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**Trauma and Disillusionment in the War Fiction of Norman Mailer,
Tim O'Brien, and Kevin Powers**

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Literature and Civilization

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this research work comes from my own efforts and exhaustive investigations. As far as I know, the thesis denies, except where due acknowledgement is made, the presence of scholarly materials formerly published by researchers in the field.

Date

20/03/2023

SignatureA handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'C.S.' with a stylized flourish at the end.

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Dedication

In loving memory of my father,

To my mother, the heroine of my story,

To my husband, the architect of my happiness,

To my siblings, the crafters of my success.

Abstract

Questions of credibility and authenticity haunt contemporary research works investigating the phenomenon of trauma in war fiction. In an age marked by mass death and mass confusion, it is difficult to place the literature of struggle within the confines of unequivocal discourses, since the great disillusionment of the postwar eras questions the state of language and meaning in a world gone wrong. As such, the legitimacy of artistic language has become debatable, calling for new modes of speakability that may communicate the ineffable.

This thesis interrogates the state of this aesthetic expression in three war stories by veteran authors, dealing with three major conflicts in American history. The three novels uncover the intricacies involved in representing the wound and the difficult task of bearing witness to extraordinary human events using ordinary language. Norman Mailer's *The Naked and The Dead*, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* move between an unquenchable desire to turn pain into coherent and restorative stories and an overwhelming awareness of the limitations imposed by language.

However, the thesis argues, this linguistic paucity authorizes limitless venues for interpreting the wound, on the one hand, and relieves the text from the burden of absolute signification, on the other. Thus, within the confines imposed by the subject matter, the novels usher readers into unlimited possibilities, allowing them to reconstruct meaning out of the shattering remnants of language. By examining issues related to narrative experience, memory, structure, temporality, and testimony both in terms of form and content, the thesis reveals the extent to which the experience of trauma infects artistic expression. Finally, it contends that the best way to understand narratives of pain is to

accept their adherence to the duplicity of meaning torn between truth and falsehood, speech and silence as well as deceit and sincerity.

Keywords: war, trauma, disillusion, illusions, testimony.

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List of Abbreviations

Naked: The Naked and The Dead

Things: The Things They Carried

Birds: The Yellow Birds

Introduction: War, Trauma, and American Literature after 1945

“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” writes Theodor Adorno (281) to comment on the state of the arts after the horrible events shaping the Second World War. Although this dictum has received much criticism from literary and cultural critics alike, one possible reading implies that it is impossible to write poetry authentically after such a traumatic historical event (Klaus Hofmann 182). The famous statement also points to the instability of artistic language engaged with the difficult task of representing the Holocaust, and that “post-war poems must be infected with knowledge of the traumatic event” (Antony Rowland 58; 60).

In his essay “Cultural Criticism and Society,” Adorno seems to link this linguistic defect to the rapid descent of great cultures to a state of barbarism since the pre-established knowledge of humanity with its supposedly ethical values failed to prevent the atrocities of 1945. After the war, the ideals of civilization and the pre-existing frameworks that shaped the world before mass trauma proved ineffective. As such, there was a need to create new literary, cultural, philosophical, and historical idioms to describe the indescribable crimes committed against humanity, a “barbaric” and chaotic discourse that matches the status quo.

Against Adorno’s famous dictum, however, some critics find in post-1945 war literature discourses related to politics, history, or psychotherapy capable of communicating truth and, thus, providing definite answers to the interrogating reader. Certainly, the topic of war opens different venues of criticism, mainly because of the nature of the subject matter as being both a historical event and a politically driven phenomenon; yet, questions of credibility arise when the experience of trauma operates in such narratives. The latter is an extensive and elusive field of study that emerges in the twentieth century to answer for collective and individual traumas through cultural,

historical, and psychoanalytical theories. Nevertheless, events marked by extremity may, at times, resist easy answers and risk being inappropriately assimilated into personal or collective stories. This difficulty of representation stems from the fact that literary language cannot formulate meaning through pre-established structures, since trauma obliterates previous ideals. Consequently, questions of authenticity and their relationship to the overall meaning failed to attract much attention from literary critics who look for specific discourses in narratives infected with traumatic knowledge.

Regarding this, the present study examines the complex representation of trauma in three war stories written by veteran authors, hoping to find a middle ground between the inauthenticity of language and the question of signification. It does not, however, endeavor to offer definite answers to the issue at hand, for this venue of criticism risks imposing meaning to a topic that apparently affords none. Following Adorno's dictum, the thesis argues that the selected stories represent the conflict in a somewhat inaccurate way since the medium of communication is a result of a huge sense of disillusionment with pre-established paradigms. Instead of looking for definite answers to the ineffable, the study reveals that these texts offer no resolution or precise meanings because their language is a result of readjustment and alteration of truth.

Despite being first-hand spectators of trauma, the three authors disclose the impossibility of writing with a pre-established consciousness. On the whole, the study attempts to answer the following questions: how does trauma infect literary expression? Is it possible to use ordinary language to represent extraordinary events? How do veteran authors narrate the unnarratable? In other words, what are the suitable modes of expression that help this category of writers testify to the wound? Most importantly, where does meaning reside after the war?

The thesis addresses the issue at hand through a close examination of the literary representation of traumatic events through both memory and immediate narrative actions. It also investigates issues related to language, temporality, and structure to show how trauma wrecks the text both in terms of form and content. By scrutinizing narrative tropes, the study also demonstrates that, despite the difficulty of writing, the topic of war transcends linguistic limitations and ultimately communicates traumatic knowledge to the inquiring reader. Although the study disclaims the existence of definite interpretations to narratives of pain, it argues that one way of constructing meaning is to both accept and negate the truth at work. In other words, meaning resides, to borrow Rodolphe Gasché's expression, in the "null-space" (35) of representation torn between the need to tell and the impossibility of telling any truth whatsoever.

In the American theatre, this preoccupation with language, as a means to communicate the horrors of warfare stretching from the Second World War to the Iraq War, was no different from Adorno's vision of postwar Europe. The United States' subsequent engagement in conflicts in the Pacific, Vietnam, and Iraq led to growing discontent and a questioning of the true political aims shaping these successive wars. When the motives proved fruitless, a sense of disillusionment grew among the American intelligentsia who started looking for truth and meaning in a world gone mad.

From 1945 onwards, the question of truth has become debatable among intellectuals and academics, leading to massive scholarly works that seek to understand the aporetic nature of the circulating truth. As the American literary critic Geoffrey Hartman, in theorizing trauma narratives, writes: "We declare one epoch over, that another has begun, and that the calendar itself should undergo a revision" ("Language" 313). Works of psychologists, philosophers, autobiographers, novelists, and literary theorists, to name but a few, flooded the American intellectual scene to either represent

the shock of the century or attempt to understand and develop theories that can answer the unanswerable.

In American literature, the subsequent wars produced a body of literature concerned with the difficult task of representing the conflict to a public eager to not only find meaning outside political propaganda but also to get an image of life at the edge of civilization. This arduous undertaking was oftentimes produced by the hand of writers who, as bystanders of armed conflicts, felt the necessity to turn their experiences into art and, thus, bear witness to the absurdity of combat in their narratives. Norman Mailer, Tim O'Brien and Kevin Powers, as successive generational writers, turned to art to translate their frontline experiences into war stories, hoping to communicate, to some extent, the traumas of soldiers both during and after the war.

However, the task of turning wounds into words hunts this category of writers, making it difficult for them to both report the actual events of the battlefield with accuracy and make readers understand what lies beyond human civilization. Yet, despite this uneasiness towards language, the subject of war fascinates postwar veteran artists and, since the twentieth century, their works flooded the American literary scene. On the one hand, the topic resides outside common speech, but, on the other hand, succeeds in creating a literary canon of its own. This dilemma pushes readers to question through what medium can veteran authors write about such a complex yet fascinating subject.

This thesis aims to examine the narratives of this category of American war novelists. Starting from Mailer's Second World War fiction *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), moving to O'Brien's Vietnam war story *The Things They Carried* (1990) and, finally, Powers' Iraq War novel *The Yellow Birds* (2012), showing how each writer struggles to communicate the ineffable to his generation. Certainly, each veteran writer differs in the degree of credibility and authenticity of the represented event, considering

that not all of them had had the same experience at the front. Mailer, for example, gives readers, despite some narrative fallacies, access into the game of war through his adoption of the realistic mode that allows for a detailed description of combat; however, O'Brien's and Powers' depiction of the operative struggle from the lenses of narrative memory pushes readers to question the validity of truth. For example, to answer his readers' skepticism regarding the problematic relationship of truth and fiction in *Things*, O'Brien said "If you believe it, it is, if you don't, it isn't," ("Textual") thus, locating his fiction in the "null-space" (Gasché 35) of representation.

Yet, despite such assertions, some critics find meaning in these complex narratives. In reading Mailer's *Naked*, Spandana G. and Mallikarjuna J. see a totalitarian evil power within the military organization. For them, Mailer resorts to the combat zone to reveal the conditions of a twentieth-century man entrapped in an industrial modern world, and that the military institution inextricably connects to class struggle and clash of ideologies (1465). In their words, totalitarianism is "a kind of cancer" that subjects soldiers to a totalitarian tyranny embodied in General Cummings and Sergeant Sam Croft; and the conflict of personal ideologies constitutes a major theme in the novel (1468).

Alternatively, Michael Glenday's view repudiates the eventual triumph of totalitarianism in that both Cummings and Croft are conquered, and their hope for mastery is undercut by absurdity. Cummings' hope to enjoy the triumph of the Toyaku Line invasion is blown away by Major Dalleson's short victory, and Croft's desire to climb Mount Anaka is conquered by the forces of nature itself. "As creatures of the system," they ultimately fail to accentuate Mailer's faith in its hegemony (201-2).

Conversely, Randall Waldron argues that the main battle of the novel happens between man and the machine. The novel's structure, character, imagery, and symbols all support in creating a metaphor in which the war, the military organization, and combat

define the “machine age” of the twentieth century (273). While the “Time Machine” section stands as a structural device mirroring the background of soldiers caught up in a mechanistic society, the mountain and the army stand as symbols that provide a broader view of this “man machine dichotomy”. While Cummings and Croft represent the machine, Hearn and Valsen stand as representatives of the “antimachine” (Waldron 273-74).

On the other hand, critics like Raymond Wilson and Erin Mercer diverge our attention from political and ideological discourses. By focusing on the relationship between freedom and control in the fiction, Wilson parallels freedom with the liberation of the self from the nonrealistic American myths of victory and control as the adaptation of the self to the forces of the jungle and the mountain. In other words, Mailer’s characters relinquish their former pessimistic societal ideals in favor of better existential hopes. Once in combat, for instance, Julio Martinez trades his heroic ideals for the violence embedded in the army and Robert Hearn gives up on his liberal character for an authoritarian personality (Wilson 164-71).

Indeed, Erin Mercer looks at *Naked* from a psychoanalytical loupe. In addition to the apparent themes of power dynamics and political dogma, Mercer argues, the novel includes darker and “unconscious themes” (60). According to her thesis, Mailer embarks on a mission to represent aspects hidden from the popular culture of post-war America. In his fiction, he depicts a return of the repressed through a realistic uncanny description of events. “By employing familiar concepts of Freudian theory regarding sublimation and sickness, Mailer attempts to position himself as a writer capable of healing society by reintegrating obscenity and violence” (Mercer 27). Since post-war America, for instance, repressed the atrocities of the war with romantic reproductions of the conflict, Mailer

takes the burden of rectifying this view through a verisimilar implementation of darker themes (Mercer 75).

Like Mercer and Wilson, Ikbāl M. Alosman and Raihanah M. read *Birds* from a psychological perspective to gaze at the face of war and the dynamics that play out before, during and after traumatic situations. Through the lenses of survival psychology, they investigate how characters respond to anxiety using the three survival mechanisms of fight, flight and submission as well as the ensuing psychological repercussions of PTSD. Such reading, Alosman and Raihanah argue, “provides the readership with another lens to fathom certain unidentified parts in the human psyche” (148).

In line with Alosman and Raihanah, Bill Walthall’s take on Powers’ fiction follows the psychoanalytical approach of PTSD along with a greater emphasis on the intertextual aspects inherent to the worldview of the narrative. For Walthall, *Birds*, in addition to its exhibition of PTSD symptoms such as repetition, nightmares, flashbacks, shame, and guilt, alludes to the tradition of war writing operant in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* and O’Brien’s *Things* (1-2).

Following Walthall’s view, Ty Hawkins places Powers alongside the lost generation of Hemingway, tracing the similar yet slightly radical approach *Birds* adopts in its treatment of postwar alienation from American culture (105). For instance, he argues that, despite the legacy that exists between *Birds* and other modern-war narratives, the former completely denies the possibility of a shared experience or empathy between veterans and citizens embodied, for example, in the experience of Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*. “In distinction to a character such as Frederic Henry, whose war trauma stands as a vanguard position culturally, Bartle is not a member of a lost generation; rather, Bartle is lost to his generation” (Hawkins 105).

Whereas these studies offer novel readings to Powers' debut novel, some tend to lose sight of the relationship between time and trauma. Critics like Alosman and Raihanah, despite transporting readers to the aura of the combat zone, overlook the temporal dimensions that play out amidst traumatic events and how this aspect may, at times, affect characters' actions during the fight or flight response; and, Walthall, although approaches the symptomatic repetition in terms of subjective experience, overlooks its relationship to plot formation.

In addition to the above discourses, other critics argue that the act of writing war stories relieves veteran authors from the burden of experience, thus, turning the ineffable into a psychotherapeutic practice. In "Seeing Signs and Telling War Stories: Recognizing Trauma Symptoms and the Role of Narrative in Recovery," Catherine Rolan looks at *Things* from a therapeutical perspective, demonstrating the relationship between writing and recovery. For her, O'Brien's fiction reflects on the psychological condition of veterans suffering from PTSD, the mechanisms they develop to cope with anxiety and how they eventually transcend their traumas through the act of speaking. Basing her study on the contemporary discourse of PTSD, Rolan concludes that literal and verbal communication help characters as well as the writer go beyond trauma and find meaning in their lives after the war.

Following this premise, Mark Heberle reads the last chapter of *Things*, "The Lives of the Dead," from a psychoanalytical perspective, examining the concept of trauma in war as well as in life. He indicates that, at the end of the narrative, O'Brien uses the technique of storytelling along with memory to resurrect the dead (99). For Heberle, the combination of the memory of his fellow soldiers and his childhood companion Linda help the author to transcend trauma. By bringing them back into fiction, O'Brien not only

saves them from the fatality of death but also salvages himself from the burden of “fear,” “guilt,” and “grief” (“Storytelling” 105).

In a like manner, Susan Farrell acknowledges the effectiveness of storytelling conveyed through the act of listening and speaking. Not only does the presence of a “sympathetic listener” (Farrell 187) in most stories alleviate the weight of trauma by unifying the speaker with the listener but also relieves the wounded consciousness from moral guilt by forming a non-judgmental relationship with one another. However, for Farrell, difficulties arise when the alliance is formed between the author and the reader, since the act of “telling and listening both involve hard recursive work that can never be fully completed” (188). In other words, Farrell recognizes both the necessity of communicating trauma as an essential step towards recovery and the complication deeply rooted in constructing and exchanging these narratives.

Both Heberle and Farrell link the art of storytelling to recovery in that trauma is inscribed in letters or verbally communicated to the listener/the reader. These stories are made up of illusions and ideals to cover up the disillusionment of a wounded consciousness (narrator) unable to communicate unpleasant memories. If the wounded consciousness, as O’Brien puts it, manages “to erase the story’s flaws” by “taking pride in a shadowy, idealized recollection,” (171; ch. 16) then trauma, as Heberle, Farrell, and Rolin argue, will truly be communicated and, thus, reclaimed. Yet, since O’Brien acknowledges the presence of these “flaws” and the necessity of constructing his craft around ideals, the relationship between storytelling and recovery becomes an illusion. On the one hand, these critics recognize the healing power of storytelling, but on the other hand, they overlook the fabrications as well as the masks surrounding this therapeutic art. Such a view places language and its expressive power at the forefront of the healing

process, or as the first step towards recovery while leaving its expressive defects unaddressed.

Reading O'Brien's fiction along with John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Victor Turner's examinations of religious pilgrimage, Alex Vernon adds that the author as well as his fiction search for a possible recovery or redemption through storytelling. For Vernon, this is impossible because O'Brien's hope of surpassing his trauma through the delusionary nature of language is a fruitless enterprise. "O'Brien's spiritual metaphor of salvation through storytelling, against such an apocalyptic and secular outlook, seems based upon an empty hope. The power of language to mollify the soul's pain is a trick, an illusion ... [it] cannot adequately express, it cannot change the facts, it cannot redeem anything (185)."

Against Vernon's vision, Amelia Precup, basing her research on contemporary approaches to the study of memory, explores the role of memory in reversing absent notions of ethics and morality, reconstructing personal histories, and transcending traumatic events. Owing to the versatile nature of memory, Bartle, in *Birds*, inscribes the past through the present memories of his deceased comrade, providing him with "some sense of redemption, some feeling of coherence and meaning" and, most importantly, some sense of humanity (Precup 175). As Precup puts it, "by reconstructing Murph's image and representing his absence, Bartle implicitly probes and recollects the process of emotional deterioration and the disintegration of humanity" (189).

Vernon's reading echoes the aim of the present study, the way language relentlessly betrays meaning, its inability to absolve the writer from moral and spiritual guilt, and how its illusionary power offers momentary relief to the spirit, all seeming to reverberate thematically. Yet, Vernon's religious approach disregards the psychological dilemma facing the characters, it overlooks the fact that O'Brien's art of storytelling does

not necessarily look for a spiritual redemption or any answers whatsoever. Storytelling unfolds the world as such without necessarily ascribing a single meaning, or as Rolen argues, without healing the wound. Perhaps, O'Brien or Powers ground meaning in meaninglessness or in the paradoxes inherent in a language where the promise of redemption or recovery is in itself a comfortable disease.

Against these readings, however, this thesis examines the narrative fallacies manifest in the selected novels, arguing that the act of crafting war stories combines both truth and deceit without reducing one to the other. Instead of seeing war stories as acts of recovery, the thesis argues that veteran authors create illusions that lure readers into believing the validity of the communicated truth; since their texts are a result of a huge disenchantment with the war, in particular, and pre-established paradigms, in general, they invent new narrative illusions to turn their experiences into art. Whatever their motives, the three writers obtrude and this act of obtrusion is unavoidable (Berel Lang 330).

By looking at issues related to language, testimony, memory, temporality, and narrative structure, the study scrutinizes the gaps left by the aforementioned critics using mostly contemporary approaches to trauma theory, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and postmodernism. The theoretical framework shaping this investigation comes from theorists that study trauma from 1945 onwards. Yet, before venturing into the theorization of trauma, it is important to look at the historical scene that shaped the literature on trauma both in theory and context.

Historical and Theoretical Background of Trauma Theory

The twentieth century ventured into the bloodiest wars in human history and technological advancements paved the way to mass death and mass destruction. In a matter of decades, civilizations were nearly burned to ashes as major European centers

were destroyed and humanity lost around 70 million people in World War II alone. In the Second World war, which was often labelled a “total war,” sacred historical sites were even destroyed across Europe. An example is the Italian Monastery of Monte Cassino, which was ravaged during the Allied bombing of 1944 in a battle that was later called the Battle of Monte Cassino. The monastery’s secretary and chief assistant, Martino Matronola, wrote in his diary: “we are impotently watching the gradual destruction of the monastery, with our hearts full of bitterness” (qtd. in Hapgood and Richardson 139). Such disasters proved that faith could no longer prevent men from committing terrible sins like the destruction of sacred religious sites.

For the first time in generations, the world came face to face with mass loss coupled with mass confusion. The nuclear weapon, for example, changed the face of battle and transformed bodies into mismatched parts that, in turn, created a new meditation on death. On the occasion, Nakamura On writes in her poignant poem *City in Flames*: “how can this be a human face / everybody thought at the sight of another / yet each who so thought had the same face” (qtd. in Shishu 118). In another poem, Okamoto Jun shockingly describes the effects of the atomic bomb on the Japanese ground: “Now no woman no man has a human shape / the islands are shattered fragments of oyster shells / an eroded desert / where bones and ashes dance directionless” (qtd. in Shishu 130). Such instances not only point to the death of human life but also to the end of the master texts of humanity and the origination of a new era defined by new narratives.

In line with the existing traumatic conditions, the field of psychology developed new theories to understand large-scale trauma from depressed veterans to Holocaust victims and nuclear bomb survivors. In any endeavor to position psychology in its place, Graham Richards argues, it is crucial to locate it “somewhere within the bloodiest century on record – a location which must, in turn, have reflexively affected the character of

Psychology itself” (373). In the United States, the growing field of psychological medicine was, relatively, bigger than in Europe because European elites fled their ruined homes for America where, according to Albert Gilen, universities “assumed leadership in all mainstream areas of psychology” (17). For Gilen, the large number of trauma survivors stimulated the growth of the discipline and its subsequent branches (45). Psychologists devoted, more than in any other historical event, enormous amounts of resources to understanding human trauma through the lens of total war.

In the field of trauma, there have been several attempts to understand extreme events like warfare. For example, during WWI, combat disorders were known as “shell shock” (Ruth Leys 4) and in the aftermath of the Second World War as “combat fatigue” (Leys 5). It was up until the Vietnam War that The American Psychiatric Association introduced the contemporary usage of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in its 1980 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III). The latter defines it as a series of symptoms “following a psychologically traumatic event that is generally outside the range of usual human experience” (236). In the context of war, these symptoms vary from one individual to the next given the traumatic situation and the degree of severity to which the person was originally exposed. To be fully diagnosed with PTSD, a person must relieve the trauma long after the cessation of the conflict in the form of uncommon symptoms.

Apart from PTSD, psychotraumatology adds another paradigm to trauma studies known as “Combat Stress Reaction” defined as a short-term stress response (Susan Ray). The latter adds an extra dimension from which psychoanalysts differentiate severe from moderate stress. In her article the “Evolution of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Future Directions,” Ray argues that the evolution of diagnostic methods has allowed for an understanding of trauma outside the limits of PTSD. The addition of “Stress Response

Syndrome” or Combat Stress Reaction (CSR), acknowledges that some disorders may appear within normal individuals due to a combination of severe physiological and emotional strains. Unlike PTSD, the symptoms of CSR usually disappear after the cessation of the conflict.

The literature expanded on the concept of trauma is numerous and often controversial. To avoid some controversies, the concept of trauma can be divided into two sub-categories: the traumatic situation itself and the ensuing symptoms. To narrow it down into a simple definition that fits within the focus of the research at hand, *The Encyclopedia of Psychological Trauma* defines it as the “exposure to catastrophic life events such as combat, sexual assault, and natural disasters” (657). It can also mean a physical wound that inflicts damage to the human body but psychological injuries appear stronger than physical ones. David Becker offers a similar view, stating that traumatic situations correspond to an atmosphere of intense hostility best highlighted in the context of warfare (2). These interpretations of trauma are analogous to classical perspectives presented a century ago by pioneering figures in the field of psychoanalysis.

Sigmund Freud, as a key figure in this domain, led the way to current insights on trauma in his seminal work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, noting that trauma comes in the form of external stressors powerful enough to smash a “protective shield” (21) and, eventually, cause a psychological breakdown to the subject. By a “protective shield,” Freud means the defense mechanisms that individuals adopted in a peacetime environment to protect themselves from everyday circumstances but cannot preserve in wartime.

Similarly, in his *Traumatic Neuroses of War*, the American psychoanalyst Abram Kardiner argues that the modern face of war, with its increased technological innovations in weaponry, created, unlike the normal neuroses of peacetime, severe traumatic ones that

emanate from a disturbance in the ego (69). What both Kardiner and Freud call traumatic neuroses are the alterations that occur inside the mechanism of the human mind and the way it perceives and reacts in the face of a threatening reality. Both claims agree that, after the traumatic situation, the most apparent syndrome is the subject's altered vision of the self. Accordingly, understanding the traumatic situation "highlights the disillusionment that occurs concerning the individual's sense of self" ("Theoretical" 37). Hence, understanding trauma from the lenses of the battlefield may help us gaze at the face of war, allowing us to imagine another living dimension and understand the disillusionment of veterans following the conflict.

In his essay "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," Freud examines as well the disenchantment of the postwar era, suggesting that the Great War obliterated two sorts of illusions: the shallow morality exercised by civilization and the cruelty practiced by human beings outside the realm of citizenship and society (280). For Freud, disillusionment is not possible without previously held illusions of the self, in particular, and society, in general. Keeping illusions is part of the defense mechanisms that are shattered in traumatic situations set previously by Freud and Kardiner. In psychology today, these pioneering figures led the way for further investigations into the workings of these defense mechanisms, attempting to broaden the scope of the question at hand.

Phebe Cramer, for instance, shows that defenses in social psychology prove that human beings tend to mislead themselves by increasing their self-respect and creating nonrealistic illusions (639). Following the same trend of thought, Brittney Beck et.al express similar views on how individuals tend to mystify certain truths so as not to fall into the trap of helplessness because facing certain realities may produce unbearable feelings hard to undertake (351). The defensive armor or the nurtured illusions coexist within a civilization to balance and alleviate the task of existence until the war, suddenly,

disturbs their steadiness and brings disillusion. In light of this, it is undeniable that there is an interchangeable nature between trauma and disillusionment and any attempt at analysis needs to be checked and balanced between the two.

Although Freud developed his theories long before the extreme historical events of 1945, his concept of disillusionment with civilizational and humanistic values echo with Adorno's post-Holocaust vision of art and culture. My emphasis on this historical event, as a reference guide to the present study, stems from the fact that most contemporary theorists turn to the Holocaust to understand the relationship between words and wounds; they also recur to Freud's understanding of extreme experiences in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, using it as a metanarrative to the concept of trauma. However, they take the concept a step further, turning their attention away from the analyst's room to the literary representation of pain. Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, and Shoshana Felman – known as the Yale deconstructionists – are just a few figures who turned to this historical event to bridge the gap between trauma and fiction.

In her groundbreaking book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth indicates that literature answers Freud's theory in that it reveals not only his obsession with the after-effects of trauma but also decodes the unspeakable experience through the literary power of language. However, she argues that this language both transmits that experience and challenges our ability to fully comprehend it; it “simultaneously defies and demands our witness (5). This not all-inclusiveness of literary language gives the text a perplexing tone and challenges readers' understanding.

Similarly, Hartman maintains that literature attempts to answer the skepticism of psychoanalysis in that, through the act of reading, words reveal pain (“Traumatic” 537). Unlike in clinical psychology, in fiction, the traumatic episodes are “registered rather than experienced” (Hartman, “Traumatic” 537). In reading fiction, Hartman asks us to simply

question “where did the trouble begin?” and to look for a “genesis-moment” that threatens the equilibrium of both body and mind (Hartman, “Traumatic” 538). This fictional moment shows an unidealized human state and a perception of art as both an act of testifying and representing trauma. This ability to “see through” the pain of others through unromantic representations allows readers to share a human condition rooted in an unconventional reality (Hartman, “Traumatic 540; 545).

In dealing with the question of testimony, Felman and Dori Laub, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, argue that to be a witness one needs to be present when the event happens, yet this presence is an absence which leaves the event without a witness (80). In simple terms, to be inside an event characterized by atrocity does not guarantee that the witness grasps the magnitude of the horrors that allow him/her to report them later on in life. To clarify their argument, they present the example of the Holocaust, emphasizing the impossibility of witnessing such an abominable incident and then simply describe its underlying events to the outside world; hence, this present yet absent presence leaves this historical event without a witness (Felman and Laub 81).

Accordingly, any event that lacks witnesses and, thus, credibility is doomed to silence; indeed, any signs of its presence in discourse inevitably contain some degree of failure (Felman and Laub 83-4). Following this argument, Mailer, O’Brien, and Powers can be said to be absent witnesses to the original event and their works allow them to reverse this absence through the process of testimony. As Laub and Felman put it, “Testimony is ... the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness” (85). In this respect, the narratives investigated here fall within the rubric of testimony in that all struggle with the impossible task of turning the ordeals of the frontline into accurate anecdotes. Yet, despite their willingness to speak, these texts

contain some degree of failure surrounding not the artistic or imaginative endeavor but rather the internal logic of the story. While the creative endeavor can affect readers' emotions, the absence of logic leaves a certain degree of cynicism regarding the validity of the artistic creation.

Testimony is, then, the urge to speak despite the silence, a willingness on the part of the survivor narrator to reclaim his voice beyond pre-established modes of reasoning. Instead of appealing to logic, he seeks refuge in modes of speakability capable only of igniting his readers' emotions. By appealing to the senses, they become in Paul De Man's terminology modes of writing that "cover up" (12) the ugliness of a "defeated consciousness" (12). In other words, since the witness was, despite his presence, absent during the event, he cannot communicate to outsiders what happened using mutually intelligible language; therefore, he inevitably resorts to other modes of discourse to conceal the truth. Literature, then, becomes a site where writers retreat to find meaning in the *différends* of language (Peter Haidu 278). Here, the *différends* of language inevitably call for Lyotard's contribution to the concept of testimony under the postmodern condition of language.

Like Felman and Laub, Lyotard gives the example of gas chambers, arguing against the possibility of testifying for such an event despite the presence of an eyewitness. Much like the victim, language enters a state of silence and instability that prevents something "to be put into phrases" (Lyotard, *Differend* 3; 13). However, this state of silence, Lyotard adds, can legitimate other modes of discourse to put the ineffable into words: "What is at stake in a literature ... is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them" (*Differend* 13). While Lyotard refrains from imposing or naming these idioms of speakability, he hints at the possibility of finding them and, thus, testifying to the wrong at hand. In light of Lyotard's optimism, Chapter Four argues that the theme of

the sublime and humor – which the last chapter will explain in detail- fall within the rubric of testimony as modes of speakability that both affirm and negate the truth.

Indicative of veteran writers' inability to create meaning comes from their personal testimonials. Despite his verisimilar description of combat stress in *Naked*, Mailer acknowledged the difficulty embedded in creative writing saying: "I'm not sure it's possible to describe the experience of novel-writing authentically" (Mailer, *Pieces* 20). Similarly, in an interview with Lynn Wharton, O'Brien confessed that his writing is limited and often goes beyond his personal experiences (229); and in another interview, he hints at the theme of the sublime and its effect on readers while commenting on a passage from *Things*. In the story, he writes, "war is grotesque [and] also beauty," but, in the interview, he confessed that he does not believe that war is beautiful in any literal sense unless the reader feels so. For him, literature must include the elements of beauty amid ugliness even if the author's beliefs negate its validity. "My perception never let me see any beauty," he said. "Literature," he added, "should be looked at not for its literal truths but for its emotional qualities" (Martin Naparsteck and O'Brien 9). This confirmation indicates that the sublimity underlying his work aims not at understanding but, rather, at making readers feel the impact of the experience.

The same response comes from Powers. In an interview, he said that Bartle's "unbearable sense of awe and wonder" allows him to connect emotionally with another human being (Powers, *Birds* 237-38). When his interviewer, Lucie Jammes, asked him about the suitable manner of writing war stories, he replied, "the best way of appreciating the totality of the experience is to engage with as many forms or modes of expression that try to address the experience as possible" (3).

In addition to the theoretical framework provided by the Yale critics as well as Lyotard's postmodern view of language, Jacques Lacan's structural psychoanalysis helps

answer some of the major questions raised in this study. As a Neo-Freudian figure, Lacan turns to literature to understand trauma from a different perspective. Unlike Freud who applies his psychoanalytic approaches to literature in order to purely gain a therapeutical insight, or as Neal Bruss puts it, “to find a cure for an illness,” (64) Lacan resorts to literature to bring to light both the essence of the excitation that Freud neglects and the syndromes resulting from it.

Like Caruth and Hartman, Lacan sees literary language as a means through which the artist can represent the human condition but without the restraints imposed by the sociolinguistic order. Undeniably, certain texts favor the discourse of the social order over the individual, but, for Lacan, the best kind of literature is the one that encompasses at once “the Symbolic,” “the Imaginary,” and “the Real” (*Seminar* 279-80). This triadic approach to language allows readers to separate the text into three major discourses: the political or ideological, the psychological and the real or, in this case, the traumatic.

Lacan defines the Imaginary as that which resides in the subject’s mind formed by a set of “images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined,” the Symbolic as that which belongs to the Saussurean language, the “determining” and “elementary structures” of the subject, and the Real as that which resides in the subject’s own experience that is neither mediated by the Symbolic nor the Imaginary (*Seminar* 279-80). In Lacan’s words, the Real is “the impossible,” “that before which the imaginary faltered, that over which the symbolic stumbles, that which is refractory, resistant” (*Seminar* 280). Differently speaking, the Symbolic is “the social code” (Bruss 67) that humans learn in order to interact and transmit their experiences. The Imaginary reflects the desires that generally defy the social discourse and give voice to the characters’ yearnings and unconscious drives; and, the Real is the most rational element in that it resides neither in

the Imaginary nor fully in the Symbolic but rather in the “individual’s actual history” (Bruss 67).

From a psychoanalytical point of view, if the analysand fully communicates his history to the analyst, then the road to recovery becomes possible because the intolerable, the unpleasurable or the real is acknowledged. However, given the paralysis that, at times, hinders psychoanalysis in extracting this real from the patient, literature then intercedes to represent a complete image of the human condition by balancing between the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. “To use the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real to reveal the meaning of a work is to show how - and how well - an author has depicted human experience” (Bruss 69). Yet, except for Mailer who uses the three realms together, O’Brien and Powers represent trauma from the lenses of memory, which denies a clear manifestation of the Real order.

Another relevant figure to the understanding of trauma in relation to language comes from the French deconstructionist Maurice Blanchot. Although his approach differs from that of Lacan – mainly because the latter deals with structural analysis and the former with deconstruction – they both argue for the difficulty of locating the Real (the traumatic) in works of fiction. While for Lacan the Real is the “resistant,” (*Seminar* 280) for Blanchot it is the impossible gaze at the object of desire.

Through the myth of Orpheus’s Gaze – that this thesis will discuss in detail in Chapter Two – Blanchot argues that literary language resides in a “neuter space” (“Destroy” 114) of signification torn between speech and silence. For him, words are neither weapons, means of action nor salvation, but systems of utter confusion (*Writing* 11). Following Blanchot’s approach to aesthetic expression, Chapter Two, thus, denies any close readings of *Things* from the lenses of psychotherapy, redemption or salvation since O’Brien constructs his tale from the ruins of traumatic memories.

Before outlining the layout of the thesis chapters, some comments on the choice of the selected case studies seem necessary. Starting with *Naked*, the novel describes the first shock of the century as the author depicts mass death and mass confusion at the Pacific front using the realistic mode in its description of combat life, the modernist techniques of flashbacks and stream of consciousness to reflect the inner life of characters, and a touch of postmodern aesthetics to reveal the fragmented consciousness of the narrator. Indeed, Mailer's personal experiences in the Pacific struggle infect his fiction with traumatic knowledge carried through testimonial fallacies, as Chapter Four indicates. Selecting *Naked*, as the first case study, allows readers to understand the gradual delegitimation of language from the Second World War to the Iraq War. While Mailer's novel employs a wide range of discourses together with the traumatic, that of Powers and O'Brien do not simply because they question the legitimacy of language in their narratives.

While all the texts examined here resort to the same modes of expression, those belonging to postmodern art vary greatly in their *modus operandi* in comparison with the modern tradition. Reading Mailer, however, makes it difficult for readers to place him within the modern or the postmodern literary tradition in that all his novels "sought to confront postmodern reality without ceding to the absurdity of the postmodern novel" (Scott Duguid 5). Following Duguid's premise, I argue that Mailer is an avant-garde writer whose debut novel appeals to both modern and postmodern aesthetics; his ability to blend Lacan's triadic frame into a single book brings together these literary mediums, something that neither O'Brien nor Powers implement.

Given the fact that most critics overlook the Real order operant in Mailer's fiction, Chapter One examines immediate traumatic experiences to reveal the horrors of combat and the cost of surviving the death encounter. Indeed, the chapter shows that, despite

Mailer's adoption of the realistic mode to convey the trials of the battlefield, he, at times, fails to communicate the full picture due to the absence of adequate words that can fully communicate the struggle in play. This difficulty of representation, which haunts veteran authors despite being first-hand spectators of conflict, is what motivates the choice of the three authors, who more than any other artists, can confirm the unspeakable nature of trauma.

In a gradual move towards another American conflict, O'Brien's Vietnam War story, *Things*, carries the reader to yet another extreme event in human history narrated from the lenses of memory. Unlike Mailer's multiple narrative viewpoints, O'Brien turns solely to the Imaginary order to narrate the grim landscape of Vietnam both during and after the war. The horrors endured by the protagonist Tim O'Brien in an Infantry Division make his traumatic journey analogous to that of the novelist, as his name might suggest. In his book *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*, Heberle argues that O'Brien, the protagonist, mirrors the wounded author-narrator who hopes to transcend his wounds through words (33). By choosing *Things* as a second case study, the thesis examines another unwarranted event in the course of American history (happening after 1945), written by a veteran author who, much like Mailer, calls for other modes of speakability that may communicate the senseless atrocities both committed and witnessed at the Vietnamese front.

