CHAPTER 4

Telling Tales

Odyssey 4: **Storyteller**

After hearing Odysseus' stories of his adventures, King Alcinous begs him to continue: 'Tell me more of your marvellous doings. I could hold out till the blessed dawn, if only you could bring yourself to stay in this hall and continue the tale of your misfortunes' (11.374–6). Civilians expect and, often, desire veterans to tell war stories. Indeed, the encounter with the person returned from war is the *locus classicus* of dialogic communication: 'What happened to you?' 'This … '. The figure of the storytelling former serviceman is a familiar one in literature and culture, from Othello's boasts about his 'hair-breadth 'scapes' (1.3.138) to Uncle Albert's tales that begin 'During the war … ' in the BBC comedy series *Only Fools and Horses* (1984–2003)[1] – an opening gambit that always provokes much groaning and rolling of eyes on the part of his listeners. The *Odyssey* is replete with the tellings and re-tellings of stories by veterans. When Alcinous, having heard Odysseus' accounts of his adventures to date, demands further stories, Odysseus obliges with yet more tales, now describing the fate of his companions in Hades. Like the first,[2] this round of storytelling leaves the audience so spellbound that 'not a sound' is heard throughout the 'shadowy hall' (13.1–2). His listeners' silence indicates a range of affects: wonder, awe, admiration, fascination, disbelief, horror, sadness, sympathy, chastened edification.

Such is the demonstrated power of stories in the *Odyssey*: these are telling tales. But, at the same time, it becomes apparent in the epic that veteran storytelling is, in certain respects, problematic. 'What memories the name of Troy brings back!' remarks Nestor as he begins to relate exploits of the war to the young Telemachus who is visiting him for news of his

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[1] The series began in 1981 but Uncle Albert only featured from 1984.
[2] Cf. *Odyssey*, 11.333–4.

father (3.103). Though his words suggest that he relishes the opportunity to recount the events of the conflict, Nestor manages only a brief overview before seeming to quail at the task, informing Telemachus: 'There is no man on earth who could unfold to you the whole disastrous tale, not though you sat and questioned him for half a dozen years, by which time your patience would be gone, and you yourself would be home' (3.114–17).[3] The telling of war stories – or, at least, this particular war story – is impossible, because the matter is excessive. (A similar idea is detectable in Alcinous' demand for more war stories: all that has happened to Odysseus is still insufficient to sate his desire to hear of battle.) And, as Nestor indicates, war stories can be flat out boring, the exhausted listener on his way home before the teller has even finished. This tendency gives rise to the sense of the war story as the tale of woe, the burdensome, often self-pitying narrative of one who has been 'in the wars' – that is, subject to any kind of misfortune.[4] The propensity is remarked upon several

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[3] A cynical interpretation of Nestor's words would be to take them as the staking of a claim to ownership. In this vein, William Broyles informs the readers of his memoir of service in Vietnam that the purpose of the war story that all soldiers tell is 'not to enlighten but to exclude': 'Its message is not its content but to put the listener in his place. I suffered, I was there. You were not' (William Broyles, *Brothers in Arms: A Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 196). I am grateful to Rosemary Pearce for this reference. 'I suffered, I was there' alludes to Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself': 'I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there'. Ironically, Whitman was a non-combatant.

[4] 'War, n.1', 1.c, 'to have been in the wars (colloq.), to show marks of injury or traces of rough usage' (*Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), online edition). In his version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, *The Cure at Troy*, first performed in 1990, Seamus Heaney refers to:

> People so deep into
> Their own self-pity, self-pity buoys them up.
> People so staunch and true, they're fixated,
> Shining with self-regard like polished stones.
> And their whole life spent admiring themselves
> For their own long-suffering.
> Licking their wounds
> And flashing them around like decorations.

(*Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 1–2). Such behaviour is seen as a barrier to (re)constructive negotiation. Quoting André Gide's *Philoctète* (1898) – 'I took to telling the story of my sufferings, and if the phrase was very beautiful, I was by so much consoled' – Edmund Wilson draws a parallel between Gide and Philoctetes, the former suffering from a 'psychological disorder' that made him 'ill-regarded by his fellows'; the latter 'the victim of a malodorous disease which renders him abhorrent to society' (quoted and trans. in *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* [1941] (London: Methuen, 1961), 258, 259, 263). But, as Gide and Sophocles both show, in telling the story of his suffering, Philoctetes has also become 'the master of a superhuman art which everybody has to respect and which the normal man finds he needs' (263). In consequence, Wilson points out, the idea arises 'that genius and disease, like strength and mutilation, may be inextricably bound up together' (259). The bow requires the wound. The subject of this chapter is the bow becoming one with the wound; the discourse that, like the lesion, merely swells and suppurates, becoming repellent and edifying no

times in Homer's epic. 'It would be a wearisome business to tell you all I have been through from first to last,' Odysseus advises Arete (7.241–2). Having related the stories of his adventures to Alcinous' court, he reaches the moment at which he arrived at Calypso's island – the point at which his recital began. 'But why go again through all this?' he asks. 'Only yesterday I told you and your noble consort the whole story here in your house, and it goes against the grain with me to repeat a tale already plainly told' (12.450–3). A number of anxieties emerge in relation to veteran storytelling: the potential for boredom and irritation; the dangers of repetition; difficulties in sating the audience's demands; the inability to do justice to the subject matter; even the impossibility of knowing when a tale will (finally) have been told.

Imbued with such anxieties, the veteran story is apt to convey concerns surrounding communication more broadly. The subject of this chapter is veteran genres that are in different ways surplus to requirements: unsolicited or unwanted accounts; tales that are repeated too many times or go on too long; discourses that go beyond their purported subject matter or take exaggeration as a stylistic principle or surpass the interest or attention span of their audiences/readers. Distended discourses have long associations with armed conflict, from the classic battlefield vaunt and taunt to the piece of propaganda.[5] Not necessarily empty words, these inflationary micro-genres can do useful work: boosting self-esteem and morale in others, undermining the enemy and creating a preferred version of events. But as a model for communication more broadly, the over-abundant utterance can express an unease apparently at odds with the confidence implied by its grandiloquence.

one. In Sophocles' play – which is very much concerned with words, their emptiness and the trust, if any, that can be placed in them – the paradigmatic figure for this kind of utterance is Thersites (notably mistaken for Odysseus) who is 'never content to speak once and for all, even when no one wishes to let him talk' (*Antigone: The Women of Trachis. Philoctetes. Oedipus at Colunus*, trans. and ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 289–99, ll. 442–4). Cf. Telemachus in the *Menelaiad* in John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Anchor Books, 1968) stating himself 'willing to have his cloak clutched and listen all night to the tale How You Lost Your Navigator, Wandered Seven Years, Came Ashore at Pharos, Waylaid Eidothea, Tackled Proteus, Learned to Reach Greece by Sailing up the Nile, and Made Love to Your Wife, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, After an Abstinence of Eighteen Years' (132). In Barth's *Menelaiad*, endless, self-reflexive, layered veteran storytelling reaches its postmodernist high-point.

[5] On the vaunt, see Poulheria Kyriakou, 'Warrior Vaunts in the "Iliad"', *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 144.3/4 (2001), 250–77, and on the taunt, see A. L. Keith, 'The Taunt in Homer and Vergil', *The Classical Journal* 19.9 (1924), 554–60. As Othello's boasts to Desdemona indicate, there is a sexual nature to the vaunt, which has a further amplificatory effect.

Talking Too Much

Veterans tell war stories for any number of reasons: to satisfy the expectations of comrades and civilians; for catharsis; to set the record straight; to cover up the truth; to memorialize; to forget; to shock; to entertain; to focus attention; to distract attention … the list could go on. And the age of mass warfare reinforced the connection between veterancy and storytelling; indeed, made veteran identity and existence foundational upon it and so produced in excess a figure apt to convey its own excesses. As is explained in the Appendix, the system for providing relief for ex-soldiers and sailors of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, overseen by the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, required would-be veteran pensioners to prove that they had come from active service, demonstrate incapacity and present themselves in their native parishes to receive monies granted to them. In other words, the veteran had to deliver – verbally, visually and by documentary proof – at a certain place and time a certain kind of story. Veterans were and are both natural and officially interpellated raconteurs and, as literary texts reveal, their tales are enjoyed and celebrated by civilians. Susanna Blamire's 'Stoklewath; or, The Cumbrian Village' (*c*.1780), for example, contains a scene in which a returned soldier's narratives are proactively elicited, welcomed and heard with attention and interest:

> 'Welcome, old soldier, welcome from the wars!
> Honour the man, my lads, seam'd o'er with scars!
> Come give's thy hand, and bring the t'other can,
> And tell us all thou'st done, and seen, my man.'
> Now expectation stares in every eye,
> The jaw falls down, and every soul draws nigh,
> With ear turn'd up, and head held all awry.
>
> (ll. 499–505)[6]

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[6] Susanna Blamire, 'Stoklewath; or, The Cumbrian Village', *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology*, ed. Paula R. Feldman (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 115–47: 129. Paula R. Feldman suggests that Blamire was inspired by the 'tales of sea voyages' and 'stories of war' told by her Naval surgeon brother William on visits home ('Susanna Blamire (1747–1794)', *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era*, ed. Feldman, 103–5: 103), while Christopher Hugh Maycock proposes that Blamire's veteran is based on her brother-in-law Thomas Graeme, who fought in the Seven Years War (*A Passionate Poet: Susanna Blamire, 1747–94* (Penzance: Hypatia, 2003), 32). 'Stoklewath' has been compared to Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770), which features a similar scene:

> The broken soldier, kindly bade to say,
> Sat by his [a clergyman's] fire, and talk'd the night away;
> Wept o'er his wounds, or tales of sorrow done,
> Shoulder'd his crutch, and show'd how fields were won.

The auditor in Rudyard Kipling's short story 'A Conference of the Powers' (1890) is similarly agog. This piece depicts a renowned author both humbled and admiring on hearing the accounts that three young soldiers give of their experiences in India and Burma. The story concludes with the professional 'golden talker' transformed into an eager listener demanding 'more tales – more tales!'[7]

But, as much as they celebrate it, literary texts of the age of mass warfare reveal uncomfortable aspects to veteran storytelling. Pacificus' 'Effects of War' (1793) refers to 'the tale, / The mournful tale that [the veteran] is doom'd to tell' (ll. 44–5).[8] The accounts are (necessarily) doleful, and 'doom'd' implies a miserable inevitability to the act of narration. John Foster's 'The Veteran Soldier' (1797) presents an 'old warrior' recounting 'chequer'd tales' (ll. 1, 2):[9] 'chequer'd' suggests not only a narrative composed of diverse experiences but hints at a degree of waywardness in both the content and the telling. The speaker in Joseph Badworth's 'Half-Pay' (1794) notes that an old soldier 'faithful tell'st thy story thrice a day' (l. 76).[10] Repetitive recounting may well be a sign of faithfulness but it might also indicate a certain obsessive anxiety. 'We doze in listless languor, when the veteran fights his battles over again,' complained one reviewer in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1816,[11] summing up civilian feeling about the veteran who tells his story again and again and again.

The full-blown version of the over-talking veteran can be viewed in two Second World War works of fiction, both of which feature the figure encountered in Chapter 2 – the veteran impostor. In Denton Welch's short story 'Brave and Cruel' (1948), the individual holding himself out as a veteran, Micki Beaumont, tells 'the most thrilling stories' (457) involving 'the most astonishing things' (471) about his supposed fighter-pilot career.[12]

(*Selected Writings of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. John Lucas (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988/2003), 51–62: 55). See, for example, Robert A. Aubin, *Topographical Poetry in XVIII-Century England* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1936), 179.

