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ON THE PERFORMATIVE LURE OF WAR MEMORIES: TIM O'BRIEN'S HOW TO TELL A TRUE WAR STORY[*]

Keywords*: war; memory; trauma; performance; recollection; re-actualization*
Abstract*: My paper focuses on the input of the performative side of Vietnam War memory in Tim O'Brien's* How to Tell a True War Story. *I contend that the performance of war memory might represent an essential part of human life trying to work through traumas and of the literary creative process. More precisely, I address the following core questions raised by O'Brien's story: in point of literary creative writing, how can a writer use war memories not as just tools of recollection but of re-actualization? How can one achieve the suspense of detachment, and why is it important for an author to do that in a literary war-related work? I argue that O'Brien's story shows that this can happen by using the performative side of war memory, via three main episodes from the Vietnam conflict: Rat Kiley's letter to the sister of Lemon, his war buddy, after the latter's death, the narrator's retelling of Lemon's death and Mitchell Sander's recounting some soldiers' version of the war experience. These characters' discarding of mere facticity and favouring of emotions and failure of war memories echo Nietzsche's point that what is needed in post-war life is a mixture of facts and feelings to avoid "the malady of history." Given this, performance of war memory in a literary work manages to restore the pulse of life during war conditions for both participants and non-participants which finally sanctions and transmits the indefinite, elusive character of traumatic existence and commits history to commemoration.*

In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, memory studies scholar Annette Kuhn makes a strong claim in favor of what one might term the performative side of memory. For Kuhn, memory work consists in

> an active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory. Memory work undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, treating it not as "truth" but as **evidence of a particular sort**: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined for its meanings and its possibilities. Memory work is a conscious and purposeful performance of memory; it takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and its (re)construction through memory; it calls into

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> question the transparency of what is remembered; and it takes what is remembered as material for interpretation. (157, my emphasis)

Put differently, Kuhn highlights that memory always implies an act of performance in which not factual truth is the cornerstone but the inquiry over various types of meaning. Such can also be the case of memory in literary works and of war memory in particular. It is a concept in which experience and imagination are permanently intertwined and in which the ratio of authenticity and inauthenticity is no longer the central issue since, as Kuhn explains above, the experience which is remembered does not necessarily have the value of factual truth but it stands for an "evidence of a particular sort," its value can lie, for instance, in enquiring for the complex meaning of war.

Given this, in what follows, I mean to address the following core questions: in point of creative literary writing, how and why would a writer use war memory not as a simple tool of "recollection" but of "re-actualization"? In other words, how can one achieve the suspense of detachment, and why is it important to do that in a literary work? I believe that this can happen by using the performance of war memories as it best transpires from Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," with important implications for cultural readings of war stories.

After first publishing a memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Send Me Home* (1973), then a novel for which he received the National Book Award, *Going After Cacciato* (1979), O'Brien's third publication which includes the story under analysis here is entitled *The Things They Carried* (1990). This is O'Brien's book which most clearly resists easy categorization as well pointed out by O' Brien scholars such as Catherine Calloway (1994), Maria Bonn (1994), Jill Taft-Kaufman (2000), Robin Silbergleid (2009), a.s.o. Made up of twenty-two chapters which are interconnected via recurring characters and intertwined plot and theme, the book can be read as either a "combat novel," or a series of "disparate essays, anecdotes, stories" about Vietnam (Calloway 249), but it is also a work which extensively uses *autobiographical metafiction*. As best suggested by Robin Silbergleid, this is a postmodern technique using autobiography within the context of an otherwise fictional narrative (131). Thus, the stories of *The Things They Carried* belong to 43-year old Vietnam soldier-author-narrator called Tim O'Brien who recalls and evaluates his Vietnam War experiences by telling stories of his own engagement, by transmitting stories told to him by other soldiers, and by commenting on the art of storytelling. Despite these similarities to the author's real life coordinates, O'Brien announces at the outset of the volume that this is a "work of fiction" yet he simultaneously dedicates it to the men of the Alpha Company, his fellow soldiers in Vietnam. Considering such aspects of construction, Silbergleid relevantly notes that "the Tim O'Brien character functions not as an unquestioned appeal to the truth vis-à-vis personal experience, but as a rhetorical or performative strategy" (132). She considers this method of creation as a performative approach to truth meant to create a sense of presence and war immediacy for the reader, and explains that, in this way, "[r]ather than

