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The War Story

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The brevity of the short story lends itself to war narratives, one would have thought, because of the suddenness of war's violence and the traumatic singularity of the battlefield event. And yet, in literary terms, war found expression in large scale narratives, the saga text of mythology (*Cath Maige Tuired*), the epic poem (the *Illiad*, the *Aeneid*), the detailed history (Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*), the gigantic Romance (*Le Morte d'Arthur*), the endless ballad (*Chevy Chase*), the epic drama film (*Birth of a Nation*). However, looked at more closely, these texts break up into discrete episodes and tales, and each tale zeroes in on a scene so powerful or strange that it effectively splits off from the epic form it is nestled within, releasing its own vivid meanings as isolated story event. One thinks of Achilles dragging the body of Hector round the walls of Troy; the brothers Balin and Balan killing each other unwittingly; Aeneas witnessing the death of Priam. These nodal events cohere as war stories, tellable, iconic, detached. The war story as short story might arguably issue from the epic as if broken from it as fragment; retaining the epic's scope as though it were secreted into the violent detail. This secret intensity need not have to do with representativeness, necessarily. Part of the mystery of war stories often lies in the ways they can block easy symbolism because of the uncanny horror of their core events. And yet the war story's central event does carry its significances at such a pitch that it will often summon up an alienating otherness of sorts from the dark edges of the short form that reads and feels as though epic were being assumed as environment. This paper will look at the war story from a variety of nations and a number of different major conflict zones to track the interrelation of

short story form and war, in particular hoping to define the war story in terms of the variety of its sub-genres: the war story as yarn, traumatic dreamwork, metafictional enigma, historical and cultural document, witness record, epic-lyric fragment, propaganda text, dramatic newspaper story, wartime sketch or diary entry, soldier's tale, meditation on violence and death in the world. The chapter will draw on examples from such writers as Ambrose Bierce, Louisa May Alcott, Stephen Crane, Sapper, Elizabeth Bowen, Tim O'Brien, Shusaku Endo, Bao Ninh, and others, and will consider how these writers have exploited the formal properties of the short story and the short story cycle in representing conflict and its social, cultural, and ideological consequences.

The rise of the short story as a popular genre is linked to the rapid expansion of the periodical press in the late 19th century as paper taxes were repealed, middle-class readerships boomed, and the appetite for sensational genre fiction accompanied high art proto-modernist experiments in form. The genre received its most significant boost in the United States. As Kenneth Price and Susan Belasco Smith put it, 'by the 1870s, the inexpensive weekly magazines, an estimated 4,295 of them, had a combined circulation of 10.5 million', that is a third of the entire population of the United States.[1] The periodicals favoured a mix of 'popular and elite forms' (p. 6), and genre and literary writing meet in the short story form, favoured, inevitably, since serialization had the effect of experientially presenting novels as short story cycles. Short stories were shorter in the States than was commonly the case in the more condensed novel tradition in the UK.[2] This has to do with the closer relationship of periodical presses to newspaper journalistic conventions. As Gary Hoppenstand has argued, looking at Ambrose Bierce's influence on the

[1] Smith & Price, *Periodical Literature*, p. 6.

[2] Cf. Chan, *The Economy of the Short Story*.

popularity of Gothic fiction in San Francisco, 'in contrast to European models, the American Gothic tale became sparser and less ornate, influenced by the evolving journalistic vernacular in a print media pressured by publication deadlines, considerations of space, and the changing tastes of an expanded readership'.[3] And it was the dissemination of Civil War stories which provided the staple of many of the magazines when turning to violent history for sensationalist genre fare.

The Civil War as it was fought had been narrated to the nation in the form of colourful and dramatic dispatches by frontline war correspondents. Washington was close to many of the major battles and became the fulcrum for a horde of war writers, including Henry Adams at the Boston Daily Advertiser.[4] Many of the 'letters' from the battlescenes mixed news with short bursts of impressions, as though hosting the nuggets of real story. The New York Tribune correspondent at Antietam, George Smalley, lapses into Tennysonian / border ballad lyric: 'Back across the corn-field, leaving dead and wounded behind them, over the fence, and across the road, and then back again into the dark woods which closed around them, went the retreating rebels.' And lapses, too, into guilty spectatorship as he walked his horse through the corn field after the battle:

> The dead are strewn so thickly that as you ride over it you can not guide your horse's steps too carefully. Pale and bloody faces are every where upturned. They are sad and terrible, but there is nothing which

[3] Hoppenstand's argument as summarised by editors, Smith & Price, *Periodical Literature*, p. 14. Cf. Hoppenstand, 'Ambrose Bierce', in Smith & Price, *Periodical Literature*, 220-38.

[4] Cf. Adams, *Henry Adams in the Secession Crisis*.

> makes one's heart beat so quickly as the imploring look of sorely wounded men who beckon wearily for help which you can not stay to give.[5]

His account, telegraphed from Frederick, was sent first straight to Lincoln at the War Department, desperate for news, and it was only then forwarded to his paper. These letters more than matched the military dispatches in speed, were similarly compromised by rumour, propaganda, misinformation; but were laced through with witness affect, story-telling zeal, the kernel of war story. And, as telegraphed texts designed for the tight compass of the newspaper page, they had to be economical, concise, packed with telling detail. This strange combination, of journalist economy with eye-witness colour, rhetoric and feeling, had an intoxicating effect, as though each reader were a Lincoln at the end of a telegraph line: and arguably generated the ways and means of the war story genre.