[7] Rudyard Kipling, *Many Inventions* (London: Macmillan, 1913), 23–42: 26, 41.

[8] Pacificus, 'Effects of War', *The Cambridge Intelligencer* (16 November 1793); quoted in Betty T. Bennett, ed., *British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism: 1793–1815* (New York: Garland, 1976), 97.

[9] John Foster, *Poems, Chiefly on Religious Subjects* (London: publisher unknown, 1797), 11.

[10] Jos[eph] Badworth, 'Half-Pay', *The Gentleman's Magazine* 64 (December 1794), 1129; quoted in Bennett, ed., *British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism*, 134.

[11] Anonymous, 'Art III: *Der Krieg der Tyroler Landleute im Jahre* 1809 von J. L. S. Bartholdy', *Edinburgh Review* 27.53 (1816), 67–86; quoted in Neil Ramsey, *The Military Memoir and Romantic Literary Culture, 1780–1835* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 50.

[12] Denton Welch, *Fragments of a Life Story: The Collected Short Stories of Denton Welch* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 457, 471. Page references are given in the text.

His flights of fancy grow ever more fantastic, and the other characters soon remark the sheer quantity of his tales. 'Oh, he's told me *so* much,' says Julia Bellingley, adding '[i]n his confusion he contradicts himself too' (471). Micki tells and re-tells his stories, layering variation upon variation:

> he could not help making stories up and acting them; it was in his blood. Then he said the stories ran away with him, so that he couldn't control his behaviour. He was sometimes amazed at his own inventions; but he was in their power. All this time he was gesticulating, talking very fast, just as he does when he gets excited. He went on and on, until he had to be stopped.

(505)

In this description, Micki simultaneously accounts for and enacts over-talking. His storytelling performance exceeds what his auditors can accept and they cease to credit him ('I don't believe he's ever even been up in an aeroplane,' comments the narrator, literally and figuratively bringing him down to earth (486)) and then withhold their attention from him. In Elizabeth Taylor's novel *A Wreath of Roses* (1949), another veteran impostor is associated with fecund, even nightmarish tale telling. Richard Elton is introduced as writing a book 'about the war' (5). 'What experiences did you have?' Camilla Hill feels 'obliged' to ask him, 'What were you? What did you do?' (6). Her inquiries elicit incredible tales from Elton: 'Dropped by moonlight half-way across France', 'Sat between Gestapo men in trains', 'passwords, disguises, swallowing bits of paper, hiding others in currant buns' (6). These details are the clichés of sensational war literature: Elton openly admits that it was all 'so much like the books I read as a boy'[13] and grows 'excited, as if he were listening to this story, not telling it' (6). The tales are simulacra, surface stories with no basis in reality, and Elton's storytelling becomes dangerous mythomania. 'Unreadable' is Camilla's private opinion of how his book will turn out. The 'unreadability' will not so much be due to its being distressing or even boring, but because his fabrications go beyond what can comfortably be consumed. These impostor-veterans telling outlandish tales are a literary magnification of the possibilities inherent in genuine veteran recounting. As these examples from across the time frame of this book demonstrate, veteran storytelling has as many negative associations as it does positive: it can over-satiate an audience to the point of alienation.

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[13] This is a point at which Victoria Stewart's observation that 'Taylor asks how, in the context of the developing and solidifying mythologies of war, individual experiences can be held separate from cultural inscription' (*Narratives of Memory: British Writing of the 1940s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 158) is particularly pertinent.

Veteran storytelling gone bad – repeated, over-long, unwanted, preposterous tales – lends itself easily to psychological and psychoanalytical interpretations. One could add nuance, for example, to the idea put forward by, among others, Cathy Caruth, Jonathan Shay and Lawrence Tritle, that talking or telling is psychologically cathartic and otherwise curative.[14] Shay, a psychiatrist who works with Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), argues that psychological recovery from such trauma – insofar as it is possible – depends upon its 'communalization': the retelling of experience so that it is 'understood, remembered and retold'.[15] Tritle, himself a veteran, notes that re-experiencing traumatic experiences through re-telling has been shown to stimulate the production of neuro-hormones with psycho-active tranquilizing properties.[16] Discussing storytelling specifically, Judith Herman observes that: ' "[T]he action of telling a story" in the safety of a protected relationship can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory. […] The *physioneurosis* induced by terror can apparently be reversed through the use of words.'[17] The veteran who talks too much adds a further pathological twist to this model, and one could speculate as to the psychological impulses behind repetition, protraction and the imposition of unwanted tales on reluctant audiences. But in this chapter, rather than offer psychological or psychoanalytical interpretations, I focus on aesthetics and epistemology.

Placing the unwanted, lengthy, multiply reiterated, unedifying story in its stylistic and epistemological contexts in the age of mass warfare involves probing the 'tension' that has been identified between a 'nostalgia

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14 Caruth's arguments are discussed in the section on 'The Ancient Mariner' below.

15 Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon and Schuster Touchstone, 1995), 4, 55, 188–92; *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 244).

16 Lawrence A. Tritle, *From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69. Shay's and Tritle's work are discussed in Kate McLoughlin, *Martha Gellhorn: The War Writer in the Field and in the Text* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 64.

17 Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 183, original emphasis. Cf. Freud's point that psychically distressed people 'can give the physician plenty of coherent information about this or that period of their lives; but it is sure to be followed by another period as to which their communications run dry, leaving gaps unfilled, and riddles unanswered' ('Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria' (1905 [1901])' ('Traum und Hysterie'), *'A Case of Hysteria', 'Three Essays on Sexuality' and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Vintage, 2001), 7–122: 16). On the idea that illness 'amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself', see Steve Marcus, *Freud and the Culture of Psychoanalysis: Studies in the Transition from Victorian Humanism to Modernity* (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), 61. On writing and rewriting the self into being, see Finn Fordham, *I Do I Undo I Redo: The Textual Genesis of Modernist Selves in Hopkins, Yeats, Conrad, Forster, Joyce, and Woolf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

for ancient eloquence' and 'an emerging ideology of polite style' in mid-eighteenth-century Britain.[18] At first glance, excessive utterances might seem to have more in common with eloquence, given that, like the latter, they can come across to listeners as torrential.[19] But the resemblance stops there. Droning on incessantly is no *copia verborum*.[20] If eloquence is 'swelled' – Hume's word – by rhetorical amplification, the long, frankly boring tale is inflated by nothing more than its teller's lack of consideration for his audience.[21] For talking too much is *rude*. Unlike eloquence, which sympathetically tries to move the listener, it is disrespectful to its audience; it is, in the thinking we encountered in Chapter 2, *inhospitable*. But it is not only these things. The lengthy, unsolicited, unwanted discourse forms, alongside but distinct from rhetorically framed eloquence, a mode of utterance at odds with the politeness whose manner is restraint, precision and transparency. That such qualities were espoused by the Royal Society (founded 1660) further linked them to 'the experimental ideal' and 'procedural rigor'.[22] Anything other than the 'close, naked, natural way of speaking' that Thomas Sprat described in his 1667 history of the Society, would cast 'mists and uncertainties' on knowledge.[23] Politeness was not just a style, then; it was also a way of thinking. In consequence, talking too much subverts Enlightenment ideals of both hospitality and reason. In the terms of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century conceptualizations of the issue by Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Aptel and others (conceptualizations that fall under the general rubric of discourse ethics), an over-talker lacks 'communicative competence', undermines the egalitarian nature of ideal

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[18] Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1.

[19] The word 'torrential' and its cognates crop up in a number of mid-eighteenth-century accounts of eloquence: in *Liberty* (1735–6), James Thomson describes ancient oratory as 'a clear Torrent close, or else diffus'd / A broad majestic Stream' (*Liberty, The Castle of Indolence and Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 64 [2.253–4]); Hume twice mentions a 'torrent' of eloquence in his essay 'Of Eloquence' (1742, 1793) (*Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (London: A. Millar, 1758), 103, 106); quoted in Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence*, 33, 47.

[20] Cf. Quintilian's distinction between eloquent ('facundus') and loquacious ('loquax') (*Institutio Oratoria* 4.2.2; *The Orator's Education*, trans. Donald Russell, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 218–19), and, further, on the fault of perissologia (4.2.43–4, 241–3).

[21] Hume commented that figures like prosopopoeia 'serve to give an idea of the style of ancient eloquence, where such swelling expressions were not rejected as wholly monstrous and gigantic' (Hume, *Essays and Treatises*, 103); quoted in Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence*, 74.

[22] Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence*, 4.

[23] Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society of London, for the Improving of Natural Knowledge* (London: J. Martyn and T. Allestry, 1667), 113, 112; quoted in Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence*, 52, 53.

speech situations, nullifies validity claims to truthfulness (in other words, lacks credibility) and so thwarts the very possibility of rational communicative action.[24]

I begin my exploration of over-abundant discourse in this chapter with an analysis of an anonymous poem of 1804, 'The Soldier's Return', illustrating how a tale that is intended to be explicatory, justificatory and palliative in the context of a veteran's homecoming is charged with a discomfiting 'feign'd' quality. Unsolicited, it fails to prepare its audience for the truth. I then consider a text voiced by one who, though not strictly a war veteran, nonetheless shares defining veteran traits: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1797–1834). In this poem, the recounting of traumatic experiences is excessive, the telling is neither curative for the teller nor edifying for the listener (at least, the tale's contents are unedifying, although the *spectacle* of its telling famously leaves its witness/auditor sadder and wiser): the ensuing model of communication is that of an infinitely repeatable but ultimately incomprehensible narrative. The final text for discussion is Henry Green's Second World War novel *Back* (1946). This work does not feature veteran tale-telling per se, but, in the discourse surrounding the return of an ex-combatant, a single word – 'rose' – is used to such an extent that it is drained of signification. Talking about talking too much, this chapter proposes that over-telling or excessive signifying on the part of veterans provokes and dramatizes misgivings about the capacities of rational discourse, which are among the prime concerns of modernity.

'My Feign'd Story': Anon, 'The Soldier's Return' (1804)

In April 1804, *The Scots Magazine* published an anonymous ballad, 'The Soldier's Return'.[25] Voiced by a homecoming soldier in the first person

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[24] Jürgen Habermas, 'Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence', *Inquiry* 13.1 (1970), 360–75: 367, 371; *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (*Sprachpragmatik und Philosophie; Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*) [1976], trans. Thomas McCarthy (London: Heinemann, 1979), 2–3, 63.

[25] Anonymous, 'The Soldier's Return', *The Scots Magazine* LXVI (April 1804), 297; quoted in Bennett, ed., *British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism*, 322–4. The poem is also available online at www.rc.umd.edu/editions/warpoetry/1804/1804_7.html. Given the obscurity of the poem, I quote it, in segments, in its entirety. Line numbers are given in the text. Simon Bainbridge suggests that 'The Soldier's Return' 'reads like a rewriting' of Robert Merry's 'The Wounded Soldier' (discussed in Chapter 1) (*British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Visions of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 43). In rewriting Merry's ending with a positive spin, 'The Soldier's Return' inverts the anti-Pitt politics of the former.

singular, the poem opens with a common concern: that those waiting at home will have given up the returning combatant for dead:

> The wars for many a month were o'er,
> E'er I could reach my native shed;
> My friends ne'er hop'd to see me more,
> But wept for me as for the dead.
>
> (ll. 1–4)

Lines 3 and 4 are a projection: the soldier, whose name is Harry, is picturing his friends weeping over his death *before* he reaches home to witness the fact. In his imagination, his friends have declared him dead, even – in some sense – killed him. Arriving at his family's cottage, Harry, like so many homecoming veterans before and since, does not enter immediately but spends a considerable interval looking through the window to a well-illuminated interior:

> As I drew nigh, the cottage blaz'd;
> The ev'ning fire was clear and bright;
> And through the window long I gaz'd,
> And saw each friend with dear delight.

