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In honor of
Tim O’Brien

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PREFACE

This issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* is dedicated to Tim O'Brien, the 2018 winner of The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature's Mark Twain Award. The essays gathered here explore the multiple dimensions of O'Brien's war fiction, whether it be a veteran's postwar struggles, as Roy Seeger focuses on in his essay on *In the Lake of the Woods,* or actual combat experience, as Lucie Jammes looks at in her essay on *The Things They Carried*. Fictional style and mode are also discussed in Susan L. Eastman's essay on the metafiction in O'Brien and Twain and in Joshua Jones's essay on postmodernism in works by Graves, March, and O'Brien. Taken together, these essays are a convincing testament to the complexity and depth of O'Brien's fiction as well as to his well-earned reputation as the voice of his generation of war writers.

LOOKING BACK: THE ORPHIC QUEST OF THE NARRATOR IN TIM O'BRIEN'S *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*

LUCIE JAMMES

In the Greek myth, Orpheus is an unparalleled lyre player, son of the muse Calliope and husband of the dryad Eurydice. One day, after being bitten by a snake, his wife dies and goes to Hell. Orpheus manages to seduce the keepers of the kingdom of Hell thanks to his skills as a musician, a remarkable prowess which decides Hades and Persephone to grant him the opportunity to bring his wife back to Earth, as long as he absolutely keeps from looking at her until they reach the kingdom of the living. However, right before they reach daylight, Orpheus cannot resist the temptation to look back and loses Eurydice again. French critic Maurice Blanchot analyzes the creative process of every form of art as an echo of Orpheus's descent towards Hell:

> When Orpheus comes looking for Eurydice, art becomes the power which forces the night open. The night of death, because of art's power, welcomes Orpheus; it becomes a welcoming intimacy, an agreement . . . However, it is towards Eurydice that Orpheus goes: in his eyes, Eurydice becomes the extreme that art can reach; it is, hidden under a pseudonym and a veil, the most obscure point towards which art, desire, death and the night seem to lead. She becomes the moment when the essence of night becomes *the other night*.[1] (Blanchot 225)

According to Blanchot's analysis of the myth, art in general, much like Orpheus's singing, is a means to explore the unknown. Art is what "opens the night," which means that it is what allows the poet to visit the realm of death, understand death and even reverse its effects—since art can metaphorically restore what has been lost,

bring back the past and even resurrect the dead by retrospectively capturing the essence of their existence. However, this voyage through Hell, towards the "profoundly obscure" (Blanchot 226), towards the extreme point embodied by Eurydice hidden under a veil, is a journey towards the heart of an unfathomable enigma. It becomes a major transgression: no mortal is allowed to unveil the mystery of death without dying first, no one can reach the *core of the night* and then choose to leave afterwards. Thus, when Orpheus looks back towards the most obscure point of the mystery, he desires to pierce the mystery of death, to know its nature more than he desires to save Eurydice: "That is what he came to find in Hell. All the glory of his work, all the power of his art and the desire to live a happy life under the beautiful clarity of the day are sacrificed for this only purpose: to look into the night and see what it hides, see the other night" (Blanchot 227).

The poet is therefore unable to accomplish his work because it ceases to be the purpose of his journey to Hell as soon as he looks backwards. For a brief moment, bringing Eurydice back to life becomes less important than seeing the ultimate truth of death in her, seeing what *she* saw. Orpheus's task, which he cannot complete because he looked back, is akin to the work of the writer. Much like the poet in the myth, the writer explores death thanks to his art; he searches his memory in order to find what was lost and what belongs to a past reality in the same way that Orpheus descends towards Hell to find Eurydice.

However, unlike Orpheus's task, the work of the writer is possible because looking back does not lead him to discover the ultimate truth of death. It rather exposes death *as a riddle,* as a mystery that shall never be solved. Orpheus's glance at Eurydice reveals to him the nature of death, but most importantly, it immediately triggers the failure of his task and Orpheus loses Eurydice again. On the contrary, the writer can only contemplate death indirectly, not from within the event like the ultimate witnesses—those who experience death and will never be able to testify—but rather from a fundamentally exterior viewpoint: that of the ones who survived. The writer's glance backwards allows him to make an infinitely renewable analysis of death and its significance as an event seen from the outside; however, this analysis cannot disclose what death is for those who experience it.

This secret, which shall remain untold and unknown, embodies the writer's failure, but also the driving force of his art: the writer is

thus both a failing Orpheus—because his glance backwards cannot reveal to him the profound nature of the ultimate mystery—as well as a triumphant Orpheus, because his retelling of the past through his art allows him to bring back the dead in the reality of his stories. Consequently, the work of the writer becomes possible and is not threatened to be dissolved by this transgressive glance, because if death is indeed present within his work, it manifests itself shrouded in its mystery, visible *as a secret* at the heart of the text.

In Tim O'Brien's short story collection, *The Things They Carried*, the narrator presents the act of telling a story as the means to restoring the past and bringing the dead back to life within the reality of the text. Meticulous analyses of his memories combined with the practice of storytelling allow the narrator to look back upon the disappearance of his friends in order to get as close as possible to the unfathomable truth of death. Recurrent descriptions of dying characters get increasingly exhaustive and circumstantiated, as if the mysterious nature of death was encoded in the details of the landscape and in the specificities of its occurring. I endeavor to analyze how O'Brien's narrator appears as a reverse figure of Orfeo, inasmuch as he manages to bring his long-lost friends back to life through writing, but fails to see and understand the ultimate enigma of death when looking back upon its various instances. In the first part of this essay, I shall analyze the recurrent moment of Curt Lemon's death and explain why its multiple recountings put forward the failure of the narrator's endeavor to crack the secret of death. During the second part, I shall demonstrate that in Tim O'Brien's collection, the only possible epiphany regarding death takes the form of an anti-revelation, which fails to transcend the unbearable reality of war. Finally, I will argue that in spite of his lack of understanding of death and his inability to see through its mystery, Tim O'Brien's narrator still manages to overcome death by rendering it powerless through the act of writing and bringing back the dead in his stories—thus completing the task that Orpheus never could.

LIFTING THE VEIL: AN IMPOSSIBLE QUEST

In several metafictional passages, the narrator comments on the bewildering death of his friend Curt Lemon, always looking back to his passing away as if searching for a solution or an explanation as to what *really happened*. These regressive movements of the narra-

tion towards Curt's death get more and more detailed and precise, descriptions of the crucial moment proliferate—yet they always fail to open the door leading to "the other night": we cannot witness what Curt witnessed when he died, nor can the narrator. Notwithstanding, Curt Lemon's death cyclically comes back in the stories, as if a repeated and in-depth autopsy of the moment (through a complete analysis of its physical and aesthetic modalities) could take the narrator closer to the nature of death. Curt's death is first mentioned briefly in a quick overview of the event: "I sit at this typewriter and stare through my words and watch . . . Curt Lemon hanging in pieces from a tree" (*TTC* 31). The idea of looking back is already present through the use of the verbs "stare" and "watch" which creates a relationship between the narrator and the past event that he observes. The expression "stare through my words" puts writing at the center of this relationship of visibility between the narrator and the past and defines art as the interface through which the descent towards "the centre of the night in the night" (Blanchot 227), represented by Curt Lemon's death, will be possible.

A few lines below, the second mention of Lemon's death is more descriptive and narrates the event by putting an emphasis on certain aesthetic features such as light and shadows: "Curt Lemon steps from the shade into bright sunlight, his face brown and shining, and then he soars into a tree" (*TTC* 31). The final result, "he soars into a tree," is preceded by a mysterious sequence of events that, far from being an explanation for how and why the body of the young soldier found itself hanging from a tree, makes the transition between life and death totally and utterly incomprehensible, beyond understanding. The reason for Lemon's death does not appear in that description, which puts forward an unsettling series of events in which the cause and effect relationship is not clarified. The description is only an aesthetic one; indeed, it considers the surface of events without revealing their logical mechanisms. By separating the physical phenomena from their origin, the text already brings forth the impossibility of making sense of death by looking at it. Seeing is no longer enough; it does not offer any knowledge but only astonishment when facing an event whose nature cannot be understood based only on its aesthetic manifestations.

The third description of Lemon's death incorporates elements from the second one—light is presented again as a central feature, as well as the elevating movement which follows the explosion of the soldier's body:

> 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. (*TTC* 67)

Several aesthetic details are added to this version of the event, including indications about the physical aspect of Lemon or even the leaves in the tree. These details underline the beauty of the scene, half-spoken by the narrator ("it was almost beautiful"); however, they do not bring forward any explanation for Lemon's death. In fact, the more the narrator tries to elucidate the unfathomable, the more the mystery becomes inaccessible. He keeps searching his memory of the scene to recover all its details and aesthetic characteristics as if they were the key to the mystery, a sort of code to be deciphered in order to access this "profoundly obscure point" of death, but for all its circumstantial specifics, the scene fails to disclose the nature of death. The beginning of the passage mentions an undefined noise which may have come from a detonator and could explain the explosion of the soldier's body; however, this hypothesis is immediately modulated by the narrative voice: "I suppose."