giving readers the facts (what we learn as children to be "telling the truth"), the narrator allows the reader to experience the "truth" of Vietnam through self-conscious assertions of authorial identity and performances of narration" (147). Based upon this, Silbergleid concludes that in O'Brien's work, truth is a function of discourse. She notes, "[a]s *The Things They Carried* illuminates, autobiographical metafiction both dramatizes and reflects on the failure of traditional narrative forms and authority in the face of historical and personal catastrophe. Rather than the death of the author, then, postmodern fiction witnesses the careful construction of author-characters looking for ways to write about death" (153). In such studies, however, O'Brien scholars choose to almost exclusively analyze the author's use of performance as a postmodern literary strategy for blurring the distinction between personal autobiographical and fictional details. I mean to supplement their findings with an analysis of how the author's story suggests the performance of war memories themselves, by capitalizing on the implications of this traumatic stance for the function of such war narratives in cultural and social terms, irrespective of whether or not we consider the autobiographical-fictional blurring technique.

One of historian Hayim Yerushalmi's paragraphs from *Zakhor*, his 1982 groundbreaking book for memory scholarship, offers a relevant grid for understanding the shifting meaning of performance of memory over time. Focusing on history as myth in primitive societies, Yerushalmi notes that in the construction of collective memory what initially took center stage was "a mythic interpretation of history that lay beyond history, that seemed to endow the individual with the power to participate actively in hastening its messianic liquidation" (74). The importance of myths for history also springs from another of Yerushalmi's quotes, according to which "the collective memory is transmitted more actively through ritual than through chronicle." (15) "Chronicle" refers here to the level of straight recording of what happened – facts; "ritual" implies the need of performing an inherited community practice, i.e. action. As Yerushalmi explains, the aim of rituals and liturgies is not "intellection" but "evocation and identification" (44). Thus, their aim is to give a sense of a full-fledged embodied physical and psychic identity. His example of Seder for the Jewish community becomes especially relevant for my analysis since Yerushalmi states that "[m]emory here is no longer *recollection*, which still preserves a sense of *distance*, but *re-actualization*" (44, my emphases). That is to say that, in the need of overcoming any sense of distance or detachment, the ritual manages to achieve its aim for creating and maintaining a sense of belonging to a community by substituting the passive connotation of mere *recollection* (by its lack of involvement) with the practice involved in performance of the ritual, in its physical *re-actualization*. Moreover, Yerushalmi notes that one problem has been "the divorce of history from literature [which] has been as calamitous for Jewish as for general historical writing" because "[t]hose who are alienated from the past cannot be drawn to it by explanation alone; they require evocation as well." (100) In making that claim, Yerushalmi also invokes the need of including re-actualization and performance of memory in contemporary historiography, using the model of a mythic interpretation of history which in our times comes from within history, i.e. the interpretation comes from within

historical conception, man-created and man-geared, spread by man and institutionalized for the benefit of the community. My interest is to see in what way this performance of memory works in contemporary literary works, what the re-actualization they can offer consists of.

I argue that O'Brien's story best shows the degree to which memory can serve as a tool of re-actualization (of suggesting action, evocation, physical and psychic embodiment) rather than recollection (mere explanation and chronicling of fact) by means of the performance of war memory. This is related to the central event of the story, represented by the death of soldier Curt Lemon from stepping on a land mine while playing a game of catch with his fellow buddy, Rat Kiley. Three episodes are worth considering from this perspective: Rat Kiley's letter to Curt's sister, the narrator's retelling of Curt Lemon's death and Mitchell Sander's recounting soldiers' version of the Vietnam war experience.

