

R.J. FERTEL

VIETNAM WAR NARRATIVES AND THE MYTH OF THE HERO



The better explanation of the army's optimism was that it was a trusting army. It believed in the reassurances proffered by the staff who, to be fair, believed them also. It believed in the superiority of its own equipment. . . . It believed in the dedication and fearlessness of its battalion officers and was right to so believe. But it believed above all in itself.

[so wrote John Keegan (*The Face of Battle*) of the British army before the Battle of the Somme wherein 21,000 British died on the first day]



The quest for rebirth—the hero's quest—charges the Vietnam war's literary record with a deep emotion. Joseph Campbell's mythic paradigm of the hero can help elucidate the shape of many Vietnam combat narratives: at their stories' thematic center many fictional soldiers long for rebirth and for the kind of death paradoxically they must first experience. That death is at bottom the demise of the illusion of heroic competence, an illusion to which Americans with their can-do spirit seem especially prone. Examining five combat narratives—by “Eric Helm,” James Webb, Philip Caputo, Tim O'Brien, and Francis Ford Coppola—in light of the quest for competence and the repudiation of that quest can help us understand and appreciate many Vietnam veterans' deepest yearnings.

The basic outline of Campbell's monomyth¹ is this: the potential hero leaves a place of safety which, however, is desolate and in need of renewal. The hero then travels to a place of

danger and darkness, down into hellish regions, or outward to landscapes peopled by demons and characterized by ashes and desiccation. Often aided by a guide of questionable nature, the hero in this dark place receives a wound. This wounding, the thing most feared, becomes a source of power, a boon, which he can now bring back to the civilization he forsook. The hero uses this gift to renew society.

Such a myth is largely foreign to the mythic world the soldiers of the Vietnam war grew up with. The “boys” who went off to war cut their eye teeth on the heroic, narcissistic myth that John Wayne stood for and embodied in war movie after war movie (and western after western), the myth of regeneration through violence.² One of the most characteristic gestures of Vietnam narratives is their bitter salute to their first recruiter, John Wayne. Many like Philip Caputo almost blame Wayne and his Hollywood image for getting them into this fix:

[T]he heroic experience I sought was war; war the ultimate adventure; war, the ordinary man's most convenient experience for escaping from the ordinary. . . . Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest. The recruiters started giving me the usual sales pitch, but I hardly needed to be persuaded. I decided to enlist. (5)

But it is equally clear that Wayne merely tapped deep urges already at work in America's youth, as in all youth, the urge to heroism, to be born again to a larger self, to do grand things and to be part of grand actions. Psychologically, the hollow version of this heroic ideal is based on the wish fulfillment structures of archaic narcissism: fearing the world and unable to meet his or her fears, the archaic narcissist builds an outward if hollow shell of self-sufficiency, the belief that one's “heroic” self can meet any and all challenges. In sum, small back, big front: the frailer the self, the more puffed up the presentation of self. My beauty, says Narcissus, is sufficient unto itself, and he falls into the pool of his own self-admiration and drowns. My quest for truth, says Oedipus, is honorable and true, and can free the city from this

plague; but he blinds himself when he must learn of truths that go beyond his ken, that it is his own acts that brought the plague on Thebes. Adolescent dreams of self-sufficiency must yield in true maturity to a more realistic sense of one's abilities and of the world's threats: life holds challenges that simply are beyond our humble means to face down. Sometimes we best meet such challenges not by a strong front but by applying the leverage of our weakness. Our wound becomes the boon we employ to meet the challenge.

Among the many traumas Vietnam will present the young man, it is the traumatic death of this idealized vision of the hero that must first be undergone if he is to enter into a true hero's quest. They must abandon what lies at the heart of the John Wayne myth, the myth of competence: that we can achieve our goals through our efforts alone. The guide figure, who so often accompanies the true hero across the threshold from the known world into unknown dangerous realms, symbolizes the budding hero's relinquishing this notion of self-competence and self-consequence. That the guide's nature is questionable, sometimes godly like Hermes but often demonic, suggests that the hero puts behind him not only his own adequacy but also the adequacy of the normal world's notions of good and evil.³ In sum, the hero's first task is not, as he expects, to don the accoutrements and pride of greatness, but rather to take on the ashes of humility. Only then can true greatness come, a greatness far beyond John Wayne and America's hollow vision of heroism.

The whole debate about Vietnam can be seen in these terms. On the one side are those who insist ever and anon that we could have won the war if only the military's hands had not been shackled by the politicians or if they had not been "stabbed in the back" by the media and the Left. The burden they carry still is the felt need to prove, or at least to insist, that they *were* competent, that it was not through the military's fault that we lost. This is understandable. They participated in America's first loss. Seen from the perspective of the need to prove and display one's competence—the hero's imagined duty—what a heavy burden that must be. But that perspective contributes to the "stuck" feeling such men and women often convey. Stuck there, such veterans miss, I believe, the opportunity to enter into the true hero's path, a path that relinquishes the myth of competence.

