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Veterans in Ruins: The Soldier's Impossible Homecoming in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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English summary:

The notion of homecoming is the focal point of Tim O'Brien's short story "Speaking of Courage," which presents an irreconcilable scission between the present and the soldier's past self and life, before the war. This cleavage is mainly embodied in the landscape of the story: the city that was once familiar seems remote after his homecoming. The way in which the protagonist looks at his hometown while driving around the lake that constitutes its center point allows the gradual (re)appearance of Vietnam landscapes and events in the descriptions, until memories from the past and visions of the present superimpose completely – thereby blurring the boundaries between war and peace, between suburban America and Vietnam battlegrounds. The bedimming of differences between the structural polarities of the "here" and the "elsewhere" enables the emergence of paradoxical aesthetics based on the notions of conflation and reversal, which thwart the prospect of ever returning home by rendering the very notion of return nonsensical and unachievable. Through writing, O'Brien thus puts into question the very possibility and completeness of the soldier's homecoming by collapsing together different spatiotemporal realities.

French summary:

La notion de retour du vétéran aux États-Unis est au centre de la nouvelle de Tim O'Brien « Speaking of Courage », qui met en avant un écart irréconciliable entre la vie du soldat avant et après la guerre. Cette scission s'incarne principalement au sein du paysage : la ville qui était jadis familière au soldat lui semble désormais étrange et indéchiffrable. Le regard qu'il pose sur sa ville d'origine alors qu'il conduit autour du lac qui en constitue le centre permet la réapparition graduelle de paysages de guerre dans les descriptions, jusqu'à ce que les souvenirs du passé se superposent complètement aux visions du présent. La limite entre la paix et la guerre, entre la banlieue américaine et le champ de bataille vietnamien est ainsi révoquée. L'annihilation des différences entre les pôles de l'« ici » et de l'« ailleurs » catalyse l'émergence d'une esthétique paradoxale basée sur un principe d'amalgame et de renversement, et contrarie la perspective du retour chez soi en rendant celui-ci essentiellement absurde et irréalisable. Par le biais de l'écriture, O'Brien remet ainsi en question la possibilité même du retour au pays après la guerre en entremêlant différentes réalités spatiotemporelles.

Mots clés: Tim O'Brien, nouvelles, guerre, témoignage, mémoire, retour du soldat.

Keywords: Tim O'Brien, short stories, war, testimony, memory, homecoming.

The notion of testimony is inherently problematic since its value lies in an irreconcilable ontological ambiguity. By definition, testimonies cannot be considered to be scientifically stating verifiable truths. If it were the case, a testimony would lose its *status as testimony* and become *evidence*. On the contrary, it is because the suspicion of perjury always lingers over any given testimony that it can keep its testimonial value, which is the guarantee of its very existence. As Jacques Derrida explains in *Poétique et Politique du Témoignage*:

Quand le témoignage paraît assuré et devient donc une vérité théorique démontrable, le moment d'une information ou d'un constat, une procédure de preuve, voire une pièce à conviction, il risque de perdre sa valeur, son sens ou son statut de témoignage. [...] Car cela revient à dire que dès qu'il est assuré, assuré comme *preuve théorique*, un témoignage n'est plus assuré *comme* témoignage. Pour être assuré comme témoignage, il ne peut pas, il ne doit pas être absolument assuré. (Derrida 523)

Since the value of testimony lies precisely in the state of uncertainty which is the basis of its intention, rejecting the value of any testimonial discourse by using the argument of its potential duplicity would become akin to rejecting any possibility to testify in general, and would thus lead to the annihilation of discourse itself. As flawed and problematic as it may be, the very survival of discourse, memory and events is rooted in this ontological interstice. According to Derrida, two different modes of perjury exist within the range of testimony, one which consists in being mistaken or having hallucinations in good faith, and one which consists in duplicity and hypocrisy. These two possibilities have similar consequences (both carry false information) but only one aims at purposely breaking the bond of trust from which testimony is ensued. Nevertheless, there are exceptional circumstances that justify this form of intentional perjury. Certain unthinkable experiences indeed require literary (re)creation in order to be delivered as faithfully as possible, so as to be felt in all their intensity. War and its aftermath are among such experiences. The absurdity of combat, the eeriness of returning home after much barbarism, physical and moral suffering, death and mourning – all these elements display a form of violence which brings writing into crisis. When confronted to a lack of words, philosopher Jacques Rancière posits that it is not because it is a challenge that the transcription of reality is impossible. In *Le Destin des images*, he asserts: “La notion d'irreprésentable a un effet bien précis : elle transforme les problèmes de réglage de la distance représentative en problèmes d'impossibilité de la représentation” (Rancière 128). In the context of war writing, these problems of adjustment of representative distance appear to have solutions. Indeed, war stories adjust or reinvent the modalities of their discourse so that the text becomes a point of contact between fiction and the experience of war. Literary devices may thus come out as fake elements, as artifices, for they draw the text away from a certain factual truth, but at the same time, they get closer to a form of truth concerning the turmoil of emotions and impressions experienced by war witnesses. The “story truth” – as Tim O'Brien calls it and which we need to understand as meaning “the fictional lie” – thus paradoxically serves what he also calls the “happening truth,”¹ that is to say the truth of what actually happened, by making the latter accessible through the detour of a subjective style concerned with intimate feelings and sensations.

