Editor's Choice

Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma. Kali Tal, editor. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. 296. $18.95.

'Stand back, leave me alone, submerged people,
Go away. I haven't dispossessed anyone,
Haven't usurped anyone's bread.
No one died in my place. No one.
Go back to your mist.
It's not my fault if I live and breathe,
Eat, drink, sleep and put on clothes.'

–"*The Survivor*," *Primo Levi, interned at Auschwitz*

Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt* is a thoughtful and scholarly analysis of literatures of trauma by survivors of the Holocaust, of the Vietnam War, and of rape/incest. All three trauma survivors use writing as one of several ways of coping with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, whose symptoms almost always include depression, anxiety, rage, hyper-alertness or exaggerated startle response, insomnia, guilt, substance abuse, suicidal or homicidal thoughts, as well as emotional conflicts about trust, intimacy, authority, and isolation. Contrary to popular-held beliefs, PTSD is not caused by sustained exposure to warfare alone: according to the American Psychiatric Association, the recent clinical definition of PTSD is a distressed response to life-threating and traumatic events, such as earthquake, plane crash, rape, torture or military combat that are out of the range of the usual human experience (119). For this reason, Tal argues that trauma narratives are distinct from other literary genres because "the tension between the drive to testify, the impossibility of

successfully conveying the experience, and the urge to repress the experience entirely" is an underlying characteristic of this particular writing (78).

Tal not only cites the striking similarities between trauma narratives, she also describes how the dominant culture interprets these texts for its own end. "The subject of this work is a psychic trauma; its cultural-political inquiry moves back and forth between the effects of trauma upon individual survivors and the manner in which trauma is reflected and revised in the larger collective political and cultural world" (5). The Vietnam War, for example, was called a "quagmire," "a swamp," "morass," "a slippery slope," "a tragedy," a "nightmare" that "entrapped us," as well as a syndrome" of a disease that the body politic must "get over" as quickly as possible. For Tal, "Both 'experience' and 'syndrome' metaphors are ahistorical: experiences are entirely subjective and emotional, and syndromes partake of the 'objective' terminology of a 'science' based in 'natural law,' and thus lie outside of history" (61).

Along those lines, the much-maligned Vietnam veteran has metamorphosed from a "crazed baby killer" into both victim and belated hero. Why now? With the demise of communism and the renewed militarism of the Reagan-Bush regimes, as well as the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982, the Vietnam veteran was "rehabilitated" in conjunction with the renewed build-up of United States military power.[1] Under Reagan, for example, defense spending went from 144 billion dollars in 1980 to a grossly disproportionate 293 billion dollars in 1988.

Like every other aspect of the Vietnam War, Americans could hardly agree on anything, and the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, or "The Wall," was no exception:

> Arguments between conservatives and liberal Vietnam veterans and their respective political supporters over the appropriateness of the severe black design (created by a young Chinese-American woman named Maya Lin) and the placement of a representational statue (sculpted by Frederick Hart) . . . clearly delineated the lines of debate. The ambiguity of the

> Vietnam Memorial Wall upset conservatives. All those names engraved on the flat, black surface would most likely fail to evoke patriotic and heroic images upon which our national mythology is built. As Jan Scruggs noted, 'Asthetically, the design does not need a statue, but politically it does.' (61-2)

Even the Holocaust has created dissension among Jews themselves. "[Noam] Chomsky asserts that the American Jewish community is 'deeply totalitarian,' and that American Jews use accusations of antisemitism and the specter of the Holocaust to silence critics of Israel as part of a carefully engineered political strategy" (28). Furthermore, a number of Holocaust survivors' testimonies, such as Bruno Bettelheim's *Surviving and Other Essays*, de-historicize the Holocaust by positing it as unique from other genocidal policies. For Bettelheim, any disagreement with this assessment exonerates the Nazi's "Final Solution." And to some extent, this de-politicization of the Holocaust justifies Israel's domination over Palestine. *Worlds* also describes the challenge to the "Holocaust hegemony" by several African-American scholars who insist that historically there are many "holocausts."

Tal also suggests that the linguistic distance between the writer of trauma and the un-traumatized reader, even the most sensitive reader, might be insurmountable. The word "oven," for example, is certainly benign enough, but not so to a survivor of Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, or any number of other Concentration Camps. Even more frustrating, trauma narratives are often times disjointed and fragmented, a point underscored by Tal.

