2   Gustav Hasford's Gothic Poetics of Demystification

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Introduction

Gustav Hasford is one of the most important novelists of the Vietnam War and one of the many ghosts of that war who continue to haunt us, though more people are familiar with the film adaptation of his first novel, *The Short-Timers* (1979), made into *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) by Stanley Kubrick, than they are with Hasford himself. Although Kubrick initially only wanted to give Hasford dialogue-writing credit, Hasford fought for and won the right to be credited as screenwriter (alongside Michael Herr), but he refused to change the original title of his novel to link it to Kubrick's film (Ross, *An Examination* 47–59). As a result, few people recognize Hasford's name, and fewer still have heard of the sequel, *The Phantom Blooper* (1990). Published on the eve of the first Gulf War, in a gathering storm of militarism and a collective desire to "kick the Vietnam syndrome," *The Phantom Blooper* made hardly a ripple before sinking out of sight. Hasford himself, after a moment of fame in the wake of *Full Metal Jacket,* and a brief but cruel moment of disgrace after his arrest for library book theft, left the United States for a Greek island where he allowed a combination of diabetes and alcohol to take his life. Though he had started his literary career with plans for a third Vietnam book and many other projects, including a Civil War story and a novel about a woman president, Hasford's chief claim to literary fame would remain his first book, *The Short-Timers*, while *The Phantom Blooper* – a more mature and thoughtful work – remains in the shadows.[1]

Together, the two novels depict the journey of the young protagonist, "Joker" (James T. Davis), into the heart of the war in Vietnam, geographically and morally, figured as a descent into hell and back. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* both haunt Hasford's narrative, since Joker's journey is also a descent into madness and loss of self as well as a radical critique of American imperialism. Like many veteran authors, Hasford turned away from conventional realist representation, but not to the postmodernism associated with Tim O'Brien or Michael Herr, where Vietnam is essentially unknowable, and every grunt's story is both true and not true (and anyway, "It don't mean nothing"), nor to the comforts of male melodrama in which war trauma is redeemed as a rite of passage (such as Stone's *Platoon*). Hasford turned to the grim toolbox of the literary

and cinematic Gothic.[2] In this respect, Hasford follows in the footsteps of Ambrose Bierce, British war poets such as Wilfred Owen, and American novelists Ernest Hemingway and William March (in works such as "A Natural History of the Dead" and *Company K,* respectively).

Yet few writers have used the Gothic to the extent and with the ferocity that Hasford does. At the heart of his two war novels lies a cluster-bomb of key Gothic tropes, including the werewolf, the vampire, the zombie, and the ghost or phantom, all of which are used to lay siege to the American myths and self-deceptions (about Vietnam, about veterans, and about American society) that led to the Vietnam War. These tropes, as well as the Gothic themes and imagery of the novels, allow Hasford to pursue his multi-fronted project of demystification by telling some of what he calls some "unendurable truths" (*The Phantom Blooper,* henceforth cited as PB 6). The most important one of these is the idea that nearly sixty thousand Americans (and millions of Vietnamese) died in Vietnam for *nothing*. If the war was a mistake, a product of American arrogance, ignorance and greed, as Hasford's two novels suggest, then there is no way to see its casualties as anything except victims of a meaningless waste of bodies and lives – a grotesque farce[3]. This is the disenchanted truth that only the Gothic genre permits Hasford to express in all its ugliness and bodily materiality.[4]

The first section of *The Short-Timers,* "The Spirit of the Bayonet," is set on Parris Island and focuses on six weeks of basic training, while the second chapter, "Body Count," is set in Vietnam, first in Danang and then Hue, during the immediate aftermath of the Tet Offensive. The last, "Grunts," is the darkest, set during the siege of Khe Sahn. Each section ends with the death of one of Joker's friends – Leonard, Rafter Man, Cowboy – and each death pushes Joker further into insanity. The last chapter is like a Gothic prose poem set in hell, an analogy that Hasford invites with an explicit reference to Dante's *Inferno*: "ALL HOPE ABANDON, YE WHO ENTER HERE" reads the sign at the entrance to the besieged base. However, the iconography in this chapter is not a Christian one of devils but a modern secular and Gothic one of skulls, skeletons, hybrid metal monsters and men "like pale lizards" hiding in trenches that smell like graves (*The Short-Timers,* henceforth abbreviated as ST, 144). Published a decade later, *The Phantom Blooper* is structured as an inverted mirror to the first, beginning in Khe Sahn, followed by a long middle section where another key transformation occurs – Joker's gradual self-reconstruction and return from madness through a year's captivity and life in a National Liberation Front-controlled village – and finally a chapter about his return to the United States. Once more, each chapter ends with a scene of violence, the first with Joker's best friend, Black John Wayne, incinerated by a flame thrower, the second with the brutal annihilation of the Vietnamese village by American troops, and the third in Joker's family home. The ending is not an escape from hell so much as a realization that he will carry it with him forever, both as scars on his face and body, and as the killer reflexes that he has been taught by the U.S. military.

