-century poetry, setting the East-Coast-establishment poets in Donald Hall’s *The New Poets of England and America* (1956) up against the peripatetic, West-Coasty Beats (Simpson lumps them all together) in Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* (1960), Simpson argues that the leopards have taken over the temple: “Indeed, the only thing that looks like an Establishment in American verse is the following commanded by Charles Olson…. This school has a system of breathing and using the typewriter that will enable anyone to write poetry naturally, without thinking. I have met several young writers who hope by entering the school not only to write poems but to find a job on graduation” (“On Dead Horses,” 520). Simpson’s goal, however, isn’t to point out that young poets might want careers, but rather to argue for excellence in poetry, and he struggles to keep his footing on the *Gradus ad Parnassum*, high above the crass materialisms and vulgar politics his subjects might indulge in. Poets want great poetry above all else, Simpson asserts, citing Pound’s appreciation of Hardy, thereby justifying his own patience with the tumult of negation by which he characterizes contemporary poetry, since some of the new vatic poetry he sees struggling to be born may be written by poets who rise above their fellow travelers in irrationality. Where Simpson’s comments on Ashbery come in are, it turns out, to distinguish Ashbery and O’Hara from their peers, though in a rather backhanded way. I cite the passage at length, since it helpfully frames the question of political poetry—a question with which Ashbery and his fellow individualist Kenneth Koch were interested.

One common revulsion has joined American poets, at least for awhile, in the common enterprise of poetry readings and protests against the war in Vietnam.
They are all—or nearly all—agreed to dislike it. The occasion has not produced much good poetry—occasions hardly ever do—but it may serve to change the poets profoundly, so that in the future their poems will be political in the way that really counts—that is, by altering the angle of vision. Political poetry need not be about a political occasion, it may be about a butterfly. A poor man does not see the same glass of wine that a rich man sees, and a poet who has been deeply affected by the war may never see the objects around him in the way he used to. Many Americans are being changed by this experience—in spite of themselves, for the experience is painful.

Of course, there are exceptions. John Ashbery, in a recent article on another man’s work, complimented him on not having written about the war. This struck me as a new concept of merit—praising a man for things he has not written. But it was not amusing to see a poet sneering at the conscience of other poets. Some people seem able to protest only against an act of protest by others:

*Cet animal est très méchant,*

*Quand on l’attaque il se défend.* (“On Dead Horses” 521)

Simpson offers a rather conventional disparagement of didactic poetry and a rather conventional understanding of the poet as a kind of lens or crystal, ground by experience, transforming objects into poems. A political poem is thus, for Simpson, a poem written through a politicized lens, though one suspects he would reject a truly Marxist poem about a butterfly (whatever *that* would mean) as not being properly poetic, which is just
to say that for Simpson aesthetics is pre-political in a rather naïve way. It is worth remarking, though, that Simpson sees poets of his own age and slightly younger (he is patronizing poets only a few years his junior) as standing unanimously against the war in Vietnam. That seems a valid judgment and an interesting one; there was, notably, no such unanimity of feeling about World War II. Yet, “Of course,” he goes on, “there are exceptions,” citing Ashbery’s celebration of O’Hara. Despite his various worries about the future of poetry and his ambivalence about the virtues of writing poetry against the war, he does believe that confronting the war will help American poets mature, and perhaps even lend them a kind of gravitas: “I think one result of the war will be that American poets will have to take their vocation seriously, as Europeans have had to take it. They are being compelled to take themselves serious, they are becoming an intelligentsia.” Huzzah.

Regardless of how seriously Ashbery took his “vocation,” he took Simpson’s swipe very seriously, writing a letter to the editors of The Nation arguing that Simpson’s summary of his remarks was misleading, asking them to quote almost two full paragraphs from his article, and asserting his own right intentions by mentioning he “signed and contributed money to the petition protesting the war” (“Poetry and Protest”). A few weeks later, Ashbery wrote another letter, now complaining that the editors had misrepresented his previous letter by cutting much of its final paragraph, which he insisted they print in full:

It should be evident from the foregoing that I was not ‘sneering at the conscience of other poets’ but praising Frank O’Hara for giving a unique voice to his own
conscience, far more effective than most of the protest ‘poetry’ being written today. All poetry is against war and in favor of life, or else it isn’t poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mold of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action, and I have, incidentally, signed and contributed to the petition protesting the war circulated by the Committee of the Professions and published in the *Times* last June 5; was a sponsor of the anti-war fast and poetry read-in at St. Mark’s Church last January; and participated in the April 15 Spring Mobilization march. I am reluctant to mention these things since I considered them as duties, as did so many others. But Mr. Simpson’s unjust attack, which the context of his article leads me to suspect was motivated by considerations of poetry politics rather than international politics, leaves me no choice (“Poets on Poetry”).

