

John Bowers

Bearing Witness to
Story: The Before and
After in Bruce Weigl's
The Circle of Hanb

John Dominic Crossan, in his book *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*, examines how story plays an integral role in defining our lives. He writes: "This is the crucial question: is story telling us about a world out there objectively present before and apart from any story concerning it, or, does story create world so that we live as human beings in, and only in, layers upon layers of interwoven story?" (9). For Crossan, the second half of this question defines our relationship to the world around us. From the moment we become aware of our existence and acquire language, we begin the story of our lives. Perhaps it is because human nature so profoundly demands to be connected to the universal experience that we begin to tell stories and ask that stories be told to us. Story places us in a universe that can be defined as a kind of reality and provides us with a dependable network to help explain our existence. Story presents to us a text of life that can be told, listened to, and retold. Through story and the interaction between teller and listener, our world is connected and relationships are formed. Moments of our experiences become connected in our stories.

Jean-Paul Sartre in his book *What is Literature?* remarks that story "[offers] to disclose the world... to the reader. It is to have recourse to the consciousness of others in order to make one's self be recognized as *essential* to the totality of being; it is to wish to live this essentiality by means

of interposed persons” (65). Through the interplay between storyteller and listener, the events in one’s life reveal meaning, substance, and significance. As Tim O’Brien says in his fictional memoir, *The Things They Carry*, “By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, ...and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain” (179). The experience itself remains abstract and undefined within one’s mind until it is revealed to another and shared by another through the story. Again, as Crossan says, “Reality is neither in here in the mind nor out there in the world: it is the interplay of both mind and world in language. Reality is relational and relationship” (37).

The power of story is not lost upon Vietnam veterans who write about the war in their poetry, fiction, and memoirs. As Robert Stone has said, “Wars are meant to be forgotten, the Vietnam War like any other” (1). But Vietnam writers struggle to keep that story alive for themselves and for future generations, for many of them believe, as Tim O’Brien says, “stories can save us” (255). Thus, Tobias Wolff, in his own memoir, *In Pharaoh’s Army*, says telling the story “toughens you and clears your head. I could feel it happening. I was saving my life with every word I wrote, and I knew it” (213). And James Carroll, in his memoir *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us*, says “the very act of storytelling... is by definition holy. Telling our stories saves us” (267).

This idea of story as salvation also lies at the center of Bruce Weigl’s *The Circle of Hanh*. He says in the introduction to his book “I have only a story and my belief in the ability of stories to save us.” In this memoir, Weigl tries to reconcile two parts of his life, what he calls a before and an after. “There was a before and then there was an after.” He writes, “There were many small before and one irrevocable after” (140). That “irrevocable after” is, of course, the Vietnam War. Though Weigl spends very little of his memoir recounting his actual experiences in the war, the war lies behind everything he writes about in this book. It is the dividing line between one set of experiences and another set of experiences. He seeks to connect these different experiences with the story he tells of his trip to Hanoi to adopt Hanh. He makes this clear at the beginning of his book when he says, “What endures is the story. The story circles back on itself if you let it have its way, ...the story led me back into the green everlasting jungle where I had always belonged. I let the story have its way and it

circled back on itself into the lives of far away people who had never stopped calling me. It led me back to the circle of Hanh” (7). The adoption of Hanh is meant to be seen as the completion of a circle in Weigl’s life that loops back through his childhood, his year in Vietnam, and his struggle to find himself in the intervening years. Though he repeats as a mantra the idea that story saves us, and he insists that he has reached a new wholeness, a reconciliation, a completeness, in his struggle to adopt Hanh and have her in his life, what comes through in the stories he tells us is not exactly the completion of a circle, but a series of broken lines. When one finishes *The Circle of Hanh*, questions remain regarding Weigl’s reconciliation with his past, his ability to complete a circle between the before and after. These unanswered questions complicate the suggestions of reconciliation in this book, and they render a redemptive reading problematic. What we are left with at the end of *The Circle of Hanh* is simply the power of story itself, with all of its hurt, grief, and love intact.

From the very beginning, Weigl raises questions regarding his role as a storyteller in this text. On the one hand, he tells us that stories can save us and that he believes in the power of the story. On the other hand, he tells us that there are certain places he will not go in this memoir. “I’m not sure I want to remember everything” He says, “I don’t believe remembering everything is necessary for our happiness or well being. Some things need to stay buried deep” (1). This statement is a strange statement coming, as it does, from one of the most important poets to emerge from the Vietnam War, and its strangeness is only made more dramatic later when Weigl tells us that it is his fate in life to write about unpleasant things. At one point, he writes, “The war took away my life and gave me poetry.... The fate the world has given me is to struggle to write powerfully enough to draw others into the horror” (5-6). At another point he says “It has become my way to find [that enormity] in the darker corners where it wants to weld something hurtful to something human. I come from a long line of violence. In my life that’s left I want to find a shape for the litany of terror and bring it into comprehension. The impossible and terrible beauty of our lives: that we use them up, that the hunger fades” (7). Given such a calling, one wonders what things need to stay buried deep in this writer’s life or why he would worry about a story’s role in our happiness or well-being or its role in his own happiness or well-being. Given such a calling, one would expect the writer to shine a light in the darkest places and illuminate them for us and for him as well.