Every step of Joker's narrative arc is figured in terms of Gothic imagery. He and the other recruits become like "werewolves" at Parris Island, they move like "ghosts" through the jungle, and they are "nightmare men in the dark" at Khe Sahn (*The Short-Timers,* henceforth cited as ST 144). When Joker is shot in *The Phantom Blooper* he becomes "a big white zombie" for several months (43), a trope he also uses to describe a Vietnamese child who has become mute after a bombing attack: "Battle Mouth is a zombie with a near terminal case of the thousand-yard stare" (PB 127). When he is taken to an underground Liberation Front headquarters, he compares the reaction he gets to that of a movie monster: "I am *The Thing* that just arrived from outer space aboard a UFO" (PB 114). Finally, the novel ends with a disfigured Joker joking that he looks like Frankenstein's monster (PB 183). These references comprise a deliberate choice to frame the two novels in a Gothic tradition that places the twentieth-century horror film at its center. Movie monsters figure prominently among Hasford's Gothic references because the general rhetorical thrust of the novels is toward exaggeration and hyperbole in the service of being as clear and accessible as possible. This rhetorically exaggerated quality of Hasford's can be compared to Flannery O'Connor's explanation of her Southern Gothic style, which she described as a strategy for addressing an audience that does not share the same beliefs and vision of the world:

> The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures. ("Fiction Writer" 34)

Although O'Connor writes about religious beliefs, Hasford's ideological differences with mainstream America pose the same rhetorical problem: writing for an audience that perceives the world in a radically different way. Instead of religion, Hasford considers political ideology as the cause of the "distortions" in perception that allow Americans to "drop bombs bigger than Volkswagens on barefoot peasants twelve thousand miles from home and call it self-defense" (PB 216). Like O'Connor's Southern Gothic, Hasford's War Gothic shouts at its readers and draws "large and startling figures" in order to shock its audience into seeing the true violence hidden underneath highly naturalized and sanitized representations of war and military training. This kind of naturalization is the work of ideology and since Hasford's self-imposed task as a novelist is to pierce the smooth

and untroubled surface of myths and images pertaining to military training and experience, he often resorts to graphic Gothic imagery to do so.

Basic Training: Madness and Monstrosity

On the first page, Joker describes Parris Island, the Marine training facility in South Carolina, as "constructed in a swamp on an island, symmetrical but sinister like a suburban death camp" (ST 3). We should notice its isolation ("an island"), its Southern Gothic setting ("swamp"), and the startling comparison to a "death camp." This description is typical of the Gothic hyperbole described by O'Connor above. In using this comparison, Hasford is not suggesting that men are literally killed in basic training (though some are[5]) but that recruits are figuratively destroyed in order to be "reborn" as killers (the "spirit of the bayonet," as the section is called, is to "kill, kill, kill"). The figure who oversees this transformation is Sergeant Gerheim, "an obscene little ogre in immaculate khaki" (4). Scholars have commented on the Drill Instructor's language, in which recruits are called "maggots," "scumbags," "pukes," and "little pieces of amphibian shit" as well as "ladies" in order to emphasize their figurative dehumanization and their initial transformation into formless beings defined by dirt, liquidity and femininity.[6] We can note how Gerheim is himself "immaculate" in contrast, representing the ideal that recruits are forced to aspire to: pure, hard, violent. The training consists of beatings and humiliations as well as grueling physical exercise and weapons training. Recalling some of the earliest English Gothic novels, the recruits are imprisoned, forbidden to speak, tortured, and driven mad. Their civilian selves are gone forever, as good as dead, and in their place are born a hundred young killers.[7]

Although Joker is the narrator, this first chapter focuses on another recruit named Leonard Pratt (derisively nicknamed "Gomer Pyle" by Gerheim). Leonard struggles in basic training – seemingly resistant to what Joker himself calls the "brainwashing" performed by basic training – and becomes the butt of Gerheim's violence on many occasions, but also of the group's collective violence at one point when they stage a kind of symbolic gang rape, holding him down while each recruit pummels him with a bar of soap slung in a towel. This nocturnal beating is a turning point for both Leonard and Joker. Betrayed by his only friend, Leonard slips into madness, thereby becoming, ironically, but also tellingly, a "model recruit" – concentrated, motivated and "squared away" – though his eyes are "milky glass" and he talks to himself (18). Pratt/Pyle literally loses himself in the military – his original personality disappears – and he seems literally possessed by "the spirit of the bayonet," or by his rifle (which talks to him).

Joker's transformation is less dramatic but no less definitive. He feels "tears flung from his eyes" as he betrays Leonard and he beats him all the harder for it, as if punishing Leonard for eliciting this feminized liquid and emotion in his body. It is the last time Joker weeps for anyone in the two

books. Even when his best friend Rafter Man is run over by a tank later in *The Short-Timers*, he says "I want so much to cry, but I can't cry—I'm too tough" (129). This "toughness" is what being a Marine means in Joker's world, and it is defined by having a "hard heart" and a "killer instinct" (13). It is also clearly a form of insanity. If Leonard's madness is obvious because he shoots Gerheim and then himself, what is equally obvious in Hasford's novel – but completely suppressed in Kubrick's adaptation – is that all the other recruits, including Joker, are equally mad. When Joker, who has already woken up with his rifle in his bed, unable to remember how it got there, mentions that Leonard speaks to his weapon, others begin to tell him of their own rifles talking to them. Thus, Hasford's critique of the military is far more radical than the commonplace notion that war damages soldiers. Hasford's point is that the damage is already well underway in the course of military training. Moreover, this is not an unfortunate side effect nor something that only affects weak recruits, but the whole point of the treatment they receive: they are all broken and warped into becoming men who kill without hesitation or conscience, i.e., monsters.