At the least, this overweening burden to prove their competence obscures from many such veteran-writers the central moral question: should *any* competence have been expended in *this* war? Their most typical posture is to insist that once you've committed to a war, don't pussy-foot. Yes, of course. But that begs the prior question that Robert McNamara's book has finally definitively (if gracelessly) answered: should we have been there at all? The paradox that the legacy of Vietnam presents and that America has largely failed to confront is that the very acts of competence with which American military might prides itself ("you never defeated us on the battlefield," puffs Colonel Harry Summers to a North Vietnamese counterpart⁴) was itself a kind of moral and spiritual wounding. Competence that never should have been employed only serves to wound our national pride. The "best and the brightest" sent the best trained and armed soldiers in history into a war to soothe the wounded ego of Kennedy after Vienna and the Cuban Missile Crisis, and of Johnson and Nixon who were both determined not to be the first American president to lose a war. As George Herring remarks, Nixon especially was "[h]aunted throughout his political career by a near-obsessive fear of defeat and humiliation" (228). And yet it is only by accepting the anointment of ashes that one can begin to achieve, according to Campbell, true heroic stature.

The narrative record of the Vietnam War confirms the structure and the importance of Campbell's monomyth: that we achieve true heroism only when we question and abandon our longing for competence. But in speaking of "true heroism" in this mythic way, I hasten to add, I do not mean to question the many heroic deeds and sacrifices that the war called upon its soldiers to make. Nor do I mean to question their competence. I know my efforts here will be heard that way, however much I protest to the contrary. Still, though it may pain some and anger many, the theme of a higher heroic quest is an important one. Exploring it can help us understand at least the nature and structure of much Vietnam narrative. It might also help someone somewhere to address that feeling of "stuckness" that continues to plague his or her days and nights.

I will look at four narratives to demonstrate a continuum of possible responses to this mythic structure, from the failure of competence to the ready willingness to let go of it. Eric Helm's

Warlord, which I've chosen somewhat at random from the 25 plus novels in the *Vietnam: Ground Zero* series, will serve here as the most conservative, unCampbell-like pole on this continuum of responses. Marred by wooden dialogue and cliché after cliché, *Warlord* has little to recommend it as literature; nonetheless, it can serve to set the near benchmark in its treatment of the themes of heroism and competence against which more distinguished literary treatments of the myth can be measured. "Eric Helm," significantly, is the pseudonym of two Vietnam veterans who as the back cover notes are "men who saw it all, did it all and lived to tell it." The name they chose suggests their sense of why they "lived to tell it": *Eric Helm*. These, and the men they write about, are men *at the helm, in charge*. They are in charge perhaps not of their destiny, because they have a war to fight that is being directed by untrustworthy politicians and staff officers who tie the hands of the men in battle. But they are in charge of themselves, first and last and always.

The special ops mission the novel sends them on represents another kind of "taking charge." The secret mission, like Rambo's, is a kind of frustrated Vietnam veteran's wet dream: everything the military wasn't allowed to do overtly, these men will do covertly. Hands tied because of international boundaries? Well, let's go into Laos to install electronic guidance equipment that will help direct bombing on the Ho Chi Minh trail and on Hanoi. Limited by finicky rules of engagement? Well, let's make a total commitment of men and materials. Tired of aimless search-and-destroy patrols that take ground only to give it up again? Well, let's take and fortify a ridge *on high ground where for once* we will have the advantage when, *for once*, the set-piece battle against main force regulars takes place.

And if in reality the military was plagued by problems in personnel, both in leadership and in the ranks, here Special Forces Captain MacKenzie K. Gerber leads a team of complete specialists, most of them Nordic in feature and build and all of them competent and unquestioningly committed to their mission. The competence of his master sergeant, Tony Fetterman, for example, is all but unfettered,

coolly professional, the epitome of the career combat soldier. He liked to work alone because he

trusted his own judgment, and he lived by the axiom that the only way to get killed in combat was to make a mistake. (65)

There is a bitter irony in these words, though flowing from Eric Helm's pen the irony is inadvertent—"The only way to get killed in combat was to make a mistake" here is meant deadpan: our competence can keep us alive in combat. (Compare Tim O'Brien's DI in *If I Die in the Combat Zone*: "You troops pay attention to the trainin' you get here, and you'll come back in one piece, believe me. . . . The Nam, it ain't so bad, not if you got your shit together" (59). But it could also mean the "best way" the "preferred way," which indeed is closer to reality. Such an "axiom" is really no better than a wish, a day-dream from a John Wayne movie: we'd all love to think that our efforts, good or ill, will determine the outcome of every situation. (There's a sense of consolation and safety even in the thought that in our failures we author our own harm; at least we are in control and not subject to fate's fickle finger). In combat, of all places, with all its freak occurrences, nothing could be further from the truth. Nonetheless, *Warlord's* narrative of course bears out Fetterman's wish-fulfillment axiom.

In *Warlord* just about everyone involved is the epitome of something:

The radio operator had spent his first tour in Vietnam as a B-Detachment radio operator and had limited field experience, but if his scores on the Army aptitude exams were any indication, he could probably build a working radio from a Coke bottle, a coat hanger and a set of Tinkertoys. (36)

The Nordic stature of the unit contributes to their appearance of conventional heroism; but the main point is that they were chosen because, we are meant to believe, their features will help them become allies with the primitive Hmong warriors against the hated Pathet Lao.