As such, Chapter Two argues that *Things* narrates the disillusionment of the war through the creation of new narrative illusions. By analyzing discourse, it negates any close reading of the novel from the lens of psychotherapy, as some critics argue; in fact, it shows that O'Brien's illusive art of storytelling lures readers into reading his story as a therapeutic act. The chapter ultimately reveals the void and the double-edged aspect of O'Brien's craft that corresponds to the senseless nature of the Vietnam War. Hence, in

Hartman's words, O'Brien's language, "in seeking to recapture the unique," incorporates the void ("Language" 315).

Subsequently, the senselessness of the Iraq War occupies the last novel of the present thesis. The purpose behind choosing *Birds* as a final case study stems from the fact that it also comes from the hand of a veteran author, struggling to communicate the traumas of the Arab War to his generation; also, because it exposes America's engagement in another meaningless conflict that generated large scale skepticism among the public at home. Therefore, Powers struggles, much like the previous novelists, with the difficult task of representing the unrepresentable. Told from the perspective of a first-person narrator and written in the form of nonlinear recollections, the novel reveals the struggle of the protagonist, John Bartle, as his troubled memories move between the homefront and the frontline. The narrator's inability to locate his traumatic memories in a single spatiotemporal zone affects the structure of the storyline as well as the characters' experience of time.

From a Lacanian perspective, time in *Birds* becomes Real time, that which resists being located both in form and content. Here, the Real, undoes the linear structure of the story, since the origin and the linear history of the narrator that supposedly shapes the plot through past, present, and future events no longer hold sway. There is only one moment encompassing all moments at once, in which the past, present, and future co-occur. In his examination of the characteristics of Holocaust literature, Lang notes that "[t]he movement of narrative form is sustained by the motivation of the agents who appear within it - not only for what they do in the text but for their 'prehistory,' what they have been or done at the point where the text begins" (332).

However, Berel argues, in narratives of Nazi genocide, the literary subject loses control of his prehistory, present, and future because an extreme event happens and breaks

down his narrative structure (332). The subject no longer cares about the before moment that gradually leads to the present and, then, the future. On the contrary, something happens and breaks ties with his linear history, urging him to design a new narrative pathway to his story.

Hence, Chapter Three reveals how trauma wrecks the narrative structure of *Birds*, arguing that the narrator plots his story according to his own troubled recollections. It also shows how the protagonist experiences time during and after traumatic events and how he consistently relives them in different spatiotemporal markers. Through structural analysis, the chapter reveals that Powers' fiction rejects the Newtonian or objective chronology in favor of a more subjective notion of time, which allows readers to imagine time outside the parameters of the ordinary clock.

Finally, Chapter Four examines the problems of literary testimony in the selected case studies, revealing how, despite witnessing the original event, the three veteran authors fail to adequately bear witness to the ineffable. The chapter legitimates two modes of speakability that evasively bear witness to trauma: the dialectics of the sublime and humor. Both discourses appeal to the senses rather than reason, making it possible for readers to assimilate the unnarratable. The chapter compares and contrasts these two themes in the three texts, showing how these veteran authors allow readers to feel the operative horror rather than understand its impossible meaning.

Indeed, by employing figures of speech such as euphemisms, similes, and ellipses, the three authors trick readers into believing the validity of the represented events. By placing them into a familiar atmosphere, they succeed in turning trauma into an approachable subject matter. Such devices are, in Hartman's words, "conscious or unconscious avoidance[s]" ("Language" 315) that make trauma bearable to the oblivious reader. Certainly, the three authors differ in their application of these literary avoidances

given the fact that the degree and intensity of their personal experiences and the constraints of their literary epoch dictate their writings. However, they share two things in common: the traumatic events of warfare and the abominable task of turning experience into literary testimonials.

The chapter scrutinizes the novels at a formal level to understand the complex construction of meaning. By identifying these modes of expression, the final part reveals how Mailer, O'Brien, and Powers employ the themes of humor and the sublime to articulate the ineffable, and how each of them handles euphemisms, similes, and ellipses to achieve an anti-mimetic representation of the conflict at work. Moreover, in the absence of accuracy and meaningfulness, any interpretation of the operating themes and figures of speech comes from the reader's response to the narrated experience interpreted from the author's implied meaning. As Hartman notes, "[s]urvivor's testimony," despite its flawed and self-deceptive nature, "is eminently interpretable" ("Testimony" 88). As such, despite their allegiance to silence, these texts ultimately succeed in making readers feel, at least temporarily, the shivering blow of warfare

Ultimately, the fourth and final chapter investigates these modes of testimony from the lenses of contemporary trauma theory, ancient and postmodern theorizations of the sublime – mainly in the works of Edmund Burke and Jean François Lyotard – and humor. In this investigation, the aim is, to use Langer's words, "to search for the inner principles of *incoherence* that make these testimonies accessible to us" (354). For example, through similes, the reader enters "the bizarre deathcamp landscape" (Langer 356) without feeling horror or repulsion at the unfolding words; and, through the ellipsis, the three dots alleviate the reader from the burden of unpleasant words.

Similarly, while humor overthrows the operative gloominess with laughter, the sublime lifts the reader to another dimension far removed from ordinary experiences. Yet,

despite Mailer's, O'Brien's, and Powers' ability to transport readers to a more bearable atmosphere, the chapter ultimately shows, that they can still feel the wound shaking underneath these literary evasions. As Hartman, in interpreting Adorno's introductory dictum writes: "Poetry and philosophy, even when they carry us beyond the datum, beyond a brute historical reality, remain inscribed - scarred - by it" ("Language" 316).

Chapter One

Combat Stress and the Cost of Survival in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and The Dead* (1948)

This chapter identifies the theme of combat stress and the cost of surviving the ordeals of the battlefield. In trying to identify the Real in Mailer's fiction, the chapter reveals three major combat stresses: the fear of fight, flight, and submission. The chapter starts by giving an overview of the novel along with a summary of the main events. It then presents the theoretical framework that answers issues related to combat death, killing, and military stress expanded into three separate sections. The first two sections examine the theme of death and killing undergone by two minor characters who rarely attract the attention of critics. The last section, however, deals with a major character suffering from military abuse as well as combat anxiety. In the end, the study shows the inseparable relationship between traumatic encounters and the ensuing disillusionment that most characters experience after surviving stress. On the whole, the chapter shows that Mailer's novel, despite some narrative evasions, allows for the manifestation of the Real through immediate traumatic scenes.

Mailer's *Naked* represents the atrocities of the Pacific struggle and the constant anxieties of men caught in the grips of combat stress. The book renounces the romantic lore of heroism and allows for a verisimilar representation of reality. The author rejects the possibilities of battle valor in the novel because, in their quest for survival, soldiers either encounter physical death or survive by becoming morally naked individuals. He explores the nature of this nakedness when, after each combat offensive, the infantrymen gradually lose their innocence. The war has, as well, "a naked quivering heart in it" (564-65; pt. 3, ch. 6); it drags the individual into the whirlwind of confusion and lays bare his

mind to “the shattering naked conviction that nothing mattered” (679; pt. 3, ch. 12). On top of everything, the story shows how the war denudes individuals from their former selves by turning their bodies into organisms devoid of the senses.

“They did not think of themselves as individual men any longer, they were merely envelopes of suffering” (656; pt. 3, ch. 12), Mailer remarks as he describes the endless patrol that strips the troops from their common sense and only brings misery and misfortune. Simone Weil describes this state as the power of war “to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive” (4-5); the body survives, it has a spirit, and yet, it remains merely an object. This aspect of nakedness along with death consists throughout the novel and appears to be a major concern for Mailer not only because he uses this idea in the title of the book, but also because this notion overarches the events of the story.

The plot of the novel emphasizes as well this notion of psychological nakedness through the technique of flashbacks. In “The Time Machine” section, which the author employs to inform the reader of the previous lives of his characters, he narrates the background experiences of the major characters of the novel, describing in detail their behaviors and daily practices before joining the military. For example, through the time machine section mirroring the early life of sergeant Croft, readers learn that the harsh conditions of his upbringing justify his psychopathic behavior in the military (161-69; pt. 2, ch. 5). The same applies to the other main figures. It is a psychosocial mirror that justifies their inevitable conduct in war, which is highly determined by inherent social factors.

In his book *Norman Mailer: A Critical Study*, Jean Radford explains that Mailer utilizes the device of flashbacks to grasp the non-military life of the platoon. “It explains their actions and attitudes in the army as the products of social determinants at home, suggesting that war only concentrates and reveals the forces of collective life as they

already exist in the given social organization (Radford 44).” In other words, it shows that military behavior is an extension of society by other means. These forces determine the conduct and reveal the motivation behind soldiers’ enlistment in the army. Moreover, this device offers a gateway from which to analyze character by merely mediating between the social background and action in combat. These flashbacks, as Robert Merrill notes, enrich the narrative action (17). By balancing the social pre-construction of reality against the demands of the battlefield, Mailer both supplements and justifies his narrative actions.

Through these occasional detours of the plot from peacetime to wartime, the book narrates in detail the gradual undoing of character and the gradual diminution of innocence to mere nakedness. From the platoon’s arrival to the Pacific shores full of heroic illusions to the despicable encounter with the enemy, including torture, mutilation, and death in all shapes and forms, the novel narrates the daily anxieties of men and the cost of surviving the horrors both witnessed and committed at the front.

Told from the perspective of a third-person narrator, the book discloses the theme of combat stress in its description of immediate traumatic events. The plot’s description of soldiers’ anxieties unfolded in narrative actions rather than reflected imaginatively, facilitates the assimilation of traumatic knowledge within the fiction. Despite Mailer’s tendency to obscure this knowledge by occasionally portraying the experience as “unreal,” “unbelievable,” (592; pt. 3, ch. 7) and filled with “a nameless anxiety,” (303; pt. 2, ch. 10) he, nonetheless, allows readers to gaze at the ugly business of the battlefield. He simultaneously represents the experience and, to a certain extent, laments his inability to fully render it comprehensible to an oblivious audience, a typical narrative aspect of veteran authors. Yet, whether he aims, through this linguistic reticence, to demystify meaning or to transmit the shock to an incognizant public, trauma is still locatable and ready to bear our testimony.

Like in *Naked*, the theme of combat stress figures in the literature of the Second World War to offer a more authentic representation of the conflict at hand. Postwar American writers embarked on a psychoanalytic errand to portray the status quo through fiction. For them, the second war was a fresh start that not only intrigued their imagination but also created a sense of obligation visa-vis an audience eager for a verisimilar representation. In prose fiction, most veteran authors focused on the incongruity of combat, the character's helplessness in the face of inexorable conflicts and human descent into savagery, but with an awareness of the difficulty of carrying such themes. Even though the American public could visualize life at the frontlines through movies, newspapers, and radios, the accuracy of these communicative means was debatable. For example, Adam Berinsky points out that the army was selective in its broadcasting methods in that it was "concerned with the portrayal of American troops and attempted to restrict any images that would paint the troops in a bad light" (41).

Similarly, Eric Homberger notes that veteran authors were competing against the war version provided by Hollywood because it was too romanticized (179). For one thing, movies idealized heroism and bravery while overlooking the anxieties of combat and issues related to cowardice, and for another, they glorified American foreign policy and its bestowed mission to free powerless nations from tyrannical ideologies.

Taking the case of America's favorite starring hero, John Wayne, during the 1940s, *They Were Expandable* (1945) and *Back to Bataan* (1945) are just a few examples of movies that offer the illusion of masculinity and fortitude. While the former mirrors the grand Pacific navy operations along with the decent funerals of casualties, the latter deals with the liberation of the Philippines from the Japanese Empire accomplished through the boldness of Colonel, Joseph Madden. In fact, unlike in movies, most soldiers were not only denied the right of decent burials but were also thrown into oblivion; their

bodies were either torn into pieces, drowned in the Pacific abyss or accidentally buried in the enemy's battleground. Thus, for later modernist American writers, like Mailer, films were not as sufficient and as valuable as the novel in representing the human condition at the periphery of civilization.

Some authors, much like Mailer, favor the representation of war as such rather than the philosophies shaping its conduct. As Joseph Waldemir notes, the most appealing texts are those that discuss the conflict "as a traumatic experience" along with "the development and effects of war neuroses" (20). To name but a few, Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* (1948), Leon Uris's *Battle Cry* (1953), and John Hersey's *The War Lover* (1959) genuinely describe the anxieties of the combat zone.

Set on the European front, *The Young Lions* mirrors human descent into villainy through the character of Christian Diestl who enjoys killing for the sake of victory. It depicts the weight and exhaustion of battle that Shaw describes as "deafening" (474; ch. 30) and leaves nothing but "weariness and fear" (516; ch. 31) in the combatants' faces. Yet, his famous description of battle figures in his allegory of the war, which compares the enemy to wild animals such as the "tiger," the "shark," and the "wolf" who only by combating him "we out-tiger," "out-shark," and "over-wolf" him (366; ch. 23).

Hersey's *The War Lover*, as its title suggests, shows how its protagonist, Buzz Marrow, loves the ecstasy stimulated by combat. The novel centers around the pilot, Marrow, and his co-pilot, Boman, and their journey on an American bombing base in England before the battle of D-Day. Throughout their journey, Boman discovers Marrow's excitement during bombing campaigns and the way he enjoys the sight of "bombs bursting in the air" (321; ch. 9).

Equally important, Uris's *Battle Cry* overwhelms readers with its shocking scenes of combat filled with grotesque images of "rotted bodies" and "gangrened limbs" (545;

ch. 3). Drawing upon his navy experiences in the South Pacific, Uris reproduces most of his adventures through a fictional squadron trapped in the “mortal combat” (607; ch. 7) of Guadalcanal. For Walter Hölbling, Uris is among the traditional authors who portray war as a subject that focuses on scenes of combat, the unescapable fate of characters, the trials of peril and death as well as the complex relationship between military officers and their subordinates (214).

As such, the theme of combat stress, much like in the abovementioned narratives, recurs in *Naked* to reflect the horrors both witnessed and committed at the front. In *The Spooky Art*, Mailer personally confessed that his debut novel “thrived on its scenes of combat” (22) to give the American public an idea of what the Second World War looked like. In almost every section of the book, he explains the ardor of combat life in minute details, which endows his novel with a realistic touch mixed with complex psychological themes characteristic of late modernist fiction.

Naked is divided into four sections that realistically represent the ordeals of combat and the soldiers’ anxieties in the face of inescapable perils. In “Wave” section, the reader immediately seizes the soldiers’ daily lives, insecurities, desires, and attitudes regarding combat. On shipboard, some think of the impending battles, Sergeant Julio Martinez numbs himself to the horrors happening around him (28; pt. 1, ch. 2), young Hennessey itches out of pressure, and sergeant Sam Croft enjoys the pain of others by imagining their eminent death (36; pt. 1, ch. 2). Like Buzz Marrow in *The War Lover*, Mailer employs the personage of Croft to present a notable figure of a psychopath inside the military organization who, unlike most combatants, “doesn’t have nerves” (24; pt. 1, ch. 1).

In the second part, “Argil and Mold,” where most combat takes place, the setting shifts from the waves of the sea to the mud and humus of the ground. The title of the

section suggests the beginning of exhaustive ordeals that await the platoon in a new geographic site difficult to penetrate. “No army could move or live in it,” (53; pt. 2, ch. 1) Mailer writes, as he points out an array of environmental stressors on the island of Anopopei. He describes the island as a place where everything is damp, heat licks at everything, and animals such as snakes, rats, and mosquitoes constitute a real nuisance to the platoon (53; pt. 2, ch. 1). Besides, the military institution poses another kind of stress to inferior members of the army; to use Mailer’s words, they exercise the so-called “fear ladder,” which generates power from the top down (181; pt. 2, ch. 6). Mailer reinforces this idea of a power struggle more strongly in the final section when Croft aimlessly leads the platoon to a dangerous parade towards Mount Anaka.

In “Plant and Phantom,” the mountains of Watamai Range, where Mount Anaka lays, impart for Croft a nameless desire to climb its peak regardless of the fatigue that overwhelms his squad. The sergeant’s ill-advised use of power leads them to a dangerous escalate that they cannot abandon for fear of being court-martialed. Herein, the writer shows that these power relations existing between privates and their superiors continue until the end of the campaign when Valsen, towards the end of the novel, fails to rebel against Croft’s tyranny. In Mailer’s words, Red’s “contest with Croft was finished, and he could obey orders with submission, without feeling that he must resist” (694; pt. 3, ch. 13). Such instances give *Naked* a naturalistic tone where characters are depicted as mere pawns in the military institution, in particular, and the war, in general; and, in the last section, “Wake,” this naturalistic determinism carries on when both the conflict, that moves on to the Philippines and the army triumph over the individual.

From a Lacanian perspective, the novel encompasses three orders: the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real. The Symbolic can be traced in the text’s political discourse embodied in General Cummings and his antagonist Lt. Robert Hearn. Through these

figures, there appears a conflict of ideologies between fascism and liberalism and a power morality that robs the individual of his integrity. Mailer sees a problem with twentieth-century philosophy like the decline of Marxism, the rise of capitalism and a fascination with ““Hitlerism”” (659; pt. 3, ch. 12) or totalitarian logic in American politics, in general, and the Second World War, in particular.

On the other hand, the Imaginary appears through the writer’s use of the stream of consciousness. It is that part of the narration that is neither voiced verbally nor felt externally by characters but rather reflected upon. These reflections are either antithetical to the Symbolic order or reflect the concealed urges of the self. An example includes Croft’s feelings when he first sees Mount Anaka, which attracts, taunts and inflames him with its size (449; pt. 3, ch. 1), or Hearn’s visualization of the politics of the war in which he thinks that “all the pressures, all the machines, were squeezing man a little more; with every weapon the odds became a little more out of whack. Morality against bombs” (583; pt. 3, ch. 7).

Ultimately, the Real aspect of narration appears when the author both voices the true physical condition of his characters and resists unfolding the full spectrum of experience. When describing the condition of his platoon in the Pacific jungle, Mailer writes:

Their fatigue had racked them, exploited all the fragile vaults of their bodies, the leaden apathy of their muscles. They had tasted so many times the sour acid bile of labor, had strained their overworked legs over so many hills, that at last they were feeling the anesthesia of exhaustion....The weight of their packs was crushing, but they considered them as a part of their bodies, a boulder lodged in their backs. (506; pt. 3, ch. 4)

In a text as long as *Naked*, the aforementioned orders are widely elaborated upon. They immerse the reader deep inside the condition of men caught up in a conflict as politically variant and ostensibly hostile as that of the twentieth century. For Bruss, if a text covers the three orders, it certainly communicates a “universal account of the human psyche”; and, when a writer fully communicates “the language of psychoanalysis,” it is because he was in contact with “the same fundamental issues in human life that Freud and Lacan only stated theoretically” (91).

On account of his biography, Mailer had been physically and mentally in touch with similar issues. Despite being a Harvard graduate, Hilary Mills notes, he chose to enlist as a private rather than as an officer so that he can witness combat and then write a novel about it. As a rifleman in the South Pacific, Mailer learned the “dark ways of the Philippine jungle and how it drained any desire for adventure of combat” (Mills 75-79); and, after the war, he went on writing *Naked* amidst the political turmoil that was arising between the U.S and Russia and the anxiety of another war taking place between these two ideologically different world powers (Mills 85).

Besides, his literary influences contributed greatly to the narrative construction of the novel. He inherited the literary tradition of the First World War generation like that of Earnest Hemingway and Dos Passos whose novel, *Three Soldiers* (1921), led to his borrowing of the technique of flashbacks illustrated in the “Time Machine” sections. He was also influenced by the Tolstoian writing tradition whose famous texts *War and Peace* (1867) and *Anna Karenina* (1877) significantly helped in shaping his literary consciousness. In *The Spooky Art*, Mailer revealed his fascination with Tolstoy including other writers:

The Naked and the Dead had been written out of what I could learn from reading James T. Farrell and John Dos Passos, with good doses of Thomas

Wolfe and Tolstoy, plus homeopathic tinctures from Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Melville, and Dostoyevsky.... I used to pick up Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy. I didn't read them every day, but they were on my writing desk and they were perfect for what I needed, Tolstoy particularly. The tone of *Anna Karenina* was wonderful for *The Naked and the Dead*....If I needed a tropical sunset or the smell of the jungle, I had Wolfe. For the characters, Tolstoy. (74-103)

In light of this, Mailer's personal experiences, his Harvard education and literary luggage led to the creation of a work of genius art. As a writer who had been physically and mentally dragged into the conflict, his text covers, in addition to the Imaginary, the Real due to his own experiences in the Philippines and because he placed, in Bruss words, "himself in the lineage of Hemingway" (69). As for the Symbolic, it originated from the political unrest of his time, his own ideological bias, and his reading of Tolstoy. From Hemingway, he borrowed the ardor and the trials of the battleground, and from Tolstoy the Napoleonic leadership of *War and Peace*.

The present chapter studies the theme of combat stress and the ensuing cost of survival through Mailer's representation of immediate traumatic scenes or, in Lacan's words, the Real. Although the Real links to any physical experience of the world, the chapter will solely approach extreme events happening in the external world. Since Mailer's fictional soldiers undergo moderate disorders during and shortly after an offensive, the chapter examines trauma in its short-lived form. In this context, the novel raises several questions: To what extent does Mailer represent war itself? How can the abnormality of the experience generate anxiety? How do his characters respond to stress; and, most importantly, what is the cost of surviving the Pacific War?

The present study answers these questions through both classical and modern theories related to the psychopathology of combat stress. Following Freud's original articulation of trauma, Robert Lifton, in his *Human Adaptation to Extreme Stress from the Holocaust to Vietnam*, for instance, concludes that the literature expanded on the concept of stress demonstrates that extreme stress can be used interchangeably with traumatic events because they are "different from the normal or predictable stresses of life" (58). The research also demonstrates that acute stress displaces "the total fabric of normal life with a surrealistic existence, unanchored in familiar elements of reality" (59).

In a different study on war stress, Charles Figley, David L. Albright, and Kathleen Regan Figley define combat stress or CS as the recognized necessity to act under the conditions of warfare and CSR as the desired and undesired aftermath of such conduct (60). As such, combat stress is a psychological and physiological response to traumatic situations triggered in times of war. Indeed, it can be divided into two major phases. The first phase deals with the psychological reactions triggered by a threatening stimulus, and the second phase with the psychological breakdown that either accompanies the reaction to the stimulus or comes in the form of remorse due to inaction during traumatic encounters. The latter implies that soldiers experience an emotional disruption shortly after combat, but they do not necessarily develop a long-term psychological breakdown such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Unlike PTSD, CSR subjects do not necessarily suffer long-term psychological disorders. Symptoms such as depression, paranoia, and insomnia linked to PTSD, and that need diagnosis and treatment, do not figure in CSR cases (Zahava Solomon 27). While the symptomatology of PTSD is discernible and clinically addressed, CSR is intangible and transient. Patricia Sutker et al. argue that exposure to combat stress does not necessarily lead to long-term psychic disorders. Basing their study on soldiers who

survived extreme events like the Vietnam War, the Second World War, and the Korean War without developing any psychopathological syndromes, they demonstrate that “exposure to unusual stressor or life-threatening trauma” is crucial for diagnosing PTSD, but this exposure does not necessarily lead to stress-related disorders (444). Likewise, The American Psychiatric Association calls it “a brief reactive psychosis” precipitated by a considerable stress such as combat trauma (205). The latter characterizes short-term psychotic symptoms that eventually return to “premorbid level of functioning” or the natural mental state (American Psychiatric Association 205).

In line with the literature on CSR, other studies focusing on soldiers’ background and their different attitudes during combat greatly contribute to the understanding of the theme under investigation. F.C. Bartlett stresses the importance of the soldier’s social background in determining his collapse on the battlefield. While some combatants successfully overcome certain difficulties, others fail to act accordingly. The inaction of the latter category links tightly to peacetime neuroses reexperienced in the combat zone. For Bartlett, the “fear of dark, of thunderstorms, of enclosed spaces, [and] of solitude” constitute some examples of these predisposing conditions (200). For example, when in peacetime or early childhood the soldier struggled to deal with thunderstorms or claustrophobic spaces, he very likely experiences a breakdown when these circumstances resurface in combat.

In another study of aerial war, Lieutenant Roy Grinker and Major John Spiegel affirm that soldiers possess distinct psychological processes that allow them to administer a severe reality. They identified three types of individual differences to show how they affect their performance inside the military. The first group exhibits diverse neurotic syndromes because of an intrinsic disturbance that combines their lack of security and their duty or responsibility towards the combat unit. When their inner struggle mixes with

a call to duty, this group experiences the highest percentage of breakdown or failure to cope in the combat zone.

Like the first band, the second experience early symptoms of collapse because of their fragile ego and anxiety, except for their lack of loyalty and flight from their combat unit. This group, thus, undergoes a small amount of internal conflict in comparison to the first group since their suffering hovers solely around their ego and their external reality. In the last category, however, the defect comes from the soldier's incapability to fit into group life, perform teamwork and, most importantly, succumb to military officers or authoritative rule (Grinker and Spiegel 56).

Moreover, Lazarus and Folkman show how individuals appraise and cope with stress differently. For example, under similar conditions, some people may react with rage, others with despair, and still others with denial or ignorance. They argued that by considering the mental processes that interfere between the confrontation and the response, disparities within personalities, under similar stress circumstances, become evident (22-23).

In a like manner, Eva Kahana et al. focus on human adaptation or coping with extreme traumatic events. Basing their research on the trauma of the concentration camps during the Holocaust, the study shows that common behavioral attitudes or comparable individual responses to such threatening life events were seldom pertinent in that some entered a state of "emotional numbing," others committed suicide and still others who merely hoped for survival (61; 64). In so being, combatants differ in their response to traumatic stimuli and certain inherent factors dictate their actions on the battlefield. Undeniably, most combatants fear the dreadfulness of battle, its unexpected ordeals, or the sudden deaths and injuries instilled in their bodies, yet, in the process, each fighter appraises and approaches these events differently.

Hence, the chapter will examine the theme of combat stress based on the psychoanalytical theories of CSR inaugurated in the works of Freud and Kardiner and expanded later by psychoanalysts dealing with the subject of war. Indeed, since Mailer uses the technique of flashbacks in “The Time Machine” sections, the literature dealing with soldiers’ differences based on their distinct social upbringing helps us understand why reactions differ from one character to the next.

Accordingly, General Cummings and Sergeant Croft do not figure in the following analysis simply because their peacetime psychopathic nature resists the stress of battle. Throughout the narration, they do not seem to experience any psychological breakdown, but rather enjoy the vigor of combat. Instead, they are perpetrators rather than recipients of stress. They are “ordinarily as much a part of the soldier’s external environment as the enemy itself” (Frederic Jameson 1535). As Jameson puts it, they “reenter the narrative representations of war” to act as masters over their subordinates (1537). Accordingly, I argue that their presence in the book creates a sense of uneasiness to private soldiers, which parallels that of the enemy.

The study, instead, focuses on two minor characters and one major figure: Red Valsen, Julio Martinez and lieutenant Robert Hearn. The chapter first studies Valsen’s encounter with death and the way he reacts to the abominable act of killing as both a participant and a witness. Second, it analyzes Martinez’s close-combat contest with the opponent and the way he fights for survival in his reconnaissance journey behind enemy lines; and, finally, it examines Hearn’s stress reaction to Cummings’ authority as means to show how the military institution creates, much like the enemy, conditions for stress followed by disenchantment.

1.1. “He Knew He Could be Killed”: Red Valsen’s Journey in the Theatre of Death

The dichotomy between life and death represents a crucial aspect of war narratives. Death occurs when all attempts to survive the unpleasurable fail in the face of inexorable misfortunes and life implies surviving the threshold of death with an unveiling knowledge of human vulnerability and finitude. Death is, thus, more permanent than life because it either decimates the human body by turning it into a corpse or imprints the soul with a disagreeable awareness of its inescapable finitude.

In *Naked*, this knowledge becomes naked when the narrator represents both the dead body and the naked mind following traumatic encounters. Mailer makes this representation possible through the character of Red Valsen who has seen so much battle in Motome and has witnessed the death of young Hennessey including many other men that “he no longer had any illusions about the inviolability of his own flesh” (129; pt. 2, ch. 5).

Unlike the other privates, Valsen encounters death early in life when his father dies in a mine explosion. Since then, he finds it hard to adapt to family life or any profession, and, after he enlists in the army, he cannot adjust to the military and the ordeals of the combat zone. As I have argued elsewhere, Valsen fits within the category of soldiers unable to adapt to combat duty, which tightly links to his peacetime neuroses mirrored in his “Time Machine” section (227-40; pt. 2, ch. 7).

Before the campaign of Anopopei, readers learn of his experience in Motome, and although Mailer does not present episodes from the battle of Motome, he makes it clear that some of his characters, including, Valsen, have already been fighting there and continue to do so when the story begins, and later on when it ends with the beginning of a new campaign in the Philippines. This modernist technique, where the author takes an

episode from the life of his character, focuses on the present moment, leaving the before and the after events obscure to the reader. Yet, the before moment supplements the narration in providing a picture of the existing condition of combatants and their attitude toward the upcoming events. Although, readers know that Valsen knows the horrors of combat through the before moment, each time he encounters an unpleasurable ordeal, he fails to adapt or cope with the situation.

Whenever Valsen encounters death, he either abstains from violating the body of the enemy or acknowledges his own mortality by projecting it on the corpses that he finds along the way. In one instance, he feels empathy for a Japanese soldier with a “pleasant face” (194; pt. 2, ch. 7), and the thought of him dying in a matter of seconds by Sergeant Croft’s grenade seems unreal despite the reality of the event. The enemy’s face looks so alive and pleasant that its imminent annihilation is difficult to anticipate. This final intersection of life and death seems to traumatize the living spectator more than the oblivious victim because, while the former mentally assimilates the possibility of death within life, the latter physically ceases to exist with a minimum sense of awareness.

The aforesaid coincides with what Dave Grossman and Loren Christensen call “an emotional and physical carnivore” that exhausts far more combatants than those killed during the event itself. Similarly, in his reading of *Naked*, Frank D. McConnell writes: “To be naked, then, is to be at once terribly frightened, exalted, and intimate with one’s own most intensely conscious self. And to be dead, then, truly dead, is never to have had such a moment, never to have watched the intricate style of your assurances crumble around you” (67).

As such, Valsen anxiously anticipates the death of his opponent by facing its excruciating reality. Unlike the Japanese soldier, he notices the “expression of terror” (195; pt. 2, ch. 7) on the opponent’s face when death suddenly intrudes. For a brief

moment, he forgets the animosity existing between them and sees the Japanese truly as human beings. When he goes to check their condition after Croft's explosion, he notices that one soldier turns into a "bloody mash" (195; pt. 2, ch. 7), into a body without an identity. Later on, Croft realizes that other Japanese soldiers have survived the shell explosion and purposefully asks him to "finish them off" (195; pt. 2, ch. 7) despite their powerless state. This authoritative order causes Valsen deep anxiety not only for having to hurt the enemy but also for being, himself, powerless in the face of an inhuman military organization.

While Valsen still debates whether he should obey his superior or not, he realizes that his victim is still alive. All of these irritations "added to the shock he experienced when he realized the soldier was alive" (196; pt. 2, ch. 7). If the man is motionless, the shock of finishing him off would be easier since all he has to do is shooting at a corpse, yet his very liveliness paralyzes his biological senses to act accordingly. The stress of witnessing the annihilation of the first man turning into nothingness, followed by the burden of having to finish off another victim paralyze him.

However, when he watches the soldier stand up and move toward him his "muscles worked suddenly, and he hurled his gun at the Jap. It missed, and the two soldiers continued to stare at each other" (196; pt. 2, ch. 7). The sudden movement of his muscles stems from the fear of being conquered by the enemy. It is a psychological awakening to a "signal anxiety" (Samuel Arbisser and Jorge Schneider 108) or a signal of danger. To survive, Valsen's muscles function in response to the movement of the enemy who represents a threat to his organism.

By failing to alter his situation, however, the shock continues as the two animals keep looking at each other wondering who would strike first. Yet, the opponent turns out to be the strongest animal when he takes his bayonet and takes the position of attack, but

Valsen turns and runs away (196; pt. 2, ch. 7). This flight reaction suggests an unwillingness to either protect himself or change the condition in which he is caught up (Arbiser and Schneider 178). Instead of fighting, he escapes not only because his victim represents a real danger but also because the weight of inflicting harm to his own species seems impossible to envision.

In his groundbreaking book *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman gives a similar example of the inability of soldiers to kill in battle. “Looking another human being in the eye,” Grossman notes, and deciding whether to kill him or not constitutes a crucial stressful instance of war (31). By resorting to flight as an inevitable reaction to his anxiety, the personage appears neither weak nor a coward but rather a humane character who, despite the laws of the combat zone, his virtue remains intact. In the end, Mailer assigns this unpleasurable task to his psychopathic character, Croft, for whom killing resembles a pleasurable experience, leaving Valsen as a spectator of death rather than its perpetrator.

Now, Valsen contemplates the results of his paralysis while his body recuperates its functions. Grossman compares this condition to the neurological function of the sympathetic nervous system, in which the body performs the fight-flight response, and the parasympathetic nervous system, where the body regains its normal functions following an unpleasant experience. In combat, while the sympathetic nervous system activates all possible strength for survival, the parasympathetic one recovers the body in the form of symptoms such as “stress diarrhea” and indigestion (Grossman 70). This view explains Valsen’s parasympathetic moment when he “looked at the soldier from whom he had fled, and already his face seems anonymous and small. A part of him wondered why he had not been able to meet him in the eyes. Jesus, I feel pooped, he thought” (198; pt. 2, ch. 7). The stress mobilizes both his psychological and biological functions.

On the psychological level, he feels empathy for the face that is about to turn into nothingness and broods at his inability to face his opponent. On a biological level, he feels the urge to discharge the stress through excrement. Yet, most importantly, from a narratological perspective, Mailer renders this moment possible through his verisimilar description of the scene. While the moment escapes the consciousness of the soldier whose organism falls into a state of numbness, the narrator succeeds in fully representing the mental processes triggered during this traumatic episode.

In another passage, Valsen comes across some Japanese corpses who, according to Mailer, seem more rested in death than life. Unlike, Julio Martinez who does not seem concerned about how “physical death could force a body” (217; pt. 2, ch. 7), or Woodrow Wilson’s concern for war souvenirs, Valsen contemplates the ugly face of death, fathoming on the possibility of his eventual death. “He was looking at corpse which lay almost naked on its back. It was an eloquent corpse, for there were no wounds on its body, and its hands were clenching the earth as if to ask for a last time the always futile question.... But the corpse lay there without a head, and Red ached dully as he realized the impossibility of ever seeing that man’s face ...” (221; pt. 2, ch. 7). Again, the character encounters mortality in its grotesque form. This time he comes across a decent corpse, one which might have passed away without much suffering since its anatomy remains intact.

Yet, the absence of the head torments him in that he cannot identify his identity or by any chance sees his face again. Such an instance, suggests that war not only violates the soul but also denies the identity of its subjects by forever immersing them in the abyss of forgetfulness. Before his downfall, however, the nameless corpse hopelessly interrogates the earth for a final answer to his existential crisis. Yet, his quest comes to nought, as Valsen deduces. Thus, he just lies there in a “casing of silence” (221; pt. 2, ch.

7) where the voice of existential truth will be forever silenced. This useless question preoccupies the spectator more than the corpse since his sense of orientation, which is supposed to guide his consciousness, has gone missing after witnessing mass death.

By projecting his fears and insecurities onto this anonymous body, the private goes further to fantasize about this condition with an inexpressible emotion of sorrow where:

Very deep inside himself he was thinking that this was a man who had once wanted things, and the thought of his own death was always a little unbelievable to him.... [He] was realizing with surprise and shock, as if he were looking at a corpse for the first time, that a man was really a very fragile thing.... he looked at the body and didn't look, thought of nothing, and found his mind churning with the physical knowledge of life and death and his own physical vulnerability. (221-22; pt. 2, ch. 7)

Mercer describes death in *Naked* as uncanny, revealing a return of the repressed. The corpse tightly links to ghastliness and acts as a reminder of what has been internalized to live; the subject knows his own finitude but chooses to repress this knowledge to alleviate the task of existence. "Like the dull ache provoked by the decapitated corpse on the battlefield, it is the way that the corpse's face remains hidden that inspires dread and fascination. Death is equated with the loss of identity, and for those who remain living, an inability to know what lies beyond the borders of life" (Mercer 70-71).

Mercer's psychoanalytic vision is captivating in that both dreadfulness and unknowability link to mortality. True, human beings do repress the possibility of their own demise, but the perception of death as such seems to have escaped consciousness. Uncanniness comes not from the spectacle of the scene or the "inability to know what lies beyond the borders of life," but from what lies beyond the knowable. The emotion of astonishment suggests that the moment is fresh, original, and brand new to the soldier's

consciousness; and, everything that is both dreadful and unusual to human experience is most likely to generate trauma.

From a Lacanian perspective, Valsen's original moment constitutes the Real since his confrontation with death comes from experience rather than from the Symbolic order. In his book *Freud, Psychoanalysis and Death*, Liran Rasinsky reads Lacan's notion of the Real in relation to a stress-provoking dream that contains absurd images of death. In the dream, the body aches and the "flesh is in its non-human existence" (214), a demonic picture that does not figure in the Symbolic order previously established by civilization.

