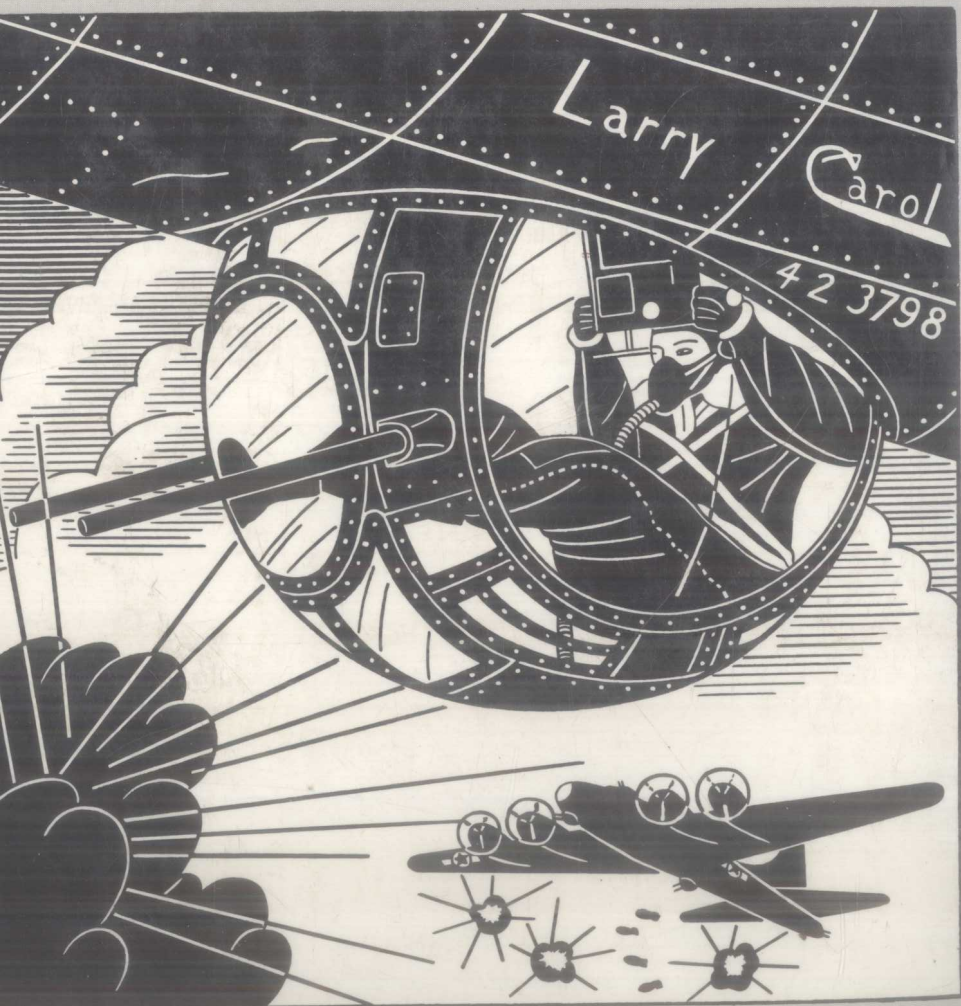


# AMERICAN WAR — LITERATURE — 1914 TO VIETNAM



— JEFFREY WALSH —

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# AMERICAN WAR LITERATURE 1914 TO VIETNAM

Jeffrey Walsh

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*To my wife Natalie  
and children  
Andrew, Howard and Elizabeth*

# Preface

War is a literary theme on the grand scale, its relevance confirmed by modern history; writers accordingly have envisioned the soldier as an image of man in society. In particular, American novelists and poets, over the last sixty years or so, have often come to understand their own country, its social character, institutions and relations with the world, through metaphors of battle. This book, in attempting to offer a concise introduction to modern American war fiction and poetry, examines some of the traditions and conventions of twentieth-century war writing in the United States; it does not aim to be either a synthesising or inclusive study. Clearly there are enormous problems of an organisational kind in writing about a topic as wide ranging as the literary treatment of war from 1914 to Vietnam, and I have been conscious of these in excluding much potentially interesting material. It has seemed more important to establish parameters than to furnish minute details.