The weaponry put at their disposal is of course the very finest:

Fetterman was relieved to find out that the weapons available to them would, at least, be first class hardware and not a bunch of worn-out retreads left over from the Second World War and Korea. . . . More esoteric weapons [besides M-16s and CAR-15s] would be available, too: Browning 9 mm parabelum pistols instead of Colt .45s; Swedish-made Karl Gustav Model 45 submachine guns, known as Swedish Ks, fitted with silencers; and Israeli Uzi submachine guns. If a particular mission required a sniper rifle, an M-21, the most accurate sniping weapon in the world, would be made available. For close-range ambushes there were Remington semi-automatic shotguns fitted with twenty-inch barrels and eight round extended magazines. (58)

Despite this commitment of men and materiel—materiel so awesome that merely describing them stops the narrative—the mission fails. They are outmanned by the Pathet Lao. Eric Helm, after all, was constrained by historical reality: if this communications base had been so effective in directing sorties against the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Hanoi, then the success of the mission might have affected the course of the war. But Helm does not need his valiant men to succeed in order for him to complete his authorial mission: to celebrate the nobility and sacrifice and competence, even in the face of insurmountable odds, of his valiant special ops team.

James Webb's *Fields of Fire* represents a more thoughtful, though still conservative exploration of the issue of competence. Like Eric Helm, the competence of Webb's characters answers the problem of the war's loss: we lost it, he seems to say, but it wasn't our fault. Lieutenant Hodge and Corporal Snake, two of his three main characters, are competent in the best tradition of the Marine Corps (as is Cat Man, a minor character whose competence plays a key role); Private Will Goodrich (Senator), his third main character, embodies the incompetence that is ruining the Corps and losing the war.

Hodge's competence has a kind of spiritual, mystical dimension. Like so many, Hodge is inspired by the movies which "were their own communion. If John Wayne wasn't God then

he was at least a prophet" (35). But Hodge's true inspiration lay in the legacy of arms that, Kentucky-bred, he receives through a family tree that dates back to the Revolutionary War. The ghosts of his forefathers haunt him and it is for them and through them that he learns the warrior's ways. Inspired by his ghosts, Hodge attains a competence much appreciated by the men who serve under him. Invoking his ghosts, Hodge muses:

And I have learned those things, those esoteric skills and knowledges, that mark me as one of you. That loose-boweled piles of shit, too much shit from overeating, plopped randomly around the outer dikes of a ville, mean trouble. . . . I can tell from the crack of a rifle shot the type of weapon fired and what direction the bullet is traveling. I can listen to a mortar pop and know its size, how far away it is. I know instinctively when I should prep a treeline with artillery before I move into it. I know which draws and fields should be crossed on line, which should be assaulted, and which are safe to cross in a column. I know where to place men when we stop and form a perimeter. I can shoot a rifle and throw a grenade and direct air and artillery onto any target, under any circumstances. I can dress any type of wound, I have dressed all types of wounds, watered protruding intestines with my canteen to keep them from cracking under sunbake, patched sucking chests with plastic, tied off stumps with field-expedient tourniquets. I can call in medevac helicopters, talk them, cajole them, dare them into any zone. I do these things, experience these things repeatedly, daily. Their terrors and miseries are so compelling, and yet so regular, that I have ascended to a high emotion that is nonetheless a crusted numbness. I am an automaton, bent on survival, agent and prisoner of my misery. How terribly exciting. (205-06)

But another of the things he learns is not to question the war:

My war is not as simple as yours was, Father. People seem to question their obligation to serve on other than their own terms. But enough of that. I fight because we have always fought. It doesn't matter who. (25)

Fields of Fire is perfectly clear on the questionable nature of the way the war is fought. It is first and last a war where competence doesn't suffice. After Hodge shows off his ability to call in artillery and to lead men in taking the village, Phu Phong (4), things quickly "turn to shit" in ways he cannot control. Returning to what should be safer duty at the "Old Bridge," his platoon is beset by careerist "chickenshit."⁵ A new platoon sergeant, Angus Wilson, is all spit and polish but has spent his 13 years of service anywhere but the bush. He delivers First Lieutenant Kersey's order to set up a listening post (LP) a hundred meters out beyond the concertina wire, an order that seems to be motivated by revenge for a fragging attempt Kersey suffered at the platoon's hands. Not only will the wire make retreat impossible, if needed, but worse happens: friendly fire rains down on the LP. Competence can be efficacious in Vietnam, but not for long.

And sometimes competence backfires. Cat Man, like Hodge, has an almost mystical level of competence in fieldcraft. Often chosen to walk point, Cat Man's perspicacity often serves to invite danger rather than to avoid it. When he sees stalks missing from a clump of banana trees—a sign of recent NVA presence—Cat Man sends the platoon into action. Phony bitterly underscores the point, echoing the tradition of Hollywood heroics: "Cat Man and his damn bent grassblades" (246). In fact Cat Man's fieldcraft sets in motion a mission that leads to Phony's losing an arm and Big Mac his life to a booby trap. Later, disaster strikes again because Cat Man is so good at what he does:

He was in such harmony with the subtleties of combat, was such a natural master of those things that others had to struggle to assimilate and use, that he would have had to force himself not to prowl. He walked with his head slightly tilted, his sensuous, small-boned face constantly in motion,

examining bends and crevices, piles of litter around hootches, contours of bomb craters. The regularities of even devastated earth were so understandable to him that they could be suspicioned and inspected. (279)

Such care leads to his discovery of a dud 250-pound bomb during the dismantling of which Baby Cakes and Ogre are taken prisoner; they are later executed. Still later, in revenge, Snake and his men commit the worst atrocity of the novel. What sets all this in motion is Cat Man doing his job—*very well*.

