

TIM O'BRIEN'S PROBLEMATIC TRUTH: TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE THROUGH STORYTELLING IN "HOW TO TELL A TRUE WAR STORY"

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ABSTRACT

A major theme common to war fiction is the truthful representation of a traumatic episode. This paper examines Tim O'Brien's use of experimental techniques in "How to Tell a True War Story" to highlight the troublesome postmodern connection between fiction and truth, and their close interrelation with some significant motifs; namely, the nature of storytelling, the rejection of generalizations about the war, and the deconstruction of the concept of truth. Contemporary issues in trauma theory draw on the pathological crisis of truth experienced by survivors, which lead them to both a denial of the experience and an urge to reconstruct it and fill in the gaps of their memory. In O'Brien's short story the narrator's compulsive behaviour to tell repeatedly the same traumatic event in different versions is understood as manifestation of his post-traumatic stress syndrome. The therapeutic working-through process he tries to undergo by means of his narrative is undertaken but never successfully accomplished because neither war nor postmodernist aesthetics allow for definite answers or absolute definitions of war.

KEYWORDS: war, trauma, story, working through, truth, postmodernism, Vietnam, Tim O'Brien.

RESUMEN

En toda obra literaria sobre la guerra aparece la representación de un episodio traumático. Este artículo examina las técnicas experimentales que Tim O'Brien uti-

lizó en “How to Tell a True War Story” para resaltar la conexión entre el trauma de la guerra y la estética postmoderna sobre la ficción y la verdad. Ello se articularía a partir del uso estratégico que el autor hace de tres aspectos importantes: la naturaleza de la narración en sí misma, el rechazo a las generalizaciones sobre la guerra y la desconstrucción de la noción de la verdad. Los estudios contemporáneos sobre la teoría del trauma se centran en el concepto de la crisis patológica de la verdad que sufren los supervivientes, lo que les lleva paradójicamente a la necesidad de negar la experiencia vivida a la vez que al impulso por reconstruirla. La narración de O’Brien muestra el comportamiento compulsivo del narrador por contar repetidas veces el mismo hecho traumático en diferentes versiones, una estrategia que en este artículo se asocia a la manifestación del síndrome del estrés postraumático en la figura narrativa. El narrador experimenta la necesidad de dar coherencia a lo sucedido por medio de su narrativa pero fracasa en su intento porque, como se plantea en el ensayo, ni la guerra ni la estética posmodernista permiten llegar a alcanzar respuestas definitivas o definiciones absolutas sobre la guerra.

PALABRAS CLAVE: guerra, trauma, relato, reelaborar, postmodernismo, Vietnam, Tim O’Brien.

Vietnam is unanimously considered to be a persistent wound in the history of the USA because of the futility and disgrace that this first lost war implied. It was precisely this problematic nature of the “Vietnam syndrome,” as Reagan dubbed it, that aroused not only the “surreal horror” (Webster 8) in the hearts and minds of the US nation, but also the inspiration of O’Brien’s “imaginative retelling of the war” as it was appropriately called by *Atlanta Journal & Constitution*. *The Things They Carried* (1990) is a postmodernist short story cycle which blurs the boundaries between unbelievable reality and plausible fiction, between the shock of the traumatizing experience and the triviality of the soldiers’ little pleasures, between the author’s own autobiography and the way the fictionalized narrator seems to conceive the tragic events. The fragmented stories reflected through the lens of unreliability, metafiction, and its low-burlesque tone incite an attempt at subverting the absolute truth and generalizations of World History by insisting on storytelling as the soldiers’ only means to survive the devastating swamp called Vietnam. However contradictory and inconsistent this means may be, it fills in the gaps in a unique way: blending “poetic realism and comic fantasy” (Lyons) in order to present what Heberle has already qualified as a “Vietnam trauma narrative” (282).