The dispatch was a hybrid style that forms the groundwork of the tales of Ambrose Bierce, who had fought in the war as a scout and topographer. He adapted the correspondent blend of newspaper economy of means (boosted by a rhetoric of suspense to simulate wartime 'telegraph' urgency) with rhetorical shows of sensational emotion that zero in, not on patriotic feeling,

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[5] As extracted in *Harper's Weekly* for the 4th of October 1862. Illustrated Civil War website < http://www.lincolnandthecivilwar.com> [Accessed 10/04/2016]. Cf. also HistoryNet website on Smalley and the battle: <http://www.historynet.com/george-smalley-battle-of-antietam.htm>. [Accessed 10/04/2016].

but on an eye-witness's shock, guilt, cynical war-weariness. He also enhanced the story-telling fictionalizing of the dispatch by overt and stagy Gothic effects. The fictionality of these manoeuvres is deliberate: it is designed to make the war story recall the correspondent's allusive drawing on other genres, like Smalley lapsing into uncanny lyric. But in so doing it releases and reveals the allegorizing power of the core violent event as witnessed by the imagination. Just as Smalley wading through the dead and dying on his horse at Antietam resembles Dante on his boat in hell, so does Bierce Gothicize in order to fathom the uncanny meanings of the war scene. To tell the tale of the horrors of Chickamauga, Bierce invents a runaway child who accidentally falls upon maimed and disfigured soldiers dragging themselves to a creek to drink. The child cannot understand what he sees, and plays at war as he is wont, riding the crawling men, leading them to the water as play general. The boy's unfeeling gaze on the horrifically destroyed bodies is eerie:

> He moved among them freely, going from one to another and peering into their faces with childish curiosity. All their faces were singularly white and many were streaked and gouged with red. Something in this – something, too, perhaps, in their grotesque attitudes and movements – reminded him of the painted clown whom he had seen last summer in the circus.[6]

The child takes on the affectlessness of the war-numbed combatant, but also the attitude of the war story-reading public, animated by prurient though innocent curiosity, enjoying the suffering as odd, grotesque, a scary-comic entertainment, merely. Bierce also, just by recording with such vivid concision the ghastly scene, releases cartoon-like satirical meaning: the poor men destroyed by the Civil War were drawn to their deaths by generals playing at

[6] Ambrose Bierce, 'Chickamagua', *Civil War Stories*, 41-46 (p. 43).

soldiers, ridden by cruel little boys with their heartless wargames. The poised cruelty of Bierce's own stylishness is self-confessedly complicit in the game, also: as survivor remembering, he moves among the dead too freely, and profits from the shocking display of the dead men's wounds and 'grotesque attitudes'.

Bierce has a sophisticated sense, moreover, of the short story form as ideal vehicle for war story: many of his tales focus, with a bold metafictionality, on wartime as traumatic experiencing of violence. That experiencing telescopes temporality into concentrated quanta: wartime at the battlefront, for Bierce, is time experienced at crazy intensity so that it slows, the mind registering a multiplexing of detail, a concentrate of feeling, fantasy and sensation that is pure war story, dispatches from the edge of reason where time consciousness itself is warped and traumatized. In 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge', a bridge-saboteur is about to be hung and imagines a full scale miraculous escape in the seconds it takes before he dies. The reader is fooled into believing the escape is the real story, only to be rudely awakened to the harsh fact of death at the close.[7] The effect is both to bolster a sense of Bierce's miracle-working narrative powers, but also to demonstrate the confabulation of wartime; the compression of long *syuzhet* time into brief chronological *fabula*-temporality – the immense psychological pressure generated by the violence, in other words, has triggered tachypsychia (distortion of perceived time).[8] But Bierce is also feeding into his tale the very brevity of the short story form: or rather its brevity is being reflected upon as revelatory of the distinction between real temporal experiencing of time and narrative textual temporality: 'these thoughts, which have here to be set down

[7] *Civil War Stories*, 33-40.

[8] Cf. Haanstadf, 71–82.

in words, were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it' (35).

In 'A Son of the Gods: A Study in the Present Tense',[9] wartime coalesces round the extraordinary bravery of a single horse rider who offers to scout for the army on his own to save the lives of the skirmishers. The present tense of the style heightens the focus on the specific incident as temporal experience, with the uncanny attention fostered by war's strangeness (the story opens with Bierce noting how 'curiously we had regarded everything' owned by the invisible enemy (47)). The whole army watching the gallant cavalryman is riveted in what Bierce calls 'a new kind of "attention", each man in the attitude in which he was caught by the consciousness of what is going on' (49). And the very distance from which the army observes, wrapt as they are in this new attention, slows what is seen to what one might call 'war story time', a temporality decelerated down to the aesthetic reading speed of a hungry detail-consuming, baitedly suspenseful and death-entranced readership. The army collectively watching the young man die is superimposed on Bierce's numberless collective readers consuming his war story time.

