7

The Things We Carry: Embodied Truth and Tim O’Brien’s Poetics of Despair

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Abstract: Bahr examines O’Brien’s The Things They Carried, a work often categorized as postmodern, and shows how this fractured, unstable, and contradictory text mirrors the physiological experience of trauma and mental illness, phenomenologically conveying the subjectivity of its author. He terms the text an “aesthetic autobiography”, which repositions “aesthetic” in its ancient Greek context, meaning to apprehend by the senses. Drawing on Ross Chambers’ concepts of “phantom pain” and “orphaned memory”, Bahr introduces the idea of “orphaned pain” and presents how O’Brien’s text has become a surrogate autobiography of what Bahr, a former foster child with a mentally ill mother, has struggled to articulate in his own life: the embodied despair resulting from extreme events.

Keywords: Trauma; memory; mental illness; phantom pain; Tim O’Brien


Legally accredited truth is one thing – the truth of a life is another.

Bruno Dossekker as "Benjamin Wilkomirski", in the "Afterword" of Fragments: Memoirs of a Wartime Childhood

In 1994, Tim O’Brien reflected on his psychological state in a New York Times Magazine article, “The Vietnam in Me”, two decades after leaving the war:

Last night suicide was on my mind. Not whether, but how. Tonight it will be on my mind again. Now it’s 4 A.M., June the 5th. The sleeping pills have not worked. I sit in my underwear at this unblinking fool of a computer and try to wrap words around a few horrid truths. (50)

It was not the first time O’Brien had written about Vietnam and his despair. Twenty years earlier, he had published a memoir, If I Die in a Combat Zone, about his experiences as a drafted soldier in the war. And, in 1990, after two novels on the subject, Northern Lights (1975) and Going After Cacciato (1978), he published a genre-defying work of autobiographical fiction, The Things They Carried. As with the three books preceding it, The Things They Carried is informed by O’Brien’s time in the military. While If I Die and Going After Cacciato depict the theater of war, and Northern Lights examines a veteran’s return, The Things They Carried is alternately set during, before, and after its protagonist, Tim O’Brien, is deployed to Vietnam. (Throughout this chapter, I refer to the narrator as “Tim” and to the author as “O’Brien”.) Understandably, it is within the context of the Vietnam War that literary scholars often discuss The Things They Carried, frequently by connecting Vietnam, postmodernism, and meta-fiction (Bates 1996; Chen 1998; Jarraway 1998; Neilson 2001; Carpenter 2003; Haswell 2004; Kaufmann 2005; Silbergleid 2009).

Although I have never been in combat or the military, I feel a strong emotional connection to the work. Because of The Things They Carried, I have reconsidered my own relationship to autobiography, truth, and language, particularly in regard to my painful past as a foster child with a mentally ill mother. Like many critics, I view The Things They Carried as postmodern, in that it is intentionally unstable, fractured, “schizophrenic”, in a Deleuzian sense. This schizophrenia – for example, its “polyphonic” perspectives and conspicuous contradictions – keeps the text in play. The book is what I term an aesthetic autobiography, in which I reposition “aesthetic” in its ancient Greek context, meaning to apprehend by the senses. As an aesthetic autobiography, The Things They
Carried phenomenologically conveys the subjectivity of its author and has become a surrogate autobiography of what I have struggled to articulate in my own life: the embodied despair resulting from extreme events. My own experience with anxiety and low-grade depression (clinically known as dysthymia) suggests that traumatic events, a biological predisposition, as well as habits of mind and behavior all play a dynamic but unquantifiable part. I can only vouch for how aesthetic works like The Things They Carried have helped me manage and alleviate these bouts. In formally expressing what had previously been solely sensed, they reconnect me with the world and animate my writing, affirming a vital reciprocity between the individual and the collective in the creative realm.