First, O'Brien starts the story by referring to the contents of a letter Rat Kiley addresses to the sister of fellow Curt Lemon after the latter's death, a letter which is essential in understanding the mechanisms of war memory by the interplay it stages between its three constitutive features, the transmitter (Rat), the recipient (Lemon's sister) and the message (namely passing down the memory of dead Curt). In brief, the letter is about "A real soldier's soldier, Rat says. Then he tells a few stories to make the point, how her brother would volunteer for stuff nobody else would volunteer for in a million years, dangerous stuff, like doing recon or going out on the really badass night patrols" (64). Two important aspects can be deduced from here: one is the heroic aura that Rat associates to Curt as a war soldier, in the traditional vein of interpreting war experiences, and the other questions the truthfulness of the remembrance in the emphasis the passage places on the stories invoked by Rat for the sake of the argument. That this is actually the state of the matter becomes clear a few passages later when the narrator actually cites Rat's words which imply a creative process involved in constructing the letter: "I write this beautiful fucking letter, I slave over it, and what happens? The dumb cooze never writes back" (66). In other words, the letter seems not to be a mere record of Rat's actual memory of Lemon but Rat's performance of memory in view of offering comfort for loss. At this initial stage, then, the fabricated letter seems to deconstruct Curt's death as the center of pain around which Rat and the sister were gravitating; the center of interest now moves to Rat's own person, his construction of the letter to stand in place of losing his friend and the lack of appreciation on the sister's part, given the narrator's explanation of Rat's use of "dumb cooze" in referring to the silent sister: "[he] says cooze, because his friend is dead, and because it's so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back" (66). Here, the sister's silence is attributed by both Rat and the narrator to her insensitive and indifferent character, while it can actually stand for an alternative stance on a par with Rat's, i.e. the need to perform the brother's absence via silence as a form of acknowledging limitations of fixity and the hope-instilling potential of grieving, only that this belongs to the memory of a non-participant, hence its different stance, as I will show later on.

So far, what we get from transmitter to receiver is a mediated form of memory via Rat's imagination; his imaginative struggle means to offer a positive version of Curt Lemon in keeping with traditional war lore and with the need of comforting a grieving family. Because of the receiver's lack of response, however, this seems to be the case of a message which doesn't get across. In putting down the memory of dead Curt, we read that "Rat almost bawls writing it" (66), i.e. he attempts to externalize his own pain in front of the loss of a dear friend by offering a memory of him to what is assumed to be a fellow-sufferer. For the expiation to occur what is needed is an acknowledgement on the sister's part which does not come and, hence, Rat's memory seems to remain as painful as ever. In fact, as I will shortly show, it finally records what cultural studies scholar Peggy Phelan[1] would term in her book about the role of performances of absences, "the repeated enactment of [Rat's] failure" (32) to control and fix Curt's disappearance which simultaneously plunges him into isolation and towards a first step to acknowledge his failures and misunderstandings.

That Rat possesses a painful memory can also be derived from the other episode when he attempted to externalize his pain by shooting a baby buffalo right after Lemon's death, as suggested by the narrator's explanations, "It wasn't to kill; it was just to hurt. (...) Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world. Later in the week he would write a long personal letter to the guy's sister, who would never write back, but for now it was a question of pain" (73). The keywords here are 'hurt' and 'pain' – the memory of dead Curt is for Rat a memory of unbearable pain which he twice reconstructs by a performance of memory. In a first instance, this refers to his violent and unexplainable acts against the baby buffalo which are reminiscent of Curt's violent and unexplainable death, as if in repeating the act of Curt's death he might be able to undo it – which is in fact impossible. In the second case, performance of memory refers to a different form of externalizing pain in point of letter writing and offering a heroic account of Curt's life but its success depends on the receiver's reaction which never comes. In both cases, in keeping with Peggy Phelan's ideas that "[e]ach performance registers how much we want to believe what we know we see is not all we really have, all we really are," the negation hence allowing for "the generative possibility of the "not all" that keeps