Although there have been perceptive studies of some of the areas of fiction and poetry discussed in this volume, it is fair to say that there is no critical consensus about what constitutes a distinctive body of knowledge or canon of modern American war fiction and poetry. Because of this, it is particularly difficult to decide upon a formula which will enable individual works to be analysed while evaluating the notion of a tradition of war writing, one which implies reworking and reconstitution into a living order. Other problems relate to the matter of historical perspective, since it seems that certain writers and works, viewed in broadly cultural terms, are more central and representative than others.

In general I have been guided by the need both to suggest historical development and to analyse through formal procedures of exegesis the internal complexities of the literary text. Inevitably, in the last resort, I have had to rely upon my own

judgement about what is important. I have, therefore, set out to write a series of arguments and analyses rather than a comprehensive survey.

In making selections I have kept in mind the overall design in two ways: first, through employing chronological methods of study, and, secondly, by treating what I judge to be representative issues and themes. The arrangement of the volume is intended to show these priorities; it moves historically from the First World War to the present time and focuses upon artefacts, writers and verbal modes that, I believe, demonstrate authentic literary and socio-cultural significance in the American imagination of war. I have tried to structure individual chapters in such a way that they are both autonomous and complementary. A number of artistic and formal questions are thus historically scrutinised. For example, the problematic of representation occupies a major part of the discussion. Another continuing concern is the manner in which the poet or novelist faces the linguistic challenge of countering the rhetoric that articulates official 'versions' of war. A third consideration has been an attempt to recognise and assess the oppositional literary politics of pacifism and radicalism: in the latter case such crucial engagements are overtly ideological in nature, and certain chapters are specifically designed to examine this constant political dimension of war literature, its call to social action and commitment.

It will be clear from the above paragraphs that I have tried to scale down the topic in order to make it manageable. The value of such a methodology is, I believe, that it enables one to address and theorise about a sub-genre of literature that would otherwise be inaccessible, as a homogeneous entity, because of its sheer bulk and complexity. It is helpful, for example, to understand Vietnam not solely as a unique literary event, but also as both an aesthetic re-enactment and a radically new structuring of experience. War, then, is perceived as a flow of contending energies or as historical process. From such a premise this study begins, that modern American war literature shares the nature of debate, discourse and consciousness rather than static form.

*June 1979*

T. J. W.

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# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 Poetic Language: First World War	8
3 Two Modernist War Novels	41
4 Radicalism: <i>Plumes</i> and <i>Three Soldiers</i>	59
5 Lost Generation at War	79
6 Hemingway and Bessie: Education in Spain	95
7 Second World War Fiction: Alienation and Group Identity	112
8 Second World War Poetry: the Machine and God	152
9 Towards Vietnam: Portraying Modern War	185
<i>Notes</i>	208
<i>Index</i>	214

# 1 Introduction

There is a notion of separateness implicit in the term 'war literature' which sounds too prescriptive, as though war literature exists in a vacuum as a genre hived-off from other forms of writing. Such a schematic interpretation of war literature clearly needs to be resisted and full recognition accorded to the interactions and dynamics of literary production, and yet the conception of a corpus of imaginative work centrally concerned with the presentation and problematic of war is a valuable one. (It is useful to refer to 'war writing' as a category in twentieth-century literature because the apprehension of war constitutes a distinctive and central element in the modern American literary consciousness. Military terrain and situations have become familiar, often assuming mythic connotations; the mass media, of course, have contributed pre-eminently to this process of dissemination, although the media do not truthfully render the actualities of war but tend normally to generate instead a new breed of inauthentic and obfuscating myths. As John Felstiner has recently argued, in discussing the poetic response to Vietnam, there is a current danger that the media, in over-exposing war, 'suffer' for us through their flow of surrogate war-visions.<sup>1</sup> Michael Herr, in his coverage of Vietnam, *Dispatches*, has coined the phrase 'jargon-stream' to name the attendant generative linguistic flux;<sup>2</sup> an obvious example is the term 'waste' which has now passed into idiomatic usage as a synonym for 'murder' or 'dispose of'. Through the conduit of the media, their textures, codes and conventions, versions of war infiltrate our homes; we consequently exploit the imagery and phraseology of battle to talk of mundane domestic situations. Paul Fussell, in his seminal study of the First War, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, has shown how the impact of 1914-18 became so widely communicated that its landscapes, forms and technologies acted as a staple of language

