

# STORYTELLERS AND LEGISLATORS: THE USES OF VIETNAM LITERATURE

*Yi-Zhou Liu*

*Writer's comment:* The value of literature is often exaggerated or underplayed: on one hand, writers can make excessive claims for the significance of their work; on the other, literature can be seen as a frivolous, "it's time for story hour!" sort of thing. I wanted to look at the concepts of *story* and *narrative* in a broader sense to understand the true uses of these things. Dr. Schroeder's American Studies 160 (Vietnamese Literature) gave me material to work with. As Larry Heinemann states in the epigraph below, Vietnam narratives attempt to "explain an alien experience to people," with the consequent desire to get the story right. This emphasis on story construction expresses itself in a pragmatic understanding within the texts themselves of how texts can be used, waiting for readers to pick up on it. I hope my own attempt was not far off course.

— *Yi-Zhou Liu*

*Instructor's comment:* I've known Yi-Zhou for a couple of years now-he's taken three classes from me-and he continues to teach me something each time I read one of his papers. What impresses me most about his writing is its erudition and the ease with which he moves from one author to another, often making the most unexpected yet absolutely unerring connections between them. This particular paper, written for American Studies 160: Vietnamese Literature, examines some of the most compelling narratives written about the Vietnam war-a subject I've studied for some time-and yet Yi-Zhou teaches me something new each time I read it. What's more, Yi-Zhou's style makes this essay a pleasure to read-it's allusive, playful, and filled with memorable images. It's a truly stunning piece of writing.

— *Eric James Schroeder, American Studies*

*The thing I learned...was that basically you're trying to explain an alien experience to people. I felt that it was really important that people understand what the work was. War as a job, this is work.*

-Larry Heinemann

*Some stories must be told-not because they will delight and instruct but because they happened.*

-Time magazine on *Dispatches*

**W**hen things we don't understand happen to us, our instinct is to talk about them (this is what the *Time* quote above is getting at). "Vietnam writers" (allow me the use of the label without its limiting connotations) are writing about their own experiences because the events *happened* to them. Vietnam affected them to the point of obsession. This is a writer's "material."

From the impulse to tell a story, there naturally follows a concern to get the story right, which means precision. Not settling for easy clichés which only tell the story halfway, if that much, and instead working through a dialectic of moves and counter-moves until you get at the marrow of a true narrative. In the process, a great deal of debunking common misrepresentations and misperceptions goes on; keeping this in mind, it's little surprise that the narratives that possess the most clarity and usefulness have a simple, elegant thing-in-itself quality to them even in the midst of all the conflicting themes, an amoral imagism that resists explication.

In direct contrast to these stories, morals and moralizing of any sort have always been secondary, not primary texts; in the most fundamental sense of the word, they are derivative-they are conclusions drawn from narratives of one form or another. Their indebtedness to narrative betrays the fact that there's no getting away from the glamour of war and war stories; therefore, trying to take an "anti-war" attitude is inherently doomed to fail. David Rabe suggests that the labels of anti-family, anti-marriage, anti-youth, and anti-crime "do not exist because family, marriage, youth, and crime are all viewed as phenomena permanently a part of the eternal human pageant. I believe war to be an equally permanent part of that pageant" (xxv).

Instead, many Vietnam writers have essentially taken a position which might be described as "anti-false story," a much less quixotic stance. The way to fight a glib, facile, too-easy story is to set your own story against it. "Criticism" alone, meaning intellectually pointing out the flaws in a false story without providing an organizing narrative of your own, won't work very well because on a deep, mythic level, we tell ourselves stories to order our lives.

As an example: even though I intellectually understand its flaws, for me the domino theory still has a seductive pull to it because the dominoes seem so clean and logical. It goes down to the gut-level memory of falling dominoes, remembering how long it took to stand up a box of ninety-six in a row and how quickly and *inexorably* they toppled once pushed. There was a metaphor in there somewhere, about entropy, *it's easier to destroy than to create*-link that to Southeast Asia and the urgency of *preservation*, of shoring up democracy and capitalism in those countries lest they fall to the Reds, becomes a much more deep-seated thing.

What's wrong with this story? Chiefly its simplistic, bipolar, us-against-them mentality, when the USSR and China in fact constituted rather less than a united Communist front; this sort of world-picture envisions the globe as an illuminated tactical map, with countries suddenly winking from green to red. There is also the related "with us or against us" mindset, which assumed that if Vietnam was allowed self-determination, it would side with the Communists, ignoring that after two hundred years of domination by one imperial power or another-over two thousand, counting the Chinese-Ho Chi Minh probably would not be inclined to slavishly allow his country to become a Soviet satellite.