Webb is clear that competence is insufficient to win or even to survive such a war as this; still he can't seem to shake free of its allure. In a moment of epiphany that leads to his extending his tour, Snake, a "bad-assed" inner city kid constantly in trouble in *The World*, realizes that for all their faults the Marines and Vietnam are where he belongs:

He sensed that, beyond the terror that was today, there was a fullness that no other thing in the remainder of his life would ever equal. That, beyond doubt, the rest of his life would be spent remembering those agonizing months, revering their fullness. That, yes, he was now twenty—well, *almost* twenty—and what would always have been the greatest, the most important experience of his life, had almost passed. If he were to go back now—when he did go back—there was nothing, not a thing, that would parallel the sense of urgency and authority and—need. Of being a part of something. And of being needed and being *good*. (332-33)

But this sense of belonging, of his skills being needed, does not prepare him to face the moral complexity of his situation. Not only do the moral and political dimensions of the war itself go unquestioned, but the passage that immediately follows also displays, apparently without irony, the consequence of such belonging:

He sensed that it was all here, everything, and there was none of it there. All of life's compelling throbs, condensed and honed each time a bullet flew: the pain, the brother-love, the sacrifice. Nobility discovered by those who'd never even contemplated sacrifice, never felt an emotion worth their own blood on someone else's altar. The heart rending deaths. The successes. All here. None there, back in the bowels of the World. Except for the pain, and even that numbed, daily pain, steady, like blue funk, not the sharp pain of an agonizing moment, capable of being purged, vindicated, replaced by a beautiful, lilting memory: Baby Cakes was a Number One dude, you know? He'd a died for me. And I killed 'em back for him. (333)

Here the noble sentiments of belonging and of participating in something larger than self is vitiated by his blindness to the moral dimension of his revenge— however well motivated, it is still revenge and an act of atrocity, which Webb seems at once to acknowledge and to condone. Snake receives a boon from his experience in combat, he achieves a broader self. But it is not necessarily a deeper self, one that can handle life's complexity or its moral demands; and it is not necessarily a boon that would serve civilization upon his return.⁶ Perhaps sensing this, Webb kills him off: there's no place for Snake back in the world. Better to let him go out heroically saving the wounded Senator— whom he detests and who most readers probably feel doesn't deserve the sacrifice.

Like Webb, Philip Caputo in his memoir *A Rumor of War* employs the same pattern of competence displayed then frustrated. But his memoir explores the moral dimension of the problem of competence more thoroughly. The issue of competence hovers at all points behind and above the narrative in *A Rumor of War*: competence is in a way *the* spring of action because Caputo above all else is determined *not to screw up*, not to be found *unsat[isfactory]*. He reflects:

I don't know about the others, but I endured these tortures [in boot camp] because I was driven by an

overwhelming desire to succeed, no matter what. That awful word— *unsat*— haunted me. I was more afraid of it than I was of Sergeant McClellan. Nothing he could do could be as bad as having to return home and admit to my family that I had failed. It was not their criticism I dreaded, but the emasculating affection and understanding they were sure to show me. . . . I was so terrified of being found wanting that I even avoided getting near the candidates who were borderline cases— the “marginals,” as they were known in the lexicon of that strange world. They carried the virus of weakness. (10-1)

Caputo here acknowledges the moral dimension of his foible, how it leads him to dehumanize those who don't measure up. The issue of dehumanization will come back to haunt him. But not before he has a chance to display his competence. On his first operation the assault he leads is

nothing like those choreographed attacks we had practiced at Quantico or on Okinawa. The marines were more or less on line, bunched into knots in some places, spread apart in others. (109)

Later, however, he gets it right, again during an assault:

“On line,” I said! “On line here. First on the left, third squad on the right. On line and start putting fire into the ville.”

Bent low beneath the enemy fire, the marines quickly shook themselves into a skirmish line, wheeling like skaters playing crack-the-whip, extending their front along one leg of the river bend. Then the line surged across the clearing, the men firing short, spasmodic bursts from the hip and the whole line going down when it reached the riverbank, going down and opening up with an unrestrained rapid fire. (252-52)

But, as so often in Caputo's memoir, the nature of the terrain prevents complete success:

If we could get across the river, we could finish the job. I wanted to get across the river in the worst way. I wanted to level the village and kill the rest of the Viet Cong in close combat. (253-54)

Nonetheless, he knows that this was the kind of competence he sought to achieve:

Still, I felt a drunken elation. Not only the sudden release from danger made me feel it, but the thrill of having seen the platoon perform perfectly under heavy fire and under my command. I had never experienced anything like it before. When the line wheeled and charged across the clearing, the enemy bullets whining past them, wheeled and charged almost with drill-field precision an ache as profound as the ache of orgasm passed through me. (254)

Caputo's next act underscores the adolescent nature of this imagery. Not wanting the firefight to be over he tries to draw fire by putting himself in danger:

"C'mon and hit me, Charlie," I yelled again, firing a burst into the tree line with my carbine. "YOU SON OF A BITCH, TRY AND HIT ME. FUCK UNCLE HO. HANOI BY CHRISTMAS."