Within is a tableau of waiting attitudes:

> My father in his corner sat,
> My mother drew her useful thread,
> My brothers strove to make them chat,
> My sisters bak'd the household bread:
>
> And Jean oft whisper'd to a friend,
> That still let fall a silent tear:
> But soon my Jessy's grief shall end –
> She little thinks her Harry's near.
>
> My mother saw her catching sighs,
> And hid her face behind the rock;
> While tears swam round in all their eyes,
> And not a single word was spoke.
>
> (ll. 9–12)

Absence permeates this scene of cosy domesticity, registered in the signs of grief for the missing one. The manifestation of this grief is distinctive for its lack of verbal articulation: in place of words are 'silent tears', 'sighs',

'whispers' and a general disinclination to talk. Absence, the opposite of return, has bred the opposite of narrative: 'not a single word was spoke'. Into this silent space, the travelling ex-soldier must bring self-identification and explanation.

The reception anxiety involved in veteran homecoming discussed in Chapter 2 now becomes acute in Harry. How can he enter the scene? How, that is, can he re-integrate himself into the society he left to go to war?

> What could I do? – If in I went,
>   Surprize might chill each tender heart;
> Some story, then, I must invent,
>   And act the poor maim'd soldier's part.
>
>   (ll. 13–16)

Fearing that he will cause emotional and even physical harm if he reveals himself immediately to his family ('Surprize might chill each tender heart'), Harry decides to unfold his identity gradually to alleviate the shock of his reappearance – protraction is built in to the process. In his judgement, telling a tale is key to successful entry and re-integration ('Some story, then, I must invent') and the invented story is that of another veteran. The tale, that is, adds veterancy to veterancy; already, it is showing signs of inflation. The tale itself is barely reported – just a line gives the gist – but its performance, which supplements verbal delivery with physical dissimulation, is described as follows:

> I drew a bandage o'er my face,
>   And crooked up a lying knee,
> And found that e'en in that blest place
>   Not one dear friend knew ought of me.
>
> I ventur'd in – Tray wagg'd his tail,
>   And fawn'd – and to my mother ran:
> 'Come here,' they cry'd; 'what can he ail!'
>   While my feign'd story I began.
>
> I chang'd my voice to that of age,
>   'A poor old soldier lodgings crave:'
> The very name their loves engage –
>   'A soldier! aye, the best we have.'
>
>   (ll. 17–28)

The presentation of the 'feign'd story' is noteworthy. It includes many of the generic motifs of real-life pension petitions. Acting 'the poor maim'd

soldier's part', wearing a 'bandage', 'crook[ing] up' his knee, speaking in 'the voice […] of age', Harry draws attention both to the sacrifices his assumed persona has made in battle and to his ongoing disabilities. But this tale is not so much aimed at persuading the military authorities to grant relief as allowing a soldier to infiltrate an intimate milieu. It must function as a discursive bridge between the world of combat and the domestic circle. Constructing such a bridge is fraught with difficulties. Once in the army, as the American sociologist Willard Waller noted with reference to the Second World War, the civilian-turned-soldier is 'shut off from the main currents of communication characteristic of civilian life'.[26] The military is an 'intense world', 'replete with meaning': its abbreviations alone are 'almost sufficient' to make its speech 'incomprehensible to the civilian'.[27] Common ground must be sought. Hence, in 'The Soldier's Return', the recently-demilitarized Harry draws on a repertoire of widely understood and familiar attributes – the bandaged face, the injured knee, the homeless old soldier – to create a physical and verbal narrative that will palliate the family and improve his chances of acceptance.

Harry's performance is successful insofar as no one except the family dog, Tray, recognizes him in his assumed persona (this echoes the scene in Homer in which Odysseus is recognized by Argus the hound (*Odyssey*, 17.291–304)).[28] But even though the human members of the family fail to recognize the visitor, the descriptor 'soldier' prompts the kind of hospitality discussed in Chapter 2:

> My father then drew in a seat,
>> 'You're welcome,' with a sigh, he said:
> My mother fry'd her best hung meat,
>> And curds and cheese the table spread.
>>>>> (ll. 29–32)

Safely welcomed with conspicuous hospitality, Harry now offers a further, ontologically complex narrative in which, in the persona of an aged veteran, he announces the news of his own continued existence:

> 'I had a son,' my father sigh'd,
>> 'A soldier, too; but he is gone!'
> 'Have you heard from him?' I reply'd;
>> 'I left behind me many a one: –

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[26] Willard Waller, *The Veteran Comes Back* (New York: Dryden Press, 1944), 25.
[27] Ibid., 26, 29.
[28] 'Tray' might be an echo of 'Troy'.

'And many a message I have brought
          'To families I cannot find;
'Long for John Goodman's have I sought,
          'To tell them Hall's not far behind.'

'O! does he live?' my father cry'd,
          My mother did not stay to speak;
My Jessy now I silent ey'd,
          Who throbb'd as if her heart would break.

'He lives indeed! – this 'kerchief see,
          'At parting his dear Jessy gave;
'He sent it her, with love, by me,
          'To shew he yet escapes the grave.'

                                        (ll. 33–48)

Two narratives are in play here: the 'feign'd story' of the aged veteran and, in the voice of that veteran, the news of Harry. Having tried to ensure that his family can withstand the shock (although the incrementally released information seems to have a similar effect on Jessy's heart as the feared 'surprize' of l. 14), Harry proceeds to his revelation, removing the bandage from his face in a *coup de théâtre*. His audience's reactions are, despite the preparation, extreme:

An arrow, darting from a bow,
          Could not more quick the token reach:
The patch from off my face I drew,
          And gave my voice its well-known speech.

'My Jessy, dear!' I softly said:
          She gaz'd, and answer'd with a sigh:
My sisters look'd as half-afraid;
          My mother fainted quite for joy.

My father danced round his son;
          My brothers shook my hand away;
My mother said, Her glass might run,
          She car'd not now how soon that day.

'Hout, woman!' cry'd my father dear,
          'A wedding first I'm sure we'll have:
'I warrant we'll live this hundred year –
          'Nay, may be, lass, escape the grave.'

                                        (ll. 49–64)

What is described here is a set of miniature deaths and resurrections: Jessy's sigh or expiration and the mother's fainting and statement that she no longer cares how soon she dies are counterpointed by her recovery, the father's dancing, the brothers' vigorous hand-shaking and the father's looking forward to a wedding, to living a hundred years and even to escaping the grave altogether. The family's reactions in these stanzas, then, reprise the soldier's own return to life, a return which the telling of a tale has facilitated. But despite the positive outcome, Harry's story raises a number of concerns regarding veterancy and communication.

The adjectives used in respect of his tale – 'feign'd', 'invent[ed]' – merit pause. Though the etymology of 'story' links it to factual history, 'to tell a story' has also come colloquially to mean 'to tell a lie'.[29] Harry's story of being an aged, wounded veteran is a lie, a lie told corporeally as well as verbally (note his 'lying knee'). A link between veterancy and lying is established by Homer: as Athene wryly observes, 'Odysseus the arch-deceiver, with his craving for intrigue, does not propose even in his own country to drop his sharp practice and the lying tales that he loves from the bottom of his heart' (*Odyssey*, 13.293–5). In *Odysseus in America* (2002), Jonathan Shay argues that Odysseus' *dolos* or guile has been acquired through veterancy: the '[s]trengths, skills, and capacities acquired during prolonged combat' include 'cunning', 'the arts of deception', 'the arts of the "mind fuck"' and the 'capacity to lie fluently and convincingly'.[30] Disguising intentions is a key element of military tactics, but deception is also part of day-to-day getting by. Shay cites Robert Graves's reference to his 'Army habit of commandeering anything of uncertain ownership that [he] found lying about; also a difficulty in telling the truth'.[31] As this indicates, lying is an habituated practice, directed towards self-preservation whether among comrades or foes. Dissembling can also be a means of dealing with trauma. As Judith Herman explains, 'the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud' is a 'central dialectic'.[32] In consequence, she goes on: 'People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin

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[29] 'Story, n.', I.7a (*Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), online edition). This usage dates from 1648.
[30] Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 6, 21.
[31] Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to All That* [1929] (New York: Anchor, 1957), 287); quoted in Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 32.
[32] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 2.

imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy.'[33] In addition to these factors, there is another incentive for the war veteran to lie: the sheer magnitude of the task of encapsulating his experiences. There is a temptation to '*surrender* in the face of representing war', to 'capitulate' to strong, well-established prior paradigms, and to produce, as a result, accounts that are more faithful to an audience's preconceptions than to actual experience.[34] In 'The Soldier's Return', Harry makes a surrender of this sort as he draws on the standard repertoire of veteran motifs. It gains him entry to the domestic milieu: his story of the aged, infirm veteran is familiar to his audience ('The very name their loves engage – "A soldier! aye, the best we have"') and elicits a reaction of welcome.

The veteran lie is explicable and justifiable, then, but it is also excessive, irrational and impolite. This is not a moral judgement but an aesthetic and epistemological assessment. Harry, it should be remembered, is not obliged to tell his story. But his instinct in the face of his anxieties concerning reception and reintegration is not to tell the plain truth but to concoct an excessive fiction. (The fiction is, as already noted, an exaggeration of his own circumstances: the old, wounded veteran he performs is a more veterated version of himself.) Rational discourse, it would seem, has been discarded as inadequate to the circumstances. Politeness, with its epistemological roots in empiricism, has been eschewed: deception, even when perpetrated with the best intentions, lacks respect. Centred around an unsolicited and misleading pretence, 'The Soldier's Return' questions the capacity of transparent, reasoned utterance to deal, at least on the individual and familial level, with the effects of mass warfare.

The gratuitous nature of Harry's storytelling in 'The Soldier's Return' strikes a further note of caution. It is not, after all, a great conceptual or generic step from the unsolicited story to the unwanted story. If the instigation of Harry's 'feign'd story' receives a warm welcome, equally or more prevalent responses to veterans' tales are, as we have seen, indifference, exasperation, boredom, resentment, rage, rejection, antipathy, avoidance. The anthropologist (and Second World War veteran) Jack Goody has argued that the personal narrative or 'relational account' requires 'the suspension not of disbelief but of discourse, at least in the sense of interplay'.[35] Active

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[33] Ibid., 2.

[34] Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the* Iliad *to Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5–6.