In the same way, such narrative moment has a dream-like quality since, when he contemplates the corpse, Mailer describes him in a state of drunkenness anchored in the realm of fantasy. Again, the narrator makes this episode comprehensible through the stream of consciousness for he expresses what his character "could not express" (221; pt. 2, ch. 7). It has something "dreamlike about it," Hartman argues ("Traumatic" 554), and in this mission of literary representation that a writer embarks upon, there is a kind of conspiracy between "shock and dreaminess" (546). Accordingly, death as this soldier perceives it, resides in the surreal realm because he lacks a Symbolic knowledge of death. Unlike in peacetime, in wartime death can "speak for itself" (Freud, "Thoughts" 214) without the guise of cultural deceitfulness.

What Lacan sees as lacking in human experience appears as such because it was previously subordinated by the laws of the Symbolic world, yet, in combat, this lack comes into being. Trauma here is twofold. On the one hand, the scene forces Valsen to acknowledge his own finitude, and on the other hand, generates a sense of discontent with his once-held question of life and death. Since war obliterates the laws of civilization and instils a primitive state of being, Valsen here takes the role of Freud's primeval man who was enforced to accept "that one can die, too, oneself, and his whole being revolted"

against the recognition that he will nevermore leave death beyond the bounds of possibility (“Thoughts” 293-94).

Moreover, in the Freudian sense of the word, the anxiety engendered by the cadaver is neurotic rather than real. This leaves us to question by what means can a corpse trigger the emotion of fear. The body is entirely defenseless yet terribly frightening. The German phenomenologist, Martin Heidegger, best answers this question in his concept of anxiety. Practically, much like the Freudian concept of neurotic anxiety, the Heideggerian one views the thing that one fears as an entirely undefined entity. This indeterminacy ties to a world, which completely lacks in meaning; it is, as Heidegger puts it, “the world as such” that oppresses the self (231-32).

Analogous to Lacan’s concept of the Symbolic, Heidegger terms the illusionary discourse provided by civilization as the “they,” which has previously brought “self-assurance” (233) to the invulnerability of the being. For Stanley Gutman, having to cope with the fact that his being is now grounded in the physical world, and the recognition that this world will, at some point end is one of the great traumas of existence (6-7). For the first time, Valsen can envision his death, gaze at the despicable face of battle, and accept the intolerable paradox of his preconstructed knowledge of life and his experiences.

It follows, then, that the price of surviving death requires the acknowledgement of its presence, belief in the limitations of existence, and acceptance of, to use Razinsky’s expression, “the vulnerability of our bodies” (73). In Caruth’s words: “the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the ... necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one’s own life” (*Unclaimed* 62). By being aware of this dichotomy of life and death, Valsen survives with an unpleasurable knowledge of his inescapable mortality and the

potential violability of his flesh. As such, his experience amidst the theatre of death and his subsequent recognition of its inevitable demise triggers a stress reaction.

The superstition of Valsen's safety is shattered on the battlefield and his stress reaction lies in his overwhelming feeling that he is vulnerable. For Shaw, "the unmasking of the illusion of safety represents a traumatic moment" where, like Valsen, the combatant becomes cognizant of his bodily weakness (qtd. in Solomon 41). It is, as Lifton puts it, a "death imprint" instilled through images of "grotesqueness" and "absurdity" (19), best exemplified in the absence of the head. As a survivor, the image of the headless corpse, hence, imprints his mind with the fact that deadliness with all its absurdities and unconventionalities will forever alter his consciousness.

By witnessing the aberrant death of the other, Valsen acknowledges his own fragility and eventual demise. Soon after, his liquor wears off and he loathes this microcosmic world even more when he carries on his walk, "looking at the tangle of war on the left and right of the road" and comparing this reality to "the way a bunch of ants would kill each other" (222; pt. 2, ch. 7). He, now, recognizes that war and its accompanying horrors appertain to the animal world where man is both the perpetrator and the victim. Yet, despite this abominable knowledge, his incontrovertible nature and inadaptability to military life relieve him from the burden of self-condemnation.

By abstaining from perpetuating injury to enemy soldiers and renouncing the very fabric of war, Valsen represents a version of humanity unblemished by the stains of the battleground. In sharp contrast, Mailer presents us with the personage of Julio Martinez, who, under the breath of heroism, resorts to a fight rather than flight response when comparable occasions break through.

1.2. A Hero without a Medal: Julio Martinez's Quest for Honor beyond the Gaze of Society

In sharp contrast to the character of Red Valsen, the Mexican dreamer, Julio Martinez, joins the army as a private in the hope of becoming a sergeant. From the misery of his childhood in the streets of San Antonio, Martinez, like many Mexican boys, breathes “the American fables” of heroism. “If they cannot be aviators or financiers or officers, they can still be heroes” (75; pt. 2, ch. 2). In other words, Martinez cannot occupy such positions in the state due to his origins and Catholic beliefs that can never make him, as Mailer notes, a “white Protestant” (75; pt. 2, ch. 2). In Martinez’s Time Machine section, Mailer describes his humble background in the streets of Texas who against all odds refuses to settle for normal. When he exhausts the possibility of holding a position in these overrated professions, Martinez finally joins the army as a private in 1937 (70-5; pt. 2, ch. 2). By the time the Second World War broke out in the Pacific, he is assigned as a corporal under General Cummings’ infantry division. He enrolls in the army full of heroic aspirations that gradually alter as combat escalates.

Having assimilated the myth of heroism, Martinez enters combat full of expectations and loyalty to the American effort. He blindly adheres to the instructions of his superior, Sergeant Croft, without much resistance or hesitation. Unlike Valsen, who carefully thinks over the situation, Martinez obeys without second thoughts even if the order leads to dangerous missions. When the platoon penetrates the damp jungles of Anopopei, everyone nags tiresomely except Martinez whose “pride with being a sergeant was the core about which nearly all his actions and thoughts were bound” (149; pt. 2, ch. 5).

As their journey progresses, Martinez and Croft form a certain relationship based on what Mailer calls, a “fear-ladder” (181; pt. 2, ch. 6) where everyone fears the rung of

his superior and, thus, conforms to the rules of this ladder. Aware of his heroic ambitions, Croft makes Martinez an instrument that carries with compliance his sadistic intentions. He maliciously leads him to believe that his loyalty can guarantee his honor and promotion after the war.

One evening, Croft sends him to inspect the region to check whether it is possible to further penetrate Mount Anaka. Afraid of reconnoitering the region himself, he thinks “Martinez is about the best man for it” (580; pt. 3, ch. 7) because of his heroic ideals of military honor. Frightened yet determined, Martinez embarks on this operation with pride coupled with his belief of being the “best man in recon” (585; pt. 3, ch. 7). Gradually, his self-confidence starts to shake as he approaches the battle line. The sheer movement of the grass or insects signals a probable Japanese ambush.

In such operations, the stress comes from the exoticism of nature itself, from being in no man’s land where territory is neither completely his own nor that of the enemy. In Osmar White’s words, he resembles a “wild” and “amphibious” animal in which “the jungle, the heat, the ever-present menace of surprise and death brooded over” him (170). Certainly, Martinez’s mission provokes stress as he constantly broods over the possibility of imminent danger.

From a military perspective, reconnaissance operations do not present any physical threat since they require to spy on the region, locate the position of the enemy, and report the information back to headquarters. According to Grossman, the psychiatric literature of WWII shows that patrolling behind enemy lines is free from psychiatric casualties. Despite being dangerous, patrols differ from combat in that infantrymen are thrown into enemy lines with precise instructions not to fight the opponent. They simply spy and reconnoiter the area for intelligence purposes (Grossman 60-61).

In the novel, however, Martinez encounters by chance a Japanese guard whom he fights to survive, a situation that requires a close confrontation. Martinez knows he has to strike first because it is impossible to move without the other seeing him (592; pt. 3, ch. 7). At this moment, the total fabric of the war washes in his mind (591; pt. 3, ch. 7) in that under different conditions, he might touch and greet the guard peacefully. In a state of dreaminess, he unsheathes his knife, but its handle seems strange despite having used it previously to open jars or cut things. The knife now symbolizes crime since, in combat, it becomes an instrument of affliction rather than practicality.

From a psychological perspective, the knife represents one of the most traumatic acts of killing in that the executioner enters into close-combat intimacy with the victim. Unlike the famous weapons used in World War II, which involved aerial bombardments and hand grenades shot at a distance, Martinez uses a sharp-edged knife in his assassination. The closer the combatant gets to his target, the greater his suffering from the repercussions of his actions and vice versa.

As an illustration, Grossman gives the example of pilots and bombardiers who wiped out entire cities like those of Dresden and Nagasaki during the Second World War. According to his argument, such pilots despite being aware of the damage they caused, the factor of distance allowed them to discredit their emotions, or as Grossman puts it, “from a distance, I can deny your humanity, and from a distance I cannot hear your screams ...” (102). He also gives examples of weapons such as hand grenades, guns, bayonets, and knives and their implications in combat. Down the scale of this weaponry, the knife represents the most traumatic instrument due to the proximity of combatants. Grossman refers to this proximity as “killing at edged-weapons range” (120), “knife range” (129) or “an intimate brutality” (120).

Thus, in addition to the weight of the knife, Martinez's mind recurs to fantasy and his body to a state of numbness. In his description of the scene, Mailer keeps reflecting on this mind-body dissociation, in which both of his entities lose their ability to interact. "I go kill him, he commands himself, but nothing happened" (592; pt. 3, ch. 7). This moment resonates with the Cartesian concept of dualism known to philosophy as the mind-body problem.

For Descartes, the mental and the physical substances exist separately. The body performs its movements in a mechanical manner guided by the brain through the pineal gland. The mind, however, differs from the brain in its ability to think in an immaterial way. Unlike the brain, which is physically perceivable, the mind is incorporeal and can only exist through thinking best summarized in his famous saying, I think, therefore I am. Since the world humans inhabit is skeptical and based on a deceitful reality, the senses are, hence, naturally misguided. Although this theory has been later revised by neuroscientists, psychologists, and philosophers to revise some of its basic premises, his argument is relevant here because Martinez's world looks so unrealistic that his senses no longer function appropriately.

In his interpretation of Descartes' dualism, John Alison adds: "Descartes casts everyday sense perception into doubt by considering madmen or the state of someone who is dreaming... they think they have a realistic sense of their presence and activities in the room, where in actuality they are asleep in bed or confined to a psychiatric hospital (2). By projecting this Cartesian "everyday sense perception" into combat perception, Martinez enters a state of dreaminess or, as the novelist puts it, a state of "terror that he knew in his nightmare" (592; pt. 3, ch. 7).

Mercer sees Mailer's sense of unreality, rendered through the uncanniness of the environment and Japanese humanity, as driving forces enabling Martinez to "carry out

his military duty” (74). Undeniably, the strangeness of the landscape intensifies his anxiety, but this sense of unreality stems more from anticipating the act of killing followed by a dissociation of his being that, eventually, enables him to carry out his action. Martinez’s universe is real but at the same time delusionary. The soldier doubts his existence and the war, yet his body no longer cooperates with his mind. Usually, this mind-body split happens when the situation is so intolerable that the human organism metamorphoses in order to tolerate it.

David Livingston calls this emergency response that humans might have primarily developed to manage external attacks and, in combat, they take the shape of numbness, allowing soldiers to recognize their being without sensing that they occupy their body. For him, the brain turns into a “circuit breaker” shutting down sensibility to make trauma endurable (158). The crime he is about to perpetuate is so excruciating that Martinez numbs himself to alleviate this burden.

Yet, despite Martinez’s paralysis, all his senses are reduced to the sensation of the knife in his hand. It is now the only source from where all his biological strength comes:

Dumbly almost leisurely, he placed the point of his knife in the angle between the man’s throat and shoulder, and pushed it in with all his force. The Jap thrashed his arms like an unwilling animal being picked up by its master....With him went all of Martinez’s strength. He looked stupidly at him, reached down for the knife, and tried to pull it free, but his fingers were trembling. (593; pt. 3, ch. 7)

His ambivalent attitude about whether he can kill or not is followed by an ambivalence of feelings. The fact that he approaches his victim “leisurely” indicates that the experience is both excruciating and pleasurable. The intermingling of the sensation of numbness and

pleasure drives this narrative action. Without this physiological alteration, Martinez cannot possibly commit his crime.

Indeed, the crime turns the reader's attention from Martinez to the Japanese who, in the act of representation, is awarded empathy as well. In this no man's land, both characters are victims of the structure of the war regardless of their respective roles in combat. For Barry Leeds, "insofar as Martinez and the guard are men, they are men irrevocably isolated by the hostility and distrust inherent in the human condition" (42). They are as such because of the conflict in play as well as their instinctive drive for survival. Martinez kills him because, suddenly, "life and death have become merely indisputable facts" (Leeds 42).

Mailer's ability to both understand Martinez's feelings and render the opponent a human equal rather than an evil other gives the text a humanistic tone. He inherits this aspect of characterization from Tolstoy in which, the severity of action leads to compassion. As writers, Mailer noted, "we can perceive everything that is good and bad about a character but are still able to feel that the sum of us as human beings is probably a little more good than awful" (*Spooky* 22-23). By so doing, war novelists can defend themselves against the romantic representations of the war (Mailer, *Spooky* 23).

Herein, Martinez does not reflect the darkest side of humanity nor the pure sentimentalist version of the self, but rather a soul tainted with shades of gray. In *An Intimate History of Killing*, Joanna Bourke adds that anti-war literature is ambivalent because, in addition to its ability to justify the violence of battle, the opponent remains human, a personage capable of winning the reader's empathy (7). This justifies Martinez's slaughter because readers know he needs to survive especially when he exhausts all the possibilities of avoiding the unavoidable.

Simultaneously, the enemy appears as a helpless animal who, much like Martinez, forces himself into the game of battle. By the time, the slaughterer reaches down for the knife, he goes through another “circuit-breaker” (Livingston 158) between his commanding voice and trembling fingers; “and then he felt the reaction” of the blood “dripping over his palm” (593; pt. 3, ch. 7), which he tries to avoid by escaping the scene. The feeling of the enemy’s flesh along with the lukewarm of blood outflowing from the body is the most difficult moment that accompanies murder (Grossman 129). At this stage, he tastes the bitterness of his own actions as the perpetrator of his trauma. Unlike external stressors, this shock, Bonnie Green notes, “involves the individual as the agent of his or her own stressor experience, rather than a passive victim ... observing or hearing about events” (1634-38) Unlike Valsen’s contemplation of death, Martinez’s anxiety comes from within; he triggers the stress instead of receiving it from without. Thus, the blood, the revulsion, and the hysteria are conceivably the taste of his own medicines.

As the blood dries in his hands, all his aspirations of heroism and honor are reduced to the loathsome smell of murder. In his return journey, he fathoms again on the chimera of his American dream: “Martinez’s being decorated, Martinez standing before the general, Martinez’s picture in the Mexican newspaper in San Antonio” (594; pt. 3, ch. 7). Here, Mailer shows how this “montage of glory” (594; pt. 3, ch. 7) prevents Martinez from falling apart despite the trauma he just experiences. While in similar events, most soldiers break down and are taken to a military hospital for rehabilitation, Martinez internalizes his stress reaction to safeguard his peacetime ideals.

As a reaction, Grossman notes, the act of killing is accompanied by feelings of remorse, exhilaration, rationalization, or acceptance. Yet, whether the soldier renounces his act, manages it, or is devastated by it, it will nonetheless exist within him. It is an act that he has to manage for his entire life (Grossman 237). So, even though Martinez tries

to rationalize his actions through this montage of glory, his sin returns to haunt him later on.

Raymond Wilson interprets the crime scene as a step towards substituting the ideals of society for those of the army, arguing that Martinez “harnessed his energies to the army’s purposes, which in wartime are connected directly to violence; thus, only after Martinez kills his first “Jap” does the platoon accept him as one of its own.... Mailer does not depict a process that determines Martinez’s life; instead, he illustrates the context within which Martinez chose” (168). Martinez, however, “harnessed” his energies to achieve his societal ideals. As I have just demonstrated, Mailer notes that his future hope of becoming a “United States Sergeant” (594; pt. 3, ch. 7) is the force behind which his actions are driven.

Besides, except for Croft, the platoon refutes his actions instead of accepting them, as Wilson argues. Robert Hearn dies because of his conspiracy with Croft, Gallagher hates him the second he learns of his actions (638; pt. 3, ch. 10), and Valsen blames him for killing the Jap and not saying anything (692; pt. 3, ch. 13). Contrary to Wilson’s premise, his identity is still thoroughly tied to his society since, on the following day, his sin comes back in the form of shame and guilt to haunt his consciousness. Shame comes from the humiliating gaze of others in case they discover his sin. He admits his crime only to Gallagher and Polack because they are Catholics and can, in turn, understand him (637; pt. 3, ch. 10), and, guilt comes because, as a Catholic, he believes in eternal damnation unless he confesses his sin to a Pope. Yet, the absence of a nearby “chaplain” that can save him from this “mortal sin” seems unfair. He searches for a punishment that might relieve him from his culpability but he knows that it’s impossible (637; pt. 3, ch. 10).

Coming back to Radford’s premise of social determinism, Martinez’s behavior is somehow an extension of his social background. He internalizes his sin to not only save

his soul but also to sustain his position by forming a kind of conspiracy between Croft and himself. If we compare Martinez to the primal man, his act is nothing more than an attempt at self-preservation from an external predator and, thus his behavior is completely rationalized. However, the very emotion of guilt makes him, despite his heroic ideals, an anti-hero. What distances him from the epic heroes of warfare is the moral aspect that hunts him under the umbrella of society.

In his *Genealogy of Morals*, Frederick Nietzsche turns our attention to the genealogy of this conscience in his second essay “Guilt, Bad Conscience, and Related Matters”. For him, because of the establishment of society, Man has lost control over his freedom; he has internalized his free will deep inside himself and it became instinctual. It has turned into a powerful and dominating instinct, which he calls consciousness (44). In the case of Martinez, this instinct of free will finds its expression in war where he can, for the first time, suppress his consciousness and unleash his aggressive drives. Nietzsche blames society for having denied Man the ability to exercise his instinctual needs. These needs resonate with Martinez’s feelings of pleasure when he puts the knife around the Japanese’s neck, but once satisfaction fades away, his consciousness reemerges to evaluate the sin according to societal codes.

Contrary to modern texts, the oral tales of ancient Mesopotamia in the East and the Greco-Roman epics in the West tell us something else about the act of killing in ancient societies. The first literary text, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (1800 BC), for instance, speaks of how the hero, Gilgamesh, along with Enkidu decapitate Humbaba and carry his head back home as a sign of victory. Similarly, in the classical epics of *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, we learn that slaughter forms an integral part of the gladiatorial societies of ancient Greece and Rome. Yet, such narratives emanate from a world where law and

order were in their formative stage and man's deeds were neither checked by reason nor condemned by divine law.

Down the centuries, however, the rate of killing has dropped significantly as societies became more regulatory and authoritative. Together with the progress of civilization, man unconsciously learned how to sublimate his aggressive tendencies to fit within this system. Up until the outbreak of war, the regulations previously established by societies are, thus, prone to violation and the act of killing becomes once again analogous to the status quo.

Unlike classical epic poets, Mailer demonstrates how such a previously unlawful act becomes permissible under the condition of warfare. In *Naked*, Martinez, unlike the Homeric heroes, suffers from the repercussions of his deeds. While in *The Iliad*, Achilles slays Hector and drags his body all over the siege of Troy as a sign of humiliation, in *Naked* Martinez feels guilty for having killed the enemy and is unable to look him in the face, let alone humiliate his corpse. Considering this, by what virtue is Martinez different from Achilles, Gilgamesh, or the primeval man in general?

Nietzsche answers this question by comparing ancient morality with modern reasoning. In ancient Greece, the Olympian gods were pleased with the violent deeds of men, which were both heroic and entertaining. It was a world of spectacle and clarity of action where happiness found its place in dramatic celebrations (52-3). The modern world with its religious morality, on the other hand, imposes restrictions on instincts and tames the cruel tendencies of man. In this world, man "interprets these animal instincts themselves as a crime against God" (Nietzsche 74). Civilized man has grown fearful of the wrath of God, which leads to punishment and eternal damnation. This argument justifies why Martinez needs redemption or punishment as a means to relieve his consciousness from guilt. Achilles' god, from a Nietzschean perspective, relieves him

from his guilty conscious and allows him to enjoy his “psychic freedom” (75), while that of Martinez rages his wrath against him.

Thus, the psychosocial mirror that Mailer presents in the “Time Machine” section justifies the culpability of the soldier. On the one hand, Martinez inherits the illusion that he is unequipped with the same destructive tendencies that were both accredited and charged against the first man, but, on the other hand, he assimilates the romantic lore of heroism bestowed upon him. What distinguishes him from the uncivilized hero is his religious consciousness and allegiance to the codes of society.

Hence, searching for a medal of honor in a society that discredits crime and punishes immoral deeds instead of celebrating them makes Martinez an anti-hero. At the same time, being anti-heroic does not make him by any means a villain, since the very emotion of guilt points to humane characteristics. By conforming to a system that simultaneously solicits and censures violence, Martinez loses both his medal of honor and self-esteem. In opposition to Martinez, Robert Hearn’s attitude in battle represents a different view of a man torn between his allegiance to power and his self-confidence in individual integrity.

1.3. An Enemy in the Army: Robert Hearn’s Rebellion Against Military Stress

In addition to the abominable theatre of the battleground displaying scenes of mutilation and the inconspicuous presence of the exotic enemy, the army becomes, by its very nature, a war stressor abusing power and dehumanizing its group members. While the army’s purpose is to increase morale, in the novel, it demoralizes soldiers through the enforcement of totalitarian power. The latter is embodied through General Cummings who rules his microcosmic American society through a “fear-ladder” (181; pt. 2, ch. 6) where everyone fears him and conforms to his fascist-like morality. Mailer epitomizes

this morality in the General's discussion with his liberal antagonist, Lieutenant Robert Hearn. In the course of their political debate, Cummings declares that the "army functions best when you're frightened of the man above you, and contemptuous of your subordinates" (181; pt. 2, ch. 6). Surprised by his philosophy, Hearn thinks that "it's a bad sense to have men hating you" because it will only lead to a Marxist revolution rather than to a "power concentration" (182; pt. 2, ch. 6).

Unlike Cummings Hearn is compassionate, a bourgeois yet a Marxist idealist who stands up for the rights of the unfortunate. He is, to use Merrill's expression, "Mailer's liberal spokesman" (22). To a certain extent, he represents the voice of Mailer because both are Harvard graduates, but more importantly because they are anti-war advocates who place the individual at the forefront. To put his revolutionary ideas into practice, Hearn squeezes a cigarette butt in the middle of the General's neat tent as a sign of rebellion against power. When the General discovers his revolt, he throws another cigarette and orders him to pick it up. Afraid of punishment, he executes the command by submitting to Cummings' will. As a result, he transfers him to Croft's reconnaissance platoon where, according to some critics, he becomes another Cummings ruling over his subordinates.

Most critics argue that Hearn's submission points to the decline of liberalism in favor of a totalitarian spirit inside the military. Nigel Leigh, for example, sees Hearn's submission as a decrease of confidence in liberalism, and the cigarette as a symbol that threatens the achievement of future totalitarian hopes (17-18). Similarly, Stanely Gutman believes that Hearn symbolizes "the bankruptcy of the liberal position" who despite his humane morality is incapable to cope with the coercive power that threatens his ideals; by picking up the cigarette, he subordinates his valor and bravery to the offensive authoritarianism of Cummings (13).

On the other hand, Radford comments that Hearn's failure originates from discovering another Cummings or Croft in himself driven by the desire to rule men as well. Radford sees a similarity between Hearn, Croft, and Cummings in that Hearn's liberalism "fails at the practical level" when he tries to lead the platoon with a certain desire for power (11). As a result, the lieutenant does not "achieve a heroic stature" (Radford 11) because he does not maintain his liberal ideas longer.

Close to Radford view, Raymond Wilson, interprets the cigarette incident as a turning point in Hearn's identity, a transition from liberalism to a more authoritarian personality driven by new desires for power. For him, "Mailer does trace a process of character transformation through a clear, if complex, chain of cause and effect ..." (165). To adopt a new identity, Wilson notes, the character undergoes certain ordeals that free him from his previous identity. The confrontation over the cigarette butt is the cause that leads to the disintegration of his former liberal self.

The effect of this humiliation introduces a new identity fascinated by a desire to control others:

Lieutenant Hearn has resisted the pressures for identifying himself with the power-holding structure longer than any other character; but, in the positive stage of the transformational process, he will find that the opportunity to control others satisfies a deeply felt need and so compensates him for his loss of freedom within the institution's structure. (Wilson 171)

This reading of Hearn's submission presents the moment as a positive incident rather than a negative one. It shows that humiliation can free the individual from the restraints of his identity that will never, as Radford argues, be put into practice.

While the critical assumptions of Leigh, Stanely, and Radford reflect, to a certain extent, Mailer's political leanings, that of Wilson seems, somehow, misleading. In other words, the former critics voiced the Symbolic or the political discourse present within *Naked*, but that of Wilson deals with the Real encounter of Hearn in a negative light. He argues that Hearn has relinquished his liberalism in favor of a lower morality. Although relevant, these critics tend to focus more on the political voice of Cummings rather than on Hearn's feelings in the face of totalitarian tyranny. Little has been said, perhaps except in the case of Wilson's reading, about the reaction of Hearn after his humiliation.

Hence, this final section examines the cigarette incident from the psychological perspective of the individual soldier rather than his political underpinnings. Instead of focusing on the character of Cummings, who represents the political voice of the novel, the section concentrates on Hearn as the primary victim of this voice. I argue that Hearn's submission is an attempt to save rather than relinquish his honor and ideals, a normal stress response spurred by the fear of being court-martialed.

Before calling to attention the lieutenant's stress response, it is important to pause and reassess anxiety in its initial stage. Considering the moment as a mere lifting of a cigarette achieved through mechanical bodily movements, undermines the magnitude of both the mental and physical processes at work. This also, as most critics view it, dehumanizes the body by reducing it to an abstract level tied to a system rather than an organism. Accepting such views not only undermines Hearn's humanity and resistance to a system he strongly repudiates but also entails accepting the idea that he, later on, truly trades his morality by adopting that of Cummings.

By the time the General decides to throw another cigarette, he first asks Hearn some questions. Their conversation goes as follows:

If I throw this down on the floor, would you pick it up?

I think I'd tell you to go to hell.

I wonder. I've indulged you too long. You really can't believe I'm serious, can you? Suppose that you understood that if you didn't pick it up, I would court-martial you, and you might have five years in a prison stockade.

I wonder if you have the power for that?

I do. It would cause me a lot of difficulty, your court-martial would be reviewed, and after the war there might be a bit of a stink, it may even hurt me personally, but I would be upheld. I would have to be upheld. Even if you won eventually, you would be in a prison for a year or two at least while it was all being decided. (330; pt. 2, ch. 11)

The moment that precedes the execution of the command tells a great deal about the motives behind Hearn's submission. At first, the lieutenant thinks that it is a joke and tells him to go to hell. Just then, he realizes that the General is serious and has the power to court-martial him in the total absence of justice. Given the situation imposed by the war, Hearn can be imprisoned because of the lack of investigation that may prove the trivial injustice charged against him. Thus, Cummings benefits from his position as a Major General in the army and from the situation of the war itself.

After proposing such a scenario, the General redirects once again his question saying, "With this in mind, how do you think you would react?" but Hearn keeps resisting saying, it is an unjust order that aims to settle a difference between them (330; pt. 2, ch. 11). That difference goes back to their previous debate about fascism and power-relations. Irritated by his stubbornness, Cummings throws his cigarette, asking him this time to pick it up for his own sake (330; pt. 2, ch. 11). At this very instant, the lieutenant resorts, as means of survival, to what Charles Rycroft calls "psychological defences" which, unlike the biological defenses of fight and flight, save the individual's honor (74). As an

alternative to punishment, Hearn bends down and picks up the cigarette, preserving his integrity from this external threat.

Yet, much like Martinez, he picks it up with a mind-body problem, “with a sick numbed suspension of his will,” in which every organism refuses to do so (332; pt. 2, ch. 11). In military studies, this abuse is “an attempt to control all conduct by creating a state of affairs in which one overmastering fear or dread sweeps away everything else” (Bartlett 122). In Bartlett’s argument, such conduct produces extreme psychological difficulties like submitting to a dominant leader despite resenting what he does (141-143). In Hearn’s case, the fear of castigation becomes the dominant emotion in that submission turns out to be the only self-preserving response available at hand.

Later on, to avoid any future threats, he asks for a transfer to another division to preserve the last reserve of his self-esteem. In response, Cummings agrees because he no longer cares about having him around as his aide anymore. Now that he has directed his power successfully, he wishes for Hearn to leave his division (331; pt. 2, ch. 11), but he purposefully sends him to Croft’s division as an indirect punishment. Soon, Hearn returns to his tent “burning with shame and self-disgust and an impossible impotent anger” (332; pt. 2, ch. 11). Herein, Mailer shows a peculiar aspect of war as a phenomenon based on the transgression of the military code as well as individual rights. Instead of physical damage, Hearn is morally injured in that he redirects the sentiment of shame and anger inwards, leaving behind all his revolutionary principles.

Charles Figley et al., view such psychical damage as one aspect of combat stress injury resulting from physical damage like death and injury, or a psychological one like humiliation and shame. In their study, they identified “inner conflict” as damage to personal beliefs because of a “conflict between moral/ethical beliefs and current experiences” in which “shame is a by-product of this injury” (61-64). In the case of Hearn,

it is a conflict between his liberal principles and his submission to an immoral leader, because, while reassessing the scene, he lays motionless in his tent contemplating all the processes, all the things he has learned and unlearned in his life and suddenly realizes that “that was the shock, that was the thing so awful to realize” (332; pt. 2, ch. 11).

The emotion of shame here is twofold. The lieutenant is, first and foremost, ashamed of his own gaze that is directed inward, and second, from the demeaning eyes of Cummings, which pushes him to change the division as an escape from further humiliation. Indeed, the shock comes from having betrayed his long-established principles which are now falling apart like pieces in his mind. “He would have to react or die” (332; pt. 2, ch. 11), Mailer reveals, as he dives into his character’s consciousness, who after measuring the magnitude of his strength to that of Cummings, realizes the impossibility of ever doing so. As a result, he internalizes his anxiety, which later develops into neurosis and resurfaces in the form of a stress reaction once in charge of Croft’s platoon.

Moreover, the lieutenant’s shame neurosis introduces a host of symptoms as he consistently fixates on the discrepancy between experience and his undesired behavior. Symptoms like persistent feelings of shame and significant behavior change are just a few examples of shame-related disorders (Figley et al. 65). Wilson’s reading of Hearn’s incident as an event that both shatters and uncovers his fragile liberal self denies the development of such symptoms. In Wilson’s words: “the incident shatters Hearn’s previous identity, revealing its brittleness, but he does not take on a new one until the chance to control troops in combat provides a positive experience that entices him toward a new identity” (171). Undeniably, the adrenaline of combat sets in motion a generative force anchored in dominance, yet, in the process of enforcing it into action, Hearn finds himself trapped in an assemblage of emotions that are at once perverse and exemplary.

Although, as a lieutenant, he inherits the shabby business of dominance that inevitably gives any man feelings of exhilaration, by being so, he discovers a certain disjunction between the movements of his body and his thinking self. As Mailer writes, “Hearn could feel the impact of each step on the sore bruised ball of his foot, but it seemed to exist at a great distance from his body; he knew remotely that his hands were slippery on the gun” (510; pt. 3, ch. 4). Along with his squad, he does penetrate the jungle of Anopopei, but the very movement of his feet, as a leading agent in the march, coupled with the sensation of the gun in his hands disturbs him and seems completely separate from himself. He does his combat duty but does not believe in its righteousness.

This mind-body dissociation counters the view taken by some critics who see Hearn’s presence in combat as a thrilling experience that compensates for the loss of his humane characteristics. Radford believes in the intrinsic fascination with the power inherent at the practical level. For him, Hearn does not offer “a consistent humanist view of nature” and, thus, he is obliged to accept “Cummings’ view in himself” (11). Relatively, Wilson regards Hearn as a character who has “moved away from an internal state of integrity and now bases his identity in the military structure and serves the needs of the army whose aims in wartime involve violence” (172). On the contrary, he goes on to his military duties with a self-awareness of his inadaptability to the rank of leadership as well as to the exertion of violence.

To illustrate, while his subordinates resist the enemy in the murky labyrinth of death, Hearn hides behind a rock, waiting for the assault to wind down and feeling a “numb absorption,” an “unmanning fear,” and a “passionate disgust with himself” (510-11; pt. 3, ch. 4). The confluence of the sensations of fear and culpability, from taking cover behind a rock while the life of his crew is at stake, hence reasserts his lingering tolerance and refutes his resemblance to Cummings or even Croft.

Instead of adopting a new identity, Hearn keeps fixating on his humiliation as combat escalates. Why this fear? he asks himself, thinking over and over again of his contest with Cummings (511; pt. 3, ch. 4). At this moment, he experiences a double-traumatic effect or a collision of binary stressful events, one happening in memory and the other in the physical world. The cigarette event of the past meets the fear of injury in the present, producing a kind of embarrassment in which the process of internalization resurfaces again when another trauma breaks through. The answer to the question Mailer poses regarding fear reads as anxiety intensified by an unpleasant memory of the past Hearn is unable to shake and so keeps fixating upon.

In another incident, this syndrome revisits him, assuming the form of revenge. Hearn discovers a need to retaliate to soothe his internalized psychic injury when he asks Croft to apologize to Roth for having killed an innocent bird. He feels like repeating the same thing Cummings did to him and imagines the resentment Croft feels for having to apologize to a noncom. "He had some idea of how he had provoked Croft, and was amused by it faintly. Except that ... Cummings had probably felt the same way when he had obeyed the order to pick up the cigarette butt. Abruptly, Hearn was disgusted with himself" (532-33; pt. 3, ch. 5; ellipsis in orig.). Again, the memory of Cummings hunts him when similar occasions breakthrough.

This emotional upheaval resonates with Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or *Après-Coup* in which two chronologically distinct events, one in the past and the other in the present, converge to create a psychic trauma (Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis 111). In revisiting *Nachträglichkeit*, Luis Kancyer sees this trauma as "a narcissistic mortification" whose "surviving effects" turn into resentments (117). The ego splits between a humiliating memory of the past that continues in the present and can carry on to the future unless the subject retaliates. The subject "has an urgent need to feel

vindicated, as he believes he has suffered an affront that deserves punishment [and] the experience of time sustained by the power of rancour is the constant brooding over an affront that never ends, an expression of insurmountable grief' (Kancyper 117).

This shame neurosis hunts Hearn throughout the narration not only under the context of another traumatization but also as a stress reaction that takes the form of vengeance. He constantly seeks to regain, as Kancyper puts it, his "self-esteem" and "the cohesion" of his ego (118) under similar conditions. Croft becomes the object of his retaliation, but unlike critics' reading of the scene, Hearn regrets his actions shortly after, since the very sentiment of self-disgust distances him from Cummings. The faint pleasure of having, to some extent, carried out his revenge, can be read not only as an attempt to reassert his identity, but also that of Roth whom Croft humiliates. By initiating this legal action, he defends a fundamental human right from being violated again by an immoral sergeant and restores the broken pieces of his self-worth. No matter how hard the battlefield drives him to such atavistic urges for violence and dominance, he ultimately resists these temptations; and even if, at times, he enjoys the ardor of leadership, he does not direct these emotions outward.

Ultimately, shortly before his unanticipated death, he lays in his tent thinking about the morality of the army and the place of the individual in it. As his consciousness keeps brooding over the nature of the war and morality, Mailer ultimately discloses his enduring liberal vision and hope for a better world:

It was skinny enough hope, and all the pressures, all the machines were squeezing men a little more; with every weapon the odds became a little more out of whack. Morality against bombs....For whatever reason you had to keep resisting. You had to do things like giving up a commission....Still, when he got back he would do that little thing. If he

looked for the reasons they were probably lousy, but it was even lousier to lead men for obviously bad motives. It meant leaving the platoon to Croft.

But if he stayed he would become another Croft. (583-4; pt. 3, ch. 7)

Although Hearn sees men as helpless pawns squeezed by the machine, he believes in their integrity and their capacity for resistance.

After untangling the complex knots of army duty, he decides to give up his commission in order to safeguard his honor. By being unable to adapt to the conditions of the battleground, he chooses to leave the platoon to Croft rather than become his counterpart. For Gutman, Hearn does not use “power to combat power,” but instead “leaves all social power in the hands of those who less humane than he, relish it” to dominate others (14-5). The uneasiness behind leaving the platoon suggests his concern for the other privates who will have to suffer under Croft’s tyranny rather than from his preoccupation with the rank of leadership.

Under his authority, Croft backs up from directing power towards his subordinates as he constantly supervises his actions; and the night Martinez goes to patrol the pass, he orders Croft to lead men back to safety if Martinez sees any Japanese in the jungle. Afraid of ambushes, he tells Croft: “I’m not going to take the platoon through the pass after what happened today” (580; pt. 3, ch. 7); he knows his infantrymen cannot climb Mount Anaka. Unfortunately, because of Croft’s conspiracy with Martinez regarding the intelligence operation, Hearn dies from a sudden bullet and Croft regains control of the troops. After his death, Croft feels a deep satisfaction from being relieved from his orders (601; pt. 3, ch. 8). The commanding voice of Hearn has died out, allowing him to extend his power freely over his inferiors.