I was John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*. I was Aldo Ray in *Battle Cry*. No, I was a young, somewhat immature officer flying on an overdose of adrenaline because I had just won a close-quarters fight without suffering a single casualty. (255)

But it is not only Vietnam's terrain and his own shortcomings that limit the effects of his competence. In a now familiar pattern, Caputo underscores how easily things turn bad in Vietnam despite everyone's best efforts. Within a page of this grand success, his platoon digs in only to be bombarded by

friendly fire (256-57). Within ten pages a Christmas cease-fire is called, but returning to the rear his platoon is decimated by a “an ambush-detonated mine.” What precipitates this act of VC treachery is a simple act of miscommunication. As the platoon struggles to climb an embankment, slipping and sliding, Caputo orders them to “Pass it back not to bunch up” (264). This order is misheard and soon a hut is set aflame: “Somebody said you passed the word to burn the hut, sir.” The roaring of the detonation follows and nine men are wounded. Much to his horror, Caputo’s leadership is found to be *unsat*:

“Charley Two,” said Neal, “you must not have been supervising your men properly. They must have been awfully bunched up to take nine casualties from one mine.” (269)

After the medevac is called in, revenge is the first order of business:

All right, I thought, tit for tat. No cease-fire for us, none for you, either. I ordered both rocket launcher teams to fire white-phosphorus shells into the hamlet. They fired four altogether. . . . About half the village went up in flames. I could hear people yelling, and I saw several figures running through the white smoke. I did not feel a sense of vengeance, any more than I felt remorse or regret. I did not even feel angry. Listening to the shouts and watching the people running out of their burned homes, I did not feel anything at all. (270)

Here Caputo expresses the sense of psychic numbing articulated by Hodge and Snake in *Fields of Fire*. The big difference is that Caputo has a sure sense of how much of his humanity has been lost. He makes it clear that this state of numbness leads to the near-crazy quest for revenge that results in the act of atrocity that climaxes the memoir. For, motivated by shame, frustration, and the wish for revenge, Caputo is “seized by an irresistible compulsion to do something”:

“Something’s got to be done” was about the clearest thought that passed through my brain. I was fixated on the company’s intolerable predicament. We could now muster only half of our original strength, and half of our effectives had been wounded at least once. . . . It was madness for us to go on walking down those trails and tripping booby traps without any chance to retaliate. *Retaliate*. The word rang in my head. *I will retaliate*. . . . I will take matters into my own hands. (298-99)

Acting on intelligence, he sets an ambush for two suspected VC, because “Out there I could do what I damned well pleased. And I would. The idea of taking independent action made me giddier still” (299-300). His independent action includes “snatching” the suspects from the village, an act well beyond the parameters of his orders and the rules of engagement. It also includes an open, though tacit invitation to murder:

“Sir,” [asks rifleman Allen], since we ain’t supposed to be in the ville, what do we say if we have to kill ‘em?”

“We’ll just say they walked into your ambush. Don’t sweat that. All the higher ups want is bodies.” (300)

Even though the full implications of his order are left unspoken, Caputo in a sense takes full responsibility: “I saw the look in his eyes. It was a look of distilled hatred and anger, and . . . I knew he was going to kill those men on the slightest pretext. . . . It was my secret and savage desire that the two men die.” Caputo is devastated when the wrong men are snatched and murdered and when charges are brought against him and his men. But in another way that has at least equal force in the narrative, Caputo takes no responsibility at all. It’s all the war’s fault:

[. . .]I wondered why the investigating officer had not submitted any explanatory or extenuating circumstances. Later, after I had time to think things over, I drew my own conclusion: the explanation or

extenuating circumstance was the war. The killings had occurred in war. They had occurred, moreover, in a war in which those ordered to do the killing often could not distinguish the Viet Cong from the civilians, a war in which civilians in "free-fire zones" were killed every day by weapons far more horrible than pistols or shotgun. The deaths of Le Dung and Le Du could not be divorced from the nature and conduct of the war. They were an inevitable product of the war. As I had come to see it, America could not intervene in a people's war without killing some of the people. (306)

There is much to support these views and one can fully sympathize with Caputo in his feeling of being scapegoated. But the point is neither to condone his act or to argue with his explanation for it. Rather the point is to understand the moral and narrative contortions he feels compelled to go through. Caputo in his Prologue presents his memoir as having no ax to grind. His book, he says,

has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests, or foreign policy; nor is it an indictment of the great men who led us into Indochina and whose mistakes were paid for with the blood of some quite ordinary men. In a general sense, it is simply a story about war, about the things men do in war and the things war does to them. (xiii)

Now we see that the whole has been marshaled as a brief to persuade his readership to acquit him. Caputo's failure to accept complete responsibility marks his failure to benefit fully from his spiritual wounding. Perhaps his problem stems from the fact that the only guide in sight (and guide figures are conspicuously absent in "Eric Helm" and Webb) is his JAG lawyer. The nature of Caputo's boon, could he fully articulate it, would be his condemning the war and the evil it engenders:

If such cruelty existed in ordinary men like us, then it logically existed in the others, and they would have to face the truth that they, too, harbored a capacity for evil. But no one wanted to make that recognition. No one wanted to confront his devil. (313)

But his attorney knows Caputo's only hope of acquittal lies in silence, in *not* putting the war on trial.⁷ That this means telling an untruth and putting the men in his command in jeopardy bothers him; still he does it:

In time, he almost had me convinced that on the night of the killings, First Lieutenant Philip Caputo, in a lucid state of mind, issued a clear, legitimate order that was flagrantly disobeyed by the men under his command. . . . There were qualifying phrases here and there— "to the best of my recollection," "if I recall correctly," "words to that effect"— but there wasn't a single lie in it. And yet it wasn't the truth. Conversely, the attorneys for the enlisted men had them convinced that they were all good, God-fearing soldiers who had been obeying orders, as all good soldiers must, orders issued by a vicious killer-officer. And that was neither a lie nor the truth. (312-13)

In this climactic episode Caputo turns the issue of competence inside out when he *competently* manipulates the rules to *competently* send his men on a mission that should not take place. *Competently*, they cross a line they should never cross, entering a village they have no right to enter, and taking and killing hostages that turn out to be the wrong men. Ironically, it is through the competence of his lawyer that Caputo avoids punishment, earning for him instead the burden of guilt that the memoir is written to assuage. So much for the American can-do spirit: for Caputo it is the worst of guides, a spiritual trap.

Webb's heroes never give up on competence and thus never pass over into a higher heroism, a fact which helps us understand the sense we have of Webb's characters' spiritual

narrowness. Caputo exemplifies a middle ground, dramatically exposing the powerful lure of competence and the moral trick-bag that temptation can trap us in. Tim O'Brien, by contrast, embraces his inadequacy early in *The Things They Carried*: that he went to war meant not that he was a hero but a coward. Thus the O'Brien narrator embodies the perhaps odd heroism, so common in the Vietnam warrior experience, of doing one's job despite not believing in it. But that this gesture is in essence the Nuremberg defense—"I was just following orders"—points to the O'Brien character's true heroism, that he *carries* the burden of this shame and makes art of it, "a true war story" in the words of one of the volume's essay-narratives, that can hope to benefit society.

The O'Brien narrator (hereafter, O'Brien,⁸ then, is a version of Campbell's "hero with a thousand faces." In the story "On the Rainy River," he is guided to the threshold of his wounding, by a mythic guide figure, "a silent, watchful presence" (51). It is characteristic of this upside-down story of heroism ["I was a coward. I went to the war." (63)] that the ironies are laid on thick. O'Brien reaches his moral and spiritual nadir at the "Tip Top Lodge"; where Fisher Kings usually long for a rejuvenating rain, this one finds a moral death on the "Rainy River"; and his guide, though designated the "hero of my life" (51), is anything but heroic in outward stature: "eighty-one years old, skinny and shrunken and mostly bald" (51). Elroy Berdahl's spiritual stature, however, is made clear in a way that prefigures O'Brien's wounding:

In one hand, I remember, he carried a green apple, a *small paring knife* in the other. His eyes had the bluish gray color of a *razor blade*, the same polished shine, and as he peered up at me I felt a strange *sharpness*, almost painful, a *cutting sensation*, as if his gaze were *somehow slicing me open*. (51 emphasis added)

The green apple looks forward to O'Brien's temptation and fall, the many cutting instruments to his wounding. Berdahl— whose first name, "the king," has Christian overtones— saves O'Brien as

all true guides do, not by guiding but by mirroring, by eliciting the hero's best self:

What I remember more than anything is the man's willful, almost ferocious silence. . . . The man's self-control was amazing. He never pried. He never put me in a position that required lies or denials. . . . Simple politeness was part of it. But even more than that, I think, the man understood that words were insufficient. The problem had gone beyond discussion. During that long summer I'd been over and over the various arguments, all the pros and cons, and it was no longer a question that could be decided by an act of pure reason. Intellect had come up against emotion. My conscience told me to run, but some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me toward the war. (52, 54)

Rationality has reached the limits of its competence to resolve conflict. What motivates his action instead is, in a word, shame, the cowardice that sends him to war and that represents his heroic wounding. That Berdahl functions as mirror, not guide, is crucial because for the true hero the wounding is never merely the result of an external force, never mere victimization. O'Brien's tragedy springs from his conscience's not informing his sense of shame but rather, reason being no longer a guide, being at battle with it:

What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame. Hot, stupid shame. I did not want people to think badly of me. Not my parents, not my brother and sister, not even the folks down at the Gobbler Café. I was ashamed to be there at the Tip Top Lodge. I was ashamed of my conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing. (54-5)

Still, Berdahl functions as guide in O'Brien's final confrontation with his demon, taking him fishing on the Rainy River and bringing him within reach of Canada:

It struck me he must have planned it. I'll never be certain, of course, but I think he meant to bring me up against the realities, to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge and to stand a kind of vigil as I chose a life for myself. (58)

