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War Stories: "Truth" and Particulars

"How'd you like to hear about the war?" (O'Brien 163). The simple question that Norman Bowker wishes he could ask his town in Tim O'Brien's tale "Speaking of Courage" expresses the profound need of war veterans to share their stories with a willing audience so that somehow, through words, they might impress the impact of their experience on the very nerves of their listeners and make them understand what they felt. War narratives, like much of human discourse, involve communicating deeply personal experiences and uniquely individual ideas. All forms of expression, from the artistic to the mundane, face the fundamental difficulties of this process, for how can people truly understand something they have never themselves experienced? Every artist, writer, and communicator encounters this ultimate obstacle to personal response and understanding. In his autobiographical work *Ecce Homo*, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche warns the reader of the inaccessibility of his work:

> Ultimately nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows. For what one lacks access to from experience one will have no ear. . . . This is, in the end, the originality of my experience. Whoever thought he had understood something of me, had made up something out of me after his own image. (261)

The use of particulars in war narrative is an attempt to give someone else an ear for the originality of one's own experience. Although this inherent obstacle to personal understanding can sometimes result in a

communicative impasse, it is not an insurmountable barrier. The most meaningful war stories succeed in reaching their audience, fostering a genuine understanding through the effective use of language and particular descriptive details that somehow resonate with the reader's or listener's own experiences.

Perhaps this factor more than any other explains why "true" war stories are seldom influenced by prevailing literary trends. These tales speak in remarkably similar ways across time despite the fact that they do not generalize but rather describe specific, unrelated events. The essence of war emerges from its details, and the stories that most effectively communicate that essence rely upon, as Samuel Hynes states in *The Soldier's Tale*, "only the things that the senses record and memory stores . . . because the truth is in the particulars" (27). This aspect of narrative, however, places the storyteller in a very difficult and paradoxical position. The theater of war contains acts and scenes far removed from the occurrences of everyday existence. To tell a true war story, the soldier must relive the sheer unfamiliarity of it as he first experienced it, and delve into its details like never before.

Nothing in life, no boot camp, no amount of training, can ever prepare a man for what he will encounter in combat. The complete otherness of war heightens the difficulty of sharing its story. O'Brien, in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," expresses the frustration brought out by the foreign nature of battle:

> . . . they'll never understand any of this, not in a billion years. Try to tell them about it, they'll just stare at you. . . . They won't understand zip. It's like trying to tell somebody what chocolate tastes like. . . . Or shit. There it is, you got to taste it. (123)

The soldier has entered an alien world so unimaginable that you must "taste it" to digest it. Regarding the soldier's attempt to capture the strange quality of combat, Hynes remarks that "war narratives, though they make war vivid, they don't make it familiar. Indeed, one motive for writing them seems to be to show how *un*familiar war is" (6). The sense of utter strangeness, the peculiar sense of isolation that is the initial response of many to battle, poses an interesting dilemma for the war narrator: how to make the reader or listener experience the unfamiliarity of it all at the same time that you are attempting to help them identify with your experience by appealing to familiar images and details.

The first and most famous Western battle narrative, the *Iliad*, deals with this complexity through the use of similes, descriptive comparisons and images that are not actually experienced by the participants in battle but that serve to elucidate the war for the poem's audience. Many of the similes used in the *Iliad* play upon peacetime images—scenes from natural settings, from domestic surroundings, or from the hunt—that are very different in nature from the activities of war. For example, the description of the Greek Army marching out to meet the Trojans:

> Innumerable throngs of buzzing flies
> Will swarm all over a herdsman's yard
> In Springtime, when milk wets the pails—
> Likewise the throngs of long-haired Greeks
> Who stood on the plain facing the Trojans . . .
> (2. 505-9)

The use of this analogy affects the listener in two main ways. First, the poet, by equating the flurried activity of the men in preparation for battle with a more familiar and particular sight, that of flies swarming around a milk pail, has provided his audience with a glimpse of what might otherwise be for many an unfamiliar scene (Lombardo xliv). At the same time, however, the simile is removing the hearer even further from the scene, excluding him from the experience. It is as if the poet were saying: "Here is what it is like, but if you haven't been there, this is as close to it as you're going to get, flies on milk in the Springtime!" Like the looks given by the returning patrol to their colonel in the story told by Mitchell Sanders in O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," it says: "poor bastard, you'll never know—wrong frequency—you don't even want to hear this" (82-83).