In 'One of the Missing', Bierce contrives a situation whereby a scout topographer like he had been during the war is trapped by a shellburst in a cabin, his gun cocked and aiming at his forehead.[10] The 4,600 word story spends 2,700 of them in Jerome Searing's mind as he wrestles with the mental torment of his own fear facing the barrel of his own weapon: for the reader that stretch of time, though in short story form, seems to take up hours of imagined storytime. The tale ends with the discovery of the body and a noting of the time by the officer: 'Six o'clock and forty minutes' – earlier we have

[9] *Civil War Stories*, 47-52.

[10] *Civil War Stories*, 53-62.

been told the shell that trapped Jerome had struck at 6.18: so in clockwork terms, those 2,700 words occupy a mere twenty-two minutes. Bierce plays with the paradox of the war story, its fusion of packed emotional detail and economy of scale, and seduces readers into the new kind of attention being generated both by the war and by the postbellum war story. What the story discovers is an eerie parallel between the war story's time paradox (we relish these very short tales so *slowly*) and the uncanny tachypsychia of the fear-crazed combatant: 'Here in this confusion of timbers and boards is the sole universe. Here is immortality in time – each pain an everlasting life. The throbs tick off eternities' (60).

Wartime as tachypsychic proximity to death is too easily associated with battlefield experiences. The Civil War stories of Louise May Alcott, who served as a nurse in the war, reveal how the delayed deaths of combatants in hospitals after battle can trigger the same 'slow storytime' temporal disturbance. Her moving and consciously melodramatic account of the protracted death of a Virginia blacksmith soldier, John, in 'A Night',[11] takes the short story form as an opportunity to fuse periodical war story with sermon-length patriotic-religious homily, The fusion works because the blend of agonizingly extended deathbed experience with the brevity of the short story matches how sermons meditating on the last things will dwell at length on the moment of death. The unnatural death in wartime sucks in energies and conventions from rival genres, adopting and adapting them to the uncanny narrative drive it generates amongst its witnesses. Alcott's sentimentality draws strength, also, from the opportunity the war story offers to link levels of story-telling, extra-diegetic and diagetic. Her story's power leans on her character's own need to tell stories about his own terminating life. After one particularly poignant memory about his mother, the narrator remarks: 'A short

[11] Alcott, *Short Stories*, 9-22.

story and a simple one, but the man and the mother were portrayed better than pages of fine writing could have done it' (18). The fusion of homily and war story works, Alcott is saying here, because writing the tragically short simple stories left behind by war-foreshortened lives simply matches the way nursing the dying is a loving reception of death-bed story-telling.

The Civil War in the United States inaugurated modern war story with the new media technologies and expanded reading public, then; its writers at the same time successfully preserving older sub-genres such as the homiletic tale. Bolder moves later in the century came from France, where Guy de Maupassant managed a stranger blend of genres in his stories reflecting on France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1. He had fought as an enlisted soldier in the war and witnessed the many humiliations and cruelties meted out on combatant and civilian. His first successful story, 'Boule de Suif', had been commissioned as part of Emile Zola's iconoclastic launch of naturalism with the 1880 short story collection *Les Soirées de Médan*. Published to mark the tenth anniversary of the war, the *Médan* project was a satirical attack on the lying, self-aggrandising cultural propaganda that characterised French literary attempts to neutralize the defeat and restore patriotic honour. Maupassant's story features a coach of passengers trying to escape from Prussian-occupied Normandy representing a cross-section of French society. They force a prostitute amongst them, Elizabeth Rousset, nicknamed Boule de Suif, to surrender her charms to a Prussian officer.[12] The story, as John Moreau has shown, fuses the *fabliau* tradition of collective picaresque storytelling of collections such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, with savage naturalist satire of the victimizing,

[12] 'Boule de Suif', *Selected Short Stories*, 19-68.

cannibalistic and erotic masochism of the French in 1870.[13] Maupassant's grim little tale allegorizes France as Boule de Suif betrayed by the collectivity so that they can secretly delight in consuming the humiliation as pornographic and sacrificial fantasy. Along with the other five tales of Zola's collection, the tale also aims to atomize any epic narrative that might seek to redeem the defeat.[14] And as with Alcott's tale of story-telling, the war story feeds off the oral telling of stories in ordinary culture, with the spectacle of the coach passengers using tales of self-sacrifice from the Western tradition to convince the prostitute to cede to the officer. Other Maupassant war stories fuse shocking naturalist detail of sordid sexual violence with patriotic narrative: 'Mademoiselle Fifi' excoriates Prussian soldiers exulting in possession of a Normandy château with a lurid portrait of an effeminate, luxurious and sadistic officer, nicknamed Fifi by his fellow officers.[15] He brings in prostitutes from Rouen, and humiliates the Jewish Rachel who defends France, biting her lip till she bleeds, tormenting her with taunts about possessing the whole country until she stabs him and flees. Rachel is Boule de Suif in revanchist mode, and demonstrates how Maupassant could deploy the patriotic tale that the *Médan* collection had ridiculed, by ironically blending it with the full force of naturalist candour about the sexual politics of the war story.

Stephen Crane's war stories are indebted to French naturalism for their candour about the unconscious motivations in extreme situations that unleash 'primitive' unconscious forces in a collective. The stories he wrote about the 1898 Spanish-American war in Cuba, which he had witnessed as a war correspondent for the *World*, combine naturalist psychology with the Bierce

[13] Cf. Moreau, 'Maupassant's Empty Frame'.

[14] Cf. Baguley, 'L'envers de la Guerre', p. 241.

