"Of the sky above you must beware": Airspace and airpower in twentieth century literature

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"OF THE SKY ABOVE YOU MUST BEWARE":
AIRSPACE AND AIRPOWER
IN TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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April 5, 2013
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To my parents, Reinhardt and Elizabeth Krampitz, for their enthusiastic support of my military career, and to my husband, Bob—call sign “Doc”—who has always been there through the hard times.
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ABSTRACT

"OF THE SKY ABOVE YOU MUST BEWARE":
AIRSPACE AND AIRPOWER IN TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

by

Kimberly K. Dougherty

University of New Hampshire, May, 2013

This project interrogates the tension between the military discourse of air war in the twentieth century and the literature that challenged that discourse. Situated within the broader study of war literature, the project moves beyond traditional studies of soldiers fighting ground wars, to explore instead the dynamics of war in the skies above. I examine the paradoxical representation of aerial warfare that has allowed airpower advocates to propose, and conduct, massive airstrikes on cities and civilians, while promising a "cleaner" method of waging war. Suggested in the writings of military theorists Giulio Douhet, Billy Mitchell, and B.H. Liddell Hart, this notion of a clean air war—one that would save lives through its speed and precision—proved seductive throughout the century to politicians, military leaders, aircrews, and the general public. I argue that writers of the twentieth century, and beyond, challenge the assumptions that support this discourse, showing aerial warfare that is messy, prolonged, and imprecise, and that saves lives of privileged populations only by sacrificing those of marginalized peoples.

The air war is perceived as clean, I suggest, when we see neither the aviator nor the targeted populations in this dynamic. Strong forces of spatial and discursive distancing, produced by the verticality of the air war and the rhetoric of chivalry, machine
war, or patriotism, combine to hide the aviators' damaged bodies and psyches. Targeted populations also disappear, cloaked in misrepresentation, displaced by precision discourse, or lost in the unreliability of the aerial perspective. The writers in this study challenge this rhetorical disappearance through poetry, fiction, reportage, and memoir, sketching credible counternarratives by making visible both aviators and targeted populations. The primarily, though not exclusively, American writers examined here aim to expose the complexities of the air war to an audience that may never otherwise see it somewhere “over there.” By depicting both aviators and target populations, and the rhetorical devices used to obscure them, these writers present powerful counternarratives to a discourse of airpower as a cleaner and more desirable method of waging war.
INTRODUCTION

In *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), J.R.R. Tolkien's elf lord Elrond warns the nine walkers of a new threat to their security: "even of the sky above you must beware" (292). He is speaking here of the dual threats of aerial surveillance and aerial attack, as the black riders transition from horseback to winged steeds, reflecting the move from cavalry to aircraft made by many militaries early in the twentieth century. Tolkien thus points to the new space of war that developed in the twentieth century, a third dimension added to the traditional battlegrounds on land and sea—the sky above us.

While Tolkien is describing a fantasy world here, his dialogue reflects the very real transformation of the sky into a space of war, begun in Libya in 1911 with the initial use of powered aircraft in combat. With this event, as airpower advocate Giulio Douhet explained in 1913, "a new weapon arose: an air weapon; a new battlefield opened: the sky" (qtd in Gat *History* 575). Theories for the employment of airpower developed rapidly in response to this new weapon, even as the nature of war itself was changing; the clash of armies on distant battlefields was replaced by the concept of total war, pitting increasingly industrialized populations against each other. Military thinkers quickly realized that the immanent power of the airplane was its ability to attack the industrialized base of a modern nation well beyond the front lines. These ideas were significant because they meant that non-combatants, for the first time, would be
systematically targeted in war.\footnote{Although civilians in war have been victimized for centuries, through displacement, rape, and enslavement, there is a sense among airpower scholars that the air war brought a frightening new dimension to anti-civilian violence. As John Buckley notes, "civilian populations became the targets of concerted military action for sustained periods for the first time, and the threat and experience seared itself onto the consciousness of the modern world" (221). The sheer magnitude of airstrikes able to kill 40,000-80,000 people in one night, and the sustained bombing campaigns, which lasted months and years, contributed to this impression.} Thus, the skies became hostile not only to the airmen that flew there, but also to the civilians below, whose homes became bombing targets. This transition is best described by Douhet in his influential book *The Command of the Air* (1921): "by virtue of this new weapon... [all] citizens will become combatants, since all of them will be exposed to the aerial offensives of the enemy. There will be no distinction any longer between soldiers and civilians" (10). Based on these tenets, airpower was used repeatedly against civilians in the colonial world during the interwar years, moved to Europe during the Spanish Civil War and expanded to Asia in World War II, resulting in the infamous bombings of Guernica, Coventry, London, Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. Bombing in World War II alone cost the lives of 800,000 civilians and 95,000 aircrew members (Grayling 5, 10). Since then, it has been employed in multiple conflicts around the world.

However, the human costs of airpower employment were often erased as the advocates of airpower created a parallel and public perception, a dominant discourse, of the air war as the answer to the messiness of previous wars.\footnote{While the terms "airpower" and "aerial warfare" include many roles, such as interdiction, air superiority, surveillance, reconnaissance, air refueling, and airlift, in this project I am primarily concerned with the dynamic of bombing, which often incorporates many of these roles. A strategic air strike, for example, may begin with surveillance to confirm target choice, and then may require establishment of air superiority to protect the bombers, and air refueling to extend their range. Post-strike reconnaissance may verify the success of the strike. I thus use the broader terms to encompass the full range of missions that are combined in the exercise of airpower.} In contrast to the bloody stalemate in the trenches of World War I, airpower advocates promised a new and better method of waging war: a "clean" war. Although the use of this oxymoron to describe
modern war has been in vogue only since the Gulf War, I contend that a discourse of
cleanness has functioned seductively throughout the twentieth century to sell the air war
despite its stated strategy of targeting civilians. From the inception of airpower in the
early part of the century even until today, proponents have portrayed airpower as cleaner
than ground war because its key elements, quickness and precision, would actually save
lives that might otherwise be lost. This promise of cleanness, with fewer dead and
wounded, proved equally seductive to the damaged Europe after World War I and to
post-Vietnam America.

Although it has become almost de rigueur to talk about cleanness in conjunction
with postmodern war, this concept is deeply rooted in the military theory that emerged
from World War I, where it served as a crucial counterpoint to the targeting of civilians.
So many of the theorists known as the “prophets of airpower” advocated the strategic
bombing of civilians that it became a foundation of early airpower theory, despite its
blatant disregard for the conventions of war and violation of the international laws
designed to protect civilians.3 Douhet, one of the most influential of the theorists,
observed in 1921 that future wars would be total wars, and argued that aircraft would best
be employed against the enemy’s weakest point, its civilians.4 The strategic bombing of
“vital civilian centers...” he contended “could spread terror through the nation and
quickly break down [its] material and moral resistance” (emphasis added, Command 57).

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3 As Sven Lindqvist notes, the fourth Hague Convention, Article 25, implemented in 1907 and still
applicable today, prohibits the bombardment of undefended towns and dwellings (26).
4 Buckley has presented a convincing argument that Douhet is incorrectly credited with much
theoretical work which he recorded but did not originate, resulting in what Buckley labels “the Douhet
myth,” in which the Italian is credited for the ideas of other theorists. My concern here, more aptly, is with
how these ideas were received and implemented, particularly with the fact that “Douhet’s most important
contribution to the development of air power lies in the perception of his influence rather than the reality”
(Buckley 77). Buckley points out that in the United States, Douhet is consider the “father of air power”
even more than Billy Mitchell, although both are esteemed (74). Interestingly, he points out that after
Desert Storm, air power advocates claimed a victory for the theories of both Douhet and Mitchell.
This contention is critical because it sets up some key assumptions about bombing that
will drive airpower employment to the extremes of World War II and beyond. First, he
codifies the idea that the goal of bombing cities is not the destruction of industry but the
spreading of terror and destruction of civilian morale, a concept that emerged from
British experiences with bombing during World War I and was also espoused by British
theorists discussed below. Next, he suggests that bombing is so unbearable that civilians
will not be able to tolerate it for long; Douhet believes the bombed citizens will “rise up
and demand an end to the war” (Command 58). Unfortunately, as will be seen later,
civilians learn to adapt to bombing, and even if they do not, the opportunity for civilians
to end the war in this way is virtually nonexistent. Accepting these assumptions as
givens, however, Douhet and his fellow theorists are able to claim that the air war will be
a quick war, a promise that would have been quite seductive to an interwar audience still
reeling from the four years and ten million deaths of World War I.

Douhet’s ideas are espoused in the writings of other theorists as well. United
States Army Air Corps pilot and theorist Billy Mitchell made similar predictions of aerial
warfare’s quickness and desirability, explaining in 1924 that this new type of warfare
would result in “the amelioration and bettering of conditions in war because it will bring
about quick and lasting results,” and repeating this idea again in 1930, promising that
“the result of warfare by air will be to bring about quick decisions” (Qtd in Jones 6).5
British airpower theorists expressed similar ideas; in fact, as A.C. Grayling points out, the
beliefs of Sir Hugh Trenchard, head of the Royal Air Force in 1918, “might have directly

5 Johnny R. Jones argues that Billy Mitchell had a strong influence on the U.S. Air Force: “Even
though Mitchell set forth his thoughts nearly 80 years ago, the lineage can be seen between his vision and
those principles that have guided our Air Force in the past, that guide our Air Force today, and that will
guide the Air Force vision for the next century” (Foreword vi).
inspired Douhet" (131), since he, too, proposed morale bombing, and designed an Air
Force with this goal in mind. British soldier and writer B.H. Liddell Hart, whom Azar
Gat calls “perhaps the most famous strategic theorist of the twentieth century” (History
645), echoes Douhet’s call for attacking “the moral objective” (morale) by attacking the
enemy’s will to resist (36). In Paris, or The Future of War (1925) he foresees aerial
attack achieving total paralysis of the enemy nerve system “within a few hours, or at most
days” (40). Significantly, while he acknowledges some ethical objections to the
targeting of civilians, he argues that the “swift and sudden” nature of the air war will
negate these objections. These theorists, then, accept the need to attack civilians,
somewhat regretfully, but justify if with their predictions of quick resolutions.

This prediction of shorter wars due to airpower implied that its employment
would ultimately save lives, an idea that became a mantra for airpower advocates in the
interwar years, and was repeated extensively during World War II. As Douhet suggests,
“these future wars may yet prove to be more humane than wars in the past in spite of all,
because they may in the long run shed less blood” (Command 61). What is unsaid but
implied in this statement is that soldiers will shed less blood because civilians will now
shed more. In the interwar years, the bombing of civilians in the margins of empire
became more acceptable, as I will discuss below, so that by the Second World War, the

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6 Azar Gat argues that Liddell Hart’s book was basically plagiarized from J. F. C. Fuller and
reflects Fuller’s ideas completely. Liddell Hart also tapped into T.E. Lawrence’s ideas from Seven Pillars
of Wisdom, and Corbett’s ideas above naval strategy and movement. Apparently, the other authors never
protested and Liddell Hart’s influence in the interwar years was significant. It should be noted, to his
credit, that in 1947, after viewing the theories of airpower in practice during World War II, Liddell Hart
amended his thinking with The Revolution in Warfare. The war, he says, had made it clear that bombing
“does not suffice to produce a quick decision where the opponent is firm in morale and skilled in defence”
(28). He also acknowledges that the lack of accuracy in aerial bombing “paved the way for a reversion to a
barbaric mode of warfare” (35).

7 This result will only be achieved, he notes presciently, when a nation enjoys air superiority;
where air forces are equal, he argues, they will essentially perform a deterrence function.

5
practice was widely accepted. Thus, men like the RAF’s Air Vice Marshal Arthur Harris “could claim to believe that [bombing] would shorten the war and therefore save lives overall—especially on his own side, by rescuing tens of thousands of young soldiers from the hazards of invasion” (Grayling 118). What is problematic about this rhetoric, of course, is the privileging of one’s own soldiers over the civilians of an enemy country, or even over one’s own civilians. This paradox, which reconceptualizes civilians as legitimate targets of military action while at the same time subordinating them to soldiers, becomes an integral part of the discourse of airpower, thus normalizing strategies that privilege the lives of soldiers through the sacrifice of civilians.8

Not all modern nations immediately bought into the need for civilian bombing, however. The United States, in particular, was reluctant to bomb civilians, and focused instead on precision bombing enabled by technological advances. During the interwar years, as Grayling points out, U. S. airpower doctrine focused on destroying key links in the enemy’s “industrial web” through precise targeting with the newly developed Norden Bombsight.9 The weak link in this doctrine was the fact that such accurate bombing required control of the air (Grayling 136), which the allies did not have until late in World War II. As Grayling notes, when the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) arrived in Europe, “reality proved a harsh spoiler of hopes” (140) as weather and resistance permitted less precision and drove the USAAF toward area bombing. Despite this doctrinal upset, however, the United States military continued a tenacious adherence

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8 Douhet welcomed the targeting of civilians as a way to equalize the burdens of war. In “The Probable Aspects of the War of the Future” he cynically wonders why we weep over a few women and children killed but not thousands of soldiers. He says “all human lives are equally valuable” but laments that soldiers are considered expendable. War in the air will serve a civilizing function that discourages war, he argues, because “people will not be able to say any more: ‘let us all arm for war, but you go and do the fighting’” (196).

9 Grayling here references Air War Plans Division Plan 1 (AWPD-1) of 1941, developed at Air Corps Tactical School (136).
to a mantra of precision bombing and promoted it widely, in essence creating a myth of precision which prevails to this day.\textsuperscript{10} Precision discourse assumed a significant role in “quieting consciences”\textsuperscript{(58)}, as Michael Sherry notes, by allowing Americans “to justify the bomber as not only a practical but a humane instrument of war” (53). The myth of precision bombing thus supported the clean war concept by directing public attention away from the targeting of civilians and towards a vision of surgically precise industrial strikes.

One might expect the promise of cleanness to be recognized as hollow when exposed to the realities of civilian bombing, especially during mid-century, but additional powerful forces contributed to this clean war discourse. We are able to understand the air war as clean, I suggest, when we fail or refuse to see the casualties on either side of the bombing dynamic: either the aviators who prosecute the air war or the people on the ground. Aviators, to a large extent, disappear from public view through spatial and discursive distancing which hides their dead or damaged bodies and psyches in the rhetoric of chivalry, machine war, or patriotism. Civilian bombing victims also disappear from view when they are reinscribed to fulfill our expectations, when we fail to see them due to the unreliability of the aerial perspective, or when rhetorical deception and precision discourse render them invisible. The air war is thus perceived as a bloodless, victimless method of waging war, a dangerous perception that presents war in the air as more desirable than war on the ground, and thus makes its use more likely.

\textsuperscript{10} See Tami Davis Biddle for more about the myth of precision as it was used to disguise the reality of area bombing during World War II. It is also important to note that while recent technological developments have made “smart bombs” incredibly precise, their effectiveness is only as good as the intelligence used for targeting decisions. The use of outdated intelligence, or intelligence that has been manipulated by informants, can result in unintended civilian deaths.
The coupling of the words *clean* and *war* in this way is always ironic, because by definition, as Elaine Scarry notes, “the central activity of war is injuring and the central goal in war is to out-injure the opponent…” (12). A truly clean war, a war without death or injuring, cannot then exist, but exists only in our perception of it as clean. This illusion is exposed by Howard Nemerov in his 1987 poem “The War in the Air,” (which I explore more extensively in Chapter One). Nemerov suggests that the air war fought during World War II is often perceived as “a clean war” because we do not see the aviators who died fighting it. In the poem, as in the war, aircrews disappear into clouds, vanish into thin air, or are swallowed up by the sea. Nemerov does not imply that these deaths did not occur; instead he shows how the lack of visible corpses functions ironically to provide the war’s victors the collective pretence of a bloodless victory.

While Nemerov focuses on the aviator, Jean Baudrillard shows how the disappearance of the people on the ground also drives the clean war discourse. In the three essays of his influential 1991 collection *The Gulf War did not take place*, published before, during, and after the war, Baudrillard controversially suggests that the war was not taking place, or had not taken place, despite its near-constant presentation on televisions worldwide. Although these claims seem maddeningly ridiculous to those unfamiliar with postmodern theory, he is in fact an astute observer of the changing nature of warfare in the late century when he posits that “war is no longer what it used to be…” (85), because it no longer encompasses “the confrontation of warriors” (86). In fact, what Baudrillard is observing is the transformation of war from the ground to the air, with the first six weeks of the war consisting solely of airstrikes. Modern war has become so

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11 Paul Patton, translator of Baudrillard’s book, notes that the essays were originally published in *Liberation*, on 4 January, 1991, and in part, on 6 February and 29 March. They were published together as a book in May, 1991 (1).
technologically distanced, he argues, that the enemy has become “invisible” (43) resulting in a “clean war, white war, programmed war: more lethal than the war which sacrifices human lives” (56). Although he attests to 100,000 dead Iraqis as a result of the war, he suggests that the politicians on both sides of the conflict dismiss them as byproducts of the war, deceptive “decoys,” or in movie parlance, “extras,” not fully human beings and therefore invisible, unable to topple the well-constructed palace of cleanness.

Over the years, the clean war discourse has been so powerful and seductive that it has continued to drive strategy and doctrine even when it has been proven wrong. It is still so potent today that it impacts national policies, as “we continue to shape our wars around a utopian idea about bombing” (Swift, “Air Power”). I am not suggesting that there have been no doctrinal changes in the air war during the last century; indeed, there have been many. Whereas during World War II civilians were often deliberately targeted to destroy morale, planners in NATO’s 2011 aerial campaign over Libya carefully crafted missions to reduce civilian casualties and disruption to daily life (Chivers and Schmitt). Despite this care, airstrikes killed between 40 and 70 civilians, according to The New York Times. While this number is miniscule compared to World War II, the Times finds these deaths disturbing because NATO persisted in describing the operation as “flawless,” conducted with “care and precision”—in other words, clean-- and was

12 Baudrillard’s use of the term “white” here, I believe, is not a reference to race or skin color but to what he later calls a “war without victims...[a] blank war” (73). Whiteness thus reflects the white or blank page of the silenced.

13 Buckley notes the limitations of airpower, and says that “there is an all too frequent temptation to overstate the value of air power to the conduct of war” (10). For instance, strategic bombing prior to World War II was expected to cause the collapse of nations, but instead it forced communities “to pull together in the interests of mutual survival” (15). Bombing, however, continued unabated. Sven Lindqvist labels bombing in Korea and Vietnam failures, and explains that bombing continued as a strategy in these wars despite evidence that bombing is most effective against modern, industrialized nations (155).
unwilling to acknowledge or investigate reports of civilian casualties. This example provides a disconcerting illustration of the ongoing power of the clean war discourse, even today, to frame our perception of aerial warfare, and mask the human costs it entails.

The discourse of cleanness attached to the air war has not gone unchallenged, however. My dissertation interrogates the tension between this discourse and the representation of airpower in poetry, fiction, memoir and journalism. It examines twentieth century literature that exposes, questions, or challenges our understanding of the air war, and also looks briefly at twenty-first century literature that does the same. The airpower theory that emerged from World War I seduced politicians, military leaders, aircrews, and the general public with its promise of a cleaner and better method of waging war. Writers of the twentieth century—and beyond—push back against this discourse by challenging the assumptions that support it, showing aerial warfare that is more often dirty, prolonged, and imprecise, and that saves the lives of privileged populations only by sacrificing those of marginalized peoples. I argue that these writers create counternarratives to the powerful spatial and discursive forces that present the air war as clean by making both the aviator and the target populations visible. Specifically, these writers reveal how airpower employment has frequently been justified through construction and manipulation of Western discourses of self and other. Ultimately, I suggest this project demands a revised engagement with our past, present, and future understanding of airpower, particularly with its human costs, in a world that desperately wants to believe in this better way to wage war.
This study is a theoretical bricolage, assembling various ideas about space and power that destabilize the discourse of the clean air war. As a framework for my readings, I combine elements of critical geography, French philosophy, and postcolonial theory that explore concepts of airspace, state power, and modern war. These elements add depth to my readings and show that the clean war discourse is not simply a construct of military theory, but is deeply embedded in broader concepts of power, subjectivity, and globalization. As Rachel Woodward notes, military "control of space is as much a discursive act as it is a physical act" (37). Most people will never fly in military airspace, nor will they know the feeling of foreign military jets overhead. Their link to this space comes through discourse. How we write about and read this modern phenomenon strongly impacts how we perceive, and act in, our world.

Over time, many predictions and assumptions have been made about the nature of airspace that have shaped, and continue to shape, airpower employment. At the dawn of the twentieth century, aviation enthusiasts believed that aircraft would operate freely in a global environment, undeterred by natural obstacles such as mountains, rivers, or seas, and equally undeterred by political boundaries. Soon, however, legal issues arose which pitted aerial freedom against individual property rights and national sovereignty.14 In the developing debate, visionaries welcomed the opportunities for travel and commerce offered by aircraft and were unwilling to have any nations hamper trade by restricting their airspace.15 However, the build up to World War I changed the atmosphere of the

14 Stuart Banner provides a fascinating discussion of individual property rights and the idea of aerial trespass.
15 However, by 1910, many people realized that States would need to be able to regulate air traffic over their territory, at the least to control safety and discourage smuggling. The challenge became how to allow states to regulate for safety and defense while encouraging them to allow free commerce.
debate, focusing on the threats posed by aircraft rather than the opportunities. Airspace expert Stuart Banner explains, “as the nations of Europe battled for the control of airspace, it was clear that air not only could be possessed, but that it had to be possessed if a country hoped to defend itself against attack” (63). In 1913, Britain acted unilaterally, prohibiting overflight of its territory by foreign aircraft without coordination; soon Russia, Germany, and France followed suit. War ignores national boundaries and restrictions, however, so even after World War I, which witnessed the first bombing of civilians, airpower advocates still envisioned the sky as open and the reach of aircraft as unlimited. Billy Mitchell proposed that, “as the air covers the whole world, aircraft are able to go anywhere on the planet” (Qtd in Jones 1). Douhet confirms this notion, explaining that “nothing man can do on the surface of the earth can interfere with a plane in flight, moving freely in the third dimension” (Command 9). This vision of airpower led British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to this frightening declaration, made in an address to the House of Commons in 1932:

In the next war you will find that any town within reach of an aerodrome can be bombed within the first minutes of war to an extent inconceivable in the last war...I think it is well...for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed, whatever people may tell him. The bomber will always get through. (Qtd in Van Creveld 59).

Ideas like Baldwin’s created a false but dominant impression of the aircraft as unstoppable, because it operates in what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari label smooth space. While these theorists do not address airpower in detail, I find their
conceptualization of space, and the terms they have assigned to it, particularly useful for examining war in the air.

In *Nomadology*, Deleuze and Guattari envision a war machine that moves through and holds territory like a nomadic band, “deployed in a horizonless milieu that is a smooth space, steppe, desert, or sea” (48). Their idea of smooth space is an empty space, through which this war machine can flow, like water, with no obstacles to prevent its movement. They briefly describe the sea as the ultimate smooth space, where a “fleet in being...holds space beginning from any point” (62), but then note that “this modern strategy was communicated from the sea to the air, as the new smooth space...” (62). This movement from sea to air is significant, because in this brief correlation the authors echo Mitchell, Douhett, and Baldwin and create a late-century vision of airpower operating in a smooth space, unopposed and virtually unstoppable. It becomes apparent, then, that understanding airspace as smooth supports the discourse of the clean war, as it implies that air forces will be able to attack quickly and precisely, with no impediments to dirty things up.

All space is not smooth, however, as Deleuze and Guattari are quick to point out. Space in which movement is limited they label “striated”: this includes walled space, the space of cities, agriculture, and even forests, all of which present formidable barriers to movement. The authors aptly point out that striated space slows or stops the nomadic movement of the war machine, but they fail to complete the thought loop by re-engaging with their vision of the air as smooth space, a failure that has been prevalent throughout the twentieth century. Militaries and politicians alike have embraced a vision of air space

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16 While the concept of the war machine presented by the authors presents a fascinating new vision of the interdynamics between the State, the multinational corporation, and marginal or minority groups, this discussion is beyond the scope of my project.
as smooth by arguing that aircraft can fly above all of these striations. This argument is true in part, but, as several historians note, analyses of airpower employment in the twentieth century have shown that airpower was most effective in open areas, such as deserts, and least effective in mountainous, forested terrain or in cities. These striations present not barriers to movement but to accuracy, as jungle canopies, mountains, and buildings allow targets to be hidden, moved, or mingled with civilians, thus complicating the concept of the clean air war. Moreover, airspace is further striated by air defenses—anti-aircraft artillery (AAA), surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and enemy fighters—which can render an apparently smooth space impenetrable. French pilot and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry adroitly illustrates the experience of trying to penetrate such heavily defended airspace in *A Flight to Arras*: "I seemed to be running the plane into a bronze wall" (390). The threat to the life and bodily integrity of the aviator posed by these striations—this wall of flak—make the air war dirtier by limiting the ability to attack with precision, which in turn delays the destruction of targets, thereby prolonging the war and sacrificing more lives in the process.

These assumptions about the nature of airspace illuminate the beliefs in quickness and precision that drive the clean war discourse, but to interrogate its promise of saving lives I turn to the idea of biopolitics advanced by Michel Foucault. Foucault’s concept of biopolitics describes modern States’ concern with the pastoral care of their populations, where the sovereign’s power no longer resides in the power to kill, but in “the power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die” (*Society* 240). He realizes, however, that this focus on health

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17 Martin Van Creveld, Sven Lindqvist, and Steven Graham all reach this conclusion about the effectiveness of airpower. Van Creveld observes: “Geographically speaking, the areas where airpower was most useful were the sea and the Sahara Desert” as well as over other “open terrain” (376). However, “when it came to fighting in the cities, airpower was almost entirely useless” (377).
and welfare is diametrically opposed to the States’ war making function.\textsuperscript{18} To explain this critical paradox, Foucault observes that racism allows States to separate populations into those who should live, and those who must die.\textsuperscript{19} When the State determines that one population (either internal or external to the state) is a threat to its own (or preferred) population, then it can justify war as a means to preserve the life of its threatened population.

Foucault’s observations provide important insight into the wars of the mid-Twentieth Century, but some critics, such as Achille Mbembe, argue that Foucault’s concept of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary violence, because it applies to traditional wars between “civilized” States. In the largely asymmetric conflicts of the colonial world, and especially in late-modern occupations, he suggests a darker vision rules; he uses the term \textit{necropower}, where he suggests that killing, and “the creation of death-worlds,” prevails (40). Although Mbembe presents an interesting analysis of contemporary violence, I disagree with his need to rename this use of power; whether in traditional or non-traditional conflicts, I believe both State and non-State actors justify killing with an idea of preserving their own populations. Julian Reid supports this idea, believing Foucault provides us the tools to identify and confront these developments, as well as the implications of biopolitics for liberal societies. Reid, correctly, sees a biopolitical crisis in the current War on Terror, “in which liberal capitalist regimes assure us that the future development of the human species is at stake against an enemy regarded

\textsuperscript{18} Foucault introduces this term in \textit{The History of Sexuality}, explaining that alongside its disciplinary functions the State also practiced “\textit{a bio-politics of the population}” (262) that focused on preserving the life of the people. The State, he explains, “focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity.”

\textsuperscript{19} Foucault explains this term as “racism of the evolutionist kind, biological racism” (\textit{Society} 261) which pits one population against another.
as vermin” (38). The U.S. use of airpower to strike at terrorist enclaves, then, is sold as a clash of populations, a biopolitical necessity designed to preserve the lives and wellbeing of the American people.

I find Mbembe most useful when he points out the importance of airspace to the exercise of power. In his discussion of Palestine, for example, he explains that “occupation of the skies therefore acquires a critical importance, since most of the policing is done from the air” (29). Eyal Weizman describes this as a “politics of verticality” that includes the control of airspace as a critical dimension in occupation politics. These observations are fascinating, but not new; air control was practiced in the colonial world after the end of World War I. These ideas, however, allow me to connect the air war and biopower to the clean war discourse. Although Foucault never applied his ideas to the air war, I suggest that his observations about biopower underpin the premise that the air war is clean because it saves lives. The immanent ability of the aircraft to “make die” infuses airpower with the simultaneous ability to “make live.” Clean war discourse, then, privileges the idea that airpower helps “make live” and disguises the death involved, on both sides of the equation.

This project of necessity crosses multiple disciplinary boundaries, including military science, European and American history, body studies, moral philosophy, human rights studies, war literature, and genre studies. It is informed both by my training in literature and by my background as an Air Force officer and aviator. My practical experience with the employment of airpower provides a critical lens not often found in literary analysis. I have seen the faces of the bombed; these memories add a sense of urgency to this
analysis that moves it from the purely theoretical to suggest a broader political engagement with this subject.

By assembling these texts about airpower and placing them in conversation with each other, and with the clean war discourse, this project not only fills a gap in the study of war literature but also complements the work of historians and military scholars on aerial warfare. Literature about the air war has often suffered one of two fates: it is completely neglected, or it is subsumed into a larger category of study. Paul Fussell, for example, limits his seminal *The Great War and Modern Memory* to the experiences of the British infantry in the trenches and deliberately ignores the aerial combat that took place above and beyond this front. While limitations of this sort are often necessary to allow for a sharper analysis, they have in practice elided from literary criticism much writing about the air war. Additionally, the texts examined here are generally well-known and well-received examples of war literature. As such, these works have often been studied under the subject of “soldiering,” which encompasses elements of initiation, experience, disenchantment, and homecoming. While this approach provides a useful means of critiquing the war experience, it almost exclusively locates the aviator within this universal experience of soldiering, and in doing so fails to address the unique dynamics of aerial combat. What is often lost by this move is the dual focus, identified by Daniel Swift, with which many airpower texts examine both the aviator and the bombed civilian. Swift’s valuable scholarship in this area suggested my dual organizational structure; my project, however, moves beyond Swift’s focus on World War II poetry to

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examine multiple genres over a century of air war. My dissertation, then, stewards and amplifies the airpower critiques that we otherwise fail to see and hear, providing a necessary corrective to this field.

This study also complements the considerable scholarship on airpower produced by historians and military thinkers over the past century, by moving beyond their concerns with leadership, decision making, or military effectiveness to examine instead the ways in which the representations of flyers and target populations have impacted our conception of the air war. Literature provides a valuable addition to these studies, as its figurative and metaphorical nature couples historical and military reports with the imagination, enabling writers not only to testify to personal or communal experiences but to extrapolate from them to produce a broader examination of the actual and potential uses of airpower. This powerful coupling results in a rich and deep exploration of the possibilities and extremes of aerial warfare and the human response to it.

With a primary focus on American writers, I extend the developing conversation about the impacts of the air war on literature and culture begun by Martin Francis, Daniel Swift, and Paul K. Saint-Amour. These scholars focus on Britain and Europe, where memories of bombers in the skies above still resonate; in contrast, the United States, due to its location, has never witnessed the sustained aerial combat that Europe and Britain saw in World War II, so that for many Americans the air war has been a distant phenomenon practiced somewhere “over there.” For this reason, the American literary response to airpower has been under-examined. This lack is surprising, however, given

22 Arnold, Buckley, Irving, Kerr, Taylor, and Van Creveld, for example, all analyze airpower’s military effectiveness, while Friedrich, Gat, Grayling, Lindqvist, Omissi, Overy, and Slim examine the political decisions of the air war. Some of these texts are notable for their inclusions of the voices of the “common person” in addition to the decision makers, with testimony from bombing survivors or public opinion polls, but often these voices are supplementary rather than primary.
that the U.S. today is the most advanced airpower nation in the world. America’s dominance, coupled with a predilection to use airpower frequently, suggests that this study is long overdue. I have assembled the writers in this project, who span one hundred years of aerial warfare, from the ruins of World War I to the technologies of post-modern war, because they write to expose the air war to an audience that may never otherwise see it. Their texts challenge the official discourses of airpower, particularly those that paint it as clean and desirable, by bearing witness to the casualties of air power employment, both military and civilian. In addition to several American writers, then, I include one French and one British author, because they, too, transform their intimate experiences with airpower to educate the American public about its extremes. Collectively, these writers work to make the American reader see what is otherwise unseen.

My prime consideration in choosing texts has been the author’s representation of the air war. Half of the authors featured here were aviators, and thus provide a unique critique of aerial combat from a privileged position within the cockpit. At stake for these “literary aviators” is their own heroic status, as they expose to public view the unreliability of the aerial perspective and the complexities of the bombing dynamic. Among the other writers, several were soldiers or journalists, whose privileged access to wars allows them to testify to what they have witnessed, and challenge the dominant public discourse of airpower. Finally, I balance these groups with the work of a few civilian authors, valuable because they provide a third view of the air war from the

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23 Both scholarship and recent events support this conclusion. Buckley suggests this dominance in his monograph, noting that “the ability of a state to sustain air war probably now only rests with the major powers, and possibly only with the USA” (203). Recent world events also support this conclusion. A NATO report on its 2011 intervention in Libya noted that the alliance was overly reliant on unique capabilities that only the United States could provide (Schmitt “NATO”).
perspective of the general public. With this grouping, it becomes apparent that the
critique of airpower has not been limited by gender or military service, as female
novelists and male journalists complement and advance the work of veteran flyers by
challenging our perceptions of the aviator and the cleanness of the air war.

These writers use multiple genres to examine aerial warfare, including non-fiction, poetry, and fiction. Rather than separate these texts, I study them together based on the strong thematic links that span this generic diversity. This linkage is justified, I believe, by the field-broadening work of Peter Aichinger and Jennifer C. James; both critics expand the definition of war literature to multiple genres, including memoirs and journalism, recognizing that in many texts "the effects of war endlessly reverberate, traversing across both space and time" (James 8). Reading non-fiction alongside fiction here is appropriate because of the frequent overlapping of literary techniques in these texts-- especially the use of metaphor, authorial intrusion, and intertextuality-- that blur the generic borders. Ultimately, this project provides a broad exploration of the impact of aerial warfare and its discourse on human lives, across space and time, from the streets of Barcelona, to the distant Plain of Jars, through five wars and eight decades, from the Great War to the war in Iraq.

In my first chapter, I explore the powerful spatial and discursive forces that collude to render the aviator nearly invisible by the end of the twentieth century, through a range of writings that expose and challenge this steady disappearance. First, Willa Cather's *One o f Ours* and William Faulkner's *Soldier's Pay* challenge the chivalric discourse that cloaked the aviator in idealism during World War I. Next, three texts from World War II, Randall Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," Joseph Heller's
*Catch-22* and Howard Nemerov’s “The War in the Air,” show the dirtiness of the air war by showing us the dead, wounded, or conspicuously absent aviator’s body. Finally, Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* and Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* challenge the human-machine conflation of Vietnam by prying the two entities apart to expose the aviator in the dynamic of airpower.

My next three chapters focus on the other side of the bombing dynamic, with texts that challenge the insidious discourses that hide civilian victims from public perception. Chapter Two examines the theories of air control that proliferated on the peripheries of empire during the interwar period, theories that effectively reinscribed the subjects of bombing to support this practice. Martha Gellhorn, in *The Face of War*, undermines these theories when they return to the metropole during the Spanish Civil War. I read her text alongside John Clark Pratt’s *The Laotian Fragments* because Pratt, also, interrogates the ways in which states reinscribe the bombing victim to support their employment of airpower. The third chapter, which reads André Malraux’s novel *L’espér (Man’s Hope)* together with Roald Dahl’s short story “Someone Like You,” questions the clarity of vision promised by the aerial perspective, demonstrating a growing awareness of uncertainty about both the physical and moral clarity this perspective provides. Building on this uncertainty, the texts of the fourth chapter address one of the most extreme applications of airpower, the firebombing of cities. In this chapter, I show how James Dickey in “The Firebombing” and Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* question the discourse of strategic bombing by exposing its victims, both in the air and on the ground, and spurring their readers to greater empathy by imagining their own homes at the heart of the inferno. Finally, my epilogue makes a brief foray into the twenty-first century,
tracing the evolution of these same discursive forces as they encounter contemporary and future weaponry. In Suzanne Collins’s *Mockingjay*, I examine how echoes of Vonnegut and Herr in her portrayal of an urban firebombing and televised, staged combat challenge the clean war discourse that supports postmodern wars waged in city streets and in the skies above. I pair this text with Jason Armagost’s “Things to Pack When You’re Bound for Baghdad,” the memoir of a stealth bomber pilot intent on making us see the aviator despite the technological forces that work so hard to hide him.

Taken in aggregate, these texts present a sharp indictment of the clean war discourse, as it has been used throughout the twentieth century, and is still used today, to support the use of airpower against civilians. They expose the tenuous foundations of this discourse, loosely supported by false assumptions, deliberate misreading, or the reinscription of targeted populations. They question the costs not only to the victims, but to the survivors and aircrews who participate in these airstrikes. As war in the air begins its second century, the means of attack have transformed drastically, but the methods used to justify airpower employment, by presenting it as a quick and precise way of waging war that ultimately saves lives, have not changed.
For a saving grace, we didn't see our dead,
Who rarely bothered coming home to die
But simply stayed away out there
In the clean war, the war in the air.
— Howard Nemerov

The premise that the air war is a clean war is based on the assumption that we see neither the deaths and injuring of its victims on the ground, nor those of the aviators who engage in it. While I address the ground victims in later chapters, here I will examine our inability to see the aviators themselves, and the function of twentieth-century American literature as a corrective to this failure. By foregrounding the body of the aviator—dead, injured, or conspicuously absent—the writers discussed here counter the notion of cleanness and force us to confront airpower's inherent messiness.

While the term aviator has often been read as synonymous with pilots, I use this term broadly to designate any aircrew member involved with the flying, navigation, communications, or offensive and defensive missions of the aircraft. Using this term

1 Several dictionaries define the word “aviator” as an old fashioned term designating a pilot of an aeroplane (Free Dictionary, Collins English Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary). Additionally, the term is quite often used today as an adjective (“aviator” sunglasses) rather than a noun. However, I prefer a broader definition which includes navigators, bombardiers, Weapon Systems Officers, and Electronic Warfare Officers (“Aviator” Wikipedia). This definition is supported by current use of the term by the U.S. Navy, for example, which uses the term “Naval Aviators” to designate both its pilots and Naval Flight Officers (NFOs). Moreover, current organizations such as “Women Military Aviators” use the term
inclusively, I believe, imparts a sense of the history and romanticism associated with the pioneers of aviation, while at the same time encompassing the expanding size and complexity of aircrews over the century. A broader definition also reflects the realities of violence inherent in aerial combat; those who fly know that their fates are intimately connected. Non-pilot crew members often remind each other that in a plane crash, they will die a split-second behind the pilot, and therefore must at all times be actively engaged in ensuring the survival of crew and aircraft.

In the early part of the century aviators were highly visible, but over the years they began to disappear. Aviators during the First World War were associated with chivalry and lauded as knights of the air, so these “young, upper-crust” pilots became heroes, and “their pictures were published, their exploits endlessly narrated by the press” (Van Creveld 29). This public perception became conflicted during the Spanish Civil War with the widespread bombing of civilians, but was temporarily revived with the Royal Air Force during the Battle of Britain in 1940. Later in World War II, however, large bomber crews began to dominate the air war, and individual glory was replaced by teamwork and the anonymity of flying as a part of massive formations. As the flyer’s mission became less palatable, the public gaze was often averted from the aviator. By the second half of the century, as wars became smaller and more geographically distant, particularly for Americans, the aviator has become almost invisible.

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2 Martin Francis notes that “in the summer of 1940 Fighter Command fought the Battle of Britain in clear sight of the inhabitants of the villages of southern England and the London suburbs” (1).
Even in the heyday of the aviator, however, the individual flyer was often erased by various distancing forces characteristic of the air war. I place these forces into two categories—spatial and discursive—both of which hide the injuring or death of the flyer and thus promote the cleanness of airpower. Spatial distancing occurs vertically, horizontally, and mechanically. Aviators often disappear vertically from public view simply because of the altitudes at which they fly. Early in the century, fliers were limited to lower altitudes where they were more visible from the ground, but technological advances soon allowed aircraft to operate in the stratosphere and beyond, making them more difficult to see and identify. For Americans, a horizontal, or geographical, distancing occurred as well, as nearly all combat flying of the past hundred years has taken place outside of the continental United States, to a great extent separating the public from the messiness of the air wars. Advances in aircraft design have resulted in mechanical distancing, as well. While World War I aircraft frequently featured open cockpits, where pilots and observers could be seen, the advent of closed cockpits and pressurization soon hid them from view. Night, all-weather capabilities and even stealth technology further remove aircraft and crew from both the human eye and even our radar-assisted gaze.

Because of the effects of spatial distancing, the deaths or wounding of aviators in these distant spaces are often unseen and unacknowledged, except in limited military or family circles. The lethal threats to aircraft and crew are many: enemy aircraft, anti-

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3 The Cold War might be seen as an exception to this claim, with Strategic Air Command’s bombers and tankers sitting nuclear alert in the continental U.S. However, I base this claim on the relatively low number of losses compared to a “hot war,” as well as the more iconic association of the Cold War with the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

4 While the bodies of soldiers and sailors often disappear as well, buried in mud, blown up by artillery shells, or drowned at sea, I focus on the aviator’s body because it so directly supports the discourse of cleanness.
aircraft artillery (AAA), surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), collision, friendly fire, and pilot error. Many planes that launch simply disappear, crashing into inaccessible mountains or the unforgiving sea, exploding in mid-air or plummeting to the ground, burning. As one Vietnam pilot explains, “We don’t see dead bodies, wounded people, guys shot up. If you don’t come back, you don’t come back. You just have burnt metal on the side of a mountain, a distant flame” (Rosenberg 62). When it is so difficult for the aviators themselves to see the bodies, it is even more so for the general public.

A second, and more insidious, factor in the aviator’s disappearance is discursive distancing, in which the aviator is hidden rhetorically. Elaine Scarry proposes that “while the central activity of war is injuring and the central goal in war is to out-injure the opponent, the fact of injuring tends to be absent from strategic and political descriptions of war” (12). The use of euphemisms such as “neutralization” or “collateral damage,” for example, often obscures the actual processes of killing and wounding that they replace. The aviator can also disappear when the individual is subsumed by a discourse which presents the aviator as a romantic, idealized figure, or contrarily, as an inhuman or machine-like being. When aviators are highly visible and romanticized as chivalric knights, for example, they become symbols of idealism, their deaths glorified, and their memories immortalized. The actual body of the aviator is essentially erased and replaced by this iconic figure.

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5 Scarry includes both wounding and killing under this term injuring. She describes two paths through which the injury disappears, and then categorizes this action further into four terms. The first path is omission, and the second is the re-description of the event. She claims the following four terms are used to erase the injury: 1) the injury as a by-product of war, not the goal of war; 2) as accidental death, on the road to some other goal; 3) as the cost of war; and 4) as the extension or continuation of a more innocent activity (66-77).
On the other hand, the aviator's body can also disappear into the aircraft itself. Scarry notes that armies often are described not as groups of people but as weapons (such as the spearhead). Although this metaphor is not intended to obscure, she explains, it effectively does so, causing the individual human body to disappear. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in aviation discourse when aviators are subsumed by the aircraft they fly, and the air war described as a war of machines, not people. Discursive distancing is insidious because it buries the aviator's humanity in rhetoric, reinscribing death and injury in terms that erase the individual. Through discursive distancing, the air war is portrayed as a space in which only icons or machines are destroyed, and thus becomes the epitome of cleanness. Through both spatial and discursive distancing, then, the invisibility of aviator's bodies contributes to the notion of the air war's cleanness; the public cannot count what it does not see.

In this chapter, I examine texts from three wars in which American writers combat the forces of disappearance by showing us the aviator’s body: frightened, wounded, dying, or conspicuously absent. As Sarah Cole suggests, “over and over, we find in war writing the provocation that the dead and wounded body… pushes back against the organizing oppositions of war” (27). Although it is rare to study texts across different genres, literary periods, and wars, I do so because of the similar ways in which these writers push back against the clean war discourse by exposing the aviators’ bodies. Because the invisible aviator has supported this discourse so consistently over the years, I analyze a range of writings to provide a sense of the ongoing challenges they present.

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An interesting non-fiction example is found in Daniel Swift’s recent book *Bomber County*. He thoughtfully notes, “what the bombers hear is silence, and what they want is witness” (19). By referring here to the aircrews as “bombers,” not “bomber aircrews,” or “the men who flew bombers,” Swift is in a sense erasing the human by conflating him with the machine, which is also called a bomber.
The generic and temporal diversity of these texts shows a keen awareness of spatial and discursive distancing among poets and novelists, both veterans and non-veterans, which has important implications for understanding the seductiveness of airpower discourse over the course of the century. These short explorations are not intended to be comprehensive analyses, but rather to suggest a new approach to reading these texts as challenges to the dominant discourse of cleanness in aerial warfare.