The Things They Carried as a meta-fictive work of war

In “The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried” (1993), one of the first scholarly articles on O’Brien’s book, Steven Kaplan quotes Wolfgang Iser to contextualize O’Brien’s work: “literature is not an explanation of origins; it is a staging of the constant deferment of explanation” (47). Kaplan anticipates later readings that explicitly identify O’Brien’s book as a postmodern text (Herzog). Yet, according to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism “is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory” (xxii). As Linda Hutcheon writes, in postmodernism’s “extreme formulation, the result is that consensus becomes the illusion of consensus” (7). Still, Hutcheon offers a working “definition” that I find useful here: “what I want to call postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political...but whatever the cause, these contradictions are certainly manifest in the important postmodern concept of ‘the presence of the past’” (4). The idea of a “present past” is a compelling paradox. It rings especially true in terms of embodied “memories”. I understand embodied memories as a physiological déjà vu in which sensations associated with a past event are triggered by certain sounds, smells, images, and patterns. As someone whose childhood was serially and abruptly ruptured by a mentally ill mother who could not care for me, I can experience triggered flashes of dread and unaccountable harm. During such moments, my heart races, I may perspire, become nauseous, and develop a slight fever. Of course, embodied memories, those both disturbing and delightful, are not necessarily uncommon or extreme. Yet for the traumatized and mentally ill, embodied memories, which are non-narrative and elude clear and definite conceptualization, the stakes are higher. Trauma and depression can isolate individuals. A desire and accompanying failure to communicate physiological experiences can amplify feelings of disconnection and despair. The postmodern – as fractured, unstable, and contradictory – mirrors the physiological experience of trauma and mental illness in crucial ways. Hutcheon notes that the postmodern “perceiving subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity”; “narrators in [postmodern] fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate” (11). As a former traumatized child who has struggled with anxiety and low-grade depression, I find the fractured self both comprehensible and identifiable.

In Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction (1984), Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as writing that “self-consciously...draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). With the ability “to ‘describe’ anything” compromised, all literary fiction can do is “represent” discourses (4). Language “becomes a ‘prisonhouse’ from which the possibility of escape is remote”, and metafiction explores this “dilemma” (4). Waugh’s definition of metafiction anticipates O’Brien’s exploration of that “dilemma” in regard to presenting historical, biographical, and phenomenological “truth”, particularly when that truth is emotionally painful.

Playing on the ambiguity of “truth”, Tim states that there is “story-truth” and “happening-truth” (Things 203). As he puts it, a “story-truth” feels true, but a “happening-truth” is a factual occurrence. The first is the realm of the subjective. Here, I note a paradox: that a subjective, felt “story-truth” is also a factual occurrence. Embodied responses are real, although such “truths” are shifting, dynamic, and not easily, if at all, conceptually conveyed. On the other hand, as Tim puts it, a “happening-truth” concerns objective facts. For him, a happening truth is the Vietnam War. For me, happening truths would include: at 18 months old, I was left at a foundling hospital by my mentally ill mother; I was placed into foster care at age two; my mother reclaimed me five years later; she left me at the children’s psychiatric hospital at Mount Sinai when I was ten; six months later, I was transferred to Pleasantville Cottage School for troubled youth. These are documented facts. But many more details concerning these facts are not documented, nor can I recall them. Further, my feelings at the time of these events are difficult to locate. All I have are memories, a dynamic interplay of sensations and images, which only
exist in the present. To compound this situation, I admit to not having the best memory for details or “happening truths”. I often insist that something occurred, although others may dispute it; I am later proven wrong. When I look back at journal entries (and I am neither a rigorous nor dedicated diarist), I am frequently surprised by the person that I was. My subjective truth is often relative and shifting, which is why, for me, “postmodernism” feels true. For O’Brien, and myself, the imbrication of “story truth” and “happening truth” is not an untenable paradox but the nature of our being. Haswell notes, “What O’Brien offers (and what critics affirm) is not a report of the war, but a ‘rehappening’ shaped by memory and imagination, making story-telling or writing itself on par with the war as the subject of the collection” (95). In other words, The Things They Carried is not about the politics of war (although the text is informed by politics); rather, it is about O’Brien’s subjective, embodied experience and how he employs language to convey the sensational.

Critics such as Andrew Martin, Renny Christopher, and Jim Nislan are justifiably concerned that a focus on subjectivity, instability, and provisionality overshadows the socioeconomic and political realities that led to and defined the war. They also are uneasy – as I am – with any form of intellectualization that erases the feeling, embodied subject. In the postmodern age, a unified conceptual subject may no longer be viable but the embodied subject is real and locatable, if not fixed. A person in pain exceeds language. And while there are those who may view The Things They Carried as a postmodern language “game”, I have never experienced the book in such a strict cerebral context. It is a work of intelligence, but it is also a product of profound feeling. It is an aesthetic autobiography in which O’Brien explores the formal “dilemma” of conveying the phenomenology of embodied trauma and depression.