For women traumatized by rape and incest, the dominant culture denies, or worse, blames the victim for her own oppression. Besides blaming the victim, Tal, an acknowledged feminist, also grudgingly admits that rape/incest narratives are largely produced by middle-class white women. The following anthologies—Louise Armstong's *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* and Toni McNaron's *Voices in the Night*—do not satisfactorily explore the double censure that women of color face by police or by the law courts.

In her book's introduction, Tal relates the following:

> I was born in 1960. I am a white woman. I am a Jew, born of Jewish parents and brought up in their completely secular household I was raised in a multiethnic, multiracial extended family—my mothers's father divorced his Jewish wife and married my Episcopalian Puerto Rican step-grandmother. . . I was exposed to elements of Puerto Rican and black culture, as well as to the ways in which racism is manifested in a close-knit multiracial family. I was sexually abused as a twelve-year-old by adult friends of my maternal grandfather. My sexual identification is primarily heterosexual. I was raised in an upper-class environment, with all the privileges that entails. (4)

The above quotation is not a gratuitous "confession" but a calculation by Tal to acknowledge her subjectivity: after all, this is literature about *felt* pain, her own personal pain as both Jew and incest victim.

Tal's connection with Vietnam veterans is more tenuous. Still, as editor of *Viet Nam Generation,* founded in 1988 to promote and encourage the study of the Viet Nam war era and the Viet Nam war generation," she has contrived a multidisciplinary vehicle for vets to publish their poetry, fiction and scholarly articles about the war (see also her web page http://jefferson.village.Virginia.EDU/sixties/). In fact, *Viet Nam Generation* published the award-winning poet, Leroy V. Quintana, whose *Interrogations* remained out of print for twenty years because of the poems' "shocking content." *Viet Nam Generation*" has also published W.D. Ehrhart's, *Just for Laughs* (1990) as well.

In the chapter "The Farmer of Dreams," Tal uses Ehrhart's work to test the three defining characteristics of literatures of trauma outlined earlier—the need to retell the trauma, the frustration in conveying it to un-traumatized readers, and the desire to repress the memory altogether.

For those familiar with Vietnam veterans' writing, Ehrhart's military service and work is well-known. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1966 when he was 17 years old and was sent to Vietnam in 1967. In 1968, he participated in many combat operations and was wounded in Hue City during the 1968 TET offensive. Ehrhart's poetry was first anthologized in 1972 in *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans,* edited by soldier-poets Larry Rottman, Jan Barry, and Basil Paquet, who were also founders of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (77-8). WHAM, "the first collection of dissident poems in U.S. history produced by soldiers during wartime" (Bibby 147), was originally published by 1st Casualty Press—a reminder that "In war, truth is the first casualty" (Aeschylus 525-456 BC).[2]

Ehrhart and Jan Barry later edited *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam* (1976), and Ehrhart individually edited *Carrying the Darkness: American-Indochina: The Poetry of the Vietnam War* (1985) as well as *Unaccustomed Mercy: Soldiers Poets of the Vietnam War* (1989). His non-fiction includes the memoir-trilogy *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir* (1983); *Going Back: An Ex-Marine Returns to Vietnam* (1987), and *Busted: A Vietnam Veteran in Nixon's America* (1995). Other publications are too numerous to mention here.

Since the '70s, Ehrhart's poetic and prose subjects include the invasion of Grenada, the U.S.-backed "low-intensity" wars in Central America, the Persian Gulf War, the contrast between the poet before and after Vietnam, and his post-war difficulty with relationships, especially with women. In the often-quoted poem "Invasion of Grenada," Ehrhart conflates the Invasion with the building of The Wall, this way. "I didn't want a monument/not even one as sober as that/vast black wall of broken lives . . . //What I wanted was a simple recognition/of the limits of our power as a nation/to inflict our will on others." (quoted in *Worlds* 91-2).