As we would expect, the Vietnam War is the dividing point, the watershed event in Weigl's life and in his memoir. There is his life before the war, and his life after the war. He addresses this division most directly in Part Seven of the memoir, simply titled "Before and After." This section is, for me, the most powerfully written section in the entire book. It is a series of juxtapositions between experiences before the war and experiences after the war, and these juxtapositions dramatically demonstrate the effect the war has had on Weigl. He begins with a discussion of how isolated and alone he and other vets felt when they returned from the war. When they returned to the before from the after, he says, they found that there was no longer a before. The country had changed, and so had they. "I want to tell you about how hard it was to come home," he writes. "I want to tell you about how lonely we were in our own country. There was and there was not a before and an after.... I didn't know much in 1968; the war had burned a hole in my brain. Still, I could sense that something distant and terrifying had happened to us that would change us forever" (125).

In the remainder of this section, Weigl tells stories of his life before Vietnam and his life in and after Vietnam. The stories are carefully juxtaposed so that we can see the emotional distance between them. Thus, Weigl tells us of one Christmas when he was nine or ten in the before. His father came home with gifts and left them on the kitchen table. He told Weigl not to unwrap them and headed back to work. The sister did unwrap them. Later that night when the father came home, he went to Weigl's room, jerked him out of bed, and beat him with a belt. He beat the boy, we are told, until the blood flowed. "He must have seen the blood and stopped." Weigl continues, "I hear the belt whip through the air behind him in the dark. In the before I waited in the dark for the belt to flash" (129). He then juxtaposes this scene with a scene from the after, Christmas, 1967, where, he writes, "I waited with my chums for the morning death toll after a night of rockets and mortars." He goes on to describe in gruesome detail the death of one of his officers, Captain Carter, who was hit by one of those rockets, and he concludes by noting: "In the before, the injured and the beaten always had a chance. In the after, Captain Carter died in our arms" (130).

In another scene from this section, he tells of his high school graduation six days before he goes into the army. He tells of the boys he graduated with and the party they had to send him off. They are all young, innocent, and naive. "With these boys who loved me first and best the way

boys loved then,” Weigl writes, “I spent my last six days of a life we had no way of knowing was being ripped terribly away from us” (141). They try to bring him into their circle, but he resists. On the night before his departure, he says, they did not dare

...say the brutally simple good-byes but drank hard with me and touched me in their drunkenness and in the after, months later, lives later, leeches and rot and words like a ball of steel in my mouth, I would lie with another boy in the razor grass, his stomach torn open glistening in the light breaking through the canopies of green, and I would remember those boys of my last nights in the world, their grace undone now, and then I would lose them forever in a war’s wind swirling and give myself to the dying boy who begged me, above the liftship blast, not to tell his mother that he had died this way. (142)

The ironies of this scene are clearly rendered. The loss of grace from the before is carefully contrasted with the intense intimacy of the soldier dying in Weigl’s arms in the after. The loss of grace represented in this scene, and the sense of irony captured by that loss, is clearly established here, and this clarity is maintained in the stories of the before and after in Part Seven. The stories and the conclusions drawn from them in this section have a unity and coherence that is not always present in the other sections of *The Circle of Hanh*.

Certainly there are ironies in the rest of the book. It is ironic, for example, that Weigl grew up in a poor working class family with no books in the house except an unread *Bible* and a copy of D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

It is ironic that Weigl did not read all the way through a book until he was in Vietnam and that this book was Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, a book through which he “glimpsed the enormous possibilities of expression” that made him think he might become a writer. In the before, he was not headed towards books; in the after, he would make books his life. “The paradox of my life as a writer,” he says, “is that the war ruined my life and in return gave me my voice” (5).

It is ironic that Weigl, in the before and after, is isolated from the world around him in important ways. In the before, for example, he lives in a home with working class parents who, he says, “worked hard for long hours and when they came home they were usually too tired to play; sometimes

they were too tired even to talk. Because they seemed so tired to me, and because I loved them, I played mostly by myself, although I didn't understand that I was lonely" (3). It was also a home where violence could flare as quickly as love. We are told that "Sometimes when I misbehaved, ...my father hit me with his belt when he came home. He'd hit me until I cried, or until my mother came in the room and made him stop" (3).