Hasford ends this first chapter on a surrealistically Gothic note, driving home the fact that all the recruits are as mad as Leonard. The scene breaks off from realism into a hallucinatory Gothic mode from the moment Leonard shoots Gerheim. At that instant, the drill instructor becomes "suddenly calm": "His face is cold and beautiful as the dark side surfaces. He smiles. It is not a friendly smile, but an evil smile, as though Sergeant Gerheim were a werewolf baring its fangs" (29–30). As he dies, Gerheim shows his true face, and Hasford is anxious to make clear that this face is evil, a "dark side." After Gerheim and Leonard are dead, Joker does not call the police or notify anyone, as he would in a realistic narrative. Instead, bizarrely, he turns off the lights and orders the men back to bed. In his rack, he pulls his rifle into his arms and she talks to him as the scene becomes even darker and more surreal: "blood pours out of the barrel of my rifle and flows up onto my hands. The blood moves. The blood breaks up into living fragments. Each fragment is a spider. Millions and millions of tiny red spiders of blood are crawling up my arms, across my face, into my mouth" (32). This horrific fantasy, a "large and startling" picture, uses Gothic imagery to show that military training is a madness-inducing process that leaves Joker in as devastated a psychological state as the now-dead Leonard. The image of blood transforming into red spiders flowing from his rifle to his mouth is a vivid image of violation and loss of personal boundaries and self. It is in this figurative sense that Hasford depicts Parris Island as a "death camp" for recruits.

The Gothic monster that Hasford evokes at the moment of Gerheim's death, the werewolf, becomes the dominant trope for this transformation, here and throughout the novel. The chapter ends with Joker in bed with his rifle, surrounded by "a hundred young werewolves with guns in their hands" (33). The figure of the werewolf appears again when Joker and

Cowboy's squad enter Hue amidst sniper fire and artillery: "We double-time, werewolves with guns, panting" (99). In addition to being a metaphor for the "killer instinct" Gerheim wished to awaken, the werewolf also represents a dissolution of the individual into the pack, into violence itself: "You are not a person anymore. You don't have to be who you are anymore. You're part of an attack, one green object in a line of green objects, running toward a breach" (98). The werewolf trope also reappears just after Joker has shot his wounded friend Cowboy. Placed at the end of the novel, the scene represents Joker's nadir on his journey into the darkness, as well as an analogy for America's situation in the war-as-quagmire more generally, and he embraces it with bitter stoicism: "*Semper Fi*, my werewolf children" (179). Here, the link between a reconstructed military identity and the werewolf as trope is made as explicit as it can be – being a Marine means being a killer beast, in Hasford's world. This is why Joker reacts to the traumatic experience of killing his friend with a reiteration of his Marine identity, "Semper Fi," as well as an image of the other Marines as werewolves. In fact, he accepts his place as father of his "werewolf children," stepping into the role once occupied by Gerheim. Traditionally, the werewolf legend represents an eruption of the beast within the civilized man, but more importantly, it represents an irreversible transformation into a killer. The modern werewolf, like "the wolf man" (played by Lon Chaney) in the 1941 Universal Pictures movie, is a tragic figure because he cannot stop himself from changing into werewolf form. His lycanthropy is a terrible curse that leads him to attack people he cares about and to writhe in moral agony when he resumes human form and sees what he has done. The ending of the film is particularly poignant because he attacks his own father and is killed by him with the silver cane that he himself gave him as protection. The allegorical possibilities of this movie monster clearly had traction for Hasford, who saw the Vietnam War as a betrayal of America's soldier sons: "Even animals protect their young," he wrote bitterly in a 1980 editorial ("Still Gagging").

If the werewolf returns repeatedly throughout the novel as a metaphor for the animalistic killer instincts inculcated in trained Marines, another Gothic figure – the vampire – is used to represent the predatory nature of the officer class, a concept that also returns throughout Hasford's novels. The scene takes place just after Joker's friend Rafter Man has been cut in two by an American tank, an event that leaves Joker wanting "so much to cry" and triggers a long passage of memories (ST 129). In a book with almost no flashbacks, Joker's grief is represented by a striking sequence of memories of his first encounters with death, as a witness and as a killer. It is at this moment of crisis that a passing officer stops Joker on the road and interrogates him about his peace button and failure to salute. The scene is important because the distinction between "grunt" (simple infantryman) and "poge" (officers and career military men, especially those who abuse their authority by harassing hierarchical inferiors) is one of Hasford's

signature obsessions. Complaining about superior officers is a common feature of war literature – Paul Fussell has an entire chapter on it in his book on World War II called "Chickenshit, An Anatomy" – but Hasford elevates it to a personal metaphysics (*Wartime* 79–95). More dangerous even than enemy soldiers, poges are psychological predators: "They want to kill you on the inside" (ST 135). Like the scene following Leonard's death, the passage with the vampire officer begins realistically but veers into Gothic fantasy as the colonel, whose skin seems "too white" and whose smile is cold, "grins, and bares his vampire fangs" (139). Noticing another Marine in the back of the colonel's truck, curled in a fetal position and with "many, many" punctures in his neck, Joker punches the officer in the chest with his "wooden bayonet" (139). Possibly a trauma-triggered Gothic hallucination, the effects of the encounter are real enough: Joker discovers upon his return to his outfit that he has been demoted from journalist to infantryman (grunt) and sent to Khe Sanh, thus suggesting that the encounter with the colonel really did happen. More important than the question of whether the scene is real or not, Hasford suggests that officers like this colonel, who use their rank to harass men for petty infractions, are figuratively like vampires, feeding psychologically off hierarchical inferiors, as addicted to power as vampires are to blood.