and conversation, as synecdoche or metonymy for a variety of different kinds of human experience. At present we frequently indulge in similar conceptualisations, talking for example of 'heading off another Vietnam' or of the dangers of 'triggering off World War Three'; such language usage enables us in this instance to structure in accessible clichés certain political options and contending theories that we believe to be part of public debate.

In an intellectual sense also the idea of a 'discourse' of war literature is valid because war has supplied writers with tropes and imaginative fictions of enormous vitality and symbolic energy. Vietnam, or more precisely American military participation in the Vietnam War (here the process of ellipsis is demonstrated at work), is an evident example. At the time of writing it seems that the American military experience in Vietnam and the former civil disturbances it caused are being redefined, given new kinds of public articulation: in movies and pulp fiction the once-forgotten war is being rescued from history in a particular way, its realities distorted, softened, mythologised in a subdued strain of jingoism. To an onlooker who is not an American it looks as though the national wounds and factions that were exposed by the war are still active, and that popular scriptwriters and motion film makers believe it is their role to manufacture and promote artefacts which seemingly heal the divisions or attempt to conceal them. (Such an opinion is, of course, difficult to substantiate and infers a level of market sophistication and conspiracy that it is virtually impossible to corroborate.) When the war was in progress in Vietnam the situation was very different; it was bitterly fought over in literature which functioned as a forum or social theatre for the debate of political issues (the term social theatre is here meant to describe in particular the role of war drama and popular protest ballads etc.). Literary works published during the immediate Vietnam war years could basically be divided into two kinds, the gung-ho or hawkish stereotypes which upheld the public, official and hegemonic version of what the war was being fought for and, in opposition, a vigorous, equally propagandistic body of dissentient writing. This protest fiction, drama and poetry often sought to instigate social action, to argue polemically against the conduct of politicians and ultimately to stop the war: it

often proclaimed itself in favour of subversive acts to gain its objectives. In such contexts war literature revealed its true political nature as ideological battleground as well as offering its readers a formal representation of warfare. Using the example of Vietnam further, the critic can observe closely the way in which war as literary subject matter retains enormous symbolic potential. War as a theme acts out the great tragic vision of our time, the prime historical peripeteia and narrative. The soldier's traumatic first encounter initiates him psychologically into new realms of experience and marks him off from his civilian counterparts who have not served an apprenticeship under fire. In many cases writers who have attended college or been nurtured in leisured families encounter in warfare their first and perhaps their only direct immersion into the industrialised realities that are collectively the daily routines of millions of their fellow citizens. The writer may, in the forces, become acquainted with new technologies, and therefore his military training, drill or combat duty will encapsulate for him the vast factory system of modern capitalist production and organisation. On the vast fields of battle, too, it is likely that a young American writer will marvel at the massive resources of his country expended in the pursuit of a seemingly mistaken idealism. The army or air force thus is transformed for him into an image of the American century, and the soldier who is also an artist takes on the role of what Frank Ross has called the 'assailant-victim': he becomes an agent of war and also its martyr.<sup>3</sup>

Since war is demonstrably the most pointless and destructive of all human activities it frequently inculcates in the front-line writer a feeling of existential loss and disorientation, a dawning awareness that the exemplary sacrifice of troops is meaningless and utterly futile: this may result in the participant experiencing a vision of *nada*. Such a bleak and nihilistic recognition, often profoundly expressed in war books, confirms the deep sense harboured by the intellectual of his own alienation, that war is truly what Philip Caputo called the Vietnam conflict, an 'ethical wilderness'.<sup>4</sup> The hunting of 'Gooks' in Vietnam in order to comply with the strategy of Search and Destroy results in Caputo's marines becoming so confused, in *A Rumor of War*, that they eventually forget the moral lessons learned in school and at church: conse-