In order to faithfully render the many challenges and complexities of the soldier's homecoming, and more particularly the feelings of up-rootedness and displacement which cripple many veterans after their return to the US, Tim O'Brien's short stories “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes” resort to a constant overlapping of spatiotemporal realities. The main

¹The expressions “story-truth” and “happening-truth” both appear in the short story “Good Form”: “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (O'Brien 171).

character's past life (during the war, in Vietnam) and his civilian life (back home, in the present) interpenetrate, thereby blurring geographical and temporal boundaries. Certain stimuli or sensations trigger a resurgence of past events in the character's mind and in the narration, stressing the central role that memory plays in the soldier's difficult return. These literary processes testify to a specific and personal experience of homecoming while making it comprehensible. They therefore attest to the reality of the world *not as it is*, but *as it can be perceived*. This testimonial regime draws away from historical fact to get closer to the intimate fact, the subjective fact, one which depends entirely upon sensations, irrational perceptions and memories of personal events. The blurring and blending together of different spatiotemporal dimensions in O'Brien's writing is thus a part of a paradoxical regime of testimony which does not aim at delivering *the truth* but *a possible truth* as to what homecoming *can feel like*.

Tim O'Brien's short story collection *The Things They Carried* was published in 1990. Its twenty-two stories narrate the Vietnam War as experienced by the soldiers of the Alpha Company. Some of these stories highlight the difficulties that GIs encounter when they try to readapt to civilian life after the war. The story entitled "Speaking of Courage" thus presents the return of Norman Bowker, a young veteran, as a moment of crucial realization: that of an irreconcilable scission between the present and the ruins of his past self and life, before the war. O'Brien thus puts forward the classical *topos* of the return of the soldier but breaks away from the conventional motif of a triumphant homecoming by turning it into a moment of absolute loss and failure. The historical dimension of the end of the war is left aside while the story focuses on the interwoven micro-events that make the everyday life of a veteran: the war might be over in official records, but its memory endures in Bowker's mind, conditioning his relationship to time and space, informing his vision, pulling him apart from the world and the people he used to know. In the short story "Notes," which directly follows "Speaking of Courage" the narrator offers a distanced perspective on "Speaking of Courage" and sheds light on the reason that caused the suicide of Norman Bowker: the distortion and falsification of his testimony, with which he had entrusted the narrator. O'Brien thus underlines the crucial action of narrating one's own journey in the homecoming process, the disastrous consequences that the inability to speak can cause in the veteran's life, and the moral pitfall of trying to testify for somebody else.

In this essay, the notion of ruins will not be dealt with in relation to the setting, which appears intact in the protagonist's eyes upon his return home. Instead, we will consider the veteran as metaphorically "ruined." Broken by the war, living in the past, Norman indeed embodies the remains of his foregone self and life. Made to face his own inadequacies in post-Vietnam war America, Norman realizes he is no longer part of a world that moved on without him.

We will endeavor to analyze how O'Brien's writing puts into question the very possibility of the soldier's homecoming by collapsing together different spatiotemporal realities. First, we will show how O'Brien resorts to the typical motif of homecoming while at the same time twisting its modalities in order to paradoxically *fit in* and *depart from* the norms of traditional war literature. We will then attempt to demonstrate how Bowker's inability to confide in anyone or narrate his experience prevents him from putting an end to his exile, and how O'Brien's appropriation of Bowker's testimony can only precipitate the latter's ruin. Finally, we will explain the modalities of a different and paradoxical homecoming *to the land of Vietnam*, and not to America, by focusing on Bowker's ambiguous sensations.

A modern take on a classical topos

The theme of the soldier's return has been present in literature since the first war narrative: Homer's *Odyssey*. Ulysses' homecoming, albeit difficult, is a success: just before reaching Ithaca, the Greek hero tells Athena about his twenty-year adventure, then, upon reaching the island, he kills all of his faithful wife's suitors and sees himself reinstated as king. If modern war literature still makes great use of the traditional *topos* of the return of the warrior, it has nonetheless abandoned all classical standards to feature instances of disastrous homecomings, more in line with the principles of plausibility and truthfulness. War literature specialist Jean Kaempfer argues that there cannot exist narratives of war without a war of narratives: modern war literature indeed borrows countless themes and *topoi* from traditional war narratives but voluntarily distorts or alters them to a certain extent, constantly upgrading the genre and thus discarding the very models from which it draws inspiration:

Voici des auteurs, qui, derrière leurs narrations, déploient polémiquement l'horizon des fables héroïques. Panorama éblouissant, qui nimbe l'horreur et la gloire de raison. Cette ouverture d'une arrière-scène agit comme un impératif : le trompe l'œil captieux commande, par réaction, le témoignage véracé. Mais d'abord, il faut faire place nette, dénoncer, avec joyeuseté ou colère, la farce des discours patriotards, arracher à leur silence les évidences fallacieuses du mensonge épique. Ainsi le récit de guerre moderne quitte-t-il son confinement subjectif et déploie-t-il autour de lui, pour légitimer la singularité dont il se réclame, les impostures narratives dont il se démarque... et dont il périmé, du coup, les prétentions. (Kaempfer 11)