Good form

The Things They Carried is a work of 22 separately titled “chapters”. They alternate between longer “stories” able to stand alone and shorter pieces that comment on and connect the lengthier texts. Yet, it is “Good Form” – number 18 in the sequence and about a page long – to which critics often refer when analyzing the form of the entire work. Robin Silbergleid states that “Good Form” is “like a piece of nonfiction, an essay about O’Brien’s writing process” that “encourages us to read it as a fairly didactic discussion of how and why Tim O’Brien does what he does” (145). The narrator of “Good Form” states that he is “forty-three years old”, “a writer”, and was once a foot soldier in Vietnam. “Almost everything else is invented”, he adds. “Right here, now, as I invent myself, I’m thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is” (O’Brien, Things 203). The narrator proceeds to describe a man he saw die but then states that the story is made up. Such assertion and denial is not mean to be “game”, the narrator explains, but “a form” (203). “I want you to feel what I felt”, he states. “I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (203). Not everyone appreciates O’Brien’s artful equivocating. In his Wall Street Journal review, Bruce Bawer calls the book “overly disingenuous” (qtd in Herzog 896) and criticizes O’Brien for “playing too many such fact-or-fiction games” (914). Similarly, Herzog recalls attending a reading by O’Brien in which the author casually recounted a seemingly autobiographical story about how he decided to go to Vietnam after nearly fleeing to Canada. At the end, however, O’Brien admitted that the story was invented. According to Herzog, a number of veterans felt betrayed by the “deception” (O’Brien simply retold from memory the story “On the Rainy River”, which appears in The Things They Carried.) I can see why Bawer finds O’Brien’s technique off-putting: the instability between “fact” and “fiction” is unnerving. I especially understand why the veterans were upset: I might be distressed to hear a writer who wrote autobiographically about being a foster child tell a story presented as fact conclude with “but that never happened”. Yet, regardless of the writer’s biography, I think that I would recognize whether he had “gotten it”, whether the story felt true to my lived experience. So when Tim states, “I want you to feel what I felt”, “I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth”, I understand. I know what it feels like to be at a loss for the facts because I do not have historical records, my memories are too painful, or I cannot recall events. I know how the imagination fills in gaps with “fictions” that become “true”.

Ross Chambers explores how fiction becomes an embodied truth with his concepts of “phantom pain”, “orphaned memory”, and “foster writing”. Chambers draws on the 1995 publication, and subsequent recall three years later, of the “faux” memoir Fragments, by a German writer named “Binjamin Wilkomirski”. Wilkomirski claimed to be an orphaned Jewish Auschwitz survivor. It was later revealed that he was actually a Swiss orphan and foster child named Bruno Doessekker. Chambers writes “in experiencing Wilkomirski’s pain as his own, Doessekker the
man transforms his personal sense of orpanhood into the experience of a 'phantom' pain; and that his writing then functions as a mode of transmission for the painful Wilkomirski memories that derive from the collective memory but that he takes as his own, in such a way that they become phantom pain in the minds of his book's readers" (101). Chambers derives the term "phantom pain" from "the neurophysiological phenomenon whereby people who have lost a limb experience a sensation of physical pain in the amputated extremity" (102). Phantom pain explains "the capacity to experience the pain of another, or of others, as wholly or partly indistinguishable from a 'remembered' pain of one's own" (102). An "orphaned memory", however, is a memory without a locus. It is, as Chambers puts it, "a kind of visitation" (102) originating in a collective memory and conveyed through its host, the foster writer. In Fragments, the persona of Wilkomirski is the orphan memory, a visitation of collective suffering, whereas Dossekker is the foster writer and his "memoir" an example of foster writing.

Orphaned memories belong to a communal memory of events "that we had forgotten, denied, or ignored" (108). To experience phantom pain, a reader need only possess "the capacity to experience the pain of another, or of others, as wholly or partly indistinguishable from a 'remembered' pain of one's own" (108). Chambers writes: "I need only to recognize its reality and relate it to myself, which presumably I do on the basis of personal experiences of pain that I remember" (108). In other words, this "recognized" pain belongs to a sensational, embodied logic outside of cognitive reasoning and understanding. It is felt. What I like about orphaned memories and phantom pain is their relational dynamic. They explain the role that storytelling plays in forging affective communities. As Tim states in "Good Form", what stories "can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again" (O'Brien, Things 204).

