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William Wharton, *Shrapnel: A Memoir*. New York: William Morrow, 2013. Pp. 263. ISBN 978-0-06-225737-6.

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In *Shrapnel: A Memoir* as in his earlier World War II novel, *A Midnight Clear*,¹ William Wharton elides the difference between personal experience, autobiography, and fiction. This is true of very many first-person accounts, whether recorded oral recollections or writings about combat, including, for example, Polybius's descriptions of Carthaginian battlefields, Caesar's of Alesia, Grant's of Vicksburg, or Eisenhower's of Normandy beaches. So, one must trust that Wharton's fifty-year-old memories are reliable within the parameters of a memoir and that the pressures of persuading an audience have not trumped the facts.

Wharton (1925–2008) is not Wharton's name. Born Albert du Aime and raised Catholic in Philadelphia, he enlisted in the Army after high school,² served in the 87th Infantry Division, and received three Purple Hearts for wounds suffered at the Battle of the Bulge and elsewhere in the ETO.³ After the war, he earned a doctorate in psychology at UCLA and eventually returned to Paris where, living on a houseboat, he marketed Impressionist oil paintings and did some painting of his own. He won a National Book Award for *Birdy*,⁴ his first novel and later a successful film,⁵ about a lunatic obsessed with canaries. (By no coincidence, Wharton, too, as a teenager raised 250 canaries and kept canaries all his life.) In addition to a further eleven semi-autobiographical novels in English, nine others have appeared in Polish only; Wharton is something of an iconic figure in Poland (not to be confused with the Black Madonna of Częstochowa).

Shrapnel mentions shrapnel⁶ a dozen times, both the all too palpable kind that gets stuck in your neck and the metaphorical “general shrapnel of the human condition” (261–62) emanating, Wharton writes, from early relations with parents, courtship trials, and life's dealings with friends and enemies. The book gathers many vignettes into seven sections—Basic Training, Fort Jackson, Shipping Out, Invasion, Men at War, Aftermath, and Homecoming. These depict experiences Wharton explicitly did not want to share with his children. When they insisted on war stories, he told them only relatively amusing ones. For him, the war remained “a soul-shaking trauma” (3) even in his seventies. He considers the conditioning of soldiers, then and now, to “respond to command without question ... an abomination.... They taught me to kill. They trained me to abandon my natural desire to live...” (5). The results on view here include several courts-martial, an American massacre of German POWs, as well as some very funny incidents told from the perspective of a smart nineteen-year-old volunteer who had changed his mind about “unacceptable experiences,” institutionalized murder. His sketches of good buddies, schlemiels, and vicious US noncoms and officers are engaging but superficial. Still, that an author leaves readers wanting more and hoping in vain to learn about later adventures is no damning criticism of an anti-war collection of mini-catastrophes.

The character Birnbaum wants to kill Germans, at least in part because he is a Jew, but this “real klutz” is abused during training by a Tennessee lieutenant, Perkins, at Fort Benning, Georgia. He is court-martialed for cleaning his rifle with steel wool (forbidden) to the point of erasing the barrel's rifling. Another character, Corbeil, urinates nightly on his cot in hopes of escaping the “service” and receives an honora-

1. NY: Knopf, 1982.

2. He does not record here how the Army got hold of him. Is this silence about his enlistment modesty or shame?

3. I.e., European “Theater” of Operations—war being a kind of drama. Irritating military acronyms lend a flavor of authenticity and proliferate in all soldiers' and military historians' accounts of recent wars.

4. NY: Knopf, 1982.

5. Dir. Alan Parker, 1984.

6. The word derives from British General Henry Shrapnel (1761–1842).

ble discharge. Dr. Smet sees through Wharton's plan to obtain a medical discharge for a bone spur in his foot and dismisses his varicocele⁷ with a flippant "Nice try."

Overseas, Wharton meets a lovely young English art store clerk in Biddulph. He parlays a mapping assignment into a picnic with her. She is very friendly and accommodating until—with perceived regret—she informs him that he is copying the maps of her fiancé. Thus deflated and defeated, he has shipped out two days later, after which he receives a note reporting that her fiancé has died in the air war. However, Wharton has lost her address along with much else.

"D-3" refers to a crazy mission that wasted soldiers' lives to deliver a radio to the French resistance two days after "D-Day." Wharton is "volunteered" by a colonel, because he can read a map, has parachuted five times in training, and knows Morse code. That he is a "cripple with varicose veins in his balls and a lump on his heel" matters little. "Good luck, Soldier," the colonel tells a thoroughly confused sheep headed for slaughter, equipped with a small pistol in case he meets the enemy before the Maquis. "I don't really want to be a hero; in fact I'm not sure we should even win this war. I'm willing to learn German" (85). Is this merely deadpan humor? Hard to say, but Wharton repeatedly condemns the war for the damage it inflicts on helpless civilians and for making beasts of men.