“How to Tell a True War Story” is one of the most representative short stories in *The Things They Carried*, a collection that combines the urgent drive of the narrator-as-witness to decipher the true war experience and the unconscious need to deny the painful episodes in it. Cathy Caruth succinctly explains that “[t]o be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or an event” (*Introduction* 4-5), and this is precisely what Tim, the protagonist of the story, is obsessed with: the truthful representation of Curt Lemon’s death as a synecdoche of the war. This essay attempts to provide

a reflection on the processes of “working through” war trauma¹ by centering the analysis on three issues. Namely, I will analyze the use in the narrative of self-conscious storytelling, as well as its deconstruction of traditional generalizations about war, and the reiterative accounts of one single death. I understand the three of them as strategies that contribute to the representation of alternative marginal truths about the horrifying dealings in Vietnam. As such, storytelling, the deconstruction of war generalizations, and the accounts of Lemon’s death become instruments for working through the traumatic experiences suffered by the narrator. More specifically, I will analyze the structure of the short story in view of some narratological techniques and postmodern strategies used to underline the fragmented character of this short story. Then, I will look at the further ethic implications that these series of traumatic events pose. This hybrid text—war narrative, black humor comedy, quasi-autobiography—does not conclude with the reorganization of the traumatic recollections in a coherent narrative memory (Janet 2005), but it provides us with an alternative point of view about Vietnam to ponder over, inscribing the readers as ethical witnesses of the reported experience.

HOW TO TELL A PROBLEMATIZING NARRATIVE

The main trouble the short story poses for a realist-oriented reader stems from the metafictional impulse of the unreliable narrator whose name is the same as the author’s. Naturally, readers know that, as announced in the book’s cover, the flesh-and-blood Tim O’Brien went to that war and probably did go through many of the incidents. Nonetheless, the fictional status of the book should not be forgotten; everything, including his real experiences, is filtered through the author’s imagination and put forward by the fictional narrator Tim. His story acquires a twofold significance: to transmit his own personal version of the Vietnam happenings and, in doing so, to meditate on “the characteristic tension between the strategies of fiction and the drive towards realism” (Onega and García Landa 31). Just by looking at the title the story has, the reader starts having difficulties with its meaning: first, storytelling implies temporal mutability and factual unreliability in itself and second, this peculiar self-reflexive story is evidently not “told” but written. The story, then, removes the reader twice from the authenticity of time and actions in it while still claiming its truthfulness. In part, it may well be “the problematizing of history by postmodernism” in Linda Hutcheon’s terms (xii), that originates the fragmentation, ambiguity and instability of the narrative, yet there seems to be

¹ Although the notion of “working through” was first developed by Sigmund Freud in his 1914 essay “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psychoanalysis), recent criticism in Trauma Studies usually relies on the interpretations provided by Dominick LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. See Goldberg 2000: 1–3. While my approach follows LaCapra’s, I will also draw from Freud’s essay at some specific moments.

another more specific reason. “The traumatized [the veterans] carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess,” Cathy Caruth states (*Introduction* 5). It is precisely this “impossible history”, on which I will concentrate below, that creates the dilemma at the core of this unsteady narrative: how to separate what has been from what might have been when both seem equally plausible. “How to Tell a True War Story” turns out to be a narrative that involves the postmodern challenges of metafiction, contradiction, and deconstruction.

The directness and simplicity of the opening already draws the readers’ attention to the familiarity of storytelling and to its oral character: “A friend of his gets killed, so about a week later Rat sits down and writes a letter to the guy’s sister” (75). The constant use of the present tense in these first paragraphs imitates the normal colloquial way of telling that is also reinforced by numerous instances of “Rat says” and “Rat tells” instead of “he writes.” However, the simplicity of this initial episode is more apparent than real. Under the superficial layer of unproblematic rhetoric, there lies a *mise en abyme* of the whole story: Rat, a mirror image of the witnessing narrator, also “tells a few stories to make the point, how her brother would always volunteer for stuff nobody else would volunteer” (75). As also happens to Tim, the traumatized soldier’s attempt to be understood by the dead soldier’s sister is bracketed by her total incomprehension of what is going on in Vietnam and by Rat’s own shock, which inhibits him from transforming his story into a coherent text. Another embedded story that parallels Tim’s and becomes its miniature is Mitchell Slanders’ surprisingly long account on the silence in war that starts by his avowal ““God’s truth”” (79) and ends with the confession that some parts had been invented but “it’s still true” (84). To explain the appearance of such sections, we can draw on Onega and García Landa’s consideration that “metafiction is reflexive fiction in the sense not only that mirror images are found in it, but also that these mirrorings and reflexive structures are used as a meditation on the nature of fiction” (31). Here, Slanders’ story questions the widespread notion “that the work is silent about itself and waits for the critic to interpret it” (*ibid.*), while Rat’s telling focuses on the capability of fiction literally and metaphorically to speak by itself even if it might never receive the desired answer from the reader (Lemon’s sister and by extension all of us).