Entering the Inner Circle: Bathos as Shock Therapy

In the third chapter of *The Short-Timers,* just after the incident with the vampire colonel, the Gothic mode takes over entirely. The chapter begins with a surreal description of the bombing campaign around Khe Sanh: "Rolling thunder. Clouds float across the white moon, clouds like great metal ships. Black wings beating; enormous objects falling" (ST 143). These enormous objects are bombs, dropped by the "droning death birds," knocking holes in the "black and wet" earth as the wind "roars, hisses, whispers seductively" (ST 143). Khe Sanh is a Gothic military outpost located in a nightmare land, under siege by forty thousand "determined little men" (ST 143). One should notice that Hasford never uses Gothicizing descriptions of the VC or North Vietnamese, who are consistently portrayed as tough and admirable "grunts." In this respect, Hasford scrupulously avoids the racialist conventions of what Johan Höglund calls "Imperial Gothic," a conservative form of the Gothic that stages colonial encounters as battles between civilized Western "good" and barbaric non-Western, often racially marked (as "black" or "dark") "evil" forces (*The American Imperial Gothic* 3). Rather, the Gothicized figures in Hasford's fiction are Joker's fellow Marines stationed at Khe Sanh. Earlier, as discussed above, they have been compared to werewolves. Here they are "shadows in the earth," sleeping in holes that are "little graves and hold the rich, damp odor of the grave" (143). Joker listens "to the sounds of the horror that is everywhere," and surrenders to his Gothic nightmares: "in my dreams of blood I make love to a skeleton. Bones

click, the earth moves, my testicles explode" (144). Even in his waking life, the surrealism of the earlier scenes is back: "I sleep on steel, my face on a pillow of blood," only now the reader wonders if maybe this is literally true in the desperate conditions of the besieged outpost.

Yet, beyond the dangers and discomforts of the Khe Sanh outpost, the true hellishness of this last chapter of *The Short-Timers* – its true source of despair – is in the loss of hope that any of their actions has any meaning. Neither Joker nor his men believe any longer that there is any value in what they are doing and suffering; instead, they all know that "getting killed over here is a waste of time" (161). As for helping the Vietnamese, "Don't kid yourself," Animal Mother says to a New Guy, "this is a slaughter," echoing the same words Joker has used to explain the war to Rafter Man (159). "In this world of shit," Animal Mother continues, "monsters live forever and everyone else dies. If you kill for fun, you're a sadist. If you kill for money you're a mercenary. If you kill for both, you're a Marine" (158). Thus, what makes Khe Sanh truly hellish is not its perils but its pointlessness, as all illusions about the war and military service have been stripped away.

The Gothic image that dominates this chapter is a skull, "charred black" and wired with "old felt Mouskateer ears, which are getting a little moldy," that the recruits have named "Sorry Charlie" (147–8). Again, like Flannery O'Connor, Hasford borrows from the repertoire of the Gothic and comic grotesque in order to drive home his point that war is essentially nothing but death, evoking the earliest Gothic novels, which often featured skulls found in dungeons and underground passages, a tradition that itself stretches back to Jacobean revenge plays and medieval iconography of the *memento mori* and *dance macabre*. Like a Gothic mascot, or the skull in the WWII photograph on Tarawa (see Figure 0.3 in the "Introduction"), Sorry Charlie has been mounted on a spike outside the outpost and greets the Marines on their way in and out: "the dark, clean face of death smiles at us with his charred teeth, his inflexible ivory grin" (148). The skull grins for the same reason that Hasford uses black comedy throughout his novels, especially *The Short-Timers*, and why his hero is called "Joker." Stripping war of its illusions, mystification and legitimating rhetoric leaves the soldier reduced to his body: "My son the meat," as Hasford wrote in a 1972 poem ("Bedtime Story" 41). This revelation is comic in the sense that all movements from high to low, from inflated rhetoric to material reality, result in bathos, which is technically a form of comedy. Thus, Hasford's Gothic demystification is done in a darkly comic key, though the intended effect is not laughter but horror, and ultimately, out of that horror, compassion. As Thomas Meyers argues, underneath Hasford's Gothic devices – a "danse macabre unprecedented in American war fiction … is a substratum of moral sympathy and humanism that battles continuously with the novel's drift toward pure horror" (117). This undercurrent of "humanism" and compassion is what gives the black humor its critical and ethical edge and prevents the novel from being merely cynical.

The last scene of *The Short-Timers* – when Joker has to kill a wounded and dying Cowboy – illustrates this perfectly. Although the scene is by far the most wrenching in the book, Joker shooting his best friend to spare him from slow dismemberment, Joker narrates Cowboy's death in starkly physiological and demystifying terms: "My bullet passes through his eye socket, punches through fluid-filled sinus cavities, through membranes, arteries, muscle tissue, through the tiny blood vessels that feed three pounds of gray butter-soft high-protein meat where brain cells arranged like jewels in a clock hold every thought and memory and dream of one adult male *homo sapiens*" (178). The medical vocabulary of eye sockets, sinus cavities and "high-protein meat" insists upon the fragility, what Judith Butler would call the "precariousness," of the body (Butler, *Precarious Life* 25–26). Then Joker makes a joke: "Man-oh-man, Cowboy looks like a bag of leftovers from a V.F.W. barbecue" (179). Specifying the barbeque as a "V.F.W." (Veterans of Foreign Wars) event complicates the joke still further: veterans eating meat, but living now with the unbearable knowledge gained in war that all men are meat. A Swiftean hint of cannibalism lurks in this scenario. Finally, the expression "man-oh-man" gives another layer of rhetorical perversity to the line, invoking humanity ("man") but only as a linguistic expression, a trope, its hollow repetition only making more apparent the void in the center – the "oh" – revealing the term "man" as a mere sign , camouflaging the illusion that human bodies are anything more than "bags of blood, easy to puncture and quick to drain," as Joker describes them (ST 32).