Told he can back out of this dangerous, secret air mission at any time before take-off, Wharton feels incapable of declining. His two-man, single-engine plane skims over the Channel and, gaining some altitude, rolls him out to parachute into occupied France. He never makes radio contact with the French and spends three days in the fields before soldiers suddenly approach. They are Canadian infantrymen, not Germans, but no one has informed them that an allied trooper is hiding under an upturned tree. Eventually, he joins his Intelligence and Reconnaissance outfit and returns to Britain.

Wharton is sent out on a much-dreaded night patrol⁸ to find "Kraut" tanks and bunkers. As his squad passes the last outpost, the guards tell them, "You guys have got to be nuts! You don't go anywhere.... We'll tell [the relieving guards] how you went out" (122). They report seeing tanks ahead, but the next morning no one can locate German machinery for three miles forward. Then near Metz, they "lose all the gain we made" (127). In France, Wharton also bumps into Mike Hennessy, a tough, doltish boy who had tormented him back in elementary school. They have a beer together, but a few days later Wharton finds Hennessy's shrapnel-pitted corpse packed in a body bag.

Kurt Franklin, a Jew who was born in Germany, conducts nasty interrogations of prisoners without a trace of American accent. His goal is to kill five "German men for every one of my family they've killed." Wharton thinks, "There's been nothing personal for me in this war; just killing the ... Krauts" and wonders why he has been paired with Franklin—"I don't speak German, I almost failed Latin in high school...."⁹ [T]he entire thing seems so bizarre, out of some ... crappy movie" (149). One of the interrogations involved pushing at least two SS men into self-dug graves and shoveling dirt over their prone bodies starting at the feet. Franklin even wings one victim with a gunshot. The Germans break silence when the Americans' Polish helpers start shoveling muddy slush on their faces. Wharton writes, "I feel like a Nazi myself" (152) and gets himself reassigned.

"Crossfire" finds Sgt. Ezra Ethridge pushing their major to send Wharton's squad on a hopeless night mission. Wharton's protests are overruled and all but one of his men are killed. He himself barely escapes. Back at his encampment, in a fury he jams his rifle butt into the sleeping Ethridge's stomach and fat face (170). Other GIs overpower him and bring him to the commanding officer, who had also opposed the mission. A sympathetic colonel saves him from a regular court-martial, but demotes him to "buck private" and transfers him from Headquarters Company back to K Company in the Third Battalion. Wharton decides

7. Varicose vein on a testicle.

8. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997), chapter 10, "Night on the Line," captures the soldiers' universal fear of chaotic nocturnal confrontations with the enemy.

9. My in-laws Pete and Eloise Smyrl verified his Upper Darby High School (PA) attendance, where the Wall of Fame includes Wharton's name as writer and painter.

“the only heroes of wars are the conscientious objectors” (176). He loses his balance owing to damage to the vestibular and semicircular canals in his ears, undetected by army doctors, and is beginning to question his own sanity when shrapnel hits to his wrist and groin take him out of action. Later, in a German cellar full of French champagne, he and other soldiers get drunk, filling a tub with the champagne, just like in the movies.

After East meets West, Wharton shares guard-posts with Mongolians in the Soviet Army. The Russians are “deep into loot and rape,” running down German women “the way you would a deer or a rabbit, shouting and hollering” (189). When some Americans try to intervene, the Russians point their rifles at them. Wharton steals scarves and jewels, which he loses when a bizarre band of Hitler *Jugend* storms through his outpost one night. A newly promoted sergeant comes upon his men, detailed to guard a lumber yard, raping or aggressively consorting with some Fräuleins. General Collier court-martials the men, but Wharton outlaws the prosecutor—Collier’s son and adjutant.

Rolin Clairmont is a sweet upstate New York hunter-guide who goes where no one else dares, both on the ground and in a recovered airplane. Daredevil pals in high school or college are one thing, but K Company on the Belgian front in 1945 was no place to partner with a man who sees war as a game—“a combination of chess and Russian roulette. He likes it!” (209). When Wharton’s unit finds a downed L4 airplane (Piper Cub) in no man’s land, Clairmont forms a cracked plan to fly it back. They stopper a bullet hole in the plane’s gas tank with bubble-gum. German shrapnel strikes the crippled craft and a French-Canadian patrol comes close to shooting them. After the German surrender, Clairmont is furloughed, disappointed that the dropping of the Atomic Bomb has ended the war.