Ashbery’s full accounting of his support for anti-war activities, along with the caveat of his reticence, highlights the stakes of literary reputation in the late 1960s vis-à-vis the Vietnam War. After all, his response has less to do with Simpson’s representation of his characterization of O’Hara’s poetry than it does with Ashbery defending himself against the charge that he is an exception to the unanimity of anti-war sentiment amongst poets, and hence not sufficiently against the war. It wasn’t enough for Ashbery to insist that he wasn’t sneering; he felt he had to prove, with concrete evidence, that he supported anti-war efforts, and even that he considered them “duties”—that is, moral obligations. In that dire year, it seems, poets had to pick a side, and there was only one side to pick. Ashbery’s sneer at the “loyalty-oath mentality [pervading] outer Bohemia” was
denounced by Simpson as disloyal, in response to which Ashbery quickly moved to assert his loyalty.

The issue of *The Nation* in which Simpson’s article appeared was a special issue titled “Poets on Poetry,” devoted in large part to the question of poetry and politics. It featured an article by Robert Bly “On Political Poetry,” a review by Wendell Berry of an anthology of anti-war poetry titled “Where is Vietnam? American Poets Respond,” a review by Michael Goldman of James Dickey’s selected poems (*Poems 1957–1967*), a review by David Ignatow of Harvey Shapiro’s collection *Battle Report*, a discussion of Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s reading at the 92nd Street Y in 1966 (by Sidney Bernard), a review by Paul Zweig of Robert Lowell’s *Near the Ocean*, a review by M.L. Rosenthal of James Tate’s *The Lost Pilot*, and a review by John Logan of A.R. Ammons’s *Northfield Poems*. It’s worth noting that Simpson, Ammons, Dickey, Shapiro, and Bly are all veterans of World War II, Dickey and Shapiro’s books both reflect on their experiences as soldiers in World War II, Lowell was a conscientious objector during World War II, and James Tate’s book, winner of the Yale Series of Young Poets award in 1967, takes its name from a poem mourning the death of his father, a B-17 co-pilot who disappeared over Germany in 1943. Yet while the subject at hand in this issue often appears to be at least somewhat related to World War II, and the voices of men who served in that war dominate discussion, it is the American conflict in Vietnam that has set the agenda. The two wars blur one into the other, mirror each other, displace each other. In this entire special issue of *The Nation* devoted to “Poets on Poetry,” only two articles lack overt connection to World War II or the Vietnam War: an essay by Clayton Eshleman on
translating César Vallejo and an article on contemporary *avant-garde* by Stephen Koch, titled “Performance Without a Net.”  

This last article discusses what its author considers to be the “three energetic schools of *avant-garde* poetry” operating in 1967, which he names “City Lights,” “The New York School,” and “Olson-Duncan-Creeley.” Koch considers the “City Lights” group (which includes for him Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Philip Whalen, Michael McLure, Philip Lamantia, and Gary Snyder) “the most programmatically and stridently *avant-gardiste* of the three,” judges Duncan the most important, brilliant, and ambitious poet of the “Olson-Duncan-Creeley” trio yet ultimately an anachronism, at once “heroic and irrelevant,” and finishes his article lauding the work of John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch in returning “the revolutionary surrealist metaphor” to “the complex confines of art from which it originally exploded” (524, 526). Stephen Koch has some valuable and, at the time, fresh insights on both Koch and Ashbery, not least to distinguish Koch’s more static, humorous, pictorial approach against Ashbery’s more musical and temporal flow.

On further consideration, we can see that even this article on the *avant-garde* is surreptitiously inflected by World War II. Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Philip Whalen were both World War II veterans, Robert Creeley served in Burma with the American Field Service during the war, and then there’s Kenneth Koch. And while César Vallejo died before World War II officially began, his last years were marked by his engagement with the Spanish Civil War, one of the larger war’s opening conflicts. If we reconsider these essays, and indeed the entire issue of *The Nation* in which it appears, in light of Louis Simpson’s claim that “a poet who has been deeply affected by the war may never see the

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110 We might also note that these are all white men, which might reflect cultural biases in favor of male writers when it comes to the subject of war, or simply reflect contemporaneous (and persistent) biases in American culture, which was and remains both patriarchal and racist.
objects around him in the way he used to,” then we must realize at the very least that the effect of war on the lens of the human soul is never a single tint, traumatic or otherwise, but always a kind of kaleidoscope.