Hearn’s unforeseeable death shocks not only the platoon but also readers who have to acknowledge the fact that his character is too good to adapt to the atmosphere of

combat or win against the boisterous noise of Cummings and Croft. In his 1963 interview with Stephen Marcus, Mailer admits that Hearn's downfall was meant to be "shocking" because only by "killing" him he can "show what death is like in war" (*Spooky* 94). That no matter how hard he fights for his dignity, the forces of evil will always conspire against him. It does not, however, suggest the collapse of liberalism, as some critics view it, but instead the inability of such a philosophy to withstand cruelty.

For Wilson, readers' grief over Hearn's demise stems from an inclination to see him as an "uncompromised" character throughout the narration whose death can be seen as a result of his collaboration with the system rather than from his nonconformity (172-3). Nevertheless, the melancholy of readers emanates from the loss of the only uncompromised character whose death is a result of the conspiracy of the system rather than his collaboration with it. Or as Frank McConnell puts it, Croft and Cummings' "unwitting conspiracy with each other murders the one man who, more than anyone else in *The Naked and the Dead*, refuses the seductions of power" (77).

Hence, combat stress engenders both a physically and a mentally exhaustive experience, in which the physical world deeply affects the mental apparatus. Valsen sees the grotesqueness of death and is forever imprinted with the knowledge of his own vulnerability, Martinez forms an intimate relationship with the guard through aggression and is devoured by the sensation of guilt, and Hearn becomes the victim of a power conspiracy that lays beyond his control. Mailer imparts to readers a mental picture of what the war feels like without being active participants. Through his characters' anticipation of the unknown and a continuous ordeal filled with absurdity and distorted scenery, he reveals to the American public the true face of battle. The former entails being mentally prepared to face unexpected threats or consistently imagining the unforeseeable such as

a sudden shell explosion or a physical injury. The latter, however, deals with the perception of disfigured bodies or the killing of enemy soldiers.

Besides the theatre of war, Mailer mirrors the variegated nature of human beings once trapped in the whirlwind of confusion. Even though his fictional platoon instinctively shares universal characteristics such as fear, aggression, and self-preservation, some distinguishing factors originate due to their distinct social upbringings including other inherent aspects. In the *Time Machine* collection, we see that his characters' behaviors highly connect to their social upbringing. Martinez's actions are fueled by the American fables of heroism, Valsen's failure to adapt to army duty is analogous to his previous inadaptability to any profession whatsoever, and Hearn's aristocratic upbringing leads him to a fascination with Marxism and its revolutionary spirit. Yet, whether they resort to fight, flight, or submission as a means of survival, all of them experience a temporary stress reaction manifest in feelings of vulnerability, guilt, and shame.

In a novel as thematically diverse as *Naked*, Mailer exposes twentieth-century politics, the ambience of combat, and the suffering of men in the gyre of war. He targets an audience capable of working through his fiction from three thematic angles of criticism. Although the themes of fascism, communism, or America's foreign policy can be easily identifiable, his fictional conflict is best understood when it is freed from the political outlook and concentrates our attention on the absurdities of the battleship.

Mailer speaks to an audience oblivious to such unconventionality and eagerly assimilates such abnormal realities through the art of his fiction. Although his literary language does, at times, obscure the meaning of the narrative action, he aims to perplex his characters and readers alike. The sole difference lies in the ability of readers to look

through the unreal and turn it into a real image, one that momentarily escapes the consciousness of his characters. This paradoxical use of language, which directs our attention to the presence of the Real in the act of reading but at the same time unreal in the fictional world, gives *Naked* a traumatic tone.

Chapter Two

“All the Illusions Gone”: A Shattered World Vision in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990)

Most of this I’ve told before, or at least hinted at, but what I have never told is the full truth.

—O’Brien, *Things*

May words cease to be arms; means of action, means of salvation. Let us count, rather, on disarray.

—Blanchot, *Writing*

In chapter one, I argued that *Naked* inscribes trauma through Real representations of events rather than through Imaginary ones. Despite his characters’ short-term numbness, Mailer’s theme of combat stress and survival makes the wound somewhat visible, and the memory of his characters momentarily inaccessible. Likewise, I concluded that physical trauma results in the undoing of character, disenchantment, and moral injury, which are all considered prerequisites for corporeal survival. In this chapter, however, I examine these traumatic remnants in Tim O’Brien’s *Things*.

In *Things* novel, the theme of disillusionment, as the condition *sine qua non* for survival, occupies a central place in the internal worldview of the story as well as for the narrator, Tim O’Brien. While Mailer describes pain through immediate narrative actions, O’Brien engraves them through gaps of memory, blurring the boundaries between Real and Imaginary incidents. The chapter starts by presenting the novel along with key theories that shape the course of this investigation. Divided into three sections that tackle issues related to speech and silence, sameness and otherness, and illusion-making, the chapter ultimately reveals the doubleness of meaning operant in O’Brien’s fiction.

Unlike *Naked Things* circles around distorted recollections of time past, present, and future:

[T]he thing about remembering is that you don't forget. You take your material where you find it, which is in your life, at the intersection of past and present. The memory traffic feeds into a rotary up on your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a thousand different streets ... (35-36; ch. 3).

The narrator's memories revolve around his childhood history, the Vietnam War, and the post-war climate, leading to the construction of a circular plot. This circular pattern calls into question the significance of truth and the validity of knowledge communicated in the text.

Things assembles a collection of short stories structured together to form the whole narration. Despite their time-lapse interval, each section relates to another through recollections central to the fragmented meaning of the whole narration. In "Notes," for example, Norman Bowker commits suicide following the war, a tragedy whose meaning goes back to a previous story, "Speaking of Courage," wherein the reader relates the suicide event with the tragic death of Kiowa. Similarly, O'Brien's inability to accept the death of Linda, Kiowa, and Norman Bowker leads to the creation of the illusion of aliveness in "The Lives of The Dead," an illusory constructed story where the dramas of the previous anecdotes are seemingly redeemed through the combination of both storytelling and illusion-making. Thus, it is through this circularity, constructed around loss, that the novel acquires its full meaning.

The initial story, "The Things They Carried," carries the reader into the aura of the combat zone where men carry both the moral and physical weight of Vietnam. Apart

from nutrition and ammunition, soldiers carry the psychological luggage of the land with all its “ambiguities,” “Grief,” “terror,” and “dishonor” all through the veil of fortitude (15; 19; ch. 1). There is no room for mourning or complaint in the story because the world men inhabit is devoid of logic, a shattered world that neither questions nor anticipate answers, but rather unfolds *things* to the reader. Like the mask of fortitude (worn by soldiers) language constructs metaphors and symbols to conceal certain truths; however, through this veil, it strives to represent the nothingness of the world it inhabits.

For Blanchot, language as such emanates from the ruins or from the death of the object it hopelessly tries to define (*Disaster* 34). It is a faulty language that inadequately names signs after being wrecked. However, this wreckage embodies a great force in that “what dies is what gives life to speech,” and, therefore, speech is born after death (Blanchot, “Literature” 327). In *Things*, the loss of civilizational values, human virtues, and being at the heart of the self are all linked to this death, substituting the being for the becoming. In his speech, the narrator seems preoccupied with an existential crisis, yet his aim is neither to redeem the past nor reclaim it for a reconstructed future, but rather to embrace it as such.

From this perspective, *Things* says, in Blanchot’s words, “I no longer represent, I am, I do not signify, I present” (“Literature” 328). Since beliefs have fallen between the cracks of warfare, signification in *Things* is both an unattainable and a futile enterprise. Thus, what remains from this fruitless pursuit are the fragments of history, “an anonymous survival as part of a dead culture” (Blanchot, “Literature” 336) and death at the very center of existence.

Almost every story within the whole collection infers a certain discontent surrounding culture, society, the self, and the entire world. “On the Rainy River,” for example, reveals the ambiguities hovering around Vietnam, American policies, and the

stigma arising from participating in an unjust war. When the “old logic” (17; ch. 1) no longer binds, the myths of democracy and the ideals of humanity shatter. For O’Brien, there is a sickness within the universe, death despite liveliness, evil feigning morality, and an otherness weighting its heavy force over the self. O’Brien recognizes the unethicity of actions and the unfamiliarity of experience, yet an omnipotent, other force weighs its power over him, be it the state, the law, or the unknown. It’s “the burden of being alive,” (17; ch. 1) the “out-of-the-skin awareness,” (82; ch. 7) the “faceless grief,” and “the faceless responsibility” (191; ch. 18) of telling the truth from the ashes of destruction that seem to occupy the entire narration.

Reading *Things* from this perspective reveals the emptiness inherent to this internal worldview, it gives readers countless possibilities of interpreting, in Blanchot’s words, “the disaster” (*Disaster* 1) without assigning a single authoritative meaning to the text. Due to the circularity of the plot as well as the imaginary inscription of trauma, O’Brien’s sickness, in particular, and his world, in general, do not redeem the loss or the meaning at work. Meaning, in his book, instead, rests on destruction. Considering this, can the art of storytelling eliminate the wound? How does O’Brien communicate truth through a circular plot filled with memory gaps? By and large, is it possible to place the whole narrative within the parameters of a single signification?

Two major literary theorists are necessary for the present investigation: Sarah Kofman and Maurice Blanchot. Both figures argue that literature covers the ugliness of the world it describes under the mask of beauty, figurative language, or mythologies. As deconstructionists, both resort to ancient Greek myths to uncover the doubleness of meaning inherent in literary language.

In her examination of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sarah Kofman’s “The Imposture of Beauty” offers a double reading of art embedded in the image of

Dionysus and Apollo. Therein, she equates aesthetic expression with illusions in that the latter protects the ego from the hideous face of reality, acting as “Apollonian” masks in the face of “Dionysian” truths (33). Art, in this respect, acquires a curative force by making reality bearable and preventing the self from dying of truthfulness (Kofman 41).

Reading her essay, Pleshette DeArmitt notes that, for Kofman, the figures of Dionysus and Apollo function as “doubles” rather than as opposing forces; instead of confronting each other they are engaged in a “conjuring game” (26-7). In other words, both figures work with and against each other to present as well as to conceal the truth.

Since Dionysus (ugly truth) is hard to bear, he veils himself under the guise of Apollo (beautiful lie) who, in turn, acquires a double image: the Apollonian and the Dionysian (DeArmitt 27). This double effect has a “pharmaceutical” function that endows art with a “double nature,” “double reading,” and a “double affirmation” (De Armitt 28-9).

Similarly, in *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot conveys a traumatic knowledge articulated in the chapter of “Orpheus’s Gaze”. Within his theorization of literature, he turns to Greek mythology as a means to define art from the lenses of melancholic lyric songs. According to the myth, Orpheus is a skilled lyric poet whose wife, Eurydice, dies too soon and is, henceforth, condemned to live in the kingdom of Hades. Unable to accept her premature death, Orpheus descends to the underworld, asking Hades -the god of death- to bring Eurydice back to the light of day. Hypnotized by his lyric songs, Hades agrees to let Eurydice’s spirit follow Orpheus up the hill of the netherworld provided that he climbs without looking back. Eager to see his beloved, Orpheus turns back to gaze at her shadow, defying Hades’ precondition of resurrection, and, thus, loses her forever. Out of agony, Orpheus composes countless elegies, making her memory immortal to the world of mortals (Ted-Ed).

For Blanchot, the death of Eurydice is equated with the birth of art as such in that his gaze constitutes the birth of art. “He loses Eurydice because he desires her beyond the measured limits of the song, and he loses himself, but this desire, and Eurydice lost, and Orpheus dispersed are necessary to the song, just as the ordeal of eternal inertia is necessary to the work” (*Space* 172). The shadowy aspect of Eurydice is as necessary for Orpheus as it is for the work of art to appear as such. The trauma of her loss is reinscribed in his elegies, creating binary oppositions between looking and not looking, between day and night, and between presence and non-presence.

Michael Newman calls these binary oppositions “the duplicity of vision” in which the eye simultaneously wishes to gaze and not to gaze at what is hidden in the manifest. Reading the myth of Orpheus within trauma, Newman situates Blanchot alongside Lacan’s notion of the gaze as well as the Real (157-166). The gaze represents the Real in as much as it is an event that is at once real and unreal (traumatic) to the eye. Besides, just as the Real is located in the visible yet invisible moment, the Symbolic is situated in the desire to disobey the law (Hades) that prohibits perception at the heart of vision.

Comparable to the Real/Symbolic order, Lacan’s “voyeur” is similar to Orpheus in that the object of perception strikes his eyes with an unknown shadowy force; however, the drive behind the seeing aims to catch a certain “*jouissance*” of the other (*Seminar* 182-3). Since the Symbolic conceals the Real image of the shadow, the eye vainly strives to unveil its inconceivable reality. Lacan’s notion of “voyeurism” (*Seminar* 182), as well as the Real, equals Blanchot’s myth of Orpheus in that both convey a traumatic discourse.

The final story of *Things*, “The Lives of the Dead,” is constructed around Kofman’s and Blanchot’s myths in that the intolerable, the unseeable, and the unacceptable become tolerable. O’Brien’s inability to gaze at Linda, Curt Lemon, or Ted Lavender in their deformed state of being becomes possible through the use of metaphorical language

(Apollo) or illusion-making, offering momentary relief to the narrator or some sort of “self-hypnosis” (252; ch. 22). “We kept the dead alive with stories....[o]ften they were exaggerated, or blatant lies, but it was a way of bringing body and soul back together or a way of making new bodies for the souls to inhabit ...” (248; ch. 22). In O’Brien’s constructed lies, Linda has no brain tumors, Ted Lavender can smile and say things, and Curt Lemon is still alive somewhere in the jungle (249; ch. 22).

Through the veil of Apollo, thus, O’Brien alleviates the pain of death and simultaneously represses the unbearable fact of his own finitude, persistently lurking in his imagination. This repression is immanent to aesthetic expression and seems to be winning over the undesirable, but at the same time keeps haunting it (DeArmitt 30). Torn between two extremes, “The Lives of The Dead,” both affirms and negates death and life, healing and sickness, illusion and disillusion, as well as bereavement and the impossibility of mourning.

Another significant concept by Blanchot, as to the doubleness of meaning and incurability in *Things* appears in his work “Destroy,” a sub-section from his book *Friendship*. Therein, he locates language within the destructive remains of a disintegrating world where a “neuter speech” transmits a “neuter desire” (113). In this speech, knowledge neither redeems meaning nor calls for possible actions, things are not real yet not completely illusory, and the present is not sustained by either the past or the future (Blanchot, “Destroy” 113-14). This none space finds its ultimate expression when sudden changes occur within a society, leading to malignant, incurable helplessness (Blanchot, “Destroy” 114) that can only be manifest in language. For Blanchot, the neuter is what constitutes literature, forming the condition *sine qua non* for it to exist as such. For Rodolphe Gasché, “the nullity of literature has in fact allowed literature to appear, ...

as the question of its own possibility ...” (35). It uncovers, as well, its vanity, vagueness and impurity, accusing itself of deceitfulness as well as illegitimacy.

In *Things*, O’Brien ceaselessly invalidates the truth behind war stories:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. (72; ch. 7)

Originating from the ruins, *Things* then denies the possibility of absolute meaning despite its ceaseless attempt to represent its internal destructive worldview. As an art of destruction, it asserts that the things it describes are unrepresentable because the narrative viewpoint is devoid of signification. It is neither nihilistic nor constructive, but somewhere in-between; it does not protest, complain, or anticipate explanations, but instead names things the way they are unfolding to the eye of the beholder.

Thus, *Things* exists, in the neuter realm of representation torn between the need of telling and the impossibility of telling any truth whatsoever. Therefore, O’Brien’s novel annuls meaning despite representation. Since disillusionment nullifies pre-constructed illusions, any attempt at reconstructing meaning out of this nullity seems faulty. It writes things outside language, conveying nothing else but the “end of knowledge” and the “end of myths” (Blanchot, *Writing* 47). Yet, this finality forms meaning by itself. Like Blanchot’s introductory statement, O’Brien’s words are neither weapons nor actionable instruments intended to rebel against an existing status quo, but signs naming the chaos at work.

Hence, this chapter examines the fragmentary nature of this language and how its meaning covers the emptiness of disenchantment under the fabrication of illusions. It demonstrates that the non-space the novel occupies blurs the boundaries between reality and imagination, affirmation and negation, truth and deception, and hope and despair articulated through linguistic tropes.

The chapter discusses three elements: (1) the turbulent relationship between sameness and otherness as well as between world and consciousness, (2) the unspeakable nature of trauma torn between speech and silence and (3) the illusions of salvation and recovery through storytelling. The overall aim correlates trauma with silence, inaccurate speech, illusions and sickness all carried through an absent language. Since the name Tim O'Brien refers back to the author of the fiction, Tim, the character and O'Brien, the narrator, the chapter will use the name Tim O'Brien to refer to the narrator, Tim to speak of the character and O'Brien to point to the writer of the novel.

2.1. "A Moral Split" between Sameness and Otherness

The equivocality of meaning in *Things* reveals the conflicting relationship existing between the self and the other. Just as language resides in the otherness of speech, the self exists beyond itself. The state metamorphoses into an omnipotent *other* that confines the soul to a foreign body, one that consistently weighs its heavy force over it. Characters appear to suffer from a "moral split" (45; ch. 4) that stems from the disunity of "purpose" and issues surrounding "philosophy," "history," and "law" (42; ch. 4). Yet, despite this psychological dilemma, they knowingly succumb to power by acting both as active participants and as passive opponents to the system.

Resistance becomes passive when words no longer lead to action but, rather, name the void. For the narrator, war may either mean death, life, or chaos. Things are no longer defined in etymological terms be it the war, the state, or the law, making it impossible for

the self to name the unnamable. In the story, this rupture is twofold: it reveals the disenchantment of characters, namely Tim, from their history and from the world they unwillingly occupy.

At the beginning of the novel, characters seem to carry the emotional load of Vietnam as well as that of America. The antagonistic nature of these widely differing nations reflects the psychological burden of soldiers inhabiting these distinct hemispheres. As circumstances change, each nation acquires a new definition that greatly diverges from its established geographical connotation. While Vietnam signifies “the waste,” (159; ch. 15) “terror,” (19; ch. 1) and “pleasure,” (17; ch. 1) America means “cemeteries,” (20; ch. 1) “machine shops,” and “vast fields” (15; ch. 1). Simultaneously, while abstract things such as the place and the air have tangible connotations, portable objects like armory and nutrition do not.

Unlike in geographical terms the burden of Vietnam, despite being intangible, has its gravity, converting it into a concrete burden. In the story “The Things They Carried,” the intangible-tangible things are the “shameful memories,” the “secret of cowardice,” and the “blush of dishonor” (19; ch. 1) rather than the grenades, the “tranquillizers” and the “rations” (4; ch. 1). In American terms, these dichotomies reflect the weapons constructed in “machine shops” and the ideals of honor and bravery. America’s construction of weapons together with its romanticized mission in Vietnam serve as major forces weighing upon consciousness.

Thus, each territory has a distinctive charge that eventually separates consciousness from the actual world. In this sense, the other resembles a Hydra – a Greek monster – whose multifaceted heads encumber the self. In sharp contrast to this monster, soldiers dream of a freedom bird whose wings and feathers fly above the sky, to a place where the weights fall off and there is “nothing to bear,” except the “restful unencumbered

sensation” (20; ch. 1) of relief. They imagine themselves “spinning off the edge of the earth and beyond the sun and through the vast, silent vacuum where there [are] no burdens and where everything [weighs] exactly nothing ...” (20; ch. 1). In a circular motion, “the edge of the earth,” the “beyond,” and “the vacuum” not only suggest an impossible transcendence of the immediate but also the helpless desire to ever find such a place. Spinning around the void, soldiers, thus, search for a place “bereft of a center” (Blanchot, *Writing* 2). Later on, this possible/impossible flight constitutes Tim’s double-bind regarding his non-consensual obedience to the system as well as his conspiracy with it.

The call of duty constitutes a different load for the twenty-one years Tim drafted to join a politically and morally unjustified war. When he first receives an invitation to join the war effort, he wishes to escape to Canada, leaving his family, friends, homeland, and entire history behind. “On the Rainy River” begins with an embarrassing revelation regarding the groundless aims of the war and the relentless desire to flee American soil, and ends with his shameful participation in the war. America’s moral and political foundations preoccupy the narrator more than the soldierly act itself because he believes there must be reasonable justifications - such as fighting a Hitler-like figure- when a country attacks another territory (41-45; ch. 4).

Yet, the American-Vietnamese conflict seems unwarranted and practically unnecessary, merely grounded on the empty illusions of democracy and freedom. By balancing the ideals of his upbringing against the conduct of the war, Tim paralyzes and imagines “the whole world squeezing in tight” (44; ch. 4). Again, the intangible weight of America against his moral values come crushing down on him. Unable to digest this fact, he thinks of escaping to Canada where he can finally be absolved of this moral dilemma; then, he imagines his family, his homeland, and the law holding him accountable for deserting his duty (45; ch. 4).

In a moral dilemma, the emotions of rage, horror, shame, sorrow, and confusion become some sort of a disease, a catch-22 situation where every decision leads to an unhappy ending. Then, he thinks of the possibility of dying at the service of a nation that sacrifices bodies to achieve its flimsy ends. In Blanchotian terms, this action unmask or lays bare the idiosyncratic face of a civilization whose service leads to death and whose omnipotent laws are illusions, “monsters,” and “fascinations” rather than humanistic hopes (*Writing* 81; 143-44). Tim’s emotions are as such because he sees that the war lacks disunity and disagreement on issues surrounding “philosophy,” “history,” or “law” (42; ch. 4). He perceives the inauthenticity of a civilization that substitutes things at the service of its interests and accepts decadent ideals to work out things (Immanuel Levinas 70). Accordingly, the emotions of “sorrow,” “guilt,” and “outrage” (46; ch. 4) have a double connotation. On the surface level, he rages against US policies and grieves the loss of their values. On a deep level, these emotions reveal his embarrassment for being unable to escape these very principles.

Farrell sees his embarrassment and guilt as an act of “confession” directed both towards his country and himself, so that the “wrongs committed” are mutually shared (198). On the one hand, Farrell’s argument does justice to O’Brien’s double accusation, yet, on the other hand, acknowledging the “wrongs committed” by these two parties requires an act of confession on both sides. Given Tim’s passive accusations, however, evil remains unresolved in that his community cannot recognize these injustices (Farrell 198). As long as he buries his language under the veil of his other self, he will never translate his anxiety to his community or reach a consensual agreement. Thus, O’Brien embodies the law for his inability to escape his ideals (his family and history) and passively defies the foundations that make up his community.

Since “On the Rainy Rivers” is a confessional story originating from memory, the protagonist’s embarrassment is not only directed toward civilization but also himself as an active participant in it. His initial affirmation that the story is a “confession” through which he will “admit” the “secret hero” (41; ch. 4) within himself is in itself a negation of truth. How can he confess the ugly truth behind a civilization whose deeds he helps to maintain? Any attempt to reveal the truth contains a level of secrecy that cannot be communicated. Meaning is blocked once the truth reaches the horrible deeds committed by the speaking subject at the service of the law. Tim cannot expose the brutality of an absolute order whose actions will, as well, expose his shameful deeds.

This echoes Freud’s writing on the war in which two types of illusions are shattered. The first is “the low morality shown externally by states which in their internal relations pose as the guardians of moral standards”, and the second is “the brutality shown by individuals ... as participants in the highest human civilization (“Thoughts” 280). While the twenty-one years old Tim believes in the goodness of his character when he says: “I was too good for this war. Too smart, too compassionate ... I was above it,” (43; ch. 4) the forty-three years old narrator does not because, eventually, he submits to the law, joins the war effort, and kills the enemy. In so being, he loses the illusions surrounding American policies as well as his innocent self.

Moreover, “The Ghost Soldiers” demonstrates the means whereby language veils the horrors of civilization. More importantly, it shows the inseparable link between trauma and subjective estrangement. While “On the Rainy River” reveals the soldier’s disillusionment with the state, “The Ghost Soldiers” unravels the reasons behind personal disenchantment. This character split happens when Tim gets shot and the medic, Bobby Jorgenson, takes approximately ten minutes to go check on the status of his wound, thus, adding up to the severity of his shock (212; ch. 20). This incident triggers an evil attitude

in that, following his recovery, Tim dreams of launching a revengeful campaign against Jorgenson. In the meantime, the medic apologizes and seeks forgiveness for his sluggish reaction. Yet, unable to forgive him, Tim realizes that the event has changed him in so many ways, he is no longer the “quiet,” “thoughtful” person who once believed the morals of civilization: “I’d turned mean inside. Even a little cruel at times. For all my education, all my fine liberal values,” I now feel cold and dark inside (212; ch. 20). Despite the difficulty of admitting this to himself, he knows that he turns into a cruel person by wanting to harm Jorgenson in exactly the same way.

He imagines himself along with Azar throwing ten flares at Jorgenson’s bunker for ten minutes, a duration similar to the wound incident. Then, the operation plays in his mind like a movie scene where he can act like “Audie Murphy,” “Gary Cooper,” and “Cisco Kid,” American heroes of decent human behavior (217; ch. 20). Then, he realizes that once in action, the “old imperatives” and “movies” swirl together like “clichés” mixing up with emotions (218; ch. 20). Here, O’Brien shows, as Jenna Field notes, how war strips away the heroic notions that soldiers used to carry and how the individual becomes incurably damaged (17).

This is because, moments later, he imagines himself rising out of his own body down to Jorgenson’s bunker feeling like an invisible, shapeless ghost:

I was part of the night. I was the land itself—everything, everywhere—the fireflies and paddies, the midnight rustlings, the cool phosphorescent shimmer of evil—I was atrocity—I was jungle fire, jungle drums—I was the blind stare in the eyes of all ... the pale young corpses, Lee Strunk and Kiowa and Curt Lemon—I was the beast on their lips—I was Nam—the horror, the war. (219; ch. 20)

On the structural level, the recurrent repetition of the personal pronoun “I” refers back to the speaking subject. On the deep level, however, the “I” has several connotations such as the “night,” the “land,” the “atrocities,” and so forth. For Eftichis Pirovolakis, whenever the “I” is chained to a web of iterable signs, its singular presence will never be accomplished; whenever the speaker uses the pronoun “I,” he assumes the responsibility of another language (129). Thus, by emphasizing the “I,” Tim O’Brien refers back to another meaning outside himself. Just like in the dream, where the body floats and comes undone, the “I” rests on the otherness of speech.

As soon as Tim tastes the bitterness of the wound, evil inhabits his body, claiming values as well as his innocent self. In as much as he participates in the great game of war, the “I” can also signify the other, evil face of civilization. By answering for his crimes, the other becomes the “Overlord” or the “persecutor” that undoes his character (Blanchot, *Writing* 19). Through persecution, the otherness of civilization replaces the sameness of subjectivity. Thus, “the blind stare,” “the beast” and “the horror” have a double affirmation, referring back to Tim as well as the state.

Likewise, by asserting that he has turned “mean,” “dark,” and “capable of evil,” the narrator refers, as well, to the changes occurring within civilization in times of war. Before Vietnam, Tim blames the law, the American soil and the entire community for their complacency with evil; yet, during and after the war, he accuses himself of becoming the “land,” the “shimmer of evil,” as well as the “beast”. The second accusation sounds more intense in that, twenty years later, he returns to the same site blaming the land for undoing his character.

In his trip back to Vietnam, the narrator’s double assertion becomes more desperate as traumatic memories continue to plague his consciousness. After twenty years, Tim returns with his daughter, Kathleen, to the same Vietnamese field that has

swallowed his friends, honor, and beliefs (198; ch. 19). When he arrives at the site, he looks for “signs of forgiveness,” “personal grace,” or anything Vietnam might afford so that he can absolve himself from moral guilt (195; ch. 19). For a stranger, the field looks beautifully arranged where the sun shines bright and butterflies dance peacefully in the blue sky. Yet, for O’Brien, this beautiful spectacle hides the “relics” of their presence such as Kiowa’s corpse, the “canteens,” and the “bandoliers” (198; ch. 19).

Contemplating the place, he wonders whether this is a mistake or some sort of a memory trick because while, to the eye, things seem ordinary and beautiful, to memory, the horror and the guilt present a different view:

[A]ll I felt was the awkwardness of remembering. Behind me Kathleen let out a little giggle. The interpreter was showing her magic tricks.... This little field ... had swallowed so much. My best friend. My pride. My belief in myself as a man of some small dignity and courage.... After that long night in the rain, I’d seemed to grow cold inside, *all the illusions gone*, all the old ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud.... I blamed this place for what I had become, and I blamed it for taking away the person I had once been. (198; ch. 19; emphasis added)

In this story, Kathleen’s “giggle” seems to embody America’s indifference to pain and shallow knowledge of the land because, despite her father’s attempt to explain his feelings, the war appears far away and insignificant compared to her happy existence. Her awkward presence in the field is an attempt to communicate the wound to a deaf culture too busy playing magic tricks. He wants to demonstrate the Vietnam that keeps him awake, but she seems uninterested in the land or anything surrounding her. Kathleen cannot understand her father’s pain because, while she sees butterflies and a blue sky, her father sees Kiowa’s body sinking into the muck. Nature does not reassure him because

he enters into a relationship with a past that fails to present things to consciousness (Blanchot, *Writing* 29). In Blanchot's words, O'Brien's state of mind refuses the sacredness of nature, and so the "blue sky" is an empty sky and the "bright sun" is the night (*Writing* 133).

This double exhibition of the landscape, torn between consciousness and unconsciousness, generates an awkward remembering and, thus, an awkward meaning. As Field puts it, his version of the truth "remains only in the form of memory" (18). Like the place, language is dispossessed of its true meaning because, instead of blaming Vietnam, Tim seems to accuse America of his new identity and for taking away the illusions and expectations that once formed his character. He is caught up in a moral split. At first, he visits the land to look for "signs of forgiveness," then he accuses it of the loss of his ideal self. In fact, "by accusing, by stating the injury," he "makes the wrong irredeemable" (Blanchot, *Writing* 53). He blames Vietnam, but Vietnam blames him, too. Then, under the spell of language, he accuses, as well, America for inscribing the injury.

In a way, Tim says, in Blanchot's words: "I cannot forgive – forgiveness comes from others – but I cannot be forgiven either" (*Writing* 53). This is evident when, at the end of his journey, he looks at a Vietnamese farmer with whom he wants to share a few stories but, instead, the man lifts his spade overhead "grimly, like a flag" and ignores him (200; ch. 19). When Kathleen asks him whether the farmer is angry or not, he responds: "I hope not.... All that's finished" (200; ch. 19). These final words answer the initial quest of the narrator. The "signs of forgiveness" are juxtaposed against the man's signal as he plants his shovel like a sign of liberation. While the unforgiving farmer embodies Vietnam with all its anger and eventual freedom through the metaphor of the flag, Tim embodies America with all the guilt and endless remorse. Neither can the man forgive him, nor can he forgive the land for the things he carries inside.

Bonney argues that Tim seeks forgiveness because, after balancing his combat deeds against the moral codes of his civilization, he realizes the true violence committed in Vietnam (8). On the contrary, the narrator fails to acquire any “signs of forgiveness” in that he no longer has any civilizational codes through which he can balance his wrongdoings. The act of forgiveness, thus, remains unresolved.

Therefore, the separation of oneness from otherness discloses the complex reconstruction of meaning carried throughout the stories. Words cover up the vulgarity of the state through the character of Tim as well as through the aesthetic representation of the land. Since the speaking subject is bereft of his singularity, meaning is located in another speech manifest through the use of metaphors and symbols. The remnants of the war, the intangible/tangible weight of Vietnam and America, and the encumbered self carry another meaning located in the otherness of language. The reader finds himself “involved in the incredibly frustrating act of trying to make sense of events that resist understanding (Kaplan 48).

Since O’Brien’s illusions surrounding his history have been shattered and his being torn into halves, his words are equally fragmented and located on the other side of language, one that has “no objective truth” (Field 17). By opening up multiple possibilities of interpretation, speech circles around the void, affirming and simultaneously denying any affirmation whatsoever. This equivocality is further reinforced in the stories “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes” where the narrator both speaks and hides the full meaning behind Kiowa’s death.

2.2. A “Faceless Responsibility” Torn between Speech and Silence

The stories “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes” articulate the unspeakable nature of trauma caught up between silence and speech. By the end of “Notes,” the writer hopes that “Speaking of Courage” may communicate Norman Bowker’s traumatic silence.

Following the war, Bowker fails to reintegrate into life or reunite with his community, he vainly looks for a sympathetic audience for whom he can describe the strange and abnormal things he witnesses in the river where Kiowa dies (153; ch. 15). Unable to speak, he commits suicide by hanging himself, leaving Tim O'Brien with the full responsibility of turning his muteness into a meaningful speech (171; ch. 16). Nevertheless, the narrator turns this responsibility into another muted speech in that, as a result of witnessing Kiowa's death, both Tim O'Brien and Bowker are bereft of language.

However, this absent speech is neither negative nor inaccurate but rather authentic because, since this responsibility arises out of death, it leads to the birth of art. In Blanchotian terms, "Speaking of Courage" along with "Notes," despite their muteness and nothingness, form the basis of art; their "deceit and mystification" are not only necessary but embody the narrator's truth and hope ("Literature" 309; 310). Thus, the death of Kiowa followed by Bowker's suicide leave Tim O'Brien with a "faceless responsibility" and a "faceless grief" (191; ch. 18) communicated through a silent language filled with equivocalty as well as secrecy.

"Speaking of Courage" narrates the post-traumatic journey of Norman Bowker as he circles around his hometown's lake in Iowa. Before the war, the lake looks bright during summertime, reflecting the blazing colors of evening fireworks (149; 157; ch. 15). After the war, however, the lake, despite being the same in size and appearance, lays calmly and smoothly for a silent audience. Although the narrator describes the town beautifully, a place where the sun shines bright and the "waterskiers" (151; ch. 15) dance in the lake, Bowker sees heavy rains pouring through the place, turning it into a dirty muck (157; ch. 15). His hometown lake is as horrible as the muddy river that has swallowed Kiowa in the Song Tra Bong. The equivocalty of meaning is reflected in the paradoxical words of "day" and "night," "sun" and "rain," "Max" and "Kiowa" (149;

157-8; ch. 15) to name but a few. In the former, Bowker is looking for “the deepness of the night in the facility of the day” (Blanchot, “Literature” 312), and, in the latter, he parallels Max with Kiowa in that both are drowned in the lake, Max in Iowa’s lake and Kiowa in the shitty field of Vietnam.

Looking for an appropriate audience for whom he can speak of Vietnam, Bowker imagines himself talking to his ex-girlfriend, Sally Kramer, then to his friend, Max Arnold, and eventually to his father; yet, the place is now distant for Sally is married, Max is drowned and his father is home watching a baseball TV game (151; ch. 15). He wants to explain to his father why he has lost the “Silver Star” (152; ch. 15) of courage and how he could have saved Kiowa from drowning but cannot say anything because of the sensation of truth against his tongue.

Several instances in the story show Bowker’s desire for speech. Expressions like “he would have talked,” (159; ch. 15) “said,” (153; ch. 15) “explained,” (158; ch. 15) “told the exact truth,” (157; ch. 15) and “described the crazy things he saw,” (158; ch. 15) all denote an impossible need for communicating the truth to an absent audience. Bowker feels the need to talk but nobody wants to listen (Kaplan 52). Even if he manages to tell the truth, the town will not “listen,” it will only “blink or “shrug” for it has neither “memory” nor “guilt” (154; ch. 15). For Rolen, the repetition of expressions like “would have talked,” “said,” and “explained” reveal the “necessity of trauma narration”.

In addition, Rolen notes that Bowker’s “silence spells disaster” and that his “end would not have been so disastrous” if he had translated his wounds into words. This argument poses an important question: how can Bowker communicate the disaster in the absence of words? Here, she puts the blame on Bowker rather than words. Arguably, language, rather than his eventual suicide or silence, is what constitutes the disaster

because Bowker dies during the disaster (Kiowa's death) rather than after (suicide), or as Heberle argues, Bowker has died along with Kiowa (*Trauma* 205).

In contrast to Rolen's argument, Bowker cannot speak in that the audience fears the truth. His words do not reside in the Symbolic realm of things but, rather, in the abominable, silent face of the Real. This is apparent when he imagines telling Sally the story of the dirty field and she says that she does not like the violent speech he uses (156; ch. 15). Unable to find the appropriate words, he asks her "what should we call it?" and she replies "I don't know, just stop it" (156; ch. 15). While Sally's reply reveals the lack of Symbolic truth, Bowker's question suggests his inability to find adequate language to name his trauma. There is "so much to say," but Sally does not want to listen. In the end, Bowker remains silent for neither his father and Sally nor his hometown are willing to listen to his, to borrow Blanchot's expression, "voiceless cry," one that is "addressed to no one and which no one receives" (*Writing* 51).

In addition to place, the notion of time reveals another facet of Bowker's traumatization. Like the circularity of the plot's description, in which Bowker drives around the lake over and over again in his father's Chevy, memory orbits around Iowa, Vietnam, and the lake, revealing a disordered state of mind. The narrator's circular movement around the town, "as if in orbit," (151; ch. 15) reveals his anguish.

Indeed, his assertion that the war has taught him how to tell time without relying on the clock, even when he wakes up at night from sleep, suggests an insomniac speech rather than the state of insomnia that Rolen considers as a sign of PTSD, plaguing most of O'Brien's characters. As Blanchot notes, "In the night, insomnia is discussion: not the work of arguments bumping against other arguments, but rather the extreme shuddering of no thoughts" (*Writing* 49). His ability to tell time without clocks parallels his ability to speak without words. It is, as O'Brien puts it, "one of those things you pick up" (151;

ch.15) from Vietnam and stays with you forever. Besides picking up the trick of telling time without the clock (151; ch. 15), Bowker picks the insomniac speech, the only “non-verbal communication” in which he is “fluent” (Field 20).