[1] In her groundbreaking 1993 study, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan proposes the need of cultural studies scholars to no longer stake everything on the role of representation but equally focus on what is unmarked, un-representational, invisible, absent in the visual-cultural field, drawing our attention to the fact that the visual and the representational are not all, that they encompass failures, all this in order to attempt to better assess ourselves and others, in order to incorporate in critical studies "the active acceptance of the inevitability of misunderstanding" (174). She particularly notes the role of analyzing one particular type of performance, that of those physically absent or dead, which we have internalized inside our own body, by noting that "[t]he mutual performances of these absences constitute our only possible relations with one another, inside and outside the psychoanalytic room" (172). This performance of disappearances allows for our acceptance of "the perpetual failure of in/sight" (174) as well as the generative hopeful possibility of the "not all," of the impossible-to-grasp excesses of subjectivity which are part and parcel of our life experiences.

us hoping" (178), Rat's performance of traumatic memory suggests a paradoxically generative failure to contain the absent dead, and by acknowledging that troubling limitation, to better assess one's connection with war and death.

The Rat – sister pair in fact provides a confrontation between two ways of performance of memory that historian Eelco Runia has identified primarily in relation to the Holocaust in his study on the roles of war-related commemoration, by distinguishing between survivor and, respectively, the non-participant child of survivors. The two forms of memory could also be applied in the case of war soldiers as direct participants - witnesses (Rat) and in the case of non-participant family members like Curt's sister. The forms of memory identified by Runia are "the excess of memory" (Runia 321) from which a direct participant tries to escape via commemoration and externalization of pain and which is a "psychological issue – motivated as it is by the wish to overcome trauma" (Runia 321) and "the scarcity of memory" of the traumatized non-participant family member, which is an "existential phenomenon," a case of "ontological homesickness" (Runia 322), i.e. a desire to understand what really happened, which usually gets translated into a confrontation with what we do not like to be confronted with, namely with acts that we consider as normally impossible but which we end up commemorating. Close to Runia's pertinent observations, in an article dedicated to the works of Tim O'Brien, Claire Stocks makes a similar claim. In counter-distinction with trauma theorists like Kali Tal who establish a binary opposition between direct trauma survivors and non-traumatized others, insisting that the empirical experience of trauma is a pre-requisite to feeling and understanding what the author-survivor means, Stocks reads O'Brien's works from *The Things They Carried* and especially *July, July* (2002) as instances that "investigate the possibility that dispersal of trauma could take place along historical rather than empirical lines" (187), just as Runia discussed the different forms of trauma transmission for direct and non-involved participants via the two forms of memory presented above. Using O'Brien's own declarations from interviews, she demonstrates that a key element of his writing is the attempt to locate the reader in the position of the author/narrator, to allow his identification with the latter's experiences. O'Brien therefore suggests this possibility of trauma dispersal to non-direct participants provided they manage to achieve acts of historical and cultural identification. Stocks concludes that O'Brien's emphasis on cultural and historical rather than merely participatory equivalence extends the relevance of applicability of the experience of trauma to both participants and non-participants, which, as I have argued in this essay, is made accessible by the strategy of performative memory, especially thanks to its self-assumed failures.

In the situation analyzed above, Rat epitomizes the "excess of memory," represented by the unbearable pain of losing his best friend in war, not as a result of a real combat but while playing catch with 105 bombs. The two instances when he performs memory become "strategies of externalization" (Runia 324) that lead to transformations of both the individual's psyche and of the memory portrayed. As to Curt's sister, she possesses the "scarcity of memory" which is taken to an extreme in the story, given her total silence. Therefore, her stance may not only represent the interpretation Rat and the

narrator give, namely indifference, but also the impossibility of finding an appropriate response to death and loss. Except for silence.