The point of all the preceding is to help position Kenneth Koch’s 1968 poem “The Pleasures of Peace” within the conversations and contexts that shaped its writing.111 Considering the clear lines marked in the 1967 back-and-forth between Simpson and Ashbery, in which loyalty to anti-war sentiment seemed (at least to Ashbery) obligatory as a criterion of participation in literary production, Koch’s decision to satirize anti-war poetry seems bold, perhaps even scandalous. In spite of the significant and deliberate thrust of self-mockery in the poem, Koch’s parody of the earnest commitments of the peace movement seemed to invite misunderstanding and hostility, which it duly received.

Two readings Koch gave in early 1968, for example, were interrupted by dogmatic hecklers. While Koch was reading at the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church in New York on January 10, 1968, poet Allen Van Newkirk walked up to the podium, pulled a revolver on Koch, and fired twice. The blanks Van Newkirk’s revolver was loaded with merely made loud, upsetting bangs, but in hindsight, in light of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in April, and the assassination of Robert Kennedy in June of that year, the prank looks rather more malicious.112 As Newkirk wandered through the audience distributing leaflets with his compatriot Andrei Codrescu, he shouted “Revolution—the only solution!” and flung expletives at Koch until he and Codrescu were finally made to leave by Ted Berrigan. Koch was visibly shaken by the affair, even angry, but he left off the poem he had been reading to deliver what Daniel

111 The poem was first published in the Paris Review 43 (June 1, 1968).
112 The incident is described in Kane, All Poets Welcome (171–173).
Kane describes as a “truly compelling” performance of “The Pleasures of Peace.” A few weeks later, at a reading at Barnard where Koch was joined by John Ashbery and Allen Ginsberg, Koch had a pie thrown in his face by a student. Koch handed his pie-covered eyeglasses to Ginsberg, and as the crowd erupted in laughter, he comforted himself for handling the situation so well as to inspire laughter. As it turned out, he was being upstaged by Ginsberg, who stood licking the pie off Koch’s glasses and groaning with pleasure (Kane 264n68).

Part of the trouble Koch’s poem inspired doubtlessly stemmed from a conflict between two very distinct frames for understanding war. For Koch, war was a disruption of civil existence and a threat to the pleasures of peace, a problem of chaos threatening order, and as such wasn’t wholly distinguishable from the angry, disruptive, sometimes threatening tactics of the peace activists. For the students and writers of the 1960s who were committed to revolutionary change, war and civil existence were, in some sense, coextensive, not least because of the way the draft connected the two—two faces of the same “system,” an evil order threatening youthful innocence. While both “sides” wanted “peace” as opposed to “war,” they each saw the other as resembling their opposition more than their goal. Koch dramatizes this very misunderstanding in the second and third stanzas of “The Pleasures of Peace”:

“I love your work, The Pleasures of Peace,” the Professor said to me next day;

“I think it adequately encompasses the hysteria of our era

And puts certain people in their rightful place. Chapeau! Bravo!”

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113 Koch read later that year at a benefit for the draft-card-burning anti-war activists known as the Catonsville 9, and was not, apparently, attacked there. (Kane 16)
“You don’t get it,” I said. “I like all this. I called this poem

*Pleasures of Peace* because I’m not sure they will be lasting!

I wanted people to be able to see what these pleasures are

That they may come back to them”….