Making the stomach believe

"How to Tell a True War Story" is the seventh "chapter" in The Things They Carried, but it is arguably the most representative example of O'Brien's "schizoid" approach described in "Good Form". Tim's insistent assertions ("This is true") and counter-assertions resemble the process of memory, which is always reshaping, recontextualizing, revising. Stories are for
and revised to justify the pain. The fifth O.E.D. definition of "justify" is relevant here: "to confirm or support by attestation or evidence; to corroborate, prove, verify". As a relational act, storytelling affectively connects people through such justification.

For me, a story that powerfully justifies orphaned pain as a source of potential identification and connection is "Speaking of Courage", more than halfway through the book. In this piece, set during July 4, a soldier named Norman Bowker suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and has trouble re-assimilating to civilian life. Feeling as if he does not belong anywhere - either "home" or in the war - he drives around the lake of his town, imagining conversations with the living and the dead. "Invisible in the soft twilight" (O'Brien, *Things* 169), Bowker looks to strangers, like a female carhop at a fast-food drive-in, but he is unable to connect. "Dark was pressing in tight now, and he wished there were somewhere to go" (170). But there isn't. Bowker continues to circle the lake and then gets out of the car after a "twelfth revolution" as the sky goes "crazy with color"; he dips his head in the water, suggesting a baptism, a cleansing, and the promise of hope.

Milton Bates has stated that "Speaking of Courage" is "a model of the well-wrought short story" notable for its "symmetries"; in the next chapter, however, "the symmetry comes undone" (250). That section, entitled "Notes", as Silbergeld has observed, "reads like a piece of nonfiction" (139). "Notes" begins: "Speaking of Courage" was written in 1975 at the suggestion of Norman Bowker, who three years later hanged himself" (O'Brien, *Things* 177). Silbergeld observes how "Notes" "isn't actually nonfiction but adopts the rhetorical devices of essay writing" (139). I first read "Notes" in preparation for an interview I did with O'Brien. I believed his gloss on "Speaking of Courage" as a statement of fact, yet, during our conversation, the issue of what was fact and fiction arose. At the time, it mattered to me what was and was not historically true. I recall that he claimed that the entire book was fabricated except for the suicide of an army buddy, which had prompted him to write "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes". When I later read the interview in which O'Brien stated that "Notes" was also a fiction, I felt betrayed. Over time, like Silbergeld, I have come to realize that whether Bowker's story actually happened is irrelevant. Both the story and its proposed autobiographical context feel emotionally true to me. According to the narrator of "Notes", the impetus for the story was "a long, disjointed letter in which Bowker described the problem of finding a meaningful use for his life after the war" (O'Brien, *Things* 177). The "real" Bowker lived with his parents and held a series of short-term, menial jobs. He enrolled in a local community college but the class work "seemed too abstract, too distant, with nothing real or tangible at stake" (177), so he dropped out. He spent mornings in bed, played basketball, and drove around alone. Fact or fiction, such alienation is identifiable to me. Not only traumatized soldiers may recognize the problem "of finding a meaningful use" for one's life, of doing what is socially expected and logical but achieving no traction, of spending "mornings in bed", and finding oneself "mostly alone" (177). These two chapters speak to my own "capacity to experience the pain of another" as "indistinguishable from a 'remembered' pain". For me, and I would contend O'Brien, these vehicles of phantom pain justify our orphan pain.

The sensations fostered by these stories derive not only from the images but also from the author's style. Throughout "Speaking of Courage", O'Brien employs extended clauses and recursive cadences. I am referring to the sensation of lyricism: its musicality, its rhythm and tone, particularly when conveying despair. Although lyricism has its negative associations - for example, affectation or sentimentality - its harmonious qualities can foster a feeling of congruity and connection. In O'Brien's case, the rhythm of his prose harmonizes the stark, isolated experience of suicidal despair. The opening paragraph of "Speaking of Courage" establishes a psychological and topographical setting: "Norman Bowker followed the tar road on its seven-mile loop around the lake", although there is "no place in particular to go" (157). O'Brien takes Bowker and the reader on a slow, lulling tour through a somnolent town. The "houses were all low-slung", "the lawns were spacious", and the "lake lay flat and silvery against the sun" (157). This is a realm of capacious stillness. O'Brien has an affinity for lists; the syntax rolls fluently along with nouns and phrases joined by the conjunction "and". The alliteration and diphthongs produce an aural lullaby. It is the language of a daydreamer adrift in melancholy, just beyond the grasp of paralyzing despair.