The dark humor and grotesque puns in the novels all relentlessly emphasize this dynamic of demystification by means of materialization, of forcing readers to remember that the whole point of combat is the injuring of bodies. As Elaine Scarry points out in *The Body in Pain*, the official language of battle and warfare tends to obscure the reality of the body, separating the physical body that is opened and maimed from its abstracted political or ideological meaning, camouflaging the fact that the whole point of war is the maiming and killing of bodies (60–68). In short, military and conventional war discourse tends to make "the centrality of the act of injuring in war … disappear" (80). Hasford's project, like Scarry's and Butler's, consists of reminding readers that war reduces everyone to their most physical and vulnerable state, and that the result is the transformation of humans into dead bodies. As Joker puts it, "Exhibit A, formerly a person, now two hundred pounds of fractured meat" (ST 102). Besides the joke about Cowboy discussed above, there are countless throw-away lines that perform the same demystifying function. When a man named Winslow is killed in *The Short-Timers*, Joker quips, "It took a lot of guts to do what Winslow did. I mean, you can see Winslow's guts and he sure had a lot of them" (73). Similarly, when the female sniper is killed, Animal Mother chops off her feet and puns, "Rest in pieces, bitch" (ST 120). Body dismemberment is the main theme of almost all the black humor in the novel.

Haunting and the Impossibility of Going Home

The project of radical demystification continues and expands in *The Phantom Blooper*, which picks up where the first novel left off, during the siege of Khe Sahn, only now the Marines are on the eve of evacuating the outpost and so everything is all the more senseless, the deaths of soldiers there utterly in vain, clearly meant as an analogy for Vietnam itself.[8] The base is being stalked by a mysterious sniper called "the Phantom Blooper," an uncanny figure who is both real and symbolic, and who had already appeared briefly in *The Short-Timers* as a "white Victor Charlie recon" who had been "wasted" by Marines (ST 58). The fact that the Phantom Blooper is reported killed in the first novel but is back in the second emphasizes that he is more of a mythological (and ideological) figure than a realistic character. In fact, no one ever sees the Phantom Blooper in the novel, except one scout sniper who sees him through his Starlight Scope and goes "plain fucking crazy" in midsentence as he tries to describe him (5). Black John Wayne, a character who serves as the moral center in this first section, explains the Phantom Blooper as a rhetorical figure for political awakening: "Don't you know why the Phantom Blooper is here, man? The Phantom Blooper has come to take your white ass to school" (24). A former Marine who has switched sides, the Phantom Blooper is "the one incorruptible bearer of the one unendurable truth: 'Go home'" (6). In other words, the war is a mistake. In changing sides, the Phantom Blooper has confused the categories of friend and enemy, us and them, but made one thing clear: the war is not the crusade for freedom and democracy as which the United States government has described it. An American guerrilla like the Minuteman during the American Revolution, the Phantom Blooper signifies that the United States has lost its way and become the repressive colonial power it once revolted against. The Phantom Blooper also represents a return of the repressed: Joker describes him as "the dark spirit of our collective bad conscience, made real and dangerous," recalling Edgar Allan Poe's story "William Wilson," in which the suppressed conscience of the protagonist returns as a mysterious figure that follows him around whispering unwanted advice and spoiling his schemes by making him aware of the consequences on his victims (6). The Phantom Blooper stands in a similarly privileged relationship to the real: "The Phantom Blooper's grasp of the situation is too damned precise and if we listen to him we'll all go plain fucking crazy," Joker says in the first chapter, though he himself is arguably quite mad at this point (53). By the end of the novel, not only Joker has come to see that the Phantom Blooper was right, he has *become* the Phantom Blooper himself, a "white Victor Charlie" who has joined the Vietnamese. As a result, he is diagnosed as mad by the military psychiatrist (a man whose job it is to tell you, Joker says, that "shit is ice cream, and that you owe it to yourself to hurry back to the war with a positive attitude and slaughter people … because if you don't, you're crazy") and released as a "Section Eight," a medical discharge for the mentally ill (PB 194).

The question of Joker's sanity brings us to the main theme and conceit of *The Phantom Blooper*, which is haunting, possession and the many ways that a veteran can never truly go home. "Only the dead have seen the last of war," Plato's famous epithet opens the final chapter and signals Hasford's thesis in this novel: the damage and madness caused by military training and war can never be undone. The war lodges itself in your brain, Joker writes, like a "black crab feeding" (ST 176). He literally loses part of himself while unconscious earlier in Hue in *The Short-Timers*, when his "Body," "Mind," and "Spirit" (a reference to a 1960s Marine recruiting poster that claimed the "Marine Corps builds men: Body, Mind, Spirit") enter into a surreal three-way discussion that ends with "Spirit" refusing to return ("Tell the man I'm missing in action"), leaving Joker's "Body" and "Mind" to regain consciousness without a soul (ST 104).