Moreover, time reveals the death of Bowker’s essence along with Kiowa’s and the survival of his body. This is evident when, in “Notes,” Bowker sends Tim O’Brien a letter telling him: “there’s no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean. 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...feels like I’m still in deep shit” (167; ch. 16; 1st and 2nd ellipses in orig.). Even long after the war, Bowker still sees himself drowning along with Kiowa as if the past, present, and future collide together to negate the synchronicity of the moment. For Blanchot, “the negation of time” is not negative but, rather, positive because it frees the subject from the temporality established in the world (“Literature” 315). By bypassing time, Bowker frees himself from the confines of his prison walls to a new time frame that is “hard to describe,” one that is both empty and unavailable (Blanchot, “Literature” 315-16).

This temporal negation is followed by an interruption of speech or ellipses, reinforcing Bowker’s muteness as well as disillusionment regarding his town, in particular, and his life, in general. Here, silence casts doubt on the narrator’s state of mind rather than on Bowker; it leads us to question whether or not Bowker’s interrupted speech reflects Tim O’Brien’s silence and traumatization since the following story, “Notes,” deceive readers’ expectations regarding the credibility of “Speaking of Courage”.

“Notes” counters readers’ hopes as to the resolution of trauma and reflects the disordered condition of the narrator as well. It opens with a declaration that “Speaking of Courage” fulfils Bowker’s wishes to speak the unspeakable (167; ch. 16), but, at the same time, it silences the narrator’s responsibility. In other words, Tim O’Brien writes this story

to free himself from the responsibility bestowed upon him, yet, because he witnesses the ugly reality of the war along with Bowker, his language invalidates the full truth of this narrative sequence. Since “Notes” is a continuation of the previous story, the reader is tempted to relate Bowker’s silence to the narrator’s muteness. In “Notes,” Bowker asks Tim to write a story about a soldier who cannot go back to his normal life or talk about his experiences: “I’d write it myself except I can’t ever find any words,” then, he urges him to find the appropriate words since, as a witness and a writer, he knows best how to put it (168-9; ch. 16). In response, Tim fulfils his friend’s request by translating his unspeakable wounds into deceitful words.

At first, the reader is tempted to believe that Bowker’s request and its eventual fulfilment leads to recovery since O’Brien writes: “I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don’t,” but Bowker’s letter compels me to believe that writing has saved me from paralysis (169; ch. 16). This assertion contains equivocation in that, on the surface level, it suggests that writing redeems the wounds or, as Heberle put it, gives voice to O’Brien’s trauma (*Trauma* 206). On a deep level, however, it may also signify the recovery of words in the “work” of fiction (Blanchot, “Literature” 310) rather than that of the writer. By communicating the wounds through fiction, Tim O’Brien frees words from the “paralysis” of absolute meaning without necessarily believing in his recovery. In as much as the word “therapy” transmits a positive connotation, it undoubtedly carries with it a negative aspect that impostures the beauty of the narrative episode.

Nowhere does this deceit becomes more evident than when the writer confesses the truth behind the narrative construction of Bowker’s story. Instead of addressing the Real, he masks its ugliness under the beauty of the lake, the summer boats and the beautiful Minnesota houses and docks (170; ch. 16). Here, the writer uses what Kofman calls “the Imposture of Beauty” in the art that inevitably hints at the presence of the

hideous. Besides using aesthetic language, he admits that he writes the story rapidly and effortlessly drafting it within a short period of time (170; ch. 16). This quick and easy endeavor points to the failure of the narrative, because speaking the unspeakable requires a “language made of uneasiness” (Blanchot, “Literature” 325) rather than “automatic” writing that never speaks (Blanchot, *Space* 179).

The narrator omits most of the details surrounding the field to fit within the narrative layout. “I had been forced to omit the shit field and the rain and the death of Kiowa, ... 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 precise truth,” the narrator confesses (170-1; ch. 16). Again, this confession contains ambiguity. The writer acknowledges the flaws that makeup “Speaking of Courage,” such as the inability to speak and the fear of remembering, yet, this nothingness or failure, constitutes language in that it opens countless possibilities of interpreting the wound without assigning a single interpretation.

As I have argued earlier, everything Bowker sees in the lake reflects his memory, but this non-realistic reflection points to the language of disillusionment. Perhaps, O’Brien communicates a certain truth in the very absence of truth in that language emerges from emptiness, uncertain speech, and negation (Blanchot, “Literature” 322). One way of interpreting the passage is to link it to Lacan’s triadic order of the Symbolic, Real, and Imaginary. O’Brien omits the language of the Real because the audience may fear the non-Symbolic representation of things. Thus, torn between these two orders, he anchors his craft in the Imaginary to free readers from the shackles of absolute meaning.

By the end of “Notes,” the narrator’s tone, however, shifts from doubt and uncertainty to hope and honesty as to the final edition of “Speaking of Courage”. After Bowker’s suicide, Tim O’Brien blames himself for his story’s “flaws” based on

“idealized recollections” (171; ch. 16) of events that Bowker finds inaccurate. Before his death, he sends Bowker a copy of his draft, hoping that it may satisfy him; yet, he replies that it’s not a bad story except that Vietnam is left behind. “It’s not terrible,” he says, “but you left out Vietnam. Where’s Kiowa? Where’s the shit? (171; ch. 16) Months later, he hangs himself in a water pipe after playing a basketball game with his friends, leaving no other note for Tim or his family (171; ch. 16). His unexpected suicide leaves the narrator with the heavy responsibility of turning Bowker’s wound and dissatisfaction into an accurate story.

A decade later, he revises the story, cutting some events and adding others hoping to answer for Bowker’s silence:

Now, a decade after his death, I’m hoping that “Speaking of Courage” makes good on Norman Bowker’s silence. And I hope it’s a better story....The central incident ... has been restored to the piece. It was hard stuff to write. Kiowa after all, had been a close friend, and for years I’ve avoided thinking about his death and my own complicity in it. Even here it’s not easy. In the interest of truth, however, I want to make it clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa....That part of the story is my own. (171-2; ch. 16)

These concluding lines are inseparably interweaved with the beginning of this chapter section in that the writer belatedly negates the full truth of “Speaking of Courage” when he ultimately confesses that parts of this story are made up. Again, he deceives his readers’ expectations and hopes, while, at the same time, affirming the presence of truth. It seems impossible to tie a single interpretation to this passage in that it contains multiple affirmations.

Heberle reads O'Brien's final hope "as an act of memorialization and deferred obligation" (*Trauma* 206) towards Bowker, and Kaplan finds the final lines ambiguous in that O'Brien is both the writer and the accomplice; his trauma, thus, either reappears through the character of Bowker or remains unresolved (qtd. in Heberle, *Trauma* 207). Similarly, Rolen notes that O'Brien's "writing probably saved him from a fate similar to Norman Bowker's. Through telling his story and his comrade's stories, the narrator safely relives and reintegrates the trauma into his personal history and honors the dead. The trauma does not paralyze or kill him because he finds a method to process the horrendous events he experienced in combat."

These critics decipher trauma from one facet, overlooking the other face of "memorialization," salvation or, as Kaplan argues, the double role of the speaking subject (qtd. in Heberle, *Trauma* 207). Nevertheless, a closer reading reveals that Tim O'Brien's traumatization transcends the boundaries set by the discourse of trauma and recovery rooted in the act of writing. As a subject experiencing the disaster and losing faith in the accuracy of language to transmit that experience, Tim O'Brien neither hopes to memorialize Bowker's silence nor resolves his trauma but, rather, keeps his story a "pure nothing" where "silence and nothingness" conspire to make his piece of art possible (Blanchot, "Literature" 309).

If we assign definitive meanings to the above passage by naming it as an act of resolution or "memorialization," the piece will lose the power of its nothingness. Even when the story seems to memorialize or resolve the event, how can readers trust, despite the narrator's mistrust, the words that inscribe these writing attempts? It is only through this echoing silence and emptiness that O'Brien's trauma finds meaning. Through statements like "I hope" and "I want to make it clear," (171; ch. 16) the writer neither hopes nor clarifies but, rather, exposes the inadequacy of language and, thus, the failure

of his story. “As soon as honesty comes into play in literature, imposture is already present.” (Blanchot, “Literature” 308) Whenever beauty impostures through words like hopefulness and truthfulness, failure becomes evident.

Heberle states, as well, that “Speaking of Courage” contains faults, yet he reads it as such because he blames Tim O’Brien for Bowker’s final desperation and unanswered letter (*Trauma* 206). Instead, failure comes from the death of language rather than the unanswered request of his deceased friend; he feels responsible for being unable to fulfil the task of writing, or as Blanchot puts it, it is “the responsibility for what he cannot accomplish, and makes him guilty for what he cannot say, for what cannot be said (*Space* 183). Eventually, the word “responsible” accuses language for its inability to speak about “the central incident,” answer Bowker’s “silence,” and free the writer from this impossible task.

Hence, the narrator writes “Speaking of Courage,” but does not speak in that he recognizes the absent language through which he carries Bowker’s responsibility. Hoping to make things clear, “Notes” and “Speaking of Courage,” thus, renounce their relationship with the act of speaking and reunite, instead, with the act of writing. In the final chapter of the book, however, this form of story writing takes another shape as the narrator resorts to illusion-making rather than speech to silence the fatality of death.

2.3. “Stories Can Save Us”: Storytelling and the Illusion of Salvation

The final section of the novel connects the act of storytelling with salvation to cover up traumatic relics. This connection places language and its expressive power at the forefront of the healing process or as the first step towards recovery. A close reading, however, reveals that “The Lives of the Dead” deconstructs this outlook through the very act of reconstruction in that signs ceaselessly acquire new meanings as memory roams around the void. Apart from the final story, the entire fiction appears to roam back and

forth between “happening-truth” and “story-truth” (191; ch. 18). Yet, “The Lives of the Dead” spellbinds readers to a greater extent through the “illusion of aliveness” (241; ch. 22) and the promise of recovery articulated at the surface level of meaning. In a hypnotic state, the narrator both redeems the horrors of Vietnam and his childhood trauma.

Thus, O’Brien is caught up in a double bind. On the one hand, he reconfigures stories to create the illusion of salvation, and, on the other hand, discredits the truth behind his artistic creation. One way to solve this narrative dilemma is to interpret words in line with O’Brien’s double bind. Since stories stem from the labyrinth of memory, solving this dilemma requires a double reading that both affirms and negates trauma.

The final chapter conceals the Dionysian truth of human mortality under the Apollonian mask of aliveness. The narrator resurrects the dead through the combination of reality and dreaminess to present as well as deny the fatality of death:

[S]tories 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. (234; ch. 22)

At first, Tim O’Brien affirms that “stories can save us” through dreaminess, which brings back the dead to life. He, then, lists the name of his deceased friends alongside unnamable others whom he encounters on the battleground. Combining the dream with reality, he represses the inescapable fact of mortality and simultaneously confesses its abominable presence even at the age of forty-three.

The words “now” and “right here” overthrow his previous claim that stories can save him since this fact haunts him even after two decades. Writing moves between fantasy and reality, leading to a covering up of pain through the illusion of life and salvation. Besides, he juxtaposes the death of Linda with that of the others, creating a double-traumatic effect in which two chronologically distant traumas converge together. His recollections revolve around the distant past (childhood), the past (Vietnam), and the present (the act of writing), making it difficult to tie trauma to a single time frame.

As memory continues to dictate words, trauma structures around a triadic time frame. The first takes place in 1956, the second in 1969, and the third in 1990. At the age of nine, Timmy witnesses the death of his girlfriend Linda, her premature death appears unreal and, thus, keeps imagining her alive (253; ch. 22). In 1969, still naïve and innocent, he looks at a corpse lying on the battleground, and, in 1990, he writes stories about everything he witnesses from childhood up to the age of forty-three. The convergence of his childhood trauma, the Vietnam War, and the inscription of these events can be read as memory’s failure to transcend the inescapable. The years 1956 and 1969 suggest a double-traumatic effect that Freud calls *Nachträglichkeit* or, in Blanchot’s words, “the undesired return” (*Writing* 42) in that childhood trauma is repressed and acquires a new meaning when another trauma breaks through.

Reformulating Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, Luis Kancyper defines it as a “retroactive re-signification, ... the moment when the traumatic, incomprehensible elements from the past are bound with the help of sensations, affects, images and words from the present” (132-33). The twenty-one years old Tim reenounters the nine years old Timmy when similar “sensations,” “images,” and “affects” emerge. When Kiowa asks him about his feelings after looking “at a real body,” he pictures Linda’s face and says: “poor old man, he reminds me of ... I mean, there is this girl I used to know. I took her

to the movies once. My first date” (239; ch. 22; ellipsis in orig.). The image of the man’s corpse with his “right arm” torn and “flies and gnats” (237; ch. 22) covering his face reminds him of Linda’s “swollen” body and “bloated” figure (250; ch. 22). His answer is interrupted by an ellipsis, which points to the absence of words.

Words fail to describe the indescribable and, thus, memory turns to describe the pleasurable. The now moment of narration inscribes these wounds through a “retroactive re-signification” (Kancyper 132) which, in the story, takes the form of illusion-making. O’Brien resorts to writing to deal with these realities through a combination of memory imagination, and language so that readers can dream along with him (241; ch. 22). Here, he reveals to readers that writing is hypnotic, he avows that language is situated along with imagination. “[I]n 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....I needed that kind of miracle.” (246; ch. 22)

For Vernon, “the miracle” represents Tim’s attempt to save Timmy’s childhood or his “pre-adult,” “innocent,” and “prelapsarian self” (147). In fact, both “childhood” and “pre-adulthood” are stages of innocence representing an ideal state of being which, for O’Brien, are “full of romantic bullshits” (102; ch. 9). On the contrary, the “miracle” is the craft of storytelling that defies death by recreating another truth. He represses the certainty of death by reviving another absolute fact: the undying soul. Since Tim attends a battlefield “funeral without the sadness,” (238; ch. 22) his story turns into an elegy that at once mourns and resists mourning.

Like Orpheus Tim O’Brien’s melancholic elegy emanates from the ruins of destruction. Although elegies tend to disencumber the mind from the Real, “The Lives of the Dead” does not because the writer excludes himself from the humanistic optimism that storytelling can transform his melancholy into knowledge (Blanchot, *Writing* 135).

However, bereavement relieves the Imaginary through passive resistance to the Symbolic order.

Like Orpheus, both Tim and young Timmy gaze at the corpse to defy the Symbolic, idealized representation of mortality. At the age of nine, Timmy goes to Linda's funeral to see her body and, thus, confirm her death; he wants something to carry with him for the rest of his life (249; ch. 22). At first, he notices that the funeral parlor is dimly lighted and has a pleasant smell (250; ch. 22). Shortly after, he steps forward to see inside the casket, but Linda seems awkward:

The girl lying in the white casket wasn't Linda. There was a resemblance, maybe, but where Linda had always been very slender and fragile looking, almost skinny, the body in that casket was fat and swollen....The room was silent. When I looked back at the casket, I felt dizzy again. In my heart, I'm sure, I knew this was Linda, but even so I couldn't find much to recognize. I tried to pretend she was taking a nap, her hands folded at her stomach, just sleeping away the afternoon. Except she didn't look asleep. She looked dead ... (250-1; ch. 22)

Against the Symbolic, ideal image of funerals stands the other, despicable face of death. While the "silent" room signifies the Symbolic, absent knowledge of mortality, the word "casket" has a double meaning: ugliness and beauty. While beauty is the veil that covers the face of death under a Symbolic representation, ugliness uncovers the other, Real face with all its abnormalities and deformities. Even the pleasant fragrance opposes the stenchy malodor of Real death. Timmy's wish to go to the funeral and see inside the coffin overthrows the absolute and unvoiced knowledge of mortality. Like Orpheus O'Brien challenges the absolute to gaze at the abominable face of the Real. Similar to

Eurydice, the unbelievable fact of her appearance as such undoes death by imagining her alive, “taking a nap” or “sleeping away the afternoon,” as O’Brien puts it.

Right after the funeral scene, he remembers a comparable scene happening in the Song Tra Bong where the dead lay in masses, exuding a terrible stench (251-2; ch. 22). Unlike Linda soldiers lay lonely on the battleground rather than inside caskets. Here, the funeral is synonymous with clearance, and the smell of bodies is horrible rather than pleasant. These double connotations are juxtaposed to present a subjective view of human finitude against a Symbolic one. Each time, his words are, as Kancyper argues, retrospectively re-signified (132) leading to a double signification of mortality. It is the “undesired return” of an unspoken past, which, despite being named, “does not figure in language” (Blanchot, *Writing* 31; 42).

The speaker simultaneously speaks of the past and negates its full truth; he does not want to tell the truth. For him, the truth resembles a “secret” or a “magic” trick that cannot be revealed for fear of losing the charm of mystery (252; ch. 22). This assertion forms the basis of literature in that it contains secrets, magic tricks, and mysteries where if the writer uses common language to explain it, the charm fades away.

After reclaiming Linda’s soul in art, the narrator does not want to lose her again to the absolute realm of signification that has already taken her body. His “secret” is, what Pirovolakis calls, “an absolute secret that does not have any content and that, therefore, cannot become the object of interpretation, revelation, thematization, or phenomenalization” (134). His desire to keep Linda alive (Apollo) despite death (Dionysus) is a comfortable sickness disguised as recovery. “She was dead. I understood that. After all, I’d seen her body. And yet even as a nine-year-old I had begun to practice the magic of stories” (252; ch. 22). Here, the writer says, in Blanchotian terms, I have

seen the Real, I am mourning, yet I refuse to weep. Thus, like Eurydice Linda's corpse gives Tim "something to carry," which somehow resembles an unresolved elegy.

Despite the mask of fortitude and the refusal to mourn, O'Brien's narrative tricks ultimately unravel the sickening, ever-presence of the Real. Like Lacan's "voyeur" (*Seminar* 182) and Blanchot's "gaze" ("Destroy" 114) Tim O'Brien's obsession with vision and his unrelenting compulsion to look ceaselessly breaks the blinding spell underlying storytelling. Throughout the story, this obsession repeatedly appears to divert the reader's gaze from magic tricks or to "the profoundly dark point towards which art and desire ... seem to tend (Blanchot, *Space* 170). The convergence of expressions like "I didn't even look," "I looked away," (238; ch. 22) and "not wanting to look but then looking" (241; ch. 22) with "It didn't quite register" and "couldn't accept it" (246-7; ch. 22) uncovers the omnipresence of trauma despite negation.

Simultaneously, assertions such as "I kept seeing the soldier's body," "I saw then, and keep seeing now," and "I know my own eyes" (243; 245-6; ch. 22) affirm the presence of the wound through time and space. In Blanchotian terms, "the obscure point" is the gaze that shapes the art of desire (*Space* 171), and this desire to look parallels the wish to inscribe pain. "By slighting death, by acting, we pretended it was not the terrible thing it was. By our language, which was both hard and wistful, we transformed the bodies into piles of waste.... one small bit of waste in the midst of a much wider wastage" (248; ch. 22). By making his language distrustful, Tim O'Brien becomes, in Paul Ricoeur's words, an "unreliable narrator" ceaselessly countering his readers' hopes and expectations (163). Besides being dubious, his language is both "hard and wistful," uncovering the possibility of mourning the wound. Just as characters turn "bodies" into "piles of waste," the narrator substitutes the "wider wastage" with a story that gives him vision or rather "[e]yes to see and to weep" (Ricoeur 188).

By the end of the story, O'Brien's double-bind intensifies as aesthetic expression both overshadows and unfolds the sickness hovering around story-making. Shortly after her death, Tim imagines Linda alive with "ageless" eyes and an "ongoing everness" that resembles the "same pinprick of absolute light" present in Timmy's eyes as "he smiles at Tim from the greying photographs" of the past (247; ch. 22). Here, the narrator uses the beautiful symbol of "light" against death, a "bright ongoing" time frame against time past, and Timmy against Tim. He does not give up on light or illusion, which are so essential to art and beauty, rather, he "wrests" them from their function by endowing them with a new meaning (DeArmitt 30). The "pinprick of absolute light" evokes the death of Timmy along with Linda and the survival of Tim. Through the illusion of light, the narrator mourns the loss of innocence as well as the separation of the self from its other, and the grey photograph, which is a combination of white and black, conveys a paradoxical language: innocence and adulthood, life and death, health and sickness as well as sameness and otherness.

Besides, the happy expression of Timmy smiling at Tim from the grey photograph has a negative connotation rather than a positive one. The smile veils the buried anguish of an unredeemable past weighting its heavy force over the present, and the silent language of the picture shows the unspeakable nature of trauma. Thus, the photograph becomes the memory, the muted speech, the mental image, and the unresolvable past that continues to plague the present.

The aforementioned becomes evident when, in 1990, language uncovers the aesthetically hidden meaning of the photograph:

[W]hen 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 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. The human life is all one thing, like a blade tracing loops on ice: a little kid, a twenty-three-year-old infantry sergeant, a middle-aged writer knowing guilt and sorrow. (245-6; ch. 22)

Moving back and forth between memories, the “unreliable narrator” (Ricoeur 163) takes the reader from 1956 to 1990, and then to 1968, leading to a mistrust of language and, thus, the fallibility of the story. Here, the “smile,” despite being foolish, remains a necessary aesthetic technique that functions as a metaphor for sadness. Moreover, the word “absolute” recurs three times in the final story and twelve times throughout the narration, and, each time, it acquires a new meaning that defies etymology. For example, in “The Things They Carried,” the narrator uses the expression “absolute silence” to oppose the “old logic,” which has now turned mute.

In “The Lives of The Dead,” however, the “absolute” is tightly linked to the soul coupled with the endless desire to resurrect Linda’s essence. In this passage, the “absolute” is connected to the ageless and “unchanging” soul, indicating a desire to renounce the “absolute” fatality of death. For Levinas, this condition reveals “the absolute position of the soul and a new conception of the human whose essence is not in freedom but in enchainment” (“Reflection” 7). There is no difference in being “inside” or “beyond” the body because Timmy dies at the age of nine and, since then, he continues to exist beyond himself, in a body that simultaneously frees him from absolute knowledge and forces him to exist in the world as such.

This conception is further reinforced in the final simile when the narrator compares human life to knife blades that trace circles on ice. The “ice” (253; ch. 22) is a

metaphor for the insensible, dead body and the “blades” (254; ch. 22) are the excruciating toll of trauma looping around existence. Since death is an unescapable casualty, O’Brien uses the word “absolute” as a double-edged weapon that substitutes the body for the soul in an attempt to redefine human subjectivity as well as to repress the awful gaze of mortality. However, the final paragraph of the story recasts this conception in a new shape, one that supposedly reveals the fear of death.

As the story reaches the end, the narrator recasts the notion of spiritual salvation as a final attempt to transfer the empty meaning of his entire fiction. The narrator chooses the present year of 1990 to end his storyline, yet, his memory continues to dwell around his childhood as well as Vietnam. In his dreams, he keeps imagining Linda alive just as Timmy does at the age of nine except that, in the story, he frees her from her former name. In death, her “real name doesn’t matter” (253; ch. 22) because, like words, the absence of the body signifies the absence of the name. By substituting the name for the unnamed, O’Brien remodels his story and his entire fiction around an unspecified meaning that, in turn, inhabits a nameless universe.

Rewriting the “ice” metaphor, O’Brien ends the novel as follows:

[I]n 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. (253-4; ch. 22)

Both Heberle and Vernon read this passage as well as the whole story as an act of resolution and salvation. While Heberle concludes that the fictional character Tim rather than the author, eventually redeems his trauma by memorializing and translating his wounds into stories (*Trauma* 215), Vernon acknowledges that, despite the “fleeting moments of transcendence” that storytelling offers, the narrator finds a “ray of light” that ultimately carries his soul and alleviates his guilt (176).

Somehow, it seems possible to agree with Vernon as to the tricks of illusions used by the narrator to seemingly alleviate the wound, yet these tricks together with the beauty of symbols divert the reader's gaze away from the otherness of meaning. Reading the passage, the reader notices that the image of the ice contains both a positive and a negative connotation.

Against these critical outlooks, the narrator, on the one level, offers visionary salvation carried through a desire to look at an impeccable universe bereft of diseases, funeral parlors, and corpses, and, on the other, reveals the frozen gaze at Linda's corpse as well as that of Curt Lemon, Kiowa, and Ted Lavender. Moreover, Timmy represents Tim's double in that his immortalized, ageless, and joyful picture hints at a blind vision, an attempt to forget the unbearable fact of his decay and, thus, eventual death. By diverting his gaze away from Timmy, Tim falls into the grips of his double, Dionysian image.

In the final sentence, however, the Apollonian spell withers away as memory realizes that imagination is nothing more than an attempt to save the lives of the dead. Under the floodlight, Timmy skates the ice covering the surface of his own history, yet when the ice melts and Tim leaps into the dim and comes down after thirty years, he

realizes that his story is but an illusion, a work of the imagination hopelessly trying to safeguard his consciousness from disillusion. Field most excellently describes this state as O'Brien's "illusion of mental stability" conveyed through fragmentation as well as disorder (21). In the end, the reader realizes that "the certainties are merely there to conceal the uncertainties and that words ... do not provide an explanation of anything" (Kaplan 45). Thus, "The Lives of the Death" in particular, and the entire fiction, in general, do not solve any questions raised by the narrator; but, at the same time, the mystery and the unresolved truth make the discourse of trauma possible.

The irresolution of truth in *Things*, hence, correlates with the nature of trauma and the character of the Vietnam War. The author perfectly responds to the ruins of the disaster through the ruins of words and the absence of signification. Tim O'Brien shows how the death of subjectivity brings on the death of absolute meaning and, thus, absolute knowledge. Despite the things characters carry, the novel does not carry the responsibility of truth, representation, and resolution; however, this lack of truth, emanating from the imagination or memory, is "not an empty place" but rather, "the world itself" (Blanchot, "Literature" 316).

As readers of literature, we desire to answer the questions raised by a given text, yet O'Brien's fiction compels us to read the wound without necessarily answering any questions whatsoever. Nevertheless, it allows us to acknowledge that the author's sincerity and trust lie more in the distrust of his craft and less in the honesty conveyed under metaphorical language. All the elements in the story answer one important question: how can the wound translate wounds? In other words, how can a fragmented language born out of the disaster transmit the wounds of O'Brien's traumatized characters? Similarly, how can the traumatized narrator answer the pain of his fictional soldiers?

Like the fragments of words, Tim is torn between himself and a strange foreign body, and Bowker cannot speak because he dies along with Kiowa in the “shit field”. Likewise, the forty-four years writer vainly struggles to reunite with the young version of himself and Linda while at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of this illusory pursuit.

Each story relates to another through a circular pattern steeped in fragmentation, nothingness, and ambiguity, all embodied through the characters of Tim, Timmy, Norman Bowker, Linda including unnamable others. The initial story, “The Things They Carried,” metaphorically binds the entire fiction together by summing up the disaster under the elusive connotation of the things soldiers carry. While, at first, readers learn of the tangible/intangible weight of things like weaponry, nutrition, and shame, in “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes,” they listen to Bowker’s speech/silence following his spiritual death in Nam as well as to the writer’s encumbering responsibility.

Likewise, while “Notes” narrates the narrative construction of “Speaking of Courage,” the “Lives of the Dead” undoes the death of characters like Bowker, Linda, and Kiowa, to counter the events narrated in the previous stories. This narrative technique carries the central idea of nothingness throughout the entire fiction so that each element complements the overall meaning. Like the gaps of memory, stories are equivocally constructed to reflect on the elusive nature of trauma and the problems surrounding its representation in fiction. Thus, the author ultimately demonstrates that the nature of his fiction is as problematic as the traumatic memories of the Vietnam War, or as Kaplan argues, O’Brien’s inability to answer for anything whatsoever stems from the fact that the act of writing is “determined by the nature of the Vietnam War” (47)

In conclusion, *Things* rewrites war by deconstructing the common discourse surrounding trauma, salvation, and resolution. Under the context of warfare, the author mirrors the senselessness inherent to this condition and its everlasting toll on the human subject. His authentic work is admired for its creation of a new discourse capable to be interpreted without an unprecedented philosophy that may, at times, blur the judgement of literary critics. Like Blanchot's introductory citation, reading his work without weapons established by *a priori* knowledge and without taking words as actionable instruments against the evils of civilization render the novel a genuine piece of art capable of infinite interpretations. Yet, this limitless venue of criticism needs to circle endlessly around the "disarray" triggered by the disaster of warfare and, thus, the death of speech.

As a final remark, it's tempting to close the debate with Levinas' reflection on the necessary absence of this origination in that, according to his conception, the subject moves from the Heideggerian *Dasein*, a being constructed by a temporal experience, to a being defined by death, an end necessary for the re-evaluation of the meaning of the human, a condition of being refuting both phenomenology and ontology (*Ethics* xiv). *Things* most excellently depicts this rethinking of the human in terms of death by creating characters unable to anchor reality in experience or their pre-constructed civilizational ideals. Such conception redefines reality through the void, an outlook that leads us to the following chapter where Kevin Powers fails as well to construct a coherent narrative truth through conventional temporal markers.

Chapter Three

“Time Was Not Ours”: Temporality and Narrative Structure in Kevin Powers’

The Yellow Birds (2012)

To say what happened, the mere facts, the disposition of events in time, would come to seem like a kind of treachery.

—Powers, *Birds*

The past is never dead. It’s not even past.

—William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects.

—Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Like the Vietnam War, the meaninglessness of the Iraq War procreated another melancholic generation of veteran writers. As a member of this generation *par excellence*, Powers represents the tremors of a pair of soldiers serving in the Iraqi desert and their subsequent disillusionment back home. In a lyrical tone, he pictures the ordeals of the narrator, Private John Bartle, and his agonies over the death of his friend, Daniel Murphy. The book is structured around Bartle’s recollections of the war, circling from Al Tifar and Virginia to Germany and America. Resisting both spatial and temporal horizons, the novel resides in memory where the simultaneity of the past, present, and future conspire to annul the linear progression of events. In line with this argument, this chapter examines the representation of time in *Birds* both at the level of form and content, arguing that the narrator’s traumatic experiences lead to a reconfiguration of spatiotemporal markers that refute traditional narrative plots.

The book begins in Iraq in 2004, then digresses to New Jersey in 2003, progressing to Germany in 2005, moving back and forth between 2004 and 2005, to finally ending in Kentucky in 2009. While in 2004, the narrator describes events of his deployment in Iraq, in 2005, he represents those taking place in Richmond or, at a time, in Kaiserslautern, Germany. The concluding chapter, however, moves quickly to the year 2009 where, inside a prison cell, the narrator formally ends his story. It is difficult to tie the text to a single timeframe or a particular location since the narrator implies that his “separation,” from such reference points, is “complete” (61; ch. 3). Unable to bring Murphy home safely, he blames himself by “trying to piece the war into a pattern” (216; ch. 11) that can make sense to the things unfolding before his eyes, but eventually fails. Yet, despite his failure, *Birds* offers temporal and spatial alternatives that allow readers to marvel at the horrors surrounding the Arab War.

Upon its publication in 2012, the novel gained widespread attraction and was immediately placed along with Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928), Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Tim O’Brien’s *Things*, including others. In an interview with Lucie Jammes, Powers confessed that it was difficult for him to connect his literary influence to specific works because they contributed broadly to his writing; however, later on, he acknowledged that, while writing *Birds*, he intended to associate it with the First World War writing conventions than with those of his generation (1-2).

Although this acknowledgement seems plausible – for example through his Hemingwayesque lyric style (Hawkins 100) – Powers shares, to a certain extent, the literary representation of time characteristic of the Vietnam and Iraq War writing traditions. Even in the literature of the Second World War, writers pay close attention to time and the way it shapes the daily lives of soldiers. In *Naked*, for example, Mailer

describes it technically to show how the military transforms soldiers into automatons, responding to the clock's demand mechanically. In *Anopopei*, each day resembles the previous one, loaded with the same monotonous tasks and operations that render the future - in terms of monotony- no different from the present or the past.

Moving from the Second World War to the Vietnam War, temporal dimensions take a slight detour as literature moves from the modernist stream of consciousness that marked the first half of the twentieth century to the postmodern fragmentation shaping the remaining half. In *Things*, for example, O'Brien's characters suffer from a postwar temporal syndrome manifest through their ability to tell time without looking at the clock. While for Mailer, time mechanizes soldiers at the frontline, for O'Brien it does so at the homefront. When, for example, Norman Bowker circles around the lake haunted by the death of Kiowa, he pauses for a second to guess time and, then figures that it is five o'clock because "the war had taught him to tell time without clocks" (151; ch. 15).

Besides, *Things*' open ending echoes that of *Birds*, which suggests the disappearance of the future and the persistence of the wound through time and space. O'Brien ends his story with a phantasmagorical vision of the dead coming back to life from the Vietnamese pit to America, and Powers concludes with the resurrection of Murphy floating beautifully downstream to where the Euphrates and the Tigris meet to caress his disfigurements, creating both a temporal and spatial dislocation that resist narrative closure. Such similarities create a literary writing tradition shared among veteran writers, or as Powers confesses in an interview with Lucie Jammes, "Tim O'Brien" (including other writers), has "left a massive legacy as a writer and certainly I am a great admirer of his work" (1).

In addition to O'Brien's influence, Powers borrows the Vonnegutian motif "so it goes" (30; ch. 1) to emphasize the endless traumatization of Bartle that *goes* on in the

present and carries on to the future. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim becomes “unstuck in time” (28; ch. 1) after witnessing the destruction of Dresden, an expression that Vonnegut tends to repeat eight times throughout the narration along with the endless repetition of “so it goes”. Vonnegut’s description of time seems to have influenced Powers’ temporalization in that this motif appears in *Birds* to describe Bartle’s permanent shock.

In addition to Pilgrim’s notion of time, planet Tralfamadore has a temporal dimension that parallels Bartle’s worldview:

All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. (22; ch. 2)

The intertextual influence of *Slaughterhouse-Five* on *Birds*, thus, allows readers to draw an analogy between Pilgrim’s phantasmagorical travel to the land of Tralfamadore and Bartle’s memories circling from Iraq to Virginia. Like Pilgrim, Bartle becomes “unstuck in time” (28; ch. 1), he perceives the past, present, and future synchronously in a way that emancipates him from the illusion of earthly chronology.

In addition to Vietnam War authors, some of Powers’ contemporaries allude as well to the complicated relationship between warfare and chronology. In *Fobbit*, for example, David Abrams parallels the passage of seconds to minutes (18; ch. 2), suggesting how time, amidst the anxious debris of Baghdad, appears elongated. Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn Long Half Time Walk* and Dan Fesperman’s *Unmanned* follow the

same attitude in their treatment of time both at the frontline and at the homefront. Fesperman's portrayal of drone warfare represents how the pilot protagonist, Darwin Cole, pays special attention to the ticking of the clock during traumatic encounters, and how, at times, he fails to measure it all together. For instance, he can tell whether an assault would take place or not by simply looking at his "bedside clock" which freezes him "with its message": "3:50 a.m. The hour of death," (236; ch. 27) Fesperman narrates. Such temporal conception, accompanied by a sense of "automatism" like when Cole stands to dress rapidly pulling his shoes without lacing them (236; ch. 27), is what Kate Mcloughlin calls "preternatural clock-watchers" who, because of the boredom of the military, cultivate a sense of hypervigilance (113; 115). At other times, however, Cole measures time according to the movement of the sun: "in the desert he'd never been conscious of time, apart from what the sun told him," (110; ch. 14) which may suggest his desire to break free from manmade chronology.

Similarly, Fountain's *Billy Lynn Long Half Time Walk* journeys back and forth between Iraq and the States in the form of recollections that blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Billy Lynn's experience in Iraq and his killing of an Iraqi insurgent in a close combat renders him traumatized and disillusioned. During his furlough, which coincides with Thanksgiving, Billy along with his Bravos squad attend the Texas Stadium party celebrating their heroism. Struck by the shallowness of the festival, Billy feels even more alienated not only from his people but also from his nation, which pays no credit to the sacrifices of the so-called American heroes. Despite his love for his sister Kathryn and girlfriend Faison, he eventually returns to Iraq, which despite the war, seems safer than America.

Like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy (who appears to purposefully share the same name with Vonnegut's protagonist) becomes "unstuck in time" (28; ch. 1)

and space, his mind fantasizes Iraq while his body inhabits America, creating a disordered chronology, or as Fountain remarks, “time didn’t count against your total allotment here on earth” (128). Likewise, before his redeployment to Iraq, he bids farewell to Faison without any promise of a future reunion, suggesting, in psychoanalytical terms, the disappearance of the future from the minds of trauma survivors (Terr 259). “It’s absurd to hope for any kind of future with Faison” because it’s “the ultimate black hole of futile speculation,” (410) Billy thinks. Thus, John Bartle, Billy Pilgrim, Billy Lynn, and Darwin Cole all seem to portray a human condition anchored outside the temporal norms that guide the so-called sane individuals.

This chapter, however, argues that temporal dislocation, far from being solely a pathological aspect of war, offers readers an opportunity to imagine time outside the parameters of the clock whose linear arrow limits human experience. The nonlinearity of *Birds* does not only account for Bartle’s troubled recollections but also the subsistence of the wound through temporal and spatial markers that leave the end of the story unattended. If Bartle truly succeeds in reconstructing his life, as some critics argue, then why does the end of the story circle around the void?