The problem with these counterarguments is that they aren't grounded in a story. They don't sink in the gut as much as the falling dominoes do. Given the common American traits of seeing "education" as an abstract cure-all and of being reluctant to undergo self-examination, the power of the simplistic, short-term, glamorous, ultimately ruinous narrative is easy to underestimate. Addressing this tendency in her 1967 essay on Howard Hughes, Joan Didion states:

Our favorite people and our favorite stories become so not by any inherent virtue, but because they illustrate something deep in the grain, something unadmitted.... A long time ago, Lionel Trilling pointed out what he called "the fatal separation" between "the ideas of our educated liberal class and the deep places of the imagination." "I mean only," he wrote, "that our educated class has a ready if mild suspiciousness of the profit motive, a belief in progress, science, social legislation, planning and international cooperation... Those beliefs do great credit to those who hold them. Yet it is a comment, if not on our beliefs then on our way of holding them, that not a single first-rate writer has emerged to deal with these ideas, and the emotions that are consonant with them, in a great literary way."

...It is impossible to think of Howard Hughes without seeing the apparently bottomless gulf between what we say we want and what we do want, between what we officially admire and secretly desire, between, in the largest sense, the people we marry and the people we love. (71-72)

Most telling here is Trilling's acknowledgment of the difference between art and life. Instead of mythic-level stories about liberal-intellectual values, literature most effectively points to those values by way of *reaction* against something else. Puritanic cautionary tales, which typically misrepresent and distort what they preach against, are essentially straw-man arguments with little value - Tim O'Brien's take would probably be that they are not faithful to the story. What the writer must instead do is fight story with story - tell the *other* story, the seductive Howard Hughes story, as best as he can, and then play something else against it. In this we recognize the familiar dialectic pattern, as revealed by pushing a concept to its logical conclusion and coming to an understanding of how much the glamour *costs*, where the story will eventually take you. This is the fundamental structure of works of partying knight-errantry, from *The Great Gatsby* to *The Sun Also Rises* to *On the Road*: eventually, the prettiness decays into decadence, and the narrator realizes that it's time to go home.

Greil Marcus said something similar about rock songs: "As with almost any popular art, the moment rock 'n' roll tries to criticize something, it becomes hopelessly self-righteous and stupid. It effectively criticizes by rendering a situation with such immediacy, or by affirming it to the point of such absurdity, that you can no longer take it straight. That is why there is no tougher antidrug song than the Velvet Underground's 'Heroin,' which also risks creating new addicts" (104).

There is an uneasiness about how to do this with Vietnam, how to represent the experience and what to take from it, how to connect the images and link them into some kind of cohesive whole without committing ludicrous reductionism. (Here I think of Oscar's comment in *Going After Cacciato*, after Buff's death: "'There's a lesson in this,' Oscar said. 'The lesson's simple. Don't never get shot'" [254].) Perhaps it may be that we're still too close to it - the responses are still developing towards some kind of critical mass, they have not yet had enough time to percolate to the point of critical detachment - but this is not a simple "time heals all wounds" issue. Stories are being made and moves are being explored, but towards what kind of synthesis?

The ending of Michael Herr's *Dispatches* bears multiple resonances for this question: "And no moves left for me at all but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there" (260). Herr has said in an interview that the need for the dialectic between remembering Vietnam and still moving on inspired those and other lines (Schroeder 36-39 *passim*), but this may inadvertently obscure the need to go back and see what significance that final *dispersion* has within the text itself.

The “no moves left to make” part is critical. Note the recurring theme among Vietnam writers that they just want to write the damn book and get it *over* with already so they can put the experience behind them: we see this in Herr, Larry Heinemann, and - particularly - Tim O’Brien. Herr’s own comments about his book are helpful but not necessary for understanding the structure of *Dispatches* - even without his comments, it’s still quite evident that *Dispatches* is a very sprawling, conglomerate text because its author put all he possibly could into the book without going crazy from all the material. Reading it, we get the sense that Herr pushed himself to his limits: he could not wrap his mind around any more data, so that is where he left it. *Dispatches* does have structure - intuitive rather than rational, and certainly asymmetrical rather than symmetrical - and that structure undoubtedly came from Herr’s developed craftsmanship and awareness of the tradition, but I get the feeling that it was an incredible struggle to keep everything coherent because everything was shoving against everything else. Why does the book open with Ocean Eyes and go on from there to Tim Page and Sean Flynn, about whom we hear little bits and pieces throughout the text until the “Colleagues” chapter 180 pages down the line, and from there to helicopters? I don’t know. In theory, you could probably go through the book and do a structural close-reading and point out why this thematic link is strong and this conceptual link is weak, but that misses the point. *Dispatches* begins with Ocean Eyes because it’s a good opener, and it goes from there to Page and Flynn and helicopters because they’re all there, important themes, inside the material, and the connections flow well, and because Herr had to start *somewhere*.