A classical heritage is discernible in between the lines of O'Brien's short story, but as a reminder that epic war narratives of heroism and triumph do not represent the reality of homecoming. Indeed, Ulysses somehow manages to return to his former life. However, as Vladimir Jankélévitch explains in his essay on the notions of irreversibility and nostalgia, if it is always possible to come back (*revenir*) to the place you left, it is impossible, however, to unbecome (*dédevenir*) – to come back to the person you once were:

C'est cette ouverture temporelle dans la clôture spatiale qui passionne et pathétise l'inquiétude nostalgique. Car le retour, de par sa durée même, a toujours quelque chose d'inachevé : si le Revenir inverse l'aller, le 'dédevenir', lui, est une manière de devenir ; ou mieux : le retour neutralise l'aller dans l'espace, et le prolonge dans le temps ; et quant au circuit fermé, il prend rang à la suite des expériences antérieures dans une 'futurition' ouverte qui jamais ne s'interrompt [...]. (Jankélévitch 301)

The return does not have the power to reverse the outward journey, for it always entails a notion of irreversibility, of temporal impossibility: the traveler can never retrieve his point of departure, because this point is more than just a geographical landmark, it is also a point in time, and time does not allow retrogression. The feeling of nostalgia emerges from an acknowledgement of irreversible loss: coming back to the place of departure does not allow the traveler to recapture what time has changed and altered forever. Even if he does get to see his country and his family again when he returns home, the soldier has lost his bearings and cannot resume living like he used to before the war.² Tim O'Brien testifies to this impossible

² In his interview for *Transatlantica*, war writer Phil Klay states three reasons why, according to him, soldiers struggle to readapt to civilian life: "Homecoming is hard in a variety of different ways. Part of this is related to the changed way in which the soldier has learned to physically navigate a combat environment, a way of operating that not only doesn't make sense back home, but causes great problems. Part of it is also the confrontation with the disconnected civilian world, which doesn't operate according to the relatively straightforward rules of the military, and which likes to project all kinds of ideas onto the veteran that never quite match the individual lived experience, and which complicate the veteran's ability to

re-adaptation by putting forward a lost, disoriented protagonist who paradoxically inhabits the familiar surroundings of his hometown. Upon the realization of the gap separating his expectations and the disappointing reality of his homecoming experience, the veteran finds himself wishing for a new departure.³ His itinerary between his homeland and Vietnam war zones thereby turns into a “closed loop,” as it is defined by Jankélévitch: instead of representing the final and closing phase of the journey, the homecoming actually proves to be what prolongs the return of the soldier without any possibility of interruption. This notion appears as a metaphor in O’Brien’s short story “Speaking of Courage.” After his homecoming, Norman Bowker revolves around a lake in his car, driving around in a loop, aimlessly. First, Norman rediscovers a city that has not changed: “It was Sunday and it was summer, and the town seemed pretty much the same” (O’Brien 131). Like Ulysses coming back to Ithaca, Norman cruises around a place where time seems to have come to a standstill during his exile. But after several loops around the lake, the city becomes inexplicably estranged (“The town seemed remote somehow” O’Brien 133) and then turns into a hostile, alien entity (“A tour bus feeling, in a way, except the town he was touring seemed dead. Through the windows, as if in a stop-motion photograph, the place looked as if it had been hit by nerve gas, everything still and lifeless, even the people” O’Brien 137). The stillness that Norman encounters is the stillness of death. The past seems embalmed in front of him, visible but unreachable, just like a memory frozen on a photograph. By contrast, the hero’s return in *The Odyssey* marks the moment when time can pick up its course: Ulysses indeed comes back to an island that is also an island in time. Seemingly unaltered by the passing of twenty years, the whole kingdom has entered a sort of stasis in the hero’s absence. Penelope’s tapestry embodies this static treatment of time. She unweaves it at night, metaphorically forcing time to pause, since she wants to wait for the return of the hero and king before allowing time to resume its course. By contrast, Norman Bowker ironically goes round and round in circles, not being able to emancipate himself from the inescapable flow of time.⁴ Norman’s failed homecoming is therefore the moment of an assessment: no return is ever possible for modern warriors. The “way back” is just an infinite prolongation of the outward journey, for closed loops can only operate in space, never on the temporal level.

process that experience through dialogue with other people. And part of this is just the delayed moral accounting of war which must happen stateside because when in war [...] the soldier must focus on the relentless churn of operations so that he or she may be a functional member of the collective” (Jammes).

³ This specificity draws a parallel between Norman’s failed return and Gulliver’s dystopic homecomings. If Gulliver’s first return is joyful, the second one is marked by Gulliver’s indifference, while the last two turn out to be irreversibly tragic: Gulliver, who has become a deranged misanthropist, cannot recognize his family. Henceforth marginalized, he sleeps in the stables and does keep company with humans. In Swift’s writing, the homecoming has already lost its classical glory: it is no longer a synonym of recognition and reunion with loved ones, and it triggers the realization on the part of the hero that he will forever be an outcast among the people and the places he knows best.