quently their own identities become blurred and tenuous and they sink into regressive barbarism. War in other ways may demonstrate the worst fears Americans have of their own culture; it may dramatise deep-rooted racial tensions or re-enact in fable a brutish violence inherited from the persecution of Indians in the old frontier days. Because of the class oppression of enlisted men by officers that is so common a theme in American war books, war may also serve as a metaphor for the novelist or poet of prevalent social injustice expressive of the dominance of hierarchies, through what Norman Mailer in *The Naked and the Dead* termed the 'fear ladder'. Taken together, then, such portrayals, images and inventive fabrications that I have outlined in this paragraph compose a picture of deep *angst*, and indeed much war literature has, as its *raison d'être*, a trajectory of protest. It protests against certain features of modern reality and life, and can be a disguised lament for the disappearance of the open plains and wilderness meadows, for vanished American innocence, for the lost Edenic frontier spirit where once flourished the pioneer virtues of self-reliance and a sturdily wholesome independence.

And yet out of such holocaustal visions come stirrings of redemption; if war can destroy a man it can also remake him in a better mould; he may for example discover a more permanent group identity in the army, and arrive at a lasting solidarity with his fellow men. In the recurrent artistic vision of honest infantry soldiers, whose love for each other transcends death in an unending bond, are reincarnated images of community, of the frontier comradeship where a man helped his neighbour, of hard times when the native American held out a helping hand to the immigrant. This portrayal of communion among brotherly officers or heroic dog soldiers infers a literary theme which enables a writer to transcend mythically both his own lonely and sedentary trade and to escape also a spiritual alienation that he may feel deeply: in the imaginative environment of war he may articulate myths which break the deadlock of capitalist modes of production, dismember the competitive ethic and postulate a social order predicated upon collective interchange of property and possessions. There is, in my speculations here, a great danger of suggesting that writers live out their fantasies through their

books, and I do not wish to suggest this. I do want to indicate, though, the manner in which the heroes of war fiction and the symbolic renderings of poetic language frequently illustrate certain recurrent imagistic enactments.

There are, of course, uniquely American visions of self-renewal and discovery through the exigencies of warfare, and most of them draw upon the literary reworking of the writer's own experience. One such example will have to suffice here, that of the Whitman-like hero who volunteers for war and learns of its bestiality at first hand. The most famous illustration of this type is the First World War figure of the ambulance volunteer (like the real life Dos Passos or Cummings) who freely chooses to enter the war, propelled by idealism, and, scarred irrevocably by what he sees, becomes a disaffiliated anarchist or radical afterwards. Much of American war literature incorporates similar melioristic social overtones; a common pattern of the hero's progress involves some degree of reconstruction which may be roughly summarised thus: the hero, a good and young American, volunteers or is drafted to war, he enters the combat zone and mixes with men from different social classes from himself and of contrasting ethnic backgrounds. In uniform he learns what it is like to be born to drill and die; thus his experience parallels that of the hero of a *Bildungsroman*: caught in crossfire he learns to combat his loneliness and to submerge himself in the resistance subculture of his fellow soldiers. He is likely to cultivate a rebellious kind of behaviour, conducting himself less frequently in a solipsistic manner and sharing in social practices, argot and rituals of style which are creatively counteractive to the rigidities of militarism. As well as this flexing of a counter-cultural awareness, the soldier-hero may also participate in a collective generational consciousness. The myth of a lost generation of soldiers is one of the most potent imaginative impulses and orientations in the traditions of American war writing; it communicates an aura of betrayal, of intergenerational conflict, of a youthful and distinctively alternative value system contending with one expressive of a paternalistic dominant culture: the older culture is rejected as it is deemed responsible for the amoral conduct of the war. I am suggesting here that such a composite 'plot' or narrative-form is indicative of a central kind of American literary response to

war, although the variations upon it and the totally different reworkings possible are, of course, numerous and too frequent to classify.