My point is that when Herr says, “I would say that the secret subject of *Dispatches* was not Vietnam, but that it was a book about writing a book” (Schroeder 34), he is only saying that the method of composition is very evident: a writer with a large amount of material that feels like a sphere, not a line, which is to say there is no self-evident place to begin, no obvious point of entry. Herr only had a certain amount of writing-stamina available to him: enough to get him through the book, but once the stamina is gone, the text is all that’s left. As it is, the structure works. But because of the book’s patchwork nature, it’s like a very intricately designed 3-D puzzle that you don’t want to mess with because it’ll never come together in quite that same way again. There is no way that Herr could go back to it and make any substantial revisions without going through the painstaking process of loading the entire text into memory again, regaining that understanding of how it works, how he ended up writing the thing the first time. It doesn’t surprise me at all that Herr says, “I haven’t been able to read it since I finished writing it” (Schroeder 41). Back to that word *dispersion* in the last line of the book: it’s out of his hands now. Cast it to the winds. The dispersion is very much one of tiredness.

From today’s perspective, that bit about “one last chopper revved it up, lifted off and flew out of my chest” sounds like a scene from *Alien*-the point being the lack of control Herr has (260). The interchange and mediation between self and world has grown to be too much, and it finally bursts out of him. Same theme as poet Bruce Weigl reflecting on the paradox of Vietnam as his artistic material: “The war both ruined my life and made me be a writer” (Schroeder 182).

In this light, C.D.B. Bryan saying, “I think that *Dispatches* was so good and said something so important about the war that I don’t think that anybody is going to do anything better than that” (Schroeder 77) comes across as *perhaps* a failure of imagination in that *Dispatches* may be a stepping stone, a starting point for the next generation of literature. As in: This was all that Michael Herr was able to take in, wrap his mind around and digest and present in coherent form. And it stands as a collection of moves and countermoves for future writers to draw from in making sense of their own experiences and, perhaps, further *compressing* Herr’s concepts into more trenchant forms. I dimly recall a Gertrude Stein quote, something along the lines of: “We will do it first. Those who come after us can make it pretty.”

But Bryan’s quote also addresses the problem of fragmentation that arose in this century with the gradual realization of all the competing narratives out there, leading to a weakening of artistic conventions.

This plays itself out in Vietnam literature at least as much as anywhere else, the problem of connecting things and making sense out of the experience. Many authors have come to the solution of approaching the material from multifocal perspectives in the hope that the whole will be greater than the sum of its parts. We see this happen in Weigl's *Song of Napalm*, Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, Herr's *Dispatches*, and Tim O'Brien's works. There is the increasing tendency to write a poem (or short story, or chapter) and then immediately follow it with a comment - not experimentation for its own sake, but because for these authors there seems to be no other satisfactory way to say what they mean. This tendency parallels contemporary art, where the work almost demands an explanation - the comments are there because the text cannot be interpreted in itself, because there are fewer genre-conventions to point to starting places. So the artist gives the viewer/reader help in interpreting the text.

As I said about *Dispatches*, this approach requires a great deal of psychic stamina just to pull all the material together, never *mind* making it more seamless. (*Dispatches* seems to go in the direction of Joyce's *Ulysses* - again, not because Herr was consciously trying to extend the modernist tradition, but because he couldn't do it any other way. Joyce, at least, had the advantage of shaping a work of fiction.) It may be useful to compare Herr's work with a similar text, O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, which is admittedly flawed, but flawed in useful ways. O'Brien didn't yet have the developed capacity and skill to pull his work off. He was younger and less experienced than Herr, and he certainly went to Vietnam with much less of a focused purpose. *Dispatches* reveals Herr's journalistic training and grounding in the tradition-you can see him as a questing figure, a monastic of sorts, who becomes overwhelmed without (consciously) *expecting* it, but he realizes what's happening to him and stays for as long as he can bear it. "What does not destroy you makes you stronger" - the tricky part is pushing it as far as you can without becoming lost completely. Hence the commonalities Herr shares with the visionary line of poets, Blake and Rimbaud in particular. (*Dispatches* isn't really a "song of innocence and experience" because that dichotomy breaks down under the pressure of, once again, too much material. There are too many forms of "experience" to be polarized in the manner of the dialectic - but this holds true to Blake's poem series, because darned if I can tell the moral difference between Innocence and Experience.)