In "Speaking of Courage", the rhythmic descriptions dominate the piece; when dialogue intervenes, it is a dissonant rupture. Bowker's encounter with a fast-food attendant, and his brief, disconnected exchange with a female carhop, are his first conversations with people that are not imagined. The dialogue's sharp, staccato rhythm contrasts with the mostly euphonic narration, amplifying Bowker's uneasy interaction with the world beyond his imagination. When O'Brien writes, "he ate
quickly, without looking up” (170), it is a poignant moment of unbridgeable isolation. The pathos is intensified with the return to lyricism: “Dark was pressing in tight now, and he wished there were somewhere to go.” After a twelfth orbit, Bowker stops the car “in the shadow of a picnic shelter” (173), and O’Brien brings this story to a close. Bowker wades into the lake, feels the “water warm against his skin” and submerges his head, opening “his lips, very slightly, for the taste”, then stands and watches the colorful pyrotechnics. There is a romance to “Speaking of Courage”, culminating in temporary purchase. But the redemption is slight and ephemeral, located in water and fleeting fireworks.

“Notes” dispels any promise of salvation. The blunt syntax suggests the “truths” of a hardened reporter. Alone, “Speaking of Courage” possesses a wistfulness buoyed by fragile optimism. In relation to “Notes”, that sentiment attains a darker cast, showcasing the limits of poetic language. Ultimately, any reconciliation that “Speaking of Courage” offers is through the writing process. In “Notes”, O’Brien/Tim states that writing the story guided him “through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse” (179). Jeff Loeb notes how the intellectual engagement with literary texts often tend to “lose or dismiss an important component ... of the narrative project: the human being behind the story” (96). For those chronicling their emotional pain, the embodied “human being behind the story” needs to be acknowledged. The human being behind “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes” is Tim O’Brien, who also is the author of the autobiographical essay “The Vietnam in Me”. In that Times’ piece, O’Brien confesses to suicidal thoughts and tells of having spent around 9,000 dollars in treatment for depression (“Vietnam” 51–52). As a result, Bowker is more than a symbol of the suicidal soldier; he has an affective genesis in O’Brien himself. As his recursive themes reveal, writing is how O’Brien handles his embodied memories and orphaned pain.

Writing as a mode of living defines O’Brien’s final chapter, “The Lives of the Dead”. An episodic narrative, frequently photographic in its effect, the piece shifts between scenes of war, childhood, and the present. Stylistically, it combines the metafiction of “How to Tell a True War Story” with the lyrical realism of “Speaking of Courage”. Once again, O’Brien begins with “truth”: “this too is true: stories can save us” (Things 255). But “salvation” is not what “The Lives of the Dead” is finally about. Rather, the work concerns writing as a living process, what Elaine Scarry calls “the objectifying power of the imagination” (164). As Tim states: “By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself” (O’Brien, Things 179). “The Lives of the Dead” begins in 1990 when Tim is “forty-three years, and a writer now”, “dreaming” through storytelling (255). His memories turn to the Vietnam War. He recalls his first encounter with a dead body, and how, through language, the more seasoned soldiers kept death at a distance by conversing with corpses. These memories transport Tim to 1956 and his first childhood sweet-heart, Linda, who, we learn, has cancer. Linda lives through the summer but is dead before the fall. Throughout “The Lives of the Dead”, O’Brien shifts among these three periods of Tim’s life, playing the memories off each other. Storytelling, an act of dreaming, keeps the dead, like Linda, “alive”. “I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging”, Tim explains (265). Yet, throughout The Things They Carried, O’Brien has undermined any stable identity. If there is anything “absolute and unchanging”, it is not found in the conceptual but phenomenological “self”.

