“Officer in Charge of the Dead”:
Traumatic Identity and the Autobiographical Self in
Philip Caputo’s A Rumor of War

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Abstract

Philip Caputo’s brilliant and influential 1977 memoir of his experience fighting in the Vietnam War, A Rumor of War is not merely an act of witnessing about the brutality and trauma of war, it is also a moving account of the author’s life as a young Lieutenant in the US Marine Corps in 1965. This paper deals especially with Caputo’s second chapter, which relates his experience as the “Officer in Charge of the Dead;” that is, as the official in charge of the gruesome task of cataloging and counting the dead and tallying up the Marines’ “kill ratio” during the early stages of the conflict in Vietnam. This is also the section of the book that focuses on Caputo’s private reflections on the war, its traumatic effects on him, and his irrational desire to return to the jungle to rejoin the fighting. My analysis of this section of the work relies chiefly on Leigh Gilmore’s (2001) work on traumatic autobiographical writing — i.e., those works which “explore representations of personhood that are skeptical of dominant constructions of the individual and the nation [and are] concerned with the interpenetration of the private and the public, and how its impact is registered in personal, aesthetic, and legal terms.” Much recent trauma theory focuses on the role of witnessing (Laub 2009) and the psychic importance of claiming one’s role as a survivor (Caruth 1996); however, Gilmore’s approach allows us to situate the work of the traumatic memoir within the scope of literary and juridical history, and to understand traumatic identity as a form of aesthetic self-reinvention. In Caputo’s case this self-reinvention relies on a modernist narrative style that undermines official military discourse by resorting to ironic self-distancing — i.e., by giving himself the moniker “officer in charge of the dead” he is able to see himself differently and re-write a self capable of accepting his role as survivor.

Keywords: Philip Caputo, memoir, trauma, Modernism, Vietnam war

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I come and go – the Demon tags along,
hanging around me like the air I breathe;
each time I swallow he fills my burning lungs
with sinful cravings never satisfied.

Sometimes (for he knows my love of Art)
He visits in a seductive woman’s form
And with the specious alibis of despair
Inures my lips to squalid appetites.

-- Charles Baudelaire, “Destruction”

A Rumor of War, Philip Caputo’s brilliant 1977 memoir about his experience fighting in the Vietnam War, is not merely an account of the shocking brutality and horror of that conflict, it is also a moving story of a young marine lieutenant who must come to terms with his misdeeds fighting in Indochina in the mid-1960s. One of the great, underappreciated classics of late 20th-century American literature, A Rumor’s power to affect us comes largely from Caputo’s firsthand experience of the trauma and anguish of the war, but it also has a self-consciously aesthetic dimension wherein the author cites the corpus of WWI, “Modernist” war writing of Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Guy Chapman, and others. In chapter epigraphs and allusions, the memoir brackets the young man’s experience of fighting communism in the Far East with the works of the Great War writers. Thus it constructs, out of real personal guilt and loss a literary work which stands boldly in the tradition of twentieth century anti-war writing. Unlike its WWI predecessors, however, Caputo’s memoir is an account of involvement in a conflict infamous for its televisial spectacle, body count fetishism, and massive unpopularity at home. Told from the perspective of one who sees the

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1 I would like to thank Professor Hsu Chiahua of National Central University for her kind assistance in pointing me to Baudelaire’s cafard and for improving my understanding of the French version of this poem. Without her kind help this paper could not have been written.
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brutality and wastefulness of the war first-hand, A Rumor of War relates Caputo’s duties in the field and as a casualty-reporting officer in the First Battalion, Third Marine Corps (the “One-Three”). Responsible for both living and dead men, Caputo is eventually stricken with what appears to be a nervous breakdown and his narrative becomes disjunctive and disoriented as he experiences several surreal (or hyperreal) hallucinations. The night terrors and hallucinations he experiences as a direct result of his duties make him remark the daily deterioration of his condition, a collapse which coincides with the shift in the course of the war from mere monitoring operations to full-scale pitched battles with the Viet Cong. Finally, after his mental breakdown he is again sent back into the field, only to then find himself court-martialed for ordering the assassination of two double-agent citizens of the Republic of Vietnam. In what follows I want to discuss the middle section of the memoir, the portions which relate Caputo’s experiences as “Officer in Charge of the Dead”—i.e., as the official responsible for cataloging the gruesome deaths of GIs and tallying up the all-important “kill ratio” versus the North Vietnamese. For it is in this section that Caputo begins to break with the war effort and start to reconstruct himself as an ethical subject who relies on a self-consciously Modernist aesthetic sense.