The narrator assumes that a detonator was the cause of the noise, since the reality of the explosion of Lemon's body necessarily calls for a starting point from which death logically ensues, but he does not actually remember it. He assumes a rational explanation that his senses could not provide, which underlines even more his inability to make sense of death through a cognitive endeavor. On the contrary, the syntax leads us to believe that the noise from the detonator did not cause the death of the soldier, but rather that it was light that killed him after surrounding him and lifting him up from the ground and into the tree. Rational explanations and subjective perceptions oppose each other in this passage, and, as a consequence, the unravelling of the mystery of Lemon's death does not reach a satisfying result.

The fourth passage where Lemon's death is mentioned is very brief and factual, void of any attempt to describe, replacing the description with a simple series of events: "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" (*TTC* 74). The first sentence finally explains how Lemon died: he stepped on a mine.

However, the second sentence immediately cancels this explanation in order to come back to an unsettling series of events as seen from the narrator's point of view. Once again, the scene that was described no longer makes any sense from a logical standpoint, and the moment when Lemon goes from life to death is part of an ellipsis: Curt is laughing and playing with his friend, and, without any transition, he is dead. He does not *die,* because the action of dying is not mentioned. It is the actual fact of "being dead" which immediately follows the laughing and playing. The moment when everything changes remains unobservable but appears as a blank in the narration, present in its absence, thanks to the elements that surround and circumscribe it: a living body playing and laughing on the one hand, and an already dead body on the other.

The fifth passage is made up of a whole paragraph and uses all the elements from the first four passages in order to incorporate them in a more comprehensive description. The passage begins a few seconds before Lemon's death and the narrator's gaze is mentioned from the first sentence onwards. The narrator relates every movement that will lead to Curt's death, but this time, it is the moments that follow the explosion of Lemon's body that are emphasized: "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 Dave Jensen 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" (*TTC* 79).

The description insists on the remains of Lemon's body, which exist only in a fragmented state and whose internal elements, now exposed, are part of a list: "white bone of an arm," "pieces of skin," "something wet and yellow that must've been the intestines." The meticulous exploration of *the surface of the scene* (through the enumeration of details from the landscape, the light, and Lemon's movements before the explosion) could not lead us to witness the truth of death. In the same way, the meticulous inspection of Lemon's corpse, what was *under the surface*, also fails. The narrator's gaze enters the body but does not find an answer to the mystery. He only finds another opaque surface, impossible to decipher, a surface which does not disclose any knowledge. The body is now inside out, its intimacy

brought to light, but it does not reveal anything substantial: the truth of the *"other night"* lies somewhere else.

In the last passage about Lemon's death, the narrator confesses his failure and his inability to see, through his writing, the last thing that the young soldier saw: the ultimate sight, leading to the revelation of a "final truth" that will remain unknown:

> 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 high into a tree, if I could somehow re-create the fatal whiteness of that light, the quick glare, the obvious cause and effect, then you would believe the last thing Curt Lemon believed, which for him must've been the final truth. (*TTC* 80)

Once again, the narrator presents the strange choreography preceding the explosion he witnessed, retracing Lemon's steps, his movements, and the light on the soldier's face. The narration echoes the expressions which were already present in the previous passages: "from shade into sunlight," "curious half step," "his face suddenly brown and shining," "It was a rigged 105 round." These repetitions are barely modulated through the use of an adverb or an adjective and invariably repeat the same key words, thus pointing to a circular pattern within the narration: the narrator, unable to reach the desired point in his story, goes over the same series of events in more or less detailed accounts, but always reaches the same narrative dead end. The work becomes an infinite loop and cannot reach and transmit what really matters, that is to say the "final truth" which Lemon witnessed. The narrator, in this last passage, admits his failure to narrate exactly what happened from Lemon's perspective: "he must've thought it was the sunlight killing him." This assumption about what Lemon believed is completed by several expressions in the conditional mode: "If I could ever get the story right," "if I could somehow re-create . . . then you would believe the last thing Lemon believed." However, in spite of the suppositions, the narrator's gaze cannot replace that of the ultimate witness. The paragraph therefore ends on a statement about the limits of writing: if art and imagination

can admittedly reconstitute Lemon's body and observe its last instants over and over again, it can never really lead us to a full understanding of the event of Lemon's death—which we can only witness as outsiders.

"DEATH SUCKS": REVERSE EPIPHANIES

Furthermore, the only revelation regarding death in *The Things They Carried* constitutes rather an anti-revelation, an obvious and underwhelming truth. In the last pages of the book, the narrator explains that Mitchell Sanders and himself have just spent three hours gathering corpses to put them in a truck—he also states that this was their worst day in the war. At some point during their gruesome task, Sanders seems to realize a superior truth unattainable so far, which he shares with the narrator:

> At one point Mitchell Sanders looked at me and said, "Hey, man, I just realized something."
> "What?"
> He wiped his eyes and spoke very quietly, as if awed by his own wisdom.
> "Death sucks," he said. (*TTC* 230)

The lines preceding the "revelation" put forward a rhetoric of suspense: Sanders mysteriously announces that he understood something, and the terms "quietly," "awed," and "wisdom" point to a form of reverence on Sanders's part as he faces the immensity of what was revealed to him. Finally, the brief mention of his discovery ("Death sucks") necessarily does not live up to the expectations of a transcendental revelation and transforms the climax of the discovery into an ordinary cliché of war. Despite their unbearable proximity with cadavers with visible mutilations, raw flesh, foul smells and noises, their worst day at war does not teach the two soldiers anything about death in general. It teaches them only how intolerable it is to handle the material consequences of war as a survivor.

Although the writer repeatedly fails to tell the ultimate truth of death, the book still testifies, paradoxically, about the mystery of death and the idea that it is impossible to unravel this mystery through the power of art. Indeed, through the confession of his many failures to reach the heart of the enigma, the narrator testifies to his inability to testify. He puts forward, at the centre of the text, the unattainable void created by someone's death, when words become ineffective

and scarce. Therefore, Death does not reveal itself directly, as it did to Orpheus when he looked back at Eurydice. It is rather revealed indirectly, being "dissimulated in the work" (Blanchot 226). Death seen from an indirect angle thus appears in the text without showing itself completely. Despite his failure to see and tell its essential truth, the narrator still manages to tell the only truth accessible to the survivors: there is nothing to learn about death; it is only possible to testify to its impenetrability. In his essay on testimony, which he based on the translation of a Holocaust poem by Paul Celan (*Aschenglorie* or *Glory of Ashes*), Jacques Derrida explains that the poem testifies to a secret, a dissimulation within itself, but that it can never reveal what the ultimate witness has seen:

> [The line] is the poem, poetics and the poetics of the poem—which dissimulates itself by exhibiting its dissimulation *as such*. But it is this "as such" which turns out to be doomed to the "perhaps." Probable and improbable (possible but removed from proof), this "as such" takes place as poem, as this poem, in it, and *there* one cannot reply in its place, *there* where it is silent, *there* it keeps its secret, while telling us that there is a secret, revealing the secret it is keeping as a secret; not revealing it, while it continues to bear witness that one cannot bear witness for the witness, who ultimately remains alone and without witness.[2] (Derrida 205)

Celan's poem follows a poetic paradigm which is centered around a dissimulation exhibited as such, and Tim O'Brien's treatment of death in *The Things They Carried* follows the same structural principle. Coming back to the moment someone died through writing allows the narrator to point out the central void of the event—without revealing its essence, yet making its power palpable, its signifying force beyond meaning. The constant repetition of the moment of death sheds a light on an operation of dissimulation at the heart of the text and presents itself as a mask of what it cannot reveal: it is of this essential solitude of the witness that I would have liked to speak. It is not a solitude just like any solitude—nor a secret just like any secret. It is solitude and secrecy themselves. They speak. [The poem] speaks to the other by keeping quiet, by keeping something quiet from him. In keeping quiet, in keeping silence, it is still addressing itself. This internal limit to any witness is also what the poem says. It bears witness to it even in saying "no one bears witness to the witness." Revealing its mask as a mask, but without showing itself, with-

out presenting itself, perhaps presenting its non-presentation as such, representing it, it thus speaks about witnessing in general, but first of all about the poem that it is, about itself in its singularity, and about the witnessing to which any poem bears witness (Derrida 206).