In fact, the theme of violence and abuse and its accompanying isolation is one of the themes that links the stories of the before and after in this book. Early in *The Circle of Hanh*, for example, we learn that Weigl was sexually molested when he was four or five by his babysitter, a teenager named Sharon. He tells this story in Part Three titled "Wrestling With Sharon," and it is clear that it is an important event in his life, a dramatic and crippling event, yet he introduces it in a curious way. He begins by saying he must tell this story because "everything begins with Sharon, or with the story of Sharon, which stays alive and grows inside me even still. I want to tell you about my brief time with her, not for the pity of the story, or for the need to be forgiven. I was not a victim of anything except the spinning out of my own life. I was willing to follow Sharon into the reckless game she invented because I have always wanted to feel all of the world" (61). Then he adds, "I want to tell you how our hours of wrestling helped shape me into who I am and how I love and how I am unable to love" (61).

This is a bold opening for the episode of sexual molestation he then narrates, but the narration does not support the characterization he gives it in this opening. Unlike the conclusions he draws to the stories in Part Seven: "Before and After," this characterization is at odds with the story it introduces. Indeed, in the story itself we do not see a boy who followed Sharon into the reckless game she invented because he always wanted to feel all of the world. We see a child who is terrorized and full of guilt because he participates in Sharon's antics and experiences an undefined excitement in them even as they abhor him. We are told that when his parents were going out, they would fix TV dinners for Weigl and his sister. When Weigl smelled the dinners, he would know that Sharon would be coming over, and that would mean that she would be wrestling with him. As he says, "I only needed to remember that smell to feel a twisting in my body; not like pain exactly, but more a contorted guilt.... I'd get sick to my stomach; sometimes I'd vomit in secret; sometimes I'd swallow it down and go on because I had to eat. First I'd be sick, and then I'd acqui-

esce in a way I'd learned in order to survive, which is the acquiescence of the fearful" (63).

Later, he says that whenever he smelled the TV dinners he would know that his fate was sealed irrevocably for the night because Sharon was coming over and his mind and body would not be his own. On those nights when Sharon would hold him down and sexually molest him, Weigl says, "I did what I was told because there was no other imaginable way to live.... I don't know what it is I fear, except seeing the thing I was those nights with her, the thing I had to be.... I'd put on my Lone Ranger pajamas as I was told" (67). This is not the language of someone who feels in control of his situation. It is not the language of someone who is willing to follow Sharon into the reckless game she invented because he wanted to feel all of the world. This is the language of someone who feels victimized, of someone who feels powerless to change the situation, who feels guilty and ashamed of a situation he had no control over, who sees himself, not as a person, but as a "thing" when he looks back upon this episode in his life.

The actual story, then, stands at odds with the characterization Weigl gives us in the beginning. There is a gap in the story. Something is missing. Something is unexamined. This story does not match the commentary that Weigl gives us at the beginning of this section. When we finish the story we do not see how the hours of wrestling helped shape Weigl into who he is and how he loves and how he is unable to love, nor do we see in the story the image of someone who is not the victim of anything except the spinning out of his own life. That is simply not what happens in the story. This dissonance between the characterization and the story is enlarged later when Weigl mentions a friend he has who always tells him the hard truth about himself. This friend tells Weigl that he only tells stories about what others did to him and never what he did to others. In answer, Weigl says "What I did to others was to allow, and what I allowed Sharon... was to lead me through a ritual that emerged and unfolded and revealed itself in almost imperceptible degrees, those random evenings my mother and father went out into their lives and their cool music" (65). Again, there is something missing here, something unexamined. The language here does not match the language of the story. The boy does not see any choices. He cannot imagine anything else than what he does according to the story we are told. And the case could also be made that if the worst thing one ever did to others was to allow them to do terrible things to him, then that person is not really in control of his life. He is not empowered. He is a victim; yet Weigl continues to insist he is not a

victim. That dissonance creates a problem in this narrative. The unexamined areas in this story, the contradictions between the author's characterization and the narrative, raise more questions for the reader than the narrative answers. The missing links in this story keep it from being integrated in *The Circle of Hanh*, because the writer has not clearly made the connections for the reader.

Such narrative dissonance occurs in several of the stories in this memoir. It even creeps into the story he tells of his harrowing journey back to Hanoi to adopt Hanh. Weigl begins the *Circle of Hanh* with this story and returns to it in the concluding section of the book. Structurally, then, it completes the narrative circle of the memoir. Emotionally, it is meant to complete a circle for Weigl himself. It brings him back to the country he loves. In 1967, Weigl went to Vietnam as a soldier. It was a brutal war. That war, he says, "robbed me of my boyhood and forced me, at eighteen years old, to bear too much witness to the world, and to what men were capable of doing to other men, and to children, and to women, and to themselves, trapped in the green inscrutable intention of the jungle" (6). He returns to Vietnam in 1996, after many previous visits, motivated by his love for the North Vietnamese people and especially by his love for the eight-year-old girl, Hanh, whom he seeks to adopt, a girl he has never met and who he only knows through a photograph and the story he has read of her life.