[15] 'Mademoiselle Fifi', *Mademoiselle Fifi and Other Stories,* 8-21.

style, a potent combination. We have the same exuberance, colour, wit, Crane developing the sheer craziness of warfare to settle on the absurdity of the mind under fire. In a tale like 'The Sergeant's Private Madhouse', a sergeant Peasley has to appease a sentry, Dryden, driven insane by terror at his outpost. The sentry will not leave or allow the sergeant to move since it will draw Spanish guerrilla fire. A Bierce-like tachypsychia is generated: '[Peasley] became aware of the slow wheeling of eternity, its majestic incomprehensibility of movement. Seconds, moments, were quaint little things, tangible as toys, and there were billions of them, all alike.'[16] This little episode is forgotten after he drags the mad sentry back to the camp; but Dryden's insanity seems to infect the way the whole war is being registered, especially the surreality of nighttime combat:

> Sometimes guerrillas crept so close that the flame from their rifles seemed to scorch the faces of the marines, and the reports sounded as if within two or three inches of their very noses. If a pause came, one could hear the guerrillas gabbling to each other in a kind of delirium. (41)

Crane's prose keeps things as close to the reader's mind's eye as the marines to the guerrillas; and the extreme psychology of the war's events is registered semi-comically, with a cool impersonality that allows for that precious war story resource, zest in the telling. And a naturalist attention to weird psychology is there in the acknowledgement of Dryden's panic as core to the war.

Another war story, 'A Episode of War', was written before Cuba in 1897, a Civil War story narrated as though with Bierce's eyewitness control. The story ponders the strange suddenness and uncanny experiential feel of casualty,

[16] 'The Sergeant's Private Madhouse' (1899), Crane, *Wounds in the Rain*, 38-42.

and discovers modernist fragmentariness in the shock of it. A lieutenant is shot whilst distributing coffee, and the men in his platoon enter into a strange ritual of alternating gazes, at the distant wood from where the shot had been fired and at the wounded officer – their gazing enacts the semi-sacral magic of violence ('they gazed statue-like and silent, astonished and awed by this catastrophe').[17] The officer is locked into a similar shock, all that is his become outlandishly other ('[his sword] had of a sudden become a strange thing to him') as he becomes as though blessed by the uncanny grace conferred by his wound ('the power of [the wound] sheds radiance upon a bloody form') (p. 67). The story follows him as he walks back through the lines to the dressing station, each thing seen witnessed with the same revelatory intensity: 'As the wounded officer passed from the line of battle, he was enabled to see many things which as a participant in the fight were unknown to him' (p. 270). Those things are like little snapshots, a general receiving a message just 'like a historical painting', the sight of men trying to control their horses under artillery fire, a battery swerving toward the right. Everything is seen as with an artist's insight:

> The battery swept in curves that stirred the heart; it made halts as dramatic as the crash of a wave on the rocks, and when it fled onward, this aggregation of wheels, levers, motors, had a beautiful unity, as if it were a missile. The sound of it was a war-chorus that reached into the depths of man's emotion. (p. 270)

The lieutenant is suffering from shell-shock, as we see later when he refuses medical aid and loses his arm: but that same shock is giving him visions of things, a proto-futurist sense of the war machine, a war aesthetic that sings of arms and the man. Crane's ability to summon this aesthetic even before any

[17] 'An Episode of War', *Great Short Works*, 268-72 (p. 268).

combat experience had impressed contemporaries, not least Bierce. His command over the representation of war psychology is fused extraordinarily with a modernist war story technique of violence-induced impressionism, war-machine aesthetics related in a shell-shocked style of delirious witness, fragmentariness and episodic tachypsychia; yet never quite abandoning the absurdist comic tone that registers, with an amusement masquerading as shocked impersonality, the powerful heart-stirring emotions of warfare.

Crane's imagination registered and exploited the resemblances between the post-Bierce war story's fidelity to what is seen and felt in wartime and the psychological extremes that French naturalism was recording. The 1895 story 'A Mystery of Heroism' dwells on the collective sensations of a regiment forced to witness the struggle of a battery on a hill above them, and is written with the 'eye of the infantry' as its focalized core.[18] That collective experiencing of an episode of the war takes its war short story time to register the psychological predicament: the soldiers stare as the blades of grass of the meadow around them, kin to them under the assault of the war machine, are 'torn, burnt, obliterated' (261). The predicament seems to be Crane's but is fashioned as a collective envisioning of the episode. When a shell strikes the grey ruin of a nearby farmhouse, they hear the flapping of the shutters as if during a 'wild gale of winter'; and this draws the regiment into an other world of apocalyptic insanity and vision:

> Indeed, the infantry paused in the shelter of the bank appeared as men standing upon a shore contemplating a madness of the sea. The angel of calamity had under its glance the battery upon the hill. (p. 261)

[18] *Great Short Works*, 259-68 (p. 259).

The infantry appeared *to themselves* as men witnessing a madness of the sea. To them in their fear, the war machine assumes the eye of divine power, that might so easily see them next after it has dealt with the battery on the hill. When Crane does zero in on one man's experience – the mind of a foolishly brave infantryman, Collins, who risks his life to fetch water – then it is to dwell more intimately on and with the collective superstition and comic absurdity generated by war's terrors: 'So, through this terrible field over which screamed practical angels of death, Collins ran in the manner of a farmer chased out of a dairy by a bull' (266).