By contrast, O'Brien hadn't built up the psychic stamina at the time of writing *Combat Zone*, and it shows in the mishmash of his citations from sources on courage; he is still too anxious of their influence. His archetype at the beginning of the book's chronology is clear from the basic-training chapters: he's an oversensitive, somewhat arrogant literature-snot who gets polarized by figures like the ultra-macho drill sergeant and only later tries to put the two (or more) sides together. But *Combat Zone* is a useful text, if not an elegant one, because it truly is "a book about writing." O'Brien's intentions are quite clearly visible - it's not solely a "learn from mistakes" kind of utility, though there is that element. He gathers a great deal of material, but doesn't connect it very well. For a reader looking for a source of raw countermoves, though, it goes a long way towards orientation in the fundamental issues at hand, and if the pieces aren't put together real well, that's not a big deal, because the reader can engage with the pieces and place them where he himself needs them to be. Look at the way the structure is set up: it begins with a basic chronology and background, and once that's out of the way, O'Brien can begin speculations on courage and representing the war without having to ground them in the narrative quite so much. The structure falls apart under formalist scrutiny, unlike *Dispatches* (also unlike Hemingway's *In Our Time*, with which *Combat Zone*'s prose-poems resonate), but the amount of raw content and story redeems the book.

And then there are the awkwardnesses of organization which point to ways it could be done better, the ending in particular. There isn't a sense of exhaustion, as there is in *Dispatches*; *Combat Zone* ends unexpectedly and suddenly, not as the last gasp the writer could make. The book is a memoir more than anything else, and so the voice and the return to the truisms set out in the initial chapters have continuity. But the sense of an ending is too formalized; the last "It's impossible to go home barefoot" line is what a

creative-writing class might call an unearned cliché. There's no denying the lyricism of the book as a whole, but other works go a few steps better because they've gone from lyricism to analysis and back again a few times.

O'Brien himself went through that cycle in his successive works. More so than usual with writers, he writes the same book over and over again in different ways - compare and contrast the various "courage" sections in *Combat Zone*, *Cacciato*, and *Things They Carried*, for instance. But it's too much to attempt to bring the material together again directly after a previous try, which is why I see *Northern Lights* and *The Nuclear Age* as rejuvenating forms that allowed O'Brien to get away from consciously thinking about how to represent Vietnam; through writing books about different concerns, he distances himself and recharges himself in order to get away from the shadow of his own influence. Writers like Herr and Heinemann may have finished their "therapy" - a loaded word, which some writers probably don't like because of its negative connotations-suffice it to say that they have done what they needed to do, and it shows in the closure of their books. (At the end of *Paco's Story*, I see a resigned, hard-earned acceptance of the veteran's "I can't go on, I'll go on" situation - beyond a certain point, there are people who will just Never Get It, no matter how much you talk, in the same way as there are people like Jesse who are instinctively kindred. Don't beat your head against the wall about it, move on down the road.)

And so Tim O'Brien returns to the subject again and again. How much of this is the writer's acquired intuitive sense that he needed to move away from the material for a time before coming back to it again, I don't know. *The Things They Carried* itself has a strangely *lulling* ending, rather than a valedictory one; O'Brien's subsequent *In the Lake of the Woods* comes to an even more ambiguous vanishing-act ending which may represent the author's farewell-through-ellipsis-and yet, perhaps a few years later, a few years after *Tomcat in Love*, he'll come back and write Volume Five, the final capstone to the series. The final image in *Things They Carried*-little Timmy and Linda skating around the lake and grown-up Tim trying to save them with a story-for O'Brien, one gets the sense that, as for Weigl, Vietnam was *the* experience which turned him on to stories and myths, so much so that there is no gap or disjunction at all between "war stories" and other stories, because they're all the same thing.