⁴ The term “clockwise” is repeated twice: “he clamped the steering wheel slightly right of center, which produced a smooth clockwise motion against the curve of the road” (O’Brien 138), “Clockwise, as if in orbit, he took the Chevy on another seven-mile turn around the lake” (O’Brien 133). In his very gestures, Norman follows the movement of clock hands and proves unable to do anything “counterclockwise.” This image illustrates his incapacity to reverse the course of time.

Exiled in his familiar yet foreign home-country, Norman is also kept apart from the world by his inability to tell a specific story from his days at the front. Deprived of an adequate conversation partner both willing to hear and able to understand his testimony, Norman finds himself entrapped in forced silence, which confirms and enhances his position as an outcast.

Exiled in silence

In his essay on Gulliver's travels and the hero's return, Jean Viviès explains that the homecoming is a structural and necessary parameter of any travel narrative: "C'est le retour au point de départ qui finalement permet le récit. Il n'est d'odyssée que racontée. En même temps, le récit est la forme de validation du voyage raconté. Le récit et le voyage s'emploient à s'authentifier réciproquement" (Viviès 111). Returning to his point of departure allows the traveler to narrate the story of the travel, which only exists *because* it is narrated to those who stayed. The narrative thus validates the journey it relates. However, for the narrative to take place, the traveler needs an appropriate audience that will prove capable to listen and understand his testimony. War being an extreme experience regarding the intensity of the emotions and sensations it triggers, Paul Ricœur suggests that finding the right audience can prove impossible for the returning soldier, who thus remains silent, enduring the perpetual solitude of a prolonged exile:

C'est sur ce fond de confiance présumée que se détache tragiquement la solitude des 'témoins historiques' dont l'expérience extraordinaire prend en défaut la capacité de compréhension moyenne, ordinaire. Il est des témoins qui ne rencontrent jamais l'audience capable de les écouter et de les entendre. (Ricœur 208)

The testimony cannot be fully completed, for the audience refuses or proves unable to listen to the narrative of the war witness. The extreme nature of the soldier's narrative indeed keeps it out of reach for a listener who might be reluctant to see his stable, normal life unsettled. Ricœur explains that the exceptional features of a narrated experience that deals with violent historical events constitute an obstacle for ordinary capacities of conception:

Il s'agit d'expériences à la limite, proprement extraordinaires – qui se fraient un difficile chemin à la rencontre des capacités de réception limitées, ordinaires, d'auditeurs éduqués à une compréhension partagée. Cette compréhension a été édifiée sur les bases d'un sens de la ressemblance humaine au plan des situations, des sentiments, des pensées, des actions. Or l'expérience à transmettre est celle d'une inhumanité sans commune mesure avec l'expérience de l'homme ordinaire. C'est en ce sens qu'il s'agit d'expériences à la limite. (Ricœur 223)

Challenging the receptive abilities of an average conversation partner, war testimonies must often remain intransitive, entrapping the veteran in undesired muteness. In O'Brien's short story, Norman Bowker comes to the conclusion that out of all his possible interlocutors, none is truly adequate to hear the story he needs to tell, the story of the night his friend Kiowa died, during a battle that took place in a disgusting swamp. His ex-girlfriend Sally, for example, would not even be able to bear the words Norman wants to use. The reality of war, its essence, embodied throughout the text by the recurrent slang word *shit*,⁵ is not a part of

⁵ Alex Vernon underlines the symbolic dimension of the setting in the story – the "shit field" in which Kiowa drowns. He indeed states that "Kiowa's getting stuck into the shit field becomes a metaphor for the United States's getting stuck into the quagmire that was the Vietnam war" (Vernon 188). Rather than examining who is responsible for Kiowa's death, the story thus aims at showing that everyone, including the American government (and even the weather and the topography), partook in Kiowa's disappearance, and that Norman's (and the narrator's) guilt is paradoxically as justified as it is pointless.

Sally's reality. Norman realizes that if he were to confide in her, she would not be able to face it, and would rather cut the entire story short than listen to Norman's inappropriate language – even though it *is* appropriate for what Norman needs to say.⁶ However, Norman is so desperate to speak that he considers telling his story to the terminal he orders food from at a fast-food restaurant:

“Hey, loosen up,” the voice said. “What you really need, friend?” Norman Bowker smiled. “Well,” he said, “how'd you like to hear about?” He stopped and shook his head. “Hear *what*, man?” “Nothing.” [...] “You sure?” “Positive. All done.” The intercom made a light sound of disappointment. “Your choice, I guess. Over an' out.” “Out,” said Norman Bowker. (O'Brien 146)

Half-man, half machine, yet dematerialized and dehumanized, Norman's first willing confidant is an abstract entity. This situation ironically highlights that in order to listen to his inhuman war story, Norman needs a non-human listener. Struck by the incongruousness of the situation, however, he withholds his story once more and starts his revolutions around the lake again. This general impossibility to testify enshrines Norman's homecoming as a failure, suspending it indefinitely. He is entrapped in a perpetual return motion, physically (since he cannot stop revolving around the lake), but also intellectually and spiritually, for he keeps remembering the event he cannot talk about.