I begin with two novels written in the aftermath of World War I, Willa Cather's *One of Ours* and William Faulkner's *Soldier's Pay*, examining how these authors construct pilots in ways that challenge the chivalric idealization of the aviator so popular at the time. Next, I look at World War II texts that complicate the concept of cleanness by forcing a confrontation with the aviator's body that foregrounds the messiness of the air war. Randall Jarrell forces us to see the wounded aviator's body in "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner", while Joseph Heller in *Catch-22* shows us both the wounded and absent aviators that haunt his protagonist. Howard Nemerov's poem "The War in the Air" exposes the fallacy of cleanness, where "we didn’t see our dead" (1) because they disappeared into clouds, sea, or the distant land below. Finally, as the air war becomes even more geographically distant from the American gaze, two texts from Vietnam challenge the discursive distancing of the aviator in post-modern war, where man and machine are conflated. In *Dispatches*, Michael Herr chillingly illustrates the erasure of the aviator through the discourse of mechanization, while Tim O'Brien, in *Going After Cacciato*, humanizes the aviators by showing their fear.

By reading all of these texts together, it becomes apparent how seductive the discourse of the clean war has become, as multiple writers in several wars feel compelled
to challenge this discourse by exposing the otherwise invisible aviator. Their focus on the body functions subversively, challenging preconceived notions of the air war. By showing the aviator’s damaged body, writers of the air war thus push back against the discourse of cleanness by showing the extreme messiness of aerial combat.

**World War I Writing: Exposing the Chivalrous Myth of the Aviator**

The notion of the air war as a clean war developed in parallel with the romantic figuration of the aviator as a chivalric hero during the First World War, and it is within this framework that Willa Cather and William Faulkner construct their aviators. Aerial combat was welcomed because it was aristocratic, individual, visible, and deadly, recalling the exploits of warriors from the times of Homer through the Arthurian legends. In a war of increasing mechanization, pilots of the Great War were valorized as “silver knights who met in single combat over the line while men looked on and cheered the victor and buried with full honors the vanquished, whether he was friend or enemy, and set his propeller over his grave” (Steinbeck 87). Pilots were lionized as heroic warriors who respected the enemy and often participated in rituals to memorialize the fallen. Although by 1917 “the life expectancy of British pilots stood at eight days from their first combat flight” (Van Creveld 28), the romanticizing of their deaths removed them from the disillusionment associated with the increasingly ignoble deaths in the trenches below.

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7 Although multi-seat aircraft often operated during World War I, and many of the small aircraft included not only a pilot but also an observer who often operated a machine gun or dropped bombs, the most iconic figure of the war was the lone pilot engaged in single combat. In a sense, the observers themselves disappeared in the public perception, hidden by the chivalric myth of the pilot.

8 An excellent example of aerial chivalry as practiced in World War I can be found in Charles Biddle’s 1919 *The Way of the Eagle*. In a surprising juxtaposition, Biddle documents his hatred for the Germans while courteously welcoming a beaten opponent and solicitously notifying his unit of the capture.
The knight, explains Maurice Keen in his seminal book *Chivalry*, was “a man of aristocratic standing and probably of noble ancestry,” with a warhorse and weapons and ritual training (1). Substitute airplane for warhorse and the similarity is striking; Piet Hein Meijering notes that these young pilots “went into battle like the mounted warriors (or *chevaliers*) of olden times. Their charger was not a living horse but a machine, yet alive with vibrating power, obeying its rider” (23). He suggests that chivalry was revived in the air war because “the interest in it had not died with it. The romance of medieval chivalry had been kept alive in epic and song” (23). This potent construction of the military aviator as chivalric knight and member of an elite fraternity was aided by the existence of these flyers at the intersection of both old and new aristocracies, where the sons of ancient families such as the Baron Von Richthofen challenged the new elites of the Ivy League, such as Princeton hockey star Hobey Baker.11

While the performance of aerial chivalry would seem to civilize war, I contend that instead the myth of chivalry supported the clean war discourse both by masking the brutality of the air war and by hiding the bodies of killed and wounded aviators in the

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9 This association is supported both by the mission and required skills of aviation: David Edgerton explains that in the Great War, aircraft assumed many of the scouting functions of the cavalry, and John Steinbeck explains that a pilot uses the skills of gentle pressure and coaxing both to ride horses and to fly an airplane (94).

10 See Piet Hein Meijering for an extended discussion and numerous examples of aerial chivalry, including the play element, the practice of courtesy, the extension of mercy, and the honoring of the dead, including fallen enemy opponents. It is important to note, however, as Meijering explains, that not all pilots performed chivalry or believed in it. Generally, chivalry was only performed between opponents who considered themselves social equals; thus race and class were important components of the extension of chivalry.

11 Even before the war, the exclusivity of aviation was promoted by the Italian futurists. Historian Azar Gat notes the early connection between fascism and airpower: “The fascists were looking for a ‘Third Way’ to modernity that would preserve ‘civilization’ and elite culture from the threat of democratic and socialist plebeianism, that would encompass the masses without being dominated by them” (640). Benito Mussolini wrote in 1909: “Aviation must remain the privilege of the spiritual aristocracy. Not every Italian can or should fly” (Gat History 582). Writer and adventurer Gabriele d’Annunzio, particularly excited by the possibilities of aviation, echoed this notion, proclaiming “that flying would change civilization, create a new ruling aristocracy of aviators, and revolutionize war” (Gat 566).
romance of legend. While the elaborate memorial rituals for fallen flyers--especially for the famous aces--may seem to contradict this idea, it seems that these ceremonies served not so much to memorialize the individual aviator as to support the discourse of aerial chivalry and the notion that all were engaged in an honorable and noble endeavor.

The Great War revival of chivalry was deceptive because the notion of chivalry itself, as James Anderson Winn explains, "has always been a fraud, a system of polite and honorable ideals masking shameful and violent acts" (104). World War I pilot V.M. Yeates suggests this deception in his 1934 novel Winged Victory, as one pilot accuses another of dishonorably killing from ambush: "You’re quite right...” he answers. "We’re just a gang of tricky murderers like all war merchants. And the papers still call us knights errant” (98). Another World War I pilot expresses a similar awareness of the discursive lie constructing the aviator. John MacGavock Grider, in War Birds: Diary of an Unknown Aviator (1926), 12 wonders what to do with his no-holds-barred journal if he dies, explaining, “it will never do to let the people at home find out the truth about this war. They’ve been fed on bunk until they’d never believe anything that didn’t sound like a monk’s story of the Crusades” (254). These examples show how widespread the idea of chivalry in the air war had become, and particularly how it dominated the public perception of the aviator.

Although the notion of aerial chivalry declined later in the century, its prominence during the Great War created a discourse of honor and fairness in combat

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12 The issues of authorship of this text are fascinating. The editor, Elliott White Springs, who seems to have finished the journal after Grider’s death, may actually have written several of the passages attributed to Grider. In doing so, he may have been able to critique the system through the eyes of a dead man, thus presenting a scathing analysis which he could not do under his own name.
that informs all later images of the air war, and the aviator. In this section, I read Willa Cather's novel *One of Ours* (1922) with William Faulkner's first novel *Soldier's Pay* (1926) because of their similar challenges to the chivalric construction of the World War I flyer. Both authors undercut this potent discursive force of disappearance by subverting the contemporary myth and exposing the aviator's dead or wounded body to our observation.

**Willa Cather’s *One of Ours***

Willa Cather's novel *One of Ours* portrays the development of farm boy Claude Wheeler from young adulthood and a failed marriage in Nebraska (Books I-III), through enlistment and an Atlantic Ocean crossing (Book IV), to his death in France during World War I (Book V). Although the novel won a Pulitzer Prize in 1923, many influential critics dismissed the novel for a lack of realism and an overly romantic portrayal of the war. A fresh look at the text by David Stouck in 1975 provided a

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13 This image of the World War I aviator was promoted as late as 1980, with Bowen's Time-Life edition of the Epic of Flight series entitled *Knights of the Air*.

14 This pairing is suggested by Merrill Maguire Skaggs, who documents a long-term literary dialogue between Faulkner and Cather, beginning with *One of Ours*, which Skaggs claims influenced *Soldier's Pay* and other Faulkner works. Skaggs notes that “*Soldier's Pay* is actually an homage to several Cather novels...*My Antonia, The Professor's House, A Lost Lady,*... [and] *My Mortal Enemy*” (note 15, 51). She points out some interesting “overlaps” between the two, and even suggests that William Faulkner himself may have served as a model for Cather. In her interesting analysis of Cather’s influence on Faulkner, Skaggs suggests what she calls a “bizarre coincidence,” the fact that Cather’s pilot Victor Morse “is a character who matches the real Bill Faulkner as he was inventing himself at this time” (emphasis original 46). Skaggs refers here to Faulkner’s post-Great War self-fashioning as a wounded aviator, noted by several of his biographers. Skaggs points out similarities in physical characteristics between man and character, as well as Faulkner’s “evolving tall tales” (47). She proposes that while Cather and Faulkner were living in the same area in Greenwich Village in late summer of 1921, Faulkner “must have told vividly his current stories to Willa Cather, who liked them and promptly used them” in her novel (49). Although Skaggs’s idea is seductive, it is also problematic, since Cather had already completed a draft of the novel by this time.

15 Steven Trout points out that Cather researched thoroughly, and interviewed veterans, many of whom applauded the novel for successfully portraying their experiences. Despite this work, both H.L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis praised the Nebraska section of the novel, but panned the war scenes set in France as being “inauthentic” (qtd in Trout *AII* 117), a view which persisted for many years. In a frequently quoted critique, Ernest Hemingway accused Cather of gaining inspiration for her battle scenes from *Birth*
necessary corrective to previous scholarship, reading the novel as satire and arguing that the novel reflects Claude’s romantic vision of war, not Cather’s. Recent scholarship confirms this reading, noting that Cather expects the reader to see beyond this romanticized portrayal to understand “the illusory nature” of Claude’s war vision (Murphy 160) and challenge the dominant myths of the Great War (Olin-Ammentopp 141).

While much has been written about protagonist Claude, only a handful of scholars consider one of the minor characters, aviator Victor Morse, despite his location at a transitional point in the novel. I propose that a closer look at this character is warranted because Cather uses him to present a pointed critique of the romanticization of war. Victor Morse appears as perhaps the most artificial character in the novel because, as critics suggest, he is performing a role, “the obligatory role of dashing aviator,” (Murphy 264) “the swaggering English airman” (Trout MF 79). Morse, whose name conjures up elements of both victory and the Morse code used by airmen, is the son of a banker from Crystal Lake, Iowa. Trapped by his lackluster life in the bank, which he calls “death in life” (308), Morse finds the liberation he seeks by becoming a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). He has flown for two years, both in France, where he was injured (287) and most recently as an instructor in the U.S.; he is now returning to the war. When Claude meets him, Morse is drunk, keeps a bottle under his pillow, and cuts a dashing

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"of a Nation," and then patronizingly concluded, “poor woman, she had to get her war experience somewhere” (Trout AJ 105).

16 Of those who do discuss Victor Morse, John J. Murphy significantly connects Morse with Cather’s change in style, from realism to romanticism during the trans-Atlantic voyage, and with Claude’s movement into “an enchanted world” of adventure (160); Skaggs notes the significance of Morse’s name (47) and suggests his origin in Crystal Lake is “because Cather thinks she can see straight through him” (48).

17 The Royal Flying Corps, attached to the British army, was renamed and became an independent service as the Royal Air Force on April 1, 1918.
figure. He has re-fashioned himself sufficiently to fool Claude and his roommates, by adopting both the language and mannerisms of the RFC: “he had gone a good way toward acquiring an English accent, the boys thought” (287); “Victor had tea in a special corner of the officer’s smoking-room every afternoon—he would have perished without it” (304). These absurdities add an element of humor to Morse’s character, as Steven Trout correctly observes, describing Victor as “one of Cather’s greatest achievements,” because he is “simultaneously ridiculous and compelling” (76). He is compelling as a character because, as readers, we see the ridiculousness while understanding that neither Morse nor Claude recognizes it as such.

Significantly, our first introduction to Victor Morse is as “the missing man” assigned to the fourth bunk in Claude’s cabin (276). With this description, Cather exposes the extent to which the American Morse has subsumed himself in the role of the British aviator, to the point where the man himself is missing, lost in the assumed identity. The models Cather used to create Victor Morse may have suggested this treatment of the aviator. Although Skaggs suggests Faulkner himself was a model for Cather, a more likely model, as Trout points out, was World War I pilot Victor Chapman, whose book *Victor Chapman’s Letters from France* (1917) is in Cather’s archives (Trout *MF* 77); a closer look at this source provides insight into Cather’s construction of Victor Morse to deliberately challenge the figuration of the chivalric aviator.

Victor Chapman was the first American flyer to die in World War I, on 23 June, 1916, so his death attained a very public significance. He reportedly died when he

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18 Trout notes several of the changes Cather made; Victor Chapman, like many early American aviators, was elite, moneyed, attended St. Paul’s school, then Harvard, had traveled extensively in Europe, while Victor Morse had risen from Midwestern obscurity. Chapman, who died in 1916, was flying with the French, not the English.
attacked a superior flight of German aircraft to defend his squadron mates, so he is presented as heroic, a romantic, rescuing warrior. He becomes a symbol of disinterested self-sacrifice, dying for a cause, not for his own country. While Chapman’s letters home are themselves mundane, what stands out in the book is the opening “Memoir” by his father, John, in which Victor is lionized as a chivalric hero in tributes from family, friends, and even the French prime minister. In this section, Harvard classmate John Temple Jeffries claims Chapman’s death “means the loss of a man who had all the noble and chivalrous instincts” (17); John Chapman writes, “Victor’s entry into the American Aviation was, to him, like being made a Knight” (25). The French prime minister called Chapman “the living symbol of American idealism” (28), and a letter from his best friend, fellow pilot Kiffin Rockwell exclaims: “He died the most glorious death, and at the most glorious time of life to die, especially for him with his ideals” (42). The construction of the aviator is perhaps best summarized by French author and family friend Andre Chevrillon: “no soldier’s death in our modern battle has so much of the truly epic....They carry us back to the legendary times in which everything was pure and beautiful--to the time of the Medieval Knight who ran, single-handed [to help besieged brethren]” (36).

In opposition to this romantic account of the chivalric aviator, then, Cather’s development of Morse reflects the broader skepticism toward romantic constructions of gender evident throughout her work. Recognizing the seductiveness of this figure of the aviator, as well as the unreality of this construction, she creates Victor Morse in a transgressive move designed to challenge this image. Morse tells Claude he chose the RFC because “the air force seemed the most brilliant and attractive branch of the service”
Dazzled by this brilliance, Claude fails to see the real Morse beyond the chivalric myth of the aviator. The reader realizes, though Claude does not, that Morse has a serious drinking problem, and has a mistress (to whom he is unfaithful) who is twice his age and syphilitic. When asked about his combat victories, Morse admits that one of the pilots he brought down was a woman; her death "was nasty business" (288). This point is particularly interesting because women did not fly combat aircraft in World War I, thus making Cather's interjection of a woman pilot here noteworthy. By combining these revelations, the author undermines the chivalric myth of the aviator. Neither Morse, the knight, nor his woman Maisie, are pure or honorable. His relationship with her is an example of carnal, not courtly love. Most significantly, the enemy pilot is not a worthy opponent, whose death brings honor upon the warrior, but a woman, so that even Morse's combat is "nasty," a disgrace, not an honor.

By thus undercutting the figure of the chivalric aviator, Cather exposes the discourse that constructs this heroic image, an image that is dangerous because it continues to seduce even after it has been questioned. Frederick T. Griffiths correctly notes that as Claude approaches the war, Morse is part of "a chorus of warning voices" (265), which Claude ultimately ignores. While other World War I writers stress the disillusionment of the war experience, Cather is more concerned that young American men view the war as a romantic quest for masculinity. She thus continues her challenge to this view by deconstructing the heroism associated with Morse's death. Claude is on the ground in Europe when he hears of Victor's demise:

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19 In the Second World War, many women from the Soviet Union flew in combat, and women in the U.S. and England flew military aircraft on test, training, and ferrying missions.
20 I am not suggesting that Cather believed a woman pilot an unworthy opponent, or that I do, but arguing that in the patriarchal system of chivalry, a female opponent would have been seen as such.
Morse, the American ace? Hadn’t he heard? Why, that got into the
London papers. Morse was shot down inside the Hun line three weeks
ago. It was a brilliant affair. He was chased by eight Boche planes,
brought down three of them, put the rest to flight, and was making for
base, when they turned and got him. His machine came down in flames
and he jumped, fell a thousand feet or more. (374)

This image is seductive, as we focus on the brilliance of Morse’s daring stand against
overwhelming odds; however, with the end of the passage Cather undercuts this
brilliance through the powerful image of Icarus, the falling aviator. Reading Morse
through Ovid’s myth, we see that Morse “has literally risen, Dedalus-like” (Trout 77)
from his Midwest, middle-class roots. Morse thus embodies both figures of the classical
myth. Daniel Swift interprets the myth through the lens of modern aviation, explaining:
“if we only have Icarus, then this is a story about a wayward boy. But if we also tell of
Daedalus, we have a parable of technology gone awry” (241). The airplane itself is thus
wrapped in myth through which the modern pilot both rises and falls. By invoking this
myth, then, Cather critiques our propensity to build a mythical aura around the aviator, a
myth that, like the sun, is ultimately unattainable.

As Claude laments Morse’s death, he asks: “What other age could have produced
such a figure? That was one of the things about this war; it took a little fellow from a
little town, gave him an air and a swagger, a life like a movie film—and then a death like
the rebel angels” (375). Cather’s word choice here highlights the construction of the
pilot; he is “produced” like “a movie film,” and is therefore essentially artificial and
insubstantial. Her closing alludes to Milton, where Satan’s defiant stand against a
superior force makes him appear heroic. As this image is seductive, but dangerous, so is
the romanticism of flying, and war in general. It is this message that Claude should learn
from Morse, but does not, leaving Claude with a romantic view of war until he is
ultimately killed in the trenches of France.

Cather, then, presented with an over-the-top memorialization of Victor Chapman
as chivalric hero, creates a counter-image of a pilot that subverts the dominant
construction of the aviator in World War I. She presents an artificial, ridiculous, self-
fashioned character, exposes the seductiveness of the myth, and challenges it by invoking
classical myths of meteoric rise and ultimate fall. Victor Morse becomes a compelling
character as we see him subsumed by the myth, an experience Cather heightens by
showing the lack of chivalry in his actions. By thus exposing this “missing man,” she
challenges the romanticizing of aerial combat, and more broadly, of war.

William Faulkner’s Soldier’s Pay

While Cather’s flyer plays a small, but key role in her novel, William Faulkner’s
two aviators are both present, and conspicuously absent, throughout his novel Soldier’s
Pay. The novel revolves around themes of seduction and death, as Clifford E. Wulfman
suggests, themes which are particularly compelling when read in the context of the
chivalric aviator. Reading the novel through this lens reveals Faulkner grappling with
issues of chivalry, absence, and wounding as he explores the figure of the aviator, a study
with deep relevance not only in the author’s writing but also in his personal life.

21 I am not aware of any critics who have studied Faulkner’s characters in this context. Instead,
critics Richard Marius, Joel Williamson, and John Lowe all identify elements of loss and change in the
novel, particularly as they are manifested in the aftermath of the Great War. Others identify the cry for
help contained in Faulkner’s working title, Mayday, “m’aidez, help me” (Watson 22) and the significance
of naming; Frederick R. Karl notes that the name Mahon suggests manhood or the everyman and Mrs.
Powers signifies the potential power of rejuvenation. He also notes the influence of T.S. Eliot’s “The
Wasteland” (ix) on the novel.
Faulkner's post-war fraudulent assumption of the role of wounded RAF aviator— "his greatest role, the one he played the longest and most consistently" (Kartiganer 11) -- shows how personally appealing he found this image. Because he himself was seduced by the powerful lure of the aviator, Faulkner's portrayal of these flyers reveals a profound confusion about this seduction, along with an awareness of the self-deception, at both the personal and societal levels, involved with this image creation. By juxtaposing the young flyer, seduced by the popular aviator image, with the severely wounded protagonist, the author exposes the dangers of this discourse, dangerous because the romanticizing of the air war hides its actual purpose of killing and injuring.

The novel centers on Lieutenant Donald Mahon, an American aviator who has been flying with the RAF and now returns home to Georgia at the war's end. He suffers from a severe head wound, which has hideously scarred his face, erased his memory, and left him going blind. Faulkner contrasts him with bitterly jealous Cadet Julian Lowe,

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22 See Williamson for a thorough discussion of Faulkner's real and imagined military experiences. For a discussion of the performative aspect of Faulkner's role-playing see Watson, and for contextualization with Faulkner's fraternal envy, see Lowe. When the U.S. entered the war, Faulkner tried to enlist, but was rejected due to his small stature. He then formed an elaborate scheme with friend Phil Stone to pose as Englishmen and travel to Canada to join the RAF. He began ground school in Toronto in July, 1918, and was still enrolled there as a cadet when the war ended in November of the same year. Numerous sources agree that he never earned pilot wings, never flew in combat, and "in fact may never have even been in a plane that was not sitting safely on the ground" (Kartiganer 13). Nevertheless, for his return home to Oxford, Faulkner outfitted himself in an RAF officer's uniform, complete with wings, overseas cap, and swagger stick, and passed himself off as a veteran pilot. He enhanced this performance with a simulated wounding, affecting a limp and carrying a cane, and sometimes insinuating that he had a plate in his head. Williamson explains that Faulkner "was amazingly persistent in offering himself as a flying officer, and credibility ran amazingly high" (185). The story was even enhanced as it spread, so that by 1932 a published description of the author credited him with two enemy kills! Perhaps feeling the pressure of the fraud he was performing, Faulkner many years later took flying lessons and obtained a private pilot's license (Lowe 82).

23 I find his portrayal of the aviator confusing because in the novel he firmly rejects the romanticizing of the aviator, although he continued to perform the aviator role himself throughout his life. Perhaps he recognizes the lie inherent in his performance and yet after six years of posturing could not let go of the lie himself.

24 John Liman associates Mahon's blindness with castration and loss of fertility, an association that compounds the horror of the wounding.
who was in flight school and two weeks from getting his wings when the war ended.  
Private Joe Gilligan and Margaret Powers team up to get him home, where his fiancée, Cecily, horrified by his disfigurement, rejects him for another man. Unlike other post-war novels of wounding, which focus on the rehabilitation of the veteran, Faulkner rejects all hope of rehabilitation; early in the novel we learn that Mahon will die.

Like Cather's pilot Victor Morse, Faulkner's Cadet Julian Lowe is a prime example of a young man "seduced by outmoded canons of chivalry rendered obsolete and foolishly romantic by the technology of destruction in World War I" (Marius 22). A disappointed nineteen-year-old, Lowe logged forty-seven hours in flight school, but was still two weeks short of earning his wings when the war ended. For Lowe, Mahon represents everything that he could have been, had he become a pilot. Mahon, despite his damage, is at the center of a group of concerned admirers, including Mrs. Powers, a beautiful woman with whom Lowe promptly falls in love. The seductiveness of the aviator's image becomes clear as soon as the two men meet. Looking up from his seat, Lowe "saw a belt and wings," the wings indicating Mahon's pilot status, then "he rose and met a young face with a dreadful scar across his brow. My God, he thought, turning sick" (21). However, despite his initial response to Mahon's scar, Lowe envies the man: "Had I been old enough or lucky enough this might have been me, he thought jealously" (21). Although Mahon is clearly mentally confused--his gaze is "puzzled" (21)—as well as physically disfigured, the wings on his chest create an image of heroism so seductive

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25 It has become common practice to read Faulkner and his family in the novel, seeing the young aviation cadet as "a mirror image...of William Faulkner" (Lowe 87), and reading Mahon as a construction of Faulkner's brother Jack, who suffered a severe head injury near the end of the war. Watson notes that both here and elsewhere, the author's warrior performance "carried directly into his poetry and fiction" (Watson 21). I am more concerned here with the goals Faulkner achieved through this construction rather than with its roots.

26 Lawrence Stalling's 1924 novel Plumes, for example, depicts the struggles of an amputee to return to normality after the war.
that Lowe wishes to be him. “To have been him! He moaned. Just to be him. Let him take this sound body of mine! Let him take it. To have got wings on my breast, to have wings; and to have got his scar, too, I would take death to-morrow” (41). Like Mahon, Lowe is unable to see clearly here; he is so dazzled by the pilot’s wings that he romanticizes the scar as well, seeing it as a part of the heroic, dashing aviator he so wants to be. His self-deception prevents him from seeing the physical manifestations of the injury: Mahon’s failing eyesight, mental confusion, and pending death.

Wulfman aptly notes the metonymic functioning of the scar in this scene, which “displaces Mahon, the figure of the returning hero, and makes him the mere ground for the scar’s figure” (para 17). However, it is not just the scar that functions metonymically here; the wings perform the same role. Lowe equates wings and scar, so that the latter assumes the same romantic significance as the former, and both promise the love of a woman: “she would say I love you, too. If I had wings, and a scar…” he dreams. “His scar: his wings” (43). Just as Lowe desires to assume Mahon’s wings, so, too, does he desire the scar. Scarring in war is significant, as Noel Polk explains, because it performs the cultural work of “creating and sustaining a national narrative, a history that glorifies the sacrifices others have made for us...” (141) and continues to inspire the youth to offer their own lives to the nation. The conflation of the scar with the RAF wings here, however, adds a new level of significance to the scar, by associating it with England, Arthurian legend, and the chivalry of the skies. For Lowe, the scar and wings support not a national narrative but a trans-Atlantic myth of chivalric aviator which cloaks the modern, technological air war in the mists of ancient legend.

Faulkner ridicules this myth by making Lowe pathetically laughable when he
learns that Mahon is dying. "‘Dying?’” he asks. “How the man managed to circumvent him at every turn! As if it were not enough to have wings and a scar. But to die” (48). The young man even goes so far as to imagine himself dead, lying gloriously in an open tomb, with wings on his chest, and he blames Fate for not providing him this marvelous opportunity. Here, Faulkner uses humor and irony to undercut Lowe’s love affair with the aviator, as we laugh at the young man’s foolishness, but are appalled by the recognition that this warrior image is so appealing it seduces boys completely, to the point of welcoming wounding and death. At this point, Faulkner dismisses Lowe from the novel, along with his outmoded view of the aviator and the air war, when Mrs. Powers, recognizing him as the child he is, sends him home to his mother. While we occasionally read his letters to Mrs. Powers, he disappears from the center of the action and is relegated to the periphery of the text. Faulkner’s use of Lowe to open the novel thus reminds us of how compelling the image of the aviator can be, while undermining this illusion by conflating it with immaturity and foolishness.

Faulkner continues to indict aerial chivalry in a passage illustrating Mahon’s bleak future. In a frank discussion with Margaret Powers, Joe Gilligan predicts that Mahon’s fiancée Cecily will reject him when she sees his scar. He bases this forecast on a letter he has found from Cecily to Mahon, a letter full of “all the old bunk about knights of the air and the romance of battle, that even the fat crying ones outgrow soon as the excitement is over and uniforms and being wounded ain’t only not stylish no more, but it is troublesome” (37). In the aftermath of war, Gilligan recognizes that the discourse of

27 Interestingly, the concept of the superficial woman who cannot accept the aviator’s disfigurement becomes almost a trope by World War II. Martin Francis discusses five rehabilitation narratives by aviators who suffered either severe facial burns or amputations. Almost all of them record the reaction of a woman associated with the flyer—wife, girlfriend, nurse—who reacts with horror and loathing.
romance and chivalry is "bunk," a childish fascination that attracts because of its excitement, but like all the distractions of childhood, will soon be outgrown. With the understated description "troublesome," he rejects the picturesque quality of the wound, recognizing it instead as a major blow to the body's integrity, one from which recovery may never be possible.

The remainder of the novel challenges aerial chivalry in two ways: through Mahon's wounding and through his absence. In a tactical move that shows his determination to de-romanticize the aviator, Faulkner withholds the wounding scene until late in the novel, thus forcing readers to encounter the injury and subsequent debilitation without the luxury of wrapping it in heroics. Christina S. Jarvis, in *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity During World War II*, explains how important the narrativization of the wounding event is to the injured: "almost all of the hospital interviews and nonfictional narratives...begin with the time, place, and immediate events leading up to the moment of wounding" (94). She suggests the injured men are thus trying to attach meaning to the wounding, so that "wounds incurred while fighting bravely...could bestow honor or sense of purpose to the wounded individual" (94). By withholding this event, then, Faulkner prevents any attachment of meaning or suggestion of heroism through the wounding.

Mahon is wounded in two places, his right hand, which was pierced by a bullet and is "withered" and "blistered" (28), and his face, which is more significant because it to the disfigured face. Both William Simpson and Geoffrey Page document this rejection, and explain how important it was to the injured man to be accepted for who he was internally, not rejected based on his exterior (142). Interestingly, several of the cases also show a second woman who does get beyond the mangled face to provide love and support to the wounded man, so that we have a dichotomy between superficial women and "angels".

28 While Jarvis is writing specifically about the Second World War, it seems reasonable that the wounded of World War I would have approached their wounding in the same way.
is so visible, and representative of the man himself. Faulkner leaves the details to our imaginations, describing the scar only as "dreadful"; readers encounter the scar through the eyes of other characters, such as Lowe who feels sick upon seeing it, and Cecily, who screams and faints. Faulkner thus de-romanticizes the aviator by making Mahon an object of revulsion or pity, rather than admiration (other than by misguided individuals such as Lowe). This construction predicts the actual experiences of aviators in later wars documented by Martin Francis, whose study of personal narratives by injured aviators notes that severe facial wounding evoked responses of "fear and pity" from viewers, thus subverting the aviator's "status as a valorous man of honour and action" (132). If the extent of Mahon's injury was the scar alone, however, he may have been able to recover this high status, but Faulkner further complicates the injuring by suggesting the flyer suffered brain damage as well, resulting in his conspicuous absence from the text.

Faulkner's portrayal of the aviator is complicated by Mahon's absence from the novel, because with this absence the author seems to be creating his own discursive erasure. While the pilot is physically present throughout much of the novel, his "illness, blindness and amnesia limit his ability to fashion his own subjectivity" (Scoblionko 64). He is often described as "puzzled," and as he deteriorates physically, he is frequently asleep; even when awake, he is seldom lucid, so that he is essentially "defined by his absence" (Dalgarno 265). Nevertheless, as John Liman points out, Faulkner makes "his narrative spiral around" Mahon despite this absence (45). The use of the absent body as a literary narrative technique became well established during the modernist period,

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29 While Francis's study is limited to World War II aviators, it seems reasonable to believe that aviators of the First World War would have noted similar responses to similar wounding.
30 Judith Bryant Wittenberg supports this reading, suggesting Mahon is an "elusive empty center" common in Faulkner's fiction (243).
enabling writers “to subvert...national narratives” (Kern 23). One early example is Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), where the conspicuous absence of the main character Jacob “symbolizes the approximately 885,000 Englishmen who were killed in World War I, half of them blown to bits and unrecovered...” (Kern 22). In a similar move, Faulkner creates an absent character who suggests the losses of the war. However, Faulkner makes this absence perform double duty by emphasizing the aviator’s body and wounding. Although various characters insist on situating the scar within legend, threatening to replace the man, the scar actually “signifies a terrifying return of the body” (Wulfman para 25). By crafting a character that is neither fully present nor completely absent, Faulkner highlights the damaged body, thus separating the man from the myth and undermining the discursive erasure of the aviator.

This absence can be read as a universal critique of war, the price a soldier must pay, as Faulkner’s title suggests. In fact, by selecting this new title to replace the working title *Mayday*, Faulkner may have been trying to universalize his message. However, both his presentation of Cadet Lowe at the start of the novel and his own personal posturing highlight his particular fascination with the image of the World War I aviator and seem to insist that we read the novel as a critique of this image. By exploring the aviator in this novel, written when he had been performing the role of the aviator himself for six years, Faulkner seems to welcome the opportunity to question both his own seduction and that of the American public. It is seductive to view the flyer as part of a chivalrous legend, and to glorify his sacrifices, but as Faulkner shows, when the aviator is objectified as either a legend or a symbol, the man himself disappears. With Mahon simultaneously present and absent in the novel, Faulkner forces a confrontation with the
body of the aviator and the discursive forces working to render this body invisible.

**World War II—the changing image**

Powerful spatial and discursive forces combined in World War II to hide the bodies of aviators from the American public. As in the First World War, the air battles of the Second were conducted in geographic isolation, far from the view of the U.S. civilian. Unlike the Great War, few World War II air battles were even seen by ground troops, since many of them were conducted between Dunkirk and D-Day (when there were no Allied troops in Western Europe) or far in advance of the front lines in both Europe and the Pacific. Due to this geographical distancing, deaths of aircrews, although numerous, were often unseen: “in the Netherlands alone, more than 7,000 planes tore into the ground or the water,” and even to this day, “plane wrecks (from the Fifth Air Force) are strewn all over the forests” of Papua, New Guinea (Fussell *Wartime* 283-284). Many of these airplanes launched and never returned, with the crews essentially disappearing.

During the Second World War, the rhetoric of aerial chivalry faded but was replaced by new and equally effective discursive forces. The ideal of chivalry actually began disappearing during the Spanish Civil War, which introduced widespread bombing of civilians, but its demise was assured with the extensive use of strategic bombing during World War II. The image of a knight engaged in single combat against a worthy foe became unsustainable as large bomber crews attacked cities. John Steinbeck, documenting the training of American bomber crews in a 1942 book *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team*, contrasts them with the knights of the earlier war by depicting

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31 I discuss airpower during the Spanish Civil War more extensively in Chapters 3 and 4.

32 The valorization of pilots was revived briefly during the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, where RAF fighter pilots were seen as brave defenders against German bombing. Winston Churchill’s statement “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few” (21 August, 1940) illustrates the discursive work upholding the heroic vision of the aviator.
the bomber crew as a democratic (rather than aristocratic) organization, dedicated to teamwork, and uninterested in individual glory. Thus, the individual aviator is absorbed by the team—the aircrew—and these in turn by the massive bombing formations of the war, such as the British one-thousand bomber raid on Cologne in 1942, with 6,500 airmen participating (Friedrich 71). Opportunities for individual glory thus disappeared, as did those for honor. The bombing of European cities, Paul Friedrich explains, “eliminated all previous inhibitions against killing. The honor of the warrior, which had once demanded that the defenseless be protected rather than massacred, was fading away” (61). While it was thus less common for an aviator to disappear in chivalric iconization during the Second World War, other forces operating at this time continued the trope of discursive disappearance.

Propaganda and censorship, important discursive elements in any war, during World War II created a serious gap between what the American public saw and what the combatants saw. The latter, Paul Fussell explains, found that “optimistic publicity and euphemism had rendered their experience so falsely that it would never be readily communicable” (*Wartime* 268). The “real war” was inaccessible, especially “in unbombed America” (bombed areas of Britain, he notes, had a better, although never complete, understanding of the war’s violence) (268). One of the factors that contributed to this perceptual gap was the public’s inability to see the dead, and especially to see the extreme violence wrought on the human body by modern war. Christina Jarvis notes a government ban on publishing pictures of the dead and injured, resulting in “a conspicuous absence of dead and wounded bodies in the media” early in the war, a policy

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33 While many fighter pilots remained in all theaters of the war, and did indeed have opportunities for individual glory and honor, it is generally accepted that the sheer number of participants in the air war contributed to the disappearance of this chivalric discourse.
which was later liberalized somewhat to prepare Americans to cope with the aftermath of the war (97). Still, in an effort to remain optimistic and shield American civilians from the horrors of the war, the government censored the realities of wounding: “American soldiers did not shed any blood in print until a May 14, 1945 issue of Life ran a Robert Capa photo depicting a dying soldier next to a pool of his own blood” (Jarvis 89). As Fussell notes, the bodies of the dead, when pictured at all, are “intact” and fully dressed (Fussell 269). This discursive distancing, ironically, presents a nation fighting a desperate war without visible losses.

While these forces conspire to hide the bodies of all combatants, on land, sea, and in the air, I contend that the writers presented below note an even greater propensity for the body to disappear in combat aviation due to the combination of spatial and discursive forces discussed above. Jarrell, Heller, and Nemerov all present the wounded or conspicuously absent body of the aviator to push back against these forces of invisibility and to thus illuminate the lie embedded in the clean air war discourse. The war in the air appears so clean, they suggest, because the bodies of dead and wounded aviators are so effectively hidden from view.

Randall Jarrell’s “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”

Randall Jarrell’s widely-anthologized poem “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” practically screams a challenge to the cleanness of the air war.34 Published at the end of his 1945 collection Little Friend, Little Friend, Jarrell’s second book of poetry, this poem

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34 The ball turret was located on the belly of the American B-17 and B-24 bombers, and due to its limited space, was manned by the smallest crew members. The gunners assumed a fetal position within the ball turret, so the womb-like simile in Jarrell’s poem is quite accurate. A simple Google search of “ball turret” provides numerous pictures of the turret, and of the man inside it.
incorporates many of the themes of the collection, including explorations of death, aerial combat, waking, and blood. In doing so, the poem, like many of his other poems, provides what Diedrik Oostdijk describes as a "self-effacing intervention of overlooked war victims" (121), particularly aviators.

Jarrell was an established poet and professor, with one published collection, before he was drafted in 1942. He trained as a pilot, but washed out of pilot training, and eventually became a state-side instructor of aerial navigation in the Army Air Corps. He never saw combat; as Daniel Swift notes, he "imagined every aspect of the bombing" (73), often based on stories told him by returning crewmembers. Poet-aviator James Dickey presents a highly-conflicted critique of Jarrell's collected works, bemoaning the lack of "any people in the war poems," reading all of Jarrell's speakers as stereotypes. However, Dickey counters his own argument with the awareness that "wars are fought, now, almost entirely by machines and that men suffer more or less as an irrelevant afterthought of the machines" (22). With this observation, Dickey, whose own poem reflects a bomber pilot's similar struggle with invisibility, highlights a critical element in Jarrell's poem, the attempt to show us the aviator, despite the collusion of spatial and discursive forces that prevent this vision.

"Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" is a short, compact poem, its five lines

35 Diedrik Oostdijk (Among the Nightmare Fighters) provides a fascinating reading of Dickey's critique of Jarrell in Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now. Oostdijk suggests that Dickey's essay shows an admiration for, and anxiety of influence towards, Jarrell. Dickey sets up his critique as a dialectic between two speakers, A and B, the first of which admires Jarrell's work, and the second who critically pans it. Although Dickey was harsh in his critique, Oostdijk believes "in some way Dickey was in love with Jarrell" (110). This reading is indeed indicated in the essay when speaker A has the last word, implying that despite the technical arguments against Jarrell's work, he inexplicably transcends them, so that "Jarrell will have something to say to people for a very long time to come, especially as the world tries increasingly to survive by inhumanity" (Dickey "Jarrell" 24). I will examine Dickey's poem "The Firebombing," in Chapter 4.
formally reflecting the speaker’s short and terrifying journey from innocence to experience, to death. The gunner, speaking as a man already dead, details his initial youth and innocence, entering the air war “from my mother’s sleep (line 1),” then awakening “to black flak and the nightmare fighters” (4). As Margot Norris suggests, aerial warfare here is “evoked as a cruel awakening into a horrific alien universe” (*War Poetry* 47). Correctly, she notes the hostility and cruelty of the aerial space of combat, but her use of the word “alien” requires further unpacking. This space, “six miles from earth” (3) is indeed alien in that, like another planet, it does not support human life. Jarrell indicates this hostility with the idea of freezing in line two, “my wet fur froze,” a literal possibility in a space where the ambient air temperature at 31,000 feet is minus 56 degrees Celsius. The fur here assumes a double meaning, suggesting literally the fur-lined flying suits, jackets and boots of the flyer, or figuratively, a sub-human animal state required to survive in this space. Jarrell shows, then, how this mechanical distancing, required to operate in this alien world, effectively hides the flyer’s body from public view.

The presence of flak (anti-aircraft artillery fire) and enemy aircraft in this space, both intent on destroying the bomber and killing the crew, adds to the hostility of Jarrell’s portrayal. However, if we read Norris’s use of “alien” to indicate an unfamiliar space, we see the paradox between flyer and non-combatant; this space, which is unfortunately all too familiar to the bomber crew, struggling to attain thirty missions, is virtually unseen by Jarrell’s audience. The deaths that occur here, due to this spatial distancing, are also unseen.

Since this spatial distancing is a characteristic of aerial warfare which cannot be
overcome by the poet, Jarrell must focus instead on fighting the discursive distancing of wartime censorship which hid these deaths from the American public. Countering the perception that the air war is clean, he shows us its ultimate messiness with a startling ending: “When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose” (5). The poet shows us the total disintegration of the gunner, a revolting death which reduces the solid, substantial human body to a liquid which is simply washed away. Using a technique similar to Faulkner, Jarrell here withholds a description of the actual wounding which results in this death; we assume that it was caused by one of the hostile elements at work in this space. But where Faulkner eventually shows us the wounding, Jarrell omits it completely, thus refusing to allow the death of the gunner to become heroic or idealized.

Literary critics have noted the way World War II writers emphasize the body to de-romanticize war. Jay Winter says soldier-poets wrote to counter the images created by older writers of “an imaginary war, filled with medieval knights, noble warriors, and sacred moments of sacrifice” (204). Alberto Casadei concurs, noting that, “in an almost totally technological war as the one fought from 1939-45, the corpse of the fallen soldier often becomes the symbol of the non-relevance or, at least, of the non-justifiability of the death of the individual” (287). Unlike the epic death in war, which brought glory both to victor and fallen, the representation of the body in modern war often “underline[s] the weakness of the human body” (287). Casadei suggests death in combat no longer gains any meaning, which is true in Jarrell’s poem. However, Jarrell attaches significance to this ghastly death of the aviator by showing it, asking readers to imagine the blood and gore being washed out of the turret, and thus refusing to allow either spatial or discursive

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36 While Casadei primarily evaluates Italian novels which do not involve aerial warfare, his observations about World War II are general enough to be applied broadly.
forces to hide the gunner's destroyed body. Published so soon after the war's end, this poem works to make the invisible aviator visible, critiquing both the discourse of airpower and the overall human costs of World War II.

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*

Joseph Heller's 1961 novel *Catch-22* fits neatly between Jarrell's poem and Nemerov's, combining Jarrell's focus on the all-too-horribly-present wounding with Nemerov's portrayal of absence to provide an almost textbook account of the distancing forces that work to hide the aviator's body. With numerous accounts of vanishing flyers—Clevinger, Orr, Mudd, Dunbar and Nately—Heller creates a motif of absence in the novel that he juxtaposes with three visceral accounts of fatal wounding: Kraft, Kid Sampson and Snowden. This litany of deaths, made painfully visible through a theme of looking, compels readers to see the dead, wounded, or absent bodies of these flyers, thus exposing the fallacious assumptions of the clean air war.

In reading the novel in this way, I diverge from many critics who, as Michael C. Scoggins notes, believe that *Catch-22* "is in fact not a war novel at all" (213). Heller himself suggested that he was not writing about war, but about bureaucracy, a statement recently challenged by biographer Tracy Daugherty, who argues Heller presented "a radical new view of the subjects at hand: war, faith, heroism, and language" (186).

Supporting this view, both Scoggins and Daugherty have noted the novel's grounding in

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37 Scoggins explains that most critics have focused on the novel's structure, influence, humor, values, or allusions, rather than its response to war. In the last decade, however, I have noted more critics looking at *Catch-22* as a war novel: James Dawes reads the novel as a challenge to organizational dynamics and language in war; Kathy J. Phillips examines Heller's portrayal of masculinity in war; and Alberto Cacicedo looks at Yossarian's response to wartime trauma.

38 I remain cautious about giving too much credence to authors' statements of intent, in general; specifically, I qualify Heller's statement with his known involvement with promotion of the novel, an awareness of the anti-war movement of the 1960s, and perhaps a literary attempt to avoid pigeon-holing his writing into a particular category.
the realistic detail of Heller’s own combat experiences—sixty missions as a B-25 bombardier operating from Corsica in 1944—and the centrality of aerial gunner Snowden’s death to the novel. Moreover, Heller noted his own obsession with the body in war, when after a mid-1950s psychological evaluation he realized, “how extensively I was focusing on the grim details of human mortality, on disease, accidents, grotesque mutilations” (qtd in Daugherty 200). This focus on mortality, I contend, provides the underlying assumption of the paradox Heller labels Catch-22: to continue to fly more missions, a man must be crazy, and if he is crazy, he will not have to fly them; but if he realizes the danger involved, by seeing all these bodies, then he is not crazy and must continue flying.

Heller foregrounds the absent flyer motif through two questions asked by his protagonist Yossarian, an American bombardier stationed in Italy. Yossarian first asks: “Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?” (35), a question which serves the dual purpose of highlighting the absence of Snowden, a gunner in Yossarian’s unit, and allowing Heller to begin revealing the critical details of Snowden’s death in the sky over Avignon, in fragmentary bits unfolding throughout the novel. Although this first question might be read as an existential query about death in a world bereft of religion, when Heller pairs it with the second question, he indicates a more practical focus on the numerous disappearances of flyers in the text. Remembering two friends who have disappeared, Yossarian looks up into the sky, and asks “Where had they gone?” (337). Although his missing friend Orr, as we learn at the end of the novel, survives, as one of the few success stories in the text, his friend Clevinger is not so lucky, illustrating the

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39 Heller here is satirizing the oft-quoted line “where are the snows of yesteryear?” from Francois Villon’s fifteenth century poem “Ballade des dames du temps jadis.” The question suggests both the transitoriness of life and a yearning for the past.
motif of conspicuous absence that permeates *Catch-22*. By repeating these queries, Heller challenges the reader to ask the same question about World War II aviators: “yes where have they gone?” a question rarely asked in post-war America. Although the “where” is never adequately answered, the absence of these flyers is emphasized throughout the novel.