According to Derrida, if the notion of the unspeakable cripples any given testimony, there will rise another—paradoxical—way to bear witness: if one cannot testify, one can at least testify to his impossibility to testify, by making a conscious dissimulation manifest itself as such in the testimony. Following the same example, Lemon's death in *The Things They Carried* is the moment when words find themselves unable to render the ungraspable reality of death, as the narrator openly admits. The unspeakable thus becomes a structural principle of the narration, whose circular pattern is put into motion by the fundamental silence at its core, which condemns the narrative endeavor to fail while at the same time giving it a reason to exist in the first place. It is through his repeated ellipses and omissions that the narrator bears witness to what no one can bear witness except him: the impossible task to understand fully and tell about Lemon's death, whose essential truth does not stop where words start to fail, but extends beyond the testimony, in silence.

RESURRECTING THE DEAD: ORPHEUS'S TRIUMPH

As we have seen so far, the writer's movement backwards and the power of investigation of his writing are bound to encounter certain limits inherent to the very notion of testimony. Through several attempts to see further than the narrator's gaze is able to, Tim O'Brien's collection shows that bearing witness to death is an impracticable endeavor that only opens the testimony to its own helplessness. However, if the narrator's orphic curiosity is not fulfilled by his many glances backwards towards the disappearance of his loved ones, he still triumphs of death—in a certain way. Indeed, in the last story of the collection, entitled "The Lives of the Dead," the narrator introduces himself as an Orpheus whose work has not been sacrificed to the unravelling of an absolute mystery and could, thanks to the power of narration, resurrect the dead: "But this too is true: stories can save us. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and even still, right here, I keep dreaming Linda alive. And Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed, and an old man sprawled beside a pigpen, and several others whose bodies

I once lifted and dumped into a truck. They're all dead. But in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world" (*TTC* 213).

Thanks to the writing process, which he compares to dreaming, the narrator is akin to an Orpheus who does not have to lose Eurydice twice. He looks backwards in vain, for his quest in the night of the past does not reveal anything to him about the nature of death, but he does not fail completely. Thanks to his art, he succeeds in bringing back what was lost and gone, making it eternal in the reality of the diegesis: "And as a writer now, I want to save Linda's life. Not her body—her life . . . But in a story I can steal her soul. I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging. In a story, miracles can happen" (*TTC* 224). The end of the collection presents death as a phenomenon which one can annihilate thanks to the writing process. The traces of physical decrepitude—such as little Linda's scars and bruises, which plague her appearance—are erased from the text when she comes back among the living in the narrator's imagination:

> I remember closing my eyes and whispering her name, almost begging, trying to make her come back. "Linda," I said, "please." And then I concentrated. I willed her alive. It was a dream, I suppose, or a daydream, but I made it happen. I saw her coming down the middle of Main Street, all alone. It was nearly dark and the street was deserted, no cars or people, and Linda wore a pink dress and shiny black shoes. I remember sitting down on the curb to watch. All her hair had grown back. The scars and stitches were gone. In the dream, if that's what it was, she was playing a game of some sort, laughing and running up the empty street, kicking a big aluminum water bucket. (*TTC* 225)

The event of death, in this passage, is down to the literal enactment of the metaphorical expression "to kick the bucket." It is no longer what transforms the bodies into corpses, a terrifying phenomenon beyond understanding, but only an insignificant action, a child's game. Robbed of its signifying power, death becomes harmless; it paradoxically does not have the power to kill anymore. It becomes something other than death: a trivial event within life, which it cannot interrupt or threaten. Besides, every element in the description of the young girl who was brought back to life thanks to the narration is used to deny the event which caused her to depart. Far from being

a dying child, she is running and laughing, her hair has grown back, all traces of disease and suffering have disappeared from the surface of her body, whose new life is celebrated by the presence of light and color ("pink dress," "shiny black shoes"). The event of death is abolished through writing, rendered inconsequential and transformed into a game. This scene of an imagined resurrection symbolically stands for life freeing itself from the limitations of death thanks to artistic creation, and it is also the moment when little Tim understands the healing power of fiction. It is that same technique of remembrance coupled with imagination that he claims to use to resurrect the dead (as well as himself or rather the child he was) at the very end of the collection:

> And yet right here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all. I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can even see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. I'm young and happy. I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story. (*TTC* 233)

Here, again, death is rejected from the text and denied by the narrator, who claims that his young self will live endlessly ("I'm young and happy. I'll never die"). The present tense used here makes this statement sound a universal truth, an eternally valid affirmation. Again, the event of death is but an ellipsis: "a place where there are no brain tumors, no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all." The expression "there are no," instead of "there aren't any," is mentioned twice and puts forward the paradoxical presence of an absence in the text, that of all physical manifestations of dying. Death therefore no longer has any place in the narrative and disappears. There is only life left, followed without transition by the afterlife, that is to say resurrection through fiction. The last sentence of the collection metaphorically sums up the Orphic endeavour of the narrator, who introduces himself as an ice skater able to go back and forth on the surface of his own life story while creating it at the same time, engraving it on the ice. The "loops and spins" of the skates are metaphors of the writing process and artistic creation in general,

which allow the narrator to grasp the essence of things as they were before in order to "save" them by writing them down forever. Finally, the figure of the narrator is doubled when the collection ends, revealing that he is both Orpheus and Eurydice: "when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story." Writing therefore appears as a means to save himself from an irreversible disappearance. Writing traces the way back home after exile and allows him to come back to himself despite the alienation of the war.[3]

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NOTES

[1]My translation. Emphasis in original.

[2]All Derrida quotations were taken from Rachel Bowlby's translation. Emphases in original.

[3]This essay was originally published in *MidAmerica* 45 (2018): 18-30.

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TELL ME OVER AND OVER AGAIN: THE GENDERING OF THE VIETNAM WAR AND THE CYCLES OF TRAUMA IN TIM O'BRIEN'S *IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS*

ROY SEEGER

> *At a time when the silencing of the nonhuman facilitates its devastation, what seems to matter most is "presenting" the nonhuman within human discourse in a way that counters destructive attitudes and behavior* (Gilcrest 44).

> *He found dead dogs, dead chickens. Farther along, he encountered someone's forehead. He found three dead water buffalo. He found a dead monkey. He found ducks pecking at a dead toddler* (O'Brien 106).

> *It was spook country. The geography of evil: tunnels and bamboo thickets and mud huts and graves* (O'Brien 103).

In the Lake of the Woods, Tim O'Brien's novel about John Wade, a senatorial candidate whose political career was ruined because he falsified records of his service in the Vietnam War, often juxtaposes violent war images with those of an exotic landscape.[1] In one case, when a soldier in Charlie Company is shot by the enemy, O'Brien describes the wound as an outpouring of "his brains smooth and liquid" while the next sentence flatly states, "It was a fine tropical afternoon" (O'Brien 39). This jarring transition becomes complicated when we consider some of the premises of eco-feminist theory, which suggest that the Other, in this case the Vietnamese people, becomes interchangeable with their landscape due to their direct dependence upon it for their survival. In *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien illustrates the social and personal dangers of the suppression, redirection, and re-imagining of soldiers' actions through veteran John Wade and

his involvement with the disappearance and possible murder of his wife, Kathy.

John Wade, when he is in Vietnam, is nicknamed "Sorcerer" because of his ability as a magician, a name that works to relocate him both topographically and morally, due to his affinity with the mysterious or feminine, placing him, along with a Native American soldier, Richard Thinbill, on the outskirts of the gender division. Unlike Thinbill, however, Wade seeks to use his position to exploit the Other in the service of American interests. As Sorcerer, Wade could "whisper a few words and [make a] village disappear" (65). By naming Wade "Sorcerer," his platoon is attempting to co-opt the mysterious unknowable forces that get labeled feminine. They give Wade special treatment because of his talents while simultaneously condemning him to the group's outskirts as a mediator of Otherness.

The interconnectedness, for the American soldier, between the Vietcong, the Vietnamese civilians, and the Vietnam landscape make it an interesting example of how American hegemonic relationships with the feminine persist even in a foreign setting, often in exaggerated ways that are dangerous when we consider Lawrence Buell's premise that "[p]lants and animals are, after all, bound together; bodies and worlds are caught in a network of dependence" (283). This is no more the case than with Vietnamese farming villages like My Lai (Thuan Yen). For the American soldier it was hard to separate the landscape, and those who utilized that landscape, from the enemy. In fact, Lieutenant Calley, the only nonfictional soldier brought up on charges for My Lai (which O'Brien incorporates into his fictional narrative), finds there to be no difference between the South Vietnamese soldiers and the landscape when O'Brien has him say, "'Kill Nam' . . . [As] he pointed his weapon at the earth, burned twenty quick rounds" (O'Brien 103). Calley's action works to polarize the landscape as the primary opposition.