Caputo’s direct and highly detailed record of these events from the perspective of a 24 year old Marine officer can, I think, be helpfully read in the light of recent trauma theory and its relation to identity-formation. Much of this theory tries to understand the psychological function of “witnessing” (Laub 2009) and the psychic imperative to claim one’s role (or agency) as a survivor (Caruth 1996). Cathy Caruth, for example, describes the “story of trauma” as:

the narrative of belated experience [which], far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life. […] The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives […] often emerges, indeed, as an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the
unbearable nature of its survival. (Caruth 7)

We quite literally see such double-telling in Caputo’s narrative, especially in the section where he describes his return from R&R in Tokyo only to find himself serving at Marine Headquarters as a casualty-reporting officer in charge of tabulating the kill-ratio on a “scoreboard” so that visiting officers can evaluate the “progress” of the war. Forced to file more and more of these reports as the war wears on and becomes more brutal, he finally learns of the gruesome deaths of several soldiers formerly under his command while in the field. By this point he has become severely sickened by the war, and, looking back on the event from the perspective of the mid-1970s, he writes:

That night, I was given command of a new platoon. They stood in formation in the rain, three ranks deep. I stood front and center, facing them. Devlin, Lockhart, and Bryce were in the first rank, Bryce standing on his one good leg, next to him the faceless Devlin, and then Lockhart with his bruised eye sockets bulging. Sullivan was there too, and Reasoner and all the others, all of them dead except me, the officer in charge of the dead. […] I was proud of them, disciplined soldiers to and beyond the end. They stayed in step even in death. (Caputo 199)

This nightmare, recollected in great clarity, shows Caputo as proudly in control of his platoon, a group of soldiers who have all been killed in reality, and reflects the degree to which his sense of loss has been re-animated by “survivor guilt.” His men, disciplined “to and beyond the end” are still with him, corpses performing for the officer in charge of the dead, at his command and still under his control. Such a lurid dream of control, of being in charge, indicates Caputo’s sense of responsibility for his comrades’ deaths, but it also points to his sense of feeling out of step or sync with the men hitherto under his command. This crisis of life will leave scars that Caputo will try to account throughout the writing of the memoir, leaving deep indents in the structure of the narrative wherever we turn: survival becomes a process of re-visiting those scars and of continuing in a state of “not dying” which will remain difficult at best.

Survivor guilt here also plays the role of calling up Caputo’s subconscious fear of
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losing control, of joining his dead men on the battlefield. And indeed, this is not merely an unconscious fear, for the next morning, awake and talking to his fellow soldiers in the mess hall, he begins to experience disturbing hallucinations:

I saw their living faces across from me and, superimposed on those, a vision of their faces as they would look in death. It was a kind of double exposure. I saw their living mouths moving in conversation and their dead mouths grinning the taut-drawn grins of corpses. Their living eyes I saw, and their dead eyes still-staring. Had it not been for the fear that I was going crazy, I would have found it an interesting experience, a trip such as no drug could possibly produce. Asleep and dreaming, I saw dead men living; awake, I saw living men dead. (emph. mine, 201)

Here the narrative switches from a “double telling” to a harsh double seeing which torments the young man with thoughts of impending madness. Yet, when Caputo takes up the narrative of the next day in his memoir he comments “I did not go crazy, not in the clinical sense, but others did” (201), and goes on to describe how terms like “acute anxiety reaction” and “acute depressive reaction” began appearing in medical and casualty reports. Thinking about these new medical terms, his own nightmares, and the football-like “scoreboard” approach of the generals, he begins to perceive connections between these seemingly unrelated phenomena. He begins to suspect the dreams and hallucinations he has been having are not merely a product of his own fatigue and anxiety but indicative of a widespread contagion, a psychological illness that was being registered in the medical charts and on the battlefield but which was kept out of official records. Caputo then begins to suspect the cafard is not just a mythic ailment but a real illness:

Those men might as well have died in automobile accidents. It made me feel guilty to think about them, guilty about my own comparatively safe life on the staff, guiltier still about being the one who had translated their deaths into numbers on the scoreboard. […] Maybe it was an extreme form of the cafard. One of its symptoms is
a hatred for everything and everyone around you; now I hated myself as well, plunging into morbid depressions and thinking about committing suicide in some socially acceptable way—say, by throwing myself on an enemy hand grenade. At other times, I felt urges to kill someone else. When in those moods, the slightest irritation was likely to set me off. (201-02)