To further emphasize how memory is a matter of mediation but also of excess and scarcity, a fourth element enters the story, the metanarrative thread, given the narrator who explains Rat's use of the "cooze" word. We learn that this is the response to a sister's indifference on the side of a mere nineteen-year old overwhelmed by the whole situation ("it's too much for him"). The narrator also offers a parallel circle of communication to that of Rat's letter: narrator as transmitter, readers as receivers, and the story of Rat's memory of dead Curt as message. Memory in this case is doubly mediated, once in Rat's version and once in the narrator's. Moreover, the narrator, given his physical presence at the death of Curt also offers insight into how "excess of memory" can function; also, thanks to the subsumed readership, we also get a new version of what "scarcity of memory" means for a non-participant who only gets to memory by means of another's mediation.

The narrator tells the story of Curt's death four times[2] and each time something different comes up, which emphasizes the incommensurability of the war experience, the failure of absolute understanding, an excess of meaning. The first time, emphasis is on the sublime, aestheticized nature of Curt's death as if the sunlight took him away, so memory is performance of a meaning beyond, there is an aesthetic meaning of memory to the eyes

[2] Below are the four instances telling Curt's death in O'Brien's story:
1. "They were just goofing. There was a noise, I suppose, which must've been the detonator, so I glanced behind me and watched Lemon step from the shade into bright sunlight. His face was suddenly brown and shining. A handsome kid, really. Sharp gray eyes, lean and narrow waisted, and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms." (69)
2. "We crossed the river and marched west into the mountains. On the third day, Curt Lemon stepped on a booby-trapped 105 round. He was playing catch with Rat Kiley, laughing, and then he was dead. The trees were thick; it took nearly an hour to cut an LZ for the dustoff.
Later, higher in the mountains, we came across a baby VC water buffalo." (73)
3. "This one wakes me up. In the mountains that day, I watched Lemon turn sideways. He laughed and said something to Rat Kiley. Then he took a peculiar half step, moving from shade into bright sunlight, and the booby-trapped 105 round blew him into a tree. The parts were just hanging there, so Norman Bowker and I were ordered to shinny up and peel him off. I remember the white bone of an arm. I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must've been the intestines. The gore was horrible, and stays with me, but what wakes me up twenty years later is Norman Bowker singing "Lemon Tree" as we threw down the parts." (76)
4. "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. It was not the sunlight. It was a rigged 105 round. But if I could ever get the story right, how the sun seemed to gather around him and pick him up and lift him into a tree, if I could somehow recreate the fatal whiteness of that light, the quick glare, the obvious cause and effect, then you would believe the last thing Lemon believed, which for him must've been the final truth." (78)

of the beholder. The second retelling is a pure record of facts, a case of what O'Brien calls happening-truth in other stories from *The Things They Carried*: Curt died because of a 105 bomb while foolishly playing catch with smoke grenades at the side of Rat; it would seem that everything was the result of two kids' ignorance, Rat and Curt playing with their lives. His third retelling is an instance of confrontation between the persisting violent form of Curt's death by means of his scattered remains and the more impressive and challenging image of Norman Bowker's singing "Lemon Tree" at the time, a life-sustaining performative aspect of memory for the person in pain, a means of accepting more easily the loss of a close person in the situation of war. Importantly, after the war, this song is the one that still wakes the narrator up at night, and not the image of blood while, interestingly, in a previous passage, the narrator indulged into an explanatory endeavour in relation to this:

> Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn't hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except **when you get to the end you've forgotten the point again.** And then for a long time you lie there watching the story happen in your head. You listen to your wife's breathing. The war's over. You close your eyes. You smile and think, Christ, what's the *point*? (76, my emphasis)

Not only the brutal fact of blood makes up the memory of the war's dead but, more persistently, its unexplainable aspect, its baffling mystery, or what Runia calls "the impossible acts" (318) one is confronted with. If we apply the above passage to the situation of us as readers, as possessors of a scarce memory and in an ontological quest for the meaning of traumatic history as revealed to us, what prevents us from getting a definite meaning is our own human fear that the answer might always escape us in its elusiveness and complexity. Hence, through the performance of war memory in literature we manage to destroy again "homely huts and erect a palace in which we once again are able to feel not at home again" (Runia 323). And this is not only our paradoxically hope-instilling fear but also that of the narrator and of the writer, that of the (non)participant and the survivor.