In “The Vietnam in Me”, O’Brien recounts his return to Vietnam in 1994, with his younger girlfriend, Kate. It is his first visit to the country since the war. Like “The Lives of the Dead”, the essay shifts back and forth in time. He recalls his return, the awakened memories, and his attempt to write the piece as he battles depression after his break-up with Kate. The essay becomes a chronicle of his struggle with “despair” (51). “This is a valence of horror that Vietnam never approximated”, he writes. “If war is hell, what do we call hopelessness?” (51). He notes that “I have not killed myself... maybe tomorrow” because, like “Nam, it goes” (51). To keep suicidal depression at bay, O’Brien takes walks, works out, composes lists, calls friends, visits lawyers, buys furniture, and keeps his “eyes off the sleeping pills” (53). His struggle is ongoing. “Numerous times over the past several days, at least a dozen, this piece has come close to hyperspace”, O’Brien writes of the essay. “Twice it lay at the bottom of a wastebasket” (53). The reference to hyperspace – which in non-Euclidean geometry indicates a relativist space–time continuum – is compelling. Writing can make the past come alive, serving as a kind of time travel, but the effect is double-edged. As revealed in “How To Tell a True War Story”, the need to write in order to anchor orphan pain, which haunts the body because its source is forgotten, exhausted, or not locatable, can result in a repetition compulsion that fosters pain. Writing, as O’Brien has stated, is not about “escaping” but “dealing” with “the real world” (Schroeder, “Two Interviews” 138). For a depressed individual, writing
can be a means of moving from a state of paralysis to reengagement. But revived memories can also kindle pain. In O’Brien’s case, painful memories have a physiological stranglehold on him. His only recourse is to “move or die” (O’Brien, “Vietnam” 56). Writing, which is active, is movement.

Writing may animate a writer, reconnecting him with the phenomenal world. But a written work also has the potential to sensationally connect readers. “The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you” (Things 259). Tim says, “All you can do is wait” and “hope somebody’ll pick it up and start reading” (273). I did not pick up The Things They Carried until I was assigned to interview O’Brien. I had categorized the work as a “war book” and did not think it would speak to me, much less move me. But, it did both, powerfully. And right now, as I write, I am close enough in age to O’Brien when he composed the following passage, which I have read numerous times, to myself and my students.

It’s now 1990. I’m forty three years old, which would’ve seemed impossible to a fourth grader, and yet when I look at photographs of myself as I was in 1956, I realize that in the important ways I haven’t changed at all. I was Timmy then; now I’m Tim. But the essence remains the same. I’m not fooled by the baggy pants or the crewcut or the happy smile – I know my own eyes – and there is no doubt that the Timmy smiling at the camera is the Tim I am now. Inside the body, or beyond the body, there is something absolute and unchanging. (264–265)

Looking at the author photo of O’Brien on the back of my book, I cannot help but imagine a fourth-grade Tim, conflating the author and protagonist as O’Brien has encouraged the reader to do. But the picture that I ultimately see is not the fourth-grade O’Brien. It is a first-grade picture of me, at age seven, just before I was taken from my foster family by my mother. The photo captures a boy who does not yet know what emotional struggles await him. Like Tim’s relationship with Timmy, my connection to the young David suggests something absolute and unchanging. The bond is energetic, embodied, found in a recognition of life. This recognition, as O’Brien suggests, is not necessarily therapeutic, although some critics understandably want it to be. As Haswell writes of “The Lives of the Dead”; “The tale of Timmy is a consolatory one, although this moment of reconciliation seems fragile and precarious. But isn’t that because the starting point of healing is the end point of the book?” (101).

If the “tale of Timmy” is consolatory to me, it is because it is a story about a man struggling, through the process of writing, to remain connected to his embodied self. I recognize that struggle and, in turn, feel less alone. Although The Things They Carried, as a whole, is about process and not necessarily progress, it does have a certain symmetry. It begins with a soldier trying to acclimate to war (“The Things They Carried”) and ends with a former soldier struggling to live with his memories. As to whether “The Lives of the Dead” is “the starting point of healing”, I am not inclined to imagine life for Tim beyond the text: the book is what O’Brien gave us. As for O’Brien, I can only look to what he has written about himself or stated in interviews. Almost five years after finishing The Things They Carried, O’Brien continued to battle despair, as “The Vietnam in Me” testifies. Ultimately, I find it less interesting to view The Things They Carried as a move toward “healing”, however the term is understood. The emotional “payoff” is Tim’s realization that writing is a means of managing his despair, and that to write is to live; in that way, perhaps, writing has kept him alive through his depressive bouts. This, for me, is sufficient self-knowledge. In her reading of “Lives of the Dead”, Chen states: “Return is figured as momentarily possible, a juncture of time, space, and desire that never offers a definitive resting place” (81–82). Recursive and process-oriented, to write is to return, again and again, to the living self. Reading O’Brien, I too return, to ground my orphan pain, find temporary narrative footing, and foster stories of my own.

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