Norman's last attempt at testifying – explained in the short story “Notes” – is also a failure, inasmuch as it involves a mediator, who is in charge of carrying out the narrative for Norman. This intermediary is no other than the narrator of the short story collection, who refers to himself as Tim O'Brien, and who falsifies the original tone of Bowker's story by fear of confronting his own memory of the night in the swamp. In “Notes,” the narrator indeed brings forth several explanations meant to shed the light upon the genesis of “Speaking of Courage.” He reveals that the version of the story included in *The Things They Carried* is actually not the first version he wrote: this first version was published previously as a stand-alone short story,⁷ but the facts it related and the style and tone of the piece strayed significantly from the situation encountered by Norman and the Alpha Company that night. Moreover, O'Brien explains that Norman, desperate to tell his story and trusting his writer friend, had sent him a letter asking him to build a narrative upon the event he wanted to testify to:

What you should do, Tim, is write a story about a guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole. A guy who can't get his act together and just drives around town all day and can't think of any damn place to go and doesn't know how to get there anyway. This guy wants to talk about it, but he *can't*. . . If you want, you can use the stuff in this letter. (But not my real name, okay?) I'd write it myself except I can't ever find any words, if you know what I mean, and I can't figure out what exactly to say. Something

⁶Indeed, when Norman imagines himself telling his story to Sally, he quickly concludes that she would not constitute a good audience. In the dialogue he crafts in his imagination, she prefers to interrupt him rather than to listen to the crude vocabulary Norman resorts to: ““Stop it. I don't like that word.” “That's what it *was*.” “All right, but you don't have to use that word.” “Fine. What should we call it?” She would have glared at him. “I don't know. Just stop it.” Clearly, he thought, this was not a story for Sally Kramer” (O'Brien 139). As she forbids him to narrate his story freely, Sally refuses Norman's testimony and silences him.

⁷The text was indeed published as a separate short story in a magazine, and later in a fiction collection. The story has appeared previously at least three times and in the following publications: first in *Massachusetts Review* vol. 17, Summer 1976: 243-253, then in *Prize Stories 1978: The O'Henry Awards*. Ed. and intro. by William Abrahams. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978: 159-168, and finally in *Granta*, vol. 29, Winter 1989: 135-154.

about the field that night. The way Kiowa just disappeared into the crud. You were there—you can tell it. (O'Brien 151)

Bowker never abandoned the hope of one day being able to tell his story, if only through someone else's words and thanks to a text he didn't author but only inspired. Because he was present the night Kiowa died and because of his talent as a writer, O'Brien constitutes the only person Bowker might trust to write his testimony in a truthful, honest way, faithfully reproducing his experience through words. Bowker himself is incapable of producing a written testimony – just like he is unable to testify orally – for he never seems to find the right words to express what he wants (“I'd write it myself except I can't find any words, I can't figure out what to say exactly”). Bowker's letter to O'Brien is muddled, lacks structure and coherence (“disjointed letter,” “its tone jumping from self-pity to anger to irony to guilt to a kind of feigned indifference” O'Brien 149-50). However, if Bowker's wish is honored by O'Brien, the text published by the latter constitutes under many aspects a false testimony. It indeed distorts and transforms Bowker's initial intention, erasing awkward or shocking details from the original story, eventually just delivering a toned-down, adulterated version of it: “something about the story had frightened me—I was afraid to speak directly, afraid to remember—and in the end the piece had been ruined by a failure to tell the full and exact truth about our night in the shit field” (O'Brien 153). Like Sally Kramer, who wouldn't tolerate the crude reality of Norman's experience, the narrator admits to shying away from a confrontation with the terrifying memory of the night in the swamp, as well as modifying Norman's story to deflect from the reality of the past. O'Brien also explains that he wished to include Bowker's story in the book he was writing at the time, *Going After Cacciato*, and that this constraint pushed him to considerably modify the narrative of their common experience:

Almost immediately, though, there was a sense of failure. The details of Norman Bowker's story were missing. In this original version, which I still conceived as part of the novel, I had been forced to omit the shit field and the rain and the death of Kiowa, replacing this material with events that better fit the book's narrative. As a consequence I'd lost the natural counterpoint between the lake and the field. A metaphoric unity was broken. What the piece needed, and did not have, was the terrible killing power of that shit field. (O'Brien 153)

This loss of authenticity and the falsification it induces appear inevitable if one considers Bowker to be the only true witness to his own experience, in spite of O'Brien's presence on that night and in spite of his talent as a writer. In his essay on the poetics and politics of testimony, Jacques Derrida considers the act of testifying for someone as a mistake and a moral pitfall, for the testimony belongs only to the witness. Any testimonial appropriation amounts to perjury, for it seems impossible to legitimately and faithfully transcribe an event experienced by someone else:

Personne ne *peut*, c'est-à-dire personne ne *doit*, personne ne *devrait* témoigner pour le témoin, remplacer le témoin, défendre le témoin, témoigner devant le témoin, etc. On ne *peut* pas et (de plus ou d'ailleurs ou surtout) on ne *doit* pas témoigner *pour* le témoin, à tous les sens du 'pour'. On ne peut et il ne faut pas (prétendre) remplacer le témoin dans sa propre mort, par exemple celui qui a péri dans l'enfer d'Auschwitz [...]. On ne peut ni ne doit remplacer (donc témoigner *pour*) le témoin de sa propre mort, ni le témoin de la mort d'autrui, celui qui a assisté et survécu, par exemple à l'enfer d'Auschwitz. (Derrida 535)

The various uses of the word “pour” can confer different meanings to the sentence “personne ne témoigne pour le témoin.” No one can nor should testify for (in front of) someone who is also a witness, because in theory there is no need for transmission in such a case. But if O'Brien and Bowker have both witnessed the same event, their perception necessarily differs and thus, the mission that O'Brien is asked to take on as a last resort and by default, leads him

to assume the position of a perjurer and usurper. Bowker's expectations will inevitably be betrayed, for he is the sole possessor of *his* truth, and cannot solicitate anyone else to put this truth into words in his place. Likewise, Derrida explains that nobody can nor should testify for the witness (in his favor): the witness must state his experience and determine its authenticity without the intervention of a third party. Finally, nobody can nor should testify for the witness (in his place): if the witness is unable to testify to his own experience, either because he is dead, or because he cannot communicate (which is Bowker's case), no one will adequately replace him in this task. The uniqueness of his experience cannot be recounted by somebody else, for speaking with the voice of those who couldn't testify amounts to abusively appropriating their testimony (thereby falsifying it). O'Brien's attempt to tell Bowker's story in his place is thus condemned to fail, for the text composed by O'Brien cannot be anything but an altered derivative of Bowker's experience.⁸ Bowker's mutism may incidentally be assimilated to the silence of a corpse,⁹ since he seems to consider himself as such: "It's almost like I got killed over in Nam... Hard to describe. That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him" (O'Brien 150). To a certain extent, Bowker endeavors to testify to his own death,¹⁰ an ultimate experience that O'Brien is, by definition, unable to relate. Indeed, according to Derrida, the ultimate witness is the one who

⁸ Catherine Calloway remarks that if the version of "Speaking of Courage" included in *The Things They Carried* differs from the version found in *Going After Cacciato*, it should not be considered as being closer to the truth, in spite of what the narrator claims in "Notes." Calloway states that the reader, after exploring both versions, as well as the explanatory "Notes," is none the wiser: "Which version of the story, if either, is accurate? The inclusion of a metafictional chapter presenting the background behind the tale provides no definite answers or resolutions. [...] O'Brien's admission that much of the story is still invention compels the reader to wonder about the truth. [...] Can even this version be believed? Was there really a Norman Bowker, or is he, too, only fictional?" (Calloway 251-2)

⁹ Mark Heberle remarks that the use of the pronoun "he" is ambiguous in certain passages of "Speaking of Courage," which gives rise to a conflation as to who really died in the excrement-ridden swamp. The following lines exemplify this purposeful confusion: "If it had been possible, which it wasn't, he would have explained how his friend Kiowa slipped away that night beneath the dark swampy field. He was folded in with the war; he was part of the waste" (O'Brien 147). Heberle states that the ambiguous pronoun shows that "the attempt to finally bury Kiowa is not only unredemptive but suggests that Bowker has died in some sense as well" (Heberle 217).

¹⁰ In his poem entitled "Homecoming," Thomas McGrath evokes the metaphorical "death" of the soldier who left home and came back essentially transformed after the war:

"[...] Then we were troubled by our second coming:
The thing that takes our hand and leads us home –
Where we must clothe ourselves in the life of a stranger
Whose name we carry but can no longer know –
Is a new fear born between the doorstep and the door
Far from the night patrol, the terror, the long sweat.
And far from the dead boy who left so long ago" (McGrath).

The way back is described like a second departure ("our second coming") which does not bring the journey to an end but prolongs it instead. The poem also highlights the phenomenon of self-estrangement experienced by the soldiers after their homecoming: they must live as, and bear the name of, someone they do not "know" anymore. Far from finding himself back when he returns home, the lost soldier realizes that the man he was prior to his departure has not just changed: he has metaphorically perished.

experienced death and if he is unable to testify, then no one will do so in his place, for he and only he has been the undisputable witness of his own ending and whoever observed it from the outside was not truly a part of it:

[...] Personne ne peut témoigner à la place d'un autre, pas plus que personne ne peut mourir à la place d'un autre [...] Dans cette impossibilité de la substitution, nous à l'épreuve d'une alliance entre la mort et le secret. Le secret reste toujours l'expérience même du témoignage, le privilège d'un témoin auquel personne ne peut se substituer, car il est, par essence, le seul à savoir ce qu'il a vu, vécu, senti. (Derrida 534)