Throughout most of the two novels, however, Joker is not only mad or alienated from himself but also possessed: first, by the hard and violent "spirit of the bayonet" (as we could call Sergeant Gerheim's teachings) and later by Gerheim himself. In *The Phantom Blooper,* which begins shortly after Cowboy's death and after he has lost his "Spirit," Joker is literally out of control: he exposes the Kid from Brooklyn to the Phantom Blooper's sniper fire on purpose, getting him killed, and slices another man's tongue in two. As the novel opens, a nude Joker is strutting "fists-on-hips like a Parris Island Drill Instructor" on the edge of the base, yelling, "LISTEN UP, MAGGOT!" (PB 3). This imitation of Gerheim's characteristically violent monologues, addressing recruits as "ladies" or "maggots" or "pukes," is followed by a strange rant in which Joker seems possessed by militaristic language itself, spewing a series of clichés and slogans from history and film: "DAMN THE TORPEDOES, FULL SPEED AHEAD! I HAVE NOT YET BEGUN TO FIGHT! GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH! DON'T TREAD ON ME! SEND MORE CONG! SEND MORE CONG!" (3). One way to understand this scene is to see Joker as literally possessed by the spirit of militarism that Gerheim represents. The scene is in fact like a Gothic version or parody of the classic moment in war cinema when an admired commanding officer dies and transmits his values to a grieving acolyte.[9] In Hasford's novel, Joker ventriloquizes Gerheim's voice, as he has largely adopted Gerheim's values, starting with his instructions to Leonard, "I teach Leonard to value his rifle as he values his life. I teach him that blood makes the grass grow" (11). Later in the first novel Joker complains that he has been away from combat too long: "I mean, a day without blood is like a day without sunshine" (66). And so when the second novel opens and Joker is at his most violent and crazy, he also sounds exactly like Gerheim when he speaks to a New Guy: "What is your major malfunction, numbnuts? ... I can't hear you, you spineless piece of lowlife ... You better sound off like you got a pair, or I will personally unscrew your head and shit in your shoulders" (18). The relationship of Joker's imitation of Gerheim to the conventional war film is essentially that of parody and satire, a *reductio*

ad absurdum, but in a Gothic mode, where what has been transmitted from military father to son is not a set of values but a form of aggressive insanity.

From madness as extreme as Joker's, the novel suggests, no one fully recovers. Although no longer possessed at the end of novel, Joker is still haunted. Thus, the trope of haunting dominates the last chapter, as Joker realizes that he cannot really go home, because, as he predicted in the first book already: "Home won't be there anymore and we won't be there either" (ST 176). When Joker is released from the veteran's hospital, he returns to Alabama and sees a "haunted region" (216). Ghosts of the Civil War, long-gone Indian settlements, and economic decay make the South an uncanny and Gothic space: "Looking through the smoked glass of the bus window is like watching a movie. I see an abandoned black tarpaper shack with broken windows like open mouths. The inevitable stripped and rusting car bodies sit in the weedy front yard next to the inevitable collapsing tool shed" (PB 216). The sensation of inauthenticity – "like a movie" – intensifies as he arrives in Russellville: "My real hometown has been taken away and a replica left behind" (222). Similarly, standing in his childhood room, he feels like he's "in a motel room" (226). These descriptions of detachment and alienation echo the estrangement felt by many veterans in war literature and fiction. One thinks immediately of Hemingway's oddly affectless Krebs in "Soldier's Home" (1925) or the numb protagonist of Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) standing dazedly in a supermarket after returning from his tour as IED expert in Iraq.

In Joker's case, however, the feeling of inauthenticity is not only a symptom of trauma – though it is also this – but a new perception of the falseness of American society, especially its self-serving rejection of "unpleasant facts" and truths, such as the Vietnam War itself. The trope of the phantom appears at this moment as well: "Black John Wayne saw it all: you stay here and live with us in our constructed phantom paradise if you promise to pay lip service to the lies we live by" (216). The word "phantom" takes on a new meaning here: as spectral or fake, referring to what Joker sees as the self-deluded character of American society: "we lie to ourselves about everything and we believe ourselves every time" (216). In contrast, Joker feels "real" when he is in Vietnam, not as a Marine but as a Viet Cong fighter: "The only time I felt like I was being what an American should be and doing what an American should be doing was when I was a prisoner of the Viet Cong. I could be real there. I could be myself ... When I was a fighter in the Viet Cong, life was not a talk show" (237–238). The image of the "talk show" for life in the United States underscores what Joker sees as its empty and superficial nature, based on lies and euphemism. His own mother is a perfect example of this: "deaf and dumb to any unpleasant reality," she tells Joker to "forget what happened overseas" (237). "Just pretend it never happened," she urges, "Put it out of your mind" (232). His mother finds pictures Joker has brought home – photos of dead bodies that the Army psychiatrist gave him – and burns them in order to destroy any reminders of

Vietnam, but Joker only laughs. "I got pictures of Viet Nam tattooed all over my body," he says, referring to his scars: "What are you going to do, burn me too?" (237). Joker knows that he will always belong to the war some-how – not only because of his scars – but also because of his ghosts: "When friends die, they own you. I am a haunted house; men live in me" (211).