Following Hawkins’ argument (stated in the introduction), whose reading points to the narrator’s disillusionment and total alienation, this chapter traces the path leading up to disenchantment *in* time rather than *through* time; indeed, it attempts to measure time in narrative action during and after the manifestation of trauma and in the narrative formation of the plot through metonymy and metaphor. Along these lines, the overall aim of the chapter answers the following questions: how does *Birds* represent time? How can its structure hang together in terms of both form and content? Most importantly, does the narrative end reconstruct the experience, as Precup argues, or reveal a condition of homeostasis from beginning to end?

To settle the argument at hand, the present study engineers its premise largely around psychoanalytical theories of time coupled with Lacan's structural model of language, and, to a lesser extent, around the temporal and spatial dimensions of trauma articulated in the works of Caruth. It also benefits from Peter Brooks' reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the dream work in untangling the complex construction of literary plots.

In psychoanalytical terms, Lenore Terr examines time perception following a psychic wound, identifying six major temporal distortions that plague trauma survivors. In his words, the symptoms involve 1) "the misperception of time," 2) "gross confusion of time sequencing," 3) "time skew," 4) "omen formation," 5) "sense prediction," and 6) "foreshortening of the future" (245). While in the first category, time slows down during the traumatic event coupled with a special focus on details, in the second, the temporal sequences delineating day and night, morning and afternoon or, as in the third type, the occurrence of one episode after another, take a different course. The remaining symptoms, however, rely on the present moment to either review past events or negatively frame the future.

To elucidate, the formation of omens, which Terr believes to be more prevalent in literary works and experimental psychology than in the literature on mental health, represents the subject's wish to escape the present because of some desire to change the course of past actions (253; 255-6). Through the present moment, however, the last two categories turn to the future either to envisage upcoming life events, such as dreams or to narrow the possibility of any future existence whatsoever (256-59). Bartle's wish to revisit the past to save Murphy from mutilation and inevitable death, his inability to imagine the future by constantly forming omens about his potential death, "I became

certain that I'd die" (44), and his failure to tell "what day it was" (22), all seem to fall within Terr's hypotheses.

To understand plot formation, Lacan's structural model of language and the importance of the signifier over the signified offers a novel angle through which to approach narrative time. In his interpretation of the psychoses, Lacan favors the signifier over the signified in that the former, in contrast to the latter, carries meaning by coupling with another signifier rather than with the signified, as was formerly established by De Saussure (*Psychoses* 217).

In search of the signified, the subject articulates a chain of signs that fail to communicate desire, but succeed in implying a certain lack. The subject enters through a series of delusions that, in the end, function as logical madness (*Psychoses* 217). At this stage, the reader reads delusion as metonymy and the final madness as metaphor, unifying the whole meaning of the text. For example, what ties sign (A) with (B) or (C) in the metonymic chain, Lacan suggests, is the rule of "similarity" and "contingency," "quilting" (*Psychoses* 220; 293) together the metaphorical meaning of the text. Here, an important distinction between metaphor and metonymy needs some consideration.

Like Brooks, Lacan locates metaphor and metonymy in Freud's dream work, in which the concept of "condensation" stands for metaphor and "displacement" for metonymy (221). While metonymy is the substitution of one thing for another, "One thing is named by another that is its container, or its part, or that is connected to it" (221), metaphor is the meaning that dominates datum through the deflection and commandment of the signifier in a way that the whole species of presupposed connections come undone (218). This happens through the process of what Lacan calls "identification" (*Psychoses* 218) visible only after the "transference" of the final signified of the structured signifiers (*Psychoses* 226). In other words, the signifier travels back and forth in the text, carrying

different yet similar connotations (metonymy); however, by constantly transferring meaning, the signified ultimately appears to (metaphor) break down preconstructed signifiers, communicating an opposite meaning.

Despite their opposing nature, both metonymy and metaphor work together to construct the form as well as the meaning of the text. “The signified only ever reaches its goal ... through referring to another meaning” (Lacan, *Psychoses* 224). It is important to note that, for Lacan, the “goal” or the end journey of signification is not the articulation of a desire but rather the articulation of a need. Since the Lacanian subject loses contact with the “I” or “*Je*” (*Psychoses* 261), the signified, despite its implied meaning, breaks ties with the Saussurean language. Thus, Powers’ fiction does articulate a need through writing but never the ultimate desire for recovery or narrative resolution.

Before any further investigation, let us return briefly to the word “quilting” cited earlier in that it contributes broadly to the question of temporality as well as the structuring of the plot. Within his discussion of psychoses and language formation, Lacan speaks of the “quilting point” that knots signifiers together, forming the metonymic chain that leads up to the ultimate metaphor. To pin down these “quilting” moments, the analyst needs to trace “the order of signifiers” and their “continuity” in a circular pattern (Lacan, *Psychoses* 263) rather than in a linear fashion. Unlike circularity linearity “leads to impasses, to inadequate, unmotivated explanations that superimpose themselves on one another” (*Psychoses* 310), Lacan writes. The circularity of the plot is continuously remolded according to the structuration of signifiers (metonymy) rather than through a conscious authorial construction.

Accordingly, the reader extracts, through an arduous endeavor, moments that quilt together the meaning of the text in a different temporal order. As Lacan notes: “[e]verything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier, similar to these

little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of the material. It's the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively" (*Psychoses* 268). Put differently, the "surface material" is the plotting of fiction formed together by buttons visible through a retroactive and a prospective process rather than via a linear chronology. Following Lacan's argument, it seems tantalizing to look for these quilting moments (by reading for the plot) through Bartle's memories moving backwards and forward in search of meaning and coherence.

In addition to Lacan, Caruth's interpretation of the belated nature of trauma unquestionably adds up to the question of space and time. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, she writes: "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to simply be located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (9). Resisting both spatial and temporal locations, trauma survivors re-experience unpleasant events repeatedly in the hope of anchoring their experience and reclaiming some sense of selfhood.

In other words, since the event is not experienced primarily, it reemerges at a later stage in the form of recollections; each recollection interprets the event with another time and place. "Latency," she adds, consists of the abeyance of the traumatic event rather than in its total forgetting, thus, only through the act of remembering that the event is primarily experienced; "it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure" (*Trauma* 6). This anomaly resonates with Michael Rothberg's "maladies of time and space" that limit historical as well as literary testimonials of extremities (162).

Besides, in her introduction to *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth rereads the story of Tancred and Clorinda from a spatiotemporal perspective - a story that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud utilizes to explain the phenomenon of repetition. In the epic of

Gerusalemme Liberata, Clorinda wears enemy armor and enters a duel with her beloved Tancred who unintentionally kills her. Following her burial, he carries on his fight with the Crusaders in a strange forest where he slices a tree with his sword, but blood mysteriously streams from the slash along with Clorinda's voice shouting that he has stabbed her all over again (2). While Freud interprets the story as the survivor's unwillingness to repeat unpleasant events, for Caruth it is not so much about the process of repetition but the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound* (*Unclaimed* 2).

Later, in the notes section of the book, Caruth refers back to the story, noting that it demonstrates "both the temporal and the spatial aspects of the notion of trauma" (*Unclaimed* 114). Although she acknowledges the inevitable process of repetition originally articulated by Freud, what interests her are the spatiotemporal dimensions of the story and the voice that cries out the wound. Thus, the significance of Torquato Tasso's story communicates the inevitable re-experience of the tragedy in another place (forest) and another time (after the burial), on the one hand, and the narrator's desire to cry out the wound, on the other. This is apparent, for example, in Bartle's reimagining of Murphy in different locations stretching from Al Tifar to Richmond and the Blue Ridge Mountains in the hope of voicing out the wound through a disrupted chronology.

Auxiliary to the aforementioned claims is Peter Brooks' significant contribution to the psychoanalytical study of plots in his groundbreaking book *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Brooks turns as well to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to understand the psychic function of texts rather than that of characters and authors. For him, the plot structures action in coded and lucid wholes, using the trope of metaphor to achieve the interrelated parts of metonymy (90-1). Conjointly, it uses repetition to take us back in the text, allowing us to hear, see, and connect consciously or

unconsciously between different narrative moments where the past and the present meet to establish a similar view of the future (99).

Much like Lacan's quilting points, Brooks speaks of a "binding" occasioned by the constant act of repetition, it is "a binding of textual energies that allows them to be mastered by putting them into serviceable form, usable "'bundles,'" within the energetic economy of the narrative" (101). Expressed differently, repetition initially blurs meaning by blinding readers from the true energy of the text; however, by quilting these coded moments, these delays or, in Brooks' words, "*détours*," the final metaphoric discharge appears.

While conventional plots speak of a beginning, middle, and end, Brooks speaks of *détours* that circle back and forth between narrative moments, denying any finality or resolved ending that would impose a deceptive authority on readers: "Any final authority claimed by narrative plots, whether of origin or end, is illusory" (109). Conceived as such, the pessimistic tone of *Birds* fails to join the end with the beginning, yet it attempts to create some sense of coherence in those cryptic but legible moments. Thus, Powers' fiction asks us to untangle the complex web that knots together moments metonymically rather than those that combine beginning, middle, and end linearly. Following Brooks's argument, it is critical to argue that the circularity of *Birds* and its unsettled closure point to the disillusionment inherent to not only the archeology of the text but also to Bartle's complete separation with beginnings (past) and ends (future).

Although Brooks tends to focus solely on the psychology of the text, the present study will also address that of characters using Terr's analytics, Caruth's spatiotemporal hypothesis, and Lacan's structural framework to draw a middle ground between text and characters. To sketch out the structure of the present investigation, the chapter starts by examining time perception during and after traumatic events using Terr's study as a frame

of reference. Second, it discusses the persistence of trauma through spatiotemporal markers. Finally, the chapter benefits primarily from Lacan's quilting points coupled with Brooks's narrative economy to convert the opacity of the plot into a coherent piece of art.

Since Lacan, Caruth, and Brooks turn to Freud to explain the phenomenon of repetition, it is tempting to base the study on their assumptions for each figure contributes somehow to another, creating a meeting ground through which the analysis centers. Likewise, Terr's psychoanalytic survey oscillates with these Neo-Freudian figures in that all tend to emphasize the separation of the past and the present, on the one hand, and the disappearance of the future or narrative ends, on the other.

Thus, each premise interweaves with the other in untangling the complex web of Powers' fiction and in carrying out the structuring of its analysis. Following Terr's hypotheses, the chapter starts by analyzing time perception both during and after traumatic encounters. Next, it examines the disruption of the traditional space-time pattern as the narrator moves between three different locations in one temporal juncture, revealing the permanent nature of trauma. Finally, the chapter scrutinizes Powers's complex structuring of *Birds*, which through an arduous task of collecting metonymies, reveals the metaphorical meaning of the narrative as a whole.

3.1. "Like the Hands of an Obscene Clock": Time Inside and Outside the Combat Zone

Birds chronicles events inside and outside the battlefield, blurring the boundaries separating time at the homefront and the frontline. Since battles take place in no man's land, manmade chronology metamorphoses into an "obscene clock" (170; ch. 8) that takes matters into its own hands; and because war happens outside the spectrum of the day-to-day human experience, everything that falls within its grips becomes subject to

speculation. From beginning to end, this aberration occupies, all at once, a major role in the life of Bartle, the narrator, the soldier, and the veteran.

The beginning of the story takes us immediately to the aura of the combat zone of Al Tafari where the narrator, despite his inclination to situate the scene in September 2004, fails to anchor soldierly events into a specific timeline. When September comes, soldiers lose sight of the autumnal change normally accompanied by fallen leaves and yellowish vegetation. Unlike Virginia's "pre-autumnal yellow" (137; ch. 7) leaves hanging over the canopies Al Tafari's fallen bodies line up the place, hiding in the alleys and bloating inside the hills, adding up to the debris of the space they occupy (5; ch. 1). Whereas in Richmond snow curiously distinguishes one day from the previous one, in the desert, the diurnal cycle is marked by "undistinguishable dawns and dusks," (7; ch. 1) hours passing into others, and minutes ticking into the past (208; ch. 10), creating, in McLoughlin's words, the impression of "monotony," "intermittency," and "automatism" carried through an elongated temporality (113).

Unchanged, "long indistinguishable days" (164; ch. 8) in the desert heat, unlike the empty days of Richmond, carry along arduous tasks ranging from daily patrolling and crawling along rooftops, to taking turns on guard (5; ch. 1), "sleeping for two hours and nodding off behind [their] rifles for one" (75; ch. 4). Here, the prolongation of duty appears longer and the constant exertion of effort carries a sense of automatism with special attention to the passage of hours. At other times, however, they track its passage, not through the ticking of the clock's arrows but, rather, through the muezzin's call to prayer (7; ch. 1), which implies the feeling of predictability resulting from the endless repetition of events.

These binary oppositions, separating "seasonless" (51; ch. 3) Iraq from autumnal Virginia, discernible from indiscernible days, and empty from loaded hours, indicate the

extent through which the timeless desert bears upon the supposedly well-timed city (Richmond), on the one hand, and war upon the natural cycle, on the other. The latter appears when, in Germany, Bartle reflects on the Iraqi season thinking, “in the desert our year seemed like a seasonless thing, except in fall” (51; ch. 3); and, in another passage, he remembers how “the bloody parade in fall” exceptionally marks “the change of season” (91; ch. 4). Since all battles take place in September or October 2004, the war itself marks a seasonal change rather than the natural cycle, indicating a state of traumatic numbness towards the external world. As Mann notes, “the Iraqi landscape appropriates Bartle’s physiological and psychological trauma through images of wounded bodies bleeding into a wounded landscape” (4).

In addition to reversing the natural cycle, Powers nullifies manmade chronology by representing the psychological apparition of time during and after traumatic collisions. During combat stress, time, as Terr argues, either quickens or slows down, pointing out to not only a dislodged temporality but also the immediacy of the traumatic experience. To illustrate, shortly before the death of Malik, the squad hides behind a narrow clay hovel where, suddenly, bullets storm the place, killing the interpreter instantly. In the interim period, Bartle sees the trajectory movement of one moment to the other as something both “finite and expansive, like the endless divisibility of numbers strung out on a line” (11; ch. 1).

In another battle, he sees bullets coming so quickly that the time it takes him to react seems “imperceptible”; he is “struck by a kind of lethargy, in awe of the decisiveness of every single attenuated moment, observed in minute detail” (117; ch. 6). Right away, someone pulls him down to the floor, and voices start shouting out: “Three o’clock, f[*]cking three o’clock!” and, though he has not seen anyone firing, he promptly squeezes the trigger of his rifle (117; ch. 6).

Still, in a more shocking event taking place at the medic's headquarters, where Murph and Bartle have been contemplating a compassionate nurse crying over the death of a soldier when all of a sudden they hear the sound of approaching mortars:

A bright sound like the sky had become a boiling kettle. We looked at each other, Murph and I, dumbly staring into our own infinity made up of fractions upon fractions of seconds. For one brief incalculable moment we were not brave or afraid.... I didn't count the mortars. All measures of time and increment were discarded like childish superstitions.... fires ablaze here and there, and parts of cheap knockoff watches had been scattered in the open spaces around the bazaar. Their bent and broken faces counted time without standard. (166-7; 169; ch. 8)

Together with the earlier events, the last episode most strikingly denudes the clock from its conventional calculations that commonly assign specific durations to narrative events. Instead of duration, the narrator charges the given moment with a certain magnitude that not only encumbers readers' expectations but also diminishes their ability to measure anything whatsoever.

Yet, despite the unfeasibility of the event, in terms of measurements, readers can read the traumatic discourse buried under the space of temporal ruins. The "endless" "imperceptible" "attenuated" moments conspire with feelings of "awe" and "lethargy," to picture, in Lacanian terms, the image of the Real against the Symbolic standardization of time.

Reformulating Lacan's triadic frame, Chenyang Wang argues that the Real has its temporal order called "Real time" that must be experienced in a Real body, and, like trauma, it cannot be "measured by watch, clock, or calendar" (41). Similarly, Bartle's experience of impending physical pain, which by definition, suspends the present

moment, dumbs his temporal judgement, which justifies his inability to calculate, count, or measure the assault. Simultaneously, Murph and Bartle's initial failure to feel neither "brave" nor "afraid" explains the fleetingness of the moment taking place before the manifestation of any feelings whatsoever. The most striking example, however, appears in Powers' metaphorical wreckage of the "knockoff watches" bending their faces on the ground, which touches upon the fraudulence of manmade chronology that now turns ineffective.

Powers' capacity to blend Symbolic time with Real-time, then favors the latter over the former, urges readers to fathom other possibilities unanticipated in ordinary life. Much like Lacan, he asks his readers to imagine time as something that has escaped the ego, something that refuses comparison with any former experience of consciousness (Wang 66). Paralyzed, Bartle sees bullets approaching in "minute details" (117; ch. 6), suggesting the slow movement of time accompanied by psychic numbing, like when someone pulls him down to the floor. Marked by "pure evanescence," "The Now is not time, but an essential component of time. It is absolute immediacy without either the past or the future. It passes as soon as the organism tries to hold this Now" (Wang 56). Again, Murph and Bartle's feeling neither "brave nor afraid" shows the acceleration of seconds during the offensive that escapes their organism for "a brief incalculable moment".

Balanced against Real time, is Symbolic time that the writer also uses for readers to discern between different psychic reactions. While Real time temporarily shuts down the ego, the clock, as Wang argues, works as a Symbolic force that supervises Man's actions (33-4), pressing the organism to act accordingly. In this case, during the offensive, Bartle pauses momentarily, yet when someone shouts "3 o'clock", he automatically fires back knowing it is the usual hour of battle.

In another episode, an Iraqi insurgent runs behind a hovel, looking around in astonishment while cradling his weapon in his arms. Surprised by his own survival, the man refrains from firing back but, then dies at the hands of Bartle who, with a great shock, realizes that he is shooting at him. Reading this sequence from the lenses of survival psychology, Alosman and Raihanah note that the insurgent fails to act accordingly because he is enveloped with too much information that at once confuses him and impairs his cognitive functions (144).

Adding to Alosman and Raihanah's criticism, this passage indicates, as well, that the man blunders because time quickens so much during the operation that it takes longer for his organism to respond appropriately. While Bartle, despite his belatedly shocking realization, reacts automatically, the man fumbles at the sight of the enemy, causing him to die not of fearfulness but postponement. Here, the confluence of the Symbolic with the Real, the conscious with the unconscious, and the automatic with the lethargic allow us to see in the unseeable, hear in the unhearable, and, above all, read in the unreadable.

Much like the psychological brevity of combat stress, Powers alludes to the fleetingness of individual lives caught up in the grips of warfare. Unlike noncombatants, soldiers return home morally older than they physically seem in that the weight of experience undoes their innocence and strengthens their character. This seeming acceleration of years within a short period or the "misperception of time duration" (Terr 251) happens mostly after distressing life events. In *Things*, for example, Rat Kiley notices that, upon their arrival in Vietnam, everyone in the company seems "young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit" (102; ch. 9); and, in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Billy feels older than nineteen years old, "as if blessed with a wisdom beyond his years. Had the war done this?" Fountain asks (135).

Likewise, during his furlough, Bartle sees his mother's hands a little more wrinkled, leading him to question whether it has only been a year since their last meeting (108). In another episode, he reflects on Murph's quick passage into maturation: "I'd had this idea once that you had to grow old before you died. I still feel like there is some truth to it, because Daniel Murphy had grown old in the ten months I'd known him" (30; ch. 2). Just then, he goes on thinking: "All I really know for sure is that no matter how long I live, and no matter how I spend that time ... Murph's always going to be eighteen, and he's always going to be dead" (32; ch. 2).

While at first, the narrator assigns an *obscene* power to the clock's hands for wearing out Murph's innocence in a matter of ten months, later, he suspends its function altogether, creating, in McLoughlin's words, "the impression of stasis" (113). The latter hints at "a sense of endlessness," "a chronic now," and "an immediate sensation of being trapped in the present" (113-14). His "sure" conviction that Murph, despite his psychological and physical death, will "always" be young indicates his everlasting recollections of the war. Following McLoughlin's premise, the expressions: "always," "no matter how long," and "how I spend that time" evoke a sense of traumatic chronicity.

Above all, the episode hints at a sense of disillusionment and the gradual demythologization of "romantic bullshits" surrounding heroism, in particular, and war, in general. This is evident, for example, in Bartle's numbness towards the external world upon his return home: "I forgot ... the people walking past, I forgot the travelers who called out their thanks to me. I was aware of my mother and of her alone. I felt as if I'd somehow been returned to the singular safety of the womb, untouched and untouchable to the world outside ..." (109; ch. 5). Disillusioned, he disregards the people passing by and the travelers showing gratitude for his heroic deeds. Yet, against the disconcerting

noise of the people stands his mother's soothing "womb," protecting him from the outside world (109; ch. 5).

Whereas Alosman and Raihanah relate the imagery of the "womb" to Bartle's safety back home (147), it suggests a return to a place of quiescence removed from all terrestrial dwellings. In psychoanalytical terms, it reconceptualizes Freud's thought on "temporal regression," which involves a return to older psychic states ("Psychology" 549). Rereading Freud's dream work, Laplanche and Pontalis define it as "the reemergence of the past in the present" in which the subject returns to "a baby at the breast" or to "the foetal state" (386-7). Touched by the horrors of the war, Bartle, thus, regresses to his prenatal stage to feel, at least imaginarily, the reassuring warmth of a safe habitat where innocence and virtue reign. Overall, this desire to digress into past psychic states points to double narrative genres: it functions as a *bildungsroman*, through the protagonists' quick passage into maturation, and figuratively as an anti-*bildungsroman*, through Bartle's wish to return to the safety of the womb.

Where the frontline entrusts the present to convey an obscene chronology, the homefront entrusts it to either divest the future from its progressive pathway or to retrace the footsteps of the past. "The shrinking of time to the immediate present," Susan Brison assumes, "is experienced not only during the traumatizing events but also in their aftermath, at least until the traumatic episode is integrated into the survivor's life narrative" (44). For her, narrative memory gives form and chronology to traumatic recollections, allowing the survivor to regain control over the self; it does not necessarily promise recovery, but can promote healthy outcomes when the wound finds appropriate words as well as sympathetic listeners to whom the person can transmit the experience (40; 46). Failure to meet these requirements blocks the therapeutic process (Brison 46) and, thus, the construction of a coherent narrative.

In his *Odysseus* return home, Bartle not only fails to find sympathetic listeners with whom he can share his ordeals but also lacks the appropriate words through which he can communicate his traumatization. Yet, he finds the immediate ruins of memory circling back and forth between the past and the future in an attempt to form a formless narrative, redeeming him from the absurdity of coherence and linearity.

At the front, Murph tells Bartle that he is never going to tell anyone anything when he gets back home (164; ch. 8). Similarly, when in Germany, Bartle finds comfort in “the absence of talk,” and in people’s inability to understand his language, allowing him to feel, at least once, “that his separation was explicable, a mere failing of language” rather than an error of a “different cause” (52-3; ch. 3).

In addition, upon his return to Richmond, Bartle locks himself in his room, refusing to talk to his friends, to the Criminal Investigation Division, or even to his mother who, when she furiously asks him what happens over there, he thinks: “How do you answer the unanswerable? To say what happened, the mere facts, the disposition of events in time, would come to seem like a kind of treachery. The dominoes of moments, lined up symmetrically, then tumbling backward against the hazy and unsure push of cause, showed only that a fall is every object’s destiny (148; ch. 7).”

In line with the cited passages, the narrator fails to testify for his traumatization, not for a loss of willfulness but of words. In Germany, he equates the absence of speech and listeners with the foreignness of the language and the strange faces of its speakers, passing by incognizant of his journey; and at home, he finds it hard to speak of the unspeakable or to order events linearly, which bears on both the form and content of the story. Accordingly, Bartle’s “separation” is twofold: he is alienated from humankind because of his inability to answer whoever questions, and from himself which bars him from language itself. By comparing moments to “dominoes,” lining up uniformly and

then falling back against the force of causation, Powers objectifies human downfall whose fate seems no different from other objects.

Moreover, by endowing his experience with an “unanswerable” quality and negating the existence of the future, he does not only use the present moment to defer the wound, but also to nullify the course of every human destiny. Thus, unlike Brison’s promising claim, the narrator does not use the present to reclaim the past and, thus, reconstruct the future; rather, he employs it to repeat trauma under a new guise – exemplified in the absence of words and listeners alike- and to dispossess the future from its illusive quality.

The same characteristic follows throughout the story where the protagonist, following his return home, ceaselessly reconfigures the past to fit within his narrative. Revisiting the past, he longs for different courses of action that might have saved Murph’s life and brought him back to his mother, LaDonna Murphy, safely. Looking back now, he wonders whether he “saw any hint of what was coming,” or whether there “was some shadow over him, some way [he] could have known he was so close to being killed” (24-5; ch. 1). Sometimes, he mourns his incapability to see his friend “giving up” (82; ch. 4) on life, that if he has comforted him after each assault, he would not have gone astray (120; ch. 6).

At other times, however, he rejects being accountable for Murph’s gradual disintegration, because he has been disintegrating as well: “I could have gone to Murph, but I did not. I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to be responsible for him. I had enough to worry about. I was disintegrating, too” (120; ch. 2). Terr calls this desire to change the past “retrospective presifting,” in which victims form “omens” to not only cope with the present but also to control the past; they look for signs, a turning point, or a chance farther

back in time to change past actions, escape mechanisms or attitudes that they now consider inefficient (253).

Condemned to the present moment, Bartle frequently repeats the past, granting each repetition new thoughts, different feelings, or other behavioral patterns that might have prevented Murph's death. Since trauma is marked by transience, it comes back later to repeat, in many forms, its missed encounter with the Real; time as such, Wang adds, becomes Real past rather than a normal past, standing out as a particular moment within chronology (66). In this way, the narrator's recourse to the past via the present reads as the manifestation of trauma throughout various temporal junctures that not only shape the present but also render the future no different than the past.

In agreement with the previous claim, *Birds* recourses as well to the immediate narrative moment to negatively architecture the future. Yet, while in the previous analysis, Bartle revisits the past to imagine a better alternative, in the present one, he visits the future to deflect the course of his destiny. According to Terr, trauma survivors dwell on the future either through "sense prediction," which happens during the state of dreaminess or wakefulness, or through "foreshortened" images of the future," which tend to obstruct upcoming life events (256; 259). Nowhere does this futureless image more perfectly represent this state than in the works of Holocaust survivor Primo Levi.

In *If this is a Man*, for instance, Levi recounted how, inside concentration camps, "one learns quickly to wipe out the past and the future when one is forced to" (33). In another instance, he questioned the vanity of every moment: "why worry oneself trying to read into the future when no action, no word of ours could have the minimum influence" (135). Likewise, in *Birds*, Powers, aware of the inefficiency of words, does not look for the future to redeem the past; rather, he impairs its forward movement so that his life circles around the same hollow axis. In the combat zone, John realizes with great

astonishment that war wrecks everybody's destiny, and eventually its unique purpose will be "to go on, only to go on" (4; ch. 1).

Equivalently, in Germany, he compares the undetermined course of his destiny to that of the German people who, much like him, have struggled to make meaning out of "an undetermined future" that keeps displaying "what happened and [their] watching it" (63; ch. 3). This condition of evenness that goes on unchanged represents Bartle's wish to control some portion of time in the future that has escaped him in the past. In Freudian terms, it is the death drive or the organism's wish to die on its own terms (*Beyond* 33), to repeat the experience according to its own desired pattern so that destiny proceeds through a manner of willfulness rather than through mere happenstance.

In a more desperate moment, the narrator reflects further on this directionless path and the impossibility of moving forward:

You want to fall, that's all. You think it can't go on like that. It's as if your life is a perch on the edge of a cliff and going forward seems impossible, not for a lack of will, but a lack of space. The possibility of another day stands in defiance of the laws of physics. And you can't go back. So you want to fall, let go, give up, but you can't. And every breath you take reminds you of that fact. So it goes. (134-5; ch. 7)

The passage brings to mind McLoughlin's concept of the "past-less" and the "future-less" (112) that robs the subject from all temporal directions. It also recalls Levinas' philosophical conceptions of "fatigue" and "indolence" that suspend the chronological flow of time into either the future or back to the past. While indolence speaks of "the impossibility of beginning", fatigue, on the other hand, expresses "the impossibility of following through" (*Existence* 26; 30). Strictly speaking, the former hints at an existential interruption with beginnings, and the latter to a state of tiresomeness

towards the unknown future. Ontologically divorced, the protagonist sets sail and cuts the moorings, deserting the contract signed with existence (Levinas, *Existence* 27; 29).

Standing on the edge of time, he can neither follow through nor go back out of exhaustion rather than out of unwillingness; he wishes to jump off the cliff, to forget, at least momentarily, the toll of experience that goes on unmeasured by Newtonian physics. Finally, the Vonnegutian motif “so it goes” (30; ch. 1) reinforces the persistence of the wound across various spatial markers. As the following section will discuss in more detail, the inseparability of time to place and their indispensable role in revealing the periodic nature of trauma allows us to travel effortlessly between different locations in one chronological juncture.

3.2. Space-Time Continuum and the Reconfiguration of Traumatic Memories

To build on the previous claim, *Birds* insinuates a counterintuitive stand against the “laws of physics” in its reconfiguring of traumatic memories through a space-time continuum. In physics, the traditional theory of Isaac Newton’s absolute or straightforward time fails to account for the narrator’s troubled recollections, because time cannot flow backwards. Against Newton’s absolutism, however, stands Albert Einstein’s relativism, which the narrator unconsciously favors for its inclusion of three spatial horizons and one temporal dimension. Combined, the four-dimensional structure flows in a continuum, allowing the storyteller to travel back and forth in time. Although the theoretical basis of physics stands outside the scope of literary analysis, its implications for modern, postmodern, and contemporary aesthetics help explain some of the most important alterations within narrative time.

To elucidate, Einstein’s scientific breakthrough in 1905 radically changed the long-established Newtonian time that had been, until then, the basis of scientific,

philosophical, and artistic applications. Along with the major sciences, the Theory of Relativity seemed to confirm the psychological belief in subjective time inaugurated in the writings of Freud, which were circulating at the time of Einstein's scientific publications.

In addition to changes in thought, the First and the Second World Wars had further reinforced the idiosyncratic view of space-time as survivors, diagnosed with PTSD, relived trauma in "another place and in another time" (*Trauma* 7). This scientific turn, Gerhard Hoffman argues, greatly shaped modern literature, since writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner make the mental correlation of space and time more intimate in their writings. The same applies to postmodern art as the writings of theoretical physicists such as Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* confirmed the Einsteinian proposition that time is a construct of the mind (qtd. in Hoffman 270).

Thus, the philosophical implications of twentieth-century physics unwittingly apply to *Birds* in that the now moment of narration occupies three spatial horizons: Iraq, Germany, and America. Borrowing Einstein's spatio-temporal continuum, this section demonstrates that space constantly reconfigures traumatic memories as the narrator travels across different locations. Most importantly, by metaphorically juxtaposing the distorted space of Iraq against the Newtonian orderly universe of America, the novel accounts for Bartle's "complete" (61; ch. 3) separation from terrestrial "laws" (134; ch. 7). Combining Caruth's spacetime premise with some philosophical principles of physics ultimately unravels the double nature of trauma moving back and forth between reality and fantasy, causing readers to escape, at least briefly, the confines of Newtonian time.

Linking one recollection with another requires a blending of narrative actions spatially which, like in relativity, connects with a single temporality – constituting at once the present, past, and future – rather than with a series of sequential events. Through a

space-time continuum, unlike through continuity, the narrator links a set of episodes nonlinearly where the end-result creates a unique meaning that reads as a traumatic discourse. Since trauma annuls pre-constructed beliefs, its aftermath allows for a reconceptualization of basic realities such as identity, space, and time (Wendy O'Brien 210). Accordingly, Bartle, having lost his fundamental notions of reasoning, redefines the world in proportion to his troubled memories of the war. At home, everything reminds him of something else and every thought he blossoms outward or backward attaches itself to another memory (134; ch. 7).

The most troubling memory, which readers encounter repeatedly throughout the story, narrates the events leading up to Murph's death and Bartle's complicity with sergeant Sterling over his actual disappearance. To sum up this anecdote, Murph goes AWOL (absent without official leave) after witnessing the death of Iraqi insurgents by multitudes, including the passing of an innocent nurse after the explosion of the medical headquarters. Disarmed and unclothed, he wanders alone in the Iraqi desert like a featherless bird whose destination has gone astray. When his company learns of his disappearance, sergeant Sterling along with private Bartle go in quest of his location where he is eventually found mutilated and thrown down the top of a minaret.

Unable to look straight at his body, they decide to throw it down the Tigris River for the simple reason that his mother, LaDonna, would not bear the sight of his disfigurement. Although this narrative action originally takes place in the combat zone, the narrator repeatedly revisits the scene in postwar climates. Each place endows the event with another meaning that repeatedly reconfigures the wound. In a circular pattern, he jumps from one memory to the next, from one place to another, and from one moment to all moments.

The most tantalizing recollection appears in Powers' imagery of light, which from the standpoint of physics explains Bartle's deeply seated anxiety. In relativity, Einstein confirmed the constancy of the speed of light regardless of space direction and time duration. This means, at the speed of light, time stops completely or dilates if a clock moves relatively; the bigger the velocity of speed, the slower time elapses (World Science Festival). In simple terms, nothing can outpace the velocity of light, not even time, and the quicker a clock moves relative to light, the slower it runs. Unlike the moving clock, the narrator recreates Murph's memory in an inertial state, which indicates that time stops when trauma breaks through.

To illustrate, upon his return home, The Criminal Investigation Division holds Bartle accountable for throwing his comrade's corpse in the Tigris River. On his way to captivity, he asks the captain to stop at the center of the bridge to throw Murph's card and his own down the river, then watches them float downstream until they disappear forever out of sight (189; ch. 9). Right away, he turns his gaze across the river where he sees the world "in fractions of seconds, like the imperceptible flicker of light between frames of film, the long unrecorded moments" that make up his life, like a movie that has been playing all along (189; ch. 9). The most interesting thing about this event, as Caruth argues, lies not only in the process of repetition but also in the storyteller's voice that shouts out the wound (*Unclaimed* 2). Although common sense confirms that no terrestrial atom can travel at the speed of light, Bartle overthrows this principle when he sees his entire history in milliseconds, snapshot after snapshot, playing simultaneously in his head; a "reduction of a whole lifetime of experience into a split second" (Daniel O'Gorman 558).

Indeed, the fact that he appears untroubled by his imminent custody suggests that he loses contact with the real world, let alone with time; and, throwing the two cards

together means that he dies along with Murph back in the Tigris. Imagining all history at once, he, thus, stops time for a millisecond to go back in time and be able to see Murph once again, but this time in the James River. Here, the river symbolizes death in that it reconfigures Murph's loss in the James after its missed encounter in the Tigris. Yet, despite his desire to repeat the action, the narrator does not tell us anything about these "frames of film" that may redeem his past; rather, he shows that those "unrecorded moments" will "be forever burned into [his] memories" (206; ch. 10). Hence, by perceiving the past, present, and future synchronously, the light metaphor both negates the universal notion of time and shouts out Bartle's unredeemable loss.

To dwell further on this condition, Powers shows how the psychological sequela of Iraq bears on the harmonious landscape of Virginia. In late summer, for instance, memories of the past come rushing down as the warm breeze ripples the water, bringing him back to "nothing" and, yet to "everything" (134; ch. 7). He hears the yelp of dogs booming out from Shamash Gate (a site in the city of Nineveh, Iraq) to Richmond along with the caw of crows striking in "perfect harmony with the memory of the sound of falling mortars" (134; ch. 7). Involuntarily, he compares the echo of these dogs to those looming the streets of Al Tifar "filled with explosives" (145; ch. 7) or to enemy soldiers throwing down mortars. In anticipation of an imaginary threat, he thinks "I, at home now, might brace for the impact, come on, you [motherf*ckers], I'd think" (134; ch. 7).

Then, he sees his mother's body "silhouetted in the kitchen window" (134; ch. 7) just like those soldiers in the battleground. Here, the word "silhouetted" has a double connotation: it may truly refer to his mother's silhouette standing "now" next to the kitchen's window, or to her illusive death. The latter, suggests, that Powers euphemistically substitutes the word "death" for "silhouetted" because, back in Iraq, the

squad prefers the latter over the former, like when Murph warns Malik of an impending attack saying “Careful, big guy. You’re gonna get silhouetted” (10; ch. 1).

The same scenario repeats shortly before his custody. When the captain reminds him of his crime, he pauses for a while to experience other moments in time:

I felt like a scum then, worse, and still do, so sometimes, on days when I remember well, when there is a deer gone down to drink in the creek behind my cabin and I get my rifle out and for the hundredth time don’t shoot the thing and just sit there starting to tremble and then the sun is out, I’ll realize I can’t smell any of it, not the burned powder, not the metal on fire ...or the stink of shit in the Tigris, where we waded up to our thighs that day. I think maybe it was my fault ... no it didn’t happen, well, not like that, but it’s hard to say sometimes: half of memory is imagination anyway. (186; ch. 9)

It is impossible not to identify in the above passage a sense of what Rothberg calls “traumatic realism” in which the narrator acquires a “double-consciousness of the simultaneous novelty and deadly sameness of the postwar world” (14), or as Powers puts it, a sense of “newness and continuity at once” (54; ch. 3). While novel elements appear in the imagery of the deer and Bartle’s automatic reaction, “sameness” recurs in images of “burned powder,” “metal on fire,” and “the stink of shit in the Tigris”. Together, the familiar (deer) and the bizarre (Tigris) produce a nonrealistic realist view of the world (Rothberg 9). Besides, the peculiar intersection of tenses shifting from the past, in units of language like “then,” “waded,” and “didn’t,” to the present, in active verbs like “do,” “get,” “sit,” and “say,” then to the future, in “I’ll,” combines the Symbolic with the Real in a simultaneous vein. For Rothberg, it also hints at the time interval between witnessing

and narrating the experience: “the shift in tense ... registers the time lag between testimony and the events to which it bears witness” (Rothberg 162).