It should be remembered that there was no comprehensive theory of trauma or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at this time, so Caputo’s belief that he was stricken with the cafard (literally, “despair” as it is rendered in the Baudelaire poem above)—the depressive condition attributed to French soldiers who’d fought in Vietnam before the United States Marines arrived—is interesting for several reasons. First, the genealogy of this suicidal condition of “despair” helps situate his own bouts of suicidal depression within the larger local history of psychic trauma, and allows him to account for his excessive rage in the field. Second, Caputo later links the cafard to his murderous rage and his decision to order the assassination of two Vietnamese civilians. Third, and finally, reflections about the cafard allow him to connect, narrate, and generalize his specific experience to the “acute anxiety” and “acute depressive” cases he has been reading about in the reports. In short, it is “the specious alibis of despair” which enable him to account for his actions and narrate the loss—loss of youth, innocence, and, ultimately, faith in the war—which I think is the primary concern of his memoir. That is, although it is quite possible that Caputo was unaware of Baudelaire’s “Despair,” the Cafard-as-creature is nevertheless responsible for inciting his own process “double-telling”—or, in the words of “Destruction,” his telling of “specious alibis of despair.”

Later scholars have (and will), for overtly political reasons, tried to put Caputo’s memoir of the Vietnam War to work to explain the tragic wars unfolding during the early 21st century. Thus William Spanos, in his reading of A Rumor of War in light of the traumatic events of September 11th 2001, discovers a pathologic “Ahabian logic” at work in the parts of the book which deal with Caputo’s (and the US Military’s) murderous pathology. Spanos
argues that:

Caputo’s deeply backgrounded narrative belies his sustained retrospective effort to individualize/universalize his experience as a combat officer in the Vietnam War. Its excess discloses, instead, that the logic that compelled him to commit a gratuitous act of murderous violence against innocent Vietnamese is, finally, the (mono)logic not simply of the military institution to which he belongs but also, despite appearances to the contrary, of the culture he represents. (Spanos 57)

The monologic malady Caputo suffers from, evidently, is the myth of American exceptionalism—not only is the U.S. military to blame but the culture which produces monsters like Herman Melville’s Cpt. Ahab, Spanos thinks that A Rumor of War follows the same exploitative and puritanical cultural logic that Melville interrogates in Moby Dick, a logic that produces both murderous zealouts and the “scoreboard” war against communism in Indochina. The militarist drive to eradicate “evil” from the face of the earth has deep roots in the puritan culture of the United States, so one must vigilantly interrogate its excesses and beware of its influence. Although Spanos’s argument helps us see why the Vietnam War and the War on Terrorism he compares it to are similar, insofar as both are linked to a popular belief in American exceptionalism, it appears some what reductive insofar as he downplays Caputo’s own awareness of the war’s destructive logic and the outcomes it produced. That is, while we can agree that the “Ahabian logic” of demonization and search-and-destroy structures Caputo’s experience of the war, this is nevertheless the structure from which he tries to escape via narrative “double-telling.” That is, his position is a liminal one insofar as it is self-consciously constructed and literary but, at the same time, also understandable as quasi-official military history; indeed, the autobiographical self Caputo tries to suppose and narrate—that of a guilt-ridden 24 year old killer who has contracted the Cafard—is only capable of accounting for the War because he sees how “unaccountable” it really is. For example, his account is always footnoted by chapter epigraphs from Wilfred Owen,
Siegfried Sassoon, and other WWI writers that help frame the events, but also distances them. The epigraph for Chapter Eleven, for example, is from Sassoon’s “Base Detail” and reads:

If I were fierce and bald and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death. (Caputo 181)

Inclusion of these lines subtly transmutes the memoirist's sense of guilt, transforming the ironic image of the do-nothing, windbag officer who sends his men to death into a doubly ironic portrait of himself at that time. Clearly Caputo thinks he is one of these officers, an Officer in Charge of the Dead, but here the reference enables him to connect his plight to an established tradition of commenting on the war—one that helps him to make peace with the “glum heroes” stricken by the cafard and sent to die under his command. In this regard his memoir is not at all a ‘monologic’ account of the US empire’s guilty doings, as in Spanos’ reading, but a dialogue with both a previous generation of writers and the tragic young men who died under his command.