In several of his poems ("Just for Laughs; The Rat, The Hawk and Two Suns; What War Does"), Ehrhart uses the pain of animals as a metaphor to describe the pain of war. Tim O'Brien uses a similar device in "How To Tell A True War Story," collected in *The Things They Carried*, which details the excruciating

death of a baby VC water buffalo" by a "crazed" soldier who just lost his best friend that afternoon. Even Otto Schubert, a World War I German artist-soldier, used animals metaphorically to depict war by drawing highly realistic sketches of horses suffering on the battlefield. The death of animals move us; after all, unlike humans they are "innocent." This empathy with animals—with all sentient beings—is in fact Buddhist in its inclination and brings to mind a key event which Ehrhart has written about numerous times. When he and his troops were ordered to loot a Temple, Ehrhart presents a vase to the captain with these words: "You wanted a souvenir, sir. Here it is. Genuine Buddist vase. Duty free. No waiting. Get 'em while they last" (101).

Ehrhart's poetry is often cited as being too didactic or too polemical which merely means "to teach or to instruct," or "to argue or to criticize." Critics who single out these qualities in his work are often defending the status quo and are wary of poetry that teaches, argues, or takes a position. In truth, unlike other veterans' poetry which rightfully enumerate the horrors they witnessed, Ehrhart's work engages in a dialogue with the power structure, forcing the reader to see the connection between imperialism, capitalism and war. And as an educator, Ehrhart knows too well the fascination young people have with war.

> There was a boy, who in the midst of my 1982 history course on the Vietnam War, asked me when I was going to tell them 'the other side,' oblivious to the fact that 'the other side is all he's been hearing since the day he was born. . . . I'm so tired of paddling against the torrent that most days I wake up not knowing how I can possibly pick up a paddle even one more time. . . . Nothing I do will make any difference, but to do nothing requires a kind of amnesia I have yet to discover a means of inducing. The dilemma leaves me much of the time feeling like a failure at everything I do. (93)

The violence that Ehrhart witnessed, or that he himself caused, is tragically not relegated to the battlefield alone. After battering

his girlfriends, Ehrhart "confesses" his brutality in this remarkable passage:

> Her eyes burned. They were the same eyes I'd seen the day I'd tried to knock Pam Casey's head off, the same eyes I'd seen on the faces of the Vietnamese peasants whose lives I'd routinely made so miserable. I could hardly believe what I was seeing or the pain that I had inflicted. Was there no end to what I am capable of? (108).

Perhaps Ehrhart's urgent need to map out his transformation from warrior to peace advocate is his way of coping. Nevertheless, in re-telling his experiences, Ehrhart, like other victims of trauma, can never hope to be the same person he was before the war: "I remember the dead, I / remember the dying // But I cannot ever quite remember / what I went looking for, / or what it was I lost / in that alien land that became / more I / than my own ever can again ("To the Asian Victors" 86). Yet to remain silent implies a complicity which Ehrhart cannot abide by: "For these authors, writing is not simply a therapeutic task, and the war is not simply 'good subject material': bearing witness is a sacred trust, and the product of a life of hard work. These men and women are the guardians of history, the voices of Cassandra, the 'farmers of dreams' " (114).

With the escalation in both personal and political violence at century's end, *Worlds of Hurt* is a timely book. Besides its importance in the fields of literature, linguistics, and psychology, *Worlds* also expands its range to demonstrate how literatures of trauma are used ideologically when they are interpreted and employed by the dominant culture. Just as Ehrhart's poetry challenges the power structure which sent him to war, Tal, too, takes on discomforting positions by reminding us that the Holocaust does not exculpate Israel from occupation of Palestinian territories, that within the feminist movement there is a disparity in race between women, and that Vietnam veterans did indeed inflict "a world of hurt" on the Vietnamese people. In his "Preface" to *Survival in Auschwitz* (NY: Collier Books,

1958), Primo Levi describes his need to "tell the story" as an "immediate and violent impulse in the order of urgency" (6). Tal's work too possesses this heart-felt urgency. □

Notes

1. See also Harry W. Haines, " 'They Were Called and They Went': The Political Rehabilitation of the Vietnam Veteran." *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*. Ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud. NJ: Rutgers UP, 1990. 80-97.

2. Michael Bibby, *Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era*. NJ: Rutgers UP, 1996.

Maggie Jaffe's publications include *Continuous Performance*, and *1492: What Is It Like To Be Discovered?*, a collaboration with the artist Deborah Small. *How The West Was One* is forthcoming from Burning Cities Press.

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Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War, by Joanna Bourke. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Pp. 336. $32.50.