However, to read the Vietnam War solely, as Susan Jeffords suggests, as "a conflict of gender" runs the risk of merely repolarizing factions in terms of good and evil, of right and wrong (xi). Labeling Nature as "good" does not dissolve its conflict with culture, which is then relabeled "evil." Not only do these labels ignore ecological and human concerns for the sake of semantics, they work to oversimplify the complexity of the American soldier's psychological landscape during the Vietnam War, which could be more accurately defined as multigendered. This oversimplification of gender roles is detrimen-

tal, not only to the soldier's relationships with his landscape and the feminine, but also to his readjustment to society. To vilify soldiers and their often violent actions is to renounce America's patriarchal agenda while perpetuating its systems of subjugation which encourage the commodification of Vietnamese corpses by initiating, as Jeffords points out, "rewards of three-day passes . . . to those who 'produced' the most" (7). This reward system, reminiscent of frontiersmen trading Native American scalps for money, shows the tendency of American culture to exploit other cultures in a way that leads to the continued feminization and exploitation of its people and landscape, as well as the repetition of similar human atrocities on both the global and domestic level.

For an American soldier in Vietnam, however, different cultural rules apply. By forcing soldiers to oppress/deny these exaggerated culture rules, we are forcing them to place these emotions and beliefs in a state of psychological limbo where their resurfacing is sudden and oftentimes violent. Laurie Vickroy explains the process of this resurfacing as:

> A psychology of oppression [emerging] from these dehumanizing and conflicted situations, wherein a process of internalizing oppression brings about social and psychic manifestations of trauma, such as emotional restrictions, fragmented or split identity, dissociation, and problems with self-knowledge. (36)

It is only through the voicing of this internalized oppression that we might begin repairing the damage caused by that oppression.

The template for the actualization and internalization of these new feminized structures, in *In the Lake of the Woods*, is Richard Thinbill, a Chippewa soldier in Charlie Company who does not participate in the killings at My Lai except to shoot "some cows" (O'Brien 193). Thinbill's confession about the cows implies that he, unlike most of Charlie Company, was able to distinguish between animals and humans, while further suggesting that he was partially susceptible to American cultural pressures despite his Native American heritage. That Thinbill and Wade feel guilt over their silence places them into what Vickroy identifies as "situations of subjection and colonization [that] have fostered many of the conditions for feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that create trauma" (36). However, they each respond differently to this trauma—Wade by erasing his experience both physically and psychologically and

Thinbill with his sudden obsession with flies and his eventual confession. On one level, the flies represent the literal waste the soldiers make of the landscape. However, the flies contain multiple meanings, able to represent Thinbill's conscience while metaphorically acting as Nature's response to the slaughter. Thinbill's witness of this response causes him to act as the landscape's voice, repeatedly drawing attention to the flies or the "evidence."

The fact that Thinbill is Native American is not arbitrary; not only does he physically connect the events of My Lai with similar events of Native Americans' destruction, feminization, and oppression throughout American history, but he is able to implicate similar colonial forces in each instance of destruction. Thinbill embodies the possibility of our overcoming a gendered dichotomy by presenting a different cultural template to help Americans re-imagine our relationship with landscape as multigendered (or nongendered). By remembering our historical subjugation of other cultures, we might understand that the ramifications of that subjugation are long term. Wade's strained connection to and dependence upon the demonized Vietnamese landscape for his sense of identity, however, is a more difficult one to navigate.

It is John Wade's confusion over differing systems of behavior that, upon his return, transforms his prewar habit of stalking Kathy into a dangerous parallel of a combat mission as he blurs the line between his identity as Wade and his resurfaced Sorcerer persona. These multiple personas struggling for dominance illustrate the Vietnam veteran's struggle to reclaim a socially acceptable belief system while simultaneously finding an outlet for his repressed trauma. In this instance, Wade re-enacts a cycle of trauma upon Kathy through his stalking. It is important to note that this manipulation did not begin, for Wade, with his involvement in the war, but with his involvement with women. His prewar stalking of Kathy may be a less violent form of control rooted in a prewar trauma, but it is no less symptomatic of a larger cultural problem—a need to know and therefore possess those things labeled feminine.

For John Wade during the Vietnam War, this antagonism targets a hostile feminine landscape. However, Wade rejects this wartime relationship with the feminine in favor of his more intimate and domestic ones after he returns home. However, this repressed violence emerges in Wade when, after he loses his election for falsifying his Vietnam records and his connection to My Lai, he pours boil-

ing water over all the houseplants of their rented cottage, killing them and creating a humid stink that recreates the smell of the Vietnam jungles, thereby bringing Vietnam and its set of repressed rules to the domestic realm. This symbolically violent act shows Wade reasserting his repressed masculinity by killing the feminine, claiming it was "not rage. It was necessity" (O'Brien 50). The fact that Wade cannot remember whether or not he poured boiling water over Kathy shows Wade's blurring of the difference between Kathy and the cabin's house plants.

The navigation of these differing belief systems is dependant upon each soldier's ability to justify his wartime actions as "duty," forget them, or distort them, as John Wade does, with mirrors. These mirrors act as a complex metaphor that engenders John Wade, at an early age, as feminine, identifying him as secretive and mysterious. However, Wade's mirrors not only become a metaphor for his repressed and transformed feminine qualities, but also act as a survival mechanism he uses to deflect the unbearable truth of his actions, a tactic used by many veterans as they return home to a society that not only reviled them but a government that renounced the questionable actions they ordered those same soldiers to carry out. However, in order to assimilate themselves back into society, veterans had to change many of the accounts of their actions. This process begins for Wade with his letters home to Kathy. He quickly learns of her dislike of his Sorcerer persona when, after referring to himself as "Sorcerer" in a letter, Kathy writes back, "you scare me" (O'Brien 38). What follows, the repression of Wade's Vietnam experience when writing Kathy, strains his interaction with the feminine within a system that mirrors America's own dichotomy that rewards the subjugation of the feminine in various economic ways. This subjugation resurfaces in Wade's marriage when he forces Kathy to have an abortion for the sake of her husband's political career and again the night before Kathy disappears, when he boils all the houseplants and considers doing the same to Kathy (49-50).

That these violent actions work to silence Kathy's voice is obvious when she disappears into the Minnesota landscape and her disapproval of Wade is eliminated, as is his apparent need to compromise in their relationship. Wade's hypothetical antagonism toward Kathy, redirected through the plants, targets a hostile feminine landscape during the Vietnam War and correlates this relationship with his marriage after he returns home and outwardly readopts his old

belief systems. However, his repressed knowledge of Kathy's disappearance enacts Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory that, in such cases: "[T]here has disappeared the possibility of establishing a general theory of politics on the basis of topographic categories—that is to say, of categories which fix in a permanent manner the meaning of certain contexts as differences which can be located within a relational complex" (180). Kathy's death, in this equation, is a metaphor for the death of hope.

Wade's struggle to navigate these cultural systems that are normally separate topographies only becomes politically productive, however, after it is discussed in the chapters entitled "Evidence," which consist of a list of quotations concerning Wade's trial, mostly from fictional characters. However, interspersed among the fictional testimony are genuine quotations that act as a historical record of American violence toward what is labeled Other. The piecing together of this information works to create in the reader what Laclau and Mouffe call "the moment when the democratic discourse becomes available to articulate the different forms of resistance to subordination, [a time when] the conditions will exist to make possible the struggle against different types of inequality" (154). Where *In the Lake of the Woods* becomes productive from this standpoint is in the dialogue it initiates over the historical documentation that leads the reader to detect those patterns of thinking that repeatedly lead to violent oppression and to recognize them as problematic. This is the case when O'Brien cites other seemingly unrelated sources as "Evidence," such as American General William Tecumseh Sherman's statement that his soldiers must "act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women, children" (O'Brien 257). O'Brien also connects My Lai to other travesties by referring to the Nuremberg trials, and the United States' own use of guerrilla tactics during the American Revolution and the response of invading British soldiers. To this end, O'Brien cites British Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie, who stated that "[Our British troops] were so enraged at suffering from an unseen enemy that they forced open many of the houses ... and put to death all those found in them" (O'Brien 259).

In the Lake of the Woods illuminates Wade's conflict on multiple levels through fragmentation, multiple perspectives, historical parallels, and the exploration and possibility of multiple outcomes of the same story. These strategies act, according to Kumkum Sangari, to

"[fix] the social locus of the production of meaning" (906). It is only through the collection of numerous Vietnam War experiences that we are able to contextualize those experiences and identify possible sources for continued acts of arbitrary aggression. In fact, in *In the Lake of the Woods*, the repeated testimony of soldiers who describe their violent acts at My Lai as a response to the landscape suggests not only a personal moral collapse but a flaw on the institutional level. Perhaps this collapse is, in part, the result of the American soldier's inability to distinguish between ally and enemy, but it is also exacerbated by the government's silencing and treatment of its soldiers, which O'Brien illustrates by including as "Evidence" a newspaper article in the Boston *Herald* about a homeless veteran involved in the My Lai massacre who was "killed in a booze fight" (O'Brien 261-2). This death shows not only how the trauma of killing women and children in a war setting debilitated American soldiers but, more importantly, how the government that ordered these killings has often ignored the physical and psychological problems of those soldiers. For John Wade, these psychological problems culminate, in *In the Lake of the Woods*, with his inability to recall his own actions surrounding Kathy's disappearance, which ironically acts as the catalyst to Wade's quest for self-knowledge.