Leigh Gilmore's Foucauldian approach to traumatic autobiography-writing helps us understand Caputo's guilty, ambivalent position with regard to juridical history and the 'crimes' he is said to have committed in Vietnam. Gilmore understands autobiographical narratives about trauma in terms of what she calls “limit-cases”—that is, as works which “examine the relations among people that exist in the presence of trauma and attempt to historicize the relations from which trauma has emerged in order to conceive of a self who can differ from the identity trauma imposes” (Gilmore 146). For Gilmore this means that trauma memoirs offer “alternative truths” which “explore representations of personhood that are skeptical of dominant constructions of the individual and the nation [and are] concerned with the interpenetration of the private and the public, and how its impact is registered in personal, aesthetic, and legal terms” (Gilmore 36). Caputo's book does indeed dwell on the interpenetration of his private case (his Court Martial) with a particularly traumatic public
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(historical) event, but it is also an aesthetic (ethical) attempt to come to terms with his own guilt in the deaths of his comrades and enemies. Near the end of his memoir, when he describes how he came up with his psychotic plan to kill two Vietnamese civilians he believed were Viet Cong spies, Caputo writes:

[The night before] I slept briefly and fitfully in the bunker and woke up agitated. Psychologically, I had never felt worse. I had been awake for no more than a few seconds when I was seized by the same feeling that had gripped me after my nightmare about the mutilated men in my old platoon: a feeling of being afraid when there was no reason to be. And this unreasoning fear quickly produced the sensation I had often had in action: of watching myself in a movie. Although I have had a decade to think about it, I am still unable to explain why I woke up in that condition (Caputo 314).

This “condition,” which repeats with greater emphasis the Modernist sense of self-dislocation and unknowing present throughout A Rumor of War, is a fairly characteristic account of what psychiatrists would later refer to as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. As is well known the modern discourse of trauma emerged in the wake of public debate about the Vietnam veterans' attempts to gain compensation for PTSD. Testimonies like Caputo's were instrumental in bringing the disorder Caputo calls Le Cafard to the attention of the American public and securing government compensation for the soldiers, and is bound up in the definition of PTSD which was formally recognized two years later, in 1980, gaining inclusion in the DSM-IV. Regardless of the official status of PTSD, however, Caputo's extreme night terrors, his paranoia, his inability to “explain” his actions, and the dissociative pathos of seeing oneself as if “in a movie” all testify that he had become radically “estranged” by some severe form of traumatic psychosis. As memoir, A Rumor of War is thus an attempt to salvage from the experience of psychosis and deep feelings of guilt a private self which can survive with some degree of dignity; that is, as narrative it is a therapeutic attempt to restore or shore up a self which has been fragmented beyond its ruins.

2 See Jenny Edkins' Trauma and the Memory of Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), pp.46-51.
Establishing an ethical relation to his involvement in the war in this way, as narrative, Caputo is able to give an account of his actions both as an agent of American foreign policy and as one of its first victims. The naïve, youthful self who enlists in the Marine Corps only to become the “Officer in Charge of the Dead” is thus a self much damaged by events, and by the narrative logic of American military policy in Southeast Asia. Whereas the memoirist Caputo, the survivor who looks back on the war a decade later, is someone who has survived the madness of kill ratios and search-and-destroy missions, he still carries the guilt of being an actor in the drama of US imperialism in the Far East. The memoir can thus be read as an “oscillation between the crisis of death and the crisis of a life,” as a re-writing of his near death experience in Vietnam, Caputo in a real sense reclaims the experience of his earlier life, circa 1978 (Caruth 7). The truth of the experience, then, lies at the intersection of the death of this youthful self and the birth of this wounded self who tries to survive—i.e., his self-imposed, ironic identity as “officer in charge of the dead” is his true identity insofar as it is emblematic of how he reclaims his identity from the traumatic circumstances imposed on him by the war.