By necessity of form, Weigl is the most fragmented of the writers I'm considering. He speaks not so much by individual poems as by their juxtaposition. Excerpting coherently from his collection *Song of Napalm* is even more difficult than excerpting from *Things They Carried*-it feels like trying to pick out specific tracks from the Beatles' *White Album* as representative. *Song of Napalm* is a deliberately sequenced work, with many poems drawn from two of his earlier books mixed with some new ones-not a greatest-hits compilation, but a concept album. Excerpts necessarily seem incomplete because the *gestalt* of the whole is important.

On the back cover of the first edition, there's a review blurb from Russell Banks: "[*Song*] is a narrative, the story of an American innocent's descent into hell and his excruciating return to life on the surface. Weigl may have written the best novel so far about the Vietnam War, and along the way a dozen truly memorable poems." Banks's assertion that *Song* is a *novel* certainly catches the attention, but his "dozen truly memorable poems" line misses the point somewhat. The poems in this collection aren't *meant* to be alone and unconnected, as some of them were in the earlier books *A Romance* and *The Monkey Wars*. Certainly "The Last Lie," "Song of Napalm," and "Elegy" are capable of standing on their own in a Norton anthology (which has yet to happen) - but many of the other poems *need* the sequencing in order to make any sense. If you just look at a few of Weigl's poems in isolation, they can seem somewhat flat, derivative in places, and too impressionistic on their own. But the point is that he develops his own voice most strongly by way of juxtaposition, an ideogrammatic theory of poetry taken from Eliot and Pound, but in this volume extended to not just setting images and quotations against each other, but instead whole poems.

The strongest example is "Monkey," the five-part weary exhalation that closes the first section of

*Song of Napalm*. Coming to the poem on its own - say, in W.D. Ehrhart's anthology *Carrying the Darkness*, which uses the older version of the poem found in *Monkey Wars*-the voice catches me off guard, especially following on the James Wright epigraph ("Out of the horror there rises a musical ache that is beautiful..."). I'm not prepared for the sudden burst of the poem, which is like the last adrenaline spurt of raw intuition one sees in people about to fall asleep and having falling-down dreams. It makes much more sense at the end of *Song*'s first section, going back and forth through all the different voices, to arrive at the penultimate poem "The Last Lie" and its emptying-out effect. After "The Last Lie," the speaker doesn't want to talk any more; he doesn't want to put sentences together in a real rational way. He wants to fall asleep and talk about monkeys.

So trace the development of the speaker through the book, and notice particularly the way the poems are framed by "Sailing to Bien Hoa" and "Elegy," the first and last poems. In "Sailing," the narrator is leaving the field to be treated; in "Elegy," the soldiers walk back into the field. It is too facile to take a page from Eliot's *Four Quartets* and say "Yes, the end is the beginning, the beginning is the end" - that's too easily metaphysical, and it points to something which isn't naturally there in the poems. Instead, consider "Sailing" as an orientation poem that starts with particulars because that's what the mind retreats to when it becomes overwhelmed by too much information: wounded, probably tranquilized, the speaker rides a hydroplane, feeling "the shrapnel in my thighs / like tiny glaciers," and we think of shrapnel like ice, like glass instead of metal, little sparkling bits of diamond and cold. That's real, even in the "dream of the hydroplane." In the second stanza, the speaker gets carried to stranger visions: "a truck / floating in urine, a rat carrying a banjo" - being swept further and further away, but wait: there is something he can grasp and hold onto to keep him from drifting into cloudcuckooland...

I'm sure of the children,  
their damp flutes,  
the long line of their vowels.

Raw sensory data, the hearing of it. Now, the speaker thinks, if I could only put these pieces together bit by bit without being swamped by it, I could make some sense out of this stuff. This process, the interchange between reason and intuition, informs the book as a whole.

And then "Elegy," at the end of the collection. This is an ending that makes sense not just because the book turns in on itself - soldiers going back into the jungle - but because the speaker has changed. Weigl has separated from himself here, we feel. He's floating outside himself, like he describes in "Him, on the Bicycle," except it's not a dream-vision any more. It's like Herr's vision of his soul floating outside his body, not like a pure white handkerchief, but like a dingy old grey parachute hanging in the air half-morously, half-obstinately. The sense of separation comes from the voice: this is the only place in *Song* where Weigl uses the third-person voice. Elsewhere, the pronouns are all "I" or "we" or "you." The shift is so significant because such an objective perspective is to be found nowhere else in the texts I'm considering, not even in *Paco's Story*, in which the ghost controls and colors the entire narration. To come out in "Elegy" to this breadth of perception, when the narrative began with the calmly desperate grasping of "I'm sure of the children" - this is the type of compression I mean when I talk about Herr's *Dispatches* possibly being a stepping-stone for later texts.