Yossarian’s fellow flyers disappear regularly throughout the novel, revealing the darkness underlying Heller’s black humor. The author uses black humor, as Aichinger notes, as a counterpoint to the horrors in the novel, particularly the horrors related to these frequent disappearances (97). Clevinger and his ten-man crew vanish while returning from a combat mission:

Clevinger was dead....Eighteen planes had let down through a beaming white cloud off the coast of Elba one afternoon on the way back from the weekly milk run to Parma; seventeen came out. No trace was ever found of the other, not in the air or on the smooth surface of the jade waters below. There was no debris. Helicopters circled the white cloud till sunset. During the night the cloud blew away, and in the morning there was no more Clevinger. (104)

Heller presents the quintessential example of spatial disappearance here, as Clevinger and crew vanish without a trace. Their absence is frightening, because it refuses causality. While other threats allow some sense of agency—flak can kill me, so I should

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40 Orr, through Yossarian’s eyes, is seen as unlucky and dangerous, as he is repeatedly forced to ditch in the Mediterranean. As we eventually learn, Orr had actually been practicing his escape from the war. In a maneuver that is ludicrous in its impossibility, we learn that after ditching for the last time, Orr has rowed his tiny life raft to Sweden, a journey which would have required traversing the western Mediterranean, through the straits of Gibraltar, and across the Bay of Biscay and the North Sea. This watery escape repeats Frederick Henry’s escape in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, by rowing to Switzerland, and anticipates Cacciato’s improbable escape from Vietnam to Paris in O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*. 

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avoid it—the randomness of this death creates a sense of unavoidability which the remaining crews must face with every successive flight. In the last line, Heller brilliantly denies the substantiality of the body by reducing it to vapor, a cloud which blows away and is never seen again.

Even more conspicuously absent is “the dead man in Yossarian’s tent” (107), “who seemed to have vanished into thin air” (92). The dead man is the ill-fated Second Lieutenant Mudd, who was “blown to bits over Orvieto less than two hours after he arrived. No one could recall who he was or what he looked like...the only ones who might have seen Mudd, the men in the same plane, had all been blown to bits with him” (107). The totality of this death is horrifying, removing not only Mudd’s body, but also refusing even the possibility of remembrance, an obliteration so total it is as if he never existed. Upon his arrival, Mudd had dropped his gear in Yossarian’s tent, but since he had not officially signed in to the squadron before flying, he had, according to the personnel office, never arrived, so no one had the authority to remove his personal effects. Through this confounding official rhetoric and the actual explosion, Mudd thus becomes a constantly present absence in the tent, a macabre reminder of both the spatial and discursive disappearance of the flyer.

The disappearances continue, creating an almost overwhelming sense of absence which surrounds Yossarian, both in the air and on the ground. He sees his friends Dobbs and Nately killed, along with ten others, in a mid-air collision when rolling off the

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41 The crews are tormented by absent bodies on the ground as well. When Yossarian is hospitalized, he and fellow patient Dunbar are horrified by the soldier in white, a badly burned man wrapped from head to toe in bandages. Dunbar is convinced “there’s no one inside!” the shell of bandages, and starts a riot in the ward, as the other patients, too, are terrified by this present absence (365). As the Military Police arrive to remove Dunbar, the nurse confides to Yossarian “they’re going to disappear him” (366). As in the air, these bodies vanish quietly, insidiously, with no meaning attached.
bomb run at La Spezia:

Dobbs...zigged when he should have zagged, skidded his plane into the
plane alongside, and chewed off its tail. His wing broke off at the base,
and his plane dropped like a rock and was almost out of sight in an instant.
There was no fire, no smoke, not the slightest untoward noise… the plane
plummeted nose downward in a straight line at accelerating speed until it
struck the water, which foamed open at the impact like a white water lily
on the dark-blue sea, and washed back in a geyser of apple-green bubbles
when the plane sank. It was over in a matter of seconds. There were no
parachutes. And Nately, in the other plane, was killed too. (376)

In this collision, the absence of fire, smoke, or sound, the suddenness of the deaths, and
the fact that the sea essentially swallows up airplane and crew combine to create a sort of
non-event. This scene recalls Pieter Bruegel’s painting “Landscape with the Fall of
Icarus,” where the falling flyer vanishes into the sea unremarked by the outside world, an
image Heller seems to mine for its representation of the way in which many aviators died
during World War II.

While these disappearances are characterized by silence and distance, the later
deaths we see become increasingly intimate, as Yossarian both hears and feels the
aviator’s bodies and deaths. Kraft’s death haunts Yossarian, because Yossarian feels
responsible for it as the lead bombardier in the flight. Kraft’s plane does not simply
disappear like Clevinger’s, but explodes in flames right above Yossarian’s aircraft. He
directs evasive action to avoid a midair collision, watching as “the wing of Kraft’s plane
blew off. The flaming wreck dropped, first the fuselage, then the spinning wing, while a
shower of tiny metal fragments began tap dancing on the roof of Yossarian’s own plane and the incessant cachung! cachung! cachung! of the flak was still thumping all around him” (137). In this episode, Yossarian not only sees but hears the deaths of the crew, spawning a sense of intimacy with Kraft that makes this death particularly difficult for Yossarian. With this delicate dance-like image of falling metal fragments, reminiscent of a spring shower, Heller spurs a horrifying awareness that as the airplane has disintegrated into tiny fragments, so, too, has the crew. He prompts readers to wonder what else—body parts? bone fragments?—might be hitting the aircraft along with the pieces of metal.

Heller paints the last two deaths with a bloody brush, so that one can no longer fail to see the aviator’s body and its violent ruptures. This visceral view of the body is important because its portrayal makes it memorable. As Scarry explains, through the “massive opening of human bodies” in war, the abstractions of politics and beliefs are reconnected with “the force and power of the material world” (128). By showing the opened body of the aviator, I contend, Heller and the other writers in this chapter forcibly remove the air war from the realm of abstraction, where it can be perceived as clean, and into the material world, where all its real messiness is exposed. The deaths of Kid Sampson and Snowden show two bodies painfully opened, with an excess of detail readers cannot ignore.

Kid Sampson dies not in aerial combat, but during a relaxing break on a local beach. While he sports with his comrades on a raft in the bay, squadron pilot McWatt buzzes the swimmers in his aircraft, showing off. As he swoops low over the raft, Kid Sampson, reaching up as if to touch the plane, is cut in half by the planes’ propeller.
Yossarian, watching from the shore, explains how the blood touched everyone: "Kid Sampson had rained all over. Those who spied drops of him on their limbs or torsos drew back with terror and revulsion, as though trying to shrink away from their own odious skins" (338). McWatt, consumed by guilt, flies into a mountain. Although not combat deaths, those of Kid Sampson and McWatt show that, in war, death is never far away. Both the nearby death, which is intimately seen and felt, and the distant death are equal in importance, though we tend to privilege the closer, messier death. By coupling them in this way, Heller invites us to see them as separate, but related points on the spectrum of death.

The most notable wounding of an aviator's body occurs when Heller finally reveals the "secret" of Snowden's death. Like Faulkner and Jarrell, Heller withholds the actual wounding until the end of the novel, but he does so not as a refusal to valorize the wounding, but to show the extent of Yossarian's trauma. Although the bombardier has tried to repress this gruesome memory, the events surrounding Snowden's death will not remain silent, returning fourteen times in the novel, haunting Yossarian in a way that the other disappearances do not. With each return, readers uncover another piece of the puzzle, along the way encountering misinformation and the unreliability of vision, and eventually learning the importance of seeing clearly. Heller sets the stage for this revelation with Yossarian's earliest flashback, where he remembers hearing his copilot Dobbs sobbing over the interphone "help him, help him" during the mission over Avignon. When Yossarian asks, "help who?" Dobbs replies, "the bombardier," which is Yossarian, who was fine, in no need of help. While Dobbs was thus misdirecting the crew, "Snowden lay dying in the back" (50). This flashback illustrates Yossarian's
traumatization, but more importantly, reveals the way in which discourse can prevent one from seeing clearly.

Heller’s use of flashbacks and fragmentation allows him to reveal Yossarian’s response to Snowden’s death before the readers see the actual event. Many of Yossarian’s actions thus appear crazy, illogical, and unmotivated when they occur in the text. For example, we discover Yossarian naked after the Avignon mission (101), but do not know why he refuses to wear his clothes until much later, when we learn that “Yossarian lost his nerve on the mission to Avignon because Snowden lost his guts” (225); we understand even more when Yossarian exits his airplane “naked, in a state of utter shock, with Snowden smeared abundantly all over his bare heels and toes, knees, arms and fingers” (260). Yossarian has removed his flight suit because it is so bloody, but even his flesh has been tainted with death here. After dozens of invisible deaths, in clouds or the sea, Heller suddenly presents us with another death which is shocking in its obscene intimacy. Yossarian’s nakedness indicates the loss of all psychic protection from the constant bombardment by death. He is still naked at Snowden’s funeral (261), and when he receives the Distinguished Flying Cross for the mission that killed Kraft. Aviator’s deaths lie heavy on the novel by this time, overlapping and intertwining.

Heller finally shows us Snowden’s wounding, wrapped in a theme of misperception which mirrors the American public’s own false vision of the war. When Yossarian crawls to the rear of the airplane, he finds Snowden wounded and bleeding, but his eyes deceive him, so he misdiagnoses Snowden’s condition, thus applying first aid for the wrong wound, the yawning, raw, melon-shaped hole as big as a football in the outside of his thigh, the unsevered, blood-soaked muscle
fibers inside pulsating weirdly like blind things with lives of their own, the oval, naked wound that was almost a foot long and made Yossarian moan in shock and sympathy the instant he spied it and nearly made him vomit.

(332)

Heller's use of language here--his graphic description of the wound--is designed to shock, by showing the injuring that was censored during the war. But along with this shock, the knowledge that this is the wrong wound provides a sense of foreboding, of even more horror to come. As Yossarian overcomes his own disgust, he treats the wound in Snowden's thigh, conscientiously applying a tourniquet, sulfanilamide, and then a bandage. He sighs in relief when he sees that the wound is not as large as he thought, but only "as long and wide as his hand, and too raw and deep to see into clearly. The raw muscles inside twitched like live hamburger meat" (438), but Yossarian "saw that Snowden was not in danger of dying" (438). Heller thus emphasizes the unreliability of Yossarian's vision a second time, as we know Snowden will die here. The sense of touch promises more reliability; Yossarian touches the wound, and finds it's not as "repulsive" as he had thought, and then "he found excuse to caress the wound with his fingers again and again to convince himself of his own courage" (438). This intimacy with the wound grounds the aviator's body in the material, replacing the impersonal vanishing we saw earlier. But both touch and sight have deceived, as Yossarian discovers a second, and fatal, wound when he opens the man's flak suit and "Snowden's insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out" where a large piece of flak had blasted right through the gunner. Yossarian, screaming, "squeezed both hands over his eyes," refusing to look. But then Yossarian "forced himself to look again" (439), and in
doing so learned Snowden’s “grim secret,” that “man was matter” (440).

With this refusal to look, Heller critiques the American public’s refusal to look at the actual messiness of World War II combat. Although showing that it is easy to be deceived about the cost of war when bodies disappear into cloud or sea, or disintegrate in showery particles, Heller insists his characters, and readers, keep looking for and at these bodies, and looking critically to see what is hidden. Only by forcing himself to look at the atrocities of war can Yossarian free himself (to leave it); similarly, by forcing the reader to look again and again at these aerial deaths, Heller promises a freedom from misperception which will ultimately empower the reader.

Howard Nemerov “The War in the Air”

I end this section with the 1987 poem “The War in the Air” because Howard Nemerov’s focus on absence, like Heller’s, creates a subliminal presence (Shapiro xix) of the dead aviator which cannot be ignored. In the 1980s, as Americans marked the fortieth anniversary of World War II, it became increasingly common to view the war as “the good war,” a label suggested by Studs Terkel’s Pulitzer-prize winning “The Good War”: An Oral History of World War Two. Although Terkel’s use of quotation marks here indicates his skepticism about any war being labeled as good, public representation of the war soon dispensed with these qualifiers and embraced the belief that World War II was a good war, marking it as decidedly different from later wars, especially Vietnam, characterized by doubt, division, and moral ambiguity. It is against this backdrop that Howard Nemerov published “The War in the Air,” in War Stories (1987). Critics have frequently noted the poet’s response to this popular new vision of the war: “Nemerov

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42 Although published in the 1980s, Nemerov’s collection is widely considered World War II poetry, and appears as such in anthologies, such as Shapiro’s Poets of World War II.
clearly despises the phrase ‘good war,’” Oostdijk explains (275), and Margot Norris seconds this notion. These readings are grounded in Nemerov’s own use of the term in stanza four: “That was the good war, the war we won” (line 13). While these critiques clearly have merit, and provide a relevant context for our reading of the poem, they tend to generalize the message of the poem, at the expense of the particulars. I argue for a closer look at the controlling metaphor of the poem, that of the “clean war,” as a critique of aerial warfare discourse and the way it masks the deaths of aviators.

Paul Fussell aptly notes that although censorship in wartime is common, “censorship cannot be imposed forever, and finally the truth will leak out” (Intro. NBMW 25). Over the forty years since the end of World War II, this truth has been leaking out, in novels, memoirs, and poetry, but in the 1980s the threat to a realistic portrayal of the war has become not government censorship, but a revisionist public perception. In his poetry, as Oostdijk notes, Nemerov exposes the “discrepancy between how the veteran perceives the war and how the public at large does” (269). Despite America’s recent experience with bombing in Vietnam, notably the 1972 “Christmas Bombings” of Operation Linebacker II, with the intensive bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong areas by B-52s and other fighter-bomber aircraft, Nemerov no doubt noted a disturbing tendency to leap-frog over this violent image and romanticize the air war of World War II. By the fortieth anniversary, the public sees the air war as a clean war, while those who have experienced aerial warfare understand the deceptiveness of this view.

Nemerov opens the 16-line, four stanza poem with a portrait of conspicuous absence, focusing on what we do not see:

For a saving grace, we didn’t see our dead,
Who rarely bothered coming home to die
But simply stayed away out there
In the clean war, the war in the air. (lines 1-4)

The air war, as Nemerov shows, is characterized by spatial disappearance, where the dead are not seen, because, almost subversively, they do not come home to die, but instead stay out there in the airspace. He develops his controlling metaphor in line four, describing the air war as a clean war; we can make this connection, he implies, because the bodies of dead aviators, conveniently, are invisible. In stanza two, Nemerov suggests a lack of discourse, a silencing of witness, as “seldom the ghosts came back bearing their tales” (5). His dead flyers, as we have already seen with Heller, are rendered invisible by numerous spatial forces, crashing into the ground, or into “the incompressible sea” (6). The incompressibility of the sea presents a markedly solid contrast to the insubstantiality of the “ghosts” and “shades” of line eight. Alternatively, Nemerov’s aviators “stayed up there in the relative wind” (7), dissipating, like Clevinger’s crew, into the air.

In the third stanza, Nemerov critiques the discourse of the air war, noting that although the crews have no graves, they do have “epitaphs/ Where never so many spoke for never so few” (9-10). By inverting Winston Churchill’s famous statement here, Nemerov focuses on the dead flyers’ lack of voice, and in this absence the tendency of public discourse to re-characterize the experiences of these dead. We do so, in part, by romanticizing slogans such as “Per ardua.../ per aspera” (emphasis original 11-12), the motto of the RAF, generally translated “through adversity to the stars.” This motto suggests some kind of transcendence or reward, in which the flyer reaches the coveted goal, the stars, through the adversities of flight, and war. As these phrases are repeated,

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43 See Note 32 for Churchill’s statement.
the discourse of the air war, once again, hides the bodies of the aviators by cloaking them in romance, colluding with the spatial forces Nemerov earlier displays to create a notion of cleanness in the air war.

In the last stanza, Nemerov shows how the invisibility of these bodies contributes to our reading of the war:

That was the good war, the war we won
As if there were no death, for goodness' sake,
With the help of the losers we left out there
In the air, in the empty air. (13-16)

Nemerov’s “we”—the victors, the Allies, the American public—can understand the war as good only because of the invisibility of the aviator’s body. The poet ironically juxtaposes the winners, those looking romantically back at the war, with “the losers,” the dead aviators who are conveniently neither seen, nor accounted for, as we celebrate our victory. The emptiness of the air in the last line suggests the emptiness of the rhetoric which consistently labels the air war as clean, because it is either unable or unwilling to see these dead. Nemerov’s poem thus makes present these absent aviators to expose the discursive forces which would render them invisible.

These three writers, as I have shown, exposed the absent or wounded bodies of the aviators to challenge the distancing forces that support the clean air war rhetoric. In the middle wars of the century, as the spatial distancing of geography and the dangers of the airspace colluded towards the disappearance of the aviator, significant discursive forces threatened to make the flyer even more invisible. Although the discourse of chivalry no longer masked the violence of war, wartime censorship hid the wounded
body from the public, creating a sense of war with no losses. Moreover, post-war romanticization contributed even further to revising American’s vision of the war. Jarrell, Heller, and Nemerov, by making the absent and wounded aviator’s bodies stunningly present, refuse to let these men disappear, forcing them repeatedly into our consciousness and by doing so challenging the discourse of the clean air war.

**Mid-to-Late Century: Distant Wars and the Invisible Aviator**

For Americans, the spatial and discursive disappearance of the aviator continued into the Vietnam War, with the extreme geographical distancing of the aerial battles in Southeast Asia effectively removing the aviator from public view.\(^4\)\(^4\) The secrecy involved with much of the air war, and the public animosity towards the war also created a discursive distancing which further isolated the flyer from view. As Kali Tal points out, Vietnam veterans were often seen as war criminals by the American public in the late Sixties and Seventies (a perception which was later revised), creating a sharp divide between military and civilians. This gap was also noted in a psychological study of Vietnam fighter pilots by Stanley D. Rosenberg, who explains that these pilots saw themselves as separate, members of an exclusive fraternity, and their combat tour as an escape from the world.

While these forces all contribute to the disappearance of the aviator, one of the strongest discursive forces portrayed the Vietnam air war as a war of machines, not people. Fred Branfman, for example, in 1972 describes the air war over Laos as a “war of the airplanes,” and more specifically as a “war which is not fought by men but

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\(^4\) I skip over the Korean War here primarily due to lack of space, although similar themes can also be found in the literature of this war. James Michener’s *The Bridges of Toko Ri*, for example, de-romanticizes the aviator when his pilot protagonist dies, not in glorious air combat, but on the ground after ejecting, in the filth of a sewage ditch.
machines, war which can erase distant and unseen societies clandestinely, unknown to
and even unsuspected by the world outside" (4). He explains that “every day, for five and
a half years, man’s most sophisticated machines of war were sent to hover in multi­
layered orbit over the towns and villages of the Plain of Jars” (18). This description
sounds futuristic, and predictive of the increasing twenty-first century use of unmanned
drones in place of “air-breathing” weapon systems. What is missing from Branfman’s
description, however, is the very real presence of the aircrew who were in these machines
over South-east Asia. Susan Jeffords, writing about Vietnam representation, explains that
this absence occurs when “war represses the body, subordinating it to the interests of the
collective technology of the military” (103). The flyer thus disappears from view due to
both spatial distancing and the discourse that represents the air war as a machine war,
thus further eliding the aviator’s body.

The disappearance of the airman into the machine is dangerous in many ways.
Branfman’s imagery, for example, while trying to convey the lack of proportionality in
attacking villagers with high-tech weapons, also contains a subtext which completely
removes the human from the power equation, thus effectively re-naming the violence as
machine violence, not human. This portrait of the aviator as a type of cyborg, I believe,
predicts the aviator’s problems with guilt and perception which I address in later
chapters. 45 Machine discourse is most dangerous, though, because it removes the bodies
of the airmen from public view, thus supporting the clean war discourse by re-inscribing

45 Donna J. Haraway defines cyborg as a “cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and
organism” (149). While her feminist manifesto suggests a liberating, empowering function achieved
through the coupling of human with technology, she also notes that the invisibility of modern machines
makes them deadly, because they are “hard to see politically” (153). I see a darker manifestation of the
cyborg in airpower discourse, an elision of human by machine which is dangerous because it is life­
threatening.
losses as mechanical only, rather than human. A technological war prosecuted solely by machines, with no threat to one's own population, thus becomes the ultimate military goal, and is also the easiest type of war to justify, as the human cost of war is eliminated. In the mid-to-late twentieth century, however, this goal had not been reached, and aircraft were still very much crewed by humans; a discourse that suggested otherwise thus helped justify the continued use of airpower in Vietnam.

The authors I read in this final section are aware of these discursive forces and expose them in their texts, as they try to separate man from machine. I read Michael Herr's *Dispatches* together with Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* because both provide stunning portraits of the machine perhaps most associated with the Vietnam War, the helicopter. While most other texts in this project portray fixed-wing aircraft, the rotary-wing helicopter has become almost iconic with Vietnam. While fixed-wing aircraft, such as fighters and bombers, are frequently separated from ground troops by altitude, high speeds and distant airfields, troops in Vietnam were intimately familiar with the chopper, so that a common image of the war, as Herr describes, is: "helicopters and people jumping out of helicopters, people so in love they'd run to get on even when there wasn't any pressure" (9). This intimacy, perhaps, makes it all the more important to separate man from machine, as the borderlines become increasingly blurred.

**Michael Herr's *Dispatches***

Michael Herr's effort to separate the aviator from the machine is indicative of his larger project to rewrite the conventional narratives of war. In *Dispatches*, "a blend of memoir, military history, and psychological portrait" (Peebles 488), Herr transforms the

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46 A classic film example is the surreal scene from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* in which an Air Cavalry unit attacks a village with a formation of helicopters blaring Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" through their loudspeakers to terrorize the villagers.
reporting he did for *Esquire* and other magazines during two years in Vietnam (1967-68) into a form of “new journalism” that resists the conventions of traditional war reporting (Jones 314). Through a combination of first-person journalism and “innovative fictional techniques,” (Heilman 127), such as the use of fragmentation, Herr chronicles the relationship of the spectator to the war, and the responsibilities of witnessing. As Stacey Peebles points out, he “vehemently writes against the false narratives of Vietnam,” particularly those disseminated through formal channels such as press briefings, but in doing so, substitutes his own truth, and tells us how to read Vietnam in a new way (489).

While many critics rightly note Herr’s challenge to the grand narratives of imperialism and the American frontier myth, indicated by his opening discussion of mapping and naming, they overlook the embedded critique of airpower discourse which often supports these grand narratives.47 By showing the seductiveness of the helicopter, and repeating the discourse of technology which hides the aviator, Herr sets the stage for a startling exposure of the flyer, as he separates man and machine, thus rewriting the narratives which suggest the air war is clean.

While Vietnam literature is often lauded for its focus on the individual experience of war, Dale Ritterbush points out that “war memoir is representative of collective experience, that experience shared by others subject to the same social, historical, and political forces” (239). In his representation of the helicopter, Herr portrays such a collective experience, an experience which involves both accusation and self-implication in the creation of the illusion. In a titillating passage, Herr presents a near-mystical experience as all helicopters merge into one:

47 Both John Heilman and Stacey Peebles discuss Herr’s use of the map to indicate the failures of the colonial project, first for France and later for America, while Ty Hawkins points out the failure of the grand narratives of Manifest Destiny and the American frontier in Vietnam.
a collective meta-chopper, the sexiest thing going; saver-destroyer, provider-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jungle-saturated webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder. (9)

In this dynamic passage, Herr vividly shows the merging of man and machine in Vietnam, where this meta-machine, which rescues friendly troops and provides medevac and resupply operations while also destroying the enemy, is crafted of both the “human” and “hot steel.” The grease of the machine mingles with the sweat of men, music with the sound of gunfire to create a marvelous and terrifying composite image of a living machine, warm and vital, but at the same time permeated with death.

While the helicopter seems to suggest escape, Herr recognizes that it all too often signifies death instead: “the ground was his [the Viet Cong’s], above it was ours. We had the air, we could get up in it but not disappear in to it...” (14). He shows an almost conflicted response to the helicopter here, seeming to desire the disappearance, that merging with machine, which would take the man on the ground, soldier or reporter, away from the war’s horrors. Yet he simultaneously recognizes the mechanical dangers inherent in this mission: “choppers fell out of the sky like fat poisoned birds a hundred times a day. After a while I couldn’t get on one without thinking that I must be out of my fucking mind” (14). Thus, the seductive, mystical machine which earlier promises escape is transformed into one that more often delivers death. With this recognition, Herr becomes aware of the both the ease and dangers of conflating man and machine. In August of 1968, after intense fighting in the A Shau Valley, Herr observes: “it was
admitted that a lot of our helicopters had been shot down, but this was spoken of as an expensive equipment loss, as though our choppers were crew-less entities that held to the sky by themselves, spilling nothing more precious than fuel when they crashed” (192). His use of passive voice here bypasses the reporter’s requirement for attribution, complicating the reported facts and thus challenging the narrative of the clean machine war they present. The exciting conflation of man with machine that we saw above turns here into a complete erasure of the aviator, an erasure that Herr exposes to show the error involved with such conflation.

While the passage above describes a “spilling out” but does not show it, this rupture is vividly illustrated in two other scenes, where Herr shows men spilling out of the helicopter, in an image reminiscent of the opening of the body we saw in Jarrell and Heller. Through this opening of the steel body of the chopper, Herr accomplishes a similar effect; by exposing the men inside, he removes this wounding from the abstraction—the loss of machines—and shows the all-too-material bodies of the men. In a scene suggesting Ovid’s Icarus and Cather’s Victor Morse, Herr describes an incident in 1968 where Marine helicopter crews refused to fly to Hill 861 because of the extreme enemy threat, thereby cutting off the troops on the ground. When a helicopter finally does arrive, the door gunner, shot, falls out of the aircraft from 200 feet; seeing him fall, the Marines on the ground cheer (122). This violent separation of man from machine creates a memorable spectacle, one that obscenely inverts the image of the chivalric World War I aviator, victorious in single combat while cheering ground troops look on. In contrast, this flyer, thus exposed, is connected with death and derision, not glory or
honor. Here, the author validates the humanity of the aircrews by exposing their fear and vulnerability, while also showing the brutality of their dehumanization.

More bodies spill out of machines at a crash scene that Herr views from the air. He remembers seeing “three ships [helicopters] shot down close together, two of them completely smashed and the third almost intact, surrounded by the bodies of the crew...all killed after they’d reached the ground” (256). While it is easy to dismiss the first two choppers as simply smashed pieces of machinery, Herr’s focus on the third ship is the most compelling, as he juxtaposes an image of intactness with a spilling out, or wounding, which exposes the dead bodies of the crew to our perusal. In this scene, Herr humanizes this loss, showing the bodies spilling out of the helicopter so that we recognize these deaths as connected with, and yet separate from, that of the machine. Moreover, by showing the deaths associated with the third helicopter, Herr suggests a return to the first two helicopters, and a realization that these machines, too, contain human bodies.

In Dispatches, then, Michael Herr takes us on a journey from innocence to experience, and in doing so, challenges the dominant discourse of airpower. From initially showing the seductive allure of the helicopter, the desirousness of merging man and machine, he moves on to show the dangers associated with this illusion, as it becomes too easy to erase the aviator and see only the machine. To counter this mechanical and discursive distancing of man-in-machine, he opens the body of the helicopter and shows the humans inside, through their deaths exposing and challenging the narrative of the clean air war.
Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*

While Michael Herr provides primarily a spectator’s view of the helicopter, in *Going After Cacciato* Tim O’Brien takes us inside the machine to provide a visceral, participatory experience of a combat insertion. Although O’Brien’s novel is mainly about soldiers, not flyers, one scene stands out—Chapter 20, “Landing Zone Bravo”--with its stunning portrait of a helicopter crew disappearing into the machine. The Vietnam novel, winner of the 1979 National Book Award, echoes earlier war novels whose characters seek a separate peace;\(^48\) it begins with the soldier Cacciato leaving the war, and unfolds as protagonist Paul Berlin imagines an 8,000-mile journey with his squad in pursuit of the deserter. Berlin creates this elaborate postmodern fantasy by interweaving past, present, and future narrative strands while he tries to control his fear during night guard duty.\(^49\) Themes of fear and control predominate in the novel, themes O’Brien explores intensely in the Landing Zone Bravo (LZ-B) scene, as the squad is airlifted via helicopter into a hot combat zone.\(^50\) This scene is part of Paul Berlin’s past, what John M. Jakaitis astutely calls “the lived experience of the war” (197), and is significant because the actions of the aircrew mirror Berlin’s own actions at the beginning of the novel. When threatened by a booby-trap, Berlin loses all bodily control, and begins shooting wildly and constantly, emptying his magazine. This moment of

\(^{48}\) One might say that O’Brien’s novel takes up where Heller leaves off, as Morris Dickstein notes in *Leopards in the Temple*. As *Catch-22* ends with Yossarian leaving the war, *Cacciato* begins with a soldier leaving the war. Milton J. Bates also notes the influence of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* on O’Brien’s novel. Like both of its antecedents, *Cacciato* questions the soldier’s commitment to war, and explores the morality, and possibility, of leaving war.

\(^{49}\) While Michael Kaufman identifies O’Brien’s style in this text as modern, not postmodern, I prefer Tom Burns’s analysis of the text as a postmodern mix of fantasy, fiction, and metafiction, in which O’Brien tells us how to read the novel. In identifying the three strands as past, present, and future, I follow the lead of Burns, Tobey C. Herzog, and William V. Spanos, who all use the same terminology, although Kaufman’s labels “memory, imagination, and experience” (385) perhaps provide a more nuanced analysis.

\(^{50}\) Several critics have identified these themes: Herzog and Burns identify Berlin’s “quest for control” (Herzog 90) in the face of fear, and Bates aptly notes the exploration of courage implicit in Berlin’s necessary choice to stay in the war or leave it.
paralyzing fear and humiliation haunts him throughout the novel and he returns to it at
the end, presumably better equipped to cope with the fear after his journey through time
and space. The uncontrollable firing of the helicopter gunners that we will see in LZ-B
provides a striking parallel to that of Berlin himself. While limited space here precludes
an analysis of the beginning and ending scenes, the fear-driven firing in all three scenes
seems to suggest both the micro-dehumanization of man in machine, specifically of the
aircrew in the aircraft, and the larger, macro-dehumanization of man subsumed by the
overwhelming forces of the war machine.

O'Brien creates a contrast between the soldiers and the airmen immediately, by
providing the former with names and bodies and making the latter nameless and faceless.
The chapter opens by naming all the soldiers—Stink Harris, Eddie Lazzutti, Oscar
Johnson, Paul Berlin, Jim Pederson—while the aircrew are identified only by their crew
positions: two door gunners and a crew chief. The soldiers are terrified, as shown by
their body language; they close their eyes, bite their nails, sweat, hug themselves, hold
themselves in against the fear. In contrast, the aircrew seem cool and mechanical, the
gunners firing their machine guns and the crew chief reading Newsweek. O'Brien's
portrayal of the gunners is particularly telling, as they fire their machine guns almost
continuously, becoming increasingly fused with the machine as the chapter progresses.
They "squatted behind their guns and fired and fired," doing their work "hunched over
their guns ... eyes dark under sunglasses and helmets," so that it seems "the door gunners
did not have faces" (127). By denying the gunners both names and faces, O'Brien shows
how they are consumed by their mission, and by their position inside the helicopter, a
case of mechanical distancing that obliterates their humanity.

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He makes this dehumanization even more apparent as the men merge with the machine: "the gunners leaned into their big guns, fused to them, shoulders twitching, firing with the steady sweeping motions of a machine" (128). The men are fused not only to the guns, but to the helicopter on which the guns are mounted. They become a vital part of the machine, providing its only defense, through their firing ensuring survival of both man and machine. Initially, the gunners seem to be firing at random, at nothing, but as the helicopter descends into the hot combat zone, it begins taking fire. Threatened, "the gunners fired and fired. They fired at everything. They were wrapped around their guns" (130). As the helicopter is hit, "with a gnashing, ripping, tearing, searing noise," the men react like wounded animals, lashing out blindly in all directions, mad with the pain. They fire "blindly and without aim" (130); "the gunners went mad with firing, firing at everything, speechless behind their guns, and the crew chief screamed and shoved" (130).

Although O’Brien’s depiction of the gunners here seems to equate them with the machine, further unpacking of this scene suggests a very human fear driving their machine-like actions. In the scenes above, it is clear that the aircrew, as well as the soldiers, are terrified. The formerly cool crew chief now screams at the soldiers, pushing them out of the helicopter, seeing them as a threat to the integrity of man and machine, man-in-machine. O’Brien describes the gunners as speechless, but in fact they are screaming, too, through their machine guns. The firing is a constant reminder of their terror, a blind, aimless mechanism for avoiding death, the only outlet for their fear. By recalling this scene, Paul Berlin is able to explore his own panicked response to fear,
allowing him to approach his own experience while keeping his mental defense
mechanisms intact.51

As the soldiers de-plane, the gunners continue firing, “automatically, firing and
firing” until they are “molded to their guns, part of the machinery” (131). In this
automatic, mechanical mode, they shoot one of the departing soldiers in the legs, but still
they do not stop firing. The soldier, Pederson, falls into the “slush” of the landing zone,
but the gunners keep firing, hitting him again. Then, released from its burden of troops,
the Chinook roars into the air, “and still the gunners fired, blind behind their sunglasses”
(131). This action invokes horror, complicating the notion of friend and enemy,52 as we
see the flyers blindly shooting one of their own, not once, but twice, so consumed by the
machine that their actions are automatic, inhuman. However, the ending of this chapter
illustrates the additional complexity of this scene.

Pederson, wounded, rolls onto his back and carefully aims his rifle at the
Chinook, firing several times at its “fat belly,” its “great underside” (132). In contrast to
the hysterical firing of the door gunners, his shooting is cool, methodical, precise. Then,
suddenly, “the door gunners were gone”—we assume that Pederson has hit them—“but
still the hot guns kept swiveling and firing, automatically” (132), and as the aircraft
climbs up and away, the soldiers still hear the firing of its guns. This last image
frighteningly suggests that the machine no longer needs the men; it has appropriated their

51 John M. Jakaitis argues that “Berlin had been denying the lived experience of the war” (197), a
defense mechanism that helps protect the individual. He suggests that both character Paul Berlin and author
Michael Herr “require the protection of the mind’s defense mechanisms” (196).

52 William V. Spanos presents a fascinating discussion of the nature of the enemy for American
forces in Vietnam. He proposes that Berlin’s anxiety is due to finding “nothing” where he expects to find
an enemy, because “the Vietnamese insurgents constituted a nomadic war machine,” on the move and
invisible, that destabilized America’s notion of war (165). Building on Spanos’s idea, I propose that the
LZ-B scene further destabilizes this notion, as the supposedly friendly troops fire on each other and thus are
re-inscribed as enemies.
defense mission and become self-sufficient. Or perhaps the gunners have become machine, so that the separation between the two can no longer be seen.

However, as we contemplate the assimilation of the gunners, it is important to note that Pederson's reaction is in many ways identical to theirs. Wounded, under attack, and fearing for his life, he fires repeatedly at the enemy, the helicopter attacking him. It is easy to understand this response as human and natural, yet when we see the gunners threatened, their (metal) skin wounded, fearing for their lives, we label their actions as mechanical, machine-like, automatic. Admittedly, both episodes of friendly fire are horrifying and paint men in war, both soldier and flyer, as inhuman. However, by presenting this comparison, with its startling similarities, O'Brien challenges us to see the door gunners as men, despite their machine-like appearance: men in war, threatened, frightened, and as human as the other men in the conflict. The demands of war dehumanize all participants to some extent; our ability to recognize only some of them as human represents an unacceptable failure of the imagination.

With this survey of twentieth century texts, then, it becomes apparent how writers have pushed back against the powerful spatial and discursive forces that have combined to render the aviator invisible. The vertical, horizontal, and mechanical forces characteristic of airpower contribute toward the spatial disappearance of the flyer, especially in the United States. Additionally, discursive forces such as chivalric or dehumanizing rhetoric further conspire toward the erasure of the aviator. By exposing the body of the aviator—dead, injured, or conspicuously absent—writers throughout the century have fought this erasure, and in doing so, have challenged the discourse of the clean air war which it supports. This literature, which spans six decades, shows a
remarkably consistent approach to this effort, indicating that the concern for the
disappearing aviator is not limited by war, gender, or genre. In fact, this concern has
continued into the twenty-first century, as I will show in my epilogue, where spatial and
discursive distancing continue to support the discourse of a clean air war.
CHAPTER II

PERIPHERY TO METROPOLE AND BACK AGAIN:

REPRESENTATIONS OF BOMBED AND BOMBER

IN GELLMHORN AND PRATT

War, however, is no longer the desperate, annihilating struggle that it was in the early decades of the twentieth century....[It] involves very small numbers of people, mostly highly trained specialists, and causes comparatively few casualties. The fighting...takes place on the vague frontiers whose whereabouts the average man can only guess at.

George Orwell, 1984

The concept of the air war as a clean war, as I proposed earlier, is based on assumptions that we see neither the aviator nor the populations targeted by airpower. I have already discussed the disappearance of the aviator; the targeted populations, often civilians, disappear also, I contend, through a complex discourse in which they are represented, or re-presented, in ways that render them invisible. This reinscription is theorized by airpower advocates who then teach a broad audience--the aviators, politicians, and the public--how to read the targeted population. This education takes place through public discourse, through airshows, or through military indoctrination; it essentially erases the actual victims by teaching us to see them through preconceived notions that project how they will respond to airpower—welcoming it, panicking under it,

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1 I use the term “bomber” here to denote not the aircraft, but those who are engaged in bombing. With this term I include the bombing aviator, but also incorporate the military leaders directing the bombing, as well as the political representatives of the state who may be controlling the bombing discourse. Where more precise terms are necessary to indicate only one of these agents, I use the more specific designation.
or adapting to it. This representation is significant because it is often used to justify the use of airpower against these populations.

For centuries, leaders have applied the advice of ancient military strategist Sun Tzu, who in *The Art of War* exhorts the warrior to know both the enemy and the self. This concept suggests that knowing both one's own population and that of the enemy will provide strategic and tactical advantages in the prosecution of war. This knowledge of both self and enemy is often implied in the representations of these groups through various types of propaganda. A state may represent its own population, for example, as good, right, or superior, while the enemy is portrayed as evil, wrong, or inferior. With the use of the term population here, I imply a conflation of both military forces and civilians, a conflation merited by the twentieth-century conception of total war as including both groups.

I am interested here in strategies in which airpower advocates re-present these populations, creating distinct portraits of who they are, what they want, and how they will react to aerial attack. This concept is particularly relevant to the production of the target population in the bombing dynamic, because, as I will show, the enemy population is often produced by the bombing state to satisfy its own desire to be seen as humanitarian, heroic, helpful, or morally justified. Belief that we can know both groups, I argue, has driven the representation of the relationship between the bomber and the bombed that often re-inscribes both groups in ways that justify the use of airpower. The discourse of

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2 My thinking about this concept is indebted to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, with its vision of the systematic production of the Orient in Western discourse. Although my scope is narrower, it reflects Said's ideas about the representation of a population, and the power relationships at play in this construction. An additional influence was an article by Ilan Kapoor, who applies Gayatri Spivak's theories to the field of international development. I was struck by his suggestion that the developer represents the other in ways that impact his or her own self-image.
airpower incorporates many of these representations, implying the ability of the airpower advocate to know and represent populations accurately. This implication suggests that the paradoxical continued use of airpower, even when actual conditions show it is ineffective or non-productive, is based on a misconception or inaccurate representation of the targeted population.

This chapter examines texts that expose and challenge the representation of bombed and bomber, both in the metropole and on the peripheries of empire. I attempt here to trace these representational strategies as they move through three distinct spaces and periods in the twentieth century, where airpower was employed against civilians or mixed civilian/military groups. I begin with the historical practice of air control employed in the colonial world during the interwar period, where the representation of the target populations was heavily influenced by colonial discourses of self and other. I then explore civilian bombing in the Spanish Civil War, where the shifting and elusive nature of representation becomes apparent as airpower moves from the periphery back to the metropole. This structure is suggested by the movement of airpower strategies, identified by Sven Lindqvist, from the interwar colonial world back to the metropole during the Spanish Civil War. I find Martha Gellhorn's journalism, collected in *The Face of War*, particularly useful here because she challenges the official representation of the bombing victim by witnessing to the war and exposing its invisible victims.

Finally, I return to the margins, to the unknown and "vague frontiers" Orwell describes, with a novel about the Vietnam War in the airspace over Laos. With this move, I suggest that the post-World War II United States has appropriated the representational strategies begun with air control and refined through the mid-century wars, to continue to
justify airpower on the edges of a new American empire. In this space, John Clark Pratt's novel, *The Laotian Fragments*, provides a fascinating portrait of an American pilot that questions United States' representations of both the bombed and the bomber. By analyzing interwar military and public discourse with later journalism and fiction, I hope to provide a sense of how writers understood and sought to expose these discourses, even as they themselves were subjected to their influence.

**The Architecture of Air Control**

Understanding the practice of air control is essential to this study because the discourse that evolved around it and supported it was in many ways foundational for the representation of bombed and bomber in the dynamic of aerial warfare. Air control was a "system of imperial policing" with aircraft (Satia 16), developed during the interwar period and was used extensively by the major colonial powers—England, France, Italy, and Spain—to control vast territories. After World War I, these states found themselves obligated to administer large new areas, many of them mandated by the League of Nations. Desperate to economize after the expense of the war, they turned to airpower for its potential as a cheap and effective method of controlling the populations of these mandates. At the urging of Air Marshal Hugh Trenchard, the British government awarded military command of Iraq to the Royal Air Force (RAF) in October, 1922 (Corum 62). Over the next two decades, the use of air control expanded rapidly; England applied air control in Aden, Sudan, Transjordan, and India's Northwest Frontier, using it

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primarily for policing, not war. In Iraq, for example, it was used to discipline tribes that raided caravans and to encourage payment of taxes, and in Aden it was used to discourage cattle rustlers (Corum 67-68). The move to air control was welcomed by air forces because it helped keep airpower alive during the interwar period. The RAF implemented air control, historian James S. Corum explains, not only because it promised economic savings, but because the fledgling RAF, which became a separate service in 1918, was “fighting for its institutional existence” (61). While David Omissi also includes under the air control umbrella the actions of France in Morocco, Algeria, and Syria; Spain, also in Morocco; and Italy in Ethiopia (although some of these border on military, rather than police actions) I will focus primarily on the RAF here, because the British discourse of air control lays the foundation not only for this chapter, but for the Allied strategic bombing which I examine in the next two chapters.

Several scholars have noted air control’s relationship to the classic panopticon, as it functions by disciplining and training populations through aerial surveillance, and through actual and threatened punishment (bombing and strafing). One of the key

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4 The term “policing” is used here to designate the enforcement of civil law and order. Readers should not confuse the term with the international policing described by Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri in Empire. They describe the U.S. intervention in Kosovo during the Gulf War as “policing,” the enforcement of international law, involving national sovereignty. Air control, on the other hand, used airstrikes to prevent and punish civil crimes such as theft, including cattle rustling. The use of airpower in this way becomes problematic as the use of force is often excessive, with war-like tactics being used for law enforcement.

5 See Omissi for a detailed comparison of air control as accomplished by the British and by these other nations (184-209).

6 The idea of the panopticon was introduced by Bentham as an improved method of administering institutions, such as prisons; it presented a radical new spatial arrangement, with a guard in a central tower, and prisoners in backlit cells around the outside. Both Satia and Saint-Amour make this connection.

7 Satia explains “air control was intended to work like the classic panopticon,” but also aptly notes that “it differed crucially from Bentham’s Panopticon in that there was no provision for public surveillance of the aerial inspectors” (33, note 72). Additionally, as Omissi makes clear, aircraft are not always visible as a permanent structure, like the guard tower. Generally, air control flying would have been accomplished in clear weather, so a villager would see that an aircraft either was or was not present overhead. The RAF created tactics such as delayed-action bombs to provide the effects of the panopticon even at night, for example, when the aircraft were not physically present over an area (171).
characteristics of Bentham’s prison architecture is that from their cells, prisoners can see the guard tower, but not the guard, and so believe that surveillance is omnipresent. Power thus becomes “visible and unverifiable”, as Foucault suggests (DP 201). The prisoners begin self-policing, believing that they are always being watched. This idea translates to air control, as the Air Staff explained in the 1920s, because “the speed and range of aircraft makes it practicable to keep a whole country under more or less constant surveillance” (Townshend 146). The goal of air control, then, is the creation of a self-policing population. An early statement by RAF wing commander Chamier explains how air control works to do this. He describes the relentless bombing and strafing of “houses, inhabitants, crops, and cattle,” acknowledges that this is brutal, but then explains: “it must be made brutal to start with. The threat alone in the future will prove efficacious if the lesson is once properly learnt” (qtd. in Corum 66). In other words, the recalcitrant tribes, believing aerial surveillance to be constant, will learn to behave to avoid future punishment from the air. Chamier’s statement thus shows the importance of educating the targeted population to achieve the desired effect. However, as we will see below, education of the imperial population is also important to the success of air control.