So now I must devote my days to The Pleasures of Peace—

To my contemporaries I’ll leave the Horrors of War,

They can do them better than I…. (*Collected Poems* 228–229)

As we’ve seen from “The Islands,” and from my argument that “Sun Out,” “The Circus” (I), and other poems of Koch’s should be read as recoding and reworking his war experiences in ways resisting contemporary political and academic discourses dominating the interpretation of war in literature, Koch did not begin from this position. Writing “The Pleasures of Peace” was very challenging for Koch, and it took him more than a year. By the end, he had about two hundred pages of rejected material. Koch recounts the genesis of the poem in an interview with Daniel Kane:

A reading that had a big influence on me was one which was held up at Columbia University that Allen Ginsberg did, in the late 1960s, with John Hollander. It was around the time of the Vietnam War, and I had never written a political poem since I was a teenager. I thought, “Why am I not writing about this terrible war, which I don’t like?” So I started to write, directly inspired by that reading, my poem “The Pleasures of Peace.” I worked on this poem for more than a year,

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114 Interview by Carter Ratcliffe and Bruce Wolmer.
maybe two years. It was very hard for me to work on a poem about the war. You know sometimes your body rejects an artificial heart? Well, my poetry rejected everything about the war. All that was about suffering and destruction. So it turned out to be a poem about the pleasures of the peace movement (Kane 249n15).

Unpublished poems of Koch’s from 1966–1968 differ markedly in tone from “The Pleasures of Peace,” and suggest that the creative process that went into producing that poem involved a desperate grappling with anger, confusion, despair, and haunting memories of World War II. One untitled poem rhapsodizes on the unique quality of peace after war, “The smell of chocolate / when the war was over / was mixed with the spirit / of high silence in the air,” attesting that nothing, no individual pleasure, “Could match that mood of peace” (Untitled (“The smell of chocolate”). Another poem, “Coming to See About Something,” seems to reflect on the previous poem, exploring how “Peace which is only a negative quantity / Can merely distribute the quantity of chocolate / Among negative distributory centers.” In this poem, Koch finds himself succumbing to a sense of poetic and political despair in the face of the inevitable fact of “that bomb,” against which “the knees of two loved ones, in close consideration / Lose evaluative power and every other life loses meaning; therefore the terms / ‘Loss’ and ‘emptiness’ come to mean actually loss and emptiness…” Replaying Stevens’s conflict between the poetry of imagination and the poetry of war, Koch sees war and death as capable of emptying out poetic self-sufficiency, of reducing signs to their referents. Koch’s poem
ends with an imperative *cri de coeur*: “But act, imagination! for your occult powers too can be / Driven for centuries to absolute nothingness and uncreation.”

Another untitled poem from the same period seems the obverse of what we understand as a Kenneth Koch poem. It begins: “Driving up the West Side Highway tonight / I feel small and terrible / New Jersey looks ugly, as usual, / And the buildings of New York are uninspiring” (Untitled (“Driving Up the West Side Highway”)). The poem goes on for 192 lines of loose, depressed, tortured free verse, more journal entry than poem, worrying the problems of political violence and American identity and how to live with them as a poet and an American, in amongst various more personal digressions. The imagination called upon in “Coming to See About Something” fails here, despite various attempts by Koch to set it going by reflecting on his various fruit-covered neckties. The closest thing the poem gets to a real condensation of feeling and metaphor is by envisioning poetry as an inspiration to new forms of violence:

One hopes one’s poetry

Will get through to some who can put their hands on the throat of our time

And twist it a little, making it abandon the insanity

Of killing people needlessly and bringing whatever is good in us to shame…

Koch rejects this violence, but he doesn’t seem to know what to offer in its place. The poem doesn’t really get anywhere, conclude anything, or find a viable constellation of metaphors through which to work, and ends with an impotent whimper.
One of the most difficult things for Koch to come to terms with was his own anger. David Lehman argues in *The Last Avant-Garde* that Koch’s use of humor was, ultimately, “a socially acceptable form of working out his aggressions,” which worked by transmuting “outrageousness into an aesthetic stance and hostility into benign wackiness” (213). This resonates with John Limon’s reading of postwar stand-up comedy: “Stand-up… begins with aggression toward an audience in order to submit that aggression to the law, which it hopes to mollify. The progress is to convert the Audience to Law for the purpose of winning the Law back as Audience” (26). This complex dialectic is only made more complicated when the aggression being submitted to the law is the law-sanctioned aggression of collective violence, i.e., war. The eroticized violence in Koch’s poems “To World War Two” and “The Islands,” along with an unpublished poem from late in his life titled “History’s Proof,” suggest that Koch may have taken more pleasure in war, and perhaps even in killing, than he ever felt capable of admitting. “History’s Proof” reads, in full:

The passions of the people die down. They stop killing each other.

Death again becomes an abstraction. Something to be afraid of and waited for.

Death.

No longer alive as when they had it in their hands.

That was lively! But what good is a woman’s beauty when you are dead?