[35] Jack Goody, 'The Time of Telling and the Telling of Time in Written and Oral Cultures', *Chronotypes: The Construction of Time*, ed. John Bender and David D. Wellbery (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 77–96: 81.

interlocutors must become passive listeners, that is, but, Goody continues, 'such is the nature of interaction that we rarely get the chance to finish our account':[36] 'Unless we impose ourselves upon our fellows and run the risk of becoming "bores," the story often remains incompletely told, partly because its telling demands not so much an attention others are unwilling to give as an inaction they are unwilling to undergo.'[37] Harry is not a bore, but some storytelling veterans can be. And there is something in the nature of storytelling that tends towards proliferation. In 1793, eleven years before the publication of 'The Soldier's Return', the writer and scholar Isaac D'Israeli noted this tendency in his work on a particular species of story, *A Dissertation on Anecdotes*. The anecdote, D'Israeli remarked, is a 'literary luxury', to be read with 'voluptuous delight'.[38] Deliciously moreish, anecdotes 'recall others of a kindred nature: one suggests another' and the pile accumulates.[39] 'More tales – more tales!' But, like any delicacy, stories can also become sating. This is particularly the case with those that are in some respect surplus, whether in length, quantity, repetitiousness, concatenation with other tales or through being unwanted by their recipients. They go beyond rich creative plenitude to intolerable overload, wearying the auditor/reader to the point of exhaustion (in the senses both of extreme fatigue and of being emptied out). The most famous – or infamous – of such tales is the one told by Coleridge's quasi-veteran, the Ancient Mariner.

On Speaking On: Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1797–1834)

In works written in the years leading up to the composition of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and during its subsequent revision, Coleridge showed consistent interest in discourses that are unattended to or difficult to engage with or that otherwise elicit negative reactions. In 'Ode to the Departing Year' (1796),[40] for example (a poem Coleridge never finished revising and that he reported readers finding 'a rant of turgid obscurity'),[41] the speaker in the first strophe informs the 'Spirit who sweepest the wild

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[36] Ibid., 81.
[37] Ibid., 81.
[38] Isaac D'Israeli, *A Dissertation on Anecdotes* (London: C. and G. Kearsley and J. Murray, 1793), 2.
[39] Ibid., 3.
[40] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text): Part 1*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 16:I:1/16 vols, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 302–11.
[41] Ibid., 302.

Harp of Time' that 'It is most hard, with an untroubled Ear / Thy dark inwoven Harmonies to hear!' (ll. 1–3). The image contains the senses both that historic harmonies are difficult to detect and painful to bear in the present moment. Another troubled reaction greets the account of the departing year in the first antistrophe: 'Thou storied'st thy sad Hours! Silence ensued, / Deep Silence o'er the ethereal Multitude' (ll. 78–9). The scene evoked here presents a powerful response to undesired or unassimilable information: silence on the part of the recipients. The unfinished 'Christabel' (1798, 1800) contains a similar moment in the lines describing the church bell that tolls 'a warning Knell, / Which not a Soul can choose but hear / From Bratha Head to Wyn'dermere' (ll. 342–4).[42] The sound, unwanted but unavoidable, resonates with other instances in the poem involving problematic utterances and their reception: refusal to listen (ll. 564–71) and inability to speak (ll. 473–4). In 'Dejection: An Ode' (1802), another multiply reiterated work, lines evoking a storm in which the wind, addressed variously as a musician, actor and poet, brings harrowing news are followed by reference to a silencing 'pause', a silence that is itself soon superimposed with the sound of a little girl screaming to make herself heard:

> Mad Lutanist! who in this month of show'rs,
> Of dark brown gardens, and of peeping flow'rs,
> Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wint'ry song,
> The blossoms, buds, and tim'rous leaves among.
>   Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds!
> Thou mighty Poet, e'en to Frenzy bold!
>   What tell'st thou now about?
>   'Tis of the Rushing of an Host in rout,
>   With groans, of trampled men, with smarting wounds –
> At once they groan with pain, and shudder with the cold!
> But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence!
>   And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd,
> With groans, and tremulous shudderings – all is over –
>   It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and loud!
>   A tale of less affright,
>   And tempered with delight,
> […]
>   'Tis of a little child

> Upon a lonesome wild,
> Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:
> And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
> And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear.
>
> (ll.104–119, 121–5)[43]

As a tale-teller, the wind is exorbitant ('e'en to frenzy bold'), bringing, like a veteran (or, in Mary Favret's reading, 'a mighty journalist'),[44] accounts of war and its aftermath. The 'pause of deepest silence' stems the sonic deluge, only for another story to begin, a 'tale of less affright'. Yet this story, too, becomes aurally and emotionally difficult to tolerate as the lost child begins to scream. Entwined with the anxieties about his personal creativity that Coleridge expresses in the poem ('A stifled, drowsy, unimpassion'd grief, / Which finds no natural outlet' (ll. 22–3)) is a concern about public discourses – specifically information about war – which are both overwhelming and capable of being overwhelmed.

   Such concern is also evident in two of the lectures Coleridge gave in the mid-1790s – 'On the Present War' and 'On the Slave Trade' – and in the poem 'Fears in Solitude' (1798). 'On the Present War', a version of one or two public lectures given in Bristol in February 1795[45] and published in *Conciones ad Populum* (1795), states as an opening principle that 'In the disclosal of Opinion, it is our duty to consider the character of those, to whom we address ourselves, their situations, and probable degree of knowledge' (51).[46] Maximum communicative efficiency is the aim, in other words, always keeping in mind that 'when the prejudices of a man are strong, the most over-powering Evidence becomes weak' (52). Indeed, it is possible that, for such a prejudiced listener, some 'unmeaning Term' can acquire 'almost a mechanical power over his frame' (52). In such cases, efforts at persuasion are fruitless: 'the shuddering Bigot flings the door of Argument in your face, and excludes all Parley' (53). In a lecture that powerfully conveys his loathing of the excesses of both the American and the French Revolutionary Wars,

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[43] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text): Part 2*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 16:I:2/ 16 vols, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 695–702.

[44] Mary Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Warfare* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 120.

[45] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, 1/ 16 vols, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 22.

[46] Ibid., 51–74. Page numbers are given in the text.

Coleridge at once and contradictorily expresses minimal confidence in the easily swayed masses, endorses rational persuasion and is both admiring of and appalled by the power of rhetoric. Edmund Burke is praised as a 'Hercules Furens of Oratory', while the speeches of the Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, are decried as 'Harangues! – Mystery concealing Meanness, as steam-clouds invelope a dunghill' (63). The steam-clouds suggest insubstantial inflation (though the use of 'hot air' to mean 'empty or boastful talk' did not enter the English language until 1873),[47] an image extended a line later: 'His speeches, which seemed so swoln with meaning, alas! what did they mean?' (63). The signification of Pitt's remarks is in inverse proportion to their ballooning quantity. In his lecture 'On the Slave Trade', given a few months later in Bristol and published in *The Watchman* on 25 March 1796,[48] Coleridge expresses similar concerns regarding the impressionableness of the public and the insidious effects of political oratory. Facts regarding the slave trade have been 'pressed' on the people 'even to satiety' (133), but at the same time anti-Abolitionist arguments have been 'the cosmetics with which our parliamentary orators have endeavoured to conceal the deformities of a commerce, which is blotched all over with one leprosy of evil' (136). There are two, opposing anxieties regarding excessive utterance here: that audiences may be overloaded to the point of ceasing to listen (a late-eighteenth-century version of compassion fatigue) and that rhetorical distortion ('cosmetics') may nonetheless be effective.

But it is in 'Fears in Solitude: Written in April 1798, During the Alarm of an Invasion' that Coleridge is most explicit about his anxieties concerning inflationary talking.[49] The poem contains a number of instances in which certain utterances are overwhelmed by others. The 'sweet words / Of Christian promises, words that even yet / Might stem destruction were they wisely preached' are 'muttered o'er' (ll. 64–7); indeed, the requirement for Nonconformists and Roman Catholics to swear the Oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy imposed by the Test and Corporation Acts[50] has had the effect that 'the very name of God / Sounds like a juggler's charm' (ll. 81–2). The proliferation of 'Courts, Committees, Institutions, / Associations and Societies' has created a bombastic-sounding 'vain,

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[47] 'Hot air, n.', 2 (*Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), online edition).
[48] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton, 2/16 vols, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 13–40. Page numbers are given in the text.
[49] Coleridge, *Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text)*, 468–76.
[50] Ibid., 472n.

speech-mouthing, speech-reporting Guild, / One BENEFIT-CLUB for mutual flattery' (ll. 56–9). And, in dangerous ignorance, the public has 'loved / To swell the war-whoop' (l. 90), an image of the discursive turgidity that results when war is regarded merely 'as a thing to talk of' (l. 96). In an extended critical passage, Coleridge then describes the vain eloquence of those who fail to connect what they read of armed conflict in the newspapers with its reality:

> Boys and girls,
> And women, that would groan to see a child
> Pull off an insect's leg, all read of war,
> The best amusement for our morning meal!
> The poor wretch, who has learnt his only prayers
> From curses, who knows scarcely words enough
> To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father,
> Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute
> And technical in victories and defeats,
> And all our dainty terms for fratricide;
> Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues
> Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which
> We join no feeling and attach no form!
> As if the soldier died without a wound;
> As if the fibres of this godlike frame
> Were gored without a pang; as if the wretch,
> Who fell in battle, doing bloody deeds,
> Passed off to Heaven, translated and not killed.
>
> (ll. 105–22)

'Fluent phrase[s]', 'dainty terms', 'mere abstractions', 'empty sounds': the lines themselves swell with synonyms for vacant yet proliferating utterances. Angrily, the poet questions what might befall the nation if 'all-avenging Providence' should 'make us know / The meaning of our words' (ll. 126–8); that is, provide a referent in suffering to what are, at present, meaningless terms. The threat itself is conceptualized as overpowering, inflated discourse: 'the vaunts' of the 'vengeful enemy' that may 'roar' like a 'gust' (ll. 199–201). Counterpointing the hullaballoo, at the beginning and end of the poem is the *locus amoenus* of a 'silent dell' (ll. 2, 229), a small, green place where the poet takes refuge from the noise of war and from the dilating sounds of ill-informed debate.

   'Fears in Solitude', with its central idea that over-talking is not merely vain but actually potentially dangerous, sits incongruously with Coleridge's own

reputation for loquaciousness.[51] To listen to Coleridge talk was to feel you were drowning. The illustrator David Scott reported that '[t]he moment he [Coleridge] is seated […] he begins to talk, and on it goes, flowing and full, almost without even what might be called paragraphic division, and leaving colloquy out of the question entirely'.[52] The writer John Sterling, a long-standing intellectual associate of the poet, recalled, in terms that are themselves by no means laconic:

> Nothing could be more copious than his talk; and furthermore it was always, virtually or literally, of the nature of a monologue; suffering no interruption […] It was talk not flowing any-whither like a river, but spreading every-whither in inextricable currents and regurgitations like a lake or sea […] So that, most times, you felt […] swamped near to drowning in this tide of ingenious vocables, spreading out boundless as if to submerge the world.[53]

The image conveys torrential talking that over-flows the listener to the point of submerging any response. Coleridge's auditors, like the speaker in 'Fears in Solitude', must have craved the haven of a silent (dry) place. The composition of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', then, took place in verbally deluged years,[54] the poet both contributing to the sea of words and conscious of the danger of drowning.

In 'The Rime', Coleridge produced a piece of creative writing that questions the very nature and purpose of creativity even as it models creativity's delightful and terrifying capacity to run on and on and on. Strictly speaking, its logorrhoeic protagonist is not a war veteran (at least, the poem does not list combat among his experiences),[55] though he is an ex-seaman, an armed killer, has seen mass death and, like Odysseus, is

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[51] Seamus Perry notes the 'obvious parallel' between the 'wonderfully talkative' Coleridge and the Ancient Mariner ('The Talker', *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103–25: 112, 105).

[52] Quoted in ibid., 109.

[53] Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling*, 11/30 vols, *The Works of Thomas Carlyle in Thirty Volumes: Centenary Edition* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897), 55.

[54] On the composition history of the poem, see Coleridge, *Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text)*, 365–8.