Joanna Bourke's insightful analysis of the Great War's impact on the male body (and our conceptualizations of the male body in modernity) is representative of a current sea change in academic feminism. We are witnessing a move away from an exclusive preoccupation with woman being "made," in Simone de Beauvoir's famous apothegm. The contiguous social construction of men and masculinity has also become the subject of study in the humanities and social sciences. The powerful influence of

Michel Foucault's theories, conjoined with feminist historiography, lead Bourke to claim that "the idea that the biological body is itself subjected to construction has been adopted by most historians examining relationships between men and women" (2). Bourke's theoretical orientations, coupled with her archival skills, have inspired her to revisit the Great War at the site of the individual combatant's body, rather than simply describing war's effect at the macro level of massed armies under the command of "great" men. *Dismembering the Male*, in short, is an important and necessary study of how the First World War caused British culture to confront the fragility of the male body and the tenuousness of masculinity. Bourke makes us aware of how the people responded to the trauma of war with heightened self-awareness. In his diary the Reverend John M. Connor confessed that "seeing your pals blown to bits, it makes a new man fellow in spirit, moral & character . . . it will make many changed man [sic] [I] tell you" (16). Bourke permits witnesses like Connor to tell us.

The titles of the book's five chapters signal Bourke's focus: "Mutilating," "Malingering," "Bonding," "Inspecting," and Re-Membering." These keywords encompass the effects of war on the body, and the body's response to war, all of which occur in a field of cultural conflict and power relations. Her first chapter, "Mutilating," examines how the war-disabled unsuccessfully attempted to make sense of the uniqueness of their experience as the rest of society gradually positioned them in pre-war terms of civilian disability. Bourke contends that by the late 1920s, "the respect that had initially been given to the fragmented bodies of war-mutilated men had ended" because of limited economic and emotional resources" (31). "Malingering" is especially persuasive in showing how the living male body became increasingly subject to state control because of the national imperative to conscript every "able-bodied" man after January 1916. Bourke effectively outlines the penalties exacted for male citizenship and the humiliations endured by those refusing to succumb to pressures to adhere to wartime norms of masculinity by allowing themselves to become cannon fodder. Most powerful are Bourke's investigations into male self-mutilation as a response to fears of even greater horrors on the battlefield. An examination of the

power of regulatory institutions over the male body is continued in Bourke's fourth chapter, "Inspecting." The book is at its most Foucauldian in her thesis that "Although the First World War did not create the impetus for state surveillance and discipline of the body, it intensified that surveillance, encouraged proliferation of regulatory institutions, and left a legacy that persisted throughout the inter-war years" (171). Here Bourke sheds light on how medical and military institutions and discourse created taxonomies (medical and aesthetic) of the male body, setting an official imprimatur on the idealization of the male body created through male-male "Bonding" (Chapter Three).

In "Bonding" men establish intimate, emotional connections permissible in wartime in ways unavailable to men in peace. Bourke persuasively argues that these intensified forms of socialization, ordinarily problematic, serve the interests of military authorities, who exploit male-male relations for effective prosecution of war. Obedience and efficiency are the ulterior aims of male bonding, but, as Bourke contends, male-male relations were also fraught with class conflict, rank distinctions, and an overriding concern to maintain conventions of male invulnerability. While Bourke usefully corrects the mythic vision of uncomplicated wartime male bonding in Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* in this chapter, she is perhaps too ready to declare male bonding a "failure," mitigating the intense feelings of male-male desire, however much rooted in fantasy, expressed in letters, diaries, and poetry (see Martin Taylor's 1989 anthology *Lads: Love Poetry of the Trenches*, for example). In general, she downplays the crucial role the Great War played in disrupting the construction of heterosexuality.

Finally, Bourke explores the dead male body in a superb final chapter, "Re-Membering." The historian convincingly illustrates how cultural pressures to sanitize representations of death served to sustain a culture's mass, and massive denial of the destruction of the male body in war. Bourke's analysis of wartime and post-war burial rituals, effectively illustrated by numerous photographs, exemplifies the illuminating power of recent methodological and theoretical trends in historiography. Thanks to Joanna Bourke's work, we are more aware of how the Great War was typical of all wars in subjecting the male body to

battlefield annihilation and then recuperating it for glorification in peace time. This mutually reinforcing process has guaranteed the perdurability of war and its myths.