The life he chooses comes from the realization that

That old image of myself as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage, all that was just a threadbare pipe dream. Bobbing there on the Rainy River, looking back at the Minnesota shore, I felt a sudden swell of helplessness come over me, a drowning sensation, as if I had toppled overboard and was being swept away by the silver waves. Chunks of my own history flashed by. . . . My whole life seemed to spill out into the river, swirling from me, everything I had ever been or ever wanted to be. (60)

O'Brien here dies to John Wayne's America. He is visited at this moment with a Dantesque purgatorial vision where dead and unborn, fictive and real, from past and future come to haunt him: cartwheel-turning cheerleaders and dead G.I.s; LBJ and Huck Finn; the Joint Chiefs and "Jane Fonda dressed up as Barbarella"; and

a million ferocious citizens waving flags of all shapes and colors— people in hard hats, people in headbands— they were all whooping and chanting and urging me toward one shore or another. . . . All those eyes on me— the town, the whole universe and I couldn't risk the embarrassment. It was as if there were an audience to my life, that swirl of faces along the river, and in my head I could hear people screaming at me. Traitor! they yelled. Turncoat! Pussy! I felt myself blush. I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination, with the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn't make my-

self be brave. It had nothing to do with morality.
Embarrassment, that's all it was.

And right then I submitted.

I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe
die—because I was embarrassed not to. (61-2)

This passage functions so well as O'Brien's special kind of surrealistic realism, as individual experience lived at a high pitch, that it does some damage to our experience of it to insist upon the mythic component that suffuses it. But following out the mythic thread that binds it together also helps us understand why *The Things They Carried* strikes so many readers as such a representative piece of fiction, a fiction that captures America's spiritual truth and not just O'Brien's. It is by facing his wounding that O'Brien rises to a place where he can rightfully carry the mantle of representative man and bring home truths back to the desiccated society in need of spiritual rebirth. Again, it does some damage to our experience of this text to see the allegory that is there, but it *is* there: embarrassment led America *too* into the Vietnam War (think of Munich; think of Kennedy returning from Vienna with his wounded ego from the meeting with Khrushchev; think of Sputnik; think of Cuba); embarrassment too made us stay there too long (think of "peace with honor"). It is by his death on the Rainy River, his dying to the adolescent dream of John Wayne and John Wayne's America, that O'Brien can be reborn. Death means accepting one's helplessness, the limits of one's efficacy and courage. It is a death America has been slow to accept and, because of that, a rebirth America has been slow to achieve.

This is largely Coppola's point in *Apocalypse Now!* Coppola's flawed masterpiece offers examples of each of the three points on the continuum of mythic heroism that we have here explored. Kilgore (Robert Duvall) is the omni-competent narcissistic hero who inhabits another plane of existence like the heroes of Eric Helm's *Warlord*. Like Achilles he is untouchable, "one of those guys," says Willard (Martin Sheen), "that had that weird light around him. You just knew he wasn't going to get so much as a scratch." But his inability to be wounded is paradoxically his Achilles heel: untouchable, he is inhuman, willing, like Lear's gods, to kill men in their sport (in this case, surfing). It is

thus no surprise that he joins battle with the charge of the Valkyrie, the Norse demi-gods ringing in his ears. But he lives his heroism at the expense of his humanity. When not organizing a surfing outing, he has sympathy for his own men, demanding that a medevac get his men out immediately. But the enemy are just “fucking savages”: inhuman, beneath his regard and undeserving of his respect or mercy.

Kilgore represents one of Willard’s guides into the heart of darkness. The swiftboat captain represents another. It is significant that, where heroes’ guides are usually marginalized because they, like Mephistopheles, for example, come from a realm beyond good and evil, the captain is marginal exactly because he does not. The captain is a complete straight arrow: a good officer who is there to do a job unquestioningly and to keep his men alive by competently following his training and the regulations. He knows nothing of the world beyond the pale that Kurtz represents and it is inevitable that he be killed before Willard and the swiftboat cross the final threshold into Kurtz’s realm of darkness and ashes.

Kurtz (Marion Brando) sees the limits of competence yet can’t give it up, willing to drop the big one to “annihilate them all.” Kurtz longs for the rebirth that forsaking competence might bring but he is stuck in the myth of the military’s adequacy. Like the nation of which he is the completion and fulfillment (as in Conrad), Kurtz cannot give up. Unable to be reborn, he must settle for the self-annihilation at Willard’s hand that promises no rebirth. Even so, he finally serves as Willard’s guide, ushering him into the rebirth that brings about the boon, the narrative of *Apocalypse Now!*, that Willard brings back to civilization. As the natives offer their obeisance to this new Kurtz-god, Willard instead drops his machete, and takes Lance’s hand (Sam Bottoms), taking on the mantle at once of guide and true hero. Rain comes to renew the land. As he pulls the swiftboat from the shore Coppola overprints a close-up of Willard sliding onto a massive Bottisattva icon: Willard becomes the Buddha, now-enlightened, who must return to society with his message of darkness and tragedy and hope. Coppola’s point, like Campbell’s (and Conrad’s for that matter), is that only that man who is riddled with the seeds of evil, *and only that man who knows and accepts it*, is adequate to the task of life. The hope? That by

relinquishing our trust in our self-competence we can attain an answerable competence— one fit to the measure of life's untold challenges. It is only through death of the self that we can embrace our fellows; it is only by embracing the darkness in us that we can find the light. Just so. Pat Barker in her brilliant evocation of another war characterizes the power of her protagonist, psychiatrist William Rivers: "his power over people, the power to heal if you like, springs directly from some sort of wound or deformity in him. He has a lot of strengths but he isn't working from strength" (*The Ghost Road*, 110-11).