[55] Alan Bewell argues that the Ancient Mariner has been 'traumatized' by 'colonial experience', suggesting that he is implicated in the slave trade. For Bewell, the 'epidemiological cost of colonialism returns in the form of "tropical invalids" who wander through the landscape as vagrants or frightening pariahs' (*Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 100, 101). Joel Faflak agrees that the Ancient Mariner has suffered 'trauma' (*Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of the Mystery* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 8). Neither, however, suggest combat experience on the Ancient Mariner's part. In this context, it is worth noting that Coleridge himself was what J. R. Watson describes as a 'hopeless dragoon' from 1793–4 (*Romanticism and War: A Study of British Romantic Period Writers and the Napoleonic Wars* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 5).

unsure on homecoming of the reality of his 'own countrée' (467).[56] His epithet, 'ancient', connotes not only advanced age (and, therefore, substantial life experience) but also, from the Latin *ante* ('former, previous'), the quality of anteriority.[57] Indeed, the first line of the poem – 'It is an ancient Mariner' – firmly and yet wholly ambiguously founds his present identity on his past occupation. 'It is a no-longer-a-Mariner' or 'It is a not-a-Mariner' would be logical equivalents. Who, or what, is someone when he or she is no longer who, or what, he or she once was?[58] 'Mariner' is an identity that has out-lasted or over-lived its applicability, in a manner similar to that in which the Ancient Mariner over-tells his story. 'Ancient Mariner', therefore, comprises veterancy both in the sense of being older and of being *former*.[59]

The Ancient Mariner certainly bears the physical signs of veterancy. His beard is 'long', 'grey' and 'hoar' (3, 619), he is 'lank' and 'brown' (226), his hand is 'skinny' (9, 225, 229): these are marks of age, harsh experience and suffering. It is with this 'skinny hand' that the Ancient Mariner literally grabs the Wedding Guest's attention in an opening that dramatizes an insistence that veterancy must be attended to in the form of storytelling. In what has been described as the 'locus classicus in all discussions of orality in the period',[60] Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783),

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[56] Coleridge, *Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text)*, 365–419. Cf. *Odyssey* 13.185–249. The version of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' used is that which Coleridge published in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) and in all subsequent editions of his poetry. Line numbers are given in the text. Piero Boitani points out another resemblance between the Ancient Mariner and Odysseus: both are 'borne back to their homeland in their sleep, the ship manned by others' (*The Shadow of Ulysses: Figures of a Myth* (*L'Ombre di Ulisse: Figure di un Mito*) [1992], trans. Anita Wilson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1994), 79).

[57] 'Ancient, adj. and n.1', 1, 5 (*Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), online edition). There is evidence that 'ancient' and 'veteran' were used synonymously in the period, as in an advert for Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker*: 'the veteran Admiral Balderick and other ancient friends' (Anonymous, 'Rowlandson's Edition of Smollet's [sic] Novels', *Diary or Woodfall's Register* (14 February 1793) (Gale-Cengage 17th–18th Century Burney Newspaper Collection)). But 'veteran' could also simply mean 'old' (cf. its use to describe an 87-year-old great-grandfather in Anonymous, 'Further Extracts from the New Edition of Pratt's Gleanings, Etc.: State of Methodism in Catholic Countries; and the Wakes or Fairs of Germany', *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post* (Gale-Cengage 17th–18th Century Burney Newspaper Collection).

[58] This reminds me of being puzzled, as a child, by Paddington Bear's Aunt Lucy entering a Home for Retired Bears. What was she, I wondered, if she had retired from being a bear?

[59] Cf. 'The man was once a mariner, as the word "ancient" implies in its sense of "former." He was singled out by nothing but his suffering' (David Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 114). I refer to the character as the 'Ancient Mariner' rather than simply the 'Mariner' throughout to preserve the sense that he is a no-longer-a-Mariner.

[60] Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 63.

read by both Coleridge and Wordsworth in 1798,[61] there is the following description of the rhetorical role of hands:

> In the motions made with the hands, consist the chief part of gesture in Speaking. […] Warm emotions demand the motion of both hands corresponding together. But whether one gesticulates with one or with both hands, it is an important rule, that all his motions should be free and easy. Narrow and straitened movements are generally ungraceful; for which reason, motions made with the hands are directed to proceed from the shoulder rather than from the elbow. […] Oblique motions are, in general, the most graceful. Too sudden and nimble motions should be likewise avoided.[62]

In the light of this, the Ancient Mariner's frenzied grasping of the Wedding Guest can be read either as a piece of hyper-rhetoric, heralding the over-talking that will ensue, or, simply, as a highly impolite action. The reaction is an immediate rejection – ' "Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!" ' (11) – notably undermining the credibility that might be conferred by veterancy ('grey-beard') with an imputation of irrationality ('loon'). The hand is quickly 'dropt' (12), an inverted precursor of the Ancient Mariner's later assertion that 'This body dropt not down' (231). This assertion is made to reassure the Wedding Guest that the Ancient Mariner is no ghost and his utterances can accordingly be relied upon; the 'dropt' hand is therefore an early hint of communicative problems. (The importance of hand/arm to communication is reinforced when the Ancient Mariner is forced to bite his own arm in order to lubricate his parched mouth with blood so as to be able to alert his fellow-sailors to the passing ship (160–1).)

Undeterred by his interlocutor's reluctance, the Ancient Mariner proceeds to talk. Ostensibly, given all the marks of veterancy, this would promise to be an encounter in which, following Benjamin's model of *Erfahrung*, experience would be handed, edifyingly, on. That the communication is urgent is made clear. The Wedding Guest is no minor attendee of the nuptials, but 'next of kin': he is waylaid en route to a highly important, unrepeatable – unmissable, that is – social occasion. But he stands 'still' (14). Indeed, held by the Ancient Mariner's 'glittering eye' (3, 228), 'he cannot choose but hear' (18, 40).[63] But even if the listening is enforced, it might be expected that this intense, urgent encounter would be salutary.

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[61] Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770–1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 16.

[62] Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* [1783], 2/2 vols (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1783), 221n. On the connection between hands and veterancy, see, further, Chapter 5.

[63] On mesmerism in Coleridge, see Faflak, *Romantic Psychoanalysis*, ch. 3.

Certainly, what ensues is extraordinary. The Ancient Mariner's utterances are not conventional talking: they are excessive talk, over-talking, talk-passing-talk. This is the war story to out-war-story all war stories. Twice, the reader is told the Ancient Mariner 'spake on' (19, 29) and the preposition gives a sense of perpetuity to the action: in fact, he speaks on and on and on and on. For his part, his auditor is the most reluctant auditor in the history of storytelling. The Wedding Guest is so desirous *not* to listen to the Ancient Mariner, indeed, that he actually beats his breasts – twice – so anguished is he (31, 37). He makes only one intervention that could be regarded as encouragement to the Ancient Mariner to proceed (the question in lines 79–81); otherwise, his few spoken responses convey that, forced to listen against his will, he is in a state of absolute consternation (224–5, 345).

Extraordinary it may be, but whether the exchange is edifying is more doubtful. Certainly, for his part, the Ancient Mariner derives no solace (or, in modern parlance, 'closure') from making his revelations: indeed, he is under a compulsion forever to repeat his story.[64] The 'woful agony' that 'forced' him to tell his tale for the first time regularly but unpredictably revisits him, dissipating only when it has been related again:

> Since then, at an uncertain hour,
> That agony returns:
> And till my ghastly tale is told,
> This heart within me burns.
>
> (578–81)

The Ancient Mariner casts his compulsion as the need to 'pass' from land to land (586) until he sees 'the man that must hear me: To him my tale I teach' (590). 'Teach' seems here to mean something other than 'instruct', 'impart' or 'inform': what the Ancient Mariner does is closer to the early signification of the verb, 'to show, present or offer to view'.[65] As he passes by, that is, he exhibits his story but does not pass it on: glow-worm rather than mentor, in the terms of the previous chapter. So much is evident in the Wedding Guest's reaction: he listens 'like a three years' child' (l. 15). The effect of the Ancient Mariner's tale is to put the Wedding Guest, not in

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[64] Cf. 'There never was a first time the Mariner recited his Rime. From the outset, the tale was a repetition – of the experience itself, which the Mariner relives as he retells it, of the words in which he retells it, and of other words, with which Coleridge and Wordsworth had been telling or trying to tell each other tales during the last half-dozen years' (Susan Eilenberg, *Strange Power of Speech: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Literary Possession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 43).

[65] 'Teach, v.', 1 (*Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), online edition).

a state of rational comprehension, but in a state of wondering, terrified dis-belief. At the end of the poem, he is described as 'stunned' (622), 'of sense forlorn' (623): his reason is in abeyance. Though he rises the following day 'A sadder and a wiser man' (624), it is not clear what this sadness and wisdom consist of. The 'sadness' may simply be pity; the 'wisdom' might be no more than a resolution not to fall for such extreme buttonholing in future. In any event, rather than resulting from the contents of the Ancient Mariner's recital – its Christian moral (somewhat reductively) summed up in lines 610–17 – both sadness and wisdom arise from the outer spectacle of his distress.

Certainly, the contents of the Ancient Mariner's utterance pose epis-temological difficulties. The subject of his story is outside human experi-ence, being either novel ('We were the first that ever burst / Into that silent sea' (105–6)) or supernatural (the 'wondrous' cold (51); the burning water; the Polar Spirit and its fellow-daemon; the 'spectre-bark' (l202); Death and Life-in-Death playing dice; the 'seraph-man' standing on the body of each dead sailor (490); the ship's preternatural speed while the Ancient Mariner is in his trance). Such phenomena are not the stuff of empirical reality but of vision, revelation or symbol. Within the poem, the person relating them is met with fear and incredulity. The Hermit, who likes nothing better than a good chinwag with veterans ('He loves to talk with marineres / That come from a far countree' (517–18)), crosses himself, the Pilot shrieks and falls down in a fit and the Pilot's boy 'doth crazy go' (565) on encountering him. Real-life readers, encountering the tale as it appeared in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), reacted with similar stunned incomprehension (one can only feel for those sailors who bought it, reportedly assuming from the poem's title that the collection was a naval song-book).[66] Charles Burney called it 'the strangest story of a cock and a bull that we ever saw on paper […] a rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence, of which we do not recognise the drift, unless the joke lies in depriving the wedding guest of his share of the feast'.[67] In George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), set in 1799, it appears as a curious period detail: Captain Donnithorne owns it is 'a strange, striking thing', but confesses he 'can hardly make head or tail of it as a story'.[68] Though Wordsworth kept it in the second

[66] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk II*, ed. Carl Woodring, 14/16 vols, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 375.

[67] Charles Burney, '*Lyrical Ballads*, with a Few Other Poems', *The Monthly Review* 29 (June 1799), 202–10: 204; quoted in Jerome McGann, 'The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner', *Critical Inquiry* 8.1 (Autumn 1981), 35–67: 36.

[68] George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1985), 109.

(1800) edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, its archaisms having been removed, he included among its 'great defects' 'that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the controul of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural'[69] – a criticism that suggests at once that the Ancient Mariner is too fantastical and not fantastical enough. Coleridge himself did not disagree. His own word for the poem was 'incomprehensible'.[70] This extended incomprehensibility, this surpassing loquacity, has been conceptualized in psychological, ontological and what might be termed theologico-bibliographical frameworks. I will outline each of these before suggesting what the significance of the Ancient Mariner's tale-telling might be in terms of aesthetics and epistemology.