The discussion so far has, I hope, inferred the positions taken up in this study as a whole, that literature is both shaped by historical contingency and is also a relatively autonomous form. I want to argue that novels and poems interact in socially complex and dynamic ways, and that the most fruitful way to examine the relations of literature to social institutions, mechanisms and forces is to draw upon the discipline of literary criticism to explore formal and generic problems. The present work concentrates upon prose fiction, war journals and the qualitatively different genre of poetry where particular attention is paid to the evolution, shaping, and traditions of poetic language. In order to try to avoid the pitfalls of a survey approach, which would be an inappropriate critical enterprise, I have spent a good deal of time on the close textual analysis of language; such a methodology is intended to show in a structural way how a writer's socio-cultural tones, evaluations and nuances are meshed in with his particular verbal patterning, his public and private utilisation of myths, his constructions of symbolic language and his resources of imagery. As an example, I have tried to demonstrate in a chapter on Second World War fiction how the ideological dimensions of war novels (in this case shown by the contrasts portrayed between the hero's alienation and his transcendence of individual loss of identity through emergent group belonging) are aesthetically communicated by fictional strategies, locutions and analogies.

The chapters of this book are intended to be free-standing studies but not totally separate essays: they are written to be cross-referential, to comment upon each other, to provide comparisons and, hopefully, to create a dialectical sense of continuing debate and discussion. Although the links between chapters may not always be apparent from their headings, the chronological organisation of the study as a whole, and the classification of chapters into those which deal with fiction and those with poetry, should facilitate a unified historical perspective. All previous studies of modern American war literature have concentrated upon small segments of the subject; they have always selectively considered as topics the

poetry or prose written in response to a particular war or wars. This does not seem entirely satisfactory, although obviously the critic who undertakes to investigate a more limited area has a good chance of probing deeply into particular circumstances. For better or worse this book attempts a wider investigation; it necessarily sets out, as a consequence of its wide range and scope, to isolate and explore representative themes, configurations and visionary nodes.

War writers are in essence literary warriors, and their embattled visions fought in words; yet battle portraits are shaped by actual histories. The critic needs, for example, to take account of the fluctuations of intellectual taste, the genesis and formation of sensibilities in both writer and audience. I have tried to meet such criteria by addressing larger more speculative issues and theories; for example, during the opening two chapters 'modernism' is examined as an emergent artist focus for reconstituting the war in new and complex paradigms; such a problematic mode is placed against the more traditional parabolic genre of war writing whose origins lie in the nineteenth century. In the case of Vietnam I argue the opposite, that the process is reversed when an oblique post-modernist mode gives way to one where military experience is expressed in more accessible public form. In both instances the social character of war literature is evidenced; its treatment of the epiphanies of battle structures in a symbolic way wider relationships and processes.



## 2 Poetic Language: First World War

If we set some of the symbolic fictions that were current at the time to dramatise the meaning of 1914–18 for Americans against the way Ezra Pound responded to the war, indirectly in the *Cathay* sequence and more overtly in two brief sections of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, we can identify the problematic relationship of modernism to the war. In such *Cathay* poems as 'Song of the Bowmen of Shu' or 'Lament of the Frontier Guard' we encounter the modernist sensibility astringently at work in the hard-edged free verse, the absence of didacticism, the concealment of the poet behind his personae. Pound's oblique treatment of the experience of 1914–15 rests upon the modernist doctrine of impersonality. Hugh Kenner has drawn attention to the poet's 'structure of discourse' and the 'system of parallels' used in *Cathay*: 'Its exiled bowmen, deserted women, levelled dynasties, departures for far places, lonely frontier guardsmen and glories remembered from afar ... were selected from the diverse wealth in the [Fenollosa] notebooks by a sensibility responsive to torn Belgium and disrupted London....'<sup>1</sup> The method employs a non-representational way of talking about war, one in which holocaustal events are inferred by a series of elaborately disguised correlations. Pound's technique searches for that luminous stasis which haunted Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist*, and his formalism led him to experiment radically with Chinese poetic devices. Donald Davie in *Ezra Pound, Poet as Sculptor* has explained how importantly syntax functions in Pound's scheme, and has noted 'the frequency with which a line of verse comprises one full sentence' or has an antiphonal effect when two sentences are incorporated into a single line.<sup>2</sup> Pound's way of writing about war, then, is to 'remake' it aesthetically, and his remaking may be related to