Wharton steals jewels from German houses, rationalizing that the inhabitants likely stole them from “the Poles, the French or the Jews [in places where] they’ve ravaged, robbed and killed. We think of ourselves as the great liberators, liberating all this loot” (234). To conceal the stolen goods from the American authorities, Wharton sews them into his combat field pack, but the surprise night raid of the Hitler “boy scouts”—armed with flamethrowers—scatters the half-naked army men. The Americans return to discover that the German teens have taken their field packs but left the rifles, pistols, and even blankets.

Wharton designates a subordinate to bring in a bunch of sad looking Germans, since he’s on the edge of tears after the capture. He is tired of “this war, feeling I’m running out of luck, but the trouble is, giving up is hard to do. You can’t be sure they won’t just shoot you” (225). One of Wharton’s own squad executes ten German POWs, after Wharton leaves them to get some necessary sleep. Their massacre—“we shot the bastards”—haunts the angry author for the rest of his life. His superior plans but foregoes a court-martial because it would hurt the Army’s reputation, damage morale back home, and deter other Germans from surrendering. Wharton himself is guilty of dereliction of duty. The soldiers who shot the weaponless POWs get two to ten years imprisonment and dishonorable discharges; Wharton is again busted down to private and docked six months’ salary. The event teaches or reminds him “How low human beings can come when you take the leash off them” (252). He never again seeks or accepts a position of authority in his life, instead becoming something of a hermit (with a family).

Wharton’s plain, self-deprecating prose style¹⁰ is part of a literary strategy meant to convince us that the war permanently brutalized its participants (except, to some degree, the rebarbative Wharton). Thus, in “Sergeant Ethridge,” the author writes “I discover the difference between being scared and being a coward is having other people find out” (155). In that same chapter, Wharton and his buddy have hidden in a barn to avoid being assigned to patrol duty. When the soldier forced to go out in their place suffers wounds, Wharton feels bad, but happily reflects that the bullet (through the thigh) did not break a bone—it is a “million dollar wound” ensuring his comrade will see no further combat.¹¹ Though Ethridge hounds the slackers, the sergeant “never once went on a patrol himself” (158).

10. The publisher oddly binds the small book in white. The dust jacket sports a simple campaign map stretching from Strasbourg to Chemnitz—places of no relevance to Wharton’s war. There are no maps or photographs.

11. “Every [honorable] man’s dream”—Ambrose (note 8 above) 261–62.

Noncom superiors are often deemed “chickenshit,” a term soldiers applied to men who never fought on the front-line. Ugly and pompous types could serve below you, above you, and as equals in your unit.¹² The war also produced the greatest black market of all time.¹³ Wharton’s own participation in the theft of enemy civilian goods caused him shame long after the fact. The Army could not or did not care to prevent Americans from stripping material from dead enemy soldiers.

For comparably unvarnished yet pondered narratives of the world of “grunts” in the Second World War, readers should consult Ernest Taylor Pyle’s spare, selected oeuvre of frontline experiences, *Ernie’s War*.¹⁴ Studs Terkel’s *The Good War*¹⁵ offers the vivid, if edited and condensed, words of participants both civilian and military. Wharton’s distinction (not unique, of course) is to have imbued his narration with a more existential “take” on his youthful, skewed introduction to adulthood in perilous times governed by “Chance’s strange arithmetic.”¹⁶

12. See Ambrose (note 8 above), chapter 14, for a survey of the place of “Jerks, Sad Sacks, Profiteers, and Jim Crow” in an eight-million-man army. Ordinary (white) Joes, from South and North, lived comfortably with their democracy fighting history’s most murderous racist with a racially segregated army (Ambrose 345). Wharton never saw, or at least never discusses, this blot on the American escutcheon, but he had abundant dreadful material, experienced at first hand.

13. SOS (Services of Supply) pullulated with small-minded profiteers, officers, and enlisted men often siphoning off war material, to sell in Britain or France—ammunition, food, and fuel needed at the front.

14. Ed. David Nichols (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1986). The “Library of America” two-volume anthology, *Reporting World War II: American Journalism*, “advised” by S. Hynes, A. Matthews, R.J. Spiller, and N.C. Sorel (NY: Literary Classics of the US, 1995) offers seven helpful maps, photographs, Bill Mauldin cartoons, chronology, endnotes, glossary, and index. It sets the gold standard for such collections.

15. NY: Pantheon 1984. Terkel’s informants’ immediacy results in part from his skill in excerpting and editing audio-recorded interviews.

16. Wilfred Owen, “Insensibility,” line 16.