Despite his desire to testify the Real, the narrator, nevertheless, diverts readers’ gaze towards ordinary elements through the act of deferral. Here, it is important to note that the act of testimony and deferral are interchangeable because, in war narratives, testimony generally testifies through deferral. It is mostly a virtuous act that needs to be undertaken, Rothberg notes, “even if what is communicated is the very failure of the limit of communication” (162). The narrator’s ethical endeavor surfaces when he confesses his crime, “maybe it was my fault,” when he disclaims the true version of the episode being narrated, “it’s hard to say sometimes,” and, most importantly, when he negates the existence of the events in play, “no it didn’t happen”. Ultimately, the dividing line separating trauma from realism or testimony from truth occurs in the final sentence when he confesses that “half of memory is imagination,” which further confirms the intersection of these binary expressions.

More of this strange quality takes place in Germany where the impression of simultaneity takes a more patent approach as the novelist superimposes various images within a single narrative moment. Hoffman affords a clear-cut interpretation to the concept of simultaneity in postmodern fiction, defining it as the infinite expansion of time or the blending of multiple perspectives into a single moment where situations, positions, or characters fuse in a way that melds them into one (304). As Vonnegut puts it, “What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen at one time” (112; ch. 5). In Germany, for instance, he sees Murph in the paintings of the saints hung on the walls of the cathedral. In his imagination, “there went Murph, floating down toward that bend in the Tigris, where he passed beneath the shadow of the mound where Jonah was buried, his eyes just cups now for the water that he floated in, the fish having begun to

tear his flesh already” (60-1; ch. 3). Using the device of simultaneity, Powers uses the past, the present, and the present perfect tense in a single sentence.

The fusion of tenses appears inconceivable from the lenses of Symbolic time because Bartle needs to be present in the Tigris, under the water, and in the cathedral simultaneously. However, by substituting the clock with Real time, he can travel far back in time to when “Jonah was buried,” (to fit within the context of the cathedral) when his friend floated down the Tigris, and “now” when the fish begin to eat his “flesh”. More importantly, despite the absence of any indicators of future tenses, readers can read the hereafter in the speaker’s attempt to frame his friend’s destiny prospectively.

Yet, towards the end of the story, this episode takes a slightly different approach that complements his former supposition:

I saw Murph as I’d seen him last, but beautiful.... A pair of soldiers watched his passage, one calling out to the battered body while the other slept,... but the body that he called out to would have been by then, little more than skeleton ... And I saw his body finally break apart near the mouth of the gulf, where the shadows of the date palms fell in long, dark curtains on his bones, now scattered, and swept them out to sea, toward a line of waves that break forever as he enters them. (226; ch. 11)

Again, the element of synchronicity makes it difficult for readers to determine whether the speaker sees Murph in the lived past or the recollected one. Also, the expression “as I’d seen him last” may either refer to his “last” visualization of his friend in the Tigris, or his prior recollection in Germany; and, the use of the adjective “beautiful” euphemistically diverts readers’ gaze from the true horrors underlying the “battered” body. It alleviates the wound by masking its ugliness with beauty, which is similar to, what Walthall, in reading Powers’ poetic closure, calls ““a regenerative pastoral elegy,””

a technique that uses elements from nature – in this case, the “date palms,” “the sea,” and “the waves” – to mask the hideous knowledge behind human finitude (10-11). While the “beautiful” takes place in his imagining of the scene in Virginia, that is because the ego tends to repeat the experience according to its own desired image, the “battered” imagery of the body happens in real Iraq, creating double imagery and double temporality.

Besides, the sentence following the first ellipsis adds extra bewilderment regarding the watchers of his journey down the river, in that the “pair of soldiers” refers back to Bartle and Sterling. This episode represents more than just a “story of separation,” as Mann suggests (9), but rather a re-experiencing of the wound that Bartle involuntarily repeats in his war story. While Sterling, more resilient to stress, bids farewell to Murph by calling him out, Bartle falls into a state of traumatic numbness similar to a state of dormancy. This state suggests that he has probably never seen the body floating down the river and, thus, feels the need to repeat the scenario in Virginia and Germany.

Additionally, although the “now” and the “then” equally hint at the final dissolution of the body into the shape of a “skeleton” or “bones,” they cannot exist concurrently. Indeed, the final sentence uses the present tense, “as he enters,” to indicate a state of perpetuity that blurs the distinction between either the real and imaginative witnessing of the scene or both at the same time. Above all, it indicates the movement of the imagination from the past and the present to create a similar vision of the hereafter.

At other times, however, the narrator invokes his future, restructuring it according to previous life experiences. Much like Freud’s death drive, Terr’s hypothesis of “sense prediction,” which happens either during the waking state or in dreamfulness, aims at reclaiming the past by controlling future events (259). To achieve this end, Bartle conjures the hereafter to acquire some sort of freedom over his falling world that hopelessly wishes to architecture its own demise. Since the war in Iraq cuts his ties with beginnings, he

labors, at least imaginarily, to control his ending. Yet, much like his perception of the deceased on the battlefield or his visualization of the Tigris, his anticipated end looms around mortality.

Sitting up indolently in the dark, he runs through all the possibilities that lay ahead of him. At times, he becomes certain that he will die, then certain he will be wounded, and then uncertain of anything (44; ch. 2). At other times, he envisions his death so concretely that it looks like he is hurtled into the future, muttering under the roof of an urban landscape (157; ch. 8). In a state of dreaminess, he goes on to imagine his life underground where graves line up, decorated by falling petals and his mother mourning. “I made her cry,” he fancies, “I saw the solidity of the earth, the worms, the flag and the tin box fading away and I saw brown earth forever” (158-9; ch. 8). Here, it is impossible for the speaking “I” to be at once underground seeing “the worms” and “the earth,” and aground seeing “the flag,” “the box,” and his mother crying. Yet, because the past and the present both loom around death, the future follows the same course of action.

Unable to join the beginning with the end, Bartle designs his eventual death in accordance with his traumatization, so that the future looks no different from the past or the present. Even when he tries to reclaim the future, he does so not to reclaim the past, as Precup argues, but rather to endow his existence with the same sense of simultaneity. His structuring of the future in such a fatalistic tone along with his willingness to remove himself from such spatial and temporal orders reveals his total separation and disenchantment with the “sweet, unwounded banality” (157; ch. 8) of his world.

Occupying three spaces and one temporality, *Birds*, thus, does not rely on the Newtonian clock in its restructuring of the ineffable. Writing “in and of an altered sense of time,” the novelist, however, captures “a past that won’t stay past and a future that won’t come into vision” (Wendy O’Brien 211). Although the protagonist succeeds in

revisiting the past and the future, he fails to reclaim them or reconstruct them into a conventionally coherent narrative; and, even though he occupies three spaces, none of them shelters him from the absurdity of postwar life.

Yet, the double nature of his narrative memory teaches us the inseparability of time to place and their indispensable role in revealing the periodic nature of trauma. “It is both an escape and a return,” Wendy O’Brien writes, a meeting ground where the traumatic meets the everyday without reducing the one to the other (217-8). All the same, this peculiar archeology of the mind, despite its apparent departure from linear chronology, plots the text through a complex web of metonymic signifiers that ultimately reveal the metaphoric unity of the text.

3.3. “Like a Tattered Quilt of Falling Stars”: Plotting Meaning through Substitution and Delay

Whereas the previous sections examine the inseparability of time to space and the effect of traumatic events on psychological time, this section discusses the indissoluble link between the archeology of the mind and the structuring of war fiction. Combining memory with imagination, it argues that the circularity of *Birds* rejects the chronological sequencing of events, leaving the end of the story unattended and the narrator’s desire unfulfilled. Rather, it shows a condition of stasis in the process of repetition and the constant deferral of the metaphoric signified, on the one hand, and a sense of disillusionment surrounding beginnings, middles, and ends, on the other.

This section, somehow, builds on a previous study by O’Gorman, in which he devotes a two-page analysis interpreting the simile: “like a tattered quilt of falling stars” (556-8). While this critic uses the simile to show, through a completely different approach, the broken sense of humanity and the fragmented nature of the world literally conveyed in *Birds*, this detailed section uses it to show the disconnected pattern of the

plot that, by knotting together different metonyms, reveals a limited sense of human subjectivity. Indeed, it draws importance not only to the major characters of the novel, but also minor ones whose significant roles have rarely attracted the attention of reviewers.

Given the complex archeology of the text, the section briefly starts by commenting on the nonlinear progression of actions to show how the text departs from conventional modes of writing. Next, it plots meaning by quilting each signifier with its substitute, which finally reveals the metaphoric unity of the whole narrative. The overall aim, however, is to demonstrate that *Birds* structures order in disorder, experience outside experience, and, most importantly, meaning outside language.

Unlike in traditional plots, it is difficult to say when *Birds* begins or, for that matter, when it ends in that the major events of the story, despite their different spatiotemporal hallmarks, carry the impression of perpetuity from beginning to end. While the book formally starts in Iraq in 2004 and ends in Kentucky in 2009, with some middle zigzags, it is still not obvious whether it begins where it ends or the other way around. To elucidate, the opening paragraphs of the novel immediately break the element of suspense that generally keeps the reading process going. Without notice, readers learn that Murph dies even before getting to know his part in the whole equation or the reasons culminating in his death.

Then, within the same chapter, he appears again with the rest of the platoon fighting on top of a roof only to be later killed by another flash of memory, constantly moving between the “then” and the “now (4-5; ch. 1). As the story progresses towards the past, LaDonna Murphy supposedly receives a letter from her deceased son, which, again, leaves no suspense as to why the letter is written by John Bartle rather than by Daniel Murph (29-30; ch. 2). The same process follows throughout the subsequent

sections as the plot constantly disheartens readers' expectations by portraying, for example, Daniel floating down the Tigris earlier in the story or John's punishment by the Criminal Investigation Division before his actual crime.

Still, the middle does not climax around any important event or a turning point that commonly pushes readers to carry on reading; instead, it fails to communicate something new to the audience and disappears from the stage altogether. However, it keeps a shadowy presence that seemingly occupies the entire narration, since every section of the book gradually intensifies the traumata surrounding the war. Instead of acting as a rising action, the climax rises readers' emotions with every recollection that restates the wound in another place, another time, and, most importantly, another language.

As to the end, the storyteller, much like O'Brien in *Things*, turns into an unreliable narrator, disclaiming the truth behind his craft, calling it "illusory" (217; ch. 22). Also, by referring to the "first day in [his] new cabin" (224; ch. 11) in the concluding sections of the book, he relocates the beginning of the story to the end, since readers, in the first chapter, learn that he is reflecting on the war while in his cabin. Ultimately, his revisualization of Murph in the last paragraph unsettles the tensions raised by the text and, thus, invalidates the illusory principle of narrative resolution.

Moving to the circular structuration of the tale, Powers uses different systems of words with each recollection to, repeatedly, defer signification. Since "all remembrances are assignments of significance" (61; ch. 3), Powers assigns each remembrance a particular meaning that, despite its "misguided archaeology" (138; ch. 7), gradually turns the narrative into a comprehensible whole. The most significant sign in the metonymic chain initially appears in New Jersey in 2003 when Bartle first meets Murph along with LaDonna. Paradoxically, the section begins with a letter that he writes to Murph's mother

on behalf of her son rather than with their actual encounter, which immediately discredits the formal qualities of the chapter (29; ch. 2). In other words, the chapter's spacetime ("New Jersey, 2003") contradicts the letter in that the latter not only describes the end journey of a not yet deceased person, but also the Iraq War that has not yet taken place. Yet, because the narrator assigns each place with a new significance, New Jersey comes to embody the letter and the unfulfilled promise (of keeping her son safe) rather than a mere place of prewar acquaintances.

Within the same section, he quilts the letter with the snow falling on the day LaDonna receives the letter, the day he meets Murph in Fort Dix (New Jersey), and the day he sits in his cabin in Richmond. "With snow falling all around her," she has read the letter, thinking each time that something new will be written there." (30-1; ch. 2) He, then, goes on to say that, before the war, the snow might have meant something special, that "all those million flakes that fall, no two are alike"; but now, looking back from where he sits, all the snowflakes that fall slowly on the ground "look the same" (31; ch. 2). Like the repetitive pattern of the letter, each snowflake appears as nothing more than a repetition of the previous one. Here, Bartle links the New Jersey December snowflakes with those falling in early October in Southwest Virginia (where LaDonna reads the letter), and those of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Thus, in stark contrast to the formal title of the section – "December 2003, Fort Dix, New Jersey" – the signifiers of the "letter" and the "snow" overthrow the principle of chronology by quilting the beginning with the end of the story. This appears, for example, when Captain Anderson from the Criminal Investigation Division comes over to his house to charge him for writing the letter in the name of Murphy. As the punisher walks towards his house, the fugitive likens the sound of his "unceasing" footsteps to the incessant snowflakes; unable to stop him, he asks "the snow to stop, for one reprieve, to

not have to face another *next*” (181; ch. 9). As in the beginning, the letter meets the snow as the narrator meets his punishers either in the figure of LaDonna Murphy or that of the officer, which, together, symbolize his endless culpability.

In a radical move towards the third chapter, he substitutes the “letter” for the “pamphlet” (55; ch. 3) to link, in the absence of linearity, the two sections metonymically. As the title of the chapter suggests – “March, 2005” “Kaiserslautern, Rhineland-Palatine, Germany” – narrative events move from prewar New Jersey 2003 to postwar Germany 2005, disregarding the in-between phase of wartime Iraq 2004. During his aimless walks in the city, Bartle falls into an ancient cathedral whose history lays out neatly inside a three-page pamphlet (59; ch. 3). For him, the pamphlet certainly comes from a “fool” who has, a long time ago, decided to write down the things worth remembering about the whole history of the church in an ordered manner (59; ch. 3). Yet, in his troubled imagination, it is impossible to control when “this happened” or when “that happened next” because all of them necessarily lead to the “present moment” (60; ch. 3). Contemplating the church, the present moment unfolds a different history, leading him to realize that there is a fine contrast between remembering, telling, and the truth and that he will never distinguish one from the other (60; ch. 3).

Just then, he juxtaposes the pamphlet with postwar Germany and the way its people have tried, unlike the pamphlet’s fool, to look for a “curved road around the plain truth” (63; ch. 3) of all the horrible things that they have witnessed. They have covered their faces with ash and pigments from spring berries, and the bodies of boys, men, and women with leaves and grass ready to burn at any time (63; ch. 3). Instead of facing the Real, Bartle recalls the Holocaust to replace individual trauma with collective suffering, turning Kaiserslautern into a site of “*différence* of signification” (Paul H. Fry 156) rather than a short-term habitat for AWOLs. Unmistakably, Powers chooses Germany, with all

its complicated history of warfare, to show the problematic nature of truth-telling caught up in the shackles of large-scale confusion. This lack of communication, Mann adds, emphasizes the limitations of language in depicting both the Holocaust and Bartle's traumatization (5).

In a further attempt to mask the truth, the middle of the storyline repeats the Real under the guise of new markers. Paradoxically, the desire to repeat sameness in the middle colludes with the death drive apparent in the storyteller's desire to reach the end in his own way, or in Freudian terms, "to die on its own fashion" (*Beyond* 33). "Not only do the middles of fiction involve ... techniques of delay, such as repetition, they also have a curious tendency to revisit unpleasurable things," writes Fry (158). In *Birds*, the narrator employs such techniques to revisit the Real as well as to plot the text according to his own desired pattern, unconsciously blending the death instinct with the life instinct. This is not to say that the beginning lacks such techniques, it is just that readers only become aware of their repetitive pattern as the story progresses.

Substituted by the Iraqi space instead of rising actions, the middle both repeats the unpleasurable and transfers desire to new objects of coded signification. Unexpectedly, the narrator reintroduces the wound when, sitting beneath a wall in Al Tafari, he looks at Murph as if through a "dim mirror" for one last time before he surrenders completely to the war, perhaps one "beat of his heart remaining as they [throw] his tortured body from the window of the minaret" (80; ch. 4). Right away, instead of narrating the unfolding picture of the combat zone, he tells readers something they already know.

Then, he turns his gaze towards a "Polaroid" photograph featuring Murph with his girlfriend standing on a dirty track (80; ch. 4). While, in the picture, the girl closes her mouth without smiling, Murph, more "alive," half-smiles with eyes squinting in the light (80-1; ch. 4). Scrutinizing the picture, he asks himself whether these facial expressions

express something special, “something fleeting” and permanent, or whether his girlfriend will ever “reach for the small of his back” if she stands on this very spot again (81; ch. 4). Here, it is not only possible to separate pain from pleasure, but also to tell whether Bartle sees Murph through the “dim mirror,” the “photograph,” or both at the same time, since the word “Polaroid” involves taking an instantaneous snapshot of reality. Indeed, the expressions “alive” and heartbeat blur the boundaries between picture and reality because, while the former has a permanent condition, the latter has a “fleeting” quality. The same hesitation surrounds the personage of the girl who, much like Bartle, stands beside Murphy on a dirty road unable to reach for his back. This pushes readers to question why does the narrator preoccupy himself so much with the position and disposition of the girl in the photograph?

This query more readily interweaves with novel elements in the novel rather than with a straightforward answer. Since, from a structuralist/Lacanian perspective, signifiers quilt with other signifiers until the final signified is reached, the task of the reader, then, turns into an act of patience. Differently speaking, readers cannot directly formulate a clear-cut response based on their “own secret selves,” as Fry puts it (157), or assign an unconscious desire to the protagonist; instead, they track the footsteps of language as it spreads itself in the plot. “A plot,” writes Fry, “unfolds to articulate desire ... yet it’s not the author’s desire, it’s a form of desire, broadly characteristic of the unconscious, that plays itself out in the mechanics of plot” (157). Respectively, the photograph finds many substitutes in the sixth and tenth chapters, both taking place in Nineveh Province, Iraq 2004.

Except for some expressions designating fear, horror, and amazement, the sixth chapter photographs the Iraqi landscape whose detritus awaits to “be tallied up” (115; ch. 6). Bartle compares the platoon to “a flock of birds” in a “mackerel sky” making an

“artless semaphore” (115; ch. 6); the shawl of an Iraqi woman to an “old quilt” giving her “a shapeless comfort” (123; ch. 6); and the whole world to a “paper-thin” arranging itself like an “orchard” (115; ch. 6). Soon after, he personifies the “orchard” saying, “the orchard” is “quiet,” “the direction,” “the softness,” and “the beaten earth of the orchard floor” shakes as mortars fall, leaving its “leaves,” “fruits,” and “birds” frayed like “ends of rope” (116; ch. 6).

Amidst this theatre, “a photographer” suddenly comes into the scene and snaps “pictures of it all,” except for a dead boy left “uncovered”. At first, Bartle thinks that the photographer has no respect for the “significance” of what he sees, but, looking back now, he thinks maybe he does and his regard is absolute (119; ch. 6). Again, like the personage of the girl, suspicion hovers around the figure of the photographer who oddly steps into the arena to register the disaster unfolding over the horizon.

Along the same lines, the tenth chapter replaces the reflective photographer with two secondary characters, entering the stage to carry out different yet similar tasks across the line. One performs the role of a “translator” or “interpreter” and the other acts as a “hermit” or a “cartwright”. While the “translator” appears as someone “confused,” “masked in a black hood with holes cut out for his eyes and mouth” (195; ch. 10) and reports information with a “precise delay,” the hermit has “patient eyes” that look from one side to the other to reassure him of his existence in the world (202-3; ch. 10). Yet, their coexisting “voices” at the same time and place, give Bartle “a momentary déjà vu,” a feeling that, as the interpreter puts it, “he has come through this place already and does not wish to walk the same way again” (203; ch. 10).

In addition to his translated speech, what obscures the character of the hermit, even more, is his “odd coterie of man, mule, and dog,” (210; ch. 10) guiding his passage with a “tripartite staccato of hoofbeats” (202; ch. 10). Besides, when Sterling and Bartle

find Murph's final resting place, they put his corpse on the mule and transport it to the Tigris River with the help of the hermit. At this narrative moment, everything becomes blurry in their eyes except for the "man and his mule emerging out of a hazy mirage, everything else vague, or inverted or duplicate" (209; ch. 10). In other words, instead of looking at Murph, they divert their gaze towards the hermit who alone can secure a safe passage to the river and, thus relieve them from the sight of the body at hand. Once more, skepticism hangs over such minor yet remarkable characters who, despite occupying a small portion of the plot, play a significant role in the construction of the meaning. Certainly, the cartwright, more than the translator, initiates a fundamental question as to why his path has a triangular pattern and makes disconnected sounds along the way.

Along the same pathways, the narrator keeps an eye on the major characters, allowing them to perform their role in perfect harmony with the minor ones. In unison with the hermit, the interpreter, and the photographer, Murph and, to a lesser extent, Sterling map most of the narrative route, especially the final sections of the novel. Since space does not allow us to mark all the labyrinthine avenues taken by the plot or by the characters, it is still important to tackle the most relevant passages that add up to the construction of meaning.

In Virginia, for instance, Murphy metamorphoses into a "misguided archeology," a "hole," "a puzzle," "a cardboard," or a "sketch" (138-9; ch. 7); and, in Iraq, he becomes "an opacity," (156; ch. 8) a "tag," (159; ch. 8) "a passage," including other "signs," (198; ch. 10) all of which endow him with abstract qualities. Of course, at times, he does acquire human characteristics when, for example, after the explosion of the medical outpost, he surfaces with a certain poise:

He wanted to choose. He wanted to want. He wanted to replace the dullness growing inside him with anything else. He wanted to decide what

he would gather around his body, to refuse that which fell toward him by accident or chance and stayed in orbit like an accretion disk. He wanted to have one memory he'd made of his own volition to balance out the shattered remnants of everything he hadn't asked for. (165; ch. 8)

Although this description, including many uncharted others, seems to free Murph from his former objectification, nothing guarantees that these personal attributes truly belong to him and not to someone else, as the final metaphor will soon reveal.

Additionally, sergeant Sterling paints some significant details that add up to the piece at work. He idealistically appears as someone having an evolutionary kind of beauty in his proficiency, on the one hand, and in his countenance, on the other. In stark contrast to Murph, whose features are almost imperceptible, Sterling looks “tall” and “trimly muscled” with a body that moves in tune with his rifle, making it easy for everyone to trust and follow his lead (33; 35; ch. 2). Unlike Bartle, when the officer from the Criminal Investigation Division asks him about his crime in the Tigris, he answers as broadly as possible without “thinking of all the room he [has] left for the gaps to be filled in” (187; ch. 9).

Although at first, Bartle disapproves of his comportment, now, looking back, he realizes that he is not a psychopath or an uncaring person, but someone whose bravery is pure (43; ch. 2); that at least, in the end, his suicide comes to signify nothing more than an attempt to do truly one thing for himself (188; ch. 9). Much like every signifier piecing together the plot, the narrator thinks that perhaps everything he notices in Sterling's demeanor stems from a “condition of reality applicable everywhere on earth” (35; ch. 2). Ultimately, the sergeant appears as the most visible antagonistic character in the story both in relation to the protagonist and to the other cartographers listed above.

Nevertheless, as the plot reaches the end, the metonymic web starts to disentangle in unexpected moments of vision, turning all the earlier snapshots into a limpid piece of art. The book formally ends in Kentucky inside a prison cell where Bartle, following his crime, spends some time trying to piece the war into a comprehensible pattern (216; ch. 11). With each passing day, he marks a new memory on his prison wall, one after the other, hoping that later on, he can assemble them into a “story” that makes sense (216; ch. 11). Each mark reminds him of some particular event so, for instance, a “long chalky scratch” stands for a scene in “the orchard,” one for a time he spends with Murph in an “alley in Al Tifar,” and so on until all the memories are scratched (216; ch. 11).

At some point, however, he comes to realize that he is not only unqualified for the present task, especially when the chalk breaks down and the marks become much smaller than he recalls, but also that the dots cannot be arranged into a pattern (216; ch. 11). Indeed, when LaDonna visits him in his cell, he feels sorry for keeping Murph away from “the family plot” simply because he has “feared the truth” (219; ch. 11); that no matter how many words he uses to explain “her son’s irrevocably human end” (223; ch. 11), nothing can account for what he has seen.

At these very moments of recognition, readers realize, much like the narrator, that all of the previous signs metaphorically hint at the plot that the narrator tries to design. All the marks in his prison cell are memories, or metonyms, which, tied together, reveal the “randomness” (217; ch. 11) of the story. Since other signs have consistently displaced Murph, his “absence from the family plot” metaphorically implies his disappearance from the plot of the story at hand. Similarly, this absence suggests that Bartle has probably never been speaking about Murphy, but rather about himself.

Despite this unanticipated moment of vision, the narrator keeps displacing meaning until the last paragraphs of the book. To illustrate, he veils readers under the

prison staff who, with each passing day (each chapter), see that the “volume” of marks expands (217; ch. 11). At times, he says, “The guards seemed to understand that my marks had meaning, [and] surely they can be forgiven if their error was one of interpretation”; at other times, he suspects that “perhaps there was a pattern there after all” (218). On the one hand, he figuratively asks readers to dovetail all the marks of his prison wall into a coherent pattern, and, on the other hand, challenges their ability for understanding the meaning behind their coded significance. For Anke Walter, it mirrors the reading process and calls to mind the extent to which readers make the same mistakes as the guards by misunderstanding the marks and reading them as a nonexistent pattern (302).

Furthermore, in the concluding sentences of the novel, he substitutes, one more time, the story for an Iraqi map that LaDonna gives him to mark Murph’s final resting place. Although the map appears less a picture of facts and more a poor translation of memories, it reminds him of “talking,” and “how what is said is never quite what was thought, and what is heard is never quite what was said” (225; ch. 11). Here, metaphor gathers in a “crystalline moment” the storyteller’s desire that is trying to communicate itself along a storyline (Fry 156). In one narrative moment, it deciphers all the codes inscribed in the previous chapters and answers the questions raised across the plotline, making it easy for readers to extract the *fabula* from the *sjuzet*, as Brooks puts it.

Hence, in light of the unfolding metaphor, let us return and evaluate the metonymic chain and try to provide a relatively straightforward answer to the questions raised above. In the first place, the narrator parallels the act of storytelling to letter writing in that both feature the character of Daniel Murphy, but at the same time do not tell anything new about his journey in Iraq. LaDonna, much like readers, hopes that the letter speaks of something new, yet, like the snowflakes, each word repeats the previous one, inevitably leading to a certain “level of skepticism” (31; ch. 2) regarding the validity of

the truth. Like readers, “she senses the cracks in its written expression,” which uncover the problems behind representing the unrepresentable. Besides, when Bartle asks the “snow to stop” for one moment, he metaphorically pleads his narrative memory to stop for one moment in order not to face a similar next.

In the second place, he counterbalances the letter with the pamphlet, which, unlike the former’s nonlinearity, represents the history of the church in chronological order. Here, he employs the pamphlet to overthrow the Aristotelian plot of the beginning, middle, and end (Brooks 11) that, despite its linearity, fails to account as well for the truth at hand; in addition, it symbolically opposes the history of the German people who, unlike its “fool” author, have adopted a circular pattern to record their traumatization.

In the third place, the narrator compares his artwork to a photograph, featuring Murph along with his girlfriend on a dirty road. Like in the photograph, the illusive craft of the storyteller undoes Murph’s death, depicting him more alive than the girl standing beside him with a beating heart and a smiling face. In fact, he masks his identity under the personage of the girl, because his inability to save him from death pushes him to repeat the episode in a new vein; moreover, his inability to foresee his impending death leads him to repeat the event through the position and disposition of another character.

In Lacanian terms, Bartle speaks through a small *other* in order to satisfy a need rather than through a perpetually elusive “big Other” which can never satisfy a desire (Fry 167). In other words, while the “big Other” belongs to the “I” or to the Real that memory fails to communicate, the small *other* belongs to the Symbolic system of language that the narrator uses to communicate a need. Since Bartle has lost contact with the “I” or “me” (Lacan, *Psychoses* 261), the girl, in particular, and the German people, in general, symbolize the *other* who speaks and acts through his unconsciousness.

More of this impersonate quality carries on throughout the book. In addition to Murph and Sterling, secondary characters quilt coherently one section with another. The photographer, who has pictured everything in the orchard except for a dead boy, answers the narrator's need to describe, despite deferring the Real, every single detail unfolding before his eyes. Additionally, the hermit, who charts the passage "with a tripartite staccato of hoofbeats," represents more than just "a quiet presence in the background," as O'Gorman sees him (551), but rather the disconnected triangulation of the operating plot; and the translator, who literally confuses meaning through a continuous delay, figuratively stands for its delayed content. In Brooks' words, one represents the *fabula* (story) and the other the *sjuzet* (plot) that the narrator tries to design. In this case, the "hazy mirage," through which Bartle perceives the "odd coterie," metaphorically alludes to the complicated pattern of narrative memory filled with vagueness and duplication.

Furthermore, the episode from the medical outpost suggests that Bartle, rather than Murph, wishes to "replace the dullness" inside of him with a story and to willfully gather the elements that make up his material; and the abstract qualities refer back, instead, to the "opacity," "the misguided archaeology," and the "puzzle" that characterize his plot. Paradoxically, the evolutionary beauty, the attentiveness, and the "unadulterated"

bravery of sergeant Sterling, despite being personal attributes, speak for the narrator's inability to write a beautifully organized book that allows readers to easily follow its lead, acting not only as the antagonist of the story but also as the antithesis of the plot in play.

Apart from the technique of impersonation, the narrative draws on multiple objects of close signification in order to mask its complex structure. Expressions like "dim mirror," (80; ch. 4) "mackerel sky," "artless semaphore," (115; ch. 6) "sagging fabric," (161; ch. 8), and "sheet of blankness" (180; ch. 9), to name but a few, all belong to the unfolding artwork. Like a tarnished mirror that barely reflects or a loosely held material,

the book allows readers to gape at the shadowy presence of the unspeakable, but simultaneously denies the possibility of any easy interpretations. By comparing his work to “an artless semaphore” in a “mackerel sky,” he unconsciously reveals the fallibility and fragmented nature of his handiwork. Weaving one object with another and substituting one metonym for the next, eventually reveals a “sheet of blankness,” signifying not the absence of words but the presence of a “timid little signified” (Fry 174).

Despite the endless detours, delays, and open-ending, *Birds* ultimately narrates Bartle’s soldierly experience and his bereavement over the loss of the “I” visible through the process of impersonation. The “timid little signified,” while lacking in Saussurean preciseness, “satisfies a need” (Fry 167) or, at least, substitutes the void following the Iraq War with a story that eventually makes sense. No object of coded meaning occurs by a manner of coincidence, each word, object, or character exists to serve a given purpose; each section, each passage, continuously repeats the previous one until all possible objects of “perpetual *différance*” are exhausted. “Nothing,” writes Fry “is there by accident,” every single “detail” forces the plot to move forward (163) metonymically rather than chronologically. Indeed, while the Real remains indefinable, the Imaginary, Fry adds, turns into the metonymic, the Symbolic into the metaphoric, and the metaphoric into the symptomatic (169; 178). The end does not promise recovery, rather it hints at a perpetual symptom similar to a chronic disease, a permanent bereavement (Mann 8), or as Kermode contends, the death of an individual or an epoch (35).

Since the narrator’s past, present, and future crumble, his war story loses as well ties with beginnings, middles, and ends. More importantly, his postwar disillusionment and radical separation bear upon his narrative closure because, unlike stories that regress to myths, it does not progress to a seemingly predetermined end (Kermode 18). Rather, the novel shows that the supposedly stable evolutionary course of human life can take

other forms when the protective shield breaks down, distorting pre-established frameworks. “It has shattered any subscription that [Bartle] may have once held to the concept of an inherently shared humanity” (O’Gorman 99).

Although readers desire endings because they render books exceedingly charming, such ends do not necessarily conform to pre-existing paradigms (Kermode 24). By breaking free from conventional paradigms, the plot reveals not only the impact of war on narrative memory but also the protagonist’s disillusionment with postwar life, which unconsciously bears upon his narrative end. “Like a tattered quilt of fallen stars,” (84; ch. 4) his story literally shows the fragmented pieces of his pre-constructed illusions (stars), and his figurative attempt to weave them back into a coherent whole (tattered quilt).

As in the beginning and the middle, the end reveals a condition of stasis played all along under the techniques of impersonation, deferral, and repetition. What makes this ending exceedingly charming, however, is not the illusory principle of narrative resolution but the shocking realization that everything contained therein points to something else; that all presupposed interpretations come undone as the final metaphor comes into sight. Yet, despite the storyteller’s inability to redeem or resolve the tensions of both his personal experience and the plot at work, his story allows him to gain some “sense of psychic freedom” (Fry 170) manifest not only in his ability to hint to a traumatic discourse but also to break free from pre-established illusions that promise fake recovery.

As Powers concludes, the story “wasn’t much in the way of comfort, but everything has a little failure in it, and we still make do somehow” (225; ch. 11). Perhaps comfort lies not in the absence of meaning, but in the presence of meaninglessness that readers find appealing and inherent to war fiction. It is a way of redefining comfort under a new guise, to show what it means to be comfortable in the utterly uncomfortable and to

meticulously form in the uncommonly formless. Thus, it is through these quilting moments leading up to the final metaphor that the text finds, in O’Gorman’s reading of the novel, “a kind of “meaningful” absence ... that does not allow trauma to linger unacknowledged” (100).

Birds, hence, evokes a traumatic knowledge carried through a dislodged temporality and a peculiar narrative structure. It reconceptualizes simple notions of time, space, and plot, forcing them to adhere to the decorum painting the Iraq War. Despite the absence of Newtonian chronology, the constant detours and the unreliability of the narrator, readers read the unspeakable nature of wartime and postwar trauma caught up between truth and fantasy. When recollections turn to the battlefield, time metamorphoses into an odd chronology that challenges our ability to comprehend the simple movement of the clock; at the same time, it allows us to see things that lay beyond our day-to-day human experience. Indeed, outside the battlefield, they grant us access to not only the past, which the narrator oftentimes avoids but also the commonly impenetrable future, which he unwillingly cancels out.

Although Powers endows the Real with an elusive quality, its shadowy presence appears when time quickens or slows down or when Bartle re-experiences the wound in a space-time continuum. There is no difference between events taking place in Iraq and those happening in Virginia or Germany, since they all occupy a single temporality and refigure similar recollections. In addition, they turn into sites of *difference* that not only differ in signification across the plot but also voice out, as in Torquato Tasso’s story, the narrator’s wound in other places, creating a condition of stasis or traumatic reality from beginning to end. Yet, this voice, albeit quiet and timid, still exudes the unsettled tensions of the speaker and the arduous architecture underlying his craft.

Regardless of its overall meaninglessness, his war story, ultimately, carries a sense of ethicality as well as an obligation towards the self and the audience, who as nonparticipants in the great game of war, learn to fathom unfathomable time zones and penetrate impenetrable regions of narrative memory. However, skepticism still hovers around the unnarratable that most war writers find problematic, especially those turning their frontline experiences into art. In this respect, the following chapter tries to answer readers' cynicism and compensate for their incognizance of trauma by allowing them to see and feel, to some extent, what first-hand veteran writers actually witnessed.

Chapter Four

The Survivor's Tale: Testimony and the Art of Unspeakability in *Naked, Things*, and *Birds*

What I'm looking for, though, is not enough information to allow me to create a near-documentary recounting of reality, but enough information to allow me to evade being totally captured by fact.

—Phil Klay, *Uncertain Ground*

While the previous chapters sought to analyze the versatile nature of trauma and its symptomatic manifestation in language, this fourth and final one aims at identifying the modes of expression through which war writers testify to the wounds shaping their experiences and ultimately their narratives. In an attempt to bridge the gap between the act of testimony and the modes of un/speakability, this comparative chapter highlights the thematic affinities and differences shared among veteran writers and the often-impossible task of storytelling told from the perspective of trauma survivors.

Writing about the subject of war has often been a challenging activity, particularly for firsthand spectators of manmade disasters. Nearly all veteran writers lament their inability to translate their frontline experiences into truthful accounts of war in that language fails to cope with the inhumanity witnessed at the front. Common aspects shared among them involve a particular similarity of experience, consensual intentions, and a preoccupation with the limits of language in communicating trauma (Tal 229). “It’s hard to tell you what happened,” (47) O’Brien pauses, and “To say what happened... seem[s] like a kind of treachery,” Powers continues (148; ch. 7).

Similarly, Vonnegut opens *Slaughterhouse-Five* with a desire to report everything he witnesses at the destruction of Dresden into a masterpiece, but then realizes that not

too many words cross his mind to fit into a book (2-3; ch. 1). Philip Caputo expressed a similar discontent in *A Rumor of War* (1978) – one of the most influential memoirs of the Vietnam War – saying: “there seemed to be no words to describe what had happened” to soldiers suffering from the effect of high explosives (158).