It is through the identification of the parallels between the soldiers' relationships with landscape in Vietnam and the more complex domestic relationships upon their return that we are able to see both extremes of this oppression/suppression and the commodification of the Other, in this case Kathy Wade. All the evidence O'Brien compiles, then, is not only evidence against John Wade but also evidence against America and, more specifically, against the ambiguous American interests in Vietnam. That these interests remain ambiguous for the soldiers fighting for them becomes a matter of commercial strategy as Jim Neilson offers, "the United States government made the war unintelligible, but for politically intelligible reasons—that is, to sell a war that needed selling" (qtd. in Neilson 163).

Ironically, it was John Wade's need to "know" Kathy completely, combined with his need to sell himself as a normal husband and politician, which formed the foundation of their domestic problems that manifested due, in part, to Wade's desire to possess her more completely, or as Wade says, "suture [their] lives together" (O'Brien 71). However, Kathy's sister, Patricia, claims in one of the "Evidence" sections that "Kathy had troubles, too, her own history,

her own damn life!" (O'Brien 263). This revelation, and its tone of frustration, show not only that these gender issues extend well before and beyond the Vietnam War, but also imply that neither Wade nor anyone involved in the investigation seriously considered Kathy's own set of traumas and *their* role in her silencing. Only after Wade begins to hypothesize about Kathy's disappearance and his implication in it does he consider her as not only an object or an ideal but also a human being and a partner.

O'Brien ultimately leaves Kathy and John Wade's fate up to the readers, forcing them to sift through and label evidence in chapters with crime drama titles such as "Hypothesis" and "Evidence." This narrative strategy encourages the readers to piece together the fragments of Wade's history and work to make their own connections between the fiction and the truth of Vietnam and the reasoning behind America's recurring use of violence to commodify aspects of other cultures and the feminine throughout history. This burden on the reader parallels John Wade's burden first to navigate his fragmented and revised memory and then to reconcile what he finds there. The ambiguous ending reflects the uncertain future for the United States in regard to these gender conflicts. To this end, O'Brien, in a footnote, offers the possibility that Kathy is not John Wade's victim but a co-conspirator, offering that, "he might have joined her on the shore of Oak Island, or Massacre Island, or Buckete Island" (O'Brien 300).

The implication here is that they are able to start a new life free of mirrors and ties to the hegemonic relationships established by American culture. This "happy" ending implies that John and Kathy Wade communicated the truth of their problems to each other and that through this communication they were able to create a new system of belief in which the landscape and the feminine are less defined by their opposition to cultural forces and more by a collaboration of those forces. O'Brien suggests that the possibility of their future and happiness is "a matter of taste, of aesthetics, and the boil as one possibility that I must reject as both graceless and disgusting" (O'Brien 300). The problem with the boil, however, is more than an aesthetic concern. The problem is with the connection this violent act has with countless avoidable travesties like My Lai. By believing the boil and the possibility of Kathy's murder by Wade's hand, the reader is rejectng Wade's potential to overcome his traumas and change his own belief in the systems of oppression that orchestrated those traumas.

The possibility that Wade and Kathy start a new life seems to depend upon Wade's ability to come to terms with his personal traumas, to navigate his fragmented consciousness, identify points of transgression, and, most importantly, accept and restructure those points along less antagonistic lines. The actualization of this restructuring is dependant upon John Wade's ability to transcend his role as Sorcerer and politician and enter into an open, honest dialog with Kathy. By rejecting the possibility of Wade's guilt in Kathy's implied murder, O'Brien shows his own interest in restructuring the hegemonic relationships established by American culture and manipulated by our government during the Vietnam War. It also reveals O'Brien's belief in the possibility of this restructuring. Wade, by subjecting himself in the end to the Minnesota landscape, acts to merge with it, not only physically but also philosophically.

It is in this area of uncertainty over John and Kathy Wade's fate that not only the most danger lies, but also the chance to understand and correct our history of subjugating those things American culture labels feminine.

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NOTE

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"NOT YOUR FATHER'S WAR": THE JOURNEY FROM MODERNISM TO POSTMODERNISM IN THE WAR WRITINGS OF ROBERT GRAVES, WILLIAM MARCH, AND TIM O'BRIEN

JOSHUA JONES

Many Vietnam War narratives harken back to the fragmented, experimental forms utilized by writers attempting to give voice to their experience of World War I. Moreover, as Paul Fussell notes, the "sardonic-jokey, half-ironic, totally subversive style," that was the hallmark of Vietnam War rhetoric, was presaged, in postmodern style, by select World War I writers (Fussell, "Obscenity Without Victory" 656). Specifically, Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That* and William March's *Company K* anticipate the feel and elusive truth of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.

In "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien provides a method for determining the veracity of his work, a technique that works alternately to trick and reassure. It's as if O'Brien sets out to prove his statement that, "[i]n any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen" (67). O'Brien describes "story-truth" and "happening-truth," which sets up a dichotomy between fact and fiction (171). Before long, the truth fails to matter, because the stories simply work to "make things present" (172). *The Things They Carried* fails to answer any lingering questions regarding the efficacy or legacy of the war, and, instead, acts subversively, seeking merely to make present an experience that, when described in prose, belies, as Lucas Carpenter notes, "the Enlightenment notion that, when properly controlled and disposed by reason, war can be used to accomplish worthy and beneficial ends" (32).

O'Brien's work does much more than underscore postmodern efforts to encapsulate the war; he builds on an ironic tradition that seeks to instill authorial unreliability into war narration. The Vietnam veteran and writer's pushback against the purpose and legitimacy of the war is more than simply a response to 1960s counterculture; it is rooted in the inability of language to describe modern warfare. Postmodern and experimental literary forms allow a method to retell something that is often inscrutable and ineffable. Just as O'Brien's fictional persona cannot cope with the "burden of responsibility and grief," his story allows us to "attach faces to grief and love and pity and God" (172). The shared responsibility that O'Brien alludes to resonates with the first chapter of the most experimental American World War I novel, *Company K,* by William March.

Published in 1933, *Company K* is composed of 113 chapters that provide micro-narratives of the American experience in World War I spanning the days before, during, and after the war. In *Company K*, each "member" of the titular company is given a chapter, a vignette. March begins his first chapter with the narrator, Private Joseph Delaney, informing readers that the novel we are reading is far reaching in its aim: "This book started out to be a record of my own company, but I do not want it to be that, now. I want it to be a record of every company in every army" (1).

This lofty goal is similar to the fictional O'Brien's desire to keep "the dead alive with stories" (226). Yet, March's narrator, Private Joseph Delaney, is the author of all the stories to follow—"I have finished my book at last, but I wonder if I have done what I set out to do?" (1). From the first page, readers learn that the source of the entire narrative is one author, an author who debates with his wife what to keep in and what to keep out. The debate plays to a readerly desire to glimpse the full truth or record, and thus the fictive scenario reveals Delaney's wife advising him to take out a climatic prisoner execution scene, chapter sixty of the actual text, and replace it with the description of an air raid because "the aviator cannot see where his bomb strikes, or what it does, so he is not really responsible" (3). In the story, Private Delaney laughs with "bitterness" and responds that his wife has "put into words something inescapable and true" (3). The metafictional episode between husband and wife does more than frame the narrative. It establishes a story world where actualities are suspect, and the conventions of literary realism, and even modernism, are subverted.

This opening episode is similar to the fictional O'Brien's fear of his daughter's judgment when she asks, "Daddy, tell the truth . . . did you ever kill anybody?" (172). O'Brien and March create a post-modern scaffold where, as Linda Hutcheon points out, "documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody" (7). In *Company K*, serious issues and the horrors of trench warfare are often treated with sardonic humor or derision in a way that calls to mind the irony present in Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That*. Similarly, O'Brien continually evades answering his daughter and informing the reader just exactly who did what, often leaving readers to wonder if he is some amalgam of each fictional member of Alpha Company or simply the fictional "Tim O'Brien." The truth matters less than the technique, because evidently "presence is guilt enough" (O'Brien 171).

As insiders, readers are the ultimate voyeurs, and we often receive O'Brien's and March's confessions with a mixture of amusement, sadness, and pleasure, making us part of the story, part of the guilt. In addition to this feeling of participation, of collective sense making, further similarities between March and Graves abound. O'Brien, too, engages in vicious irony, such as Azar's reaction to the one-legged Vietnamese child: "One leg, for Chrissake. Some poor fucker ran out of ammo" (30). A few sentences before, the chapter began by noting, "The war wasn't all terror and violence. Sometimes things could almost get sweet" (30). Like O'Brien, March is a master of turning the expected into unexpected irony. In *Company K* the men come forward, as seconded by Philip Beidler, "One after another, average men talk about terrible things that generally seem to have happened mainly just because they have happened" (xvii). This narrative strategy resonates with the anecdotes that dot Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That*. Graves is engaged in a complicated act of remembering that mirrors the fictional recountings of O'Brien and March.