Justification of Airpower through Representation

Implementation and continuation of air control doctrine by the British required intensive “selling,” in which the Air Staff launched several educational efforts directed both at the government and the public. These efforts promoted air control as a cleaner method of enforcing England’s political goals in the mandates. The British were already familiar with methods of colonial control from their long imperial history, so the new policy was introduced as air substitution, where aerial bombardment simply replaced the
colonial practice of conducting punitive ground expeditions. While these Army expeditions generally resulted in hundreds of total deaths, air substitution was alluring, because it promised fewer casualties (Omissi 169). Further efforts to justify air control were prompted by ethical challenges, which argued that the bombing was indiscriminate, killing women and children, or punishing entire villages for the actions of small groups of militants. The Air Staff countered these accusations with more arguments stressing the cleanliness of air control, emphasizing its humane practices, and claiming a higher level of bombing precision than was ever actually achieved (Omissi 166). Significantly, the Air Staff also supported this claim by blaming the victims. In deference to parliamentary concerns, RAF squadrons were required to warn the villagers of a coming airstrike, and allow time for evacuation. The Air Staff pointed out that if the tribal leaders failed to clear their villages, or police their own members, the leaders, not the RAF, must be blamed for exposing their people to bombing (Omissi 165). Airpower advocates thus began to manipulate the discourse of bombed and bomber, by representing the bombing victim as irresponsible for allowing herself to be bombed, while the perpetrators are presented as humane and blameless in this action.

Because its goal was disciplinary, the success of air control was dependent on the response of the targeted population: as Omissi explains, “policing is not simply a set of regulatory institutions; it is a dialectical relationship between the police and the policed” (107). Therefore, the nature of the policed groups, and their possible reaction to

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8 As Omissi smartly points out, these objections were raised not as part of an abstract debate but within “a political battle between the services” for power and money (163).
9 Townshend notes air control incorporated the idea of the “air blockade” (148), a term which is generally viewed as synonymous with air control. The air blockade is basically the reverse of a siege--designed to keep people out of their villages rather than in. Air blockade tactics were thus primarily designed to disrupt daily life rather than to destroy it.
bombing, became the focus of much speculation during the interwar years. The
conversation generally assumed a binary view of populations—civilized or savage—and
then predicted bombing responses based on the traits associated with these groups. The
British observed that their own citizens had panicked during the bombing of London in
World War I, so many theorists expected that all civilized groups would panic.\textsuperscript{10} Some
argued that the primitive people in the mandates would be even more terrorized by
airstrikes, because they lacked the civilizing institutions to provide them with physical
and emotional support. Others applied a type of reverse racism, arguing that Europeans
were more sensitive to bombing, while the simpler psychology of “non-white tribesmen”
would allow them to adapt to it (Omissi 110). The most sophisticated analysis of
adaptation was provided by John Salmond, who believed “humanity was the same the
world over” and identified three stages of response: panic, followed by indifference or
contempt, and eventually after prolonged bombing and disruption, an “intense weariness
and a longing for peace” (Omissi 110). Omissi notes that this “three-stage theory” was
embraced by Trenchard “and eventually became the standard Air Staff dogma” (111).
Salmond’s theory is both brilliant and chilling, as it begins by incorporating the
observations from the London bombing in World War I, and eliminates any idea that the
British are weak by explaining that everyone reacts with panic when first exposed. Then
it provides ammunition for a prolonged war, allows the RAF to excuse any perceived
indifference, and argues that the only solution to this indifference is to continue bombing,

\textsuperscript{10} David Edgerton explains “The panic caused by small Zeppelin and aircraft raids in the First
World War confirmed this view [that societies were held together weakly] and suggested that bombing had
a very great psychological as well as physical effect” (45). Interestingly, Edgerton explains that in the
1930s some argued that Germans would hold up better under bombing than the British due to better social
controls, but others argued that the “plucky individualist Britons could take it while regimented Germans
would panic once teutonic administration was disrupted” (45).
or bomb even harder!

The above discussion highlights the difficulties of trying to accurately represent the targeted populations, couched as it is in the difficulties of knowing both self and other. However, airpower strategies were often based on the belief that one could know the targeted group, and predict their responses. Cultural historian Priya Satia provides keen insight into this phenomenon, in her analysis of British air control in the broadly-defined area of “Arabia.”\textsuperscript{11} Satia argues that British justification of air control in Arabia was based on a romantic representation of the region and its people: in the British view, the Bedouins romanticize and enjoy warfare, so bombing them is not morally wrong (37-38).\textsuperscript{12} Underlying this concept is the British belief that they can, and do, know the Arab mind. She suggests that British cultural constructions of Arabia allowed them to conflate the desert, nomadic warfare, chivalry, and the aircraft to create a tantalizing vision of revitalization of both war and warrior immanent in the practice of air control. This re-inscription of Arabia thus “offered the Air Staff a means of selling the new warfare to the public by exhibiting it in a famously romantic and chivalric place where, it was known, the bourgeois rules …did not apply anyway” (42). Satia’s brilliant work not only exposes the Orientalism at work here, but also reveals how this representation of the target population impacts the Western notion of the bombing self.

Satia’s analysis exposes the ongoing tension between these representations that are continuously being manipulated in the discourse of airpower, such as the RAF’s

\textsuperscript{11} Satia explains she uses the term Arabia, in part for a discussion of air control in Iraq, but primarily “in the cultural sense, to refer to the British imaginary of a land of mirage, myth, and imprecise borders” (17 note 4).

\textsuperscript{12} Satia interestingly connects air control to T.E. Lawrence, who saw nomadic warfare as a “chivalrous and individualized mode of combat suited to the region” (37).
depiction of the targeted populated during public air shows in the 1920s.\footnote{According to Townshend, as early as 1921 the Air Staff was aware of the perceived barbarity of air attacks, but hoped that if it minimized them, before another war occurred “the public may become educated as to the meaning of air power” (qtd in Townshend 159). Townshend observes that “the air control idea was a way of furthering such education without impinging too sharply on civilized sensibilities”; he argues that it was only partially successful, however, and that the public didn’t fully accept airpower capabilities until the advent of total war (159).} In these widely-attended events, air strikes were staged against “a tribe of airman, suitably dressed and blackened,” (Omissi 172) and in 1927 against the (civilian) inhabitants of an Eastern village. These shows appeal, obviously, to the racial prejudices of the audience, as well as the notion of civilization and savagery which underwrites the imperial contract.

Additionally, Paul K. Saint-Amour labels these displays “exercises in mass-reassurance” (6) for the British, keeping them focused on the use of airpower not against “civilized Europeans” in total war as airpower theory suggested (or through air policing at home), but against an “inferior” enemy race. These events illustrate the critical importance of representation to airpower advocates in the interwar years, an importance that resonates throughout the century, and colors our perception of appropriate airpower use even today.

This representation began to seem unreliable, though, as air control practices from the periphery of empire were brought back to the center with the mid-century bombing of Spanish cities. Sven Lindqvist argues that there was a close correlation between air control and European bombing, as the tactics airmen and military leaders learned during the interwar years were transferred to Europe. In 1924, Spanish aircraft attacked Moroccan villages, using both conventional bombs and mustard gas (banned by the Geneva Convention a year later), destroying houses and crops and killing numerous civilians. The next year, the Spanish Foreign legion, with the assistance of American volunteers, destroyed the African city of Chechaouen. Lindqvist proposes that it was
here that young Francisco Franco learned the strategy of using “the air force of a foreign land to bomb one’s own territory” which he would later employ in Spain; thus “Chechaouen laid the foundation for Guernica” (51).

**Martha Gellhorn’s Representations of the Bombed**

As a war correspondent, Martha Gellhorn cut her teeth in Spain during the Civil War. She reported on several wars during her career, spanning more than forty years, and collected many of these articles in *The Face of War*, first released in 1959. From this collection, I examine two articles about the Spanish Civil War, written originally for *Collier’s*: “High Explosive for Everyone” and “The Third Winter”. Gellhorn’s writing about this war is significant because it is located at the intersection where the strategies of air control learned at the margins collapse inward on themselves, bringing the bombing of civilians back to the metropole for the first time since the Great War. As an American journalist writing about Spain in a prominent U.S. magazine, Gellhorn appealed to an audience that was keenly interested in airpower and its potential employment in total war. Her writing exposes the new fusion of the domestic and the war zone in modern cities, as the battlefront moves into the cities and the boundary between combatants and non-combatants begins to disappear. By reporting on the responses of civilians to bombing, Gellhorn challenges the representation of urban civilians which had become a fundamental assumption of airpower theory: the promise

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14 Gellhorn published a revised edition in the United States in 1988. All of my references are to this revised edition.

15 The first selection was published in *Collier’s* as “Only the Shells Whine,” July 17, 1937. Gellhorn preferred her original title and returned to it in the collection. In the frontispiece to *The Face of War*, Gellhorn states that all of the articles in the Spanish war section were published in *Collier’s*, but as Kate McLoughlin astutely notes, the second was written in November, 1938, but rejected by *Collier’s* in February, 1939. For consistency, I will use *The Face of War* as the reference for both articles.
that the air war would be quick and would save lives when panicked, bombed civilians
demanded a quick end to war.

Gellhorn enjoyed an unusual level of influence in the 1930s. Raised in Saint
Louis, she attended Bryn Mawr but left before graduating, and worked for a time as a
cub reporter in Albany. Early in the decade, she spent several years in Europe writing
and publishing a novel,16 then as a love affair soured, returned to the United States to
experience the Great Depression firsthand. She spent much of 1934 working for the
Federal Emergency Relief Administration, documenting the ravages of the depression;
she traveled extensively, seeing the distressed conditions up close, an experience she
later fictionalized in the successful short story collection The Trouble I've Seen (1935).
She met the Roosevelts, was afterwards frequently a guest at the White House, and
corresponded regularly with Eleanor Roosevelt. In 1937, she published her first war
report with Collier's, an important weekly magazine with a circulation of 2.4 million,17
and with the publication of her second article, her name was added to the magazine's
masthead, suggesting she was a regular staff writer.18 In the late 1930s she reported
extensively for Collier's on war and war preparations in Spain, England, France,
Czechoslovakia, and Finland.

Activism was at the heart of all Gellhorn's writing, both fiction and non-fiction.19

In a 1939 letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, she acknowledges her privileged life, and says she

16 Her first novel, What Mad Pursuit, was published in 1934; according to Moorehead, Gellhorn
later dismissed it as juvenilia (81). Gellhorn went on to publish ten novels, two short story collections, three
non-fiction books (two of which were collections of her reporting), a play, and dozens of magazine articles.
17 Gellhorn's biographer Caroline Moorehead reports a readership of ten million (146), but I use
Kate McLoughlin's figure of 2.4 million in 1936, which seems more accurate (43).
18 Kate McLoughlin, in Martha Gellhorn: The War Writer in the Field and in the Text provides a
fascinating analysis of Collier's creation of the figure 'Martha Gellhorn—war correspondent' (147-154).
19 Giovanni Dell'Orto compares Gellhorn's fiction and non-fiction and concludes that there are
few differences between style and subject matter, and notes that her intent with the fiction is similar to her
journalism—to show what she sees to stimulate her readers to action.
hopes to give something back to the world through her writing, by making "an angry sound against injustice" (Moorehead SL 73). "I write like someone screaming" she later told a friend, explaining that she screamed against barbarism and for kindness.\textsuperscript{20} This type of journalistic advocacy was not unusual at this time. Giovanna Dell’Orto notes that other contemporary journalists, including Helen Kirkpatrick and Ernest Hemingway, also saw a personal, involved role for reporters (306). Kate McLoughlin situates Gellhorn’s writing in the larger tradition of New Reportage prominent in Europe in the thirties. The influence of this new thinking was such that “the presentation of fact...was a key means of educating and, crucially, mobilising public opinion” (26). As war developed in Spain and began to threaten the rest of Europe, “Gellhorn was writing for the eyes of Americans, trying to persuade them to help Spain and then other European states” (McLoughlin 173). With its tradition of muckraking, Collier’s provided a perfect fit for Gellhorn’s writing activism.\textsuperscript{21}

In the waning years of the decade, Collier’s published an interesting mix of genres which shows a desire both to entertain and inform its readers. In 1938 and 1939, the magazine featured fiction by prominent authors, including short stories, serialized novels and mysteries.\textsuperscript{22} Additionally, the magazine maintained a serious focus on international affairs, with emphases on flying and the global build-up to war. Lightheaded articles like “Flying is Fun” by Eleanor Roosevelt (April 22, 1939) were juxtaposed with more serious ones, such as “Commuting to War: An American Pilot Fights for China” by Elwyn Gibbon (November 12, 1938); “Brown and Yellow Bombers: Report from Hankow---and the future of war in the air” by W.B. Courtney

\textsuperscript{20}Letter to Allen Grover, October 30, 1944. Quoted in Moorehead, p. 229.

\textsuperscript{21} McLoughlin provides a discussion of Collier’s editorial bent.

\textsuperscript{22} Collier’s archives are available online at http://www.unz.org/Pub/Colliers.
(February 4, 1939); and “Bombs Don’t Scare Us: English prepare for atrocities” by Winston Churchill (June 17, 1939), a frequent contributor. Gellhorn’s focus on total war and the impact of airpower on civilians would thus have complemented and advanced Collier’s developing themes.

The author’s awareness of developing airpower theories in the late 1930s may have been influenced by her association with H.G. Wells, beginning in the middle of the decade.23 In two notable texts about future wars, The War in the Air (1908) and The Shape of Things to Come (1933), Wells predicts aerial warfare on a global scale, as war increasingly focused on populations. “War,” he explained, “which formerly had been fought on the flat along a ‘front,’ suddenly reached through and over the contending armies, and allowed no one to stand out of it anymore” (Shape 150). Andrea Lynn notes that “frequently, HG’s works were on [Gellhorn’s] current reading list” (370) (although she does not specify which texts). In whatever sense Wells influenced Gellhorn, her writing about war in the late 1930s shows a confident ability to contextualize what she saw in Spain with contemporary thinking about airpower.

In approaching Gellhorn, we must understand that readers of war literature have

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23 Accounts differ as to whether or not the two authors were lovers, but it is known that they were friends beginning in 1935. Wells, who was significantly older than Gellhorn, claimed that they were lovers, but Gellhorn vehemently denied this claim. Andrea Lynn is unable to verify either version, relegating the debate to a “he said/ she said” scenario. Lynn, however, disputes the fact that they met for the first time at the White House (March 1935), using datebook entries to suggest they met earlier, in the south of France in 1934 (366). Bertrand de Jouvenal, Gellhorn’s lover in the early thirties, was an admirer of Wells (360), which might have influenced her to seek out Wells for literary advice. Lynn suggests that Gellhorn “probably planned to meet HG” (433), as he was very useful to her in getting her book The Trouble I’ve Seen published (and he wrote the Preface).

Although there is little evidence of direct influence, its likelihood is difficult to ignore. Gellhorn’s writings before meeting Wells show no interest in airpower, but afterward, they do. Admittedly, this change may be due to an increasing airmindedness in the general population during the build-up to war, or may not have occurred until she witnessed the effects of airpower firsthand. Unfortunately, very little correspondence between the two is currently extant; the letters that do exist do not discuss the air war. Gellhorn’s archives have been sealed until 2023; when they are opened, perhaps additional information will be available.

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traditionally privileged the writings of veterans for providing the truth about war (Norris 22). For most of the twentieth century, war writing, Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick explains, “was thought to be writing by men about men” (3). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify an image of the “woman left behind” in men’s war writing, and note that this figure “reinforced the notion that women--and thus women writers--remained behind or outside the actual war effort and therefore deprived of the inside experience necessary to express the realities of worldwide combat” (234). Men’s war writing was valued more than women’s because it was assumed to be authentic, with an authenticity derived from men’s eyewitness accounts of battle.24 Shari Benstock and Jean Gallagher highlight the priority given to vision here, noting our frequent description of combat experience as “seeing action” or “seeing battle.”25 Women’s war writing was undervalued because it lacked the authority provided by this visual experience, by seeing the trauma of war. Generally, we understand the term “seeing action” as the simple act of being on the front lines of the war, a definition which allows us to value writings not only by combat veterans, but also those of non-combatant Ernest Hemingway, for example, or accounts by journalists, such as Michael Herr’s Dispatches and Sebastian Jung’s recent book War.

Critics might argue that even this definition of seeing action disqualifies

24 Much has been written about the unreliability of vision (Paul Virilio’s The Vision Machine, for example), and twentieth century viewers realize that they cannot always believe what they see, especially as pictures and video can be manipulated. However, and perhaps for this reason, we continue to value the eyewitness account as providing an unmediated (or less mediated) truth.

25 Jean Gallagher, in The World Wars Through the Female Gaze, notes that vision functions “as a mark of and basis for authenticity and authority in writing about war” (3). She explains that war experience was traditionally divided by gender, with men as those who “see battle” and women as passive spectators. She re-defines women’s role as that of an active and resistant observer, and notes several writers who fight the totalizing effect of the “unified wartime seeing subject” (4). While Gallagher provides a fascinating discussion of the construction of the female subject, my concerns differ in that I focus primarily on women’s response to the changing front lines. Shari Benstock (Introduction, A Son at the Front) argues that women’s WWI writings challenge the divide between men’s and women’s war experiences, broadening the definition beyond “seeing action” (x).
women’s writing because, historically, women did not see the front lines. However, in twentieth-century wars, where cities become targets and their streets battlefields, women (and other noncombatants) are on the front lines and do see action. It is in this context that Gellhorn describes her arrival in Madrid in March, 1937, where she found that the “whole city was a battlefield, waiting in the dark” (15). She understands this new perspective on war, observing that “what was new and prophetic about the war in Spain was the life of the civilians, who stayed at home and had war brought to them” (16). Women are no longer separated from the battlefield, and Gellhorn therefore asserts her authority to write about war by privileging the visual, saying “the point about these articles is that they are true; they tell what I saw” (6). Importantly, what Gellhorn saw in these spaces differed radically from the representations of total war, and particularly the use of airpower, that had emerged during the interwar years.

I discuss Gellhorn’s article “High Explosive for Everyone” (July, 1937) briefly, since it portrays the city of Madrid under attack by artillery, not aircraft. It is significant here because it illustrates the author’s scathing use of irony to show the new space of total war, thus setting up our reading of “The Third Winter.” Gellhorn describes the irony of her situation, living in a hotel in Madrid after fifteen days of shelling, “like a hotel in DesMoines or New Orleans, with a lobby and wicker chairs in the lounge...and meantime it was like a trench when they lay down an artillery barrage” (19). McLoughlin here identifies the “normality trope” in Gellhorn’s texts, where the author “destabilizes normality” by comparing it to familiar, and often American, landscapes (46). While

26 Gellhorn echoed this statement in a letter she wrote in 1944 protesting the restrictions on women reporters, where she explains the importance of her work to “millions of people in America who are desperately in need of seeing, but cannot see for themselves” (letter, Martha Gellhorn to Colonel Lawrence, June 24, 1944, qtd. in Moorhead 221).
McLoughlin suggests Gellhorn uses this technique to spur American involvement, this text seems more intent on redefining the spaces of war, showing that what can happen in Madrid can happen in any city. By centering the action in the city, Gellhorn prevents any suggestion that the artillery is targeting troops and missing, there are clearly no troops nearby. She describes a hit on one room in the hotel: “I went back to my room, and again there came that whistle-whine-scream-roar and the noise was in your throat and you couldn’t feel or hear or think and the building shook and seemed to settle” (21). As Claire M. Tylee explains in her writing about gender and war, writers from subordinated groups often use irony to challenge the establishment (521). Gellhorn does so here to expose the patriarchal lie that men protect women from war, showing that instead of protecting them, men are targeting them. She goes on to describe the streets around her as “No Man’s Land” (21), a stunning move which recalls an iconic image of World War I while at the same time presenting a vision of modern war, in which the center of the battlefield is no longer located at some distant “front lines” but instead amongst the homes and businesses of civilians. Gellhorn thus defamiliarizes the by-now familiar images of the Great War by re-locating the trenches in the city centers, and by replacing the doughboys with the people of Spain, thus showing her audience that the old notions of war no longer apply in this startling new vision of total war.

Gellhorn moves on to a more direct challenge of airpower theory in her article “The Third Winter,” written in November, 1938 when “Italian planes were bombing Barcelona” (40). She opens with a description of what she sees, expertly weaving

27 In the frontispiece to The Face of War, Gellhorn states that all of the articles in the Spanish war section were published in Collier’s, but as Kate McLoughlin astutely notes, “The Third Winter” was rejected by Collier’s in February, 1939 (note 203, 57). (I would attribute Gellhorn’s frontispiece error to poor memory, of which she complained, rather than deliberate obfuscation.) Gellhorn refers to this article
elements of war and peace together to create a tapestry of modern war, lived among civilians, set in the cities they call home:

In Barcelona, it was perfect bombing weather. The cafes along the Ramblas were crowded. There was nothing much to drink; a sweet fizzy poison called orangeade and a horrible liquid supposed to be sherry. There was, of course, nothing to eat. Everyone was out enjoying the cold afternoon sunlight. No bombers had come over for at least two hours. (37)

What Gellhorn crucially shows in this passage is the reaction of the civilians to the bombing, specifically, their ability to adapt to it. Here, as we see, the people are not panicked, nor are they hiding in terror; they are out on the streets, patronizing cafes, trying as much as possible to lead a normal life despite the constant threat of bombing. As Dell’Orto notes, Gellhorn uses contrast stylistically here to show not only the “insanity of war” but also “the stoic resistance of civilians” (307) exposed to it.

We should remember here that in the discourse of cleanness promoted by the prophets of airpower the violence of targeting civilians was mitigated by a promise of quickness, which would limit the overall deaths. This was supported by a representation of civilians as prone to panic and capitulation in the face of bombing. Douhet, Trenchard, and Liddell Hart all advanced this notion to some extent, predicting that a country could not continue “living and working under this constant threat” (Douhet, Command 22).28

Douhet expected “a complete breakdown of the social structure” and expected the people in a 1941 letter, noting that “events made it outdated before it could be published: it was my responsibility” (McLoughlin note 203, 57). Further archival research into the editorial decisions made regarding this article would be interesting, but are beyond the scope of this project.

28 It is important to note that Douhet envisioned the aerial delivery of poison gas as well as incendiary and high explosive bombs, but gas was not used in this way during the Spanish Civil War or World War II. Perhaps the reactions of the bombed would have more closely fulfilled his predictions had gas been employed as he thought it would. Gellhorn’s reference to “a poison called orangeade” in the previous passage shows an ironic awareness of this absence.
to rise up and demand an end to the war (58). Although John Salmond modified this idea with his idea of three stages of adaption, as discussed earlier, the prevailing belief in the efficacy of bombing at this time was still based on Douhet’s less accurate representation. Gellhorn’s representation of the Barcelona residents thus takes on a transgressive function, because she shows that they are not panicked or rebelling. In fact, Barcelona’s civilians are most likely located at stage two of Salmon’s reaction triad: indifference. They are not panicked, and not yet at the stage of intense weariness. Instead, they are enjoying the fresh air, indifferently refusing to alter their daily routines any more than necessary in reaction to the bombing. With this alternative representation, Gellhorn undercuts one of the foundations of airpower theory, showing civilians clearly adapting to the bombing.

Later in “The Third Winter,” Gellhorn describes an even more powerful example of adaptation. She sees several Barcelona women standing in line for food, and explains, “I could not see the planes but I heard them; on a clear day they fly high for safety, so you rarely see them” (48). Yet the women have become so well adapted to the bombings, that:

they know perfectly, by the sound of the first explosion, where the bombs are falling. If the first bomb sounds hollow and muffled, they do not move from their places, because they know there is no immediate danger. If they can hear the drone of the planes too clearly or the first explosion is jagged and harsh, they scatter for doorways and refuges. They do this professionally, like soldiers. (39)

This passage shows the extreme adaptation of the civilians, to the point of militarization.
As Bentham and Foucault suggest, the surveillance and threat from above provides training to the people below. However, the civilian response does not conform to the expectations of Douhetian airpower theory. Gellhorn again shows that the civilians adapt, coolly and professionally, with no panic; even fear is contained and managed. Most importantly, this passage exposes the lie in the concept of a quick war. The people have not risen up against their leadership, and if indeed they desire to demand a quick end to the war, no one seems to be listening. In fact, the people of Barcelona see the bombing as their part in the war, and their resistance as a way of showing their own solidarity with the troops. Gellhorn quotes a mother whose two sons are soldiers: "‘My sons are always close to the bombs,’ she said in her blurred old voice. ‘If my children are in danger, it is not well that I should be safe’" (42). Not only does this adaptation signal no quick surrender forthcoming, but it also suggests that the only way to achieve victory is to continue the bombing indefinitely, in an attempt to push these civilians into the third stage of adaptation, that weariness that may eventually end the war.29

Gellhorn’s decision to include this article in The Face of War shows her continued belief in the importance of its message, although by 1942 she was already feeling some disillusionment, noting: “Spain was also like a vaccination which could save the rest of mankind from the same fearful suffering. But no one important cared” (Moorehead SL125). Sixteen years later, as she prepared the collection for publication, the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary was fresh in her mind. She compared Hungary to

29 Gellhorn was not the only one writing about adaptation at this time. In fact, it seems likely that the Collier’s editors bumped Gellhorn’s article, submitted in mid-December, 1938 (Moorehead, SL 70), in favor of an essay by Winston Churchill, “Let the Tyrant Criminals Bomb!” published 14 January, 1939. In it, Churchill argues that the capabilities of airpower in war are not as great as anticipated, and provides examples from the Spanish Civil War as illustrations. Particularly, he says civilian panic in response to bombing cannot be expected, as city residents “would develop a life of their own, a life ‘adapted to its environment.’ They have done this in Barcelona” (36). This article provides an interesting counterpoint to Churchill’s support of morale bombing as British Prime Minister during World War II.
Spain in a 30 November, 1956 letter: "It looks very bad to me; I think it’s about 1936 now. And Hungary is a new style of Spain, and like Spain, it will die. No one ever helps in time" (Moorehead SL 265). By publishing her collection of war reporting, Gellhorn was once again trying to make a difference, trying to be heard. War reporting, she wrote, must "record truly" because "it is the only revenge that all the bastardized people will ever get: that someone writes down clearly what happened to them" (Moorehead SL 118).30 By thus recording her Barcelona observations, she holds out hope that perhaps someone will listen, and understand that bombing civilians is not an effective strategy.

Using the women of Spain as an example, Gellhorn thus exposes the contradictions inherent in Europe’s preparations for war in the latter part of the decade. While states continued building bombers and the discourse suggested that their use against cities would be quick and decisive, both the experiences of the RAF with air control and her observations in Spain exposed the flaws in this doctrine. She shows that, as Salmond suggested, the people of Europe responded to bombing in the same way as the natives on the frontiers, with initial panic followed by adaptation. Expectations of quick victory through airpower were either exaggerations or outright lies, which in fact were evident in the insistence of the states on preparing their populations to withstand bombing, by issuing gas masks, practicing air raid drills, and designating shelters. Gellhorn’s observations of daily life in the war-torn cities of Madrid and Barcelona, then, challenged prevailing views of airpower by exposing what she saw, at the new front lines of modern war.

Despite warnings such as Gellhorn’s, and highly publicized representations of

30 The first letter was addressed to Bill & Annie Davis, June, 1942, the second to Leonard Bernstein, and the third to Max Perkins, 17 October, 1941.
Spain’s bombing victims such as Picasso’s painting “Guernica,” the wheels of war rolled steadily toward World War II, where civilians were bombed extensively. During the Second World War, representations of bombing and its targets shifted fluidly, as I show in later chapters. The United States emerged from this war as the new imperial power, particularly in the Pacific, where it was soon once again embroiled in battle in the Korean War, and then later, the war in Vietnam. For white Americans fighting in Asia, the enemy was often represented as a racialized other; as such, William Spanos suggests, “the menacing invisibility of this subaltern Other of America was strategic: it put into positive practice the Eurocentric identification of non-Westerners with nonbeing” (165). While Spanos links this observation to a reading of the foot soldier in Vietnam, this insight is readily applicable to the air war also, as it codifies the disappearance of the targeted population begun forty years earlier with the discourse of air control on the margins of the British Empire. The movement of this discourse, then, imagined as a geographical and temporal spiral, rose from Europe in World War I, spun out to the fringes of the British Empire, was refined, then passed back through, and devastated, Europe. With the war in Vietnam it returns to the periphery once again, spatially displaced, and with a different master but with the same need to represent the targeted—and targeting—populations.

Representations of Laos (and America?)

in John Clark Pratt’s The Laotian Fragments

In his Vietnam-war novel, The Laotian Fragments, John Clark Pratt illustrates the dual nature of this representation, in which the Meo people on the ground are represented in a way that allows the American characters to re-inscribe their self-images as
benevolent rather than destructive. Pratt complicates this representation first by showing us the silencing of the Meos, filtering the discourse about the American aerial presence through various American characters and completely eliding the voice of the native Meos below. Then he shows the re-presentation of this population, portraying the Meos as always welcoming this aerial presence.31 Pratt locates these critical moves, I argue, in the Americans’ belief in their ability to know and understand the people below; in doing so he reveals the extent to which the aviator participates in this representation of the people, and he exposes the dangers of this illusion.

This novel has never received the critical attention it deserves, in part because its structure makes it a challenge to read. A postmodern novel, The Laotian Fragments consists of a pastiche of informational bits involving pilot protagonist Bill Blake, including Operations Reports (Opreps), poetry, letters to, from, or about him, transcribed tapes of cockpit communications, and journal entries. With each fragment, the reader must evaluate not only the relative truth-value of the information it contains, but also the motivation and reliability of the writer. Blake is a Major, commanding several scattered groups of pilots flying as Forward Air Controllers (FACs) over northern Laos.32 Blake’s life is complicated by his state-side wife who wants a divorce, two local women who want him, another pilot, Hamilton, who wants his job and wants him out, and by the

31 The Meos presented here are troops which the United States is supporting, so unlike the natives in the air control period, they themselves are not being bombed or disciplined. However, as I show below, other sources indicate that the civilian population in the area, for whom the Meo troops were ostensibly fighting, was often subjected to deadly and disruptive bombing. I suggest that the representation of this population, then, erases both troops and civilians.

32 USAF FACs coordinate between ground troops and strike aircraft, locating and marking targets and ensuring the safety of friendly troops in the area. FACS operating in Laos were known as “Ravens,” and flew small, slow, propeller-driven aircraft—the O-1 (a Cessna L-19), the U-19, or the T-28—which made them very susceptible to ground fire. According to Ed Gunter, “The mission of the Ravens was to support indigenous forces in Laos in their fight against invading forces from North Vietnam. The Ravens were all volunteers who had previous experience as FACs in South Viet Nam. Due to international treaties, the Ravens were “divorced” from the USAF. They wore only civilian clothes, and operated out of generally small fields at different sites in the Kingdom of Laos.”
absurd nature of the war, being fought on the ground by Meos, an indigenous group, and in the air by the U.S. and a few regular Laotian pilots. The fragments are being compiled by York Harding, a political science professor, after Blake has been declared Missing in Action (MIA).3 The novel is set in 1968-69, during the secret air war over Laos, and is valuable because it is one of the few texts that address the air war.

The war described in the novel is being fought mainly over the Plain of Jars,4 home to 50,000-60,000 people, with eighty percent Lao Phoueu, ten percent Meo (or Kha), and ten percent Chinese/ Vietnamese. According to advisor Fred Branfman, after more than fifty years of French rule ending in 1954, the area underwent a period of decolonization, followed by “American intervention concentrating on wooing the Meo, and the emergence of the Plain as a major Cold War battleground” (11). The Pathet Lao, communist guerillas supported by the U.S.S.R. and allied with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), occupied the area in May, 1964; in response, the U.S. funded the Lao army and created a “C.I.A.-led army among [the] Meos” (13), supported by American bombing from 1964-1969.

Literary critics have focused in general on two elements: Pratt’s use of fragments, and the intertextuality of the novel. The title itself hints at both of these elements. *The Laotian Fragments*, as Kathleen M. Puhr explains, “works as a metaphor: we know only bits and pieces of any situation, and we piece together what we think is the truth....” (115). In one of his own journal fragments, Blake comments on a poem written by

3 Pratt’s naming of the characters shows the diverse literary influences he brings to the text. As Puhr and Aubrey note, Blake is a reference to the poet William Blake; Harding was a Graham Greene character; other characters include Dante Hamilton, Robert Browning, and Jake Barnes, Blake’s commander, who, appropriately, “has no balls” (Puhr 116). Lt Col Vonnegut ironically has a background in Strategic Air Command (SAC).

4 Located in the province of Xieng Khouang, and so named because it featured large clay jars “believed to be the funeral urns of an ancient...race” (Branfman 9), the geography of the plain and its location as a crossroads made it an area often fought over.
another pilot after the death of a third pilot, and he laments, "how little we really know about other human beings—from the inconclusive fragments that they let us see" (190). In the novel, however, through the use of Harding as editor, we are able to see more of these fragments than Blake would (or could) have let us see, and thus construct an idea of the man as viewed from multiple perspectives. The use of the word fragments also echoes T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, where the poet writes, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (line 431). As Eliot assembled fragments in an attempt to understand the post-Great War world, so Pratt uses them to understand Blake and Vietnam.

This use of fragmentation, as Donald Ringnalda explains, is characteristic of the best Vietnam novels. In a comprehensive article, Ringnalda uses military tactics as an analytical tool for evaluating over two hundred Vietnam War novels. The bad ones, he explains, use conventional structures of realism, plot, and character development which mirror the largely unsuccessful conventional American military tactics. The best novels, including *The Laotian Fragments*, use unconventional guerilla tactics to try to make sense of this crazy war: "the action...is unpredictable, discontinuous, fragmentary, and seemingly without design" (39). These writers, he says, "sabotage their own language, and then try to rearrange the nothings of war until they become fictive potential and inchoate form" (emphasis original 42). Pratt's use of fragments, then, reflects an artistic choice of form that allows him to approach such a complex and chaotic subject.

This form is more than just an artistic choice, however. Pratt himself explains in an interview, "I started writing...in the form of fragments for artistic reasons, for political reasons, and for personal reasons..." (Tal 5). The political reasons are especially
important, because Pratt’s positioning is unique, as the only author examined in this project who was still an active-duty Air Force officer when he wrote and published the novel. As Aubrey suggests, Pratt sometimes felt conflicted between his dual role as an Air Force Officer and English Professor, and thus uses various literary devices to encode a critique of U.S. policies in Southeast Asia that, as a serving officer, he was not able to openly express (121). These devices include allusions to Joseph Heller’s World War II flying novel *Catch-22*, and as Aubrey notes, structural similarities to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which “invites any reader ....to see the Southeast Asian war effort as the moral equivalent of colonialism” (119). Taken together, these literary connections thus foreground Pratt’s novel as a critique of American airpower and its use on the peripheries of empire.

The novel’s structure also forces us, as readers, to address “fundamental questions concerning who we are and how we know what we think we know” (Ringnalda 37). Because we are uncertain about the reliability and motivations of individual narrators, including Blake, we are forced to question the truths they present. Aubrey also notes this important theme, that “truth is inaccessible,” even if it exists (115). If we readers are confused, we join in the general chaos of the situation. One of the officers presented in the novel explains that “the only people who don’t know what’s going on are the commanders and the people back home” (124). But even the principal actors often feel they are lacking information. Puhr explains that Blake experiences difficulty commanding because “nothing’s written down” (117). This emphasis on the fluidity of truth and the lack of reliable information undercuts the certainty of the American use of airpower in Laos, and the Americans’ beliefs that they can and do know the Meo people.
they are supporting.

Pratt previews this difficulty of knowing with the editorial comments to Fragment 1. Describing Blake's journal, Harding explains that it is written in the second part of a spiral notebook; in the first 34 pages of the notebook are notes from a 1954 philosophy class entitled "Asian Thought." At the end of this section, and prior to the beginning of the journal detailing his time in Laos, Blake has written in two inch letters, heavily retraced, the words "FUCK IT," followed by eleven exclamation points (7). The implication here is that knowing he was going to war in Southeast Asia, Blake had reviewed his class notes, hoping to find insight about the space in which he would be fighting, but gave up in disgust. Blake continues to try to educate himself about Laos, reading books about U.S. foreign policy there, minutes from the Senate Hearings on Laos, and the archives of Project CHECO (Contemporary Historical Examination of Combat Operations) (96). During his first meeting with the local C.I.A. representative, Blake says he expects it will take six months, his full tour, "just to find out what's going on" (59).

His effort is made difficult by the number of agencies directly involved with the war in Laos—the State Department, the Pentagon, the C.I.A., and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) -- each with "different interests and views on how to

35 Pratt, John Clark. The Laotian Fragments. New York: Viking P, 1974. All page references will be to this text.
37 Pratt includes excerpts from "Hearings before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-first Congress, First Session, Part 2, October 20-22 and 28" that read as a Catch-22-like rendering of the disconnect between what the men fighting in Laos know and what the Senate knows about the war, pages 12-15, 23-27.

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handle Laos” (29). In turn, each agency tries to educate Blake on its view of the war, and particularly of how to “read” the use of American airpower there. While Blake understands that these truths are relative, and one has to “read between the lines...to understand what’s going on in Southeast Asia” (88), he is influenced by these efforts, until after three months he believes “I’m beginning to understand this war, and I know a hell of a lot more than anyone else around” (210). Unfortunately, this belief in his ability to know will prove fatal for Blake, eventually prompting him to fly an unauthorized mission which results in his disappearance.

Blake’s education revolves around the importance of airpower to the Meo troops. Abe Horowitz, “The Company” (read: C.I.A.) chief, tells Blake that before the U.S. arrived, the Meos were “a bunch of rag-tag tribesmen who believed in spirits and nature gods, with only bows and arrows and some primitive flintlocks....Now they’ve got modern weapons and know how to call in airpower” (59). In several scenes throughout the novel, Pratt’s fragments paint the Meos as a simple people who love American airpower, thereby re-inscribing the aircrews as the patronizing saviors of an oppressed people and the Plain of Jars as a space where American intervention is welcomed. Blake first sees this from the air on an orientation flight with veteran pilot Dante Hamilton, who explains to Blake how he should read what he sees below. Hamilton has strong contacts with both The Company and General Vang Pao, commander of the Meo forces. He has been recommended to Blake by the Air Attaché, as someone who knows the natives, “the only one who can eat Lao food regularly, and ...even has a ‘wife’ who has been given to him by Vang Pao” (42), suggesting that one needs only a palate and a penis to know the Other. Hamilton tells Blake, “you’ve got to know the people here to understand what’s
what" (77). As they fly over an airfield, it appears empty, but recognizing the airplane, the Meos come out of hiding, as the two pilots converse over the interphone:

Hamilton: ...See the little guys come out of their holes?

Blake: They're like spiders. Look at them wave.

Hamilton: They love American airplanes. They feel safe when we're around. God help them if we ever go home.

Blake: That guy with the big floppy hat's shooting, Dante.

Hamilton: Sure, straight up. It's their way of saying hello. (78).

In this passage, Blake's first impulse is to see the people as "spiders," something less than human as they pour out of their hiding holes, and he is concerned that the man in the hat is shooting at the airplane. Hamilton, however, interprets the scene for him, treating the Meos as humans, but with a primitive bent, explaining that they are waving because they welcome this show of airpower, and shooting, not in hostility, but in greeting.

Significantly, we do not see the actual reactions of the Meos here, as our only source of knowledge is Hamilton, who filters their actions to comply with his preconceptions. The Meos may be waving not because they "love" American airpower, but because, fearing it and knowing its power, they must display their friendliness to avoid becoming victims of this power.

Americans in the area also tap into local mythology to support their vision of airpower and the Meo response to it. One of the items Blake reads is a booklet called "Welcome to Laos: A Practical Guide," published for the American Women's Club. In it, he reads the "Legend of the Seven Dragons," about an indigenous people who lived on the Mekong River near Vientiene (located just south of the Plain of Jars). The people
lived in peace and prosperity, because they were defended by seven dragons, who were summoned from their cave with a large drum when the community was threatened. Their luck turns, however, when a spy tricks the people into giving up their drum; when the Thais attack, the villagers can no longer call the dragons to their defense, and they are defeated. The legend is accompanied by marginal notes written by Blake: "Distant drummer? Who's the dragon—who's the spy? The Dragon or the Drum" (19). With these comments, Blake is speculating on how he and the other agencies function in the re-writing of this myth. Read the villagers as Meos, substitute American airpower for the dragons, the FACs for the drum, and the myth is reconstituted so that as a FAC, he is the drummer who summons the USAF dragons to defend the Meos. His questions indicate his ongoing uncertainty about the role of all the players, including the spies (The Company), in the equation.

Representatives of other agencies answer these questions, in two separate communiqués to which Blake was privileged. The first, Fragment 36, is a memo from the Army Attaché to the Air Attaché explaining the difficulties his men have in training the Meo ground troops to be self-sufficient. This training is hampered, he notes, by their overreliance on airpower: whenever the ground troops get into trouble "your airplanes come along and save the day. At least that's what the foot soldier thinks. The generals think of air as their magic wand--all they have to do is wave it and the enemy will go away" (94). This association of airpower not with military tactics but with magic illustrates the paternalism of the Americans, and more importantly exposes the arrogance attached to their own view of airpower and technological superiority. In the second document, Fragment 46, Horowitz further develops this theme in a memo to the Air
Attaché describing a battle in which the Meo troops withdrew when bad weather precluded an airborne gunship attack: “anytime the great fire-breathing USAF sky dragon fails to spew forth destruction, the little guys get understandably scared” (111). Pratt instills several layers of meaning in this image. Read literally, there is indeed a strong resemblance between the USAF AC-130 gunship and a fire-breathing dragon, as the flames from its powerful cannons blaze out from the side of the aircraft like dragon fire, creating a stunning image in the night sky. Metaphorically, Pratt is creating a connection to the legend of the seven dragons, in which American discourse subsumes and rewrites the legend, substituting the mythical dragons with the literal gunships. In doing so, the discourse reifies the dependency of the tribesmen, capitalizing on their inability to defend themselves. The derogatory use of “little guys” to refer to the American allies on the ground adds to their inferior status in the eyes of the coordinating agencies.

These passages recall Satia’s discussion of air control in Arabia, where the British belief that they could know the minds of the Arabs supported their use of airpower in the region. Similarly, Pratt shows here how the American agencies have created a discourse that implies an understanding of the Meos and re-inscribes them as dependent on—and welcoming—airpower. In turn, this discourse re-inscribes the American aviators, too, whose sense of themselves as heroic warriors defending the defenseless echoes the chivalry that Satia notes forty years earlier in Arabia.

As the novel progresses, conditions in Laos deteriorate, as NVA troops advance on the Plain of Jars from the northeast, pushing the Meos westward across the plain. When enemy forces attack airbase Lima 22 (Xieng Khouang), the FACs eventually have to withdraw due to poor weather, leaving the Meos alone to suffer their worst defeat of
the year. When Blake later surveys the scene of the battle, he writes in his journal, “I felt so sterile and disassociated” (160). Here we see that Blake has so effectively learned the lessons of airpower in Laos that he feels unmanned, sterile, when he is unable to fulfill his role of rescuing from the air. His sense of disassociation from those dying on the ground is characteristic of airpower employment, and compounds his feeling of being simultaneously both in the battle and outside of it. Despite this defeat, the CIA chief, Horowitz, is optimistic, telling Blake that General Vang Pao is holding the ridgelines, “and if he doesn’t see airplanes up there all the time, he won’t stay...What he wants is a curtain of lead between him and the enemy--American lead, coming from the sky” (169). Once again, an American is speaking for the Meos, eliding their voices and replacing them with airpower discourse.

As the onslaught becomes more intense, the Meos are besieged at Long Tieng and the FACs are forced to pull back to a safer airfield. Somehow, the Meos survive the night and hold the city; the next day, Blake sends an operations report to the Air Attache arguing to return the Ravens to the area. Blake explains that the FACs should stay with the general because “it looks good and inspires confidence in the troops to see us here....” He explains that “we could see the strain on the little guys’ faces relax more each time a flight of U.S. aircraft passed overhead” (222). The education provided by Hamilton and Horowitz has paid off, as Blake now reads the Meos as dependent, and reads his own involvement with airpower as heroic.