Given its emphasis on overcoming trauma and reclaiming an identity that affirms the author’s dignity, A Rumor of War’s repeated allusions to Modernist, WW1 war-writing begins to make more sense. For, as Mattei Callinescu writes, the modernist “far from being interested in novelty as such, or in novelty in general, actually tries to discover or invent new forms, aspects or possibilities of crisis….Art is supposed to become an experience—deliberately conducted—of failure and crisis” (Callinescu 125). For this reason Modernism is closely allied with traumatic pathos, both as an aesthetic ideal and as an original psychological formation. In his postscript to the memoir, Caputo says that the book existed in a “nymph stage” that went through 25 drafts, beginning as a novel, becoming a collection of short stories, and finally morphing into a full-scale first-person memoir. This happened, he says, because he “fell under the spell of the great British memoirs from World War I: Robert Graves’ Goodbye to all That, Guy Chapman’s A Passionate Prodigality, and Siegfried Sassoon’s Memoirs of an Infantry Officer. The form somehow felt right, and it seemed to me that Vietnam, though a far less bloody and horrible conflict, resembled the
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First World War in its pointlessness, in its ultimate disillusionment, and in the changes it wrought in cultural and social values” (Caputo 347). The form of these Modernist memoirs most likely “felt right” because, as literary works, they are attempts to represent the failure and crisis of modern war from the “limit perspective” of the individual who has lived it. If Caputo had written A Rumor of War as a novel it no doubt would have resembled Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms more than Graves’ Goodbye to all That, but it would not have mattered a great deal since both of these works are about how the individual soldier experiences death and trauma and is able to write himself out of the psychological abyss of the war. We could say, then, in Leigh Gilmore’s terms, that to overcome the identity that trauma imposes on the subject (i.e., as “war criminal”) he must first “come under the spell” of a new idiom, a new diegetic model for describing a reality characterized by despair, fear, and psychosis.

These fragments from Graves, Owen, and Sassoon that Caputo uses to frame his narrative offer an important clue to understanding the fragmented, traumatized mind of the young Marine lieutenant who was the “Officer in Charge of the Dead.” Thus in accord with T.S. Eliot’s familiar argument in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” we could say Caputo writes in such a way that “not only the best, but most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (Eliot 48). Caputo’s engagement with the tradition of twentieth-century war-writing certainly encompasses the New Critical idiom that T.S. Eliot says embraces all the dead poets who of the past, but the narrative is often disaligned and intercut by language that is filmic/televisual in sweep and thus not always conducive to an organic unity of author, tradition, and text. Indeed, the language of film montage that Caputo relies on so often is interesting precisely insofar as it flirts with war movies and throws traditional coherence into doubt. If there is an extra-ironic “anxiety of influence” at work here it must be that the author’s allusions to the Great War poets and memoirists does lend Caputo’s memoir a certain degree of aesthetic authority and gravitas. However, in citing Sassoon, Owen, and Graves he not only puts his own writing in line with these earlier masterworks, he also puts himself far outside that tradition when he contextualizes the Vietnam War as violence and trauma. It’s as if mere
words are no longer enough, that by the 1960s the war memoir was faced with a new task—not only of relating a wasteful and pointless war, bogged down in meaningless and violent tasks, but also talking about the way that waste and blood was seen on television screens of American homes for the first time. Addressing tradition in this way is, in some ways, similar to the work of “postmodern pastiche” undertaken by authors like Thomas Pynchon. In V., Pynchon’s first novel, the author ironically appropriates a number of different High Modernist styles and modes of speech (from Henry Adams to T.S. Eliot) to tell an interminable quest tale in blank parody. Thus Caputo’s memoir keeps a certain ironic distance from WWI war-writing, speaking its language as a means of telling a deeply personal story about trauma and psychosis in the jungles of Vietnam, but never really adopting it as a "mother-tongue." Thus the work is a step beyond previous, modernist war writing insofar as tradition is rendered through the lens of individualized significance in a narcissistic and truthful manner; that is, as Caputo’s “confession” of his sins in Vietnam, his accounting of dead friends, mindless cruelty, and mental disintegration is literary in some profound sense we are unable to generalize about except in terms of the post-modernist subject.

Though presented as authentic confession, then, A Rumor of War is nevertheless a memoir that foregrounds the difficulties of historically accurate representation. Thus when Caputo looks back on his experiences in the US military’s “scorecard war” he often finds his understanding of war was conditioned by media spectacle and movie culture. As a combat lieutenant in the jungle, away from his desk and military reality, his narrative thus takes on a fragmented, montage-like quality that renders the trauma visible as language. Thus, in the field, plagued by insomnia and exhaustion, the author reflects:

The month that followed the attack on the Vu Gia valley had itself been a bad dream. I can recall only snatches of that time; fragmentary scenes flicker on my mental screen like excerpts from a film: There is a shot of the company marching

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near a tree line that was napalmed during the assault. Through my field glasses, I see pigs rooting around forms which resemble black logs, but which are charred corpses. Click. The next scene. A crazy, running fire-fight on the last day of the operation, the Viet Cong dashing down one side of a wide river, firing as they run, my platoon running down a dike on the other side, firing back. (312).