Kipling's war stories of the Boer War record a growing disillusionment with belligerent propaganda which he had sponsored as war correspondent. Malvern Van Wyk Smith has correlated this disillusionment with an increase in narrative indeterminacy in the tales, as if Kipling were both acknowledging the breakdown of racist imperial ideology, and concealing the consequences from himself through obliquity.[19] This gathering distance from patriotic writing exploits the puzzling plurality and complexity of the modernist short story as it emerged from Russian and French models: so that, in the post-Boer War 1904 story 'Mrs Bathurst', for instance, an intradiegetic narrator tells the story of an infatuation and affair between Vickery and Mrs Bathurst that is relayed second hand, and occluded by Vickery's obsession with a random film that captures her at Paddington, an obsession which drives him to desert. The story ends with the enigma of two tramps fried by lightening discovered in South Africa, one of whom might be Vickery. Nicholas Daly relates the tale to the Boer War and the ghostly correlation between the war's distant and invisible trauma and cinematic channeling of romance.[20] It becomes a war

[19] Cf. Van Wyk Smith, 'Telling the Boer War'.

[20] Cf. Daly, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity*.

story because of our own suspicions about Kipling's guilt at the war dead, and the potential crazy sacrificial sexual economy that drives war's lusts. That supposition of war guilt is retrospective, to a certain extent: based on the story of Kipling's loss of his son in the trenches, and the turn against his own propaganda role in savage stories like 'Mary Postgate'.[21] The tale tells the story of Mary's adoption of a young man, Wyn, as substitute son, and, when he dies and she discovers a wounded German airman in her garden, she takes her revenge by gloating over him as he dies. The tale relates to atrocity stories of the Great War in its theatrical portrayal of Mary's Home Front hatred of the enemy. But it equally has great subtlety in the mounting hysteria and obsessive mania the story reveals as underbelly to her barely contained bereavement. She takes sexual pleasure in the airman's death; and this fanaticism is related to a savage freedom gained by her own grim determination to burn Wyn's things in a garden 'destructor'. Something of the shock of short story form, that it give us so much life so quickly only to so quickly end it, is written in to the cold-bloodedness of her sadistic bacchanal of murder and memory-obliteration. The war story has taken on board other comparably condensed sub-genres, such as the propaganda atrocity tale in wartime news, the psychological case study, and fused them into an unholy mix that both reveals war ideology at work in the unconscious, but also invites us to take guilty relish in collective acts of sadistic sacrifice too. The tale draws into its orbit other contemporary war stories about militarized thinking that cross sex and death, such as D.H. Lawrence's account of the killing of an officer by his orderly, in the 1914 'The Prussian Officer': a grimly frank tale about homoerotic bullying, hinting at rape and sadistic sex, that leads to murder followed by the orderly's death; as with 'Mrs Bathurst', the two bodies

[21] Kipling, 'Mary Postgate', *War Stories and Poems*, 235-49.

are displayed together, revealing the deep dynamic of war hierarchies for Lawrence.[22]

More traditional war stories were produced by writers like 'Sapper' (pseudonym of H.C. McNeile), who turned his experience in the Royal Engineers into popular stores for the *Daily Mail*. What he specialized in were war story cycles which stitched together impressionistic scenes or presented typical trench characters or telling episodes. 'A Fortnight in France' fictionalizes Sapper's own experiences of Ypres, and takes the form of a slowly evolving set of anecdotes that show a lazy rich-kid nonentity being toughened by the war. 'The Education of Bunny Smith' does a similar job of displaying, clearly for propaganda purposes, the ways a rather useless bank clerk becomes minor hero by learning 'the lessons of true leadership and unselfishness' at the Front (299). But it is the sequence 'Seven Stories' which does real writerly work, with its first tale 'Morphia' accompanying a soldier as he dies in hospital, desperately imagining his nurse is his loved one. This is followed by a tale of a waster, an Irishman O'Shea, who redeems himself with some excellent action with a bayonet. The third tale stages a 'company idiot' so useless yet also redeemed by the 'religion of esprit de corps' (426) so that he dies trying to fix cut telegraph wire; and the fourth recounts the tale of a futurist artist commissioned to create a camouflaged tree thankfully destroyed by a shell. And so on: the sequence works to spread the same set of recruiting values across its different zones and topics. Sapper's technique sentimentalizes the war, turns harsh conditions into fluent anecdote, wry fireside yarn, and propaganda tale. McNeile's journalistic glibness and patriotic zeal led him to channel his own experiences as easy-going recruiter lore; and agreeably censored the darker side to war's motivations.

[22] 'The Prussian Officer', *The Prussian Officer and Other Stories*, 1-21.