Pratt shows the uncertainty associated with this battle in Fragment 122, the draft of an intelligence summary composed by the Air Attache, Jake Barnes. Barnes is trying to figure out what happened at Long Tieng, and is able to find no answers, only
questions. He asks if the estimates of both enemy and friendly troop strengths were accurate, if the enemy had the equipment we thought they had, if they feared a united Meo-Lao force, and asks two crucial questions about the effectiveness of airpower: “Was our interdiction campaign successful...?”38 Did our airstrikes chew them up so much that they could not continue?” And tellingly, “Did we win a battle, or did the rains save our ass?” (224). Barnes clearly shows the inability of the American forces to understand not only the people on the ground, but even the events of the battle. However, he realizes the futility of challenging American airpower discourse, and revises the report significantly, to read: “Despite extremely poor weather and miserably dangerous flying conditions, U.S. air support assured the success of this major engagement” (225).

It is important to note that as Blake becomes convinced he sees clearly and understands the war, his vision is increasingly obstructed and inaccurate. Pratt indicates this with the deterioration of the flying weather, as the view from the air becomes obscured by smoke from burning fields, the resultant haze, and low clouds. Blake writes: “I could barely see the runway when I flew over the valley this morning....There seem to be fires all over...and the smoke layer tops out at more than 12,000 feet....Could barely see the other end of the runway on touchdown....This smog makes Los Angeles seem like Colorado on a clear day” (196). The perceived omniscience of the aerial perspective is thus shown to be erratic and unreliable, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3. Although Aubrey suggests that “the more [Blake] learns about the war, the less he feels he knows” (116), the evidence indicates the opposite—Blake believes he is seeing the war clearly. Despite his literal inability to see, Blake explains in Fragment 136, “progress

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38 *Interdiction* is the practice of preventing troops or supplies from reaching the battle area through aerial attack. A prime example of interdiction in Vietnam was the continued U.S. attacks on the Ho Chi Minh trail.
can be made only by people who thoroughly understand Southeast Asia” and notes, “I have obtained some insights denied the majority of Americans” (239). Blake by this time is so invested in the discourse of heroic airpower, that he cannot recognize his own blindness.

One of the things he fails to see clearly is the refugee problem. He documents the increasing number of refugees in the area, and helps coordinate an airlift to remove many of them from the battle area. He believes the refugees are fleeing the NVA offensive, which indeed they may be. In fact, Pratt suggests this in Fragment 81, a *Washington Post* article by Peter O’Loughlin which claims 100,000 Meos have died in nine years of war in Laos (163). However, Blake fails to understand the impact that American bombing (not just the NVA advance) may be having on civilian life in the Plain of Jars, an impact that becomes clear only in other texts, where we are allowed to hear the voices of the people.

These voices, presenting a counter-narrative about the bombing, are provided by Fred Branfman, who was working in Laos as an educational advisor in the late sixties, and worked as a translator for the international media. He conducted interviews with many of these refugees: the result is a startling book, *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life under an Air War*, with both texts and drawings made by the people evacuated from the PDJ. Branfman is highly critical of the air war and its secrecy, and views the war as an automated war, a “‘war of the airplanes’ [which] marks a new era in the history of military conflict: war which is not fought by men but machines, war which can erase

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40 The editor’s obvious bias requires a cautious approach to these interviews; however, by comparing the drawings, which show a strong familiarity with American aircraft, with the stories the refugees tell, it seems unlikely that the interviewees were coached.
distant and unseen societies clandestinely, unknown to and even unsuspected by the world outside” (4). This vision of the war as automated presents a radically different view of airpower than Pratt’s very human portrayal of the airmen involved, but one that mirrors not so much the reality of the air war as the feeling that those on the ground are battling an unknown, faceless enemy whom they can neither defeat nor surrender to.

These civilian voices provide a marked contrast to the Meo troops who welcome American airpower, and though obviously troops can be expected to react differently than civilians, we must remember that the refugees are most likely the families of the troops Blake and his Ravens are supporting. Their testimony consistently attests to fear of American aircraft, and the need to hide. A 30-year old woman, Nang ______, writes: “there was danger as the war came closer, like the sound of bombs or shells or the airplanes which constantly made a terrible noise in the sky and led me to be terribly, terribly afraid of dying” (42). A 26-year old nurse says that in 1968-1969, “every day and every night we sought ways of hiding from the danger from the air” (52), and a 26-year old man explains: “just as I reached the mouth of the hole, they bombed. I was so afraid that I would die” (55). Others record the disruption of daily life. A 22- year old woman writes: “But in 1969 it became impossible to teach. We could not go out of the holes, as the airplanes bombed near my village every day” (84). A 51-year old farmer explains: “When bombs would drop near the hole, the ground would shake and my tears would well up.” Later, “we couldn’t work for fear of the planes” (112). A 49-year old farmer notes: “Not a day would go by that we would not get up and go into the holes....The rice was nearly gone in less than a year because of the fires from the bombs. These difficulties enveloped my heart” (130). Although these interviews inspire empathy and
outrage against civilian bombing, a few of the interviewees do note the presence of anti-
aircraft guns near their villages; it therefore seems likely the airstrikes were intended
against military, not civilian targets. Despite the intent, however, these voices show the
results of the airstrikes, collectively presenting a distinct counternarrative to the
American discourse of airpower which is sold to Blake in the novel, and which he
eventually comes to believe.

Although these voices provide valuable insight to what is lacking in Blake’s
education, Pratt does not include them in The Laotian Fragments because he is not trying
to show the whole war, from a balanced perspective. On the contrary, he is writing to
show the education of one man, Major Bill Blake, and how the manipulation of airpower
discourse creates the representations that help perpetuate the war. In the epilogue to the
fragments, written by fictional editor York Harding, Blake’s wife confesses that she
never really knew Blake, and suggests that Harding, who barely remembered Blake at the
time, knew him best (242). Harding reassures her that she, indeed, knew the pilot best;
he does not feel he knows Blake until he has reassembled all the fragments. Ironically, in
this scene Pratt illustrates the difficulty of knowing someone even as close as a husband,
with whom one has lived intimately. How, then, he asks, can we expect to know the
people of a culture foreign to us, under the jungle canopy, in a country half way around
the world? By thus questioning our ways of knowing, and the application of this
knowledge, Pratt points out the absurdity of justifying American airpower employment
on the ability to know a place and a people.

In the half-century of airpower discussed in this chapter, the air war, whether
fought on the vague frontier or in the city center, has been dependent on the
representation of those on the ground. The writers discussed here show that
representations of target populations are often mistaken or inaccurate, rendering the
people invisible. Gellhorn tries to make the bombing victims visible again by showing
how people adapt, not willingly, but out of necessity, to these horrors, thus exposing the
fallacy of the quick air war. Pratt shows how airpower is used to re-present populations
of both bombed and bomber. Pratt expands this argument even further to show how this
representation can double back on itself, re-inscribing the power relationships between
populations in ways that reinforce the use of airpower. These writers challenge us to see
the brutal and surprising realities of this dialectic, as the air war moves from the
peripheries to the center and back again, and in doing so to question the discourse of the
clean air war.

In conclusion, it is important to note that these observations provide insight into
contemporary power relations as well as historical and literary analyses. The idea of air
control has experienced a resurgence of interest in recent years, as U.S. military officers
and airpower theorists explore air control as a viable option for post-cold war
peacekeeping operations.\textsuperscript{41} Moreover, others see air control policies still in operation
today in places such as Palestine: spatial critic Eyal Weizman explains that “the actual
day-to-day policing of the Occupied Territories is done primarily from the air” (“Politics”
para 12). Crucially, these practices involve not only the military practice of air control,
but also, according to Weizman, incorporate the practices of representation we have seen
in this chapter. In a recent article about Israel’s use of International Law, he identifies a

\textsuperscript{41} Corum discusses articles published by Dean (1983), Builder (1995), and Pape (1996) which all
suggest that the U.S. Air Force might apply the principles of air control, as used successfully by the RAF
during the interwar period, in some of its current operations. Corum argues that these suggestions are
misguided because the RAF use of airpower was neither as successful as it has been imagined, nor was it as
independent of the Army as has been assumed.
significant re-naming of target populations. Israel, like the British in the early air control period, makes a point of warning civilians that their homes are targeted, allowing time for evacuation. While this practice conveys an admirable humanitarian aura, he suggests that, on closer examination, it also allows the Israelis to skirt ethical issues. As Weizman explains, "the strategy is also aimed at changing the legal designation of anyone who is killed. According to this interpretation of the law, if a warning has been issued, and not heeded, the victim is no longer a 'non-combatant' but a voluntary 'human shield'" ("Short" 28). While this example is focused solely on legal descriptions, its similarity to the texts we have read here is obvious, as the target population is re-named, in essence represented as a different entity, in a way that allows the bombing nation to justify its use of airpower.
A characteristic of air wars is that those who sow the wind do not reap the whirlwind, and those who reap the whirlwind did not sow the wind.

In the last chapter, we saw how the targeted population, often civilian, disappears from view when represented in ways that support the employment of airpower. This chapter continues to explore this disappearance, with the work of two writers who interrogate the aerial perspective and the ways in which it shapes our view of the targeted population. In fiction published during or shortly after wartime, André Malraux and Roald Dahl provide a sense of immediacy as they witness, and question, the expanding use of airpower in Europe during the Spanish Civil War and World War II. I take a short detour from my reading of American literature here, with the work of a French novelist and a British-Norwegian short story writer, a move that is justified, I believe, because both men lived or traveled in America while writing their texts. Their work, I suggest, was influenced by this interaction, and although not directly targeted at an American audience, exhibits an urgent need to expose the air war to a public unfamiliar with its complexities.

André Malraux's novel L'espoir (1937) and Roald Dahl's short story "Someone Like You" (1945) both display a keen awareness of the promises, and threats, of the
aerial perspective. Malraux and Dahl, who both had combat flying experience, were uniquely positioned to interrogate this radical new perspective of modernity, the view from above. In the late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth Century, tall structures such as the Ferris wheel, Eiffel tower, and skyscrapers provided the opportunity to see the world in new ways. Spatial theorist Michel de Certeau suggests that this skyscraper view transforms the observer into a voyeur, distanced from the view below, and creates the illusion of divinity, a sense that the city below can be read by the viewer “looking down like a god” (92). The aircraft, too, represented a better way of looking, superior in its technology and mobility, and seductively omniscient. Airships and airplanes promised dazzling opportunities for travel and commerce, but the aerial perspective also threatened new and frightening applications of power through surveillance, reconnaissance, bombing and strafing.¹

Capitalizing on their own experiences of this aerial perspective, Malraux and Dahl write sophisticated responses to the new realities of employing airpower against both troops and civilians. Malraux presents multiple perspectives to expose the power dynamics of the air war, challenge our views of the aviator, and show the unreliability of the view from the air. Dahl further complicates the aerial perspective, exposing the fallacies of omniscience and clarity which support concepts of precision bombing, and showing the terrifying potential for misuse of this “god-like” employment of airpower. With these texts, I argue, the two authors provide a complex challenge to mid-century airpower discourse.

¹ Marit J. MacArthur provides an interesting reading of the aerial perspective in contemporary poetry, but her focus is on commercial flight and the perspective of the passenger rather than on the military perspective.
**André Malraux's *Man's Hope***

Malraux’s novel *L'espoir*, published in French in 1937 and translated into English as *Man's Hope* in 1938, is significant because, like Martha Gellhorn’s work, it documents the first use of airpower in Europe since World War I. As I explained earlier, emerging from the brutal attrition of the First World War, airpower prophets Douhet, Trenchard, Mitchell, and Liddell Hart began a discourse in the 1920s advocating a new type of war, a total war using airpower to bomb cities, a strategy meant to be quick and decisive. As we saw in Chapter Two, many of these theories were put into practice in the colonial world during the interwar period, when many of the colonial powers bombed villages in Africa and the Middle East to maintain control of their empires. The Italian bombing of Ethiopia in 1936 brought increasing visibility to the use of airpower, but as Linqvist points out, it was not until the Spanish Civil War, when the bombs began falling on European soil, that the world truly took notice. Suddenly, the western world was outraged by the bombing of Madrid and Barcelona, and the destruction of Guernica in April 1937.

Malraux’s involvement with the Republican cause began within days of the coup, before most other writers were even aware of the hostilities. The Spanish Civil War began, Axel Madsen explains, when Spanish elections “had given power to a Frente popular, a coalition of radicals, socialists and communists. Its program was more anticlerical and democratic than socialist, but it was enough to provoke monarchists, fascists, the Church and the army” (176). A coup took place 18 July 1936--rebels expected quick victory, but the workers of Madrid rose up for the Republic\(^2\), beginning an extended war. On 20 July 1936, the French Prime Minister received a request from

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\(^2\) Various terms are used to describe participants on opposite sides of the war: I will use *Republic* to designate the loyalist government forces, and *Nationalists* to designate the fascist rebels.
Jose Girard, Spanish Prime Minister, for arms and aircraft. While France soon arranged to provide 20 Potez-540 bombers to Spain, developing politics of non-intervention made it impossible to man them with French military pilots. So, in the search for pilots and other trained aviation technicians, France turned to anti-fascist organizations, such as Giustizia e Liberta (Justice and Liberty), a group of Italian refugees operating in France. As Walter G. Langlois notes, “by the mid-1930s Malraux had become recognized as a leader in the worldwide antifascist movement” (94). Malraux, co-president of the World Committee Against War & Fascism (96), was a logical choice to negotiate with the refugees for support. Spain offered temporary contracts to pilots to fly for the Republic, and Malraux was selected as squadron commander, although at the time “he was not a flyer himself... [but] resourceful and imaginative, a dynamic organizer and natural leader” (Langlois 106). He would lead the squadron with two aviation specialists as advisors, with his main responsibilities recruiting, personnel administration, and acquisition of equipment. In the next several months, he also flew sixty-five combat missions as a gunner/bombardier (Madsen 183). His command ended when his squadron was absorbed into the International Air Force in February, 1937, at which time he returned to writing and fund-raising.

If Malraux’s immersion in the war seems unusual for a writer, it should not; his fictional oeuvre is rife with both adventure and political engagement. As a young man he organized an archaeological expedition to Indochina in 1923, in search of ancient Khmer art.3 During his two years in Phnom Penh and Saigon he developed anti-colonial sentiments, actively expressed in his daily newspaper “Indochina in Chains,” and his first

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3 He located ancient Buddhist statues, and was subsequently arrested for attempting to remove them from the area. Walter Langlois (“Indochina”) notes that after a conviction and jail sentence, the charges were eventually dropped.
novel, *The Temptation of the West* (1926). Subsequent novels continued to engage politically, with both *Les Conquerants* (1928) and *La Condition Humaine* (*Man's Fate*) (1933), winner of the Prix Goncourt, exploring the Communist revolution in China. Malraux thus emerged as a militant intellectual, as critic Erik Nakjavani explains, who combined two modes of being—reflective and active. Although Malraux was always concerned with art, his novels rejected the pure aesthetics of high modernism, instead aligning him more closely with other writers of the 1930s. As C.J. Greshoff notes, for these writers, political engagement served to merge the intellectual and the physical, and brought an element of danger which many craved as a method of bringing meaning to their lives and work.

His active life continued with expeditions to Iran and Afghanistan in 1929, in search of more Buddhist art, and a 1934 aerial expedition from Paris to the horn of Africa, the Arabian peninsula, and back. The latter expedition is important because it was Malraux's first significant experience with flight, providing the author with material for thinking about the aerial perspective a full two years before he flew in the Spanish Civil War. Malraux made the month-long journey with pilot Edouard Corniglion-Molinier, a World War I flying ace, and airplane mechanic Maillard; their goal—finding a lost city of the Queen of Sheba—involved an eleven-hour round-trip flight from Djibouti, over hostile territory in Yemen, to the edge of the forbidding Rub al-Khali desert. As Langlois explains, Malraux understood the flight as a romantic struggle between man and nature. In his notes, he writes: "the grave nobility of aviation is to hurl man again and again against the oldest forces in the world, against the epic dangers of which Gods are made" (Langlois *Sheba* 283). Malraux's focus on the airplane as a
romantic vehicle of exploration and adventure seems rather naïve, since colonial nations had been using aircraft to bomb the Middle East for over a decade. One would expect him to show a greater awareness of the multiple uses of aircraft, since his team flew out of military airfields for most of the trip.

Perhaps more single-minded than naïve, though, the author no doubt was seduced by this amateur foray into the developing technique of aerial archaeology, which promised a new perspective, a clarity of vision that surpassed the ground-based view to provide new truths about our world. Malraux designed his expedition based on this promise of clarity from the air, a promise that seemed fulfilled when he and his team actually photographed what appeared to be the ruins of a major ancient city. However, Malraux may have later become disillusioned as professional archaeologists expressed skepticism about the discovery. The difficulty in precise positioning, the short loiter capability of the airplane, and the altitude made identification difficult; some experts argued that all Malraux had discovered was a modern Arab village. The contradiction between the superb promise of his first experience with aviation, and its somewhat inconclusive results, may have sparked in Malraux an early awareness of the instability of the aerial perspective, an awareness which he explores extensively in *L’espoir*.

Malraux, then, brings both the skills of an accomplished novelist and the airmindedness of the aviator to *L’espoir*. This term, according to Jane Hu, developed

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4 Langlois notes that Malraux had originally planned an overland trip to look for the city, but Corniglion suggested an aerial reconnaissance, and on exploring this idea further, Malraux learned that a Jesuit priest, Father Poidebard, had pioneered aerial archaeology in North Africa and the Middle East. Poidebard had been able to clearly identify ruins of highways and forts from the air, where sand had all but obliterated them from ground discovery. Poidebard "had proved that aerial reconnaissance and photographic techniques often could reveal ancient remains from distances as great as 50 kilometers" (8).

3 Jane Hu explains that: "'Airmindedness' is a term that used to be everywhere and now it's nowhere. The expression emerged with the development of the airplane in the early twentieth century, during which an entire generation struggled to expand their conceptual boundaries skywards. Prompted by
along with the aircraft in the twentieth century and indicates "an interest in and enthusiasm for the use and development of aircraft." Significantly, Hu explains, "thoughts of airmindedness are inextricably linked to wartime anxieties on the future and the threats therein." As one reads the novel, it becomes clear that Malraux recognized the future threat airpower posed to Europe, as the binaries between soldier and civilian began to break down. Humanist Sarah Cole points out that twentieth-century total war began the disintegration of "categorical and binary terms—combatant and civilian, men and women...enemy and friend" (25). Adam Piette concurs, explaining that, "in the wars on civilians, it is the war zone which tracks the family down, ambushes it from peaceable hills and skies" so that "this little civilian space and time, have become war zone" (sic) (45). Piette is particularly astute in noting the way in which war comes to civilians from the skies.

Malraux's experience enabled him to recognize and expose the changing nature of warfare from the inside. He once explained that "the major facts of our times are not events but shifts in concepts" (Madsen 12). He thus saw the Spanish Civil War, I suggest, not as an event, but as a significant shift in the concept of warfare, and he saw an urgent necessity to warn the world about this shift he witnessed in Spain. Using the notes he took during the war, Malraux wrote his 500-page novel in just over four months, after he stopped flying, getting it to his publisher on 1 July 1937, just prior to the first anniversary of the war (which would continue for another two years). The speed with which he wrote and published the novel reflects the urgency of his mission.
What was this mission? Malraux’s own political agenda, coupled with the fact that he fought for several months on the Republican side, has led many to believe the novel’s primary purpose is communist propaganda.6 Certainly, one can find several elements of propaganda within the text. However, scholar Martine de Courcel provides a more nuanced reading of Malraux’s purpose. In all of his writing, she argues, “his sensory—above all visual—awareness is such that he also wants to make us see” (8). Expanding on this idea, she explains that “he would like us to see what he sees, and he has for us the same feelings that we have for the blind man we help across the street” (9). Moreover, de Courcel proposes that an underlying theme of Malraux’s writing is the Question, which is developed both “in the questions he has put to the world...and in the questions the world has put to him” (14). De Courcel’s insightful observations about seeing and questioning provide a blueprint for my reading of L’espoir. I suggest that in the flying scenes of the novel, Malraux shows us what he sees, to then challenge us to question what we see. One of the critical questions the world has put to Malraux in the Spanish Civil War is couched in the discourse of airpower and its authorization of civilian bombing. Madrid was bombed while Malraux was flying and fighting, and Guernica while he was writing. The impact these events had on his thinking about the novel is evident when Malraux arranges with Pablo Picasso to use his sketches for the painting “Guernica” as illustrations for the novel (an arrangement which later fell

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6 Many scholars have debated the propagandistic nature of the novel. C.J. Greshoff (1975) describes Malraux as “a communist writer” at the time L’Espoir was written (126), and Bernard Wilhelm (1992) argues that Malraux legitimizes the Communist party, with propaganda “woven into the novel” (4). Several scholars disagree: James W. Greenlee (1975) believes Malraux is more focused on technology than ideology; Geoffrey T. Harris (1988) argues that the novel provides leadership lessons, not propaganda; Claus-Dieter Krohn (1992) proposes that Malraux provides multiple political perspectives to force the reader to decide; Ben Stoltzfus (1999) explains that the author critiques communism, and notes that his values are actually more democratic than communist (183).
through). Malraux responds to this shifting use of airpower by questioning what we will do with this new power, asking how it will affect the humanity not only of those who employ it, but of those below who must suffer its fury.

**Multiple Perspectives of Airpower**

In *L'espoir*, Malraux moves far beyond memoir or reportage to create an almost epic account of the first nine months of the war. He begins with the start of the war in July, 1936, and ends with the Battle of Guadalajara, a victory which provided hope that the Republicans might still win the war. Using a “dispersal of narrative perspective” (179) that Ben Stoltzfus describes as approaching the postmodern, Malraux moves back and forth between the ground war and the air war. He presents Manuel, a ground commander, as the primary protagonist in the novel, but as many scholars point out, Magnin, the air commander, represents Malraux himself. Yet although the novel focuses on these characters, Stoltzfus points out, “the most memorable characters in *L'espoir* are not individuals, but the people, the refugees, the combatants, the airplane crews, the bombed cities, and ultimately Spain itself” (190). In his depiction of the ground war, the author frequently uses extended dialogue to explore the complex politics at work in Spain, and many critics focus on these conversations as key to the novel. Stoltzfus counts fifteen major dialogues, each with a shift in focus and perspective. However, while these dialogues present an intellectual argument about the war, the flying scenes are primarily visual, more concerned with showing and questioning than with presenting a reasoned argument.

Malraux challenges the discourse of airpower through this use of the visual, by showing multiple perspectives on its actual employment. Just as his friend Picasso used
cubism to decenter the traditional subject, Malraux creates a decentered picture of airpower through the divergent perspectives of aircrew members, peasants, and the international media. Showing us the air war in all its complex messiness, he moves beyond the euphemisms of abstract theory to expose the realities of modern warfare. Specifically, he questions the discourse of airpower in three ways: by exposing his audience to the expanding role of airpower, by de-romanticizing the aviator, and by showing the unreliability of the view from the air.

In a short, but critical passage, Malraux proposes that airpower represents not an anomaly, but a major shift in the power dynamics of war. Most importantly, he points out the impossibility of conducting a war of the people in the face of advanced airpower. One of Magnin’s pilots, Vargis, explains that “this war’s going to be a war of mechanized equipment-- and we’re running it as if noble emotions were all that mattered...” (113). Continuing this conversation, Garcia, an intelligence officer, notes how in previous revolutions barricades were erected in the streets as a defense against the Army’s cavalry. “Spain today is covered with barricades,” he explains, “against Franco’s aviation” (114). Here Malraux notes the disconnect between obsolete concepts of a people’s war and the reality of airpower. The workers of Spain who rose up in defense of the Republic did not possess the technological equipment or training to fight a modern, airpower-based conflict. As Madsen notes, Malraux, during his reconnaissance of Spain immediately after the coup, observed that “the mortal weakness of the Republican forces was that it

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7 Significantly, the airpower inequities Malraux exposes are still relevant today. In April, 2012, desperate refugees from Syria’s Arab Spring revolution explain their technological frustration in the face of airpower: “Tanks we can stand in front of—we can try and stop them, stand in front of them, die as martyrs—but how can we stop a helicopter?” (Abouzeid 30). In the past twenty years, United Nations Security Council resolutions developed No-Fly Zones in Northern and Southern Iraq, and most recently in Libya, to prevent the use of airpower against groups of people who had none. In light of these recent events, Malraux’s observations in Spain provide a prescient analysis of airpower employment designed to educate his readers about this shifting concept of war.
had no planes” (181). As the Nationalists received airpower support from Germany and Italy, including state-of-the-art aircraft and military pilots, Hugh Thomas notes the disparity between these enemy forces and Malraux’s Escadrille Espana, which “never had more than six aeroplanes in the air at the same time, never more than nine ready to fly, never more than twenty in all” (42). Malraux emphasizes this inequity in L’espoir, when Magnin’s squadron, in the early days, consists solely of aircraft he presents as obsolete: “three Douglast and three multi-seaters armed with 1913 machine guns” (96). While this could create a narrative where the outgunned airmen are fighting heroically against overwhelming odds, Malraux pointedly de-romanticizes the aviator, as I illustrate below.

The Spanish Republic’s lack of aviation expertise created the need for the International Air Force, comprised of volunteers and mercenaries of various nationalities, a fact that Malraux exploits in the novel. As we saw in Chapter One, many writers since World War I have challenged the public romance with the aviator, viewed as modern knights of the air; Malraux does this by showing us who the aviators are, and showing how the nature of aviation separates them from the people of Spain. Magnin’s aircrews do not fit the stereotype of the chivalric young flyer. He assembles a motley group of volunteers and mercenaries, including airline pilots and World War I veterans, many in their fifties, and one, Darris, described as white-haired (54). When a crippled bomber returns to base, the injured and dead crew members are Moroccans, Frenchmen, and Englishmen (53-54). Malraux is doing several things here: he shows the international nature of the fight against fascism, and he advances one of the major themes of the novel, the focus on the collective, on groups, rather than individual characters. But,

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8 Walter G. Langlois provides an excellent discussion of Spanish aviation capabilities in the 1930s, in “Before L’Espoir,” where he notes that by 1935, Spain was woefully behind other European countries in both aircraft and pilot training.
significantly, what Malraux does not show here are heroic Spanish aircrews fighting a desperate battle for their homeland. In his description of Magnin’s crews, the novelist eliminates much of the distinction between them and the Italian and German aircrews fighting for the Nationalists. The aircrews on both sides of the battle are foreigners in Spain, paid professionals fighting a war “where technology and organization [would triumph] over a heroic spirit” (Costa et.al. 40). Although the airmen in the novel do suffer and sacrifice, Malraux seems to suggest that the nature of military aviation creates a disinterested technical elite, as Magnin’s aircrews are distanced from the Republican cause, and from the Spanish people.

In the famous “Descent from Linares” scene Malraux presents the aircrew from the perspective of the Spanish peasants. This scene initially seems to contradict the view of the aircrews as apolitical, technical mercenaries, but a closer look reveals a continued rejection of the romance of airpower. This scene, presented in Part Three, was dramatized for the movie version⁹ of the novel, Man’s Hope, and is often read as one of the key scenes of the novel. The Descent is a fictionalized version of a real-world mission by one of Malraux’s crews in December 1936. In the novel, three of Magnin’s aircraft make a daring and successful dawn raid on a group of hidden Fascist aircraft. On their return leg, they are attacked by German fighters, and one of the aircraft is damaged, crashing into the side of a mountain, leaving one crewmember dead, and several injured. The climax of the scene is the rescue mission, organized by the aircrews, but supported by the peasants from nearby villages. The crash site is high up on the mountain, near the village of Valdelinares, inaccessible by road. The peasants of the upper village begin to descend

⁹ Malraux filmed on location in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, but the film was lost for years and not released until after World War II, by which time it had lost its appeal and was not successful.
the mountain, carrying the wounded crewmembers on litters, while Magnin leads a rescue operation up the mountain from Linares. The two groups meet in the middle, and proceed down the mountain, forming a long line of stretcher-bearers, women carrying hot soup, and airmen on mules and donkeys. As the rescue procession enters Linares, the watching peasants raise clenched fists in silent salute to the dead and wounded flyers.

Most critics focus on the message of fraternity portrayed by this image: Madsen describes the scene as “a chain of fraternal hope” (191) and Greenlee emphasizes the brotherhood of humans. This scene does, briefly, provide a hopeful and inspiring vision of unity in a war being fought by multiple factions, and increasingly divided by technology. Stoltzfus explains that “the fraternal voices of the Spanish peasants meld with the rhythms of death and renewal on the mountain in order to oppose the dehumanizing and destructive forces of the war” (188). While Stoltzfus provides a more nuanced reading of fraternity in relation to the war, like the other critics, he fails to address the key questions that Malraux poses in this scene.

I suggest that Malraux provides a pointed commentary on the air war here, as he challenges the romance of military flying. As the procession reaches Linares, the women on the battlements are shocked by the appearance of Langlois in the lead, injured and astride a donkey: “with a bleeding bandage around his head and toes sticking into the air...he looked like Don Quixote.” Malraux then asks: “Was this how war in the air ended, war in its most romantic form?” (485). With this iconic image of Cervantes’ knight errant, Malraux seems to be suggesting a war fought for high ideals. Yet he immediately follows this image with another flyer passing, his jacket soaked with blood, followed by Gardet with his face torn open. As we saw in Chapter One, where writers
focused on the injured bodies of the aviators, Malraux graphically portrays the injuries of the crew in this scene, forcing us to see their blood and disfigurement. Gardet’s face is slashed open, his jaw broken, his nose hanging awry. By showing us the wounded bodies, Malraux exposes the messiness of the air war. But he continues, “this stretcher [Gardet’s] was the visible incarnation of the peasant’s immemorial conception of war” (485), and shows the peasant’s salute. Thus, the wounding of the aircrew appears to be honored as a sacrifice for the nation.

Before exploring this scene more deeply, let me point out that this is not the first time in the novel we see an aviator astride a donkey. The Descent from Linares is previewed earlier in Part Three when one of Magnin’s bombers crashes on the beach, and several crewmembers are injured. Bombardier Attignies cries out for help to the stream of 150,000 refugees passing by the crash site, with little response. In this scene, Malraux shows the plight of civilians, driven from their homes by the war. He also shows how the mass psychology of the refugees keeps them from helping the wounded crew, as each of them believes the appeal for help is directed towards his neighbor, not himself. This seems to be a comment not only about Spain, but about the indifference of the democratic world to the plight of Spain’s democracy. He also notes that Attignies may look too much like a German pilot, causing the peasants to fear him, and again complicating the connection between the mercenary aircrews on both sides of the battle, and emphasizing their difference from the peasants. Attignies eventually makes it to the road, where he joins the stream of refugees in search of a telephone to contact his squadron. Wounded, he commandeers a donkey, and the peasant surrenders his donkey without protest when told “it’s for a wounded airman” (436). Thus, Malraux maintains the elitism of the flyer
here, showing him as sufficiently privileged to commandeer transportation, yet undermining this superiority by placing Attignies on a donkey.

In both scenes, then—the crash on the beach and the Descent from Linares—Malraux is demystifying the aviator by bringing him down among the people, humbly, riding on a donkey. He does this, in part, to present a vision of Spain, united in a common cause in the fight against Fascism. But whereas our first view of the air force in the novel is of a crippled, burning plane returning to an airfield, seen only by the flight crews and maintenance personnel, Malraux’s goal in these scenes at the end of the novel is to make the aircrews visible not only to the Spanish peasants but also to the reader. Yet in the Descent from Linares he complicates our understanding of airpower by posing the question: “Was this how war in the air ended, war in its most romantic form?” (485). He answers the question not with dialogue, but only with images. His description of the peasants raising their fists in solidarity is a fleeting image, defiant but not triumphant, and replaced almost immediately by Malraux’s closing image of “the everlasting clamour of vultures [linked] with the muffled sound of sobbing” (486). The picture of a victorious aircraft at the beginning of the scene is here transformed to one of flying scavengers, and mingled with sorrow. He ends the chapter in the next paragraph, as the aircrews are consumed once more with technical preparations for the next air strike, in the Battle of Guadalajara. In the Descent from Linares, and the crash on the beach, then, I suggest that Malraux challenges both the romantic image of the aviator and the discourse of the air war as a clean war, by bringing the aircrews literally down to earth, showing them wounded, and placing them on donkeys. Moreover, by posing crucial questions and refusing to linger on the success of the air strike, but instead focusing on the price the
flyers pay for this success, he invites his readers to see and question the complexity of airpower.

**Interrogating Bombing Discourses**

Alongside this de-romanticization of the aviator, Malraux exposes and questions the two concepts of bombing which had developed during the interwar period: precision bombing and area (or morale) bombing. The concept of precision bombing, embraced by the United States, relied on the ability of the aircrews to identify and accurately strike their targets, which generally consisted of essential infrastructure, such as oil production and transportation. The idea of precision bombing to a great extent eliminated any moral qualms, as its proponents believed that civilian deaths (euphemistically labeled collateral damage) would be minimal. Area bombing, on the other hand, and most often associated with British air forces, involved massive attacks on cities, with the intent of so severely impacting morale that the airstrikes would bring about a rapid conclusion to the war.

By showing multiple perspectives on bombing, Malraux asks us to consider how we perceive bombing—is it murder? War? Something other than war? He begins with the aircrew's perspective. Several of Magnin's crewmembers express a strong reluctance toward bombing civilians and troops. The first is Sibirsky, a Russian pilot, who tells Magnin, "I don't want to have to bomb objectives within a city--not under any circumstances," because he once missed a headquarters and ended up bombing a school (71). With this image, the author challenges the idea of precision bombing, showing the potential for, and the result of, bombing inaccuracy. Later, Malraux describes the International's attempt to stop Franco's army, approaching the town of Medellin on its advance toward Madrid. Here Malraux rapidly shifts points of view between pilots
Sembrano and Darris and bombardier Scali, creating a composite effect in which all voices seem to merge into one. Sembrano, although one of the best bomber pilots in the squadron, considers himself a pacifist, and to ease his conscience, flies very low to drop his bombs. Malraux explains that “somehow the sense of danger, the risks he was going out of his way to run, solved, for him, the ethical problem” (101). I find this quote particularly interesting because it shows a desire to somehow return the sense of chivalry or fairness to the bombing war. Sembrano understands that he has the advantage in the bombing equation, and tries, by increasing his own sense of risk, to even out the odds as a way to resolve the morality of bombing. Malraux refuses to support Sembrano’s attempt at justification, however. As he watches the destruction his bombs have caused, Scali, a bombardier on one of the aircraft, concludes “that military aviation was a disgusting business” (102). He lines up on another target, feeling “as if he were at once a judge and a murderer—and of the two roles the former struck him as by far the fouler” (103). Here, Malraux poses the profound issue that Roald Dahl will later explore more thoroughly: the aircrew’s awareness of sitting in judgment with power over life and death, a sense that somehow this power has been wrongly delegated to them by the state, and a reluctance to wield this power.

Despite the qualms the aircrews express in these passages, Malraux is careful to show the International Air Force bombing only legitimate military targets, while pointing out the inhumanity of the Fascist air forces, who are targeting civilians in violation of international law. This emphasis adds a strong element of propaganda to the novel, apparently working in conjunction with the author’s post-combat fund-raising activities.

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10 The translators use the term bomber throughout the novel, but I choose to use the more common later term bombardier to provide a clear differentiation between the man and the machine.
However, in the passage below, as literary critic John B. Romeiser notes, Malraux moves beyond propaganda by using a journalist from a neutral nation to expose this bombing, as an essential witness to this new and frightening use of airpower. As the Nationalist bombing of Madrid begins, American journalist Shade\textsuperscript{11} reports from within the city. Romeiser rightly suggests that the role of Shade, generally considered a minor character, has not been sufficiently studied. He argues, however, that “Malraux attaches a good deal of importance to him despite his non-pivotal role in the narrative” (92). In particular, Shade’s journalism is concerned with the threat to the civilian population in the cities of Spain. Through Shade, Malraux presents a crucial international perspective on the air war, moving the threat of airpower beyond the Spanish borders to show the global threat it poses. As German Junkers bombers approach the city, Shade hears a “massive throbbing” caused by “engines so numerous that everything was merged into a single implacable, robot progress” (339). It’s interesting that he describes the enemy planes as robotic, which removes the human element from the attack. We will see this reference to aircrews as robotic again in *Slaughterhouse-Five*; both authors seem to be suggesting that bombing dehumanizes the aircrews. The Germans bomb two hospitals, as well as other buildings, using incendiary bombs (342) specifically designed to create fires within the old centers of cities. As he watches the bombing, Shade is struck by the “utter haphazardness of this death flung from the sky,” and he notes a profound sense of transition created by the air war. He “had often visited the front,” Shade explains, “but he had never had this feeling before. War was war, but this was something other than war” (353). In this profound revelation about the changing nature of the front lines, as

\textsuperscript{11} Malraux uses the name Shade in his original novel. Translators Gilbert and Macdonald for some reason changed the name to Slade in their 1938 English edition. In keeping with prevailing scholarship, I will use the name Shade, as it seems to best reflect Malraux’s intentions.
they move from the trenches of World War I to the cities of Spain, Malraux uses Shade to expose and question the discourse of airpower as it is being employed in Madrid. In a later scene, Shade predicts that the violence in Spain is just the beginning, signaling an expansion of the same strategies to the rest of Europe. Shade thus provides a key perspective for Malraux's pointed critique of morale bombing.

This critique continues with Malraux's portrayal of a press conference where the Republican intelligence officer Garcia exposes a captured Fascist document to the press. He prefaces its release by noting that the Republican forces have been targeting only airfields. He emphasizes that although the planes may have occasionally missed their military targets and wounded civilians, "at least we can assert that never has a Spanish town been systematically bombed by us" (377). In contrast, the Fascist document Garcia releases proposes that the morale of enemy troops must be shaken, and to do so "...it is essential to inspire a certain salutary dread in the population." The Fascists propose attacking the civilian population in order to demoralize the troops in the field, who will see their families attacked and dying while they are unable to protect them. Therefore, the document explains, "all points to the rear of the enemy front must be considered as zones of attack" (377). Although this tactic doesn't specifically note air attacks, it does reflect the military thinking of the twenties and thirties about the targeting of populations, and the concept of total war. Here Malraux shows how Garcia works to control the discourse of airpower, showing the Republican bombing as legal and humane, while that of the Fascists is illegal and inhumane. But in light of Malraux's earlier equation of bombing with judgment and murder, the reader is asked to question this discourse. When read alongside Shade's prediction of expansion of this type of war to Europe, it becomes
apparent that Malraux believes bombing of civilians by one side will result in an escalation of violence by both sides, a prescient suggestion in light of the later use of bombing in World War II. When one state wages total war, the opposing state will soon be driven to implementation of the same strategies, or risk losing the war.

**Complicating the Aerial Perspective**

Malraux provides a third perspective on airpower by showing his readers what the aircrews see, and exploring the reliability of aerial vision through images of literal blinding as well as metaphors of blindness. He uses impediments to vision to show the detachment of the aviators, the inevitable dehumanization of their targets, and the contradiction between what the aircrews actually see and what they think—or know—they should see. By highlighting the frequent failure of the aircrews to see clearly, he challenges the outmoded Enlightenment belief in universal truths, embracing instead the modernist belief that truth is contextual and relative. Where the view from the air initially promises a god-like omniscience, it instead delivers a limited, fragmented, disinterested perspective, a truth that is both fleeting and flawed.

Malraux shows this limited and fractured vision in a scene early in the novel in which he exposes the distancing of aviators from those they kill. The bombardier Scali releases his weapons over a column of Fascist troops, and watches the troops below running. He scrambles from the bombing station to the back of the airplane to try to see the results of the bombing. Because of the altitude of the airplane and the distance the bombs have to fall, Scali notes that “nine fateful seconds intervened between those men and himself... [until] under twenty simultaneous bursts of scarlet flame they all stopped running. The plane sailed on, as if all that were none of its concern” (100). The aircrew
is separated from the deaths below by both time and space. The altitude and the plane’s motion collude to prevent Scali from seeing the deaths below, so he has to resort to extraordinary measures to see if he has killed or not. John Berger, describing ways of seeing, explains that “we only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice” (8). In his last sentence, Malraux metonymically fuses the aircrew with the plane; its mechanical indifference is supposed to mirror the indifference of its crew, but Scali chooses to look, fights to be more than just a part of the machine.

In this same passage, Malraux also suggests that even when the aircrew members can see, their vision is suspect. While Scali is struggling to see the results of his actions, his pilot, Darras, simply has to look out the cockpit window to see the troops below him. What he sees are not men, however, “only little specks of khaki dotted with the white turbans flying for their lives, like panicked ants carrying away their eggs” (100). Malraux’s comparison of humans to ants in this simile can feel clichéd to a twenty-first century reader—hasn’t everyone on his or her first flight made the same comparison? And yet, most of Malraux’s contemporaries would not have had flying experience, so this simile would feel new to them. We will later see a similar metaphor used by Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Rather than simply repeating tired metaphors, both authors are stressing how the view from the air can dehumanize those below, and suggesting that

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12 The troops here wearing turbans are Moorish troops fighting for the Fascists as part of Franco’s Army of Africa, which was advancing from the south on Madrid. Bernard Wilhelm suggests Malraux borrowed this image from journalist Louis Delapree, killed in Dec, 1936. He suggests Delapree may have flown on Malraux’s plane, and later described “the men on the ground dispersing as mere insects” (6).

13 Philosopher Bertrand Russell uses the same image a year later in *Power*, showing the distancing from humanity provided by altitude and speculating about the potential abuse of power which might result. After a discussion of Bruno Mussolini bombing the Abyssians, he notes: “most of us have, at some time, wantonly disturbed an ants’ nest, and watched with mild amusement the scurrying confusion that resulted. Looking down from the top of a sky-scraper on the traffic of New York, the human beings below cease to seem human, and acquire a faint absurdity. If one were armed, like Jove, with a thunderbolt, there would be a temptation to hurl it into the crowd, from the same motive as in the case of the ants’ nest....” (22).
failure to recognize this humanity authorizes the practice of bombing and allows the crews to rationalize their participation.

In this passage, Malraux begins to expose the unreliability of aerial vision. Vision itself had long been suspect, as Paul Virilio points out. Virilio explains that in 1914, the "deregulation of perception" created an environment in which Americans and Europeans "could no longer believe their eyes" and "the visual field was reduced to the line of a sighting device" (13). The mediation of sight through the camera or the gun-sight created limited and artificial views which often diverged from what the eye saw. Twentieth-century viewers began to realize that they could not always believe what they saw, especially as pictures and film could be manipulated. Malraux expands this skepticism to the air, pointing out the physical restrictions of aerial vision posed by altitude, speed, bombsights, and the fuselage, and showing the errors of interpretation which may result from these limitations.

In a telling example, Malraux presents a literal blinding to spark a discussion about the reliability of vision. In this passage, two Italian Fiat aircraft fighting for the Nationalists are shot down, and when the militia finds the wreckage the next day, the pilot's eyes have been gouged out by the peasants (141). Scali shows a picture of the mutilated crews to a captured airman during interrogation, a gesture that obviously conveys a veiled threat of violence. However, Scali is using the picture not to frighten the prisoner, but to convey the lack of knowledge on both sides of the war. This passage is fascinating because it contains not only the story of a blinding, but a mediated photograph portraying this blinding. The literal blinding of the dead pilots is a symbolic action signifying the inability of the foreign pilots to see the atrocities they are
committing. The peasants seem to be stating that the pilots have no need of eyes since they fail to use them anyway. To the airmen, both prisoner and interrogator, the photograph represents a horrifyingly personal threat to the body of the aviator. However, this threat too, fades, its impact lessened by its mediation. The prisoner, at first appalled, soon begins to question the authenticity of the photo, and Scali, too, wonders if it was faked for its propaganda effect. Malraux’s choice of Scali as the interrogator here is significant. Having already shown us Scali’s struggle to see the results of his bombing action, above, the author now uses him to further question the reliability of vision and the use of propaganda in wartime.

Malraux’s critique of the aerial perspective also connects tropes of beauty, seeing, and blindness in surprising ways, effectively inverting the archetypal folktale of Beauty and the Beast, which Naomi Schorr describes as “possibly the greatest myth of blindness in the West” (85). Schorr reads this myth as a feminized blindness, in which the female character is metaphorically blinded by the beast’s horrible exterior, and is thus unable to see his inner beauty (101). Upending this convention, Malraux presents a masculinized blindness, in which the aviator is blinded by the beauty of war, and especially the beauty of flight, and is thus unable to see the horrors which lie below. Malraux further complicates this inversion with his insistence on seeing. Schorr explains that “the blind person as seer is the central figure of the literature of blindness” and notes that this figuration is based on a double notion of seeing, as “both a physical and a cognitive act” (88). Malraux’s aviators, when not blinded by beauty, are temporarily blinded by

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14 Mary Wilson Carpenter challenges Schorr’s concept of feminized blindness by showing examples of blinding the male hero in Victorian literature. She suggests the blinding of the hero is a way of making him listen to the mother’s voice. While this interpretation is not applicable to my readings, she concludes with an interesting suggestion that blindness associated with wartime trauma may move beyond metaphor to focus on the body, perhaps representing other invisible wounding.
physical phenomena such as altitude, darkness, clouds, and snow. The flyers struggle constantly to overcome these barriers and see clearly. Their struggle to see, then, combines both the physical need to observe the battle below, and a compelling intellectual desire to comprehend their actions.