As Steven Trout notes, *Company K* is a "memory-obsessed narrative" built around the consciousness of 113 US Marines, each contained in Private Delaney's narrative ("William March's Company" 4-5). Like the men of O'Brien's Alpha Company, the men of Company K come forward to give their accounts, but the story is framed by the fictional narrator who anticipates O'Brien with his obsession with remembering. O'Brien takes March's self-referential metafictional experiment and goes further in chapters such as "Spin,"

"Lives of the Dead," "Notes," and "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" which, as Michael Clark explains, "comment on their own construction or the construction of other stories in the collection" (132). The style typifies postmodernism as each chapter fails to follow any temporal or structural order, particularly in "Notes" where the fictional author discusses the development of the novel and other works by the actual Tim O'Brien, such as *Going After Cacciato*.

For readers, the effect is dislocating as *The Things They Carried* works to mimic and even undercut its own reliability and construction. *The Things They Carried* begins with this dedication: "This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa." These six individuals represent essential figures in the novel. Bowker's story is particularly tragic as he survived only to hang himself in the YMCA some years after the war. Jimmy Cross's infatuation with Martha mirrors the readers' search for truth despite problematic remembrances. Cross clings tightly to her letters even though "[t]hey were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping" (O'Brien 1). The care and delicacy with which he handles these letters is tender, given that they are less than what they seem: "he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending" (1). Cross's ritual reflects a desperate search for a deeper meaning to Martha's letters, but they remained "elusive on the matter of love" (1). Cross's thoughts are qualified with words like "almost sure" and "mostly" (1). He repeatedly "knew better" (4). The beginnings of *The Things They Carried* and *Company K* reveal a disconnect between the way things are and the way things ought to be, much like the very texts themselves. In introducing these characters, the narrator of each novel becomes decentralized, and the ensemble of characters introduces a situational relativity that is characteristic of postmodernism.

Irony is, of course, characteristic of modernist literature, but *Company K, The Things They Carried,* and *Good-bye to All That* do much more than cast the war in terms of ironic action. The most famous war narrative, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, was released four years prior to *Company K*, but even Remarque acted by a very different set of rules. Lucas Carpenter notes that his work follows "a profound progression from innocence to experience involving some combination of fear, courage, brother-

hood, sacrifice, and, at its most existential, an ultimate realization that one is a meaningless pawn in the larger (though equally meaningless) game of history" (31). Graves, March, and O'Brien follow this to be sure, but their works do more to advance postmodernist style than those by Hemingway, Remarque, and Mailer. Remarque's narration on war exemplifies this postmodern orientation:

> We are not youth any longer. We don't want to take the world by storm. We are fleeing. We fly from ourselves. From our life. We were eighteen and had begun to love life and the world; and we had to shoot it to pieces. The first bomb, the first explosion, burst in our hearts. We are cut off from activity, from striving, from progress. (88)

Remarque's tone is at once regretful and wistful, marking that progression from youth to something else. The journey is brutal, but it is also grounded in realism.

Compare Remarque's account to March's account in chapter one when the fictional author, Private Delaney, remarks, "I wish there were some way to take these stories and pin them to a huge wheel, each story hung on a different peg until the circle was completed. Then I would like to spin the wheel, faster and faster, until the things of which I have written took life and were recreated, and became part of the wheel, flowing toward each other, and into each other; blurring, and then blending together into a composite whole" (1-2). Thus, March defines postmodernism, with its flurry of disparate elements all seeking a place, a "composite whole."

Even more so, March's text mimics the spinning of his hypothetical "wheel" with its short, sharp vignettes that often begin *in medias res* and end with no real resolution. As Patrick Hennessey points out, "the 113 Marines of the eponymous Company K, create a kaleidoscope effect in which each vignette stands on its own, and yet the whole is greater than the disorienting sum of its parts" (x). Beidler also addresses this: "Given its complex and innovative literary experimentalism, it also may be said to offer a prophecy of a number of major American experimental war-fictions to come" (xiv).

The men of *Company K* often interact, but it is as if through a pall, each separated by perspective, memory, and temporal continuity. Take, for instance, the chapter named for the Unknown Soldier in which a member of the company seeks obliteration as he bleeds out. The soldier is not given a name, but he has the prescience to

throw away his dog tag so he will not be remembered: "I've beaten them all! —Nobody will ever use me as a symbol. Nobody will ever tell lies over my dead body now!" (166). The savage irony works on many levels, but it is March's ability to transmute experience and convey what Beidler points to as an "intensity of . . . commitment to bearing direct witness, first and foremost, to what actually happens to ordinary men in modern, mechanized, mass combat" that is grounded in a postmodern attempt that alternately reinforces and subverts genre (xiv). Notions of glory are swept aside and only the essence of the spinning wheel, that "unending circle of pain" the "picture of war," remains (March 2). Beidler addresses this issue by noting that the "war is hell" or innocence lost model, as seen in works by Hemingway, Dos Passos, and others is simply inadequate to the task of modern or, rather, postmodern war narration: "In March, more than any of his contemporaries, this too is ultimately subsumed into a depth of horror that goes far beyond any Lost Generation conceit" (xiv-xv).

Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That* takes a different approach as it treats the narrative mode that centers on what Beidler calls the "loss of illusion, of betrayal through patriotic lies" with sardonic irony and outright parody, elements that anticipate postmodernism (xiv). Graves's approach matches humor and wit as he juxtaposes trench life with what Fussell calls satire of circumstance and the expectations of readers in regard to war memoirs. Graves's journey from youth to war veteran is startlingly quick; indeed, his sardonic façade feels well-worn as if he has always been discontented with the expectations of his generation and, even more, the previous generation. Graves's aloofness allows him to comment on the irony and absurdity inherent in trench warfare. He self-consciously recounts incidents that occurred in his life as being nothing more than "caricature scenes." In other words, Graves crafted a self-reflexive "memoir" that can easily be described as postmodern in its subversion of authorial intent and meaning, and its resentment of what Fussell labels "official culture with its rationalizations and heroic fictions" ("On Modern War" 23). Graves's work has elements of modernism, but there is a firm break from the ordered past that so many modernists cling to. Graves's sardonic style surpasses even modernists with their anti-heroes, such as Hemingway's Jake Barnes, and their dismissal of myths of idealism ("On Modern War" 23). Instead, Graves reveals in his "Postscript to *Good-bye to All That*" elements

of that postmodern tendency toward nihilism, and, more notable, at least by Paul Fussell, "a self-consciousness bordering on contempt about the very medium or genre one is working in, amounting to a disdain for the public respect and even awe that normally attend such artifacts" ("Obscenity Without Victory" 656). This attitude is noted in the "Postscript" as he undercuts his work by telling readers that he wrote *Good-bye to All That* simply to make a "lump of money," and he did this by sprinkling in certain expected, and entirely disingenuous, "ingredients" as Fussell calls them (*The Great War* 204).

Graves recounts that as the war dragged on, the rules of engagement were escalated to match the war's emphasis on body count and attrition, thereby anticipating the American strategy in Vietnam. In training camps, troops were taught to "hate the Germans and kill as many of them as possible" (178). Graves comments on this and other aspects of absurd British army dogma with characteristic sarcasm: "Once more I was glad to be sent up to the trenches" (178). Graves's sardonic façade belies an attempt to make light of the death all around him and his men; however, one also gets the sense that Graves relishes the defiance of convention and readerly expectation by reimagining the literary conventions of the time. As Trout notes, "The traditional modes of writing about war no longer apply" (Introduction xxviii). Thus, Graves, in a much subtler though equally subversive fashion like March, constructs a postmodern war narrative. By its very nature, with its short vignettes and opening authorial reference, *Company K* typifies the experimental. Graves, however, is similar to O'Brien, telling us essentially that "this is true," while leaving much "mostly self-explanatory" (O'Brien 64; Graves 197).