The idea of storytelling as psychologically curative has already been touched on earlier in this chapter. More specifically, Cathy Caruth has argued that, after Freud,[71] trauma is locatable in the way that 'its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on'.[72] The fact that direct experience is somehow missing becomes the basis of the repetition of the trauma in/by the traumatized person in the form of the 'wound that

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[69] William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green, *The Cornell Wordsworth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 791.

[70] In *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge recounts an 'anecdote' in which an 'amateur performer' asked a common friend to be introduced to him (Coleridge) but hesitated when the introduction was granted on the grounds that he (the performer) was the author of a 'confounded severe epigram' on 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. This surprised Coleridge because the epigram in question 'proved to be one which I had myself some time before written and inserted in the *Morning Post*':

> To the author of the Ancient Mariner.
> Your poem must eternal be,
> Dear sir! it cannot fail,
> For 'tis incomprehensible
> And without head or tail.

(*Biographica Literaria I*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 7/16 vols, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Pricneton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 28). The editorial note states that Coleridge's four lines were published in the *Morning Post* on 24 January 1800 but addressed, not 'to the author of the Ancient Mariner' but to Henry James Pye. Coleridge 'may have invented the story' (ibid., 28 n1).

[71] In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922), Freud set out the idea that that 'memory-records' are often 'strongest and most enduring' when 'the process that left them behind never reached consciousness at all' (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (*Jenseits des Lustprinzips*) [1920], trans. C. J. M. Hubback, ed. Ernest Jones, *The International Psycho-Analytical Library* (London: The Hogarth Press/The Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1922), 27).

[72] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

cries out'.[73] Sarah Cole remarks that Caruth's outcrying wound 'returns a fundamental productivity to the sufferer, in the form of his/her urgent storytelling',[74] but in the Caruthian model, it is not so much that the survivor speaks as that the trauma *tells itself*. This notion gives scope for aligning the Ancient Mariner's marvellous tale with what, after Kristeva,[75] has been termed the 'semiotic'. In Elizabeth Grosz's words, the semiotic, like the repressed, 'can return in / as irruptions within the symbolic'.[76] These irruptions represent 'the symbolization or representation of hitherto unspeakable or unintelligible phenomena, instances on the borders of the meaningful'.[77] The Ancient Mariner's utterances might be characterized as semiotic, not insofar as they are syntactically orderly and, indeed, cast in strict metrical and verse form, but insofar as they constitute an irruption in the social order (they disrupt the attending of a wedding) and, in epistemological terms, consist of vision and mystery rather than reason and logic.

Judith Herman broadly concurs with Caruth's analysis, characterizing a survivor's initial account of the traumatic event as 'repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless'.[78] Herman notes that the trauma story 'in its untransformed state' has been described as a 'prenarrative' that 'does not develop or progress in time'.[79] But, after 'many repetitions', a moment arrives in which the telling of the trauma story 'no longer arouses quite such intense feeling' but simply becomes 'a part of the survivor's experience'.[80] Boring not only other people with one's tale but actually boring oneself with it is a measure of mental well-being. If these literary-diagnostic frameworks are applied to 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', the protagonist's compulsive storytelling becomes a more-or-less instinctive form of psychic defence; talking (and there could be no such thing as *over*-talking) understood as a Freudian-based remedy offering healing through the recovery and mastery of a repressed traumatic event through narrative.[81] Hence, storytelling

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[73] Ibid., 4.
[74] Sarah Cole, 'The Poetry of Pain', *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 483–503: 484.
[75] See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (*La Révolution du langage poétique*) [1974], trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 68.
[76] Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 152.
[77] Ibid., 153.
[78] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 175.
[79] Ibid., 175.
[80] Ibid., 175.
[81] The so-called talking cure, and the Freudian/Caruthian model on which it is based has been questioned by psychiatrists. Richard J. McNally, for example, writes: 'As with all extremely negative emotional events, stress hormones interacting with an activated amygdala enhance the hippocampus's capacity to establish vivid, relatively durable memories of the experience – or at least

abates the 'woful agony' that periodically assails him. The problem is that
the 'cure' would, at best, be a work-in-progress: as 'The Rime' ends, the
Ancient Mariner has disappeared from view, but there is no reason to
assume that this latest iteration of the tale has induced distress-alleviating
habituation in him. The 'woful agony' may yet reappear. Far from consti-
tuting a means of psychic re-integration, a putting-back-together of self,
his narrative is a process that, never ending, never confers relief.

   In an ontologically inflected reading that overlaps in part with these
psychological models, Seamus Perry argues that 'like *Heart of Darkness*',
'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is 'not about a disastrous voyage but
about an old tar, years later, *retelling the story* of a disastrous voyage'.[82] Form
is content, that is, but the Ancient Mariner's obsessive re-telling is more
than simply 'polishing an anecdote': rather, 'it is an attempt repeatedly to
make sense, to convince himself of his shaky grasp of the telling events'.[83]
The 'genius of the piece' lies in 'its showing how passionate and driven may
be the desire to gather one's experience into an intelligible thesis'.[84] The
Ancient Mariner finds (self-)meaning through narrative. In a later essay
(not discussing 'The Rime') Perry introduces a related epistemological
concept: Richard Rorty's distinction between 'therapeutic', 'edifying' phil-
osophies and 'constructive', 'systematic' ones, the former 'aiming at con-
tinuing a conversation rather than at discovering truth'.[85] Coleridge, Perry
notes in this later piece, has often been read as 'following an edifying route
of "anti-rationalism" and purposefully proceeding "on a disorderly, mis-
cellaneous fashion"',[86] and, in a similar way, the utterances of the ver-
bose Ancient Mariner might be thought to exemplify the exploratory,
therapeutic open mode of ongoing conversation. But Perry insists that,

its salient, central features. High levels of emotional stress enhance explicit, declarative memory for
the trauma itself; they do not impair it. When people with PTSD recall traumatic events, recollec-
tion is accompanied by emotional arousal that creates the illusion of reliving the event. None of
these reactions requires any special "trauma" mechanisms in the brain; the mechanisms of intense
emotional encoding and retrieval suffice to explain traumatic memory as well as memory for other
emotionally intense experiences' (*Remembering Trauma* (Cambridge, MA; The Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press, 2003), 276). McNally does not explicitly address the point as to whether
the 'enhanced' traumatic memory he describes is accompanied by similarly enhanced articulacy or
notable prolixity, but their presence is not a notable feature in his account.

[82] Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 287, ori-
    ginal emphasis.
[83] Ibid., 287.
[84] Ibid., 287.
[85] Perry, 'The Talker', 117, citing Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell,
    1980), 5, 373.
[86] Perry, 'The Talker', 117, citing Kathleen M. Wheeler, *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction*
    (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), XI, 16.

far from endorsing 'anti-systematic thinking', Coleridge 'espouses vehemently the opposing values of unity, wholeness and system'.[87] Accordingly, the Ancient Mariner's verbal torrent might be thought of as a 'single purposeful flow' – Sterling's 'spreading every-whither' sea transformed into a swift, all-encompassing current – in which, in 'Platonic connectedness', 'digressiveness is redeemed'.[88]

In this model, profusion is unity, verbosity inter-relatedness (albeit, in Perry's words, in 'monomaniacal form, unifying as a form of dementia').[89] And in a third interpretative framework, this time a theologico-bibliographical one, Jerome McGann offers a reading of 'The Rime' in which meaning is again the product of accumulation, of quantity. Coleridge, it will be remembered, himself described the poem as 'incomprehensible'. In *Biographia Literaria* (1817), explaining the genesis of *Lyrical Ballads*, he explained what 'incomprehensible' might consist of. In the poems he was to contribute to the volume:

> [I]ncidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural, and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. [...] In this idea originated the plan of the 'Lyrical Ballads'; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least Romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. [...] With this view I wrote the 'Ancient Mariner'.[90]

Here, Coleridge suggests a 'reality' to supernatural situations; at least, that is, a 'reality' deriving from 'whatever source of delusion' the person experiencing them may be under. To credit such 'reality' requires 'poetic faith', a faith with much in common with religious faith. McGann's reading of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' ascribes a bibliographical quality to Coleridgean faith. Drawing on the work of Elinor Shaffer, he argues

[87] Perry, 'The Talker', 117.
[88] Ibid., 118, 121.
[89] Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*, 287.
[90] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria II*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 7/16 vols, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 6–7.

that Coleridge's following of the Higher Critical approaches of figures such as Christian Gottlob Heyne, Johann David Michaelis, Alexander Geddes, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn led him to espouse a 'mythological hermeneutics'.[91] Shaffer explains further:

> Coleridge's argument reflects a long struggle of the new criticism with the idea that an eye-witness account must be of special value. If, by their own critical endeavour, it became clear that none of the Gospels was an eye-witness account, the status of the 'event' therein recounted must, on the old view, be diminished, its credibility undermined; but if there are no such privileged accounts, if all event is interpretation, then the Gospels need not suffer. Indeed, as we shall see, their value as literature is increased. For Coleridge, 'event' and 'mystery' must be expressed with equal delicacy, obliquity, and restraint. The miracle becomes the paradigm of reported historical event; the historical events reported by eye-witnesses represent instantaneous mythmaking.[92]

According to this line of thought, textual evolution (which, in the case of the Bible, involved 'accretion and interpolation over an extended period of time')[93] is at once a witnessing, an act of faith and the occasion for further acts of faith – and, McGann argues, Coleridge's views on the Bible were 'merely paradigmatic of his views on all literary texts'.[94] The textual evolution of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' becomes not merely an exercise in clarification but a process with 'symbolic value and meaning, that is, a religious, a Christian, and ultimately a redemptive meaning'.[95] By extension (an extension not made by McGann), a similar argument could be made in respect of the Ancient Mariner's repetition of his tale. Multiple reiterations distance the story from its origins (whatever the epistemological status of such origins may be) and, in their very numerousness, represent a de-privileging of any single version. Excessive telling, a verbal palimpsest, models cumulative truth. The problem with this theologico-bibliographical interpretation lies in the fact that the Ancient Mariner's tale – so far as it can be discerned – never varies. What the 'woful agony' induces him to tell and re-tell is the same story: not so much a verbal palimpsest, with all that implies about a complex layering of diverse texts, as

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[91] McGann, 'The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner', 44.
[92] Elinor Shaffer, *'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 46–7.
[93] McGann, 'The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner', 48.
[94] Ibid., 57.
[95] Ibid., 60.

the accumulation of like on like. Such unvarying repetition in fact works counter to an understanding of accreted meaning based on models of textual criticism and book history.

These psychological, ontological and theologico-bibliographical interpretative frameworks have in common an emphasis on significance produced by plurality. Prolixity equals meaningfulness. But here I would like to propose that the Ancient Mariner's imposed, unwanted, lengthy tale forms, rather, a model of communication in which a discursive excess results in diminished signification. The marks of veterancy, in this case, accompany an account of phenomena beyond the experience they could render credible. The Ancient Mariner's telling of his story, its contents beyond comprehension, is the spectacle of a monologue:[96] what occurs is a passing by rather than a handing on. The story will be repeated ad infinitum: not by an edified Wedding Guest to the further edification of future listeners, but by the Ancient Mariner to other reluctant auditors. For the Ancient Mariner's never-ending story runs a different course from both the affect of rhetorically charged eloquence and the persuasiveness of rational communication. Those who encounter him may pity his distress, but none of them will be either moved or convinced. In making this argument, I do not dispute that Coleridge 'espouses vehemently' the values of 'unity, wholeness and system'.[97] My point is not that the Ancient Mariner's discourse is 'anti-systematic'; it is that it is *rude*. It severely inconveniences a stranger and, in doing so, it disrupts an important social ritual. It doesn't just demonstrate the inadequacy of polite, reason-based discourse, it completely overwhelms it. From this torrential outpouring, I move on from the late eighteenth century to consider a post-Second World War novel in which excess again proves that more is less.