What makes Tim’s narrative even more problematic to grasp is his recurrent use of narratorial intrusions, which Heberle calls “commentaries” (190) and Wesley “narrative deliberations” (91). As I see it, the device works to impose a sense of order in the flow of the already jumbled story, in this way forcing readers to consider the story’s paradoxical character in terms of truth, morality, generalizations, and contradictions. After the first disclosure of Rat’s emotional letter, there is a narratorial intrusion in which Tim explicitly addresses the readers to warn them against war stories that bear moral messages, which is echoed later in Slander’s story: “Hear that quiet, man? [...] There’s your moral” (84). These commentaries insist upon

the idea that the only way to create a “true war story” is through the deconstruction of generalities about the war by means of paradoxical and contradictory acts of storytelling and not through single, monolithic descriptions of the events. In this way, the second intrusion, which comes right after the earliest belated version of Curt Lemon’s death, reverses the opposition of truth and illusion—because “it is difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen”—and opts for “the hard exact truth as it *seemed*” (78, emphasis in the original). It leads to the impossibility to fix a monolithic vision of the events on formal level too: not only do these sections fragment the story and obstruct its conception as a whole but due to their different tone, they also force the readers to focus on them as philosophical ruminations and metafictional intrusions.

O’Brien’s approach in “How to Tell” also subverts the logical presentation of events by not starting directly with the cause that originated them, that is to say, Curt Lemon’s death, though it occupies a central position in the story since it is represented at least four times from diverse angles. Versions may openly contradict one another—e.g. “when he died it was almost beautiful” (78) and “the gore was horrible and stays with me” (89)—but their function is more on the complementary side. As Braswell perceptively affirms, the 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” (155). Yet, to his idea of the image I would add the suggestion that the whole story is *shown* through images rather than *told*, to recall Lubbock’s metaphorical opposition between “showing” and “telling” (in Onega and García Landa 20), with the exception of the metafictional commentaries which simply tell. Although what Tim shows is grounded on temporal dislocation and persistent contradiction, the experimental structure of the story grants to it if not authenticity, at least an insight into the truths as they might have happened.

A TRUE WAR STORY? HISTORY AND TRAUMA

“THIS IS TRUE” - are the first words of the short story and they are used to describe the personal, historical and fictional plausibility of the forthcoming accounts. Because Vietnam happened. Because its immorality reached the public through the mass media broadcasting (“pacification” and “search and destroy” missions, My Lai massacre, “Phoenix Program” came to light) and, what is more important, because it was brought home by the testimony of the survivors who were lucky to come back. Many, though, came back feeling guilty either for having survived in a lost war or for having been dishonored by the betrayal of the US government. They were not fighting back against the aggression of an impending Soviet communism, as they had been told. Vietnam was the example par excellence of the phenomenon of the Cold War, the confusion of postcolonial nationalism with the expansion of Marxism. The American troops were presented from their own side as the liberators and

defenders of democracy and freedom. From the other side, they were the invaders, killing thousands of innocent civilians. Eventually, both the American country and its soldiers started to ask themselves why they had to continue making war after 10 years. Cathy Caruth explains the coming-home effect as follows:

the returning veterans from Vietnam were often [...] compelled by a mission to reveal a truth, a “truth mission” that in Lifton’s words, suggests a kind of “prophetic element” to much of these soldiers’ words.[...] the truth to which they have asked us to listen concerns both the horror of war [...] and also the horror of betrayal, the betrayal of the public and of the soldiers themselves by a government not willing to reveal either its own motives for entering and escalating the war, or its intentions for remaining there in a stalemate. (*Confronting* 179)