—D. A. Boxwell
United States Air Force Academy

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James A. Connolly. *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland.* Edited by Paul M. Angle. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 400 pp. maps, index. $14.95 (paper).

Indiana University Press has republished two Civil War narratives in paper in the last year, Walter H. Taylorís *Four Years with General Lee* and James A. Connolly's *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland.* Most of the narratives of this sort serve the military historian more than other scholars and aficionados. They provide factual accounts, often with first-hand detail unavailable anywhere else, of the complex tactical maneuvers that characterized most engagements in the War Between the States. Connolly's narrative, however, serves this purpose and much more. His gripping style and highly personal approach makes this text one of the most intriguing Civil War narratives we have available.

An Ohio-born attorney with a small practice in Charleston, Illinois, Connolly was elected major in the 123rd Illinois infantry just as the Confederate general Braxton Bragg and his Army of the Tennessee began an extended campaign into Kentucky in 1862. Desperate for cavalry, Army of the Cumberland commander General William Rosecrans ordered the 123rd into cavalry service, with the new Spencer repeating rifles, in early 1863. Connolly recounts minute details of his service in letters to his fiancee, who later, on one of Connolly's leaves, becomes his wife. The letters recount battles such as Chickamagua, Lookout

Mountain, and the siege of Atlanta. The latter portion of the book details Connolly's participation as a staff officer in Sherman's march to the sea.

Early in the letters, Connolly establishes a distinct persona and builds greatly upon it as the war, and his narrative, progresses. He has the prose of an attorney who had been clearly educated in the plain style, a style he calls the "King's English" (369). He writes clearly, yet with powerful emotion and perspicacious detail. Consider his criticism of Don Carlos Buell's leadership of the Army of the Cumberland late in 1862:

> Oh! for an active earnest leader from the free states! One who sees nothing sacred in negro slavery—one who can say to neutral Kentuckians "Get thee behind me Satan"—one who will not guard rebel wells and springs to keep our thirsty soldiers from slaking their thirst—one who will hang every rebel guerrilla in Kentucky. . . . I am heartily tired of his [Buell's] kind of work, and if I had no hopes of a speedy change in policy I wouldn't hold a commission another day in the service of protecting rebels and their property. (27)

But Connolly displays a good deal of compassion for his foe as well. On a solo cavalry reconnaissance mission, he guardedly advances upon a remote cabin. In it he discovers a Confederate deserter, surrounded by an adoring wife and children. The rebel pleads to remain with his family. Connolly agrees and returns to camp to report the encounter to his commanding officer. Convinced by his superior to take the distraught rebel into custody, Connolly cannot help but feel sympathy for the man and his plight and in turn question his own code of right and wrong:

> I almost shuddered when I thought of the great wrong I might be committing; of the utter hopelessness and utter destitution I might be unjustly bringing on that little household; of the terrible imprecations that might be heaped on my head by that wronged wife. .