'Rose after rose after rose': Henry Green, *Back* (1946)

Henry Green's sixth novel, *Back* (1946), has been widely interpreted as a commentary on the post-Second World War social and economic uncertainty that greeted those 'back' from the fighting, and, just as widely, as a study in trauma and repression (what is held, or refuses to remain, 'back'). Representing the former critical tendency, David Deeming calls the novel

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[96] Arthur Frank's term for the kind of story that brooks no discussion or interpretation is 'monological' (*Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 35).

[97] Perry, 'The Talker', 117.

'Green's most brilliant study in social alienation',[98] while Laura Doan finds it expressive of 'that historical juncture where a displaced British society passively watched the disintegration of the old order against the uncertain creation of the new'.[99] In psychological and psychoanalytical readings, Gerard Barrett describes the novel as the 1940s' 'finest representation of a condition that has only recently acquired a name', that is, post-traumatic stress disorder,[100] and Stephen A. Shapiro notes that one of the work's 'central concerns' is 'the way the present returns to the past, the way the unconscious gets back at consciousness'.[101] Siting trauma in the context of social behaviour, Kristine Miller suggests that, by 'juxtaposing physical and emotional trauma and questioning dominant political and sexual discourses', *Back* represents the wounded soldier 'as a sign of the instability of postwar gender roles'.[102] Green himself endorsed these critical propensities. 'The truth is that the present times are an absolute gift to the novelist,' he wrote in a letter of 14 March 1945 to Rosamund Lehmann, 'I see *everything* crumbling & growing all round me.'[103] But he also stated, simply, 'It's all about a man whose nerves are very bad.'[104] In this section, while not ignoring the novel's social and psychological motivations and implications, I will explore what *Back* and its veteran protagonist have to say about communication and, specifically, about how meaning is produced – or not produced.

In this exploration, I hope to build on the critical thought that has accumulated in relation to the linguistic aspects of Green's writing. In fiction in the decades following high modernism, argues Lyndsey Stonebridge, it seemed as if that heteroglossic movement had resulted in 'the effort of hearing other voices' becoming 'too much'.[105] Accordingly, Green's dialogue is constructed on 'the principle that people cannot hear

[98] David Deeming, 'Henry Green's "The Lull" and the Postwar Demise of Green's Modernist Aesthetic', *Modern Fiction Studies* 44.4 (Winter 1998), 865–87: 883.

[99] Laura L. Doan, 'Recuperating the Postwar Moment: Green's *Back* and Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*', *Mosaic* 23.3 (Summer 1990), 113–24: 123–4.

[100] Gerard Barrett, 'Souvenirs from France: Textual Traumatism in Henry Green's *Back*', *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival*, ed. Rod Mengham and N. H. Reeve (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 169–84: 169.

[101] S. A. Shapiro, 'Henry Green's *Back*: The Presence of the Past', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 7.1 (Spring 1964), 87–96: 93.

[102] Kristine Miller, 'The War of the Roses: Sexual Politics in Henry Green's *Back*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.2 (Summer 2003), 228–45: 228.

[103] Quoted in Jeremy Treglown, *Romancing: The Life and Work of Henry Green* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 176. The letter is held in the library of King's College, Cambridge.

[104] Quoted in ibid., 176.

[105] Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture* (Basingstoke; Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 124.

what others are saying to them'.[106] Rod Mengham, too, drawing attention to the many instances of acronyms in *Back* (discussed further below), proposes that Britain in 1944 was 'literally *unreadable*' and, further, that 'the crucial disadvantage for returning servicemen' was 'the inability to identify and decipher the messages received'.[107] Mengham's perception that Green's novel represents the problem of legibility as 'a form of surplusage' is particularly suggestive.[108] In what follows, I will argue that *Back* models excessive signification – a proliferation of signage – and its consequent voiding, offering a depiction of veteran communication that is simultaneously growing and crumbling.[109]

Green's chief protagonist, Charley Summers (the pluralization contained in his surname is a tiny example of a repetition, in this case of a season) is a veteran returned from a prisoner of war camp where he has spent five years of the Second World War. The second sentence of the novel mentions that he has a 'peg leg' (3):[110] the first of many instances of loss resulting in replacement or doubling (or tripling or multiplying to even greater factors). In the opening scene, Summers is visiting a graveyard, a place of death but also of (vegetal) growth. His perception of his surroundings is typical of that of an ex-combatant: he 'note[s] well' the slits in the church tower, 'built for defence'; he runs his eye 'with caution' over cypress trees and between gravestones (3). The reason for this militarized awareness is soon given: 'He might have been watching for a trap, who had lost his leg in France for not noticing the gun beneath a rose' (3). Both the structure and the contents of this sentence are worth note. Though the subordinate clause is strictly grammatically correct, it nonetheless seems to lack a 'he' ('*he* who had lost his leg…'). The small syntactical quirk serves to deprive a relative pronoun ('who') of an adjacent subject pronoun. 'Who', that is, is cut adrift from the 'he' it refers to. The effect is replicated in the contents. The rose concealing the gun functions as an image of signification in which

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[106] Ibid., 124. On hearing difficulties in Green, see further Rex Ferguson, 'Blind Noise and Deaf Visions: Henry Green's *Caught*, Synaesthesia and the Blitz', *Journal of Modern Literature* 33 (Fall 2009), 102–16.

[107] Rod Mengham, *The Idiom of the Time: The Writings of Henry Green* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 158, original emphasis.

[108] Ibid., 172.

[109] Elizabeth Taylor's *A Wreath of Roses*, discussed briefly above, forms a fascinating intertext with *Back*, sharing its concern with empty signification and using the same word – 'rose' – to explore this. There is not space here to compare the two novels in detail; see my forthcoming 'The Literature of Tiredness', *Postwar: British Literature in Transition: Volume 3 1940–1960*, ed. Gill Plain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[110] Henry Green, *Back* [1946] (London: Harvill, 1998). Page references are given in the text.

a sign is discontinuous with its referent.[111] While a real-life rose may be no more or less than itself (Gertrude Stein's 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose'),[112] in written discourse the word 'rose' and the concept 'rose' comprise a sign as signifier and signified respectively, the referent of which is an actual rose.[113] Summers remembers a rose (an actual rose in the fictional world) becoming a sign of something else (a gun). He failed correctly to read this rose, and paid the price with his leg. On the first page of the novel, then, the relationship between signs and their referents – and, indeed, significa-tion more generally – has become suspect.

Immediately after this sentence comes the following sentence-long paragraph:

> For, climbing around and up these trees of mourning, was rose after rose after rose, while, here and there, the spray over-burdened by the mass of flower, a live wreath lay fallen on a wreath of stone, or in a box in marble colder than this day, or onto frosted paper blooms which, under glass, marked each bed of earth wherein the dear departed encouraged life above in the green grass, the cypresses and in those roses gay and bright which, as still as this dark afternoon, stared at whosoever looked, or hung their heads to droop, to grow stained, to die when their turn came.
>
> (3)

Here is a profusion of roses (they are climbing up or rising; they rose): both the flowers in the fiction and the word 'rose' in the prose. This is, indeed, an 'over-burdening' of roses, threatening to make the stem on which they all depend collapse and so turn them into their own wreaths, or, reading them in metaphorical terms, to overload the system of signification and turn signs into dead signs. These roses repeat themselves. A naturally occurring wreath of actual roses lies on a wreath of stone roses, another on a wreath of paper blooms: the roses are both alive and inanimate, real and artificial. In further complex layering, the artificial paper roses on which the real, fallen roses are superimposed mark the graves in which remains are fertilizing another generation of real, overhead roses that will, in their turn, die, casting further wreaths upon those in the glass boxes. The roses

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[111] Mengham brilliantly notes that 'beneath a rose' or *sub rosa* means 'in secret, secretly' (*The Idiom of the Time*, 172, 166).

[112] The line, which Stein modified through a number of works, appeared originally in the 1913 poem 'Sacred Emily' (Gertrude Stein, *Geography and Plays* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 178–88: 187). Mengham comments that *Back*'s 'ambition would be to eternalize the formula' devised by Stein (*The Idiom of the Time*, 170).

[113] I am using 'sign' and 'referent' here in the sense suggested by Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours de linguistique générale*) [1916], trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), 65f.

are perpetuating themselves in a circularity that is again reminiscent of Stein's 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose'. In Stein's phrase, the sign 'rose' has become self-referential, repeated in a persistent but ultimately ineffectual attempt to produce meaning (like an actual rose, the proposition that a rose is a rose does not add or subtract anything). In a similar way, Green's roses are, as signs, at once proliferating and atrophying – growing and crumbling – spreading profusely only to become the inanimate roses of paper and stone.

Almost immediately, *Back* introduces another rose: 'But he came now to visit because someone he loved, a woman, who, above all at night, had been in his feelings when he was behind barbed wire, had been put here while he was away, and her name, of all names, was Rose' (4). In this sentence, which is long – though not among Green's longest – 'name' is repeated, as is 'Rose', the word that has already been repeated multiple times. This Rose is also associated with death and with profuse growth. Summers imagines the briar roots 'pushing down to the red hair of which she had been so proud and fond' (5), her body as 'food for worms' (6), her 'great red hair, still growing, a sort of moist bower for worms' (6): a nightmarish fecundity. In another image of signification, he sees 'sharp letters, cut in marble beyond a bunch of live roses' and realizes that this is where his former sweetheart must be buried 'for the letters spelled Rose' (10). In a literalization of Stein's 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose', actual, live roses lie on top of the sign for roses and beneath this sign lies another referent, but this time a dead one: Rose the woman. Now the sign 'rose' must do double signifying duty, producing an excess of meaning. At the same time, there is also an excess of signs: both the live roses and the word cut in the marble refer to (memorialize) the dead woman beneath. Signs and referents are both confused and confusing. Contributing to the confusion is a further play on the meaning of 'rose': a resurrection motif that recurs throughout the novel and that I will pick up later.