Many war writers have observed the almost uncanny connection between beauty and death, and noted the irony apparent when the soldiers/aircrews see around them the spectacular beauty of the war and yet understand that this beauty is inherently coupled with death, either of themselves or their enemies. As James Anderson Winn suggests, “poets...use the full range of poetry’s powers to express the full range of our contradictory responses to war, including our ability to find beauty amid the horror” (4). This stunning coupling of beauty with horror is not limited to poetry, however, but often found in war fiction as well. In “How to Write a True War Story,” Tim O’Brien explains:

For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like brilliant red ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the harmonies of sound and shape and proportion, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorous, the purply orange glow of napalm, the rocket’s red glare. It’s not pretty, exactly. It’s astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery
barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference—a powerful, implacable beauty—and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly (80). O'Brien astutely notes the conflict between the mind and the eye when he explains, “you hate it, yes, but your eyes do not.” Critic Klaus Theweleit skewers O'Brien's observation, proposing that “the word beauty simply doesn't belong in the context of killing. Whoever uses it there is a criminal, wants to be a criminal and knows it” (311). He goes on to say that seeing beauty in war “makes out of the killing an act of pleasure” (311). Unfortunately, Theweleit misses the point badly. O'Brien, and the others who write about beauty, do not see the killing as beautiful; instead, they are overwhelmed by the stark contrasts between the visual extravaganza around them and the extreme violence they are perpetrating.

Writers of the air war frequently note this conflict, significant because the inherent beauty of the sky highlights the chasm between seeing and knowing, and compounds the aircrew’s extreme detachment from death.¹⁵ Like O'Brien, Malraux creates stunning pictures using eye-popping color, chiaroscuro, or the glow of moonlight to compel us to look at this aerial space. A bomber piloted by Attignies and Leclerc attacks a gas plant, which explodes in bright red flames.¹⁶ The crew takes machine gun fire as they exit the area, but as they leave this hellish place, they climb through the clouds to safety. Above the clouds, they notice that “the whole plane was

¹⁵ Antoine de Saint-Exupery, for example, in Flight to Arras, juxtaposes beauty and death in the air in several places. In one scene, he describes a flight that is “beginning to get nasty” because of air defenses. “And yet I cannot help being astonished by the blue of the evening. ...the color is so deep...this evening air is marvellously blue!” (377).
¹⁶ Gerda Blumenthal reads this scene mythically, as a “breathtaking... [dual] between Prometheus and Saturn...fought in the air, realm of the gods” (80). I argue for a more literal understanding of this scene.
phosphorescent, glowing with a bluish light” (218) (most likely St. Elmo’s fire, which often forms in static-charged air around aircraft). They see the moon “lighting up the aluminum on the wings,” creating a sense of well-being “merging into an almost geological tranquility, incorporating them in the mystic union of moonlight and pale metal gleaming as precious stones have gleamed for countless ages on the extinct stars” (219). But this image of beauty also signals danger; seeing the shadow of the plane on the clouds below them, the crew realizes that they are presenting a bright and vulnerable target to any pursuit aircraft hunting them. Tellingly, when blinded by the space in which they operate, the aircrews struggle to see the fatal truths of their world. Their eyes see ants below them, but their minds remind them the ants are humans; their eyes see brilliance and beauty around them, but the mind understands it is coupled with death.

As Malraux continues to explore the unreliability of aerial vision, he moves from the exploration of literal blindness, through beauty-induced blindness, to a more metaphorical use of the trope. In a scene from the night of 6 November, Magnin leads a sortie returning from an over water mission bombing ships. Magnin, unable to see the results of the strike, muses that after landing they will have to ask the War Ministry “whether the ships had been hit” (273), exposing the difficulty of seeing clearly. As they fly over the city of Palma in the Balearic Islands, the plane is invisible in the darkness, but the town begins to fire anti-aircraft guns randomly, “like a blind man screaming” (273). This unusual simile aptly depicts the city’s fearful reaction to an invisible threat. Ironically, the crew is not even targeting the city, having already released its bombs above the ships, but the city in desperate self-defense may kill all the crewmembers. Malraux describes the cockpit as a space of anonymous unity in the protective night, but
suddenly the plane is illuminated by searchlights, and “for the first time since they began their flight, those men could see each other” (emphasis original 274). With this ability comes the awareness that they are also exposed to the enemy on the ground; in the airspace above the city, being seen is coupled with death.

This scene effectively inverts our understanding of airpower as a panopticon. Although Bentham proposes that in this mode of discipline, “power should be visible and unverifiable” (qtd in Foucault, *DP* 201), as Foucault also notes, “visibility is a trap” (*DP* 200). While Foucault refers to a prison scenario, in Malraux’s scene the aircrews, trapped by the beams of light, themselves become prisoners, losing their position of power. The searchlights and anti-aircraft guns thus create a revolving dynamic between observer and observed, subjecting both to surveillance and death.

Below them, the city begins extinguishing its lights, also seeking safety in darkness. With his eyes closed against “the blinding dazzle” of the searchlights” (274), the pilot begins evasive action. Still, “the searchlight went stabbing through the sky, like a blind man feeling his way with a rapier” (275). This last image is stunning, even bizarre, as the blind man is not equipped with the standard cane, but with a sword. The aircraft escapes, back into darkness, “but each of them had vividly before him the picture of the features of his comrades as they had been thrown into relief for that brief moment” (275). Interestingly, Malraux never explains what the crewmembers see in the others’ faces, but no doubt, like the city’s defenders, they see terror and impending death. City and attacker are conflated through these rapid shifts in blindness and vision; the city is blind, while the aircrew is simultaneously blinded and given clarity. Although blind, the city has the most deadly weapon. Light is dangerous for both city and crew, while
darkness protects them. For both, seeing is dangerous—it means vulnerability and threat. In this death-struggle between city and aircrew, Malraux challenges the discourse of clean airpower, by showing the aviators’ bodies exposed and threatened, in the striated spaces created by air defenses. Moreover, this scene previews the battle that will be waged over numerous European cities in the following years; through the metaphor of blindness, the author not only challenges airpower discourse, but also suggests that his contemporaries prefer living in darkness than seeing the stark shift in the twentieth-century concept of war.

Malraux further exposes the limitations of the aerial perspective by appropriating and subverting the classical literary connection between blindness and insight. Where mythical Tiresias obtains inner vision and clarity through blindness, Magnin’s blindness in the final flying scene of the novel precludes insight into the nature of modern war. Deconstructionist Paul DeMan, in “The Rhetoric of Blindness,” argues that we are often most blind when we believe we are seeing clearly. Malraux seems to be making this same observation several years earlier, and is nicely using it to challenge both the reliability of vision and the presumed omniscience of the view from the air.

Here, Malraux uses external barriers to sight—clouds, mist, and darkness—to illustrate aircrews’ restricted vision and distancing from their bombing work. The battle of Guadalajara\(^\text{17}\) begins with the troops on the ground in the snow, desperately low on ammunition, waiting for relief. The mechanized infantry arrives, sparking some hope, and then roaring down through the snow clouds, eighty Republican air force planes arrive just as the troops begin an advance. Interestingly, Malraux presents not the newer French

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\(^{17}\) A decisive moment in March, 1937, in which the Republicans eventually attained a major victory.
and Soviet aircraft, but old planes which had not been used since the beginning of the war. Leading the airstrike, Malraux explains, the pilot Magnin is seeing “the birth-pangs of war” (494). With this odd observation (after several months of war), Malraux seems to be addressing the increasing professionalization of the war; Hugh Thomas notes that by the end of 1936, the war “had ceased to be an affair for amateurs” (44) as modern weapons demanded greater technological proficiency.

As the aircrews approach the battle, however, visibility is impaired by a cloud “so thick it gave the pilots the impression they were going blind” (493). Below the clouds, an evening mist rises, “swallowing up everything” (495), making it impossible to identify the results of their five passes over the battlefield. They drop to six hundred feet above the troops on the ground, trying to see the battle below them, but darkness further impedes their vision. The darkness here is both literal, as night is falling, and metaphorical, referring to the darkness of Fascism threatening Spain. Although the crews had dropped all their bombs, and “could see nothing,” they “were loath to leave the sky above the battlefield” (496). Magnin’s effort to see becomes increasingly urgent, and he descends ever lower, even though the ground troops “were riddling his wings with bullets” (496). Magnin exposes himself and his crew to death in a desperate attempt to see whether his efforts have brought victory or defeat. While Malraux uses this battle at the end of the novel to show hope for an overall Republican victory in Spain, we can also read in it his awareness of the shifting concepts of war. Magnin, in his obsolete aircraft with limited vision, clings to the romantic notion of a peasant victory, although as the impact of the tanks and aircraft on the battle shows, and Claus-Dieter Krohn suggests, Malraux understands that technicians would win the war, not “utopists of revolution”
Thus, the novelist here shows the failure of the view from the air to provide insight, and an insufficiency of vision which will become even more important in later explorations of airpower.

In exposing these limitations, Malraux speaks not only to his era, but also anticipates current observations about airpower which challenge the reliability of the aerial perspective. Historian Frederick Taylor (2004) describes airstrikes as "the half-blind work of an instant for the perpetrators" (89), because of the effects of speed, altitude, and the difficulty of identifying the target. War literature analyst Stephen Jaeger (2006) explains, "in wars of bombing neither the pilots and bombardier, nor the victims and defenders, nor even the bomber command, military strategists, defenders, or politicians have an overview of what is really happening. The pilots only see flames; often hardly their targets..." (67). Although history demands closure, Jaeger believes "the air war is de-materialized and de-localized; it consists of gaps, blind spots, and ambiguities" (68). As Malraux suggests and Jaeger confirms, the unreliability of the aerial view clearly is disastrous for a discourse that promotes precision bombing as a panacea for war.

In L'espoir, then, Malraux sets the stage for much of the later writing about bombing. While he is careful to show the Republican air force as limited to only military targets, he begins to challenge the romanticization of aerial warfare, and introduces the question of judgment in the employment of strategic bombing, a question that Roald Dahl will take up next in his short story. He uses motifs of seeing, beauty, and blindness to challenge the reliability of vision, showing the flawed and limited nature of the aerial perspective. In so doing, Malraux presents an urgent, raw response to the shifting nature
of warfare, now encompassing war in the air, an urgency that also emerges in Dahl’s writing in response to the more extensive use of airpower in World War II.

One of Malraux’s contemporaries, philosopher Bertrand Russell (also writing during the Spanish Civil War) makes a keen observation about airpower, comparing the destruction of Guernica to the devastation of Pompeii. He argues that the power of Mount Vesuvius has now been usurped by men in aircraft, and predicts that the next target might be London. Then Russell asks a penetrating question about the aircrews who will wreak such devastation: “And if it were Berlin and Rome, not London and Paris, that were destroyed by the thunderbolts of the new gods, could any humanity survive in the destroyers after such a deed?” (23). In other words, it is easy to vilify the perpetrators when we already see them as barbarians, but what happens to our notion of civilization when we ourselves employ the same strategies? From the perspective of one of these destroyers, Dahl examines this question in “Someone Like You.”

Roald Dahl “Someone Like You”

Roald Dahl is perhaps best known as a writer of popular fiction, including well-loved children’s stories James and the Giant Peach and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory as well as adult short stories of macabre horror, published both individually and in the collections Someone Like You, Kiss Kiss, and Switch Bitch. His earliest serious fiction, the collection Over to You (1946), which consists of ten short stories about aircrews engaged in colonial or wartime flying, thus often seems like an anomaly to readers. This collection, however, is located between two of Dahl’s other texts about flying, the Walt Disney-published book The Gremlins (1943), and a critically unsuccessful novel Some Time Never (1948), a grouping that shows Dahl’s early concern
with military aviation. While *Over to You* as a whole presents a fascinating examination of airpower, Dahl’s short story “Someone Like You,” originally published in *Town and Country* in November 1945, and republished as the last story in this collection, is most significant because it interrogates the aerial perspective, shows us both aviator and target population, and presents a strong critique of aerial bombing.

As Laura Vinas Valle points out, criticism of Dahl is often divided by genre, focusing either on the children’s or the adult literature, but seldom on both. Critics, however, are often uncertain of how to deal with *Over to You*. For example, Alan Warren, who focuses on Dahl’s horror stories, feels compelled to mention these stories but unsure what to do with them, noting that “these are unlike Dahl’s later work, though they are just as vivid and economical” (121). Peter Burger, in an examination of Dahl’s use of folklore, values *Over to You* for “three ghost stories” and one story of African folklore. One exception is Mark I. West, who examines Dahl’s entire canon in his book *Roald Dahl*, and rightfully devotes most of a chapter to *Over to You*. West thoughtfully points out Dahl’s exploration of human nature, alienation, and connection in these stories.

Yet in all these analyses, something is missing. It seems the difficulty critics face in dealing with these stories comes from their attempts to read *Over To You* as generically connected to Dahl’s later work. I suggest we can achieve a much richer understanding of the texts by looking outside of Dahl’s canon for this generic connection, by reading these stories as war stories, and particularly as tales of airpower, alongside

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18 This short story should not be confused with Dahl’s later story collection, also entitled *Someone Like You* (1953). The short story is found only in *Over to You.*
19 Among recent critics, only Valle and David Galef examine the crossover between the two genres, with Valle examining narrative voice in Dahl’s entire oeuvre, and Galef seeing plot similarities and a “sense of impishness” (30) in both types of writing.
20 Burger describes “Death of an Old Old Man,” “Only This,” and “Katina” as ghost stories (142). I do not agree with this reading.
Malraux’s novel. This approach allows us to re-examine Dahl’s early work not as an isolated anomaly, but as part of a larger critique of airpower in World War II.

In “Someone Like You,” the narrator meets a fellow pilot in a bar. He immediately notices the change in his friend, who’d been flying in combat for five years. “From being a young, bouncing boy, he had become someone old and wise and gentle. He had become gentle like a wounded child. He had become old like a tired man of seventy years” (151). Dahl’s observation here is grounded in fact; aviators, particularly in the desperate times of both world wars, often were seen to age quickly, due to the stress of combat and the proximity to death. After drinking a beer together, the pilots quickly switch to Scotch, and the troubled pilot begins to talk about bombing. As he begins each bombing run now, he explains:

I keep thinking to myself, shall I just jink a little; shall I swerve a fraction to one side, then my bombs will fall on someone else. I keep thinking, whom shall I make them fall on; whom shall I kill tonight. Which ten, twenty or a hundred people shall I kill tonight. It is all up to me. And now I think about this every time I go out. (152)

In this passage, Dahl shows a critical awareness of the target population, the ability of the pilot to see them correctly, and his responsibility to them.

In his analysis of this story, West explains that the bomber pilot “is the only character in the book who questions the underlying morality of carrying out bombing and strafing missions. He feels that he is somehow responsible for the deaths of many civilians, and this makes him feel immensely guilty” (30). While West’s analysis is accurate, he does not look deeply enough into the implications of bombing in the story.
Dahl goes well beyond suggesting that the pilot is "somehow responsible" for these deaths; Dahl begins with the assumption that the pilot is responsible and then proceeds to critique the arbitrariness of the pilot's power over life and death, and suggests that this misapplication of airpower may lead to madness. He shows how the slightest movement by a pilot on a bombing run, a jink to the right or left, determines who lives and who dies. He raises the broader questions of state authority and individual responsibility here; although the state has sanctioned a certain type of killing, and the pilot acts by order of the state, the killing escapes the boundaries of this state sanction. Dahl illuminates the moral dilemma the pilot faces as he realizes he has become the executioner without benefit of judge or jury.

While Dahl's story primarily presents the aerial perspective on bombing, his concern with the fate of those on the ground is pronounced, and was no doubt influenced by two events in his life. Dahl's biographer Donald Sturrock notes that as war approached in 1939, Dahl was working in Africa. He frequently warned his mother and sisters, who lived in Bexley, near London, to move, because he feared their home would be bombed (114). In June, 1940, his concerns became more intense, and he continued to try to convince them to move, to no avail (157). These concerns show not only filial loyalty, but a keen awareness of airpower theory. Dahl knew that his family's status as civilians would not protect them from bombing. His concerns were real, as he learned in September 1940 that their house was, indeed, hit by bombs, although his family survived (129).
In addition to this very personal experience with bombing, Dahl recounts witnessing the results of bombing in his autobiographical work *Going Solo*, where he describes watching from the ground as an oil tanker was bombed after the Battle of Athens. When the bombs impacted the ship, oil spilled onto the surface of the sea and caught fire. Dahl writes, “we had seen plenty of bombings in our time, but we had never seen men jumping into a burning sea to be roasted and boiled alive like that. It shook us all” (166). Thus, Dahl’s acute awareness of civilian exposure to bombing, coupled with his perception of this incident, impacts his world view in “Someone Like You” and illustrates Dahl’s ongoing awareness of targeted populations and the responsibilities of those who bomb them.

The short story is not simply autobiographical. While informed by events of his life, the story shows a deep awareness of the complexity of airpower employment that moves beyond his own flying experience. Though Dahl himself was an RAF pilot, his time in combat was limited to five weeks due to injuries from a crash. He flew only single-seat fighter aircraft, and participated primarily in air-to-air combat, not bombing. However, after he was grounded for medical reasons, Dahl was posted to Washington D.C. as the Assistant Air Attaché in 1942 (Sturrock 164), and later to the British Security Coordination office in New York, where he worked for the duration of the war. His primary role was propaganda; during these years, in this role he was most likely privy to photographs and reports of the Allied bombing of Europe from 1943-45. He would have been aware of the official discourse of strategic bombing, promoted as a clean war at the

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21 Sturrock notes that in the 1980s when Dahl wrote this book, Dahl was more concerned with narration than with truth. The biographer claims that although Dahl tells a great story here, his facts are not always accurate. For my purposes, the accuracy of the story is not as important as Dahl’s internalization of the experience and its impact on his writing.
highest levels of military operations; in Britain, head of Bomber Command Arthur “Bomber” Harris believed his crews could win the war from the air, proscribing the need for an invasion (Linqvist 98). In the Pacific, U.S. Air Force General H.H. “Hap” Arnold proposed “that an acceleration and augmentation of the strategic air program culminating in a land campaign will bring about the defeat of Japan with a minimum loss of American lives” (596). Arnold was convinced that the United States could win the war in Japan by bombing, and he and other advocates of strategic bombing believed American lives that would otherwise be lost in an invasion of Japan would be saved by the employment of airpower.

This argument allowed many aircrews to approach their bombing missions with clear consciences for two reasons: they believed they were saving lives, and they understood their mission as sanctioned by state authority. Jörg Friedrich, in The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945, makes it clear that many British aircrews felt no regret for what they were doing, believing in the concept of the clean war, knowing that “bombing saved the bloodshed that ground operations would bring, and it shortened the duration of the war” (44). American crews also adhered to the belief in a clean war, which “saved bloodshed; it was humane” (128). Fairly, Friedrich notes that some crew members, speaking after the war, expressed misgivings about bombing civilians, but noted that they felt unable to act on these feelings, due to fear of reprisals. Many thoughtful warriors, however, realized that while airpower discourse was initially seductive, it essentially involved trading the lives of civilians for the lives of soldiers, a trade that they rejected.

Dahl does not allow his pilots the luxury of advocating responsibility to the state,
however. As they continue their discussion in the bar, the troubled pilot explains that exerting just a slight pressure with one foot on the rudder pedal

would throw the bombs on to a different house and on to other people. It is all up to me, the whole thing is up to me, and each time that I go out I have to decide which ones shall be killed.....I can do it so that I don’t even notice that it is being done. I just lean a little to one side because I am shifting my sitting position. That is all I am doing, and then I kill a different lot of people. (153)

The pilot here has no illusions about acting as the implement of state power. Although he is obviously on bombing missions sanctioned by the state, he understands the imprecision of bombing at this time. Any movement he makes, deliberate or inadvertent, will change the outcome of the bombing run slightly. The rudder pedals on an airplane help control yaw, the direction in which the nose of the aircraft points. Pressure on one rudder pedal will cause the nose to change direction slightly; this angle will affect the angle at which the bombs drop. A slight movement at altitude will be magnified by the distance the bombs have to fall, resulting in a significant difference in the actual target hit by the bombs. And even though some bombing inaccuracies were accounted for in planning, the pilot realizes that his actions will affect who lives and who dies.

In this passage, Dahl complicates not only the discourse of the clean war, but also that of precision bombing. The latter presumes an element of state control based on the ability of the aircrews to clearly identify and hit their targets. It is informed, to an extent,

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22 Friedrich notes the “creep back” effect that occurs when pilots drop their bombs just slightly early, “just to get it over with.” He notes that in a large strike, the creep back could string for miles along the bomber’s path, and explains that planners compensated for this effect by placing the target markers ahead of the actual target (24). Dahl, however, is describing a side-to-side motion rather than a lateral one.
by the belief that the aerial perspective provides a clarity or omniscience which Dahl here rejects. Wanting clarity, Dahl’s pilot is instead blinded by arbitrariness, hyper-aware of the fact that his own body may be fooling him, its slightest movements impacting his accuracy. Like Malraux’s pilots, he is struggling to see the results of his work, and ultimately unable to do so.

The pilot is also haunted by the power of judgment he wields. He explains:

> Each time I go out, I say to myself, shall it be these or shall it be those?
> Which ones are the worst? Perhaps if I make a little skid to the left I will get a houseful of lousy women-shooting German soldiers, or perhaps if I make that little skid I will miss getting the soldiers and get an old man in a shelter. How can I know? How can anyone know these things? (153).

Dahl emphasizes the element of judgment here, and the difficulty of ensuring the bombs will fall on the enemy. The moral dilemma here is exclusively concerned with power.

Bertrand Russell, in his examination of power dynamics, asserts that mastery of technology (and he particularly refers to airpower here) changes power relationships, and he notes that this newfound power can make a man “feel himself a god” (23). Sturrock points out similar experiences in Dahl’s own life: “Dahl’s ability to see himself as a detached, sometimes godlike figure, wandering the imaginative territory of the skies, and critical of those less free-thinking than he was, had been exacerbated both by his crash and by his combat experiences as a pilot. Both made him feel set apart—liberated from the earthbound existence of most of his fellow mortals” (254). Yet, with this freedom comes great responsibility. We see Dahl’s pilot grappling with the godlike feeling of power, and the supreme act of judgment he is faced with as he tries to decide “which ones
As Malraux’s bombardier Scali points out, of the two labels, judge or murderer, the label judge seems by far the worst to him. Moreover, as Dahl continues to show, it is not only this act of judging that torments the pilot, but the distinct possibility that his judgment may be wrong. A judgment that the “women-killing German soldiers” do indeed deserve to be bombed can be undermined by a simple jink that then kills the innocent civilian instead. With this scene, Dahl seems to anticipate the difficulties of post-war human rights dialogue, in which the recognition of multiple subjects and multiple ways of seeing complicates the moral determination of right and wrong. If right and wrong are not universally determined, then how can the individual, or the state, judge accurately? What are the implications of inaccurate judgment coupled with the extreme lethality of the bomber?

Navigating this moral dilemma is easier when the responsibility for judgment is shared, but Dahl refuses his pilot even this compensation, instead highlighting the pilot’s insistence on owning the responsibility, the guilt, and the stress of judgment for himself. (As we will see later, James Dickey makes the same move in his poem, allowing the pilot to grab all the guilt for himself.) Although he is flying on a bomber with other crewmembers, Dahl’s pilot refuses to share the guilt. He notes that he can alter who lives and dies with “just a touch on the rudder-bar and the bomb-aimer wouldn’t even notice” (153). Although in reality a bomber crew functions as a team to complete the mission, which by inference means that the crew would share responsibility for the deaths they cause, Dahl’s pilot internalizes the power he feels. There are a few reasons Dahl may construct the pilot this way. As the pilot in command, he is responsible for the entire
crew and the success of the mission. The infamous pilot ego, of course, is also a factor here, as the pilot would assume that anything involving the aircraft or mission is centered around him. Dahl’s centering of the aerial view here contrasts sharply with Malraux’s decentering, using multiple perspectives. While the genre limitations posed by the short story versus the novel may have driven this choice, Dahl’s move also serves to concentrate the power dynamics, and reiterate the expectations of god-like omniscience promised by the aerial perspective, an omniscience which his pilot fails to achieve.

Up to this point in the story, the narrator has listened quietly, but then he reveals his own flying experiences, telling the first pilot “I jinked once...ground-strafing. I thought I’d kill the ones on the other side of the road instead.” The pilot replies “everybody jinks” (153), and suggests they have another drink. Immediately after making this statement, the narrator tries to change the subject, because he doesn’t like being reminded of the power of judgment he wielded. He points out a woman in the bar, drawing attention to her “wonderful bosom” (154) in an effort to change the subject, but his guest will not be deterred. He begins to tell a story about a pilot called Stinker who had a pet dog. During a unit move, the dog was left behind, and Stinker’s response was to become “mad as a hatter” (155). He pretended the dog was still there, called the invisible dog, petted him, lost him and scolded him. The pilot ends the story by stating that Stinker “used to jink too” (156). Here, the pilot is associating jinking with madness; he implies that the power and burden of judgment lies heavily on the airmen. Also, by telling Stinker’s story, the pilot is desperately trying to create a distance between himself and madness. He staves off madness by drinking and talking, but even the talking may not help; Stinker, the pilot explains, used to talk about jinking too. The narrator points out
that random acts may also save lives, and explains how he methodically delays starting out when driving a car to avoid possible accidents which might have occurred had he started earlier. But this attempt to paint arbitrariness in a positive light fails, as the pilot concludes “you never really know what would have happened” (157). Once again, the narrator points out the woman with the “marvelous bosom,” hoping to use sexual desire to move the conversation away from killing. But even this appeal to the most basic instinct falls short; his guest replies, “I bet I’ve killed lots of women more beautiful than that one” (157).

With this statement, Dahl complicates the pilot’s predicament even further. While the man earlier spoke of the possibility of missing the enemy soldiers and killing an old man by mistake, he is now acknowledging killing civilians as well, including women, an action contrary to the conventions of war. The pilot then points to the crowded bar, and asks if there would be “a bloody row” if suddenly all the bar patrons fell dead. The narrator agrees there would, and the guest then calmly explains: “well, I’ve done that hundreds of times. I’ve killed more people than there are in this room hundreds of times. So have you” (158). He notes that the people he’s killed are the same as those around them, drinking in the pub. Here Dahl uses a technique similar to Malraux, who showed his pilots fighting blindness to see the results of their work. Dahl’s pilot juxtaposes the bar patrons with the people he’s killed in an attempt to visualize the numbers, to invest them with some sort of humanity. As the flyers in both texts struggle with individual responsibility, they fight the distancing from death provided by the aircraft, striving to see the deaths they’ve caused.

As Dahl’s story continues, the image of the dead that the pilot conjured sours the
two men on this bar, so they decide to find another place to drink. The guest suggests going to a place with only a few people, “or a place with a hundred thousand people in it” (158). The last suggestion is chilling, as it predicts the destruction of entire cities through firebombing and the use of the atomic bomb. By equating the people around them in the pub with those they have killed, the pilots try to control the guilt by moving to a nearly empty pub, or one filled with so many people they can’t possibly imagine killing that many. However, with this outrageous number, Dahl subtly conveys the fact that in 1945 alone, aircrews have already killed hundreds of thousands, and he suggests that with the advent of nuclear weapons, the death toll will continue to climb, as the bombing of civilians becomes more acceptable with each passing day.

As the bombing war became increasingly destructive near the end of World War II, according to Sturrock, Dahl’s “anti-war stance had been slowly evolving” (252). Sturrock notes that Dahl was haunted by the use of atomic weapons against Japan in 1945, and this led to his decision to write the novel Some Time Never in late 1945. The unsuccessful novel depicted the extreme destruction of a Third World War waged with nuclear weapons. The novel shows “the terminal distress that flying itself has wrought on one pilot’s soul” (Sturrock 258). In its moral ambiguity, “Someone Like You,” published three months after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, seems to anticipate the direction of this novel, and as the more successful of the two, provides a scathing exposure of the toll that strategic bombing can take on the aircrews for whom belief in a clean war is not enough.

In “Someone Like You,” then, Roald Dahl begins a brutally honest engagement with strategic bombing, showing its moral complexity and how the power to kill escapes
the control of the state. His protagonist refuses to use the discourse of aerial warfare as a clean war, with its life-saving claims, to exonerate himself from responsibility for the deaths he has caused. Like Bertrand Russell, Dahl wonders what kind of humanity survives in those who participate in this destruction; his answer suggests that madness threatens these individuals, and particularly those who question their participation in the horrors of bombing. He concludes with a timely and subversive warning about the atomic bomb, showing the potential of nuclear weapons to amplify the level of destruction to new and unacceptable levels.

This chapter has shown how two writers, sensing the potential expansion of airpower and the threat it posed both to civilians and aircrews, infused their work with a potent warning. Building on their own flying experiences, André Malraux and Roald Dahl scrutinized the seductive aerial perspective and exposed the air war in all its complexity. Both showed the unreliability of the view from the air, the lack of clarity and imprecision characteristic of mid-century bombing, and the arbitrariness of its results. They used their writing to challenge the cleanness of the air war, and question the moral impact of this new and frightening weapon on those chosen to employ it. Both writers challenge the reader to look beyond the promise of airpower discourse, and in doing so they set the stage for later writers to question this discourse even further.
CHAPTER IV

WRITING THE BOMBED CITY FOR ‘UNBOMBED AMERICA’:

JAMES DICKEY’S “THE FIREBOMBING” AND KURT VONNEGUT’S

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

We are simple-minded creatures, glad to believe on the basis of symbolism alone (up is better than down) that air superiority is moral superiority.

Kurt Vonnegut, Fates Worse Than Death (105)

Nowhere was the air war dirtier than during the strategic bombing campaigns of World War II, where an estimated 800,000 civilians and 95,000 aircrew members died in a war that was consistently promoted as clean.1 In previous chapters, I examined early responses to bombing by both civilians and aviators, as well as the assumptions and educational efforts that promoted the use of airpower in both the peripheries and the metropole. In this final chapter, then, I explore the penultimate expression of airpower discourse, the firebombing of cities in both Japan and Europe.2 I return to American literature here because of the efforts of its writers to show the human cost of the air war, in all its blazing violence, to readers in what Paul Fussell so aptly calls “unbombed America.” Fussell identifies a gap between what the public saw during World War II and what the combatants saw, as the true violence of the war was hidden from the public.

1 The casualty statistics vary depending on the source. I use A.C. Grayling’s figures here.
2 Firebombing is often considered one step below the ultimate use of airpower, the delivery of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, it provides a more productive study, because the latter bombing is still seen as a bit of an anomaly, a rare event, while firebombing was widespread and resulted in many more deaths overall.
through propaganda, censorship, and euphemism. This gap was especially wide in “unbombed America” (268) he suggests, rendering the “real war” inaccessible.3

I read James Dickey’s poem “The Firebombing” (1965) together with Kurt Vonnegut’s novel Slaughterhouse-Five4 (1969), because both texts focus on the extreme use of airpower against civilians. Dickey, who flew as a radar intercept officer in the Pacific, and Vonnegut, a soldier and survivor of the firebombing of Dresden, draw on their personal experiences with airpower to provide us with views of strategic bombing from both the air and the ground. Compelled by America’s general ignorance of firebombing extremes, due in part to the government’s deliberate manipulation of the bombing narrative, both authors work to expose the discourse of “clean” airpower by showing the dirtiness of the air war when it is waged, with fire, against cities and towns.

Strategic bombing, defined as “the use of air forces to attack the enemy state, its centres of population, and its economy directly,” came of age during World War II (Buckley 2). The most controversial aspect of strategic airpower, the bombing of cities, is generally known as area or morale bombing, and is thus differentiated from the more exact practice of precision bombing, which attacks military or industrial targets.5 The use of incendiaries, commonly known as firebombing, denotes one particular type of area bombing, which was widely practiced in the later years of the Second World War. While

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3 Fussell uses this phrase in Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War. In contrast, bombed areas of Britain, he notes, had a better, although never complete, understanding of the violence.

4 The full title of the novel is Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children’s Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death. In keeping with common critical practice, I will use the abbreviated title here.

5 The term area bombing is generally used to denote bombing of a large area, often a city center, in hopes of damaging multiple targets, often through the creation of fires. Morale bombing denotes bombing primarily employed to create panic and chaos among the people (Buckley 78). Hugh Trenchard, Chief of the Air Staff for the RAF after World War I, used this term to describe the detrimental effects of bombing on the morale of the people. The separation in terms suggests a difference in intent; where area bombing still suggests military targets, the latter does not. Morale bombing is sometimes replaced with the term terror bombing. The three terms are often used interchangeably, as the accomplishment of area bombing often also achieves the effects of morale (or terror) bombing.
incendiary bomb loads were often combined with high explosives for maximum effect, the sheer numbers of incendiaries used is stunning: eighty million 4-pound incendiary sticks were dropped over German cities during the war (Friedrich 16). Similarly, on just a single day over Japan, U.S. bombers dropped 6,145 tons of incendiaries (Kerr 269). In the wooden residential areas of cities this practice often created firestorms, or conflagrations, where individual fires merged, the heated air functioned as a chimney, and fresh air rushed in along the ground to feed the fires. The extreme heat, intense winds, and lack of oxygen changed the atmosphere in the bombed cities to that of “another planet, one incompatible with life” (Friedrich 167). These extreme results were not accidental, as firebombing tactics were deliberately studied, tested, and evaluated; both the British and the Americans employed fire scientists to determine how best to incinerate a city.  

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6 As opposed to high explosive bombs, designed to destroy by exploding, incendiary bombs were used to create fires in built-up areas, with the stated purpose of causing chaos, destroying housing (and by doing so, disrupting industrial workers), burning factories, and generally reducing the morale of the people. The most common weapons used for firebombing were the 4-pound thermite bomb used over Europe and the 6-pound napalm (jellied gasoline) bomb over Japan. A typical incendiary strike on Germany began with 4,000-pound high-explosive bombs which destroyed roofs and opened up the interiors of buildings, followed by clusters of 4-pound incendiaries. Using this tactic, “the buildings became chimneys, and the incendiaries dropped in” (Friedrich 14).

7 The amount of destruction caused by firebombing varied widely. In some cities, firebombing caused little damage and few deaths, because firefighting techniques, civil defense measures, and weather combined to keep the fires from spreading. However, in other ill-fated cities, factors such as clear weather and minimal air defenses, which allowed for accurate bombing, along with the disruption of electricity, water flow, and communications created conditions ripe for the development of firestorms or conflagrations, causing severe devastation. In cities subjected to firebombing, most people were killed not by explosions, but by fire or suffocation. Friedrich explains the anatomy of a firestorm: it “created two insufferable spaces, the blazing exterior and the gas-filled interior.” He notes that in these cases the body is not killed by violence, but simply put in “another place, a place that does not support life” (167). Bombing created notorious firestorms in Hamburg (July 1943) and Dresden (February 1945), as well as in other German cities.

8 Fire scientists in England concluded that fire would be particularly effective in old, medieval, city centers, such as those of numerous German cities. U.S. scientists came to similar conclusions about Japan: “the combustible materials in Japanese residential construction would serve as ‘kindling’ for conflagrations that would destroy factories and other military objectives over wide areas” (Kerr 42). Two authors provide detailed descriptions of the fire science employed in developing incendiaries and firebombing tactics during World War II. See Jörg Friedrich for a discussion of the scientific studies.
This study is relevant today, over sixty-five years after the last World War II bombing mission, because, as John Buckley notes in *Air Power in the Age of Total War*, the world is still uncomfortable with the concept of targeting civilians. The issue of strategic bombing has experienced a resurgence of interest in the last two decades, with several events spurring new historical scholarship: the end of the Cold War in 1991, which provided access to records and survivors that for years had been off limits behind the Iron Curtain; the United States’ air campaign over Iraq during Desert Storm in the same year; the return of war and genocide to Europe in the Balkans in the mid-1990s, with NATO’s aerial response to this violence; the 9-11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington; and the subsequent American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

This new scholarship has spawned an international debate over the ethics and morality of strategic bombing, and a re-assessment of the military necessity of this practice. Two texts have been particularly controversial because of the ethical questions they pose. In *The Holocaust and Strategic Bombing* (1995), Eric Markusen and David Kopf argue that strategic bombing constituted genocide, and support their claim by applying criteria of the United Nations Genocide Convention. Genocide, Markusen and Kopf explain, resides in “the deliberate calculated slaughter of masses of defenseless, innocent human beings on the basis of their membership in a group rather than because of what they as individuals did or did not do” (257). This idea of deliberation is further emphasized in Jörg Friedrich’s *Das Brand*, published in German in 2002, and in English translation as *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945* in 2006. Whereas Allied bombing was previously seen as “provoked retaliations,” (400) William Rasch explains, conducted in England. E. Bartlett Kerr discusses similar methods employed by the U.S. for the war in the Pacific.
The Fire portrayed the British “as autonomous agents, as proactive, not merely reactive” (402). The timing of its original publication, between the 9-11 terrorist attacks and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, along with extensive sales, made a strong impact on the conversation about bombing, as Andreas Huyssen notes, creating a sense of immediacy of experience that sparked massive anti-war protests in Germany.⁹

In opposition to these texts are others which present strategic bombing as justified by military necessity. As Buckley explains, we often base our ethical judgments on the effectiveness of the bombing, asking if it helped win the war. E. Bartlett Kerr, in his 1991 study of the air war in Japan, concludes that aerial bombardment was justified because it won the war in the Pacific. Similarly, Frederick Taylor, in 2004, points out the military value of targets in Dresden, in an effort to dispel what he calls “the pervasive postwar myth” (149) that Dresden was a city of art and commerce with no military importance. In his recent important book, Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan (2006), A.C. Grayling merges these two strands of analysis, asking if the bombing was a crime against humanity or “justified by the necessities of war” (1). After a comprehensive analysis, significant because it is accomplished by one of the victors, not the victims, Grayling concludes that area bombing was morally wrong, “very wrong” (277).

This recent scholarship provides a new and intriguing context for studying Dickey and Vonnegut, who not only speak to the issues of their time, but also anticipate the moral controversy about area bombing that is still ongoing today. In their texts, both writers question the military necessity of the firebombing they depict, and in doing so,

⁹ Huyssen notes that several hundred thousand copies sold in the first few months (166). His article “Air War Legacies: From Dresden to Baghdad” provides a fascinating analysis of how Friedrich’s hybrid writing style contributed to the reception of his work.
challenge the ethical justification of this practice and the discourse of airpower that supported it. As Grayling rightly notes, to understand the Allied bombing campaign fully, “one has to have a clear picture of what was known, what was believed, and what was hoped by those who carried it out” (120). To this end, before examining the work of Dickey and Vonnegut more closely, I will briefly review the justification of bombing which was prevalent prior to, and during World War II, and the rhetorical deception which hid it from the American public. These beliefs form the dominant discourse of airpower that the poet and novelist challenge in their texts.

**Justification of Bombing**

As I showed in my Introduction, the airpower theory emerging in the wake of World War I claimed that the bombing of cities would save lives, in what Markusen and Kopf identify as the “healing-killing paradox.”¹⁰ This notion, they explain, was promoted in military circles by both the fathers of airpower—Douhet, Trenchard, and Mitchell—and the wartime commanders, such as Arthur Harris and Curtis LeMay, to justify strategic bombing. With this argument, “a means that had traditionally been regarded as evil was now regarded as noble” (203). Since the end intent was admirable, these men believed that their morally-questionable means were acceptable. This rationalization, then, made “the slaughter of enemy civilians...more emotionally and morally palatable” (249) by presenting strategic bombing as a cleaner method of waging war.

This way of thinking was not limited to the military, however, but reflected a new vision of the role of civilians in relation to the state. As Richard Overy observes, during the interwar years mass mobilization of populations “came to be regarded as an

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¹⁰ These authors write extensively about this paradox in Chapter 9 of *The Holocaust and Strategic Bombing*. 

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expression of modernity, in which the modern organic community, organised around the
principle of the modern nation-state, fought for its survival by every means that the
modern age had made available” (47). Thus, mid-century wars were no longer limited
to armies in the field: the concept of total war pitted “whole societies” against each other
(Buckley 2). Opposition to the targeting of civilians was often stymied by the argument
that civilians working in war industries, building tanks and aircraft, were as culpable in
the war effort as the uniformed troops on the battlefields, and therefore were legitimate
targets.

States were able to justify this healing-killing paradox by enfolding it in the
modern concept of governing Michel Foucault describes as biopower, a benevolent,
nurturing, patriarchal method of government concerned with preserving the lives of the
people. By re-envisioning war as a struggle not between armies but between populations,
modern states were able to justify taking civilian lives in war as a means of preserving the
lives of their own people. Even the sacrifice of one’s own people, by subjecting them
to enemy bombing, became acceptable as part of the state’s biopolitical imperative, as
these wars and sacrifices ultimately led to the preservation of the population as a whole.

In this context, it becomes apparent that by the start of World War II, many states
had insidiously and effectively persuaded their citizens to buy into the doctrine of area

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11 Overy believes this turn of thought was influenced by earlier scientific thinking, particularly
Darwin and Freud. Darwin encouraged people to see war as a struggle for survival of the fittest, while
Freud suggested a tendency towards violence in all humans. Though neither man promoted war, their ideas
created “an intellectual framework” allowing supposedly civilized societies to justify extreme violence (49).

12 Foucault discusses biopower in The History of Sexuality and Society Must Be Defended.

13 Foucault, looking back at the extreme violence of the twentieth century, asks how such a
system, based on life, could justify war, which requires it “to call for death, to demand deaths, to give the
order to kill, and to expose not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death?” (Society 254).
His answer is state racism. He uses the term racism to describe “racism of the evolutionist kind, biological
racism” (261) which pits one population against another.
bombing by presenting it as a cleaner and more modern method of waging war. Both Friedrich and Grayling note that the bombing of cities was widely accepted, and expected, by citizens of Germany, Britain, and the United States, both before and during the war. States emphasized protection of their populations by implementing air defense measures to prevent bombing, and civil defense measures to help people survive when the bombers got through. Japan, for example, conducted blackout exercises in Tokyo, beginning in 1933, as “one of a number of measures taken to demonstrate it was a ‘modern’ city” (Kerr 105), prepared for modern war. In Europe, also, civil defense drills included gas masks, sheltering and fire fighting procedures. Moreover, civilian populations “were encouraged by the authorities to see themselves as soldiers on the factory front, or soldiers of labour,” thus complicating any effort to see them as separate from the war (Overy 46). Together, these conditions created an environment in which bombing nations could, in part, sidestep their own responsibility for the killing of civilians by placing the blame for these deaths on the opposing government, which had provided insufficient protection for its own population.

Exposing Rhetorical Deception

It was within this world view, then, that Dickey and Vonnegut gained their experiences of air power, but it was in a very different world that they wrote their texts.

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14 Japan’s preparations were not as thorough as those in Europe, however. Tokyo implemented some civil defense measures, but half-heartedly, since its leaders did not expect any aircraft to reach mainland Japan, at least for many years. The Japanese ordered some evacuations of non-essential personnel in Tokyo in late 1943, and evacuated school children in the fall of 1944; however, E. Bartlett Kerr reports that by November, 1944 “less than 4 percent” had been evacuated (107). The city relied primarily on large trench shelters, which were ineffective against incendiary bombing.

15 Friedrich suggests that biopower functions ironically through civil defense. Bombing, he explains, creates the need for shelter, and “only the government can make such spaces available; the state is the guarantor for the protection of life” (325). The Germans offered compensation to bombing victims, a practice Friedrich describes as “the state claim[ing] the air war for itself” (390). Protection always involved priorities, however, as resources for the protection of civilians were balanced against the needs of troops in the field.
Both authors wrote twenty or more years after the end of World War II, and during this time witnessed the expansion of airpower capabilities as modern jet aircraft and rocket technology extended the global reach of both conventional and nuclear weapons.

Although both texts can be read as tales of personal trauma—Dickey’s poem as the trauma of a firebombing pilot, and Vonnegut’s novel as the trauma of a firebombing survivor—they also move well beyond the personal to challenge the public perception of bombing that emerged from World War II and continued to drive policies in the sixties and beyond. As Morris Dickstein notes, “the new war novel of the 1960s was less about the war than about the Holocaust, the Cold War, fear of atomic war, and finally the ongoing war in Vietnam” (40). While Morris limits his scope to the novel, I suggest his observation is quite applicable to Dickey’s poetry as well.16 This temporal distancing from the war allows the authors to respond not only to their own experiences, but also to the subsequent representation of the war, particularly of American participation in firebombing. The rhetorical deception that becomes increasingly apparent to them in the years after the war spurs their efforts to show the extremes of this practice to “unbombed America,” in ways that speak both to a 1960s audience, complicit in the bombing of Vietnam and threatened by the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction,17 and to a twenty-first century audience still grappling with the morality of bombing civilians.