With the image of the haunted house, Joker acknowledges that he remains a man possessed by others, and not only by friends. Gerheim is among these ghosts dwelling inside him. When Joker loses his temper at his stepfather, who accuses him of having shirked his responsibilities while in Vietnam – "You been living high on the hog in the service, eating our tax money, but now your free ride is over" – Gerheim's voice emerges again. "Just what is your major malfunction, numbnuts?" Joker yells at his step-father while forcing him to hold a loaded pistol to his own head (232). Joker screams at him in Gerheim's signature capital letters: "DO IT! DO IT NOW!" The scene ends with Joker shooting the gun into the kitchen floor as his stepfather says, "You're a killer now, boy. You got blood on your hands. Your kind don't fit in. You don't belong here no more" (233). While we don't agree with the stepfather on most things – he is made into a hateful and cowardly character – we are forced to see that Joker is indeed permanently changed by his journey into madness and war. He realizes that "America has made me a killer" (220), and as the Marine Code Manual insists, "Becoming a Marine is a transformation that cannot be undone."[10]

This brings me to a final point that makes Hasford's two novels quintes-sentially Gothic: their staging of an irreconcilable double-bind for the reader. Like many Gothic novels, *The Short-Timers* and *The Phantom Bloooper* are narrated by an unreliable narrator: a character that is engaging but prob-lematic since we cannot fully identify with or approve of his values. Thus, the experience of the reader of Hasford's fiction, like that of Shelley's *Fran-kenstein* or Morrison's *Beloved*, is a moral aporia or impasse. As I argued in *The Poetics and the Politics of the American Gothic*, the Gothic stages situations that scandalize conventional standards of judgment and leave the reader suspended in a critical attitude of ethical ambivalence. While a real-life situation of moral impasse would be uncomfortable, an experience of fiction-based aporia is pleasurable the way that a fiction-based experience of fear is pleasurable. Hasford's novels present us with a protagonist whose witty and cynical perspective on the hellish landscapes that he navigates from Parris Island to Vietnam and then back to the American South is both compelling and repellent. It is compelling in that Joker is more complex and insightful than most of the people he encounters but his graphically violent narrative is also repellent because he himself becomes a cold-hearted killer and remains one. As he realizes in *The Short-Timers* after killing an unarmed "ancient farmer": "what you do, you become … and no amount of insight could ever alter the cold, hard fact of what I had done" (ST 133).

To illustrate what I mean by a moral aporia, I would like to end with the two most important examples of such moments in the two novels: Joker's

mercy killing of Cowboy and the almost unreadable scene in *The Phantom Blooper* of torture and revenge on an American pimp. The killing of Cow-boy by Joker has been the subject of much critical commentary,[11] so I would mainly point out that it is viewed in mutually irreconcilable terms – as both necessary and unforgiveable – even by his own men. Cowboy has been shot and is slowly being dismembered by a sniper who has done the same thing to several other men. In fact, Cowboy has sacrificed himself in order to offer mercy killings to the wounded Alice, Doc Jay and the New Guy, but the sniper shoots off his hand as he tries to turn his gun on himself. Animal Mother and the other squad members are ready to get themselves also killed by trying to run out and save Cowboy, so Joker has no choice but to shoot him in order to save the squad. After shooting Cowboy in the face, Joker observes: they "hate my guts, but they know I am right." Nevertheless, Joker knows that "they'll never see me again; I'll be invisible" (178). In other words, Joker has cut himself off irrevocably from the squad. His mercy kill-ing may have been "right," but it was still unforgiveable, and it transforms Joker into a kind of ghost or phantom himself as he becomes invisible even to his own men.

The scene in *The Phantom Blooper* poses even more of a dilemma. It is a scene of physical cruelty that mobilizes the classic Gothic problematic of the exaggerated revenge and is also a direct attack on Kubrick's opportunistic decision to insert two prostitution scenes into his film adaptation of Has-ford's novel, which scrupulously avoids sexually exploitative material. Two Marines, Beaver Cleaver and Funny Gunny, run a brothel offering only Eur-asian girls – children of French soldiers or American spies – under the age of fifteen. They acquire these children by pressuring Vietnamese families to sur-render them and they murder the families who don't comply through their connections to the Phoenix Program, the notorious American covert assas-sination program run from 1965 to 1972 (PB 136). During one of Joker's missions with the Vietnamese guerillas, the child-prostitutes take revenge on their American pimp: "a fireteam of twelve year old girls with hammers" crucify Funny Gunny to a tree and a "blue-eyed strawberry blond" named "Teen Angel" castrates him and sews his penis into his mouth (153). "You Phoenix … I Phoenix *you!*" she says to him, justifying her act as a revenge for the Phoenix program, which relied on targeted kidnappings and assas-sination of suspected Viet Cong operatives and civilian sympathizers. The man looks at Joker with "the same expression" Joker saw on the face of a dying sniper girl in Hue, a scene that is well known through Kubrick's film version. In the earlier scene, Joker performs the mercy killing, as he does again for Cowboy. This time, although the man's eyes "plead for mercy," Joker only dry-fires his pistol at the dying man as he walks away. In a dark reversal of the mercy killing scenes on the first novel, a politically awakened but also much hardened Joker leaves the man to die slowly (154). Even more so than the two killings in the first novel, this scene poses a problem for the reader, who is otherwise often able to identify with Joker. As much

as we sympathize with the exploited children and hate the murderous pimp, this scene leaves us unable to approve of his torture and of Joker's part in it. We are left in an uncomfortable double-bind. This is the very heart of the enduring power of the Gothic genre as a form since it first appeared in the late eighteenth century, namely, the way it stages ethical problems at the event-horizon of our critical judgment, where irreconcilable ethical imperatives clash, feeding into our modern anxiety about how to judge without clear moral blue-prints while insisting that we must judge nonetheless.

By way of conclusion, one might note that *The Phantom Blooper* itself scandalizes judgment and defies easy categorization in American literature and culture. The result is a paradoxical work, denouncing warfare and militarism with intensely graphic violence. By setting out to "mangle fragile civilian sensibilities" Hasford assaults the very public that would be most sympathetic to his critique of the American military. Yet his fiercely critical work remains timely and compelling, intent demystifying war, hoping to pierce our faith in the value of military solutions, and reminding us that every journey into war leaves us permanently changed and forever haunted.