The opening sequence models the profusion of R/roses in the novel. It should again be noted that *Back* is not, and does not contain, a veteran's story that is multiply reiterated or that refuses to end. Nor is it the case that the veteran protagonist over-talks. Indeed, Summers exhibits the opposing tendency, having difficulties in expressing himself. Something has happened in France that he knows 'as he value[s] his reason' that he 'must always shut out' (183). Green writes: 'He clapped his hands down tight over his ears. He concentrated on not ever remembering. On keeping himself dead empty' (183). The deadness and emptiness refer as much to the capacity to engage in meaningful communication as to emotional memory. Later,

the reader is told that 'the nausea, which had recently begun to spread in [Summers'] stomach whenever prison camps were mentioned, drove all else out of his head' (15). Voided of data (dead empty), he responds to his interlocutor in a way that reveals both verbally and in terms of volume his inability to engage in signifying practices: '"Rather not speak of it," he replied, indistinctly' (15). (In Habermasian terms, he doesn't even aspire to communicative competence.) In a variation on these instances of vacant communication, Summers is shown 'forever asking himself things he could seldom answer' (5). In the opening scene, he wonders 'what he could say' if a village gossip were to see him – to his mind, incongruously – in the graveyard, but is unable to provide himself with a reply. In another key moment, his landlady, Mrs Frazier, warns him against talking to himself: '"Mr Summers, you want to watch out. Not at your age. Why," she said, "your voice rose," and again, as this word came through, he not even experienced guilt. "You spoke loud," she said. "Take care, you can do that when you get to my age, but for a young man like you, well …"' (32). Talking to oneself – particularly when no answer is forthcoming – is another example of circular signification. The point is made subtly in the phrase 'your voice rose', which juxtaposes the means of speech with the worn-out word 'rose' as copulates: in some sense, Summers' voice *is* R/rose, but R/rose has been emptied of signification. Mrs Frazier's warning is, furthermore, a reminder of the social constraints on Summers' discourses. Elsewhere, he is described as having 'a sort of block in his stomach, which, in the ordinary way, seemed to stand between him and free speech' (22): the phrasing makes 'speech' a political, as much as a somatic, psychological and emotional, phenomenon. The paradox is that Summers' reticence is linked to excess. Diagnosing Mrs Grant's amnesia, the doctor comments, 'I've a number of cases like that, now. Comes from the bombing. […] the nervous system rejects what is surplus to its immediate requirement' (154). The same is true of Summers' traumatized and hence self-voiding memory, with the result that he volunteers little ('he sat back, having talked too much for him' (36)). Instead, the signifying surplus is displaced to the discourses that surround him.

In consequence, *Back* is a novel of repetitions and multiplications. On the formal level, Doan has noted its ABA structure (Summers' return / his 'lapse into delusion and madness' / his recovery), the outer wings of the triptych each forming a version of coming 'back'.[114] The text is thickened with parallel intertexts. As Marius Hentea has observed, Summers passes a

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[114] Doan, 'Recuperating the Postwar Moment', 116.

second-hand bookseller's window and notices a set of the works of Rhoda Broughton (52). Surprisingly, the title that catches his eye is not 'one of Broughton's more popular works, *Red as a Rose Is She* [1870]' but *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867)[115] (the title is a synonym of 'rose' as a past-tense verb). Hentea points out that *Cometh Up as a Flower*, like *Back*, has an opening sequence set in a graveyard, and, moreover, shares certain plot developments with another *Back* intertext – the *Souvenirs de la marquise de Créquy*, a twelve-page passage that is inserted into *Back* supposedly as a 'translation' in a journal, which James Phillips sends to Summers because it seems 'so close' to the latter's situation (87).[116] Published in Paris between 1834 and 1836, the purportedly autobiographical *Souvenirs* were early denounced as a fake.[117] Green made two long translations of passages from them, the first published in the December 1944 issue of *Horizon*, the second in *Back*: 'there could be no doubt', writes Hentea, 'that he was working with a forgery'.[118] The *Souvenirs* have two, opposing, implications in terms of meaning production. Paralleling the plot of *Back* in the overlap between the delusions of Summers and those of Septimanie de Richelieu, they add an extra – excessive – layer to that narrative. At the same time, their status as a forgery sabotages it. Gerard Barrett argues that, by 'planting' the earlier translation in *Horizon*, Green ensured that 'the most fantastic and hallucinatory aspect of *Back*' would have 'an oblique, historical validity',[119] and yet this 'validity' is hypertextual (dependent upon an external text) and therefore both produced by and productive of meaning that proliferates beyond the novel. Mengham suggests that the 'central gap' that the *Souvenirs* make in the text of *Back* is 'an image of writing as schizophrenia': '[w]hen everything is written over […] the lengths to which it is possible to go in covering up tracks are theoretically limitless'.[120] The *Souvenirs* both reinforce and undermine the fiction of *Back*: replicative, they once again model signification that is circular and so ultimately empty.

Back proceeds on this replicatory principle. Summers' prosthesis has already been mentioned: described both as an 'aluminium leg' (20) and as a 'wooden leg' (5), it is as though he has two false limbs, and it/they finds/

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[115] Marius Hentea, 'Fictional Doubles in Henry Green's *Back*', *The Review of English Studies* 61.251 (September 2010), 614–26: 620 n31.

[116] Ibid., 610 n31. The extra 'l' in the surname 'Phillips' is another tiny example of surplusage.

[117] Ibid., 617–18.

[118] Ibid., 610.

[119] Barrett, 'Souvenirs from France', 180.

[120] Mengham, *The Idiom of the Time*, 172.

find another parallel in Middlewitch's 'chromium plated arm' (20). Hentea notes the 1:1 principle of the filing system Summers establishes in his office (36)[121] in which cross-indexed entries refer back to each other. This filing system has kept Summers 'sane' (35), no doubt because it is a means of controlling the proliferation of meaning even as it involves an over-production of signs. Coincidences, another form of parallelism, are rife in the work – 'Once you start on coincidence why there's no end to those things,' remarks Mrs Frazier (30). Middlewitch, for example, knows Rose's parents and is both a former lodger of Mrs Frazier's and Nancy's neighbour.[122] There are a number of doublings. The toddler Ridley connotes fecundity and proliferation ('riddling'): Summers is 'taken up by a need to see the child a second time', a reiteration that will allow him:

> to search in the shape of the bones of its face for an echo of Rose, to drag this out from the line of its full cheeks to see if he could find a memory of Rose laughing there, and even to look deep in Ridley's eyes as through a mirror, and catch the small of himself by which to detect, if he could, a likeness, a something, however false, to tell him he was a father, that Rose lived again, by his agency, in their son.
> (10)

There are plural Roses in this passage, the dead Rose who is potentially discernible in Ridley's bone structure and cheeks; and, in a beautifully complex construction, a Rose resurrected via the image of Summers in Ridley's pupils, an image that, if he detects in it a likeness to the boy, will allow Summers to know that Rose lives again in their son 'by his agency'. In yet another resurrection, Mrs Grant thinks that Summers is her brother, John, killed in the First World War: she sings out ' "John, John," twice'. It is not clear whether this means that the name is said two or four times in all but, in either event, the re-naming is in excess of the apparent referent.

The most important resurrection is that of Rose herself, whom Summers confuses with her half-sister, Nancy Whitmore (there is both blankness and excess in the name).[123] On first seeing Nancy, he reacts with shock: 'He looked. He sagged. Then something went inside. It was as though the frightful starts his heart was giving had burst a vein. He pitched forward in a dead faint, because there she stood alive, so close that he could touch, and

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[121] Hentea, 'Fictional Doubles in Henry Green's *Back*', 622.

[122] See Andrew Gibson, 'Henry Green as Experimental Novelist', *Studies in the Novel* 16.2 (Summer 1984), 197–212: 207.

[123] Nancy has black hair (45) unlike Rose, whose hair is red (5, 6). Nancy is darker than Rose as a consequence of this, but, as her surname, 'Whitmore', suggests, also paler (more white). In these tiny details, Nancy appears to be, not just another version of Rose, but further plural versions.

breathing, the dead spit, the living image herself, Rose in person' (43). The shock is excessive, and this Rose, too, is excessive: it is as though there are multiple Roses – the 'dead spit' and the 'living image'.[124] The conversations between Summers and Nancy repeat the word 'R/rose' further, asserting it, questioning it, straining it, undermining it. The novel teems with Roses. Summers 'denies' her three times (10, 23, 146), giving her a Christ-like quality: she refuses to die but keeps rising, 're-flowering' (35). Nancy is affronted when Summers brings Rose's husband to her flat: 'Think of it. Him that's met his wife naked in bed with him, and you bring him along to me. Oh it's not proper' (83). Her fear is that she replicates Rose, and so her own naked body will be familiar to him: her reaction hypostasizes another Rose (later Summers accuses her of being a bigamist, doubling her husbands). Dot Miller cruelly repeats Rose's name – 'It's Rose, Rose she's called, isn't it Rose?' (107) – and Summers has to leave the room in case he vomits. His physiological urge bespeaks his emotional distress, but there is also a sense of an excess of signs, which requires purgation. 'R/rose' multiplies and multiplies so that Summers, trying to escape the sign, keeps coming upon it: 'He fled Rose, yet every place he went she rose up before him' (52).[125]

Proliferating in this way, 'R/rose' empties itself out, ceases to be a sign with meaning.[126] It comes to resemble the many acronyms in the novel ('Everything's initials these days', sighs Mr Grant (16)): a surplusage of letters that, since they are impenetrable, also marks a diminution of communication.[127] The acronyms find a physical form in the letters Summers scissors from old letters from Rose to paste together as a message that he can have compared with Nancy's handwriting. Though the intention

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[124] 'Dead spit' derives from 'spitting image', itself a corruption of 'splitting image' ('splitting, adj.', 5 (*Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), online edition), the exact likeness formed when something is split in two.

[125] In a sense, the roses even extend beyond the novel – and Green's life. The collection of his previously unpublished writings, *Surviving* (1992), contains a piece Green dictated in 1964 about his childhood home, Forthampton Court: 'one beached the boat at dusk to turn and see Tewkesbury Abbey's Norman tower in Caen stone glowing rose above dying light – the Rose, darling Rose – he did not know it yet but of whom he was to write, never even having met her, written of not until after the Second War, muddled as she was, unthinking but always right, the dear Rose he would love at that time just to lose the agony of the air raids' (*Surviving: The Uncollected Writings of Henry Green*, ed. Matthew Yorke (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), 301). The passage is extraordinarily reminiscent of *Back*.

[126] Hentea reads the profusion of 'R/roses' as expressive of Locke and Hume's 'association of ideas' ('Fictional Doubles in Henry Green's *Back*', 622). Yet Summers does not seem to be *producing* these roses so much as encountering them.

[127] Willard Waller comments that 'Army abbreviations alone are almost sufficient to make military speech incomprehensible to the civilian' (*The Veteran Comes Back*, 29).

is a doubling of signs, the message is meaningless and Summers berates himself for having 'killed' Rose's letters (118): 'R/rose', like the numerous acronyms, is reduced to so many dead letters. Unsurprisingly, Summers becomes inured to the sign: 'Each time he said her name he noted he felt nothing any more, so much so that he hardly bothered to watch himself these days' (38). This is symptomatic of an atrophying of signification: exhausted, 'R/rose' has no meaning.

The ubiquity of 'R/roses' in *Back* results, not in an equivalent proliferation of significance, but in a mass of empty or dead signs. Summers' urge to vomit after he has heard the word 'Rose' three times is indicative of a model of signification in which repetition (regurgitation, bringing something up again, *rising*) is ultimately synonymous with voiding. 'R/rose' is now incomprehensible. Veteran tale-telling, over-talking, has been displaced into a more general linguistic surplusage, equally relentless, equally unsatisfying, equally unedifying.

Conclusion

Mass warfare – itself a phenomenon of excess – produces an over-talking figure: the veteran whose tales of war, if welcome at first, quickly become unwanted. In this chapter, I have characterized such redundant, overabundant stories, and their abstraction into linguistic surfeiting, as rude and (hence) irrational. Whether read within the framework of eighteenth-century notions of polite, reason-based discourse or within that of more recent ideas of discourse ethics, the surplusage can be taken to indicate communicative anxieties. The experiences and after-effects of mass warfare cannot easily be encompassed by the parameters allowed by rational communication, but spill over, forming a torrent of verbiage. In the next chapter, I discuss in much greater detail the epistemological nature of these communicative concerns, again as figured through veteran storytelling. Rather than manifesting themselves in over-talking, however, these concerns result in under-talking; indeed, in some cases, in not talking at all. From magniloquence to pauciloquence, then, and the end of the story.