It was not only Freudian psychology that encouraged a darker vision of the sexual drives running the war story: as we have seen, naturalism had discovered similar core drives in its representations. But it is true that the First World War in its magnitude and machinic apocalyptic power obliterated patriotic sentiment – like Wyn's things being burnt in Mary Postgate's destructor. What also obliterated the patriotic tale was the ideology-annihilating force of the Russian revolution. Isaac Babel's extraordinary war stories in his 1926 collection, *Red Cavalry*, give a feverish, nightmarish account of his conscription, as Jewish recruit, into the service of the Cossack cavalry in the brutal campaigns against Poland in 1920. The stories have a wild clarity to them, and read now as predictive of Nazi destructiveness in their weaving together of pogrom and war story. The opening tale, 'Crossing the Zbrucz', lands us straight in the unspeakable with the narrator taking quarters in a Jewish family's house, ordering them about, sleeping in a bed next to another sleeping Jew.[23] He wakes from his sleep in delirium with bad dreams of the war, and the woman of the house reveals to him that the figure he has slept beside is the hideously killed corpse of her father who had begged the Poles who killed him to kill him outside to spare his daughter's mind. The brevity of the story is part of the shock, and gives a flavour of the mind-distorting effect of sudden realisations of horror in a rapidly changing war-day and -night. But also Babel's story-telling draws on very ancient *shtetl* traditions of oral lore, that weave iconic and dark comic anecdotes of Jewish suffering and transformative language together with tales of supernatural powers of rabbis. His war stories find war analogues for the *shtetl* tales, pogrom violence making the anecdotes uncannily terrifying, the war machine brutality having supernatural effects on the landscape. But it is the language which survives, in its brevity and shocking simplicity, as with the heart-breaking cry of the

[23] Isaac Babel, 'Crossing the Zbrucz', *Red Cavalry*, 91-3.

daughter: '"And now tell me," the woman said suddenly with terrible force, "tell me where else in all the world you would find a father like my father …"' Babel somehow harnesses such terrible force, and allows the language to ring in the memory with its power and contradiction: her madness lies in her decision to display her father to the Cossack as moral of her tale, as atrocity that is shockingly tender, revealing the violence both of pogrom and war, but resisting warfare with the terrible force of her language of bare (darkly comic) witness even as it enacts the failure of father to spare daughter.

Irish writing of the 1919-21 Irish War of Independence and the 1922-23 Civil War that followed may not have Babel's economy of terrible force, but has comparable blending of ancient story-telling traditions and ultra-modern conflict. In the short stories of Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain, civil war splits in identity are figured in the trope of two men on the run in the countryside. In O'Connor's 'September Dawn', two republicans on the run from the British, Keown and Hickey, act out the division,[24] and in O'Faolain's 'Fugue', there are two men again on the run, reduced to one when Rory is shot by the Black and Tans;[25] but the split persists, between the solitary imagination hunted by enemy and the unreadable landscape of the nation at war with itself. The memory of this psychic 'civil war', turning Irish landscape into war zone, both hostile enemy's country and loving-patriotic refuge, draws on Gaelic legends of the renegade outlaw mad king Sweeney on the run in the moors and hills and fields; and the runaways' encounter with kindly inspirational women at isolated farmhouses summons Cathleen ni Houlihan or the Spéirbhean figure of the Aisling vision poem, Ireland personified. These

[24] O'Connor, 'September Dawn, *The Best of Frank O'Connor*, 39-54.

[25] 'Fugue', *The Collected Stories of Sean O'Faolain*, vol 1 (London: Constable, 1980),

stories and the ways they modernise semi-ironically the dreamy sentimentalities of the Irish Revival (especially their revival of the visionary Gaelic allegorical tale) feed in to Irish modernism obliquely, pitching Joyce against Yeats in contestation over the meaning of the Irish war story. With the Second World War and Irish neutrality, the Irish war story, for Elizabeth Bowen, turned to interrogate its own form as modernist, Irish, as national-mythological tale. In her introduction to *The Faber Book of Short Stories* in 1936,[26] she had allied the modernist short story, which she saw as specializing in 'an affair of reflexes, of immediate susceptibility, of associations not examined by reason', with experience of war; which explains, for her, the dominance of Irish and American short story writers in English – for their cultures have known war and civil war. Both nations are places where 'either sexual or political passion makes society unsafe', leading to cultures of 'high nervous tension', attributable to experience of war: 'The younger Irish writers have almost all carried arms; American civilization keeps the Americans, nervously, armed men' (11). The Second World War, for Bowen, especially in Blitzed London which she witnessed first hand, was a war of the unconscious; as she remarked in her postscript to the U.S. edition of her wartime collection, *The Demon Lover*: 'It seems to me that during the war the overcharged subconsciousnesses of everybody overflowed and merged'.[27]

"The Demon Lover' is consciously Jamesian, reprising psychological ghost stories like 'The Jolly Corner' or *The Turn of the Screw*, featuring uncanny returns to abandoned houses and hauntedness which is undecideably mental

[26] The Short Story', introduction to *The Faber Book of Short Stories* (1936) (Stockholm: A/B Ljus Förlag, 1944), 7-19.

[27] 'The Demon Lover' postscript (1945),*The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen, ed Hermione Lee (London: Vintage, 1999)*, 94-99 (p. 95).

or supernatural.[28] Kathleen Drover returns in August 1941 to her 'shut-up house', under the gaze of 'no human eye', meeting the '[d]ead air' as she opens the door (743). She receives a mysterious letter that is delivered to her from the deep past, a lover of twenty five years back arranging a rendezvous: it triggers a nervousness in her that drives her to the mirror to check on her identity in time. The story shifts then back to the past moment being summoned by the writing: August 1916 and the time she said farewell to her soldier fiancé – the moment in a transitional space at the end of the garden, her looking back to house and family, making a sinister troth with him that they will meet no matter what. In order to stave off the fear of the supernatural, she takes comfort in the mundane reality of ringing for a taxi to carry her and her parcels to the train station. The comforting sense of the taxi driver emboldens her, but this feeling alternates with being spooked by the certainty that someone is heard leaving the house. Outside, signs of 'the ordinary flow of life' and she takes a taxi that seems strangely to know where she is going. The taxi is stopped suddenly, and the driver turns to stare at his passenger, then drives off as 'Mrs Drover' screams and screams.