Notes

1. Scholars have almost universally ignored *The Phantom Blooper*. Even recent studies of American war literature like Wallis R. Sanborn's *The American Novel of War* (2012) omit any mention of it.
2. For the limitations of the postmodernist approach to the Vietnam war, see Jim Neilson's excellent *Warring Fictions*, and for the use of melodrama in war narrative, see Soltysik Monnet, "Melodrama and the American Combat Film."
3. Vietnam historiography falls into roughly three camps; the liberal camp which considers the war a tragic misadventure, the more radical version of this which sees it as an inevitably outcome of the imperialist tendencies in American politics, and the revisionist school, which argues that the war was right but America lost because of a lack of nerve. Hasford falls squarely in the second camp and traces its implications to their natural conclusion, namely, that American soldiers who died in the war died in vain. As he writes in a 1980 editorial, citing a Harris poll showing that 63% of the American people feel that Vietnam veterans "were made suckers, having to risk their lives in the wrong place at the wrong time," that Vietnam veterans will probably "go down in history as 'suckers'" ("Still Gagging").
4. I use the term "mode" and "genre" interchangeably in this essay, on the principle that what matters is not how to define and categorize the term "Gothic" but to examine what it does and what it allows us, readers and critics, to do. A fuller discussion of this point can be found in my book (*The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic* 17–20).
5. In the famous Ribbon Creek incident of 1956, a drill instructor on Parris Island led his recruits into a river in an unauthorized night-time exercise, leading to the drowing deaths of six.
6. See especially Zimmerman, pp. 263–275. In fact, Hasford's depiction of Marine values and world-view, as taught by Gerheim, closely resembles the misogynist

ideology of the proto-fascist Freikorps depicted by Klaus Theweleit in his study *Male Fantasies Vol. 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (1987).
7. Hasford's account of basic training seems excessively brutal, but it tallies with Lt. Col. Dave Grossman's study of the changes in military training techniques between World War II and Vietnam. In the wake of S.L.A. Marshall's controversial findings that soldiers in WWII had a 80–85% nonfiring rate in combat, the military adopted a variety of training strategies – which drill instructors themselves would not hesitate to call "brainwashing" techniques – that conditioned recruits psychologically to be prepared to kill without hesitation. In Vietnam, the nonfiring rate had been reduced to 5%, testimony to the success of the military's ability to overcome resistance to killing. According to Grossman, however, the toll on soldiers was a much higher rate of psychological problems during and especially *after* the war (*On Killing* 251–263).
8. In "Still Gagging on the Bitterness of Vietnam," an editorial from 1980, Gustav Hasford insisted that the deaths of his friends in Vietnam were all "for nothing" (Los Angeles Times, 30 April 1980).
9. The classic example of this in American war cinema is John Wayne's death scene as Sgt. Stryker in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), where his death inspires his tearful men and especially the newly converted symbolic son Conway (John Agar) to renew their commitment to the war, accepting his values and even imitating his trademark expressions: "Alright men, saddle up! let's get back in the war."
10. This slogan is also currently featured on the Marine Corp. enlistment website: http://www.enlisting.com/marines.htm.
11. See, for instance, Jeffords, Kinney, Fuchs, Gilman.

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3   Haunted Jungles of Horror and Trauma

Elements of the Gothic in Vietnamese and American War Fiction

John Armstrong

At the climax of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), while the Doors' song "The End" is playing, and the audience watches Colonel Kurtz's final moments, slaughtered like the water buffalo hacked to pieces by the Montagnard village tribe, he utters Joseph Conrad's ambiguous, repetitive phrase, "The horror! The horror!" and we are left wondering about the final vision of Kurtz in those dying eyes: the physical horror of the war in Vietnam, perhaps, in which men, women, and children are shot, bombed, and burned indiscriminately; the repetition and continuation of America's genocidal frontierism, begun on its own soil with the destruction of its indigenous tribes, now laying waste to huge swathes of South-East Asia through bombing, chemical defoliation, and massacre; humanity's seemingly insatiable desire to destroy itself in ever more vile and efficient ways; or his own tortured existential descent into his own heart of darkness. Conrad's Marlow is also left to wonder at the meaning of the simple, repeated phrase: "this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candor, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth – the strange commingling of desire and hate" (101). Francis Ford Coppola's transposition of *Heart of Darkness* from the nineteenth-century jungles of the Congo to the twentieth-century ones of Vietnam and Cambodia is both an expression of the repeating historical parallels of Western colonialism and imperialism and an application of Conrad's late Victorian Gothic narrative and psychological framework. The film plays this out with its hallucinogenic blurring of reality, its doubling of Kurtz and Captain Willard, and its 'closure' in Kurtz's labyrinth (in which he is the Minotaur to Willard's Theseus), a pyramidal temple of an ancient civilization, surrounded by Kurtz's minions and the severed heads of fresh sacrifices of a younger civilization descending into barbarity like its predecessors. Conrad's "appalling face of a glimpsed truth" is perhaps a literary forerunner of Michael Herr's "dripping, laughing death face" that "simply wanted to tell you at last what somehow had not been told" (218) about the war in Vietnam (large sections of the screenplay for *Apocalypse Now* were written by Herr). The Gothic, after all, at least in terms of fiction and film, has often dealt in alternative realities, truths of the imagination which lurk somewhere beyond the quotidian and rational. However, the "vibrating note of revolt" and the "commingling of desire and