In the final pages of historian Loren Baritz's *Backfire*, Baritz states:

At last there is one remaining question: What should we *do* now? This is a very American question, based on the mad assumption that political problems, like technological ones, necessarily have solutions. What should we do about what? Our culture? We are not so simple a problem to 'solve.' The 'solution' to a flawed culture is its perceived failure. The tragedy of Vietnam provided us with the experience necessary for careful reflection. (348-49)

Good war stories fall into this category of careful reflection. The question of "what are we going to do

now?" only really comes up when the closure of a story's ending isn't powerful enough to make the story its own whole entity, as in the weak ending of *Combat Zone*. Again I think of Oscar in *Going After Cacciato*: "The lesson's simple. Don' never get shot."

But there is also still the uneasiness of representing Vietnam in which the "what should we do now?" question comes back. If lessons can at all be learned from Vietnam-if history can actually progress somewhat, rather than only moving sideways, in cycles - then the experience is still percolating, being digested and internalized.

A few sentences later, Baritz says: "We must develop the long-term resilience and knowledge to act in our own best interest" (349). It's lines like that which make people like Baritz himself understandably leery of the possibility of *learning* anything from the war. Just a couple of paragraphs after *that*, Baritz parries and ripostes himself with his description of Ronald Reagan and his new American lullaby: "Governor Reagan then predicted...: 'We will become that shining city on a hill'" (350).

I don't think "we must develop long-term knowledge" is a particularly workable concept on a broad scale. I think of political manipulators of great influence, and their seemingly intuitive ability to place themselves at the intersection of prevailing force-lines and tap into the energy of the current national mood, the energy of half-conscious, unspoken desires. Earlier on, Baritz states that Joseph McCarthy "succeeded so well, while he lasted, because he had stumbled on an American truth. Like John Winthrop and Woodrow Wilson, the senator was making war on Evil. The energy for his crusade came from the American need to slay monsters in the name of virtue" (72). Against McCarthy, place Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, a direct response to the Red Scare. I try to understand which one had more *influence*, the senator or the play/text/artwork, and I eventually come down with the senator every time. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world? Miller's play will survive longer than McCarthy's influence, in the same way that the statue of Ozymandias outlives Ozymandias's empire? Perhaps. But McCarthy the senator was not only an *acknowledged* legislator, but a poet in his own way, the artist as con-man who created a story, sold it well enough to seize power and reputation for a time, and by doing so shaped American culture in an arguably greater manner than Miller the playwright - and Miller was, after all, only reacting against McCarthy without incorporating the very real power of the Red Scare's paranoia into his own resistance. Miller's hero in that play was the old man whom the Puritans killed by placing a board on his chest and piling large rocks on top of it: his final words were, "More weight." It's a beautiful story, but it doesn't strike me as a particularly inspiring way of counteracting Red Scare-type hysteria, or even stopping it before it starts. Miller's play fulfills Thomas Jefferson's prophecy, the one about how the tree of liberty must be watered from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants, but there still seems to be too much fatalism and self-fulfillment there.

So what can war stories *do*? Ideally, good war stories would provide an artist-manipulator figure with the countermoves necessary to go against someone like McCarthy and win, story against story. Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators" quote has a real point if you consider certain politician leaders to be artists: The storyteller will lead, not the professor. Philosopher-kings only exist Platonically. Professors like Arthur Schlesinger, Kennedy's advisor, failed to deal with and manipulate the basic root story of infantile-masculine power politics between JFK and Khrushchev. Schlesinger realized that "the ultimate choice is between messianism and maturity" (quoted in Baritz, 29), but he couldn't sculpt that into a counter-story, a synthesis-story, of why maturity is *better* - and yes, even more *glamorous*.

For Baritz's call to reflection, to "struggle with the oyster until we grasp the black pearl" (349) is accurate. Learn the basic moves from the stories. Debunk the facile narratives until you get to the marrow of experience. From this you learn themes - and from a strong knowledge of themes, you recognize their recurring nature and play variations off them in order to shape experience. This is what storytelling is all about once the book isn't being read any more and the audience has left the fire-circle.



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