Other war memoirists, such as Siegfried Sassoon, turn conventional literary style on its head to convey the dissonance involved in explaining the strangeness of war to those who have never experienced it. Sassoon, disillusioned with the First World War, ridiculed its glorification in works of Romantic prose and poetry in which a lofty and elegant diction was used to avoid the reality of experience and of death. Sassoon crafted his poems in the elevated style of traditional war romanticism but added a bitter twist, inserting an image or a statement told in a heightened fashion but which contained a subject not so gilded. In "Suicide in the

Trenches," he begins in an ebullient, sing-song tone, "I knew a simple soldier boy / Who grinned at life in empty joy. . ." (78). While maintaining the same jovial rhythm in the second stanza, Sassoon quickly changes subjects. We see a particular scene of war: "In winter trenches, cowed and glum / With crumps and lice and lack of rum, / He put a bullet through his brain" (78). By the third and final stanza the poem and its poet have performed an about-face. He bitterly rails: "You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye / Who cheer when soldier lads march by, / Sneak home and pray you'll never know / The hell where youth and laughter go" (78). Sassoon recognizes that the audience lacks the experience to wrest any meaning from his description of war, and thus feels the need to preach to them directly in a third stanza. Like Rat Kiley in O'Brien's "How to Tell," Sassoon experiences the frustrations of dealing with the ignorance of the "dumb coozes" (77) back home who do not respond to the sad truths he is attempting to share.

Michael Herr, in *Dispatches*, also uses literary technique to convey the unfamiliarity and disorganization of the war in Vietnam, cultivating an idiosyncratic style to match the disjointed chaos going on around him. Herr grounds much of his scattered account in particular and accessible images like the rotations of a ceiling fan and the faces of the fighting men "serious beyond what you would call their years" (16). Herr imposes no rational order or organized analysis on his narrative. He constructs no framework that a civilized reader can use to put the experience of war in perspective. Instead he allows the images and the soldiers to speak for themselves, bringing a surreal intensity to the events. Although not a soldier, Herr, like Sassoon and Homer, counterbalances his detailed description of events with the sentiment that the reader is still never going to get it. Describing the time that he asked a grunt for the rest of the story of a patrol that went up the mountain, Herr states that "he just looked like he felt sorry for me, fucked if he'd waste time telling stories to anyone as dumb as I was" (6). Like the platoon in Mitchell Sanders' story, Herr's grunt feels isolated by his experience and consequently alienates his audience. As William Broyles explains in his article "Why Men Love War," for many veterans "the purpose [of the story] is not to enlighten but to exclude; its message is not its content but putting the listener in his place. I suffered. I was there. You were not" (61). This is the sacred aspect of the soldier's experience, and it stems from a powerful encounter with the forces of life and death.

> The presence of death and danger has a strange way of bringing you fully awake. It makes things vivid. When you're afraid, really afraid, you see things you never saw before, you pay attention to the world. (219)

As O'Brien here describes in "Ghost Soldiers," many soldiers return from war having had a peak experience, a love of their lives that others will never understand. "To tell the truth I've never been happier in my whole life. Never," the displaced teenager Mary Anne remarks of her Vietnam experience in O'Brien's "Sweetheart of The Song Tra Bong" (110) Through her story, O'Brien delves into an aspect of war not often expressed—its attractive side, which can overwhelm even those like Mary Anne who enter it the most innocently. What many who have not been to war do not understand is the very ambiguity of the experience, the fact that it can be both horrifying and attractive at the same time. One of the hardest feelings for veterans to explain is the bizarre attraction they possess toward an event that while horrific, also exhilarates them like nothing ever before. William Broyles describes it this way:

> . . . the love of war stems from the union, deep in the core of our being, between sex and destruction, beauty and horror, love and death. War may be the only way in which most men touch the mythic domains in our soul. (61)

The depth of emotional contact to which Broyles alludes cannot be understood by those who have not had such a heightened experience of danger or close brush with death. In "How to Tell," O'Brien makes a similar point about an encounter he had with a woman who, after hearing a reading of one of his stories, approached him and praised the tale's tragedy. He states that she will never get it "because she wasn't listening. It wasn't a war story. It was a love story. But you can't say that" (90-91). Men return from war not only having experienced its hell, but its beauty as well. "The awful majesty of combat" (87) as O'Brien calls it and the heightened state of awareness it brings are most eloquently expressed in war narratives through the use of particulars.

By bringing men so near to death, war makes them aware of the little details that constitute life, especially the small impulses and responses that compose their own living bodies. Norman Bowker hears the valves

in his heart, and Mary Anne regarding her combat sorties remarks, "When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything. . . . I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else" (O'Brien 121). Often, it is the profound immediacy of these physical sensations that soldiers wish to have equaled in the emotional response of their audience. "A true war story," says O'Brien, "if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (84). In other words, an effective narrative brings out a tangible, physical response in its hearer, it brings him as close to the action as a second-hand account can get. This, of course, is no easy task for the storyteller. Rat Kiley in telling his story "wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt" (O'Brien 101). O'Brien here likens the potential impact of the narrator upon his audience to the physical sensation of burning, because no other way of experiencing the narrative will suffice.