That this journey is meant to be a journey of reconciliation between Weigl's past, the violence he has known in the before and after, and the new love he has developed for his former enemies. This sense of reconciliation is stressed in the first part of the memoir. On his first visit to Vietnam, Weigl tells us, he had gone back to Vietnam with himself at the center of his thinking. "Gradually," he writes, "as I met people who had been my invisible enemy sixteen years before, that self began to lose its importance. In the face of the enormous struggle these people had endured for most of their lives, my brief involvement in the war and my imagined sacrifices seemed less and less important" (33). On this first visit, Weigl has a conversion of sorts, and the world begins to look different to him. "During that first trip back to Vietnam," he says,

I'd caught glimpses of the boy I had been in the war: here and there a fleeting shadow would pass. After being with Miss Tao that day I knew that Vietnam would never be the same for me again. The old proud songs were gone now: the songs of napalm and mines, the songs of burning shit

and pulling guard, the songs of the surrounding blues. The old songs wouldn't work anymore and the boy that I had been back there, the boy I'd been reaching back to all these years, was gone too. Not lost exactly, but drifting in a green, misty place that is neither his world nor anyone else's. (37)

For anyone familiar with the poems in *The Song of Napalm*, this description of them as "proud old songs" comes as a surprise. They are poems full of guilt and shame and anguish, poems full of horror. And the boy, who goes to Vietnam, as we learn from the stories in *The Circle of Hanh*, is a boy full of guilt and self-doubt because of the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse he has suffered. What Weigl offers us here is an enigma: a romantic, sentimental version of that boy, not the image of the boy we get later in the memoir. His language, when describing the boy here, creates the kind of dissonance here we find in much of this work.

Nevertheless, the conversion that Weigl has found is partly to a world that includes a new love and compassion for the North Vietnamese, his former enemies. It is this love and compassion that, he says, motivates his journey to Hanoi and to Hanh. Indeed, as he says, "One result of my meeting with Miss Tao would be my decision to return to Vietnam to try to give back something of what I had helped take away. Another consequence would be my trip to pick up our eight-year-old daughter and bring her into our home so she might have a life of choices" (33). This journey is meant to bring Weigl home in a way, to connect his stories in the before and after by completing the circle between his two lives in America and Vietnam.

But, as with the story of Sharon, the motive of love and compassion, which supposedly generates Weigl's journey is interrupted and clouded by other parts of the narrative, and the circle remains incomplete. Early in part one, for example, as Weigl waits in line for his ticket to Hanoi, a Chinese man who asks where Weigl is going confronts him. Weigl says he is going to Vietnam, and the man replies that Vietnam is a very bad place because it is full of communists. Weigl does not want to have this conversation, and he tries to direct the discourse to other areas. When the man persists, Weigl tells us "I told him I wasn't a politician, and that I wasn't going to Vietnam for political reasons—partly a lie—but that I was going to adopt an eight-year-old girl from an orphanage in northern Vietnam" (17). When the man continues to insist that Vietnam is communist, Weigl

turns away from him and avoids him for the rest of the time he waits in line.

What is interesting in this scene is Weigl's refusal to engage this man in a political discussion about Vietnam on the one hand, but on the other hand to admit to us that his trip is partly political. What does he mean when he says his trip is partly political? That question is never answered in the rest of the narrative, but it lingers, casting a shadow over his motives to go to Hanoi in the first place. It casts a shadow over the journey he narrates. Since he does not explain what he means by this statement, we are left to wonder about the adoption of Hanh. We are left to wonder if there is a political agenda behind her adoption, and, if there is, what that agenda might be. This comment, unexamined and unexplained in the narrative that follows it, complicates Weigl's motive for his journey to Hanoi and his motive for telling it to us. The ambiguity of his motive would suggest that we are in another area he intends to keep buried deep within himself.

The *Circle of Hanh*, finally, remains a broken circle for the reader. The unexamined areas in this memoir, the conflicts between the author's characterizations and the narratives themselves, suggest that this memoir contains some elements of Weigl's life that he intends to keep buried deep inside himself. The connections between the victim and the victimizer, between the abused and the abuser, between the violence of American society and the violence of the Vietnam War, are never examined here. As Peter Marin points out in his essay on the moral pain that many veterans of the Vietnam war carry, "Our great therapeutic dream in America is that the past is escapable, that suffering can be avoided, that happiness is always possible, and that insight inevitably leads to joy" (46). That great therapeutic dream is a lie, as Weigl's memoir, once again, demonstrates. This story, told presumably for our happiness and well being, only succeeds in showing us that more stories must be told by this author, stories that throw a light on those places that lie buried deep within us all.

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