That Francis Ford Coppola's masterpiece should lend itself so readily to mythic analysis is not surprising since Kurtz is seen reading Frazier's *The Golden Bough* and since Coppola himself says in *Hearts of Darkness* that he shaped the feature film to conform loosely to the structure of Homer's *Odyssey*.⁹ But my larger point is in part that the mythic patterns here discussed pervade far less self-consciously mythic narratives, such as Webb's, Caputo's, and O'Brien's, and many others, writers who might object to the mythic readings I have offered.

The myth of the hero furthermore helps us to understand not only the challenge that Vietnam *narratives* face, but the challenge faced by Vietnam *veterans*: to die to the crass and hollow notions of heroism and regeneration through violence that many carried to war; to be reborn to a truer heroism based not on competence but on the empathy that springs from accepting one's wound. The veterans task then is to rip through the pasteboard mask which the myth of regenerative violence relies on for its power, to find beneath it the true rebirth that comes only from compassion, from I-thou relationships with nature, and even with the enemy. This truer regeneration starts with a death that many veterans and many writers about the war have failed to achieve. But if reborn, veterans bring a boon back to the World, the tragic recognition that the myth of competence will continue to get us into wars that competence alone will not enable us to win. Here's Campbell, gnomical as usual, but profound:

It is by means of our own victories, if we are not regenerated, that the work of Nemesis is wrought: doom breaks from the shell of our very virtue.

Peace then is a snare; war is a snare; change is a snare; permanence a snare. When our day is come for the victory of death, death closes in; there is nothing we can do, except be crucified— and resurrected; dismembered totally, and then reborn. (*Hero* 16-17)

They carry too a tragic vision of civilization's thin veneer, of man's capacity for evil, and of man's (and especially America's) love-hate relationship with violence. In sum, what veterans of America's longest and perhaps most tragic war bring us is a vision of man's frailty, not a defeatist vision, but a true humanist's sense that man's strengths and weaknesses— like the good and evil we do— are so finely interwoven that they cannot be disentangled. ☞

Notes

1. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero -with a Thousand Faces*. "Myth" has been much discussed regarding Vietnam narrative but usually in the sense in Hellman's words, of "stories containing a people's image of themselves" in *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, ix. See for example Beidler, Meyers, and Ringnald. See also Slotkin's magisterial, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* where myth is seen to have "the power of symbolizing [. . .] society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness," 5. I mean myth instead in Campbell's quasi-Jungian sense that it expresses deep structural understanding of the human drama. On Campbell's complex, sometimes uneasy relation to Jungian depth psychology see Segal, "Introduction: In Quest of the Hero" in *In Quest of the Hero*, xvi-xxii. My interest in applying Campbell to Vietnam War narratives is not theoretical in nature. This is an essay in practical criticism: his myth of the hero, I find, illuminates their deep structures. Still, the fit is so good, the insights so compelling, in my view, that in effect this essay is a brief for Campbell's approach to myth.
2. See Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* and on the "John Wayne Syndrome" *Gunfighter Nation*, 319-20.
3. We often forget that Dante's Virgil, who is Dante's guide into the underworld, embodies both: he embodies poetic greatness, and, the writer of the Fourth Eclogue which seemed to prophecy Christ's birth, divine inspiration; but to the medieval mind of Dante's audience he was

also closely associated with the dark world of necromancy. On Virgil as magian to the medieval mind see Butler, 7.

4. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, p. 1.

5. "Chickenshit" is a term which, according to Paul Fussell "refers . . . to behavior that makes military life worse than it need be: petty harassment of the weak by the strong; open scrimmage for power and authority and prestige; sadism thinly disguised as necessary discipline; a constant 'paying off of old scores'; and insistence on the letter rather than the spirit of ordinances," 80.

6. Thus Snake inscribes a contradiction at the heart of the novel which as Philip Beidler argues is a brief for complex moral awareness, complexity that the anti-war left of course fails to achieve. See *Re-writing America*, p. 69.

7. One can sympathize with Caputo in his practical decision not to insist that his lawyer make the nature of the war the issue of the case. His life and career were on the line and it was 1966, quite early in the nation's dawning awareness of the war's ambiguous character. Still it should be noted that such a defense was in fact mounted at just about that time by a physician, Dr. Howard B. Levy, who refused to support the war by training Green Beret aidmen. Charges were brought in 1966 and he was court-martialed in 1967. See Strassfeld. My thanks to Professor Strassfeld for pointing this case out. Critics differ on how close is the identification between O'Brien and his narrator. My own take is that O'Brien more than most invites the identification and does little to subvert it. Usually such identification between author and limited narrator is dangerous because there is ironic distance between them: the author knows more than the speaker who impersonates him. But the point here is just the opposite: the author is no more competent than his impersonation. One can trust neither teller nor tale.

8. And also, not least because *Apocalypse Now!* was originally conceived by George Lucas whose mythic and interest in and commitment to Campbell and myth are well known.

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