Frustrated at not achieving this effect, the soldier will keep returning to the perception that haunts him, hoping to finally impress it upon his listener. Kiowa, in O'Brien's "The Things They Carried," cannot shake the picture of his buddy Ted Lavender dropping suddenly dead to the ground. He returns again and again to what he saw: "The poor bastard just flat-fuck fell. Boom. Down. Nothing else. . . . Like cement. . . . The guy's dead. I mean really" (13). In his brief, disjointed remarks Kiowa extracts what he saw. He forms from them a story, a complete narrative of war contained within a single, compelling image. Through his story Kiowa is coming to terms with himself and his own experience, pinning down its meaning in his mind. While this tactic may not help others to ever fully understand the experience, it does reveal a lot about the nature of human memory and its ability to get at the "truth."

"What sticks to memory, often, are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end," (38) O'Brien comments in "Spin," and indeed his circular narrative style in *The Things They Carried* reflects this non-linear quality of memory. O'Brien readily admits of his own Vietnam experience that "much of it is hard to remember," (36) an observation common in war narratives because of the fact that the physical and emotional sensations get mixed up through time. Many were never very clear in the first place. Whether in a trench in France or a jungle in Vietnam, it is difficult for the soldier to distinguish anything but what is going on directly around him, his attention being focused upon "other,

closer, mortal things" (Hynes 14). This confined perspective, combined with the nature of memory, makes an accurate vision of war difficult to construct. As O'Brien describes his own attempt in "How to Tell":

> The angles of vision are skewed . . . the pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed. (78)

All that remains then is this "surreal seemingness" and the disjointed fragments of sense data, the meaningful particulars somehow still contained within the porous human brain. Part of the function of stories then is to fill in the blanks left by memory and to join the past with the present and the future. What then is to be considered the truth, and how do we recognize it? How many details are required to make a story true?

Robert Graves once commented that war stories were "true but not truthful" (Hynes 21). Indeed, all war narratives are in one way or another simply fiction manufactured out of the jumbled perceptions of reality. Concerning this cloudiness of memory and its effect on truth, O'Brien remarks, "In a war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it is safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (88). Paradoxically, however, war stories often can come far closer to the truth by way of fiction than through factual accuracy. Such stories possess an ability inherent in all myths, they are vehicles that refer past themselves to a greater reality, which like an Impressionist painting can supersede any reality achieved through photographic precision. Their expression depends on portraying what is real, not generalities or abstractions, and truth must ultimately be extracted by piecing the particulars together.

In the title story of *The Things They Carried*, the truth of the Vietnam experience is contained within the thousands of little details involved in being a grunt in the field. O'Brien puts the reader into the shoes of the grunt, making him feel the weight bearing down upon him. The truth of this weight encompasses everything from personal items like jungle boots and flak jackets, to forces and entities like atmosphere, gravity, and fear. This is, of course, an attempt to get at truth through factual detail—what the soldiers really carried and what they really felt. It is a catalogue

of particulars constructed in an attempt to truthfully render an experience through story. In "The Man I Killed," however, O'Brien's thoughts about the enemy do cross over into the domain of fiction. In order to make the man he has killed more real in his own mind and to understand what his death signifies, O'Brien personalizes him, building a fictional profile of what he must have been like while alive. In doing so he also projects his own characteristics onto the man. O'Brien is using here the two main methods we have for sympathizing with another person (even an enemy): personalization, realizing that the other is an individual human being; an outward projection, identifying characteristics in that person similar to our own. By constructing a fiction around the reality of the corpse, O'Brien provides a model for his own audience on how a war narrative must operate, and, how it must be read.

Finally, there is that truth that cannot be successfully expressed by building a profile of particulars around it or by casting it within any sort of conceptual framework. Sometimes stories are "just beyond telling" (O'Brien 79). Sometimes the true story is better represented outside of words, as in the case of Herr's grunt with the ocean-floor eyes. As Herr reports, the men in his team would say: "All's you got to do is look into his eyes, that's the whole fucking story right there" (6). Here lies no narration of events or experiences but a description of a single reflection of human response, an image that reveals more than words about the experience of war. It is not alone.

"If in some smothering dreams you too could pace / Behind the wagon that we flung him in . . . ," Wilfred Owen begins his vivid description of a gassed soldier whose image haunts his dreams "guttering, choking, drowning" (55). The force of Owen's entire message in the poem rests upon the incredible sub-marine image of that single dying man. "How to Tell a True War Story" centers on O'Brien's recollection of Curt Lemon's sun-drenched death and his assembling of the parts of the image over and over in an attempt to recapture the meaning of a moment in words:

> Twenty years later, I can still see the sunlight on Lemon's face. I can see him turning, looking back at Rat Kiley, then he laughed and took that curious half step from shade into sunlight, his face suddenly brown and shining, and when his foot touched down, in that instant, he must've thought it was the sunlight that was killing him. (90)

Although Owen's and O'Brien's images are different in nature, both attempt to communicate through words the shock of watching a man die. Such an indelible mental and soul-piercing image contains no moral. A true war story is extracted from experience and perception. It does not instruct. It simply "bears witness" (Hynes 32). Herr tells of one such story told to him by a grunt: "Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell the rest of us what happened" (6). There is no moral here, no smooth finish to the story, just a statement as cold and empty as the deaths it describes.

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