Postmodern narratives, by their very nature, fail to conform to a single pattern or classification. The Vietnam War and World War I were different wars, yet the experience, as revealed through narrative, is strikingly similar and, quite frequently, postmodern. The fictional O'Brien's obsession with the man he killed recalls Graves's frequent references to his caricature scenes, but to take it too seriously, as Fussell notes, is to "ignore the delightful impetuosity, the mastery, the throw-away fun of it all" (*The Great War* 206). Here, Fussell is referring to Graves, but the same can apply to O'Brien and, most assuredly, March. March's chapter, "The Unknown Soldier," juxtaposes horror with the same ironic, "throw-away" fun that also resonates with O'Brien's chapters "Enemies" and "Friends" in *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien's text is woven with remembrances

of a "slim, almost dainty young man of about twenty" while Graves's narrative also struggles with remembrances and trauma, such as the fact the he is unable to meet more than two people in a given day, and the fact that he is unable to answer a phone due to a specific incident that occurred during the war (124). Yet Graves's struggles are underscored by his sharp attentiveness to detail and a startlingly ironic wit and self-awareness. Perhaps, he faced the horror of war in life as he does in narrative, with humor and wit. Nowhere is this more evident than in Graves's "Postscript to *Good-bye to All That*" where he tells readers, "And nothing must be held back that can possibly be given" (284). Such is the case with *Company K*, which Beidler describes as a "novel by a man who had clearly been to war, who had clearly seen his share of the worst of it, who had committed himself afterward to the new bravery of sense-making embodied in the creation of major literary art. It is of that bravery that we still have the record of magnificent achievement, the brave and terrible gift of *Company K*" (xii).

While often giving everything, Graves, O'Brien, and March frequently hold back and yet readers want for nothing as these authors relate modern war's veteran experience—enigmatic, suspect, and unrelatable. In these postmodern war stories, the authors find their voice in shifting strategies and literary experiments—parody, irony, self-reflexive gestures, outlandish stories, coincidences, and truthful lies—but their main goal, regardless of the method, is, often, to simply "talk" (O'Brien 124).

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HOW TO TELL A [TRUE WAR] STORY: TIM O'BRIEN, MARK TWAIN, AND METAFICTION

SUSAN L. EASTMAN

The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature's honoring Tim O'Brien's lifetime achievement with the Mark Twain Award inevitably raises questions about the connections between Twain and O'Brien beyond the purpose of the award.[1] These two authors share a Midwestern cultural heritage, a broad-based popularity, and a reputation as an amplifier of the American experience. Each also has a unique, sometimes scathing humor, and each wrote metafictional stories about how to tell stories. Comparing Mark Twain's "How to Tell a Story" and Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" provides a means of exploring metafictional qualities in both authors' texts.[2] Indeed, O'Brien enacts both his and Twain's definitions of "How to Tell a [True War] Story" in his telling of "true stor[ies] that never happened" (O'Brien 84).

Twain's explication of storytelling relies on the definition of a humorous story. In "How to Tell a Story" (1895), he employs the stories of "The Wounded Soldier" and "The Golden Arm," to demonstrate, instruct, and enact the art of storytelling. He determines that a humorous story should be "told gravely," and that storytellers should "string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities" (5, 10). The storyteller's lack of awareness creates a distinct juxtaposition with O'Brien's storytellers who strive to make "the stomach believe" (78). However, they both enact Twain's instruction to "slur the point" and "drop a studied remark . . . as if one were thinking aloud." Finally, the storyteller *must* employ pauses—specifically a pause before what Twain writes is the "nub, point, snapper" (10, 5).

In O'Brien's explication of "How to Tell a True War Story," there seem to be limitless qualities of such a story. Certainly, O'Brien encapsulates Twain's "incongruities" (9). He "create[s] absurdities"; however, unlike Twain's ideal storyteller, O'Brien's narrator is fully aware of the discrepancies, and he attempts to engage readers in exploring them along with him (Twain 9). The absurdities are, undeniably, essential to the ambiguity of war and of telling true war stories. As his narrator explains, "the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity" (O'Brien 82). Creating inconsistencies and ambiguity absorbs the reader in attempting to tease out the definition along with the narrator.

Consequently, O'Brien stresses ambiguities as his narrator continuously inserts a "studied remark" (Twain 10):

> In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. *What seems to happen becomes its own happening* and has to be told that way. 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*. (71, emphasis added)

Of course, these are the elements of trauma—of the impossibility of fully witnessing or representing the traumatic. The "surreal seemingness" of telling the story rests at the center of O'Brien's writing and in Twain's call to "string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way" (9). This is how O'Brien constructs paradoxical, ambiguous, repetitive, never-ending, perhaps even absurd, true war stories.

If we further apply Twain's list delineating the means of telling a story to O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien "slur[s] the point," with contradictions, multiple definitions, and ultimately the lack of a definition (Twain 6). O'Brien catalogs the qualities of a true war story with a dizzying array of descriptions; among others, it "embarrasses," "is never moral," "can't be believed," "never seems to end," and is "beyond telling" (69, 68, 71, 76). Indeed, these stories are so far "beyond telling" that Tim O'Brien cannot tell them. Instead, his metafictional narrator, Tim, attempts to tell them. Moreover, O'Brien highlights ambiguity and seems to relish it, as his narrator directly tells the readers that "the truths are contradictory" (80).

Pauses before the "nub," or point, are more challenging to identify in O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" (Twain 11). There are pauses, and the retracing of steps—in Mitchell Sanders' Listening Patrol story, in Kiowa's repetition of "Boom. Down" and throughout O'Brien's writing (68-72; 6). However, the "point," or what Mitchell Sanders calls the "moral," is always elusive, unless readers truly listen to O'Brien at the end of the story (7). He writes that "[i]n the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. . . . It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (81). A true war story is about far more than war; it is about lived experience, the human condition and, significantly, about the relationship between the storyteller and the audience.

Twain, too, focuses on the connection, or lack thereof, between the storyteller and the audience. Applying Twain's storytelling elements to his own writing reveals his ambiguous, wandering narratives that metafictionally detach Twain—who is already distanced by his authorial name—from the narrative. Moreover, the storyteller's appearing unaware, or naïve, is the very quality that people cite to indicate burlesque ambiguity in Twain's own fictional recounting of his two-week service in, and subsequent desertion from, the Confederate Army in the summer of 1861. In his short story, "The Private History of a Campaign that Failed" (1885),[3] Twain imports humor to paradoxically insert and remove himself from his own disenchanting war experience, thereby revealing and concealing his attitude toward war.

Critical studies of Twain's attitude toward his service and desertion from the Confederate Army highlight ambivalence. For example, Twain critic James Cox does not take pacifism seriously but thinks the account of killing the stranger in "The Private History" provides merely a "genteel little moral" (194). Others, such as Fred Lorch, reject "The Private History" as "an accurate exposition of events and motives" because it is an "obviously burlesqued account" (454). Yet DeVoto and Schmitz regard "The Private History" as a realist text. DeVoto takes pacifism seriously and Schmitz argues that Twain tries to "break [the South's] narcissistic Sir Walter Scott trance" (Schmitz 81). What these studies do not consider is how to interpret Twain's inconsistent representation of war.

The repetition and revision of Twain's personal war story indicate that he was plagued by his service in and desertion from the Confederate Army. Elmo Howell argues that Twain's Civil War experience "left a wound that did not heal" and that Twain was haunted by the idea of flawed manhood, explaining why he went west when he deserted from the Confederate Army (61). He continually integrated and purged himself from his war writing in attempts to come to terms with his unresolved past.

Twain's ambiguous confrontation with and retreat from his past emerge in his writing primarily through humor, thus enabling Twain to remove himself from his war experience. Twain applies naïve characters and a self-depreciating apology in the "The Private History" to serve as defense mechanisms that detach Twain from *both* his service to and desertion from the Confederate Army. The characters share similarities with the old farmer in Riley's "The Old Soldier's Story" discussed below. Twain describes them as naïve, or dull-witted: a young "herd of cattle headed for war" (166). He includes his metafictional self among this group when he writes that "[w]e were hopeless material for war . . . in our ignorant state; but there were those among us who learned the grim trade; learned to obey like machines; became valuable soldiers" (177).

Initially, Twain accentuates the absurdities. Louis Budd describes this as Twain "disarm[ing] the opposition" with humor by making himself out as a "hapless victim" in order to gain "chuckling sympathy of the Unionists" (Budd 85). Yet even when Twain appears to turn on a positive note—acknowledging those who did not desert—he seems to "slur the point," claiming some of them became "valuable soldiers." Here, he "drops a studied remark" (Twain "The Wounded Soldier" 10). Ultimately, these accomplishments are those of a "*grim trade*" (emphasis added). These men were successful because they learned to "obey like machines." It is because of their automated compliance that they " . . . became valuable soldiers. . . with excellent records." (177). Have they not fallen victim to Sir Walter Scott disease as Twain has said of others?[4] Rather than experiencing the disillusionment that Twain's narrator expresses in "The Private History," those who come out of this war with "excellent records" were once adolescent brutes and are now transformed into fearless machines.