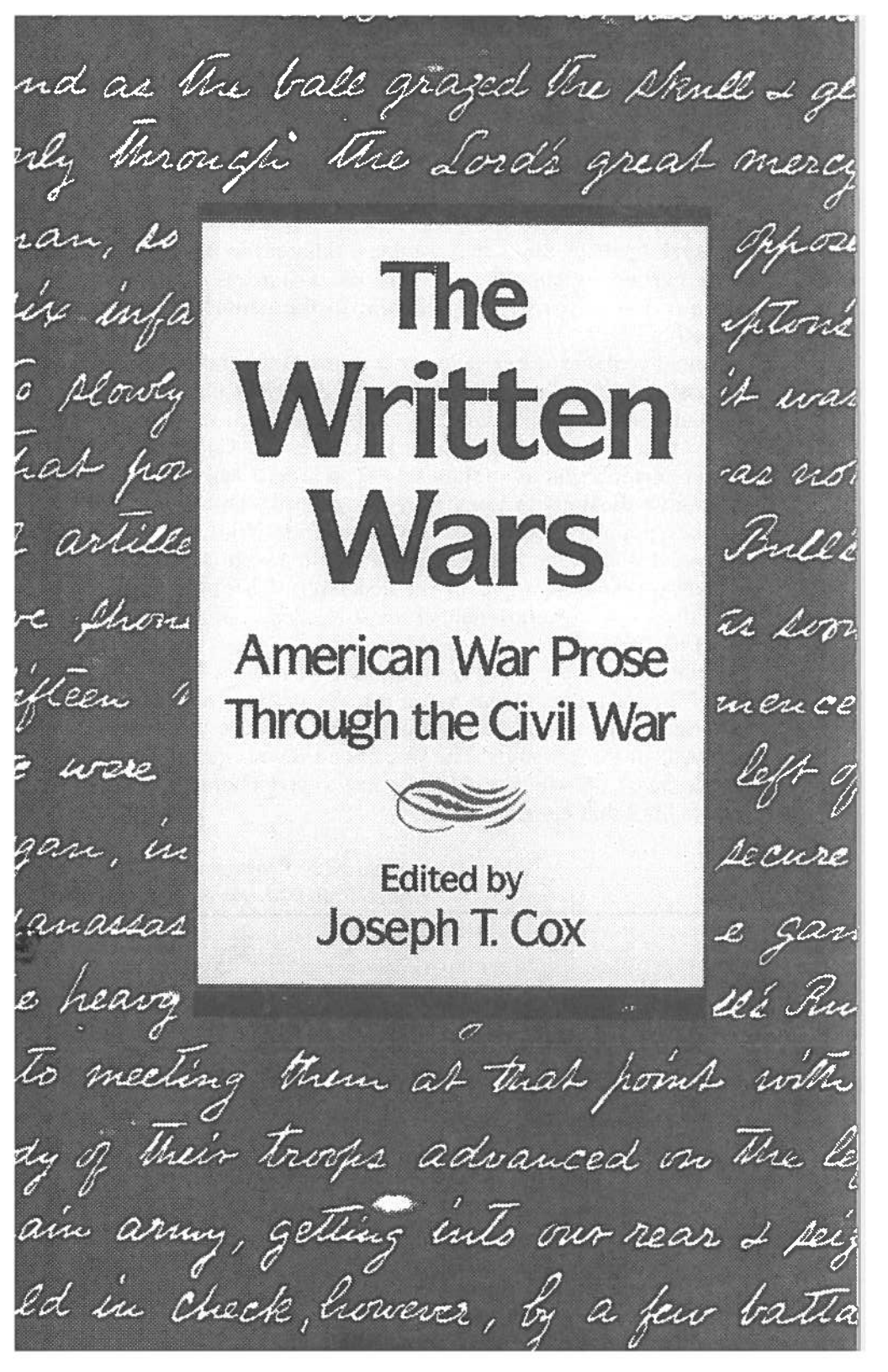
> . . I convinced myself that humanity bade me return him to his family. (72)

It is such contradictions that establish this text as not having a mere narrator; Connolly is a persona: a citizen-soldier fully aware of the contradictions inherent to the conflict he found himself in.

Connolly makes other judgments worthy of some note. His discussion of the Union's treatment of deserters is intriguing. He feels not as much compassion for the train of wayward slaves that followed his regiment through the Carolinas but more consternation as to their fate. The literati will appreciate Connolly's illusions to Longfellow (36), Lord Byron (67), and the then-popular local colorist Frances Miriam Whitcher (39). I enjoyed his detailed discussions of Union foraging. Connolly was always quick to argue for the necessity of this practice and the ethics (or mere rationality) his troops used while engaged in it (301-2).

Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland is an exceptional Civil War narrative. It has value for the military and literary historian. This new edition will make this valuable text readily available for further study. The War has numerous chroniclers of its carnage. Connolly is one of the few to give character to the men behind that carnage.

—Richard S. Keating
United States Air Force Academy


The
Written
Wars
American War Prose
Through the Civil War
Edited by
Joseph T. Cox

Recommended Reading

The Written Wars: American War Prose Through the Civil War, Ed. Joseph T. Cox, Editor. Archon Books: North Haven, CT, 1996. pp. 282 pages. $39.50.

The Written Wars is an important and unique collection of stories, essays, memoirs, journals, and letters that samples America's response to war from the Colonial Period through the Civil War. Cox seeks to provide "a chronicle of the transformation of war experience into language and image and story, and the impact of that translation on American consciousness and culture" (xiii). This book contains five major parts, each focusing on a particular war or period of conflict. Each part includes a general introduction, a helpful chronology, and a carefully organized collection of pieces.