Tim’s mission as narrator involves a quest for truth and he implicitly tackles Vietnamese cities that were military strategic sites during the war (Hanoi, Haiphong and Quang Ngai, the nearest big city to My Lai). In spite of this, he is more concerned with the personal traumatic experiences that leave a disturbing imprint on the soldiers’ minds. The engagement with truth and storytelling immediately brings to mind other war narratives, for instance Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-5*, which starts as follows “All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true” (1), or Jeannette Winterson’s *The Passion*, whose narrator requests, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” (5). These stories come to challenge the absolute truth implied in the traditional totalizing World History, as also mentioned in Rat’s letter to his buddy’s sister (78). Furthermore, they give a new, aesthetic meaning to traumatic experience. I would argue that the process of storytelling also helps the narrator as a therapy, to work partially through the painful loss of a friend. When O’Brien’s book was released, the Vietnam veterans were already been recognized as the living victims still acting out a traumatic history 20 years after the horrible events happened. As victims, they were “bound with a question of truth” (Caruth 5). In my view, the narrator in “How to Tell a True War Story” is in charge of reporting their symptomatic acting out of the trauma. As informed by Trauma Studies (see LaCapra 2001), the traumatic experience is acted out repeatedly through a literal return of the shocking experience to the victim’s mind in the form of dreams, flashbacks, repetitions, ghostly appearances or fragmented reminiscences of the events. As the narrator states, “You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end” (83). When Tim narrates Curt Lemon’s death for the first time at the beginning of the story, his narrative voice already fluctuates between “it happened” and “it’s hard to tell what happened” (77-78). Not only does Tim report Lemon’s death in several occasions, some of the phrases he uses occur repeatedly in a matter of few paragraphs to highlight not just his uncertainty about the event but his symptomatic acting out of the experience that traumatized him. Freud denominated this symptom of the acting out as a “compulsion to repeat” after a period of “latency,” which in

this case is 20 years; “he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (Freud 150). Apparently, the appalling visualization of Lemon’s death had been haunting Tim earlier too — “I’ve told it before – many times, many versions” (85). Nevertheless, it is not until 20 years later that he feels the urge to try to fully remember what really happened. Is he able, by narrating his friend’s death to succeed and work through his personal trauma? Some critics have pointed out that “the story does not represent Tim O’Brien’s trauma, but Rat Kiley’s” (Heberle 191) on account of the narrator’s initial delay on reporting on Lemon’s death and because of the attention with which Rat’s violent acting out is treated. But Tim’s delayed report on his own understanding of the soldier’s death reveals the symptoms that trauma entails: “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it, that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (Caruth, *Traumatic* 89). The second report on Lemon’s tragic death is again deferred by the exhaustive fabrication existing in the story reported by Mitchell Sanders. It should have taken no more than five lines to describe it again, with almost the same vocabulary that had been used before but Tim puts a few details more, and in addition goes on to describe the straight effect that the soldier’s death had on his loving friend Rat: the torture of the baby VC water buffalo. The crisis of survival, to use Freud’s term, takes the form of acting out vengeance on an innocent Vietnamese animal:

Rat took careful aim and shot off the ear. He shot in the hindquarters and in the little hump at its back. He shot twice in the flanks. It wasn’t to kill, it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. [...] He shot off the tail. He shot away chunks of meat below the ribs... (85)

The readers of course cannot appreciate Rat’s deliberate fragmenting of the baby water buffalo as a *mise-en-abyme* icon of the whole story until they read the next version of Curt’s end. We may be momentarily taken aback on reading the heartless killing of the baby buffalo. Nevertheless, the report coexists in the following page with the metafictional commentary that “war is grotesque [b]ut in truth war is also beauty” (87). Later, black humor appears as an invitation to the readers to cooperate to strengthen the paradox. We read then that “Dave Jensen [was] singing ‘Lemon Tree’ as we threw down the parts” of Curt Lemon’s fragmented body that had stuck on a tree (89). The narrative moment signals that readers have may be experiencing the trauma’s “contagion,” as Lenore Terr’s labels it, that is to say, “the traumatization of the ones who listen” (in Caruth, *Introduction* 10).