The taxi might be taken to signal the modernist war story: its lethal machine mobility, the brevity of its journeys, the sense of being controlled by something driving you, its combination of technology and transitional power. In the taxi, Bowen concentrates her hybrid sense of the war story as both tight realist prosaic space of encounter with death and supernaturally expansive forcefield for unconscious dreamwork. The struggle between a brutal modernity and female psychology under war compulsions creates an unmistakeable Bowen hybrid: 'After that she continued to scream freely and to

[28] 'The Demon Lover', *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1999), 743-49.

beat with her gloved hands on the glass all round as the taxi, accelerating without mercy, made off with her into the hinterland of deserted streets' (749).

After the Second World War, late modernism spawned metafictional doubt about its own literary procedures with regard to the war story, following on from manoeuvres with form readable in high modernist tales like 'The Demon Lover'. In the wars of late modernity, the media channeling war's violence also channeled metafictional reflection, and it was with Vietnam that this came most clearly to consciousness, technically and culturally. Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, written, ironically, years after the conflict, take the form of New Journalistic creative non-fictional pieces that read like a sequence of short stories, stories based on his work as war correspondent for *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*, 1967-68.[29] Each dispatch ponders its own status within the Bierce tradition of creative war correspondence, and takes the measure of Vietnam's transformation by television and the immediacies of a news-mediatized warscape. As Mark Heberle has argued, *Dispatches* is 'non-linear, particularly in the catalogue of violent and ironic epiphanies titled "Illumination Rounds"',[30] and deliberately unpicks the capacity of any history to account for the war's immensities and surrealities with straight chronologies and smoothly long-winded story-telling. What the episodic, media-deranged and treacherous structure of the book encourages is less metafictional reflection in the technical sense, than a hyperawareness of lethal fictions and their crazy networking of death-entranced minds in-country. Herr becomes addicted to war story, like everybody else, like, even, the dead

[29] *Dispatches* (New York: Knopf, I977),

[30] Mark Heberle, 'Vietnam Fictions', The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-century British and American War Literature, ed. A. Puette and M. Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 205-13 (p. 207)

themselves: 'After a year I felt so plugged in to all the stories and the images and the fear that even the dead started telling me stories' (31). War story through the attrition of dispatch after dispatch, interview after interview, reduces itself to this: 'a story that was as simple as it had always been, men hunting men, a hideous war and all kinds of victims' (214). As Ty Hawkins argues, the fact of violent death is not only the essence of the war for the war correspondent[31] but has an addictive, viral effect, a story-generating and story-fissional effect, isolating the druggy hit of each death story. A typical hit is a fragmentary narrative without link either to past or future, but only to the text of annihilation as such. A violence-addicted Lurp (marine in a long-range reconnaissance unit) tells him this typical core war story: "'Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened'" (6). Herr waits for the story to be developed: 'I waited for the rest, but it seemed not to be that kind of story; when I asked him what had happened he just looked like he felt sorry for me, fucked if he'd waste time telling stories to anyone dumb as I was' (6). War turning into story becomes narrative without beginning or end, arbitrarily end-stopped, chartless, barely communicable, formlessly simple in its fixation on violent death as broken episode: and so, as its own lethal Ur-fragment, becomes war story.

The American War in Vietnam caused immeasurable suffering to the Vietnamese, civilians and Viet Cong alike, with the quite mind-numbing bombing campaigns contributing to a death toll that Robert McNamara himself judged to be around 3.5 million. Vietnamese short stories that came out of the conflict and its long aftermath, either by Vietnamese writers or from

[31] Ty Hawkins, 'Violent Death as Essential Truth in *Dispatches*: Re-Reading Michael Herr's "secret history" of the Vietnam War', *War, Literature and the Arts* 21.1/2 (2009), 129-43.

the Vietnamese-American community, do not display the same postmodern tricksiness and ultra-mediatized surface, necessarily; but engage with the conflict using forms that draw on other conventions. In 1995, Wayne Karlin worked with Vietnamese editors Le Minh Khue and Truong Vu to produce *The Other Side of Heaven*, an anthology of postwar fiction by both Vietnamese and American writers.[32] Bao Ninh has a story in the book, 'Wandering Souls', which tracks the same spookiness encountered by Herr with its representation of a shell-shocked veteran surviving into the postwar yet wracked by hypnagogic lucid dreams of the war dead, in his room, singing on the air, sequencing terrible war memories before his very eyes. The PTSD focuses on the sheer scale of the bombing, and on the endless dead blasted into the other dreamworld by the U.S. war machine; here, from a litany of terrible reminiscences:

> And a rain of arms and legs dropping before him onto the grass by the Sa Thay river during a night raid by B52s. Hamburger Hill, after three days of bloody fighting, looked like a dome roof built with corpses. A soldier stepping onto a mine and being blown to the top of a tree, as if he had wings. Kien's deaths had more shapes, colors and reality of atmosphere than anyone else's war stories. Kien's soldiers' stories came from beyond the grave and told of their lives beyond death.[33]

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[32] Wayne Karlin, Le Minh Khue, Truong Vu (eds.), *The Other Side of Heaven*: *Postwar Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers* (Willimantic, CT: Curbston Press, 1995).