Thus, in trying to cope with the insanity of the war Caputo becomes the insanity and has to resort to a “poetics of impersonality” to deal with the horrific images that flicker across his “mental screen.” These painful, impersonal flashbacks haunt him to the point where it appears the struggle with le cafard and the night terrors finally did undermine his sanity: he frequently loses a sense of time, has hallucinations, and sometimes sees himself from outside his body, as if in the third person. Thus, just as in Graves’ *Goodbye* we are prone to encounter battlefield passages like “‘Come on!’ ‘Get back, you bastards!’ ‘Gas turning on us!’ Keep your heads, you men!’ ‘Back like hell, boys!’ ‘Whose orders?’ ‘What’s happening?’ ‘Gas!’ ‘Back!’ ‘Come on!’ ‘Gas!’ ‘Back!’,” in Caputo’s narrative too the montage approximates the hysteric tempo of disordered recollection (qtd. in Fussell 213). However, unlike Graves’ chaotic montage of voices we get the discrete camera “clicks” that allow Caputo to frame his psychosis as snipped off, disconnected moments. Interestingly enough it is at this time that Caputo’s breakdown occurs, and this coincides with his final break with the official, US military discourse of war—i.e., when he declares he’s “through with all that…the only important thing was to get through this insane ordeal with some degree of dignity” (332). Adoption of the modernist idiom, I argue, enables that dignity and opens the possibility of the distancing necessary for his memory to buffer and cope with, in ethical-aesthetic manner, the “official” madness and unrepresentability of America’s war in Vietnam.

In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud claims that by taming the instincts and curbing our appetites we gain the psychological focus on building and expanding

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4 For a detailed discussion of the “poetics of impersonality” see Charles Altieri’s *The Art of Twentieth Century Poetry—Modernism and After* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2008), pp.53-54.
civilization. At the same time, however, we are stricken with inescapable feelings of guilt which rob us of our ability to achieve real happiness and peace. Near the end of his book Freud allows that it “was my intention to represent this sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt” (Freud 81). What is interesting in this now famous formulation is that, rather than consider guilt a mere displacement of desire, Freud claims “the sense of guilt is at bottom nothing else but a topographical variety of anxiety: in its later phases it coincides completely with fear of the super-ego (emph. orig. 82). This guilt-complex that is rooted in anxiety is caused by a deep rift within the psyche—one that allows the supremacy and over-determination of the (parental) principle of restraint, self-control, and prohibition to take charge. This rift, which shuts off the ego’s attempts to juggle desire and duty, can be considered the source of Caputo’s difficulty in reconciling his duties as the “Officer in Charge of the Dead” with his increasingly grave doubts about the expansion of American military power into Vietnam. That is, the anxiety and depression he experiences is precisely parallel to his doubts about the veracity of America’s claims to be defending “the Free World.” His recollection of the opening of this rift attempts to confront the widespread internal damage done by le Cafard, which later becomes known as PTSD, and addresses the growing symptoms of guilt-anxiety among U.S. combat troops.

As I have argued here, however, A Rumor of War is not only concerned with combat psychosis and the U.S. soldier’s traumatic experiences in the war—it is equally invested in the task of recuperation and the gradual claiming of a new identity. Caputo represents the process of this self-reinvention as a confrontation with oneself as a mask, as an ironic impersonality that leads to an eventual reclamation of personality and dignity. Thus throughout the book we see a narrator who is at odds with himself, struggling to give a satisfactory account of actions which seem to have been committed by someone else, in nightmares and film-like hallucinations. Indeed, near the end of the memoir the young marine who volunteered to fight in Vietnam can barely be seen: he has undergone an irrevocable transformation into a traumatized, deeply disturbed and disillusioned soldier.
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who believes the war itself is criminally insane. Out of this morass of traumatic suffering and self-loathing he fosters an identity which is both ethically capable of defining the meaning of his service in Vietnam and giving a literary account of how war crimes take place. At the end of the memoir that identity is still very guilt-ridden, but it has gone a long way toward narrating an experience that was surreal and at times even insane. Thus, with Leigh Gilmore I believe the salient components of autobiographical narratives like Caputo’s are the attempt to construct an identity which is distinct from the identity imposed on the author by events—i.e., brutality in the line of duty and accusations of war crimes in a criminal war. However, I believe the construction of this new, traumatic identity is carried out by a self-conscious reliance on modernist narrative techniques—the use of fragmentation, film-like montage scenes, incorporation of dream sequences, dislocation of personality and “estrangement,” and, of course, the use of modernist intertextuality, all open a space of creative redemption for Caputo’s narrative. Thus, Caruth’s traumatic “double-telling,” which continually crosses over between the crisis of death and the crisis of ongoing life, can, at least in Caputo’s case, be seen as the continual attempt to survive by historicizing painful experience.