Cox, an Army officer and Vietnam veteran, is a deft and concise editor. His simple, yet incisive introductions to each piece show again and again that the "transformation of war to word and combat to collective myth is a varied, often paradoxical, and sometimes self-canceling process" (xiv). Each introduction contains both appropriate historical framing and coherent critical commentary.

Rather than attempting to show the "real war," this anthology catalogues the "aesthetic strategies used to explain the cultural significance of war experience" (273). The resulting picture is not positive. Most often the religious, heroic, self-promoting, "rational," or emotional apologies for war turn out to be more rhetorical than real. In this way, these accounts are of a "written war" that never really took place. Consequently, as Cox's critique emerges from the various introductions, we find that he has much in common with Fussell, Ellis, Keagan, and even Baudrillard.

But Cox's main point concerns ideology much more than the rhetoric. If there is a uniquely "American way of war," it is not in how Americans fight but in how they talk and write about war. Ideology is concerned with the categories of signs we use, and the

writing Cox has selected includes the same ideas and words for radically different circumstances. According to Cox, "these multiple interpretations of combat . . . reveal a master narrative that continues to shape today's rhetoric of war" (xv). His point is that what has endured is not so much the rhetorical but the tired ideologies of war that Americans are never far from resorting to. This is exactly why Whitman's "real war," which Cox refers to, is not so much something out there as it is something in people's heads.

The impossible "gap" Cox finds "between the concrete reality of personal war narrative . . . and the mythic ideals of America's public war rhetoric" is no surprise, but, of course, it is the struggle (the age-old one between public and private) with this "gap" that is important (272). And it is where this struggle takes place, within the combatant, that is paramount to Cox. People experience war with both "eyes and . . . myths," and no one including Cox can escape the ironic struggle between language and myth. At one point when talking of Benjamin Franklin Scribner's account of the Battle of Buena Vista, Cox says the "volunteers overcame the romantic notions of war and fought well under the most difficult circumstances" (168). One wonders what to do with the adjective "well" in such a context or how someone so otherwise self-conscious of war's severe consequence can traffic in such euphemism. This passage unselfconsciously confirms Cox's later point about the struggle between private language and public myth with the sort of cliché seldom found in his lucid prose.

The forty selections in this book are remarkable for their authors as well as their ideas. Cox was careful with the selection and included canonical figures like William Bradford, James Fenimore Cooper, Ulysses S. Grant (on the War with Mexico, not the Civil War), and Benjamin Franklin along with less known but equally remarkable accounts by authors such as Colonel Benjamin Church, Joseph Plumb Martin, and Private Carr White. This book does for early American history what countless other books have done for later periods. A look at any study of more recent wars will find the same strategies for writing war that Cox highlights. Reading this book makes it clear that the study of war's

battles, commanders, weaponry, and tactics is much less important than self-consciously examining how we tell the story. This is a nice lesson especially for a service academy such as West Point, where Cox currently teaches. *The Written Wars* is an excellent and essential book for both classrooms and collections concerned with representations of war in the United States.

—Elliot G. Gruner
United States Air Force Academy

Recommended Reading

Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic. Paul Fussell. Boston: Little, Brown, 1996. Pp. 310. $24.95.

To write a book that can simultaneously delight and affront infantrymen, social reformers, English professors, television producers, book marketeers, sports fans, University of Pennsylvania alumni, and the "high-minded and unimaginative" everywhere in American society is no small achievement. That achievement is especially remarkable in a book of only 310 very generously spaced pages, of which about 60 are devoted to the shaping effect of Paul Fussell's youth and adolescent years of sun-drenched, protected affluence in Pasadena and Pomona, California. Regardless of the subject, Fussell looks unblinkingly and speaks with pungent directness. "Southern California was not yet [in the 30s] synonymous with shallowness, compulsory 'leisure,' show business, and sleaze" (7); "The ROTC classwork [at Pomona] was farcical, focusing on the generalities of military sanitation (we never saw a saddle trench or a Lister bag) and wholly abstract map reading" (62).