O'Brien's texts overflow with these "studied remarks"; certainly, we see them in the lists of paradoxical traits of a true war story. The

narrator may appear unaware of the remark's importance, as Twain would hope. However, this is because there are so many, sometimes contradictory "truths" to consider, not because the narrator or characters attempt to appear naïve. They are, instead, quite earnest. Consider Mitchell Sanders, for example, trying to tell and retell the Listening Patrol story or the narrator recounting Curt Lemon's death. Each wants the audience to *feel* the truth of the story. Still other studied remarks are meant directly for the reader to contemplate. For example, O'Brien's narrator warns his audience that if they "don't care for obscenity, [then they] don't care for the truth" (69). The narrator even tries to demonstrate this phenomenon when he relates an encounter with his listening audience, particularly the "older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics" who tells him to forget the awful past and tell other stories (84). He explains that "she wasn't listening," as a metafictionally didactic moment for his current readers (85).

Like O'Brien, in another metafictional stroke, Twain applies his own storytelling instructions to his own writing. The paradoxical humor Twain calls for resounds in nearly all his texts, perhaps unexpectedly in "How to Tell a Story." More significantly, however, as he accentuates the importance of manner over matter, form over content, he also intensifies his own instructional list. Consider, for example, Twain's distinction between comedy and humor when he writes that "[t]he humorous story depends for its effect upon the manner of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the *matter*" (4). O'Brien's Mitchell Sanders, for example, demands that others "tell it right" (107). To illustrate the distinction between form and content, Twain cites the story of "The Wounded Soldier," which he describes as an "anecdote which has been popular all over the world for twelve or fifteen hundred years" (6). In this story a soldier loses his leg in battle and asks another to help him back to the rear for medical attention. Meanwhile, the battle rages on and a captain stops the second soldier, asking him why he is carrying a carcass. The soldier drops the body of the wounded, regards the body with confusion, and replies to the captain: "'It is true, sir, just as you have said.' Then after a pause he added, '*But he* TOLD *me* IT WAS HIS LEG!!!!!'" (8).

The failure of this story, according to Twain, lies not in the content, but rather in the *manner* of storytelling. Here, Twain provides insight into his own writing: "The humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and

arrive nowhere in particular" (4). O'Brien also seems suspicious of stories with a point. He writes that a true war story has "no point" or if it does it is belated; moreover, it has no end (82). Twain champions these wandering, cyclical narratives abounding with pauses and revisions.

In fact, Twain describes James Whitcomb Riley's[5] version of "The Wounded Soldier" as the epitome of a story told in the proper manner.[6] Twain does not provide a sample of the method Riley employs; instead, he provides guidelines for storytelling. Again, form is stressed over content. Twain explicates Riley's method:

> He tells it in the character of a dull-witted old farmer who has just heard it for the first time, thinks it unspeakably funny, and is trying to repeat it to a neighbor. But he can't remember it; so he gets it all mixed up and wanders helplessly round and round, putting in tedious details that don't belong in the tale . . . taking them out conscientiously and putting in others that are just as useless; making minor mistakes . . . and stopping to correct them . . . remembering things which he forgot to put in in their proper place and going back to put them in there . . . and so on, and so on, and so on. (9)

This description resonates with O'Brien's. For example, Twain's "tedious details that don't belong" correlate with O'Brien's untrue "normal stuff [being] necessary to make [the audience] believe the truly incredible craziness" (71). Yet, distinct from O'Brien's thoughtful narrators, Riley's version highlights a dull-witted narrator, thus emphasizing the importance of the naïve storyteller. Riley's old farmer "slurs the point," and reveals the "nub" of the story—seemingly unaware—when he describes the first wound as the soldier having his head shot off. He corrects himself, "Hold on here a minute!—no sir; I'm a gittin' ahead of my story; no no; it didn't shoot his HEAD off . . . etc. (7). The storyteller is not only dull-witted but also pathetic. According to Twain and Riley, he is telling a story everyone has heard, yet he still cannot tell the story straight through.

The inability to tell a story straight through is precisely the metafictional narratological embrace evident in O'Brien's work as well. For example, both Mitchell Sanders and O'Brien's narrators tell and retell the stories they share, in attempts to "get it right." Moreover, Twain ends "How to Tell a Story" by writing that "you will find [storytelling] the most troublesome and aggravating and uncertain thing you ever undertook" (14). This is the challenge

O'Brien's narrators and story-telling characters encounter, particularly throughout *The Things They Carried* and in "How to Tell a True War Story."

"Tell it right" Mitchel Sanders demands, reiterating the significance of the manner of storytelling (107). O'Brien poignantly enacts Twain's instruction and "drop[s] studied remark[s]" in order to further engage his audience in unraveling his texts (10). Readers become participants in O'Brien's search to demarcate a true war story. Often readers and critics of *The Things They Carried* become so enamored by the participatory quality of O'Brien's writing that many focus on the beauty of the ideas and relish reflecting on their responses to them. While this is wonderfully engaging and likely one of the many reasons O'Brien is a popularly revered author, languishing in this type of response to his writing can lead readers, particularly students, to overlook the metanarrative qualities of O'Brien: not just telling us what a true war story is but enacting his very definitions as he writes.

Two seemingly disparate authors—one humorous, the other sober—do, indeed, share many similarities. The most significant correspondence lies in Twain's and O'Brien's telling "true war stories that never happened" (O'Brien 84). Both distance themselves from their war stories via metafictional narrators. Both enact their own instructions for telling stories, and O'Brien's surprisingly echo Twain's. Twain calls for absurdities that both he and O'Brien underscore. For O'Brien, it is possible that the ultimate absurdity is the quandary of defining truth in war as a means of determining how to tell a *true* war story. Regarding O'Brien's ever-elusive truth, which I champion as a direct confrontation with the authenticity of experience too often touted as *the* evaluative quality of representing war—whether it be in literature, films, or memorials—O'Brien writes that true war stories are rife with contradictions. He further delineates, "In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (82).

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NOTES

[1]The first version of this essay was a presentation for the panel, "Celebrating the Work of the 2018 Mark Twain Award Winner, Tim O'Brien" at the 48th annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, Michigan State University, May 17-19, 2018.

[2]It is not my aim to examine all the ways in which O'Brien writes metafiction, but to compare how he enacts Twain's storytelling elements. Many scholars have examined metafiction, metanarrative, and metanarration in O'Brien's work. For examples see the following: Don Ringnalda, "Tim O'Brien's Understood Confusion," *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*, UP of Mississippi, 1994, 90–114; John Clark Pratt, "Tim O'Brien's Reimagination of Reality: An Exercise in Metafiction," *WLA: War, Literature,and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 8.2 (Fall 1996): 115; Mark A. Heberle, *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*, U of Iowa P, 2001; Stefania Ciocia, *Vietnam and Beyond: Tim O'Brien and the Power of Storytelling*. Liverpool UP, 2012.

[3]First published in *Century Magazine's* series of memoirs, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*.

[4]See Neil Schmitz, "Mark Twain's Civil War," *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain*. Ed. Forrest G. Robinson, Cambridge UP, 1995, 74-92.

[5]Riley (1849-1916), another Midwestern writer, from Indiana, is known for using dialect in his poetry and is often called the "poet of the common people." We can see this in the very title of one of his most famous poems, "Little Orphant Annie."

[6]Riley would recite his Civil War-themed poetry to veterans' groups such as the Grand Army of the Republic. He also acquired two nicknames: "The Hoosier Poet," because his work often centered on his Indiana upbringing and employed Hoosier dialect, and "The Children's Poet," because children were the intended audience of much of his work. Interestingly, his poem, "Monument for the Soldiers," was adopted in the campaign to build the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in Indianapolis, also known as Monument Circle. This 284-foot limestone monument was dedicated in 1902 and stands as a tribute to Indiana's soldiers and sailors who served in the Civil and Spanish American wars.

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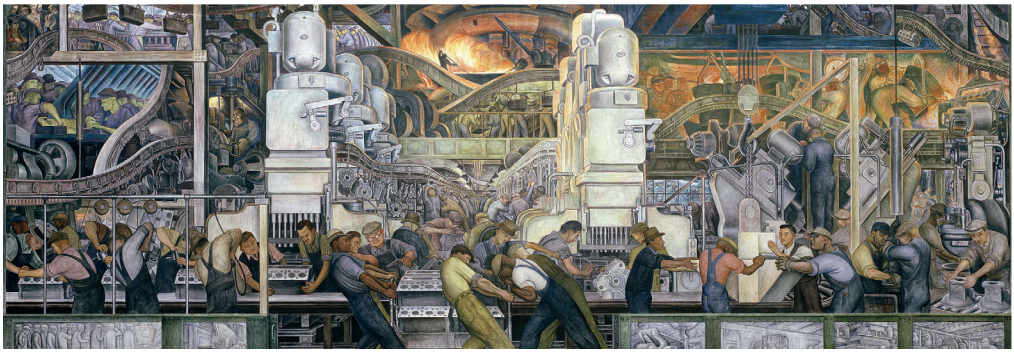

Dictionary of Midwestern Literature Volume 2

Dimensions of the Midwestern Literary Imagination
Edited by Philip A. Greasley

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