What good is a summer day? What good is truth?
This “liveliness” of holding death in your hands is attested in Koch’s “To World War Two,” and by many other writers. James Jones wrote in *The Thin Red Line*: “There was a joyous feeling in the safety of killing” (309). J. Glenn Gray wrote, in his philosophical memoir and meditation on war, *The Warriors*: “[T]he soldier who has yielded himself to the fortunes of war… is no longer what he was. He becomes in some sense a fighter, whether he wills it or not…. He must surrender in a measure to the will of others and to superior force. In a real sense he becomes a fighting man, a *Homo furens*” (27). There are appeals in war that are not limited to camaraderie and cinematic spectacle, but that go straight to our deepest limbic being: aggression is deeply wired into the human animal, and deeply wired into human sexuality, and war offers a field of play for the satisfaction of aggressive instincts as does nothing else. The memory of such satisfactions can be hard to bear and, what’s more, most of us would prefer to deny that they would ever appeal to us in the first place.

Finally we come to understand what’s going on with “The Pleasures of Peace,” and what motive drove Koch to mock the anti-war activists even at the risk of social humiliation and literary ostracism: “The Pleasures of Peace” isn’t about Vietnam War activism so much as it is about Koch’s complex, conflicted relationship to his own war, World War II, and his strenuous, life-long effort to integrate and understand his war experience not as a traumatic primal scene, in which his own confrontation with death merges with the glory of postwar American exceptionalism, but as a comic episode in a life of poetic creation—to prove, by living it, that “One single piece of pink mint chewing gum contains more pleasures / Than the whole rude gallery of war!” The poem indeed passes through Koch’s memories of World War II, turning after the opening four stanzas
to a digression invoking “Oh Norman Robinson, the airplane, the village, the batteries,” very probably alluding to the airfield his unit guarded at Patok after the cessation of hostilities on Leyte. Lamenting that he “was supposed to be on my way to Boston / To go to college or get elected to the Legislature / And now I’m here with a lot of cowboys who talk spiritual Dutch!” he cries out, “Let / Me out of here!” Imagination, geographical displacement, linguistic play, sex, dope, and inversions (“not even sexual ones!”) are the tools by which Koch escapes over the next stanza and a half from his memories of the war to a line which is surely one of the 20th century’s pinnacles of pure poetic play: “O Labrador, you are the sexual Pennsylvania of our times!”

Then there’s a break: “Chapter Thirty Seven.” The next phase of the poem returns to the 1960s and brings in Giorgio Finogle, Koch’s parody of Allen Ginsberg (and perhaps Lawrence Ferlinghetti). The ostensible competition between Finogle and Koch for the Peace Award devolves into “hysteric,” and the poem descends and ascends at once as its narrative flow breaks down into an incantatory succession of names, objects, phrases, disjointed events, contradictory judgments, and finally a Whitmanian parade of things that “will go on,” including the poem itself, “like a Cadillac of wampum”—a glossy, fast-moving luxury commodity made of the very stuff of flux itself, the philosopher’s gold that can change anything into anything else, magic money, pure poetry—a ceaselessly changing circuit of objects and identities, each transformable into another, any word connectable to any other, a purely capitalist, purely surrealist, wholly zany system of metaphoric exchange, a system of language more potent than nature in which any thing, worker, word, poem, poet, rabbit, or sign can be traded for any other, and death shall have no dominion: M=M=M.
Here we see how radically the *comic hero* that Koch valorizes and Bugs Bunny embodies stands opposed to the *trauma hero* of the bomber lyric and *Catch-22*. The latter confirms the social order’s dependence on a primal scene of violence by serving as civil society’s scapegoat, while the former profanes the ritual violence of war by refusing it sacred status. Hence Koch’s unwillingness to narrativize his experience in accord with post-1945 nationalist expectations, similar to Bugs Bunny’s unwillingness to go along with the war machine when offered the chance at a sexual Eden, and hence Koch’s lifelong effort to recode and reinterpret his war experience in some other way. When the definition of a true war story is a story of trauma, a poet who finds the nationalist politics of trauma repugnant has two options: lie, or change the truth. Koch tried first one, then the other, only to be attacked with mock-assassination and pie. Understanding Koch as a comic poet and a war poet, indeed as a *comic war poet*, helps us better understand how the truth of war has been historically constructed in post-1945 American culture, and how we might go about constructing that truth differently.


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