The combination of the imperative to tell such a story with the paradoxical impossibility of telling it in a coherent way and by using a grave tone may produce what qualifies as a shared “collapse of witnessing” (Laub 79-80). However, at this point the black humor ingredient also exposes to the reader the real horror: the young soldiers are not “fully conscious during the accident itself” (Caruth, *Introduction*

7). The event is beyond assimilation at that moment it takes place but it will return belatedly, after 20 years “in your sleep,” Tim says (88), and with the same intensity and same “paradoxical obligation to speak without burying the silence at the heart of the story” (Caruth *web 2*). “Christ what’s the *point*” of telling such a story, the narrator wonders (89). Why his repetitive attempts at portraying it truthfully, of trying to explain what war is to people who don’t understand? Tim’s truth mission is also part of his rehabilitation: storytelling broadens the horizons in front of him and allows for working through the traumatic experience. The repetitive telling is not just a symptom of the narrator’s post-traumatic stress disorder, but also the means that contributes to enhance the credibility of the event. While repetitiously telling the event, the narrator is still traumatized, in the process of making sense, of giving some coherence to what happened; his emotions, manifested in his post-traumatic symptoms, are credible and reinforce the reader’s capacity as a witness. By the time we reach the fourth description of Lemon’s death, we have no doubt that it happened because of the “nonsymbolic nature of traumatic dreams and flashbacks,” a symptomatic process of acting out whose return is “absolutely *true* to the event” (Caruth, *Introduction 5*). Compared to the first one, the fourth version is almost identical: there is the sunlight that beautifully illuminates Curt’s face and lifts him up, there is the laughter of the two kids echoing in the mountains, there is the booby trap. There is that same “surreal seemingness which makes the story seem untrue” (78) since it is depicted in contradictory terms: a beautiful, funny, astonishing, profound death.

Not surprisingly, the narrator delivers the end of the story with another story, one that shatters all that has been told up to now. In an apparent fit of rage at a *hypocrite lecteur*—an old lady who had not interpreted correctly “How to Tell”—Tim dismantles the narrative we have been reading so far: “None of it happened. *None* of it.” (91). She had read it as a war story, full of “blood and gore” when in fact “[i]t *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story” (p. 90, emphasis in the original). The narrator’s vindictive behavior towards the innocent older woman may echo Rat’s violence towards the baby buffalo, a bitterness about the story that is transferred to the reader: “because she wasn’t listening.” Then again, Tim is finally convinced that “you can tell a true war story if you keep on telling it” (91) because if you do not so, “the presence of the past” (Hutcheon 4) will haunt you. That has become Tim’s way to work through his trauma: he eventually is “more conversant with the resistance with which he has now become acquainted” (Freud 155). It is not that he does not know that Curt’s death came first, then Rat’s revenge on the baby Vietcong water buffalo and only then the writing of the love letter to Curt’s sister. His mental confusion spreads out of the mark left by Vietnam and conveyed through this narrative attempt to give some coherence to it. In this line, O’Brien’s work is frequently compared to Herr’s *Dispatches*: “the most curious of love letters [...] but also an elegiac state-of-the-union meditation on violence and language” (Thompson 570).

Throughout the centuries, we have been bequeathed with a bulk of atrocious legacy on war by both history and fiction. Tim O'Brien subverts the possibilities for any absolute truth about war, because "truths are contradictory" (87) and one cannot generalize. During a war, it is also possible that along with the horror and trauma, the soldiers could discover "something essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling there was not yet a name for it" (86). They might feel a fascination with "the harmonies of sound and shape and proportion" (87), and fell in love with the land and with the war just like Mary Anne does in another story by O'Brien called "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." Obviously the traumatic effects remain, but so does the narrator's attempts to tell all those stories that are true, because they could have happened.

CONCLUSION

"How to Tell a True War Story" intertwines truth and fiction, the factual and the invented in a unique manner: making the process of storytelling more believable than the facts it represents and that perhaps never happened. While reading "How to Tell a True War Story" it seems appropriate to borrow Lynn Wharton's contention, "everything is true but nothing authentic" (1999). All this is achieved paradoxically with the help of metafiction and constant contradictions, devices that prevent readers from "suspending their disbelief" while requesting their full involvement in the narrative. In this way, we are conscious throughout the whole reading not only of the story's status as an artifact but also of Tim's struggle (and his mise-en-abyme mirrorings) to work through his traumatized condition through storytelling. Instead of repressing the harsh occurrences that come to his mind, he revives and reinvents their meaning with a growing need to depict them if not truthfully at least honestly. Above all, the metafictional tale on how to tell a true war story thus becomes a careful examination of the affectionate relationships between comrades exposed to continuous jeopardy, of the frustrations the survivors carry back home and of the revelations that have altered them for ever.

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