One of the values of war literature is its ability to talk back to public rhetoric by bearing witness to trauma, thus creating a counter-narrative about the war. In her

16 The influence of the Vietnam War on Dickey’s poem may have been minimal, as Laurie Goldensohn notes, because Dickey wrote the poem in 1963, in the early days of American involvement there (159).
17 Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) is a term first used in 1968. The OED defines it as “mutual deterrence between nuclear powers based on the possession by each of the capacity to destroy a substantial proportion of the population and industry of the other in response to an initial attack.”
analysis of trauma literature, Kali Tal explains that politics can silence the trauma survivor; therefore, for many people, “bearing witness is an aggressive act” (7). Elena Lamberti and Vita Fortunati agree, noting that “[war] literature is used to bear witness” (17) and to oppose the restraints of public rhetoric. Lamberti and Fortunati explain that public rhetoric creates national myths which attempt to frame our memories of war; literature, in contrast, allows the release of “uneasy memories often removed from public euphemisms and national myths and mythologies” (8). As I will argue below, Dickey and Vonnegut are releasing these uneasy memories, bearing witness in their texts to the barbarity of firebombing, removing it from the shadow of euphemism, and exposing it as the bastard stepchild of the American discourse of precision bombing.

Upon entering World War II, the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) believed that daylight precision bombing, not area bombing, was the key to airpower employment. In the interwar years, U.S. airpower doctrine focused on destroying key links in the enemy’s “industrial web” through precise targeting with the newly developed Norden Bombsight. The bombsight promised incredible accuracy: “bombardiers liked to boast that with the Norden bombsight they could drop a bomb into a pickle barrel from 20,000 feet” (Sherman 78). Seduced by the promise of this secret weapon, John Steinbeck described the job of the bombardier as “a technical job, a surgeon’s job” (43) in his 1942 propaganda text *Bombs Away*. Unfortunately, actual performance of the bombsight “fell short of its theoretical capability” (Van Creveld 69), and other factors such as air defenses and poor weather also challenged these precision capabilities.18 Although the U.S. continued to officially embrace the mantra of precision bombing,

18 During the war in Europe, both British and American air forces originally employed precision bombing, but experienced heavy crew losses in doing so. In response to these losses and poor bombing results, the British Air Ministry in 1942 began to target the built-up areas of cities (Friedrich 70).
historians generally agree that the reality of the air war did not match the rhetoric. Buckley explains: “although the Allied governments never admitted it openly, from early 1942 onwards first the Royal Air Force and then latterly the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) pursued a policy of area bombing” (5). By January, 1943, the Allied Combined Bombing Offensive identified among its objectives “undermining the morale of the German people” (Irving 36), thus introducing an element of rhetorical slippage which, for many, justified the bombing of civilians. In the Pacific, air operations closely followed Europe’s lead, so by 1945 precision bombing in Japan was for the most part replaced by area bombing tactics also, resulting in the systematic targeting of civilians in both theaters.

During the war, the public rhetoric that supported the myth of precision bombing was carefully and aggressively controlled, particularly in response to the firebombing of Dresden, when Associated Press correspondent Howard Cowan described the attack as part of a new Allied policy of “terror-bombing” (Biddle 106). A flurry of queries arose at the cabinet and senior staff level, from men who knew how significantly this accusation conflicted with the American “gospel” of precision bombing. Military public relations offices began a campaign to “contain and manage” the controversy, an effort so successful that it “remained to a great extent hidden from the American public,” as the pro-airpower press “rarely challenged the official interpretation of events” (Biddle 112). Historian Tami Davis Biddle observes that the vagueness of the language used in bombing directives often allowed the planners and politicians to salve their consciences while avoiding consideration of the actual human costs of the strikes. She concludes that

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19 In the United States’ defense, Grayling notes that when the U.S. finally gained air superiority, the 8th and 15th Air Forces returned to precision bombing tactics (142).
“Americans had, collectively, been engaged in a kind of cognitive self-defence that linked intention and outcome in sometimes problematical ways” (111). Similarly, Michael S. Sherry reads a cold deliberation in America’s bombing rhetoric, as both civilian and military leaders described the firebombing of Japan not in terms of killing civilians, but of “dehousing industrial workers” (232). They used the language of cost-benefit analysis to justify the strikes, emphasizing the number of industrial man-hours lost rather than the number of people killed. This discursive obfuscation thus re-framed the firebombing as a virtuous attack on industry, so that “Americans appeared to themselves to practice restraint” (Sherry 254). It is this type of rhetorical deception, an insistence on the precision of American bombing despite evidence to the contrary, that compels Dickey and Vonnegut to challenge the prevailing American perception by witnessing to, and thus exposing, the extreme practice of firebombing.

James Dickey’s “The Firebombing”

James Dickey, a prolific and respected poet, professor, essayist, and literary critic, began to establish himself as a major American poet with his first published collection in 1960. He won the National Book Award for *Buckdancer’s Choice* in 1966, and served as poetry consultant for the Library of Congress a few years later. Labeled “a masterpiece” by Joyce Carol Oates (79), his poem “The Firebombing,” which opened *Buckdancer’s Choice*, presents a pilot persona struggling to accept his role in the firebombing of a Japanese town during World War II. To be more precise, in the 279-line poem Dickey creates what literary critic Ross Bennett describes as “dual protagonists” (431), a young pilot in his World War II cockpit over the Pacific, and the same man twenty years later,
overweight, dieting, and living in American suburbia. The poem juxtaposes the young pilot’s mission with the older pilot’s speculation on individual and state responsibility inherent in airpower employment. The setting shifts rapidly in both space and time, from the pilot’s suburban pantry to the combat cockpit and back to the manicured lawns of his all-American neighborhood. Separations fade, as everyday objects like flashlights assume additional significance as anti-aircraft searchlights. Crafting a nightmare world interspersed with intense beauty, entangled with guilt and patriotism, Dickey develops a stunning examination of the dynamics of firebombing.

Like the texts of Malraux and Dahl, Dickey’s writing was informed by his personal experiences as an aviator. However, Dickey’s work, especially in this poem, was complicated by his own deceptive self-fashioning, in which he created a public myth about his combat experiences by falsely claiming he was a bomber pilot with 100 combat missions. This myth soon became a part of the critical record; Oates, for example, in her 1984 article, repeats this misinformation about Dickey. Only recently, biographer Henry Hart, in James Dickey: the World as a Lie (2000), exposed Dickey’s deception, showing that he was not a pilot but a radar observer, and flew not bombers but the P-61 night fighter (109). Hart also notes that Dickey’s personal experience of firebombing was minimal; he did not fly in any of the major firebombing missions over Japan (Hart 109). Reading the poem in light of Dickey’s actual flying history, then, the imaginative construction of the text takes on a greater significance, moving the poem well beyond the

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20 Critic Beckie Flannagan modifies Bennett’s appraisal to identify multiple personas in the poem, but I prefer Bennett’s analysis as providing a more accurate reading of the pilot persona.

21 While he did participate in two P-61 demonstration missions, dropping “eight one-thousand-pound ‘demos’, which were firebombs” on the port city of Fuchu on August 10th, 1945, they caused minimal damage, burning small swaths rather than destroying cities (Hart 110). Located as it was, after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6th and Nagasaki on August 9th, Dickey’s mission on the 10th would have seemed quite insignificant at the time. Hart reports, however, that on this flight Dickey saw the smoke rising from Nagasaki (107), a sight that must have made an impact on the poet.
personal to a larger exploration of complicity and the dirtiness of airpower.

The poem's critical reception has undergone a profound shift since its publication. Vietnam-era critics, particularly anti-war poet Robert Bly, denounced Dickey's focus on power, believing he supported and promoted war (Suarez 89). (Dickey's own self-promotion at the time no doubt contributed to this misreading.) However, in a brilliant and seminal 1980 analysis, critic Ross Bennett challenged Bly's earlier condemnation, arguing that Dickey "is responsible and moral," challenging the seductiveness of airpower (438). In a post-9-11 reading, Jeffrey C. Alfier suggests that Dickey's exposure of "twentieth-century airpower theories that legitimized civilian populations as military targets" (para 2) is still chillingly relevant today.

Although my reading of the poem is informed by the work of Bennett and Alfier, I expand their readings by looking more closely at the way Dickey uses the trope of the home to expose firebombing's complexity to "unbombed America." As Daniel Swift aptly notes, "the poetry of air bombing requires a particular imaginative sympathy absent from other war poetry, and it must play between telling and deferring the tale: between the poet who survived and the others who died that night" (31). Bombing poetry therefore requires "a split reckoning, a thinking in two places" (Swift 38). Laurie Goldensohn echoes this notion, explaining that Dickey's "pilot and victim live in parallel nontouching universes" that achieve unity "only in retrospect" (157). Dickey employs this conventional split format with a dual presentation of both the burning city and the pilot in the aircraft above, to address the issues of power, perception, and guilt associated with bombing. However, Dickey moves beyond this duality to add a third dimension, a trope of the home, in which he juxtaposes the aging pilot's American home with the
homes of the Japanese victims. With this trope, he exposes the twentieth century strategy of targeting civilians, questions the military necessity of firebombing, and invites American readers to imagine their homes in flames, as the targets of strategic bombing they had become in the post-war years.

Their Homes and Our Homes

Dickey’s employment of this trope reflects the new reality of the front lines created by aerial warfare, both as conceived during the war and later, during post-war analyses. As the war in the Pacific raged, Col. Cecil Combs, Deputy Chief of Staff of the B-29 strike force, defended morale bombing, noting: “it is believed that no other form of attack can bring home so clearly to the Japanese people the power of the Air Forces to destroy Japan as an industrial nation” (Emphasis added. Qtd in Kerr 229). Although his statement ends with a focus on industry, its opening images of home and people show how the front lines have expanded to include them both. Airpower theorist B.H. Liddell Hart (who had advocated aggressively for airpower in the interwar years), by 1947 argued that area bombing, by targeting civilians, had initiated a descent into barbarism that posed frightening implications for the future: “The homes of all people are glass houses now that it has come to a matter of throwing atomic bombs” (RIW ix). More recently, critic Sarah Cole observes that twentieth century total war involved the transgression of boundaries, where home became a place of war, not an escape from it. Similarly, Joanna Bourke observes that in twentieth-century warfare “unarmed women and children have become the target of choice” (20), and explains that, because of this transformation, “modern warfare is inseparable from barbarism. The war entered, uninvited, into people’s homes and took up residence” (21). This powerful trope of the
home, then, so long associated with safety and security, has, through the practice of area bombing, been perverted, newly signifying threat and insecurity.

Dickey appropriates this transformation by framing his poem with the trope of the home, used in opening and closing images, and as a continuing theme throughout the poem. As the poem opens, Dickey immediately challenges the reader to focus on the home and family:

Homeowners unite.

All families lie together, though some are burned alive.

The others try to feel

For them. Some can, it is often said.

Starve and take off

Twenty years in the suburbs, and the palm trees

willingly leap

Into the flashlights (lines 1-8).

The first line suggests an exhortation, but is better read as a simple declaration in which Dickey conflates all homeowners, both the dead of Beppu and the pilot / suburban homeowner, collapsing time and place and forcing the dead Japanese into middle-class suburban America. Dual meanings of the word “lie”—sharing a bed, uttering a falsehood—create tension between a sense of unity and, as Suarez notes, an element of

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Dickey uses white space frequently to interrupt lines of the poem. In my use of quotations, I try to accurately reconstruct Dickey’s use of space.
self-deception. The poet thus suggests that our mutual self-deception about airpower creates a unity in which all families might be burned alive. The words “starve” and “take off” in line five also carry double meanings, suggesting both the diet challenging the older pilot and the starving of reciprocating engines and the take off of bombers. The flashlights promise illumination, the ability to clarify connections between these homeowners; they also bridge the gap between suburbs and cockpit, and suggest the way city searchlights illuminate attacking aircraft. With this powerful opening, Dickey suggests a unity of homeowners, but as the poem unfolds we realize this unity comes not from mutual understanding or empathy, but from the dubious distinction of being mutually targeted.

Dickey illustrates this new reality as his speaker relives the airstrike, looking down from the cockpit onto the small city of 5,000 sleeping people: “I did not think of my house/ But think of my house now” (emphasis added 76-77). For the young pilot, the mission is all that matters. But for the old pilot recalling his actions, maturity and time bring a clearer vision of this interconnected world, and the vulnerability of civilians everywhere. Later, Dickey presents a horrifying image of his bombing mission, when the pilot, after dropping 300-pound tanks of napalm on the city below, imagines that “the bomb finds a home/ and clings to it like a child,” (emphasis added 222). This image is startling because this is what napalm does; it clings to its targets to burn them more

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23 Ernest Suarez correctly suggests the speaker uses the American suburbs to try to comprehend the impact of his actions; “he imagines his world being firebombed” (emphasis original 93), but I argue that Dickey goes one step further, urging the reader to imagine her world being firebombed.

24 Diederik Oostdijk (Among the Nightmare Fighters) suggests an interesting way to think about the body in Dickey’s work. Oostdijk notes Dickey’s obsession with the ideal male body, and his body building during WWII, which had a “talismanic” effect on Dickey’s own notions of survival during the war. The pilot protagonist in this poem is 20 pounds overweight and approaching middle-age. If we accept Oostdijk’s premise, then the pilot’s loss of the ideal male body also means the loss of protection it yields, allowing vulnerabilities and uncertainties to surface.
effectively. Dickey's conflation of home and child, though, also serves to highlight the
costs of total war and call into question any concept of military necessity that might be
attached to this mission.

Strategic bombing of Japan during the Second World War shifted rapidly from
precision to area bombing, yet the belief that this move was a military necessity was
seldom questioned. The USAAF's systematic bombing of Japan began in 1944, targeting
steel production, aircraft plants, and urban industrial areas. Bombing of the latter often
included residential housing in cities, due to the belief that much war production occurred
in cottage industries (Kerr 72). Although Air Force leaders there initially practiced high-
altitude precision bombing, they turned to area bombing in the spring of 1945 when
precision bombing produced disappointing results; these new tactics created the
infamous conflagration in Tokyo which killed 83,000 people in one night. By mid June,
when U.S. bombers had destroyed Japan's six major cities, targeting expanded to several
smaller cities, chosen because they were "congested and 'burnable'" (with some war
industry or transportation assets) (Kerr 259). Systematic destruction of Japanese cities
continued until the country surrendered in mid August, 1945.

Many people, both immediately after the war and today, have argued that the
bombing of Japan was crucial to the U.S. victory. In his 1949 memoir, General Henry
"Hap" Arnold, Commander-in-Chief, USAAF, argues that the use of the atomic bomb
was not the decisive element in achieving victory, instead crediting the entire Pacific
bombing campaign. Kerr reaches a similar conclusion in 1991, concluding that American firebombing “was a major factor” in establishing peace, “forestalling an invasion of Japan scheduled for November 1945 and saving countless human lives” (278). The ongoing discourse of the Japanese firebombing, therefore, stresses military justification and repeats the idea that airpower saves lives.

It is significant then, in light of this discourse, that Dickey chooses a target city which can in no way be seen to have military value. In the poem, the pilot is conducting “an ‘anti-morale’ raid” against a small resort town, Beppu, a healing place known for its medicinal waters, population 5,000. Through this choice, Dickey refocuses the discussion of necessity not on the practice of area bombing, which suggests some military value, but on the more controversial idea of morale bombing, which targets the entire population. Dickey’s choice to depict a tiny, purely civilian target, not a large, semi-industrialized city such as Tokyo is crucial, because it severs any connection to military necessity that might exonerate the pilot. By removing this excuse for bombing civilians, the poet forces a confrontation with the essential practice of burning homes and civilians, without the rhetorical slippage induced by the idea of military necessity. Although this tactic might seem overly simplistic on the part of the poet, its brutal clarity effectively indicts “the esteem such bombing held in the American military and public eye” (Alfier para 3), and challenges the healing/ killing paradox associated with airpower discourse. Moreover, through the trope of the home, he redirects our gaze away from the industrialized city to the residential community, thus increasing the tension between morality and duty that the pilot faces.

Arnold notes: “We had hit some 60 Japanese cities with our regular H.E.[high explosive] and incendiary bombs, and as a result of our raids, about 241,000 people had been killed, 313,000 wounded, and about 2,333,000 homes destroyed” (598).
Power, Perception and Guilt

While the trope of the home provides a valuable third dimension in Dickey’s poem, and one which I will return to shortly, Dickey also employs the traditional split reckoning that Swift identifies in bombing poetry to show not only the bombed civilians but also the costs of area bombing for the aircrews who implemented it. As Dickey’s older pilot recalls his bombing mission from the safety of his own suburban home, he confronts the damning issues of power, perception, and guilt; through this exploration, Dickey advocates for a new clarity of vision for his American readers. In a 1973 interview, Dickey explains the complexity of employing airpower: “the danger facing pilots...is in the feeling of power it gives them to do these things and not be held accountable for the carnage and the terror and the bloodshed and mutilation. To not even see it” (Playboy 92). Here Dickey echoes Roald Dahl in his concern with the aircrew’s power over life and death, but whereas Dahl was primarily concerned with exercising this power over individuals, Dickey focuses on the extension of this power to include entire populations. As the older pilot remembers his strike mission, he initially dissociates himself from the act of killing by describing himself in the third person, seeing “some technical-minded stranger with my hands” (line 17) at the controls of the aircraft. This splits Dickey’s subject even further, creating not only a younger and older version of the pilot, but also an othered version which allows the pilot to avoid accountability for his actions. A few lines later, he again says “the one who is here” (33) over Japan rather than “I”. The syntactical awkwardness of this description mirrors the extremes of self-deception the speaker embraces as he examines his complicity with this act. But the memory of the mission is consuming, and so debilitating that the pilot does not know...
everyday things, like “where the screwdriver is where the children/ get off the bus” (86-87). He thus lacks power in everyday life, yet is overwhelmed by the remembered power of firebombing. Even twenty years later, the speaker says: “I still have charge—secret charge—of the fire developed to cling to everything” (98-99). The realization of power in this passage, signaled by the move from third to first person, repairs the fragmented subject and empowers the pilot to keep looking back. Doing so, the pilot recognizes the complexity of the bombing dynamic, characterized by “detachment/the honored aesthetic evil/ the greatest sense of power in one’s life” (189-191). The speaker, although hampered by detachment from his victims, implicitly understands that the bombing of civilians is evil, yet cannot understand why it is honored. By compressing the ideas of honor and power with evil, Dickey complicates the speaker’s dilemma.

Dickey further complicates the bombing dynamic by showing the pilot’s inability to see what he has done, as we saw earlier with Malraux and Dahl. This emphasis on seeing, and especially the desire to see clearly, functions as a major theme in the poem, as Dickey contrasts what is seen and what should be seen. This theme serves not only to provide insight into the pilot’s struggle with accountability, but also to challenge how the “unbombed” American public sees strategic bombing. In the opening scenes, a flashlight, a cockpit light bulb, and the moon promise to provide clarity and vision, but this clarity is obscured by clouds and the aircraft’s altitude. Still, the belief that altitude provides clarity is seductive; Dickey’s pilot wants to be able to see and read the city below him. As the narrative transitions from the cockpit back to the pilot’s suburban neighborhood, the speaker mourns the fact that after twenty years, he is “still unable/ To get down there or see/ What really happened” (253-255). His sense of human rights compels him to see
what he knows he should see; a massacre of civilians from the air, but the detachment that is characteristic of airpower prevents him from doing so.

General Curtis E. LeMay, architect of the Tokyo firebombing, articulates the complexity of the bombing aircrew’s position: "You drop a load of bombs, and if you are cursed with any imagination at all, you have at least one quick horrid glimpse... [of a child suffering or burning]. Then you have to turn away from the picture if you intend to retain your sanity. And also if you intend to keep doing the work your nation expects of you" (Qtd. in Kerr 154). In LeMay’s view, it is the job of the aviator to look away, so that he can continue to function. But as we have seen with Malraux, Dahl, and now Dickey, it is the job of the literary aviator to look squarely at the ground below, to allow the imagination to fully realize the horrors the aircrews have perpetrated, and to convey this vision to their readers.

Trying to see what lies below, Dickey emphasizes both the hot fire of power and the cold detachment of death from above. From a glimpse into the burning houses of Beppu, where “the low tables/ catch fire from the floor mats, / blaze up in gas around their heads” (171-173) the poet propels the reader mid-verse to the aircraft above, where “one is cool and enthralled in the cockpit/ Turned blue by the power of beauty...Deep in aesthetic contemplation/ seeing the ponds catch fire” (177-181). As Malraux showed earlier, what the pilot’s eyes see from the bomber is an aesthetic beauty created of light and color and the moonlight shining on the clouds. Here Dickey points out the extreme gulf between bombed and bomber, and the detachment the flyer experiences, both naturally, from the effects of altitude, and from that which he constructs himself to avoid seeing. In an attempt to bridge this gulf, Dickey’s older pilot forces himself to imagine
the terror on the ground. As he visualizes the bombs exploding and children dying in flames, he understands “that is what should have got in/ To my eye” (168-169). The speaker knows that he should have seen more than he did see, and his attempt to repair this omission leads to his contemplation of responsibility and guilt.

Although the bomber crews may not actually see what is happening below them, most can imagine the effects of their bombs, leading Dickey to examine guilt and responsibility, issues that many aviators faced after the war. In an interview, Dickey explains that, as an aircrew member, “you think of the exercise of authority via the machine that your own government has put at your disposal to do exactly what you did with it” (“Interview” 123). Here Dickey exposes the complex dynamic between state authority and individual responsibility which resides in all military action, but which is particularly thorny for the bomber crews because of their (often) civilian targets. Although the state sanction of the bombing mission should alleviate any personal guilt felt by the crews, in reality, their reaction to their mission was often conflicted. For example, in a 1992 television documentary analyzed by Erwin Warkentin, World War II bomber crews expressed feelings of guilt about the firebombing mission. Particularly, crews were bothered not only by seeing the destruction in progress, but by “the types of bombs they knew they were carrying… everyone knew what incendiaries did. They set wooden houses on fire and did very little to the concrete and steel factories” (Warkentin 262). Warkentin points out that crews were instructed not to look at the burning cities on night missions in order to protect their night vision (which is a valid point); however, for some crews these instructions also provided psychological protection from their actions. The author concludes, “the problem…really only begins to take root after one realizes
that, as an individual, one should perhaps feel remorse for what has happened” (262). This example illustrates the paradox Dickey’s pilot faces, as he understands the horror of what he has done, and thinks he should feel remorse, but is not quite able to do so.

As he relives the firebombing, Dickey’s speaker tells himself: “my hat should crawl on my head/ In streetcars, thinking of it/ The fat on my body should pale” (148-150). And yet, his hat remains firmly in place, and the fat is only affected by dieting; he is torn between what he thinks he should feel and what he does feel. Logic tells the pilot he acted as an instrument of state power, but conscience suggests a sense of complicity with evil that “must be shed in bars, or by whatever/ means...” as he seeks a reprieve from guilt (192). Near the end of the poem, Dickey uses the repeated phrases “letting go, letting go” (208) and “leave it, leave it clinging and crying” (215) to fuse the mechanical act of the bombs leaving the airplane with the desire of the pilot to leave the horrors behind him.

Critics differ about the pilot’s assumption of guilt. Joyce Carol Oates suggests the persona does not feel guilt because he lacks the ability to form “a normal human response” to the bombing; he “has acted as a machine inside a machine” (81). Her reading suggests the disappearance of the aviator into the machine that I discussed earlier, and in doing so fails to accommodate the pilot’s wish to know, to see, what he has done: a robot would not care. On the other hand, Harvey Shapiro, editor of Poets of World War II, suggests that Dickey “grabs [guilt] for himself and revels in [it]...” (xxv). The notion of “reveling” in the guilt, as Shapiro suggests, only makes sense when we believe Dickey’s personal myth and read the poem as expiation, rather than exploration. Reading Dickey’s persona, like Roald Dahl’s pilot in “Someone Like You,” as a constructed
character, rather than an extension of poet/author, provides a more nuanced insight into the guilt.

For Dickey’s persona, the horrors he confronts are intimately connected with citizenship and duty to country. After the pilot releases the bombs he banks the plane up and away:

To cloud streaming from the night engines
Flags pennons curved silks
Of air myself streaming also
My body covered
With flags, the air of flags
Between the engines. (225-230)

Flying through tattered clouds creates this strobe effect of flags in the air around the plane and in the shadows on the pilot. While Ross Bennett describes this scene as one of burial and rebirth, alluding to the iconic flag-draped coffin of the war dead, the flag imagery seems more clearly linked to Dickey’s exploration of duty and country. Dickey uses this image of the pilot being wrapped (or wrapping himself) in the flag to show the complexity of killing in the name of the state. The flag symbolizes the state; by following the brutality of the airstrike with this scene, Dickey complicates the culpability of the pilot. The state orders the aircrews to burn civilians alive; by exposing this horror, Dickey shows the long-term impact these actions have on the aircrews, challenging our perception of airpower’s cleanness.

A Return to the Home

After examining the pilot’s struggle with the power, perception, and guilt
associated with firebombing, Dickey returns once more to the trope of the home, recalling his opening image of homeowners and the possibility of unity. Dickey creates the most powerful image of home near the end of the poem, when the speaker envisions inviting the victims into his house like neighbors, but realizes the futility of this gesture:

But it may be that I could not,

If I tried, say to any

Who lived there deep in my flames: say, in cold

Grinning sweat, as to another

Of these homeowners who are always curving

Near me down the different-grassed street: say

As though to the neighbor

I borrowed the hedge-clippers from

On the darker-grassed side of the two,

Come in, my house is yours, come in

If you can, if you

Can pass this unfired door. It is that I can imagine

At the threshold nothing…

…nothing I haven’t lived with

For twenty years, still nothing not as

American as I am, and proud of it.

Absolution? Sentence? No matter;

The thing itself is in that. (256-279)

This passage follows immediately after the pilot’s lament that he cannot get down to
Beppu to see the results of his actions, so it can be read as a failure of vision in which the pilot cannot see the dead of Beppu as neighbors. Perhaps he cannot do so because he is blinded by the discourse of airpower, which reduced the residents of Beppu to the status of targets rather than humans. However, by reading this passage as the closing frame of the trope of home, which also opened the poem, a greater significance emerges. By inviting the dead homeowners of Beppu into American suburbia, Dickey unites pilot and victim not as neighbors but as targets. While the speaker's sight might fail him, his imagination does not, as shown by Dickey's positive construction "I can imagine...nothing." Nothing is what he left in Beppu, after the firebombing, and nothing is all that would be left beyond his suburban American threshold if the Cold War doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction should be realized. By conflating their homes with our homes, Dickey makes all civilians residents of Beppu.

Significantly, Dickey immediately follows this existential image of nothingness with a reminder of the speaker's "American-ness", thus offering the pilot absolution by blaming his actions on the state exercise of power while suggesting that his nationality is a sentence, both judgment and punishment. In doing so, Dickey invites his readers to question their own complicity in the practice of firebombing. He refuses to let the readers blame the aircrews for the destruction, by showing that the crews are not uncaring robots, but humans who want to know what they have done, and who suffer for their actions. He wants his readers to understand the price of the airpower policies the United States supports, and know the realities of what the nation has done. For American readers who have bought into the myth of precision bombing, he presents a vivid picture of morale bombing in all its horror and complexity, challenging them to look at what has been done
in the past and what might be done in the future.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

The city of Dresden was attacked by hundreds of British and American bombers three times over a fourteen-hour period on the night of 13-14 February, 1945. The clear weather, lack of air defenses, and low altitude approach permitted an accurate strike on the bomber's target, the Aldstadt section of the city, creating a firestorm in which 25,000-40,000 people died. The city had no bunkers, so initially civilians took refuge in cellars. As the firestorm developed, these spaces became unlivable; many of the victims died not from the fire but from asphyxiation. An elderly female survivor of the airstrike describes the experience: “No power could stop them. On they came, wave after wave. There was no way we could surrender; no way to tell them we couldn’t stand it anymore” (Vonnegut “Wailing” 38). In this woman's testimony, we see the essential helplessness of civilians in the face of airpower: unseen, unheard, and unable to stop the destruction. As Friedrich points out, the laws of war protected soldiers, (who could be killed only as long as bearing arms), but civilians had no such legal protection: “they were neither legal entities nor individuals; they were a group defined by virtue of their residence in a target area” (Friedrich 380). Hugo Slim concurs, explaining that among the reasons that

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28 The actual number of dead has been difficult to determine, due to the severe destruction and the amount of refugees in the city of Dresden when it was bombed. Additionally, soon after the bombing of Dresden, the city was occupied by Soviet troops and became a part of East Germany. Frederick Taylor points out that between the destruction of Dresden in 1945 and the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, there was little scholarship. Knowledge of the firestorm was made popular either through literature or propaganda, and only recently has the scholarship opened up, with new access to archives and eyewitnesses. In the 1950s, reports of deaths ranged from 35,000-400,000. Vonnegut uses the figure of 135,000 dead (239), the number used by David Irving, whose book Vonnegut refers to in the novel. Christopher Koontz of The Air Force Historical Studies Office reports that “in 2008, an independent historical commission formed by the city of Dresden concluded that approximately 25,000 lost their lives in the attack.” I use the estimate provided by Taylor, who cites cemetery documents found in 1993 that tally just over 23,000 burials. Allowing for errors in accounting, Taylor settles on figures between 25,000-40,000 (448).

29 See Sven Lindqvist for a thorough discussion of the international legal attempts to protect civilians and the universal disregard for these laws.
civilians are killed is "intense collective thinking that resists seeing the individual within
the enemy group" (6). This is the world Kurt Vonnegut is writing about in
*Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut, a U.S. soldier being held prisoner in Dresden at the time
of the attack, survived the bombing and afterward was forced to help with the removal of
corpses. The novel's protagonist, like Vonnegut, is a survivor of the firestorm. By telling
his story, the author personalizes this collective group of victims, bearing witness so that
at least one member of this group is seen and heard.

In the novel, Vonnegut tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, an optometrist in the
1960s, trying to make a life for himself despite the damage he suffered in World War
Two. Pilgrim is outwardly living the American Dream--married with two children, well-
off with a thriving business--but his war experiences constantly intrude. Through a
narrative construction that merges past, present, and future, Pilgrim's war story unfolds
alongside his current life and visions of his future death. The young soldier we meet
confounds any expectations of heroism: Pilgrim is a chaplain's assistant, unarmed, never
issued boots or a helmet; his only combat experience is getting lost on the battlefield,
being captured, and taken prisoner. When he arrives in Dresden as part of a POW work
detail, he is clownish, clad in silver boots, a blue curtain worn as a toga, and a fur coat
carried like a muff. Sheltered in the depths of the slaughterhouse, he, his fellow
prisoners, and four German guards survive the firebombing of Dresden. Pilgrim
represses both the initial shock of destruction he witnesses and the later horrors of corpse
recovery operations, and they become a big secret in his life. As an avid reader of
science fiction after the war, he manages to avoid these painful memories by believing
he's been abducted by aliens, where he becomes a zoo exhibit on the planet
Trafalmadore. He attempts to live as the Trafalmadorians do, refusing to look at unpleasant moments and focusing only on the pleasant ones, but his memories of Dresden will not be silenced. When triggered, they suddenly burst out, and Pilgrim is forced to remember and tell his story.

The autobiographical basis of the novel is well known. Biographer Charles J. Shields, in *And So It Goes, Kurt Vonnegut: A Life*, provides an excellent discussion of the author’s own experiences as a POW and a survivor of Dresden, and about his difficulties writing about these experiences. Gregory D. Sumner, in *Unstuck in Time: A Journey through Kurt Vonnegut's Life and Novels*, notes that Vonnegut was “driven to find a way to convey the stories he had witnessed” (2) in Dresden. Much criticism of the novel, particularly since the 1980 addition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to the DSM, has focused on Vonnegut’s use of the novel, and Billy Pilgrim, to work out his own trauma associated with the firebombing. Susanne Vees-Gulani presents a convincing argument that Billy Pilgrim suffers from PTSD, as does the narrator, “a fictionalized version of Vonnegut himself” (180). Stacey Peebles sees the novel as pushing back against collective narratives to make a space for individual trauma, allowing the voice of the wound, as Cathy Caruth describes it, to be heard. The narrative structure of the novel, with its rapid shifts in time and place and frequent flashbacks, supports these readings, pointing out Vonnegut’s attempt to work out the trauma of the firebombing.

The novel, however, is not merely a tool for private healing. There is a very public element of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as well. Alberto Cacicedo argues that Billy Pilgrim needs to remember trauma in order to begin to take a public role and act
ethically. Todd F. Davis describes Vonnegut as a postmodern humanist, who wrote “to enact change,” and specifically “to establish patterns for humanity that will lead to the construction of better realities” (5). Whether he was successful or not in accomplishing change is a matter of debate, but what is certain is the cultural impact this novel had on the public perception of the Dresden firebombing. In a brilliant analysis of this impact, Ann Rigney explains that the novel, “was arguably the catalyst that helped turn ‘Dresden’ into a site of American memory evoking large-scale and morally questionable destruction on the part of the Allied forces” (23). It is this public element that I will examine here.

Vonnegut’s choice of post-war careers for his protagonist is significant. Pilgrim, an optometrist, is busy “prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls” (36). Like his character, I argue, Vonnegut is trying to make Americans see what they have not seen clearly before, namely, the extremes of airpower as used in World War II, and the potential for abuse in current and future wars. The author’s initial compulsion to expose the violence of Dresden was prompted by the lack of public knowledge about the event, Sumner notes. After he returned home from Europe in 1945, Vonnegut actually went back through old newspapers looking for information about the attack, but found very little (Sumner 18). As the narrator explains in the first chapter of the novel, “it wasn’t a famous air raid back then in America....There hadn’t been much publicity” (12). As we saw earlier, much of this lack of public knowledge was due to the American effort to manage the response to the Dresden airstrike, as the firebombing conflicted with the preferred narrative of precision bombing. This divergence between the official discourse

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30 James Lundquist also recognizes the importance of Pilgrim’s profession, and the significance of this quote. However, he proposes that Pilgrim is trying to make Earthlings see the fourth dimension more clearly, as Trafalmadorians see it (82). Lundquist was writing before the application of PTSD diagnoses to the novel, and therefore he interprets the novel quite differently than I do.
of precision bombing and the reality of morale bombing in Dresden drives Vonnegut’s
need to write.

Two additional events influenced Vonnegut’s approach to the novel. The 1963
release of David Irving’s popular book *The Destruction of Dresden,*31 along with his own
trip back to Dresden in 1967, sparked a revelation, as Vonnegut realized he did not have
to show the actual bombing; the strike itself was not his story (Shields 231). Instead, he
was able to create a novel concerned more broadly with power relations and the “misuse
of technology” (Shields 246) associated with strategic bombing.

My reading of the novel explores three responses to firebombing: Billy Pilgrim’s,
the narrator’s, and Kurt Vonnegut’s. I examine Pilgrim’s early response to bombing,
before he confronts his memories of Dresden, and oppose this to his later, more engaged,
response. I next look at the narrator’s stronger response, with an emphasis on exposing
and witnessing. Finally, I analyze the choices Vonnegut makes, as author, and how these
choices illustrate his powerful, but nuanced, reaction to the firebombing and his focus on
the future threat of airpower.

**Pilgrim Empowers the Powerless**

Throughout much of the novel, Billy Pilgrim is portrayed as powerless, unable to
control his life, especially his “spastic” time traveling. He is ineffectual as a warrior:
weak, clownish, a non-combatant. As a husband, he is uncommunicative with his wife,
unable to talk to her about the war. At work, his office contains an “owl,” actually his
optometer, designed for creating prescriptions. The owl promises wisdom and clarity of

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31 Although this book was recognized as historically valuable at the time of its publication,
Irving’s historical methods, objectivity, and credibility have since been questioned. His support for Hitler
and later denial of the Holocaust raise questions about his approach to Dresden. As mentioned in Note 28,
his statistics for the number of dead have since been proved inaccurate.

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vision, but provides none. Pilgrim cries unexpectedly. His refusal or inability to remember has damaged him emotionally.

As the novel unfolds, we learn about his experiences as a survivor of the firebombing of Dresden. Pilgrim realizes that he has memories he has been suppressing; “a great big secret somewhere inside” (221), and suddenly “he remembered it shimmeringly” (226): the firebombing. The barbershop quartet singing at a party reminds him of the four German soldiers who were guarding him and his fellow prisoners in the slaughterhouse during the attack. The open mouths of the singers mirror the mouths of the guards open in horror when they emerge from their shelter to find the city destroyed. Pilgrim remembers, “Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals” (227). After the bombing, Pilgrim, his fellow prisoners, and a handful of guards walk through the ruins of Dresden and he realizes that “absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead, regardless of what they were, and that anybody that moved in it represented a flaw in the design” (180). By surviving the airstrike, Pilgrim interrupts the biopolitical plan of the allied forces.

Despite this memory, his initial response to the discourse of airpower is to ignore it. Time traveling to 1967, he is introduced to the Vietnam-era military discourse of airpower, as presented at the Lion’s Club by a guest speaker, a Marine officer. The speaker seeks a decisive victory in Vietnam. He advocates an escalation of the air war: “he was in favor of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason” (76). One would expect Pilgrim, with his Dresden experience, to speak out against this proposal, but he does not. Surprisingly, Billy “was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous
things he himself had seen bombing do” (76). Instead, Pilgrim continues his lunch at the Lion’s Club, and chats politely with the Marine officer. Pilgrim’s response here is motivated by the popular prayer about serenity in his office, asking God to provide the wisdom to know what can and cannot be changed. The narrator here notes that Billy cannot change “the past, the present, and the future” (77), suggesting an acceptance of inevitability.32

However, his later response to airpower discourse shows a small, but determined effort on Pilgrim’s part to refuse this complacency and to make himself seen and heard, a change prompted by another traumatic experience. In the novel’s penultimate chapter, Pilgrim is hospitalized after surviving a plane crash. Vonnegut’s ironic use of a plane crash, although the crash is of a civilian airliner, not a military plane, is significant, because it opens a line of communication between the bombing victim and the Air Force. In the next bed is Bernard Copeland Rumfoord, a Harvard history professor, retired Brigadier General, and official Air Force Historian. Rumfoord is a larger-than-life figure: a senior officer, professor, prolific author, multimillionaire, competitive sailor. In comparison, Billy, who lies in an apparent coma, appears almost sub-human; Rumfoord expresses contempt for Billy’s vegetative state, and argues for euthanasia, as he no longer recognizes Billy as human at all. As Billy listens, Rumfoord discusses his latest book with his wife; in the book he feels compelled to revise previous Air Force history by including the destruction of Dresden. Rumfoord feels this pressure only because the American people have now heard about the firebombing (he refers to David Irving’s

32 Alberto Cacicedo summarizes the critical readings of Billy’s apparent acceptance of inevitability and rejects them, believing Billy learns to act ethically over the course of the novel. Much of my reading of Billy is loosely based on Cacicedo’s conclusion, but I differ from him by focusing narrowly on Billy’s response to airpower, whereas Cacicedo looks more broadly at ethics, seeing Billy as “a spiritual pilgrim who follows in the footsteps of Christ” (365).
book here), so the American actions can no longer be suppressed.

Billy, then, hearing Rumfoord’s discussion, interjects with the statement “I was there” (245), a statement demanding recognition not only of him but of all the inconvenient people who were on the ground when Dresden was firebombed. Rumfoord refuses to understand him, insisting that Pilgrim is suffering from a disease in which he repeats everything he hears. Actually, Pilgrim “was having an adventure very common among people without power in time of war: he was trying to prove to a willfully deaf and blind enemy that he was interesting to hear and see” (emphasis added 247). In this conversation, we see an uneven power dynamic, as Rumfoord, representing the official airpower discourse of World War Two, stifles the dissenting voice. Read alongside Rumfoord’s earlier devaluation of Pilgrim’s life, we see in this scene the dehumanization and dismissal of any life which is not seen or heard, and therefore not valued, mirroring the biopolitical justification of strategic airpower. Additionally, we see the American attempt to control the discourse of airpower by refusing to acknowledge the dirtiness of this event.

But this time, unlike in the discussion of Vietnam, Pilgrim does not give up. Later that night, he once again declares, “I was in Dresden when it was bombed” (247). This time, Rumfoord hears, but does not believe Pilgrim. The survivor continues witnessing, though, stating yet again, “I was there” (247). By morning, Pilgrim has made himself heard, as Rumfoord “was reluctantly becoming interested in Billy as a human being” (253). He listens as Pilgrim tells him stories of what he saw as a survivor. However, the stories he tells, of wounded horses and displaced persons, cannot even begin to convey the horrors that he saw. While Pilgrim does finally make himself seen
and heard, sadly, his story alone has little impact on the official discourse.

The Narrator Bears Witness

While Pilgrim succeeds in making himself heard, but does not create change, the narrator of the novel takes a much more aggressive stance against the discourse of airpower, and is more successful at making himself heard. For most of the novel, the narrator uses third-person omniscient point of view, with occasional intrusions, but in Chapters 1 and 10, he speaks more directly to the reader. In the first chapter, the semi-autobiographical narrator reveals the difficulties he experienced in writing the novel, and expresses relief that it is finally complete.\(^{33}\) He discusses the books and people that influenced his writing; significantly, the last major influence he discusses is the biblical story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Like Dresden, these cities were destroyed by fire from the sky, and the narrator expects the reader to make this connection (although it is not implicitly stated).\(^{34}\) The narrator explains the religious belief that “those were vile people in both cities, as is well known. The world was better off without them” (28). There were only a few survivors of the firestorm, and of them, only Lot’s wife looked back. According to the Bible, the Lord turned Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt in punishment for this forbidden act, but the narrator explains, “I love her for that, because it was so human” (28). The narrator then explains that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written by a pillar of salt, thus aligning himself with Lot’s wife.

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\(^{33}\) Some critics, such as Lundquist and Stacy Peebles, conflate the narrator with the author. Jerome Klinkowitz, too, proposes that Vonnegut is the speaker in Chapters 1 & 10, using “a style of public spokesmanship” (115) to address issues that Pilgrim cannot. While Klinkowitz makes a useful point about this public aspect, I find it more useful to separate author and narrator. In doing so, I follow the lead of Susanne Vees-Gulani, who views the narrator as a fictional creation which “allows Vonnegut a degree of distance from himself and his experiences” (182). I see the narrator as the speaker in the novel, while the author is the one who chooses what the narrator will say.

\(^{34}\) Edward A. Kopper, Jr. notes the military connection to this biblical story. The bombing of Hamburg in 1943, which created the first major firestorm, was code-named “Operation Gomorrah” (6).
With this courageous and defiant statement, the narrator directs our attention to the God-like power of destruction that is evident both in Sodom and Gomorrah and in Dresden. His assertion that the people of the first two cities were evil challenges us to question the evilness of the residents of Dresden, while simultaneously questioning the power of judgment. Even if we accept the Lord's judgment regarding Sodom and Gomorrah, the narrator instills doubt about the judgment of Dresden, accomplished not by a Supreme Being but by men. Finally, the narrator points out the subversiveness of his act of remembering, and writing about the burning of Dresden. Like Lot's wife, he insists on looking back, even though the forces of time and government discourage such actions. Moreover, unlike Billy Pilgrim, who struggles to be seen and heard, the narrator expects to be heard. At the beginning of the next chapter, and again halfway through the novel, he exhorts the readers to "Listen" (29/173). With this appeal, the narrator evokes the oral tradition of storytelling, and creates literary links to the witnessing of other disaster survivors, like Coleridge's ancient mariner or Melville's Ishmael.

If the reader has indeed, been "listening" carefully, she will note the transition from third person narrative back to first person at the beginning of Chapter 10, the last chapter of the novel. After opening with a litany of deaths which shocked the nation in the late 1960s—Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, soldiers in Vietnam—the narrator re-focuses our attention once more on the deaths which did not shock the nation, those in Dresden. Recalling a recent trip to that city, he remembers flying over East Germany, seeing the city lights below, and explains, "I imagined dropping bombs on those lights, those villages and cities and towns" (270). Here, the narrator reminds us that Dresden was not a natural disaster, or, like Sodom and Gomorrah, a divine judgment, but a
deliberate human-caused event, an apocalyptic destruction wrought by bombers dropping fire from the sky. Then, for the first time, the narrator shows the bombing’s aftermath, as Billy Pilgrim and his fellow prisoners are detailed to recover the city’s corpses. Here, the narrator intrudes forcefully, saying, “I was there. O’Hare [his old war buddy] was there” (271). Unwilling to leave the witnessing in the hands of Billy alone, the narrator echoes Pilgrim’s earlier statement, thus adding the weight of omniscience to this moment. For those readers who might confuse this account with science fiction, he is saying: It happened. I was there. Unlike Billy, who can tell Rumfoord only about wounded horses and homeless people, the narrator shows us the corpses, suffocated in basements, rotting and liquefying. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, we never know what Lot’s wife saw when she looked back at the cities. But by witnessing for Dresden’s dead, the narrator exposes airpower’s extremes, in a scene so vile that some of the prisoners die from the horror.

Controlling Authorial Ambiguity through Blended Genres

The impact that Billy and the narrator have on the public perception of Dresden is largely due to the choices that Vonnegut makes in his presentation of the city and the airstrike. He shows Dresden as an open city, effectively removing any question about military necessity from the discussion, and in doing so, uses the novel to create a new counter-narrative about the bombing. He also challenges military responsibility for the airstrike, embedding non-fiction public statements and pseudo science fiction in the novel to suggest a broader culpability for the attack. Through this blending of genres, he prompts an awareness of the constructedness of the bombing discourse and suggests a blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction that helps him address his own
ambiguities towards morale bombing.