The double vision apparent in the last quotation—the recognition of the disjunction between ignorance and pretension on the one hand, and earthy, often painful reality, on the other—pervades this engaging, ballon-pricking book. And that double vision makes clear why Fussell devotes nearly a quarter of the book to his youth and another third, at least, to the profound intellectual changes resulting from his experiences as a twenty-year-old lieutenant of infantry, a platoon leader wounded in Alsace in the waning days of WWII. Nothing in his affluent and innocent youth prepared "Boy Fussell," as he calls himself in retrospect, for the reality of army existence in wartime Europe. The duality he reports in "my hatred of the army ultimately was diluted by a sense of ironic gratitude for what it made me" (177) makes possible both his engagement in and detachment from the actions he describes:

> Earlier, there had occurred in F Company the event known as the Great Turkey shoot. In a deep crater in a forest, someone had come upon a squad or two of Germans, perhaps fifteen or twenty in all. Their visible wish to surrender—most were in tears of terror and despair—was ignored by our men lining the rim. Perhaps some of our prisoners had recently been shot by the Germans. Perhaps some Germans hadn't surrendered fast enough and with suitable signs of contrition. (We were very hard on snotty Nazi adolescents.) Whatever the reason, the Great Turkey Shoot resulted. Laughing and howling, hoo-ha-ing and cowboy and good-old-boy yelling, our men exultantly shot into the crater until every single man down there was dead. . . . The result was deep satisfaction, and the event was transformed into amusing narrative, told and retold over campfires all that winter. If it made you sick, you were not supposed to indicate. . . . As we went on, we became always more aware that the idea of war is synonymous with the idea of mortal blunders. (124-5)

This narrative, however, is not part of a breast-beating *mea culpa,* but a coming to grips with the matter of factuality of infantry war; the experience on the front lines in France led inexorably to Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, surely a classic study if ever there was one. And it led just as inexorably to his *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays* in which he takes issue with all those high-minded persons—"pacifists, certain social scientists, international reformers, and others ignorant of the ugly physical and psychological details of the war," those free of "mortal blunders" who safely and retrospectively condemned the United States for dropping Big Boy over Hiroshima.

Implicit in that action is a thread that runs throughout this book, the simultaneous critical, skeptical view of the highly trained intellect and the experienced, wounded veteran who has come to have a great affection for the troops and for their perseverance in the face of idiocy. Nowhere is the underlying affection more evident than in the stories of Lt Abe Goldman's

irrational heroism or Sgt Edward Hudson's death or the death of Matt Rose, ordinary men all.

What each of those vignettes points to is the astonishing capacity of ordinary men, ordinary Americans *and* Germans, to do the unexpected and extraordinary—both heroic and cowardly. That perception, unlike those in more traditional, cliché-ridden memoirs or self-aggrandizing narratives of some former commanders, puts this book squarely in a select tradition of truth-tellers. Because of its literary allusions, *Doing Battle* touches many of the themes of Heller's *Catch-22*, but it also echoes Phil Caine's *Spitfires, Thunderbolts, and Warm Beer* (1995), a matter-of-fact account of the quiet heroism of an ordinary American, LeRoy Gover, flying in England; it outdoes a classic infantry narrative, Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun* (1944). In each case, the astonishing capacity of ordinary people to carry on in the face of appalling losses or terrifying fear becomes central to the book. And Fussell's willingness to confront the ugliness, the blood, the losses, the idea (citing Philip Caputo) that "one of the most brutal things in the world is your average nineteen-year-old American boy," ties *Doing Battle* with Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* which explores the capacity of ordinary men to commit horrific acts. What we discover underlying this angry book is a lament, a scream of outrage for humanity and the humane values lost in war.

Fussell's wartime experiences clarified for him the commonality we all share as humans and caused him to insist that we not betray it through ignorance, perverted education (he's especially hard on Wharton School of Business), or fatuous indulgence in the latest intellectual fad as so many professors have done. And, he writes, in another moment of honest self-knowledge, what could be a an epigraph for the book:

> Despite some of my critical views about America, the very idea of the Constitution moves me, for there's an implication in it of the essential decency of ordinary people who make up the electorate, crazily as they may behave on occasion. That implication, however false, does honor to human nature and the admirable hope that people will act justly and wisely if given the

> chance. I can't stroll through any military cemetery without choking up—not so much for the dead boys, who are, thank God, now out of it, but for their families, who can never be wholly happy again. (296)

It's that kind of humane idealism, balanced with palpable reality that makes this sharp-tongued book one to read, ponder, and treasure. Paul Fussell has done double-eyed truth a real service with it.

—Jack M. Shuttleworth
United States Air Force Academy