Court-martialed for murder by the institution that ordered him to murder, Caputo occupies the curious position of both historical-juridical subject and postmodernist memoirist. That is, while it is possible for him to situate his own agency in an “insane war” within the larger history of Twentieth Century war writing, Caputo is able to activate his own memories of the conflict and render them both aesthetic and comprehensible in a meaningful psychological sense. The problem with this approach is that it risks translating Caputo’s experiences into what Baudelaire calls “specious alibis of despair” which, however estranging, remain closer to fictional truth than to autobiographical realism. I think this risk is largely avoided in Caputo’s account of his sense of guilt due to an ironic awareness of his youthful self, a self subjected to and reared on the American rhetoric of anti-communism in Vietnam. That is, taking on his ironic identity as “Officer in Charge of the Dead” Caputo conceives (or constructs) a self which is capable of surviving—i.e., by forming his own, “alternative truth” as a survivor he distances himself from the traumatic events he
witnesses—by seeing the it as something outside himself that obstructs his own attempts at survival. It is mainly for this reason that later, on the eve of his court martial for killing two South Vietnamese double agents, he says “I felt very much like a man who has lost a leg or an arm, and, knowing he will never have to fight again, loses all interest in the war that has wounded him. As his physical energies are spent on overcoming his pain and on repairing his bodily injuries, so were all of my emotional energies spent on maintaining my mental balance” (332). Caputo does recuperate, overcomes his mental breakdown and le cafard to restore a coherent sense of self by deeply reflecting on the truth of a war that robbed him of his dignity and much more. Thus, as a “deeply backgrounded narrative,” *A Rumor of War* recollects the story of a young man who has been deeply damaged by a war he can only understand from the perspective of his readings in early 20th-century modernist literature, reconstructing a self on the basis of those fragments shored against his ruins.
"Officer in Charge of the Dead" : Traumatic Identity and the Autobiographical Self in Philip Caputo's A Rumor of War

Works Cited


〈掌管傷亡的軍官〉
—— 卡普托《越南戰火》中的創傷認同與自傳自我
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摘要

卡普托（Philip Caputo）1977年深具影響力的回憶錄《越南戰火》（A Rumor of War）不只是對戰爭殘忍創傷的體現，也是作者身為一個美國年輕軍官在1965年親身經歷的感人故事。本論文聚焦於《越南戰火》的第二章，也就是卡普托描述他在越戰初期時擔任「掌管傷亡的軍官」時的任務：計算、編錄死者和總結美軍陸戰隊「傷亡率」的恐怖工作。此片段是作家個人對戰爭的反射、創傷影響和他再進叢林重返戰場慾望的描述。分析本章是根據 Leigh Gilmore 對創傷自傳的研究，那些作品「探索個人特質的展現：懷疑的個人和國家的優勢建構、愛心的私人與公眾相互影響，試圖瞭解此影響如何衝擊個人、美學和法律上的意義」（Gilmore 2001）。最近的創傷理論則是重視證人角色和認同生還者心理上的重要性。無論如何，Gilmore 的觀點讓我們將創傷的自傳放在文學和審判歷史的視野裡，理解創傷本體是一種美學的自我再造。卡普托自我重塑的實例是依賴現代主義的敘事手法，採用反諷自我疏離來削弱官方的軍事論述，藉由掌管傷亡的軍官名號，給自己不同的看法並且改寫肯定他作為倖存者的自我。

關鍵詞：卡普托、追思錄、創傷書寫、越南戰爭、現代主義

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