Vonnegut chooses to present the city as an open, undefended city, and the airstrike as a massacre (24), although in the twenty-plus years since World War II there had been much debate over the military necessity of the attack. As Billy Pilgrim and his work detail leave the prison camp for Dresden, a British officer tells them Dresden is "a beautiful city," and explains they won't have to worry about being bombed, because "Dresden is an open city. It is undefended, and contains no war industries or troop concentrations of any importance" (186). By placing these words in the mouth of a British officer, most likely an airman, Vonnegut undercuts the argument that the bombing of Dresden was a military necessity, or that the British did not know that it was undefended. Vonnegut repeats this point two pages later, in a letter written by one of the American POWs telling his wife that Dresden "will never be bombed. It is an open city" (188). By repetition, Vonnegut induces the reader to absorb this statement as fact, and evaluate the bombing accordingly.

Most likely, Vonnegut based this statement on his reading of David Irving's book, in which Irving makes a strong argument against military necessity, and emphasizes that by February 1945 Dresden was "virtually an undefended city, although the Allied Bomber command might well plead ignorance of this" (76). The novelist's use of Irving's text, now seen as tainted, may raise questions about the reliability of the

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35 An open city is defined as "an undefended city; specifically a city declared to be unfortified and undefended and so, by international law, exempt from enemy attack" (OED). Under the terms of Article 25 of the 1907 Hague Convention IV, "the attack or bombardment, by whatever means, of towns, villages, dwellings, or buildings which are undefended is prohibited" (ICRC).

36 I make this assumption based on the fact that most of the British prisoners seem to be officers, and the boots used in the Cinderella skit are airman's boots painted silver (184).

37 Tami Davis Biddle, in "Wartime Reactions," explains that the motivation behind the bombing of Dresden was the Allied desire to assist the Russian advance. Although this military strategy was initially published along with accounts of the bombing, it has since been overshadowed by claims that the bombing was not a military necessity.
novel. However, as Ann Rigney rightly notes, Vonnegut turned to Irving solely in search of more detail about an event that he witnessed, but of which he was not an expert. Irving’s text was “not an unreasonable choice at the time for a non-specialist,” she explains, “given the paucity of other books on the subject and the considerable splash that Irving’s book had made in the media” (10). More importantly, as I am trying to show here, Vonnegut’s novel should be read as an artistic work, not a work of historiography; his inaccuracy of historical detail, as Rigney points out, pursues “goals that are not only epistemological, but aesthetic or moralistic” (6). Rather than simply appropriating Irving and other discourses, then, Vonnegut actually manipulates them as needed to create a desired effect.

Thus, while Irving gives the Allies the benefit of the doubt in the above passage, Vonnegut does not. He continues to build a portrait of innocent Dresden when he describes the city as “the loveliest city that most of the Americans had ever seen” and compares it to “a Sunday school picture of Heaven,” and the city of “Oz” (189). He notes that unlike other German cities, it had never been bombed, and describes its industry as “medicine and food-processing and the making of cigarettes” (190). Vonnegut here is helping to create what Frederick Taylor, in his 2004 book Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945, labels “the pervasive postwar myth,” (149) that Dresden was a city of art and commerce, with no military importance. Taylor devotes an entire chapter to documenting the war work which was done in Dresden, and even notes that the cigarette factory had been converted to manufacture bullets. Vonnegut’s portrayal of

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38 Taylor provides detailed accounts of the war work that was being done in many Dresden factories that were converted from their original civilian work. Factories made items such as field radios, steering elements for torpedoes, electrical fuses for aircraft, and parts for V-1 and V-2 rockets. The largest employer was Zeiss-Icon, which made cameras and optics used for aircraft (153). Also, Dresden was a
the city was so effective, Ann Rigney notes, that Taylor's book is not so much a response
to Irving's earlier book, but is 'a counter-narrative to the 'legend' formulated by
Vonnegut" (23). Ironically, then, as Vonnegut writes a novel to counter the national
myth of precision bombing, he creates his own myth of the bombing of Dresden. This
portrait of the city as innocent, then, exposes the dirtiness of the air war, undermines the
concept of military necessity, and illustrates Vonnegut's concern with the uneven power
dynamics at work in its destruction.

Vonnegut continues to challenge the dominant discourse by exposing the "official
U.S. Air Force history" being written by Rumfoord. The novelist appropriates three non-
fiction public statements and manipulates them himself to show the constructedness of
the bombing narrative. I find two of these passages particularly useful for my discussion:
President Harry Truman's speech of August 6, 1945 announcing the American atomic
bombing of Hiroshima, and the Introduction to the American printing of Irving's book
_The Destruction of Dresden_, by Ira C. Eaker, Lt. Gen, USAF (Ret.). By juxtaposing
these passages, Vonnegut shows two different constructions of the bombing narrative,
with Truman focusing on the type of targets attacked, and Eaker addressing the
justification of the bombing. By including these passages, Vonnegut focuses our
attention on the official American narrative and asks us to question its reliability.

39 I choose not to discuss the third passage, the original Foreword to Irving's book, by Air Marshal
Sir Robert Saundby (RAF), because it is more focused on the actions of the British and the RAF than of the
United States. Tellingly, Saundby excuses the authorities who approved the bombing of Dresden, saying
they "were neither wicked nor cruel, though it may well be that they were too remote from the harsh
realities of war to understand fully the appalling destructive power of air bombardment in the spring of
1945" (240).
These two passages are significant both for what Vonnegut includes and for what he leaves out. Vonnegut quotes the first several paragraphs of Truman's atomic bomb speech verbatim, leaving out only a few paragraphs detailing the scientific work involved in the building of the bomb. Truman's focus in these paragraphs is the destructive capability of the weapon, and a sense of retaliation for Pearl Harbor and Japanese aggression. Vonnegut ends with Truman's threat that with this new weapon “we shall destroy their docks, their factories, and their communications. Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan's power to make war. It was to spare—” (238).

Why does Vonnegut quote this passage? Why does he leave it incomplete? In part, he uses it to remind us that, as he believed, the destruction of Dresden was even worse than the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (12/244). (This belief, of course, was based on Irving's death toll of 135,000, figures which were since revised, in comparison with the 71,000 deaths of Hiroshima.) This passage also ties into the author's concern with the future use of nuclear weapons, discussed below. However, this passage is perhaps most significant because of its focus on the destruction of things—docks, factories, communications—rather than people. In this passage, Truman emphasizes the items typically targeted by precision bombing, and avoids mentioning the human targets of the ultimate morale bombing event, the use of the atomic bomb. Vonnegut, then, uses this passage to show how the official discourse hides the reality of morale bombing.

It is important to note, also, what Vonnegut elided from this speech. The author

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40 Ronald A. Carson reads Truman's passage as a celebration of "the marriage of science and technology," notes Vonnegut's ambiguity toward this marriage, and suggests he uses it to examine the morality of knowledge (193). While I agree in part with Carson's reading, I suggest that Vonnegut's use of the passage is better read as a critique of America's bombing discourse.
fails to include Truman's next few lines: "It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth..." (Truman). By deleting these lines—especially by refusing to include the suggestion of sparing lives—Vonnegut negates the healing half of the healing-killing paradox. Moreover, where Truman reverses the responsibility for the bombing onto the Japanese leadership, Vonnegut responds instead with his characteristic "and so on" (238), thus dismissing any attempt to deflect American responsibility for the bombing.

While the Truman passage provides a political context for strategic bombing, Eaker's text provides the military context. As mentioned above, the initial Associated Press report to American newspapers about the firebombing of Dresden suggested that, with this strike, military officials had implemented new policies of terror bombing. Eaker, then, is writing to deflect responsibility from military leaders, himself included, back to the politicians and the American public. Eaker's Introduction emphasizes a sense of quid pro quo in the bombing war, explaining that the Germans were launching V-1 and V-2 rockets on London at the time, killing civilians indiscriminately as well, and a sense that the attack on Dresden was a regretful but "necessary effort" (239) in the greater conduct of the war. Significantly, he also chastises those who wept for the deaths of enemy civilians but not for their own aircrews. While his concern for the troops seems laudatory, a closer look at this passage shows how it supports the healing-killing paradox by privileging the military of one's own nation over the civilians of the enemy.

By including these non-fiction excerpts, then, Vonnegut uses the novel to expose
his readers to texts they might not otherwise encounter. In doing so, he shows how the official discourse is constructed, and how it supports the idea of precision bombing even while announcing the ultimate morale bombing event. He then manipulates this discourse himself to question our acceptance of the healing-killing paradox, and our willingness to believe that military necessity requires the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians.

For a survivor of the horrors of Dresden, Vonnegut shows remarkable personal restraint in not more openly attacking the aircrews that bombed the city. In an essay about Dresden published posthumously in 2008, Vonnegut writes, “it is with some regret that I here besmirch the nobility of our airmen, but boys, you killed an appalling lot of women and children” (Wailing 40). A sense of ambiguity towards the crews, which combines an awareness of their complicity with a refusal to directly indict them, is evident in Slaughterhouse-Five when Vonnegut obliquely critiques the crews by comparing them to robots. By doing so, he suggests that the brutality and detachment of their occupation dehumanizes aircrews, as we saw earlier in the journalist’s commentary in Malraux’s L’espoir. Vonnegut’s critique, however, is imbricated in multiple layers of fiction, as a story within a story, gaining complexity with each layer.

This complexity is developed in the narrator’s description of Pilgrim’s encounter with a science fiction novel. After Pilgrim is injured in the plane crash, he remembers meeting his favorite author, science fiction writer Kilgore Trout. Trout wrote a book in 1932 entitled The Gutless Wonder, remarkable, according to Vonnegut’s narrator, because “it predicted the widespread use of burning jellied gasoline on human beings” (214). Here, Vonnegut nods to the numerous futuristic texts published in the late-
nineteenth and early-twentieth century in which aircraft brought mass destruction to civilians. In Trout’s book, napalm was dropped from aircraft by robots, who had “no conscience, and no circuits which would allow them to imagine what was happening to the people on the ground” (214). The leading robot’s biggest flaw was not lack of conscience, but halitosis; after he eliminated his bad breath, “he was welcomed to the human race” (214).

In this brilliant short passage, Vonnegut takes his audience along on a temporal journey that spans four decades. By setting Trout’s novel in 1932, he draws attention to the discourse of airpower in the 1930s which led to the abuses of the 1940s. He points out the lack of horror shown by the public towards the burning of human beings, both before and during this practice. In fact, he suggests that the public was already anaesthetized to these horrors before the war, through their consumption of these futuristic tales. By disguising the story as science fiction, he creates irony when we realize that the fiction has already come true. He exposes the cultivated detachment necessary for aircrews to participate in such missions, the need for them to become like robots in order to do their jobs. Finally, he connects the past, present, and future by choosing napalm, widely used during the Vietnam War, rather than the thermite incendiaries used over Dresden. Throughout the passage, he invites us to question our own complicity in these ongoing horrors.

A 1990 speech Vonnegut delivered at the National Air and Space Museum as part of a lecture series entitled “The Legacy of Strategic Bombing” shows the complexity of

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41 One such example is Samuel W. Odell’s 1898 novel The Last War, or the Triumph of the English Tongue, in which total war is waged, and “1500 airships of the allies were armed with bombs of unparalleled explosive power and some sort of napalm” (Qtd in Lindqvist, p. 22). Lindqvist provides a detailed analysis of futuristic texts that describe racially-motivated mass bombins.
his view of bomber crews.\textsuperscript{42} In the speech, he explains, “I fully understand the bombardiers’ lack of discrimination as to who or what was underneath them,” noting their belief that those below them were contributing to the Nazi cause (\textit{Fates} 101).\textsuperscript{43} His delicacy here may be in deference to the venue, yet more likely he is uncertain where the blame lies, as we saw earlier in Dickey’s poem. He cannot blame the aircrews for actions they performed as representatives of the state.

I look closely at this speech because it gives us a fascinating glimpse into the ambiguity Vonnegut grapples with as he examines the U.S. history of strategic bombing. Despite his facility at dismantling state discourse of airpower in the novel, he seems unable to step outside of the discourse completely. He stays true to course when he attacks and labels as myth the concept of precision bombing, labeling it “our Government’s tall tales of delicate surgery performed by bombers equipped with Sperry and Norden bombsights” (\textit{Fates} 108). By exposing these ideas as myth, as he does here, or science fiction, in \textit{Slaughterhouse-Five}, Vonnegut moves beyond a focus on the crews to instead challenge the American discourse of precision bombing, still very much a part of airpower doctrine at the end of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{44} However, he contradicts this critique by describing the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as a military necessity, saving lives which otherwise would have been lost during an invasion. Here Vonnegut seems conflicted, essentially supporting the healing-killing paradox by valuing the lives of American soldiers more than those of enemy civilians. Yet in a chilling statement later in

\footnote{\textsuperscript{42} Vonnegut includes the texts of this speech in \textit{Fates Worse Than Death}.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{43} For additional insight into the aircrew impressions of the bombing of Dresden, including interviews with participants, see Frederick Taylor.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{44} Interestingly, Vonnegut flatters his audience, saying we’d never be so naïve as to believe these tales again, pointing out the post-war aircraft in the museum around them that were not precise, but instead designed “to kill everything…within an enormous radius” (108). Yet within a year of his speech, the United States and coalition aircraft in Desert Storm touted their precision targeting, and the public believed it.}
the speech, he excoriates the biopolitics of airpower, claiming that the United States’ frame of mind in 1990 “is such that civilians attacked from the air are as unworthy of being discussed as individual germs” (*Fates* 104). Vonnegut’s struggle with ambiguity is apparent in both the novel and the speech, as he is vehemently opposed to the unnecessary bombing of civilians and the dehumanization which fails to even see them, but he is still conflicted about the notion of military necessity, rejecting it outright for Dresden but not for Hiroshima. We see here how seductive the discourse of airpower can be, then, even for someone challenging it.

Their Homes/ Our Homes

As we saw with Dickey, Vonnegut’s manipulation of time creates a focus on the present and future, as informed by the past, at the heart of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Biographer Charles Shields notes that the novel “linked the World War II generation to the current one mired in the conflict of Southeast Asia” (249). Further expanding this idea, Ann Rigney explains that "the narrative … exhorts one to think about future and present wars and question their necessity" (emphasis original 21). Vonnegut is keenly aware of the war raging in Vietnam as he writes the novel, as well as the potential of the Cold War doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction to destroy countless cities around the world. He shares this concern in “Wailing Shall Be in All Streets,” saying he would have given his life “to save Dresden for the World’s generations to come. That is how everyone should feel about every city on Earth” (45). Expressing this vision in two key scenes in the novel, Vonnegut links the destruction of Dresden to the potential destruction of American cities and towns, showing how easily the discourse of airpower which led to the former might also lead to the latter.
The first scene, the death of Pilgrim's wife, Valencia, might be overlooked as part of the melodrama surrounding Pilgrim's own plane crash. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that this incident is clearly linked to the firebombing of Dresden. Hearing that her husband has been in a plane crash, panicked Valencia drives from her home to the hospital. Enroute, she causes a car accident due to her distracted, tearful driving. She is rear-ended, and the back end of her Cadillac is severely damaged. Unhurt, and bordering on hysterics, she continues the drive, leaving her exhaust system behind. Vonnegut describes her arrival at the hospital using a significant simile:

> When she arrived at the hospital, people rushed to the windows to see what all the noise was. The Cadillac, with both mufflers gone, sounded like a heavy bomber coming in on a wing and a prayer. Valencia turned off the engine but then she slumped against the steering wheel, and the horn brayed steadily. A doctor and a nurse ran out to find out what the trouble was. Poor Valencia was unconscious, overcome by carbon monoxide.... One hour later she was dead. So it goes. (234)

The language Vonnegut uses to describe this incident provides a direct connection to the bombing of Dresden. He compares the sound of the Cadillac not just to an aircraft, but to a heavy bomber, like the Lancasters and Flying Fortresses which bombed the city. While the bombers coming in "on a wing and a prayer" suggests battle damage, this cliché is tempered by the sound of the blaring horn which mimics the air raid sirens in the city. Most important, Valencia is not killed in the car accident. Had Vonnegut simply wanted to kill off Pilgrim’s wife, the accident itself would have been the easiest way to do so. However, his choice to use carbon monoxide poisoning after the crash links her death to
the deaths of thousands of civilians in Dresden, killed not from explosions, but from suffocation as the firestorm created a place hostile to life. Thus, without descending into didacticism, Vonnegut adroitly connects 1960s rural New England to 1945 Germany. He asks his readers to make the connection between their homes and our homes, and recognize their interchangeability.

Immediately after this scene, Vonnegut juxtaposes a conversation about Dresden with a picture of New York City which further illustrates this concern. Hospitalized after the plane crash, Billy Pilgrim discusses the firebombing with Rumfoord; the military historian argues that the destruction of Dresden was necessary, and then comments:

"It must have been hell on the ground."

"It was," said Billy Pilgrim.

"Pity the men who had to do it."

"I do."

"You must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground."

"It was all right," Billy said. "Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Trafalmadore." (253)

In this dialogue, Vonnegut rapidly focuses us first on the ground, to the victims of the firebombing, then to the air, to the bomber crews, showing the full complexity of the event. He then directs our attention back to the ground, to Pilgrim, who functions in a liminal space, as both bombing victim and member of the bombing nation. Pilgrim’s liminality here mirrors that of every citizen of a nuclear-armed nation during the Cold War: simultaneously both target and aggressor. Billy’s response does not excuse what was done at Dresden, but, as Cacicedo points out, reflects his excitement toward his new-
found mission to witness to the destruction.

Vonnegut follows this conversation almost immediately with an image of Pilgrim in a hotel room in New York, on the balcony overlooking the city. The author's word choice is key here: "beyond the parapet of the terrace was the air space over Forty-fourth Street. Billy now leaned over that parapet, looked down at all the people moving hither and thither and yon. They were jerky little scissors. They were a lot of fun" (emphasis added 199). Vonnegut's use of the words air space to describe the space over the city, with its close proximity to the dialogue about the men who had to drop the bombs, thus transposes Pilgrim with the bomber crews in the air space over Dresden. From this space above New York the people do not seem real--they are "little scissors," "fun," but not necessarily human. We see in this passage a similarity to Malraux's "little specks of khaki" and "panicked ants" discussed in Chapter 3; both authors emphasize the dehumanization of those on the ground. Here, Vonnegut brilliantly connects the men who bombed Dresden to Pilgrim, a survivor, while simultaneously transposing, through Pilgrim, the dead of Dresden with the living of New York. Through this transcendence of time and space, Vonnegut suggests that the view from the airspace above New York is not very different from that above Dresden; when humans are seen as less than human, they are readily exposed to the violence of a biopolitical control of air space.

Additionally, the author's choice of New York is symbolic, as shown in his later writings. In Palm Sunday: an Autobiographical Collage (1981), Vonnegut calls New York City "the Capital of the World" (319), and as such it functions not merely as an American city, but as an every-city that can be destroyed from the air as easily as Dresden. Later, in Fates Worse than Death, he expands on this statement: "every great city is a world
treasure, not a national treasure. So the destruction of any one of them is a planetary
catastrophe” (30). In these two scenes, then, Vonnegut exposes the rhetoric of nuclear
war and Mutual Assured Destruction, showing how easily entire cities and their
populations can be targeted, as the view from the air distorts our collective vision of the
humanity on the ground.

Vonnegut perhaps expressed his understanding of airpower best in *Fates Worse
than Death*, when he said: “we are simple-minded creatures, glad to believe on the basis
of symbolism alone (up is better than down) that air superiority is moral superiority”
(105). As shown above, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut works to expose air
superiority and the broader use of airpower in general, challenging his readers to
interrogate not only the symbolism, but the discourse of airpower. In a small victory for
the powerless, Billy Pilgrim makes himself seen and heard, challenging the biopolitical
imperative of the Allies both by surviving and by telling his tale. The narrator echoes
and strengthens Pilgrim’s declaration “I was there,” exhorting his audience to listen to the
counternarrative of strategic bombing. Vonnegut makes these voices effective by
portraying Dresden as innocent, by undercutting the official bombing discourse, by
complicating our views of bombing from above and below, and finally, by conflating our
homes and their homes, using this story of the past to speak to the present and future of
airpower.

In “The Firebombing” and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, then, Dickey and Vonnegut
examine the individual struggle with total war and extrapolate from it a challenge to the
national myth of precision bombing, by exposing the extremes to which the U.S. resorted
in the past, and might again in the future. Written in the sixties, as the Cold War raged,
Strategic Air Command deployed hundreds of nuclear-armed bombers, and the United States accelerated the war in Vietnam, these texts can be read not only as commentary on things past, but as warnings about things to come. Reading Dickey and Vonnegut in light of today’s conversation about the bombing of civilians shows that, although the weapons and targets have changed in the past half-century, the justification of civilian bombing through precision discourse has changed little. During the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the media coverage, fed by U.S. military briefings, “emphasized the success of high-technology, precision-guided munitions” even though these munitions composed less than ten percent of total bomb loads. Moreover, “the U.S. Air Force, as reported in the New York Times, estimated that 70 percent of bombs dropped missed their targets, and presumably, some of them smashed and burned nearby buildings, including homes” (Markusen and Kopf 31). More damning, according to Grayling, is the continued inclusion in 1997 Air Force Doctrine wording that suggests “that the morale of the civilian population may, in itself, legitimately be targeted since weakening of the will to fight would offer a military advantage” (275). These examples suggest an ongoing desire to justify the increasing use of airpower by Western nations by using precision discourse to erase the threat to civilians. Dickey and Vonnegut are therefore relevant today because they ask their readers to imagine fire raining down upon their American homes as it had on fictional Beppu or actual Dresden. By exposing the fallacies inherent in the discourse of airpower, particularly in its promise of saving lives, both writers exhort their readers to listen to them, see what must be seen, and understand their own responsibilities to the targeted civilians of this world.
EPILOGUE

CONTINUED EXPOSURE:

BOMBING NARRATIVES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The intent of this project has been to examine how literature interrogates the discourse of airpower. By presenting the air war as cleaner than ground wars—quick, precise, and saving lives—airpower discourse helped justify the employment of airpower against civilians throughout the century. The texts I have studied here, in a generically diverse collection of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction, have shown that the air war has never been as clean as we believe. However, it has often been promoted and perceived as clean because the bodies of the aviators and the civilians on the ground were hidden from public view. The aviators disappeared through various means, both spatially and discursively; the writers in my first chapter challenged this invisibility by exposing the extreme violence visited on the aviator’s body. The civilian bombing victims also disappeared from view when they were reinscribed to fulfill our expectations, when we failed to see them due to the unreliability of the aerial perspective, or when rhetorical deception and precision discourse rendered them invisible. The authors I explored in the last three chapters all worked to create counter-narratives to this discourse that strove to make both civilians and aviators visible as part of the strategic bombing dynamic.

Have they been successful? Perhaps not as successful as they might have hoped. Although the magnitude of strategic bombing is waning in the twenty-first century, the
use of airpower is not; in fact, the opposite is true. In the last two decades, “airpower became the instrument of choice by which post-Cold-War conflicts were waged” (Van Creveld 318). The opening of the new century witnessed the most horrifying employment of “airpower” in recent memory, the 9-11 Al Qaeda terror attacks in which commercial airliners and their civilian passengers were turned into weapons, an unprecedented terror event that did not even pretend to military necessity. Since the dawn of the new millennium, more traditional airpower has been used by United States, NATO, and coalition forces to enforce United Nations sanctioned No-Fly zones in northern and southern Iraq, to prosecute wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, enforce a No-Fly zone over Libya, and most recently, provide air support to French forces in Mali. Moreover, the U.S. Air Force has fielded a new and controversial aerial weapon, with hundreds of drone strikes in Afghanistan in the past five years, and over 300 in Pakistan, a country with which we are not even at war (Grossman 28).

It is not surprising, then, that twenty-first century writers have continued this exploration of airpower, questioning and exposing its ongoing implications for both civilians and aviators. In my epilogue, I look briefly at two texts that do so: Suzanne Collins’s fictional *Mockingjay* (2010) and Jason Armagost’s short memoir “Things to Pack When You’re Bound for Baghdad” (2008). Like their twentieth-century predecessors, these authors challenge the clean war discourse, with Collins showing us bombing’s victims, and Armagost fighting to make the aviator visible again.

**Suzanne Collins’s *Mockingjay***

Suzanne Collins merges past with future in a fascinating picture of postmodern
urban warfare, staged and televised, complete with an old-fashioned, twentieth-century firebombing. At the end of *Mockingjay*, the final novel in Suzanne Collin’s young adult Hunger Games trilogy, we see shattered heroine Katniss Everdeen and her co-survivors building an illustrated book about their experiences, to serve as a permanent record of those atrocities when human memories fail. For them it will function like other war memoirs, as “the place where we recorded those things you cannot trust to memory” (387), thus using the power of literature to bear witness. In this metafictional moment, Collins seems to be signaling her own difficulty in describing war to her young adult audience; like Katniss, her dilemma is how to “tell them about that world without frightening them to death” (389). This dilemma is especially valid for the writer, in a novel that begins and ends in the ashes of District Twelve, where a firebombing destroyed ninety percent of the population.

Collins’s trilogy describes the country of Panem, a post-apocalyptic dystopia where the affluent and decadent Capitol District rules the other twelve districts with an iron fist. Its primary method of retaining order and discouraging rebellion is the annual Hunger Games extravaganza, a Roman-gladiator-meets-reality-television moment, where twenty-four children are chosen to fight to the death in televised arena combat. In the first novel, Collins documents Katniss’s first victory in the arena, followed by a necessary return engagement the following year in the second novel, *Catching Fire*. Katniss unwittingly becomes the face of rebellion when secret District Thirteen orchestrates her televised escape from the Games; as punishment, the Capitol razes her home, District Twelve, by aerial firebombing. In *Mockingjay*, the rebellion escalates to all-out war against the Capitol, eventually involving all thirteen districts and toppling the
government.

Reviewers and critics generally describe the novels as science fiction or fantasy, and many, such as Susan Dominus, Laura Miller, and Eric Norton, agree that the trilogy portrays a dystopian society. They situate it in a long history of dystopian novels both for adults and young adults, and examine the various influences that the author tapped for inspiration.\footnote{Collins acknowledges the influence of the classical world, especially the Roman gladiators, the story of Spartacus, and the myth of Theseus and the sacrifice of children to the Minotaur. Susan Dominus reports Collins's debt to Spartacus, while Rick Margolis documents her acknowledged use of the Theseus myth. Margaret Skinner points out the source of the country's name; from Juvenal's \textit{Panem et Circenses}, bread and circuses, tying the Capitol's governing strategies to those of the ancient Romans (110). Several note the resemblance of Collins's District Twelve portraits to Depression-era photographs, and Andrew Stuttaford notes the influence of Emile Zola's coal-mining saga \textit{Germinial}.} While some critics have suggested that the trilogy is about the experience of adolescence, the "arena" of high school, or the experience of the outsider,\footnote{Laura Miller presents a plausible reading of the first novel, \textit{The Hunger Games}, as an allegory of the young adult experience, particularly high school. The work of the stylists, the detailed descriptions of costumes/outfits, and the notion of an arena, where the children are constantly watched, and where "the rules are arbitrary, unfathomable, and subject to sudden change" (134) support this reading. I agree that this is a valid reading for the first novel, but I believe it begins to break down by the second and third books. I do not think you can read the firebombings in \textit{Mockingjay} as anything other than war. Andrew Stuttaford reads the trilogy through the politics of the Occupation movement, as "one of eternal appeal to those on the outside" (45).} Collins herself has insisted that "they're absolutely, first and foremost, war stories" (Qtd in Margolis 27), and it is as such that I read \textit{Mockingjay}. By reading it as a war novel, we see Collins pursuing a dual strategy of exposure and challenge. First, she bears witness to the violence of the Twentieth Century in a way that will reach the youth of the Twenty-first, using the medium of young adult literature to delivery history in a way that moves beyond the textbook to create a visceral experience. Second, she exposes and challenges the direction in which current and future war is moving, particularly televised and automated war. Geography parallels history as the action moves from the firebombed community of District Twelve, reminiscent of World War II, to the Capitol, suggesting postmodern urban warfare. Collins's critique is pertinent to this study because many of
the attacks are still waged with airpower. Although Panem no longer possesses “high-flying planes, military satellites...drones” or biological weapons, which were all “brought down by the destruction of the atmosphere or lack of resources or moral squeamishness” (130), the ubiquitous hoverplane is a fully capable replacement.

As Mockingjay opens, stunned Katniss walks the streets of the firebombed district, stumbling over skulls and the decomposing remains of those who were not incinerated completely. Collins’s treatment of the firebombing in the first six and last five pages of the novel draws clear connections between District Twelve and the firebombings of World War II, particularly that of Dresden, and the literature that exposed them to the American public. The Capitol’s hoverplanes targeted “old wooden homes embedded with coal dust” (7) in District Twelve, just as the RAF targeted the Aldstadt, the medieval wooden center of Dresden, on February 13, 1945. The few survivors of Katniss’s district lived because they retreated to the Meadow, one of the few open areas, just as many residents of Dresden sought relief outdoors in parks such as the Grosser Garten.3

Even more compelling than the attack, however, is Collins’s description of the corpse recovery operations at the end of the novel, which begs a connection with Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five, another novel that ends with post-firebombing corpse recovery. After the war, Katniss returns to District Twelve, where she finds other survivors working to clear the town of human remains. She watches “teams of masked and gloved people with horse-drawn carts. Sifting through what lay under the snow this winter. Gathering remains” (384). Collins’s use of horse-drawn carts here shows the

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3 See Frederick Taylor’s Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945 for a recent, detailed analysis of the firebombing of Dresden.
primitive state to which the district has been relegated by the Capitol, but it can also be read as an allusion to Vonnegut's ending scenes, where Billy Pilgrim and his fellow POWs travel back into Dresden on a horse-drawn, coffin-shaped cart after the firestorm (248), where they participate in "corpse mining" operations, removing bodies from the cellars for a second burial. The condition of the horses—bleeding, parched, their hooves cracked—brings Pilgrim to tears for the first time in the war. With this image, Vonnegut links Pilgrim to the horses, both through their mutual lack of agency, and by metaphorically harnessing Pilgrim to the dead. As the war ends and the POWs emerge into a new springtime, Vonnegut juxtaposes the image of the horse-drawn cart with the singing of birds, implying hope for the future of the world despite the burden of the dead with which the survivors are forever linked.

Collins's use of the horse carts here for the "reaping of the dead" (385) recalls this scene, connecting it with Dresden, but also drawing power from Vonnegut's image of ultimate destruction, displaced by hope for a new future. For the survivors, Collins explains that "the questions are just beginning" (389), a very contemporary observation that echoes today's conversation about the firebombings of Europe, discussed in my previous chapter. In a poignant conversation with Katniss, Plutarch, the Hunger Games designer and architect of the revolution, explains: "Now we're in that sweet period where everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated. But collective thinking is usually short-lived. We're fickle, stupid beings with poor memories and a great gift for self-destruction" (379). Although Plutarch goes on to suggest the possibility that perhaps humans are evolving to move beyond war, one is left with the impression that we have heard this argument before. Still, Collins's deliberate choice to depict a
devastating firebombing, along with allusions to Dresden and Vonnegut’s novel, illustrates her concern with keeping these memories alive by educating a new generation about these horrors.

Collins is not simply looking back in this novel, however, as she also presents a very postmodern glimpse of high-tech, televised, urban warfare. Whereas *The Hunger Games* depicts the ultimate in reality television, with arena combat staged and managed, in *Mockingjay* Collins presents actual warfare that is staged for film crews. As the rebels prepare for an invasion of the Capitol, she and her squad are told “you will be the on-screen faces of the invasion” (257). The rebels take special measures to protect their mascot while showing her in combat: in the city, “a special block has been set aside for filming. It even has a couple of active pods on it. One unleashes a spray of gunfire....But it’s still an unimportant residential block with nothing of strategic consequence” (273). This image is fascinating not only because of its examination of combat photography, but also for its implications for future urban warfare.

For the people of Panem, images of combat are used for both propaganda and entertainment. As Susan D. Moeller points out in her study of twentieth-century combat photography, “the camera has brought the exotic and dangerous near; it satisfies a lust for seeing the action, with the bonus that the viewer at home is never in any danger” (3). Like voyeurs, she suggests, an “armchair audience gazes at, but does not participate in, war” (3). Wars have been increasingly televised, particularly in America. As Moeller reports, during Vietnam sixty percent of Americans obtained their war news from television (391). Coverage continued to evolve, prompting cultural critic Linda Robertson to suggest that the 1991 Gulf War was presented as a movie, in which the
challenge was “how to portray as both interesting and admirable the use of overwhelming force to bomb an undefended enemy into submission in a lopsided war” (234).

Collins, then, taps into this modern trend, fed by twenty-four-hour news coverage, of presenting war as entertainment, and she critiques this practice when the staged, managed filming becomes a trap in which several of the soldiers and film crew are ultimately killed. She shows, then, the dangers inherent in treating war as entertainment, and the desensitizing of the public that can result from this trend.

Even more chilling in Collins’s presentation of urban warfare is the description of the “active pods” which may “unleash a spray of gunfire” on the city block. This is very much the vision of postmodern urban warfare that human geographer Stephen Graham exposes in his 2008 article “Imagining Urban Warfare: Urbanization and U.S. Military Technoscience.” While United States’ military planners had come to depend on surveillance and targeted airstrikes by the start of the twenty-first century, he explains, the war in Iraq has illustrated the weaknesses of this strategy, as the urban terrain is not amenable to this type of warfare. This is a striated space: walls get in the way. Enemy forces have thus sought refuge in cities, forcing the U.S. to risk human lives in close combat. The response of military planners is increased automation of surveillance and attack weapons. Graham argues that increasing the use of automated weapons will deny the citizenship “of both urban civilians and the U.S. military personnel themselves” (41) by removing the selectivity of targeting.

The automated war Graham predicts is exactly the type of warfare Collins depicts as the rebels attack the Capitol. Streets near the perimeters of the city are laced with

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4 While I do not wholly concur with her proposal that the enemy was undefended, I find Robertson’s point about the filmic nature of the war interesting and informative.
cameras, connected to automated pods that attack any movement on the street. Designed to present infiltration by the rebels, they soon create a hell of indiscriminate destruction, as refugees from the city’s outskirts flood toward its center, themselves becoming targets of the automated weapons. Katniss watches as “a pod’s activated ahead of us, releasing a gush of steam that parboils everyone in its path” (341). Weapons are no longer selective, or targeted, but attack all equally: “peacekeeper, rebel, citizen, who knows? Everything that moves is a target” (341). While the actual methods used by Collins’s pods are various and futuristic, their existence is not as far-fetched as readers might think, and as the author suggests, they present unique problems for the prosecution of future wars. As war becomes more automated, Graham explains, “civilian urban populations, where visible at all, are rendered not as bodies of urban citizens with human and political rights requiring protection” (40), but as “little but physical and technical noise,” or as “a set of targets to themselves be coerced, rendered passive, or manipulated” (40). The fictional example in Mockingjay presents a dynamic vision of the direction in which war is moving.

Suzanne Collins thus presents a striking mash-up of twentieth-century air war strategies and futuristic, postmodern, and potentially all-too-real visions of urban warfare. Her use of the Young Adult genre as a medium for doing so suggests her desire to expose a new generation to the plight of civilians in war, and, as Kailyn McCord argues, with the struggle of survivors to “maintain humanity” (108) in the face of extreme violence. This struggle, to maintain a sense of humanity in the face of the increasingly technological modern air war, is a major challenge for Jason Armagost as well.
Jason Armagost’s “Things to Pack When You’re Bound for Baghdad”

In his short, post-modern, self-consciously intertextual war memoir, “Things to Pack When You’re Bound for Baghdad” (2008), Jason Armagost links the stealth bomber pilot to other literary warriors, in an attempt, I argue, to make us see the aviator.\(^5\) Armagost’s effort is significant because it, too, exposes the dominant discourse that portrays the air war as a clean war, a war of machines in which we can easily disregard the human costs. Specifically, I examine the struggles of the pilot to make himself visible when his own “invisible” radar-evading aircraft, high altitude, and the geographical distancing of his mission all collude against him. This visibility is imperative as the pilot tries to understand his role in the bombing of Iraq, overcome the detachment from killing characteristic of the air war, and expose the human element in the dynamic of airpower. With this effort, Armagost continues the work of twentieth-century American writers Randall Jarrell, Howard Nemerov, Joseph Heller, and James Dickey, whose texts expose the aviator to challenge the discourse of airpower.

In his memoir, Armagost pushes back against this discourse by showing us the human in the machine. To do so, he uses intertextuality effectively both to drive the narrative and to explore the post-modern warrior’s experience. His title, “Things to Pack When You’re Bound for Baghdad,” of course, nods to the influence of Tim O’Brien and The Things They Carried. Like O’Brien, Armagost opens by describing his weapon, the B-2 Stealth bomber and the bombs it carries, and his mission, a twenty-thousand mile, 39-hour round trip flight from Whiteman AFB, Missouri, to bomb Baghdad on the first

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night of the Iraq war. He then lists all the things he carries aboard the aircraft, including items for personal comfort, for self defense, and significantly, the twenty-five books and four journals he carries for psychological comfort during the flight. The texts include poetry collections by Billy Collins and Jim Harrison, books about flying by Beryl Markham and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, books and journals about hunting, and classics including the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, and *Don Quixote*. For the pilot, “these things, these books, are a measure of security,” Armagost writes, “a redoubt in war” (207). For the writer, I suggest, they also provide the symbolic capital that authorizes him to write about art, flying, war, and killing.

Through these books, Armagost struggles to make himself visible to the reader by aligning himself with canonical writers and by connecting himself, as pilot, with legendary warriors. By opening with Tim O’Brien, Armagost suggests that he is writing a true war story, and embraces O’Brien’s critical, but sympathetic look at war and the warrior. The books also provide historical and geographical context for his journey to Baghdad: he reads Cervantes as he flies through the straits of Gibraltar, Homer when passing Greece, Beryl Markham over Africa, the Psalms of David while approaching the Middle East. The text might *almost* be read as a literary travelogue, if one could forget, momentarily, that the writer is on a bombing mission. However, while the bombing narrative ends over Baghdad, Armagost’s story ends three years later, when fly-fishing on a family vacation. This ending echoes Ernest Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River,” a textual choice suggesting that the pilot has been scarred by his experience and is still trying, three years later, to understand himself as a warrior.

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6 All except the last three pages of the memoir are written under the dateline 19 March, 2003. The conclusion is dated 9 April, 2006.
Armagost's greatest challenge in this regard springs from his desire to reconcile the contradictory concepts of honor and stealth. He tries desperately to reconcile these concepts, but seems to conclude that the two are, and have historically been, incompatible. Whereas the ancients gained honor through battle, the stealth pilot admits, "I seek honor in posthistorical air war, but it is difficult to match deeds with the ancients. I am cloaked in the conceit of technology" (210). Armagost here grapples with the pilot's personal need to view himself as an honorable warrior, which is complicated by the inherently non-heroic nature of twenty-first century aerial warfare. Turning to the classics for guidance, he notes that the Greeks earned honor because they "sought decisive battle in the open field," while "the Scythians, and later the Huns and Mongols, were the people of stealth, deception, and hit-and-run, guerilla-style warfare" (217). He labels the Greeks, who fought openly, "disciplined and courageous," while the people of stealth he calls "marauders," and "undisciplined" (217). This recognition is problematic for the pilot, because he understands that although he represents a country which likes to align itself with honor and righteousness, his war fighting tactics more closely resemble those of the nomadic marauders so often seen as barbarians.

The pilot, therefore, has come to equate honor with visibility, believing that one's courage and exploits in battle are validated only when they are seen or known. Armagost explains that "honor is, at best, diluted in the binary code of the most advanced airplane in the world" (210). The pilot understands that he has disappeared into the machine, his existence virtually unknown to all except the few that fly with him on this first night of the war. He blames this invisibility on the stealth characteristics of the airplane he flies, noting that "the skin of the airplane that shields me from my enemies' eyes also shields
me from renown" (211). While these passages suggest that his actions would be heroic or honorable if only they could be seen, additional unpacking of the stealth concept reveals an underlying discomfort with the air war which is not caused by twenty-first century technology but was recognized as early as World War I.

The stealth technology that so effectively hides Armagost’s pilot is, quite simply, an advanced way to achieve the surprise that has always been valued in aerial warfare. For example, in V.M. Yeates’ 1934 novel *Winged Victory*, a World War I pilot explains that in the air war, victory goes not to the honorable pilot, but to the one who ambushes most effectively, “who, for instance, dive[s] on an unsuspecting enemy out of the sun” (41). A fellow pilot accuses him of deception and dishonor, and he agrees, admitting, “You’re quite right...we’re just a gang of tricky murderers like all war merchants” (98). As this example shows—and there are many more available—Armagost’s dilemma arises not from the cutting edge stealth technology of the B-2 bomber, but from the tactics pilots have embraced from the earliest days of aerial combat. It is within this heritage of surprise and deception that Armagost’s stealth pilot tries to find personal honor.

Warriors have often achieved honor not only through open battle but also by killing a worthy opponent, but this avenue, too, eludes the pilot. In a two-page personal narrative within the larger bombing narrative, Armagost describes his own practice of deer hunting and then compares it to the aerial hunt accomplished with the B-2 bomber. He hunts with a primitive bow and arrow, thus aligning himself with the nomadic and stealthy warriors mentioned above.7 The hunt is a minimalist experience where he strips down to nothing but running shorts, and barefoot, his body coated with mud, approaches

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7 One might also make the connection between the B-2 bomber, with its bow-like shape, and his weapon of choice for hunting.
and kills a deer with a well-placed arrow. Although this stripping bare of the act of killing seems to counter the technological distancing of killing from the B-2 bomber, the two acts are surprisingly similar. His description of the deer’s death, “my kill comes clean and quick” (219) echoes the terminology of airpower theorists who advocate a clean, quick air war, while the mud which coats his skin is remarkably akin to the special radar-absorbing paint applied to the skin of the bomber. Although he kills the deer through stealth, he believes his actions are honorable because the battle is equal, a pitting of the deer’s keen senses and quickness against his own ability to move stealthily. In contrast, as he attacks Baghdad, the stealth aircraft prevents any kind of fair fight, as he and his flight deceptively “ghost- in through the back door and bring hell” to the city (219). The critical difference between the two, he suggests, is that in the killing of the deer, he sees what he has done, looking into the eyes of the deer as it dies, “owning” its death (219). In his bombing missions over Baghdad, he is never sure if he has killed, and if so, whom he has killed, an uncertainty which continues to haunt him three years later.

The deer hunting ritual is important, Armagost explains, because it brings him “closer to existence and the actual costs associated with living” (216). These costs of living are also what he is trying to show us by exposing the aviator, the human in the machine. He wants to show his readers that when their nation commits airpower to a distant war, this commitment goes beyond a clean war, fought by machines. There is a human cost involved, both to the aviator and the bombing victim.

Armagost’s text has important implications not only for our understanding of the war in Iraq, but for future wars as well. His exploration of the postmodern warrior arrives at a pivotal moment in the evolution of air power, as the increasing use of the
unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV)—the drone—threatens to replace the human in the aircraft cockpit. Armagost's stealth bomber pilot, invisible even to our radar-assisted gaze, exists in a liminal space between the extremely vulnerable bomber crews of earlier wars, particularly World War II and Vietnam, and the emerging drone pilots who fly their UAVs remotely from a location of complete physical safety. Armagost's tale thus offers transitional insight into concepts of honor and humanity for the virtually invisible warrior engaged in postmodern wars.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I return to the question of success—has the work of these writers made a difference in our perception of airpower? I cannot answer this question definitively, but I suspect that their success was incomplete, perhaps due to a collective desire on the part of Americans to avoid looking too closely at how we prosecute war. As military theorist Liddell Hart notes after World War II, "the political world, which had lost touch with the study of war as warfare became more professionalized, was content to follow the soldier's interpretation of...[developing] doctrine—with devastating results" (*RIW* 68). This unwillingness on the part of politicians to study war, he suggests, led the air war, that promised to be clean and quick, to the extremes of firebombing and atomic weapons, and hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths. Sixty years later, Linda Robertson wonders why Americans were so willing to watch the "shock and awe" bombing of Baghdad on television: "Surely," she argues, "underlying the public's apparent gullibility was the desire not to be required to know the effects of bombing on innocent men, women, and children, as well as the infrastructure..." of the city (239). Today, it seems, not only the politicians, but academics and public alike have chosen to
leave the study of the air war, and its literature, to the professionals, so that these texts have either been ignored by the literary field, or when read, have been interpreted in other ways. My goal for this project, then, has been to bring these two fields together, using the tools of the humanities to examine the discourse of military science. My hope is that increased exposure to this discourse will provoke an increasingly sophisticated public response to the use of airpower in the future.