No one can bear witness for the witness, no one can testify *for* him in every sense of the word, without depriving the testimony of its value as such. Indeed, a testimony should always be carried out in the first person (Derrida 534) and the witness cannot be demoted to the rank of a third party, for he cannot be replaced in his privileged position. The witness's death is thus bound to remain a secret. Therefore, O'Brien's attempt to testify to Bowker's (metaphorical) death, forever inexpressible because only experienced by Bowker himself, ends in the latter's literal death. Having observed what a stylistic betrayal the first published version of the story was, compared to his personal experience, the veteran commits suicide and thus takes the ultimate step towards the silence of death: "It's not terrible," he wrote me, "but you left out Vietnam. Where's Kiowa? Where's the shit?" Eight months later he hanged himself" (O'Brien 154). The brutal transition between the questions taken from Norman's letter and O'Brien's mention of his death by hanging indicates a causal link between the falsification of the veteran's testimony and his suicide. Upon seeing that O'Brien had left out essential truths as well as the sensory reality of Vietnam (once again entirely encapsulated in the word "shit"), Norman realizes that his testimony has not been completed and most likely never will. His mother, informing O'Brien of Norman's passing in a letter, mentions her son's characteristic silence, which defines him even in death: "There was no suicide note, no message of any kind. 'Norman was a quiet boy,' his mother wrote, 'and I don't suppose he wanted to bother anybody'" (O'Brien 154). Norman thus proves to be a character marked by an incapacity to express himself, down to the way in which he chose to die – without a warning or a written explanation.

Beyond Norman's failure, though, lies the author's testimony about his own incapacity to put into words what he has been trying to write several times. Indeed, as John K. Young states:

'Speaking [of Courage]' enables a return of the [...] traumatic origin, or at least a returned attempt at telling that story [...]. As 'Notes' makes clear, that attempt fails, and the story of its failure repositions 'Speaking' no longer as a story about either Paul Berlin's or Norman Bowker's inability to narrate the traumatic event, but about O'Brien's own struggles [...]. (Young 98)

Norman's muteness is but a correlate of O'Brien's, just as Norman's circling around the lake embodies the author's attempts at telling a story which he never quite manages to capture, and which he keeps changing in order to feature it in different books, while still deeming it inadequate every time. "Speaking of Courage" can thus be envisaged as a metaliterary comment on the author's failures at testifying to his own experience, and on his refusal to quit trying.

From Norman's muteness and outcast position in his homeland stems an unavowed desire to engage in another kind of homecoming, one that would lead him back to the war and to Vietnam. Indeed, O'Brien goes further to stage Norman's inability to properly return to the US by putting forward an inversion of the polarities between the homeland and the land of exile.

Back home... to Vietnam

The city where Norman grew up indeed exhibits strange features, its inhabitants are rather indifferent or hostile and their customs seem foreign to the veteran: “You blind?” the fast-food waitress asks him (O’Brien 145), when Norman does not understand that he needs to speak in an intercom to order. The veteran proves unable to readapt to the habits and traditions of a society that he cannot decipher: he is a stranger, a foreigner exiled at home in his own country. This realization triggers a need for another departure, and this new departure takes the form of a paradoxical return to the imaginative landscape of Vietnam, triggered by an analeptic narration that imitates the regressive motions of the protagonist’s memory. Tina Chen indeed notes that:

Although O’Brien’s concept of displacement is predicated upon the impossibility of any permanent return, his work nonetheless insists upon multiple returns, however fleeting or unstable, to the imaginative landscape of Vietnam. These returns produce the stories, which in turn demand the acknowledgment of Vietnam as the central *topos* and creative core of the fiction. Vietnam exists as both place of estrangement and ironic homeland, a fictive geography acting synchronically as point of return and alienation. [...] Return is figured as momentarily possible, a juncture of time, space and desire that never offers a definitive resting place. (Chen 82)

In parallel to Norman’s failed return to his old self and life, the text thus engages another return through memory, towards the “elsewhere” of Vietnam that becomes, for lack of a more familiar place, the soldier’s new homeland. The lake plays a major role in his metaphorical homecoming to Vietnam: it stands as the focal point of the narrative but also as the landmark around which the protagonist physically and mentally gravitates. Indeed, if the narrator cannot be freed from the universal laws of physics that prevent him from going back to the past, the lake is an entity that seems immune to the passing of time. Unmoving, it is a witness to History and to many geological eras, which it has spanned without disappearing or changing. As a consequence, the lake represents an ideal state of things that is inaccessible to Norman, who has lost his past and remains a stranger to himself in the present:

Then, there had not been a war. But there had always been the lake, which was the town’s first cause of existence, a place for immigrant settlers to put down their loads. Before the settlers were the Sioux, and before the Sioux were the vast open prairies, and before the prairies there was only ice. (O’Brien 132)