Finally, the narrator's fourth retelling concentrates on the impossible, failed endeavour to express what Lemon perceived as causing his death, namely sunlight. He poses this impossible aim at the level of what would be just, in similar terms with Yerushalmi's idea that the antonym of "forgetting" might not be "remembering" but "justice" echoed in the narrator's plea, "if I could ever get to tell the story right" (76). Indeed, in this assertion, O'Brien sides with Yerushalmi in the understanding of "justice" as not meaning a mere record of facts but an insight into the ethical complexity and inherent failures constituting life, in conjunction with its function of evocation and not mere explanation.

Considering the above instances, it is in light of contrasting the narrator's second and third retellings that one comes to understand how literature manages to achieve re-actualization of war memory, particularly its failures to fix meaning, by means of its

performative character as depicted in Rat's two acts of exteriorization or in Norman Bowker's tune. Had the narrator simply discussed Curt's death in terms of facts as a case of death resulting from playing catch in the jungle and leading to a violent shedding of blood, memory would have only managed to function as straightforward recollection of an event, a dry explanation of facts. This discarding of mere facticity echoes Nietzsche's point that "it [everything that has life] ceases to live when it is dissected completely" (97), when one is merely drawn by the need of "historical verification" (95) to the detriment of feeling and the mystery of life. In other words what is needed is a mixture of facts and feelings to avoid "the malady of history" (Nietzsche 120) and this is what O'Brien offers.

In actual life, in the relation between a human person and an event, the latter is just a trace, what gives meaning to it is the human reaction to the situation in its complex aspects. Therefore, in including actual examples of performance of memory, the story manages to re-actualize what happened, i.e. to grasp the emotional and failed side of memory, its ambiguous aspects. In using suspense of detachment this war-related literary text thus offers readers the possibility of living through similar states as those of traumatic war memory and of understanding the complexity involved in finding a resolve.

Apart from the narrator, there is another character in O'Brien's story who deals with the performative side of war memory: this is lieutenant Mitchell Sanders who recounts how a listening-post operation sent to inform the base about any enemy activity starts to hear "this real soft, kind of wacked-out music. Weird echoes and stuff. Like a radio or something, but it's not a radio, it's this strange gook music that comes right out of the rocks" (70). The soldiers remain silent as they cannot report music but in a week's time they again hear voices and music: "they hear chamber music. They hear violins and shit. […] The whole time, in the background, there's still that cocktail party going on. All these different voices. Not human voices, though. Because it's the mountains. Follow me? The rock—it's *talking*" (71). This time the soldiers announce the base and start shooting at nature as if it were an enemy; afterwards, they cannot explain to their superior why they did all that because he wasn't there and couldn't understand. Mitchell explains the moral of that unbelievable sound these soldiers were hearing: "Hear that quiet, man?" he said. "There's your moral" (74). In a nutshell, Mitchells' story once again tries to show that some things cannot be explained or understood in war situations, the only thing that can be grasped, however temporary, is the emotion inside the war memory, the failure to appropriate, and these features cannot be rendered by mere recollection but by re-actualization. In other words, in O'Brien's work, performance of war memory manages to restore the pulse of life during war conditions for both participants and non-participants which finally proves and transmits the indefinite, elusive character of traumatic existence and commits history to commemoration, a necessary act so we can attempt to "take leave of ourselves as we have come to know ourselves and become what we are as yet to know" (Runia 325).

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