[33] Bao Ninh, 'Wandering Souls', *The Other Side*, 15-19 (p. 17).

The war machine commands the weather (lethal rain), controls the environment like a master-builder (bodies as bricks); commands like a godlike trickster, a supernatural agent directing the dead to generate war stories for the dreamer. The war story becomes a textual space for the scening of the war machine's dreams, just as it is an arena for the lethal spectrality of the war in Vietnam; Vietnam where death had undone so many, the postmodern waste land where the victims of the B52s (so many dead) still crowd.

Bao Ninh's sense of the terrible, endless, broken sequences of war memories that modern warfare blasts into spectral being, and their spooky relation to traumatic war story, chimes with the haunted violent unreality of Vietnam in Tim O'Brien's fictions. His 1990 short story cycle, *The Things They Carried*, takes that unreality and bases upon it a trauma model of metafictionality that is, O'Brien might be said to argue, made by Vietnam.[34] The stories were published separately in *Esquire*, *Playboy* and elsewhere between 1976 and 1990, then revised as a story-cycle with each story following the characters in, and events experienced by, one infantry company.[35] The genius of the move from isolated war story to cycle lies in the attention to genre as traumatised; the 'they' of the title are a mini-collective, an aggregate of characters comparable to the eccentrics and wasters focussed on by Sapper, yet their experiences do not quite ring true, generate severe contradiction and falsehood as tale superimposes on memory of tale. O'Brien

[34] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo, 1991).

[35] James Nagel analyses O'Brien's use of the cycle to unify the tales of the company usefully in chapter five of his *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

is not just exercising a postmodern slipperiness of fact and fiction, though that is the effect; it is more that the war story itself has somehow slipped its moorings under the pressure of the war's collective trauma, its lethal unreality functioning as a generator of destructive fictions within the minds and texts of survivor combatants. O'Brien's stories stage a fictive O'Brien as member of 'A' company and the tales have the vivid nightmarish shock and awe of eye-witness accounts – tales return again and again to recycling the deaths of key comrades-in-arms, Lavender, Kiowa, Lemon. Curt Lemon's death is eerily identical to one of the deaths witnessed by Kien in the Bao Ninh story:

> he took a peculiar half step, moving from shade into bright sunlight, and booby-trapped 105 round blew him into a tree. The parts were just hanging there, so Dave Jensen and I were ordered to shinny up and peel him off. (78)

The fact of the coincidence is supplemented by suspicion when Jensen starts to sing 'Lemon Tree' 'as he threw down the parts' (79), and by the narrator's confession of the unbelievability of the story at this point; for he follows through with 'You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask' (79). What emerges from the tissues of fictions and mock truths is that any naïve desire for these war stories to be true (because based on O'Brien's real experiences as an ex-combatant writer) is not only itself dangerous, because so gullibly blind to the warping fictions and lies of the American mission in Vietnam, but also misses the whole point of any war story: 'A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing might not happen and be truer to the truth' (79), is the way the narrator puts it.

This is slippery since the story cycle reveals the myriad ways special pleading, guilt-oblation, traumatic condensation, fantasy, displacement, and wish fulfilment twist and turn the war story from any textworld intradiegetic

sense of true. O'Brien's war stories attend to odd little fragments that stick to the memory (34); to the Fantasyland that is the whole war effort such that combatants cannot remember what the real *is* (102); to the ways war story mimes war's targeting killing attention (like the gaze of Crane's angel of calamity): it is story which makes the dead talk (226). O'Brien's war story-telling turns inwards and thinks about war story as war's story-making power, generated partly by the fog of war: 'war has the feel – the spiritual textures – of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity' (78). Without clarity, the 'sense of truth' is lost, a Conradian point: 'the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity' (78). The texture of the tales as we move through the cycle is made more menacing, and more shocking, somehow, by the raw fictiveness of the procedure, and by the bold satirical anarchic energy released on realising just how treacherous the war storytellers are in the collection. For war stories exploit the ambiguity and fog of war to tell it as it never quite was: so we have several versions of key deaths, for instance, which accumulate new detail as contradictions. The tour de force story is the death of Kiowa who drowns in a shit field (the unit camps on a field used for centuries as a village's latrine, rendered liqud by a firefight). Not only is the story too good or bad to be true ('we're in deep shit' and its many variants being so common a tag about Vietnam); even its allegorical truth falls down as an Agatha Christie number of his comrades confess to and evade responsibility for not saving Kiowa's life. Kiowa becomes part of the general waste that is Vietnam: the waste of life and the waste that the dead become in the wasting away of lives in the conflict. But what wastes away most of all is the very language of war story: story-telling simplicities, confession's plain style, the accent of integrity are all wasted by the in-your-face fog and shite of lying fictions that was the war effort en masse, collectively and neo-colonially. Nothing can redeem that, and O'Brien turns the war story's weapons of creative-realistic representation, cleaned and prepped and handed on down by generations of war

correspondent witness-writers since Bierce, against its own brains and pulls the trigger.

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