As an inanimate natural entity marked by permanence, the lake testifies to the existence of another temporal scale that exceeds the human lifespan. Through its presence, the lake unifies the different periods of time it has known and operates a link between them, bringing them together in a geological continuum that contains them all. The lake therefore constitutes the only element connecting Norman to his life before the war; it embodies what remains of the past in spite of the inevitable passing of time: “Back in high school, at night, he had driven around and around it with Sally Kramer, wondering if she’d want to pull into the shelter of Sunset Park, or other times with his friends, talking about urgent matters, worrying about the existence of God and theories of causation” (O’Brien 132). The lake is the silent witness to many important moments in the protagonist’s life, and constitutes a trace, a literal imprint in the landscape in which immemorial events can be read (“The lake bed had been dug out by the southernmost advance of the Wisconsin glacier” O’Brien 132), but it also bears clues and indications of recent happenings, of a life now vanished but still accessible through the landscape. Being a contact point between what once was and what is now, the presence of the lake allows Norman to access his memories. It is therefore the catalyst of the only journey back in time that Norman can truly experience: a journey through memory, back to a forsaken past life. However, this constant return towards what has been lost through memory gradually

splits. The lake indeed seems to bear more and more resemblance to the Vietnamese swamp in which Kiowa drowned during a nighttime attack in the rainy season: it appears filled with algae (“filthy and algaed” O’Brien 132) and generally muddy, like the swamp in Norman’s memory (“big swampy field” O’Brien 138). By its flatness and immutability (“the lake would turn green with algae” (O’Brien 140), “the lake lay flat and silvery” O’Brien 131), the lake is reminiscent of the Song Tra Bong, the Vietnamese river that overflowed during the night of Kiowa’s death (“this slow, flat, muddy river” O’Brien 135). The expression “It was a bad lake for swimming and fishing both” (O’Brien 137) also indicates that the lake is insalubrious, which underlines yet another common feature with the swamp (that Norman calls “the shitfield” for it is used as a public toilet by the inhabitants of the closest village). In addition, the lake is responsible for the death of Max Arnold, Norman’s childhood friend, as reveals the peculiar formulation “the lake had drowned his friend Max Arnold, keeping him out of the war entirely” (O’Brien 132). Resorting to a verb of action, O’Brien underlines the essential role played by the lake in his friend’s death: it “drowned” him, but it also prevented him from going to the war, and thus metaphorically saved him from enduring the same hardships as Norman. The lake operates simultaneously as a destructive and protective entity, equally resembling a matrix and a tomb, much as the swamp field that saved Kiowa from the war while causing his death. It triggers a double return through the action of remembering, leading the protagonist back to his life in his hometown before the war, but also back to Vietnam. This second return therefore puts on paradoxical characteristics, as it does not lead Norman back home, but to the foreign land of his exile. The very end of “Speaking of Courage” exemplifies this double return by allowing for a paradoxical double reading. In this final passage Norman stops and leaves his car for the first time, then walks towards the lake and immerses himself completely in the filthy, stagnant water to watch the fireworks on the 4th of July:

He [...] waded into the lake without undressing. The water felt warm against his skin. He put his head under. He opened his lips, very slightly, for the taste, then he stood up and folded his arms and watched the fireworks. For a small town, he decided, it was a pretty good show. (O’Brien 148)

Some critics have seen in this surprising ending a form of self-baptism from a character who wants to be a part of his old community again.¹¹ But the peculiar setting of this passage is eerily reminiscent of a scene that Norman keeps replaying in mind, for lack of an audience – the memory of the battle that caused the death of his friend Kiowa in the swamp:

Another round hit nearby, spraying up shit and water, and for a few moments he ducked down beneath the mud. As he came up, a pair of red flares puffed open, a soft fuzzy glow, and in the glow he saw Kiowa’s wide-open eyes settling down into the scum. [...] He could taste it. The shit was in his nose and eyes. There were flares and mortar rounds, and the stink was everywhere [...] Slowly, working his way up, he hoisted himself out of the deep mud, and then he lay still and tasted the shit in his mouth and closed his eyes and listened to the rain and explosions and bubbling sounds. (O’Brien 143)

In the two passages, the character is fully dressed, submerged in filthy water, listening to explosions caused by fireworks or warfare. In both passages he tastes the sickening water around him. But at the end of the story, it is voluntarily that Norman opens his mouth under water, as if to get another taste of Vietnam, and remember the sensations of war, horrible as

¹¹ We are referring to John Timmerman’s interpretation of the short story’s ending: “The longing is buried, however, deep in memory. As the war story coils back inside his brain, he stops the Chevy, walks out into the water of the lake like one trying to baptize himself into a new reality, then stands and watches fireworks, the town’s own little fantasy battle” (Timmerman 10).

they might be. Far from baptizing himself into the American ways again, Norman performs a figurative return to the war through the recovery of past sensations that superimposes war time and peace time, weaving different spatiotemporal realities in the character's mind and in the text.

O'Brien's text thus harnesses the classical theme of the glorious homecoming of the hero while twisting it into a dystopic version of itself, testifying to the irreversible passing of time that forever separates the soldier from an irretrievable past life. Deprived of a willing or appropriate audience, Norman finds himself unable to narrate his journey to bring it to a close and keeps going aimlessly around the lake just like his memory repeatedly goes back to the war. Finally, the conflation of home and Vietnam through different stimuli and sensations puts forward a different and paradoxical type of return, towards the land of exile and back to the war. Vietnam thus exists both as a place of exile and as the soldier's homeland in O'Brien's text. It constitutes an imaginary location that embodies both as a point of return and as a place of estrangement. The notion of homecoming is thus presented as momentarily achievable: less than a definitive resting place, it is rather a meeting point of time and space through the ephemeral act of remembering.

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