A closer look at the texts examined here reveals two critical themes that speak the unspeakable under the rubric of testimony: humor and the sublime. Although both of these generic modes originate from master narratives of literary criticism, their evasive mood attunes to the postmodern state of the art. As Lyotard confirms, “the unrepresentable ... [is] a writing which in many of its operators still belongs to the genre of novelistic narration” (*Postmodern* 80).

The sublime appeared on the western stage with Nicolas Boileau’s translation of Longinus’s treatise *On the Sublime* in 1674. Upon its publication, the treatise was seen contemptuously by critics of the enlightenment era for its defiance of logical reasoning and traditional generic modes (Robert Doran 101). Originally, the sublime meant a universal feeling of awe and pleasure triggered by greatness in nature; it aimed “not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves” (Longinus 163). The genius of the writer appears in his excellence of speech and his ability to raise strong emotions through word choice, metaphors, and elaborate language (Longinus 181).

With the publication of Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry*, however, the sublime turned from being a universal feeling to a subjective experience of the physical world, which places the concept alongside the “psycho-physiological” realm (Lyotard, *Analytic* 61). Unlike Longinus Burke locates the feeling in anything that, at close range, excites ideas of horror and danger, but from a distance, gives a certain amount of delight (36-37). It is simultaneously a sensation of fear in the face of life-threatening events and pleasure at the survival of the mechanism after the cessation of danger. Contrary to its traditional

conception, readers encounter this sort of the sublime in any terrible object be it “the gloomy forest,” “the howling wilderness,” “animals,” “kings and commanders,” including other sources of fear (Burke 53; 60-62).

Along these lines, it is tempting to locate Burke’s sublime within Mailer’s representation of the Real in *Naked* in that both are interested in the reaction of the senses when facing real anxiety. Since Mailer fully employs Lacan’s triadic frame, Burke’s sublime finds a place somewhere between the Real and the Imaginary realm. Nevertheless, this Burkean picture rarely fits within the rhetoric of *Things* or *Birds*, which inevitably brings Lyotard’s postmodern sublimity into the present equation.

In an attempt to bridge the gap between postmodern aesthetics and the sublime, Lyotard reads Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement* while presenting his *Lessons on The Analytic of The Sublime*. He finds Kant’s notion of reflective judgment, as opposed to universal judgment, particularly appealing to his philosophical views because of the ability of the imagination to break free from pre-established rules. He locates the sublime in those moments when the relationship between thinking and the presented object falls. At this stage, nature cannot communicate with thought through pre-established codes, rather it merely suggests a certain magnitude that transcends presentation (Lyotard, *Analytic* 52).

Unlike the feeling of the beautiful, which has an object of admiration and finds meaning in form, the sublime lacks an object and, thus, form. Yet, to give form is, for Lyotard, to limit; hence, the beautiful is limited and definable while the sublime is formless, unlimited, and undefinable (*Analytic* 58). In simple terms, it is a feeling of incompatibility between the faculty of reason and the faculty of imagination, leading to feelings of pain and pleasure:

Imagination at the limits of what it can present does violence to itself in order to present *that* it can no longer present. Reason, for its part, seeks, unreasonably, to violate the interdict it imposes on itself and which is strictly critical, the interdict that prohibits it from finding objects corresponding to its concepts in sensible intuition. In these two aspects, thinking defies its own finitude, as if fascinated by its own excessiveness. It is this desire for limitlessness that it feels in the sublime “state”: happiness and unhappiness. (Lyotard, *Analytic* 55)

In the absence of *a priori* mental judgement, reason not only experiences pain for its inability to name the phenomenon at hand, but also pleasure for its ability to imagine that there exists something beyond its power of understanding. Here pleasure, unlike in its Burkean or Longinian connotation, happens indirectly and has a somehow negative quality (Lyotard, *Analytic* 68).

In this way, the theme of the sublime, while it tends to attract postmodern writers for its unnamable excellence, this attraction operates unconsciously. Neither O’Brien nor Powers, for instance, make this feeling of delight known to their audience, or for that matter, to themselves. Likewise, their concern with narrative form in the presence of the formless unavoidably situates their texts within the discourse of the sublime. Both confess their inability to write or construct a linear narrative, yet they ultimately succeed in testifying to their wartime experiences through a conflictual relationship between reason and imagination as well as between an obligation to form and their narratives’ adherence to the formless. Hence, this mode of speakability is legitimate in that it motivates thinking to venture beyond the knowable (Lyotard, *Analytics* 55).

In addition to the sublime, testimony ties with humor in that both communicate the ineffable evasively. Before any inquiry into the nature and relevance of the theme to

the present study, it is important to note that, since the concept of humor is in and of itself an elusive term with different sub-categories, only its applicable categories will be taken into consideration. Equally important, the texts examined here do not fall within the comic genre; rather they employ humor only episodically in order to hide the darkest reality of the war. To borrow Hoffman's expressions, they are simply an "*attitude*" that depends on "negativity," "*incongruity*," and dualism (606-7). Much like the sublime, humor is, thus, a literary attitude that communicates a double feeling: laughter and horror. This simple delineation narrows the scope from the more general term of humor to the more specific one of dark humor.

While traditionally, humor aimed at endowing works of fiction with a touch of gaiety and exuberance, in its modern and postmodern usage, it aims at covering the absurdity of the world under the veil of laughter. This is especially true with the American black humor of the 1960s that originated as a reaction to the absurdity of the Second World War and later the Vietnam War. Yet, although this movement seems particularly appealing to O'Brien's Vietnam War narrative, it does not justify Mailer's instances of black humor in *Naked*, which was written a decade before the origination of the movement.

This simple distinction liberates the term from the confines of the American black humor characteristics of the 60s and allows readers to consider the term simply as a technique of evasion facilitating the process of testimony. "Humor," Arne Axelsson confirms, "is used mainly as a means of creating distance, detachment or diversion to make the scenes and acts of war bearable" (263). Thus, any negative connotation mixed with comicality is a typical feature of black humor whose purpose is both to divert readers' gaze from the true horrors at work and to facilitate the process of testimony.

In line with the preceding argument, Freud's psychoanalytical contribution to the study of humor clarifies further the concept of dark humor. For him, laughter both liberates and protects the ego from unpleasurable events within the external world: "The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure" ("Humour" 162). As such, it rejoices at the prospect of having defeated its vulnerability as well as the austerity of the physical world. However, in essence, this exultation acts temporarily in that it ultimately uncovers the bitterness buried under this defense mechanism.

Following Freud, the literature on humor as a liberating force has assumed different appellations with specific functions –like the arousal and incongruity theories – developed by figures like Patricia Keith-Spiegel in her "Early Conceptions of Humor" (1972) and Herbert M. Lefcourt with Rod A. Martin in *Humor and Life Stress: Antidote to Adversity* (1986).

Moreover, in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Wolfgang Kayser unknowingly categorizes the grotesque among the ingredients of black humor. After a thorough inquiry into the nature and origin of the term in both written and visual art, Kayser concludes that the grotesque, when accompanied by "a faint smile," is "AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD" (188). Later on, the significance of the grotesque has slightly altered from Kayser's modern articulation of the term to Hoffman's postmodern conception. The latter defines it as "the utter *deformation of humans by humans*" that contains elements of the "comic" and "the ridiculous" (611-12). Both claims argue for the relationship of the humorous with the hideous in the physical world, which bridges the gap between the modern and the postmodern theorization of the grotesque.

In addition, both conceive of a certain relationship between the sublime and humor. For Kayser, the grotesque needs its opposite – the sublime – to transport readers to the abysmal and loftier realms of the world (58), and Hoffman speaks of the inevitable concurrence of the sublime with the comic mode in postmodern narratives (600). However, the significance of this incongruous expression lies in its allegiance to the unspeakable realm of language fundamental to the act of testimony. As Kayser notes, “The creator of grotesques ... must not and cannot suggest a meaning” (86). Still, this creator does not solely rely on the comic or the sublime mode to speak the unspeakable; at times, he resorts to certain literary devices either because they are necessary to the creation of these two discourses or because they can independently carry out meaning.

While figures of speech constitute an important facet of literary works, in war fiction, three important devices seem to operate in favor of the survivor’s testimony: euphemisms, ellipses, and similes. Although metaphors can function just as well in the present discussion, their consideration in the previous chapter excludes them from the present one to avoid repetition. Like in testimony, these figures show an absence of speech despite its presence in discourse, aiming to divert readers’ attention from the true meaning of particular narrative scenes. By definition, all say one thing to mean something else either through the softening of words, lifelike comparisons, or simply punctuation marks. Interestingly, they oftentimes go hand in hand with the rhetoric of the sublime and the comic, making it easier for writers to construct meaning out of silence.

Originating from the Greek word “*euphemos*,” meaning speaking well, euphemisms are soft words or expressions that substitute offensive, harsh, or coarse vocabulary (Colin Bulman 83). Oftentimes, euphemisms cover taboo subjects related to death, body parts, and sex as well as governmental and religious dogmas; indeed, they tend to change over time mostly in response to socio-cultural conditions. In the twentieth

and twenty-first centuries, for instance, the subject of war and armed conflict has become more sensitive compared to the previous centuries (Bulman 85), especially in the United States and its unwarranted military aims in Vietnam and Iraq. This sensitivity led to the literary implementation of euphemisms as a means to soften the brutality underlying the subject of war, or in McLoughlin's words, to throw "white paint at the red business" (147).

This "diversionary" tactic, as McLoughlin calls it (151), aids veteran authors in representing the unrepresentable using expressions that can mitigate the shock to an incognizant audience. Words associated with killing, for instance, assume different or opposite connotations like cleaning something or taking care of someone; instead of slaughtering the enemy. Mailer, for example, writes, "cleaning out the Japanese," (54; pt. 2, ch. 1) which at once alleviates the shock and facilitates the act of bearing witness.

Luring readers into assimilating the narrated events, the false clue of simile adds extra shelter for veteran writers struggling with the burden of accuracy. By comparing fiction to reality, this figure of speech creates the illusion of precision and correctness, allowing the horrible to hide under the familiar. Such a simple device, detectable through the words 'like' or 'as,' has not in the least been analyzed with respect to literary testimonies and the way it helps in communicating the ineffable. Probably, the classical definition of this device by dictionaries of literary terms offers little insight into its relationship with traumatic discourse. However, Marie Louise Von Glinski's recent book on *Simile and Identity in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, allows readers to place the figure alongside the rhetoric of the uncanny.

In this book, Von Glinski compares similes to metamorphoses for their tendency to see one thing in place of another and their manipulation of either the mental or the physical form of a given structure. Unlike metamorphoses, which permanently transform the shape, simile mentally alters the object of comparison without changing its

physicality. It simultaneously grants and denies access to Narcissus's image, challenging the reader and the narrator alike to recognize that likeness fails to represent sameness (Von Glinski 1-2; 5).

In addition, Von Glinski calls this technique a literary illusion in that "The familiarity of shapes lures the reader or dreamer across the threshold of consciousness and allows him to accept an internal logic that defies the rational part of his brain" (Von Glinski 132). In other words, the narrative glimpses outside itself to disrupt its movement while at the same time deepening its illusive quality. Usually, this glimpse places the reader in a familiar atmosphere akin to the real world, thus, bridging the fictional world with the extra-textual experience of the reader (Von Glinski 115). Like testimony, it short-circuits the faculty of understanding but quickly compensates for this deficit with something that readily appeals to logic. Certainly, Von Glinski's theorization of simile appeals to the texts examined here in that all substitute their disillusionment, both in form and content, for the illusion granted by this literary device.

Like euphemisms and similes, the ellipsis carries out the same responsibility using a different technique. While the simile aims at comparing fictional scenarios with lifelike experiences to enable readers to relate to the narrated experience, the ellipsis omits certain passages for lack of words that neither similes nor euphemisms can replace. In the latter case, readers, instead of relating something to something else, try to fill in the gaps by relying on the preceding words (Freud, "Censorships" 139). Whereas the simile presents a "mental image with the help of words" (Von Glinski 156), the ellipsis triggers the same frame of mind, but without a verbal expression, marking its presence with three dots (...), dashes (—), asterisks (***), or hyphens (---) (J.A. Cuddon 231).

It is important to distinguish here between ellipsis as a sign of omission of unnecessary text and as a sign of evasion or unspeakability. Indeed, the ellipsis espoused

by critics like Derrida and Gérard Genette concerning repetition and narrative closure remains outside the scope of this chapter in that both aspects have been examined Chapter Three.

The present examination, however, reads the ellipsis as a sign of unspeakability, marking its presence with three dots. It resembles Freud's reading of the ellipsis in "The Censorships of Dreams" where he compares the dream "mumble" or "three dots" to the practice of censorship that omits important passages in political newspapers for their unpleasantness. In the same manner, in describing the dream, the writer omits certain passages because they contain something objectionable to the audience. For Freud, like in newspapers, surely the gaps contain the most important information; "It was precisely the objectionable nature of these passages that was the motive of their suppression" (138-39). In *Naked*, for example, Roth shockingly tries to remember the color of blood spilling from Wilson's corpse thinking "it was darker somehow. . . arterial. . . venous. . .?" (571; pt. 3, ch. 7; ellipses in orig.). Unable to provide an adequate description, he replaces words with three ellipses, asking readers to fill in the gaps from the preceding word blood.

Hence, under the rubric of testimony, two themes and three figures of speech can carry out this impossible task: the sublime, the comic, and the language of euphemisms, similes, and ellipses. Speaking through binary systems – both positive and negative – these idioms allow veteran writers to carry their tales "back to the halls of normalcy" (Tal 232). Insofar as the tragic blends with the comic or the sublime and hides under figures of speech, these tales strike readers as being normal narratives. In truth, they are in Jan Alber's words "unnatural narratives" for their adoption of traditional modes of discourse, like the grotesque, to ridicule some psychological states (52). Like testimony, they oscillate between a fascinating speechlessness and the human need for understanding

(Alber 106). Instead of appealing to reason, they affect readers' emotions, asking them to look for answers in silence or to come to terms with their inexorable allegiance to silence.

Before examining the art of testimony, it is critical to note that modes of speakability, although similar in effect, function differently in the three narratives. Each author belongs to a different generation of American war writers and had had a different experience at the front. Fighting and writing about the Second World War greatly differs from writing about the Vietnam or the Iraq War not only because the former belongs to modern aesthetics and the latter to postmodern art, but also because the former had justified its aims compared to the latter. Thinking of his "grandfather's war," Bartle confirms, that they "had destinations and purpose" (91; ch. 4). Similarly, O'Brien disapproves of America's use of military force against other nations unless it justifies its motives, like when fighting "a Hitler or some comparable evil" (45; ch. 4).

Undeniably, the events of the Second World War covered one of the most traumatic episodes in human history, yet their effect on language was still at its primitive stage. Unlike postmodernism's radical break, modern writers were still trying to represent the shock of the time by looking back on tradition. "The modern," Sawyer explained, "associates itself with nostalgia for a former time and its "able" presentations, while the postmodern rejects the consolation of "correct" forms and searches for new modes of expression, irrespective of the standards of taste and pleasure" (172).

In keeping with the same argument, this chapter will identify the differences in each survivor's tale based on similarities in modes of speakability. To clarify, Mailer prefers the Burkean sublime in that it fits better within the dialectics of combat stress whereas Powers and O'Brien, despite keeping the same effect, favor Lyotard's postmodern sublimity in that it accentuates the illegitimacy of language. In the same manner, the comic in *Naked* focuses on the element of the grotesque, but in the other texts

deals mostly with incongruous laughter; and, while O'Brien intentionally uses euphemisms to induce laughter, Mailer and Powers use it automatically. Certainly, the same variations apply to similes and ellipses. At times, however, Mailer's sublimity or grotesqueries find expression in *Birds* and *Things* irrespective of the literary tradition defining them, which indicates their inevitable adherence to the conventions of war writing.

Altogether, these variations within sameness ultimately reveal a certain uniformity of experience torn between the unalienable urge to bear witness and the inability of language to communicate that experience with precision and accuracy. In light of this, the chapter will first start by examining the theme of the sublime in the three novels respectively, showing how the three authors impart feelings of self-preservation, the infinite, and the infinitesimal. Next, it will demonstrate how the comic mode interrupts the gloominess at work in order to overthrow the "DEMONIC" (Kayser 188), in particular, and accentuate the senselessness of armed conflicts, in general. Finally, the study will look at how each author employs euphemisms, similes, and ellipses to achieve certain narrative aims, which, despite their silent rhetoric, allow readers to interpret the operating scenarios. By and large, the chapter ultimately reveals how these veteran authors make use of the same idioms of testimony to achieve different narrative ends.

4.1. "How do you answer the unanswerable?" Sublime Art between

Eloquence and Reticence

Following his service as an infantryman in the South Pacific, Mailer writes *Naked* while the vigor and ardor of combat were still vivid in his imagination. In 1946, shortly after his Odysseus return home, he wrote the novel as quickly as possible, finishing it within fifteen months. In his introduction to the novel, Mailer called himself an amateur of Tolstoy and that his book lacks "the demands of good style" for its immediacy,

excitement, and sloppiness (Mailer, *Naked* 5). However, in the latter part of the introduction, he noted that his art ultimately teaches readers that “compassion is valueless without severity,” reminding them that life “is like a gladiator’s arena for the soul so [they] can feel strengthened by those who endure, and feel awe and pity for those who do not” (Mailer, *Naked* 6). Arguably, despite its indifference to the excellence of style, this mixture of “severity” and “compassion” as well as “awe and pity” gives his work a touch of sublimity, which endows it with an eloquent style.

The sublime in *Naked* takes place chiefly in the combat zone where the proximity of death calls for the preservation of life. Through the character of Red, Mailer mixes the instincts of self-preservation with horror at the sight of a Japanese soldier on the verge of death. Unable to kill the enemy, Valsen hides in the jungle brush and watches Croft with awe as he mercilessly slips a grenade out of his waistband and throws it at enemy lines (194; pt. 2, ch. 7). While Croft feels joy at the sight of the unfolding scene, Red has “an odd detached pleasure, quite incongruous, which stem[s] from the knowledge that he was unobserved ... yet all of this was mixed with dread, and the certainty that none of it was real” (195; pt. 2, ch. 7).

Here, the oddity of the scene, both real and unreal, triggers an incongruous sensation of pain and pleasure. In Burkean terms, the latter comes from being “unobserved” or safe behind the brushwood and the former from the imminent death of the soldier. Red’s empathy unfolds with a degree of brutality to make him feel not only “pleasure” and “dread,” but also pity for another human being. In turn, this double sensation affects readers who, despite the absurdity of the scene, can still share this odd feeling with the characters. At the same time, the personage of Croft teaches them that compassion may not necessarily be universal, as Longinus’ sublime dictates, but, rather, something that concerns the individual alone.

Indeed, the scene imparts feelings of admiration. This happens when Croft saves Red from a near-death contest with the enemy and the latter feels a “grudged admiration” mixed with “a great deal of resentment at being in his debt”; for some time, he tries to find the appropriate words to thank him for saving his life, but he cannot “utter the words” (197; pt. 2, ch. 7). Here, the “admiration” comes from human beings’ tendency to admire powerful things, whether in institutions or commanders, despite their adherence to terror (Burke 62). He can neither hate him for saving his life nor admire his cold-bloodedness, which leaves him in a state of speechlessness that emphasizes the sublimity of the moment. Since Mailer cannot legitimize the act of killing using ordinary language, he resorts to the idiom of the sublime to communicate the unsayable through emotions. Ultimately, the unsayable pushes readers to neither appreciate nor condemn Croft’s behavior, but consider it necessary for the survival of another human being.

In a similar contest with the unnamable, the writer employs another wicked character to lay bare the inhumanity of military leaders outside the realm of the ordinary. Through General Cummings, he represents a sadistic version of humanity expressed only in times of war. In “The Time Machine” section, he travels back in time to when Cummings serves as an infantryman in the trenches of the First World War so that readers understand his generalship in the operating campaign of Anopopei (407-31; pt. 2, ch. 13).

Contemplating the trench warfare from afar, Cummings enjoys the slow movement of men in the field, the blast of the German artillery, the changing colors of the sky and the spectacle of fallen bodies (418; pt. 2, ch. 13). When his Colonel asks him about his feelings, he replies, “Oh, it was. . . But he cannot find the words. It has been too immense, too shattering.... There were all those men, and there had been someone above them, ordering them, changing perhaps forever the fiber of their lives.... He is choked with the intensity of his emotion, the rage, the exaltation, the undefined and mighty

hunger” (418-19; pt. 2, ch. 13; 1st ellipsis in orig.). Unlike Croft, Cummings appears like a psychopathic coward who contemplates this sublime scenery from a distant place, which initiates the sensation of joy and pain at the prospect of being out of danger. Valsen experiences the same feelings of security, but, while he loathes the severity of the scene, Cummings fully enjoys the spectacle of death and hungers for the stature of leadership. In this case, pleasure does not only derive from safety, but also the gratifying sensation of governance; and, pain from his inability to neither actively take part in the conflict for fear of death nor command the movement of men.

At the beginning of the passage, Mailer fills the silence with an ellipsis to accentuate the absence of words and then goes on to present the “undefined” emotions at work, which are “too immense” and “too shattering” for human comprehension. As such, he combines Burke’s element of self-preservation with Lyotard’s conception of the formless that is both unlimited and undefinable. Hence, Cummings’ anxiety stems from the absence of *a priori* significance to the unfolding event in his consciousness, but his “exultation” comes from his capacity to defy the limits of his understanding in order to present something meaningless. In other words, his “[i]magination [is] at the limits of what it can present [so it] does violence to itself in order to present *that* it can no longer present” (Lyotard, *Analytics* 55). Yet, despite this reticence of speech, the writer eventually succeeds in testifying to the wickedness of the military and the way leaders extract pleasure by dehumanizing the subordinate members of the army.

Together with the astonishing ambience of the battlefield, the inarticulate finds solace in natural phenomena, which, in their strangeness and immensity, heighten the detritus painting the Pacific War. Whilst elevating the spirits, the exoticism of Anopopei, with its strange geology and oppressive climate, impairs the rational thinking of American soldiers who lack *a priori* mental judgement of the unfolding picture. “The jungle,”

Mailer writes, “offer[s] far more resistance than the Japanese,” a “formidable” place with high temperatures, prodigious vegetation, and rustling animals (52; pt. 2, ch. 1). On a stormy evening, Ridges, afraid that the typhoon will blow away his tent, contemplates the weather with “panic and acceptance,” thinking of God’s power in decorating the unfolding canvas with brilliant and varied shades of greens that resemble the Garden of Eden. He senses his Almighty presence in the turbulent churning of the foliage, the beating of the jungle and the aliveness of the earth, which make him flinch before this all-powerful might (104; pt. 2, ch. 4).

In addition to his concern for the tent, he watches the typhoon with a certain veneration for God’s impeccable creation and a stroke of panic at his overpowering presence. This mixed sensation endows the moment with a touch of sublimity not only for Ridges’ contemplation of the storm from a safe place (tent) but also for his admiration of divine power despite its probable threat. Whenever God appears in representation, everything “terrible in nature is called up to heighten the awe and solemnity of the divine presence” (Burke 63-64). Moreover, Burke adds, soundness and loudness, audible for example in the “raging storms,” the “thunder,” the artillery, or the shouting of men in battle, evoke feelings of sublimity in that they are phenomena belonging to the senses (75-76). In this respect, the churning of the foliage and the beating of the jungle heighten the stress for Ridges is unaccustomed to such an exotic environment. Thus, the confluence of the elements of power, threat, admiration, and loudness all belong to the realm of the senses rather than that of understanding, which transmit a sublime effect for readers and characters alike.

Much like the jungle, the mountain of Mount Anaka represents one of the most challenging contests of men with nature. The novel delineates the outer limit of the military campaign for Anopopei, on the one hand, and presents the final contest with the

unnamable, on the other. Each infantryman perceives the mountain according to his psychological distress, allowing its geology to assume multiple shapes as well as different emotional effects. For Gallagher and much the rest of the squad, the immensity of the hill assumes an animal-like shape:

[I]t looked like an immense old gray elephant erecting himself somberly on his front legs, his haunches lost in the green bedding of his lair. The mountain seemed wise and powerful, and terrifying in its size. Gallagher stared at it in absorption, caught by a sense of beauty he could not express. The idea, the vision he always held of something finer and neater and more beautiful than the moil in which he lived trembled now, pitched almost to a climax of words. There was an instant in which he might have said a little of what he was feeling, but it passed and he was left with a troubled joy, an echo of rapture. He licked his lips, mourning his wife again. (449; pt. 3, ch. 1)

Like Gallagher, Hearn experiences awe and fear at the power and immensity of Mount Anaka rising above the ocean. He suffers “a faint sharp thrill” as he watches, through his binoculars, its misty peak, causing him to imagine a titanic struggle between the ocean and its bedrock. In fact, he mistakes the sound of artillery with the melody of the ocean as it caresses the mountain’s bedrocks in that, shortly after, Mailer writes that the vibration of munitions sounds like “surf” or a “muted thunder” (498; pt. 3, ch. 3).

Standing beside him, however, Croft perceives the mountain differently. Its immensity taunts and urges him to climb and reach its peak, imagining the pleasurable sensation of its massive weight under his feet. His emotions shift from awe, hunger, ecstasy and, then, hate (449; pt. 3, ch. 1) for being uncertain whether he can truly reach the top or surrender to its mighty power. Towards the end of the campaign, he forces the

platoon to join him in the climb, guiding them tirelessly to the far edge of the jungle where the mountain rests. Unable to resist his leadership, the platoon ascends the hill with every bit of “fatigue,” “nausea” and “vertigo,” and with them, Croft progresses “out of some internal contest in himself as if to see which pole of his nature would be successful” (696-97; pt. 3, ch. 13). As the march comes closer to the mountaintop, a flock of hornets attack the men like a “burning fuse,” numbing their ears with a maddening pain that causes an acute shock. For the squad, the hornets present the “final unbearable distress” of the whole campaign for Anopopei, and, for Croft, it finally relieves him from “the unadmitted knowledge that he [has] found a limit to his hunger” (698-99; pt. 3, ch. 13).

At first, the immensity of the hill leads Gallagher and the rest of the platoon to see it as a huge old elephant that is at once wise, omnipotent and frightening, leaving Gallagher in a state of speechlessness mixed with a “troubled joy” and melancholy at the memory of his deceased wife. After that, Hearn imagines a titanic clash between the mountain and the ocean, which, in turn, induces feelings of fear and awe at the sight of it and excitement for being impervious to the danger at work. Lastly, Croft imagines himself standing on its peak and feeling all its mighty power under his feet, which reflects his hunger for controlling not only his subordinates but also the land under strife. Each member of the platoon reflects his insecurities and anxieties on the architecture of the mountain, allowing it to metamorphose from one shape to another.

Mailer employs elements from nature to carry different emotional effects that allow readers to read the thoughts and desires of characters without clear-cut descriptions. Here, thinking “can still employ nature, but to its own ends (Lyotard, *Analytic* 52). While Hearn’s reaction mixes the Burkean feeling of horror at the sound of artillery that startles and confuses the imagination and safety for watching the scenery through his binoculars, that of Gallagher rejects the form granted by the beautiful in favor of an unspeakable

formless. It is “the aesthetic of denaturing,” as Lyotard puts it (*Analytic* 53) or, in other words, the act of changing the beauty of nature to match with neurotic thinking. Eventually, in Croft’s sublime reaction, Mailer reveals the complex power structure existing inside the military organization and the hegemony exercised through, what General Cummings calls, “a fear ladder” (181; pt. 2, ch. 6); most importantly, it unravels the supremacy of nature over the individual and the nullification of class structures inside demilitarized zones.

While in *Naked* the sublime appears episodically, in *Things*, it occupies almost every section of the book, making its overarching presence a patent ingredient in O’Brien’s narrative memory. It attempts to translate his wartime experiences into a comprehensive narrative whilst simultaneously disclaiming the validity of the narrated events. In sharp contrast to Mailer, O’Brien ties the sublime with the failure of language in transcribing the wound rather than with events in the physical world. Certainly, at times, he alludes to the psychophysical realities of the combat zone inherent to the tradition of war writing, but the greatest portion of his material laments the inadequacy of language in testifying to the wrongs witnessed and committed during his active duty in Vietnam. This is because his faculty of imagination, which in fiction means narrative memory, grapples with his faculty of understanding common rules that in the text supposedly represent truths and facts (Doran 209).

Since war shatters pre-constructed rules (illusions), the mind resorts to imaginative writing while at the same time lamenting the loss of logical reasoning. As such, although O’Brien confirms that his story is “beyond telling,” he succeeds in igniting readers’ emotions through his imaginative genius; in other words, despite its linguistic reticence, *Things* eventually “makes the stomach believe” (80; ch. 7) what the mind refuses to comprehend.

In “How to Tell a True War Story,” the author opens the chapter with a statement of truth as to the validity of the ensuing events and concludes by disclaiming his preceding proclamation, thus endowing the middle with a certain level of skepticism. “THIS IS TRUE,” the narrator proclaims at the beginning of the story and ends up saying “a true war story is never about war” (71; 86; ch. 7); yet, between this confident beginning and deceitful ending lays the imaginative middle that authorizes unlimited versions of the truth.

As he tries to recount the death of Curt Lemon, for example, the narrator stops abruptly to accentuate the inefficacy of language saying, “It’s hard to tell you what happened next” (74; ch. 7), then he continues his testimony by designing a less shocking scenario. “There was a noise, I suppose ... so I glanced behind me and watched Lemon step from the shade into bright sunlight. His face was suddenly brown and shining ... 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” (74; ch. 7). To break the silence, he covers the darkness of mortality with illuminating expressions like “bright sunlight” and “shinning” face mixed with beauty as in “beautiful” death, “vines” and “white blossoms”. Yet this beautiful mask blends some dark tones detectable in words like “shade” and “brown” fused with a degree of skepticism as in the uncertain statement of “I suppose”.

Where Mailer touches on the unsayable from the Real, O’Brien speaks of the unnamable from the Imaginary where concepts, rather than visible objects, acquire a sublime form. Within the same story, the author tries to describe the complex terminology of warfare, but his attempt comes to naught when he unintentionally bypasses the original meaning of the term. Unable to afford a clear-cut definition, he suggests multiple yet contradictory connotations that startle rather than clarify the subject

matter, arguing that war is at once grotesque, ugly, beautiful, horrible, majestic, astonishing, and commanding. He, then, adds that it is neither pretty nor astonishing, but rather something powerful, implacably beautiful and morally indifferent (82; ch. 7). In this sense, O'Brien's story becomes a place in which imperfection, ugliness, monstrosity and deformity, because of their sublime nature, regain their rights in fiction (Lyotard, *Inhuman* 96-7).

Indeed, instead of telling the truth, he generalizes about the realities witnessed at the front because there, "everything is true" yet "nothing is true" as well; and, "a true war story," he concludes, "will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly" (82; ch. 7). Through generalization, he opens an unlimited gateway for the imagination to fathom beyond pre-existing definitions, on the one hand, and provokes marvelous feelings of shock, admiration, scorn and indifference (Lyotard, *Inhuman* 96-7), on the other. "Untraumatized readers," Tall confirms, "cannot retake a journey through a Vietnam they never actually visited and thus cannot reexperience a "'tragic shattering'" of old myths" (232). Stuck between the need for clarification and a limited vision of the war, readers, however, can only gape at the sublimity of the narrated text and, probably, share the experience with the traumatized speaker.

At times, however, the narrator does rely on the seeable to convey the unsayable, yet, unlike Mailer, he aims not at exposing the evils of the military but to lay bare the psychic numbness of his characters following traumatic episodes. Shortly after the death of his friend Lemon, Rat Kiley comes across a baby buffalo roaming lonely in the mountains; after chasing it down, he shoots every single inch of its body for the simple pleasure of hurting an innocent creature (80-81; ch. 7). Whereas Croft mercilessly shoots the Japanese out of joy, Rat numbly murders the animal with tears in his eyes, thinking it might compensate for the loss of his best friend (80-81; ch. 7). As the rest of the platoon

watches his actions in shock, he takes his rifle and leaves the crime scene with a twinge of sorrow for the baby buffalo. “For a time no one spoke. [They] had witnessed something essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling there was not yet a name for it” (81; ch. 7).

Just then, Mitchell Sanders blames Nam (a place in Vietnam) for Rat’s killing, calling the place a Garden of Evil where sins are original and new. In contrast to Ridges, who conjures up the divine upon seeing a Garden of Eden in the mountains of Anopopei, Sanders invokes the demonic in calling the place a Garden of Evil. This moment brings to mind Lyotard’s adoption of Kant’s reflective judgement in his reading of the sublime in that, unlike transcendental intuition, reflective reasoning applies to particular events rather than to universal phenomena. As such, the platoon’s inability to speak stems from the absence of *a priori* mental judgement that might name the despicability of the operating scene, and Sanders’ remark confirms this absence when he indirectly compares Rat’s sin to that of Adam in the Garden of Eden. The peculiarity of the event, hence, pushes Sanders, in particular, and readers, in general, to judge the crime reflectively, which instead of accusing the mournful perpetrator, accuses the place for perpetuating evil.

Still, in another episode from “The Lives of The Dead,” the narrator stresses further this linguistic reticence when he recalls his childhood friend Linda who, despite her death, brings her alive in the story. By reviving her spirit in his head, he hopes that readers may dream along with him (241; ch. 22). Like in the previous episode, he finds it difficult to name his relationship with her both during and after her premature death. Writing about her decades later, he ponders over the nature of their relationship, wondering whether she represents “a crush” or a childhood infatuation. Their friendship, he adds, “had all the shadings and complexities of mature adult love, and maybe more,

because there were not yet words for it, and because it was not yet fixed to comparisons or chronologies or the ways by which adults measure such things” (239; ch. 22). Failing to provide an adequate description, he combines “memory and imagination and language” to offer readers “the illusion of aliveness” (241; ch. 22) that appeals to the senses.

At first, he estimates that it shares some qualities with “mature adult love”; then, he quickly denies this estimation, arguing that it is not subject to comparison with anything whatsoever. Herein, he employs the mathematical sublime – that which is absolute and beyond comparison (Kant 132) – in that the despicable fact of her death paralyzes his sensible intuition. He wishes to transcend the limitation of language by appealing to the imagination, which, in turn, frees him from the burden of a rational description. For Lyotard, the mathematical sublime is beyond comparison, infinite, and greater in number, but at the same time sinks to zero when it fails to present anything whatsoever (*Analytic* 114).

Accordingly, O’Brien, despite his desire for a complete description, fails to measure the true nature of his relationship against other standards, urging readers to fill in the gaps left by his imaginative work. Yet, in the face of failure, the writer succeeds in transcending the abominable fact of human finitude that, regardless of its unspeakability, opens vistas for the imagination to venture beyond the knowable. As Doran writes, the mathematical sublime’s search for totality frees man from “the limitations placed on him by his sensuous nature ... thereby realizing the essential freedom” of his consciousness (221). Ultimately, in this sublime moment, readers realize that the power of the imagination offers a better reading experience than that of understanding in that it opens up doors of infinity into the limited sphere of their human comprehension.

Ultimately, in *Birds*, the pain and pleasure evoked by the dialectics of the sublime appear in Powers’ poetic yet traumatic narrative style. David Evans, William Leith and

Hilary White confirm this sublimity when they praise the novel for its “contradictory notions of beauty and horror,” the way it manages to horrify with beauty and numbs with sensuality, and for its “negative ecstasy” (Powers, *Birds*). Indeed, Powers reinforces this theme when he favors the power of the imagination over reason saying “It’s imagination or it’s nothing, and must be, because what is created in this world, or made, can be undone, unmade; the threads of a rope can be unwoven. And if that rope is needed as a guideline for a ferry to a farther shore, then one must invent a way to weave it back, or there will be drownings in the streams that cross our paths” (100; ch. 5).

In the above passage, he beautifully delegitimizes historical thinking by substituting the imagination for the metaphor of the rope that can, despite the difficulties along the way, travel to the farthest realms of memory without the risk of drowning. Certainly, the “streams” crossing his way is just another name for the trauma that risks falling into silence if carried through logical reasoning or preconstructed modes of thinking. As such, Powers, to avoid silence, resorts to the sublime mode to weave back his traumatized memories into a novel that at once “moves and terrifies” (Powers, *Birds*) the reader.

Yet, despite its attempts to overthrow historical thinking, *Birds* occasionally conveys feelings of nostalgia, or what Lyotard calls the “nostalgic” sublime (*Postmodern* 81), characteristic of modern art. For Lyotard, the nostalgia of the modern sublime “allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents” and offers readers a certain amount of pleasure for its recognizable quality (*Postmodern* 81). In his interview with Jammes, Powers ties his fiction with the writing conventions of the First World War writers, like Hemingway and Erich Maria Remarque than with contemporary writers (2). Indeed, Jim Holstun classifies *Birds* within late modernism for its “overwhelming narration, prolonged interior meditation, interwoven and nonlinear plot

lines” that ultimately fail to tell the ineffable (10-11). As such, the theme of nostalgia, recurrent in modernist fiction, recurs in Powers’ fiction under the light of the sublime that fails to communicate Bartle’s yearning for a meaningless past.

At times, the protagonist’s nostalgia manifests in his homeland in Virginia where he recollects most of his wartime experiences. Troubled by his memorable journey in Iraq, Bartle yearns for his old life that has now been shattered by the Iraqi landscape. “Home,” he thinks, “was hard to get an image of, harder still to think beyond the last curved enclosure of the desert, where it seemed I had left the better portion of myself as one among innumerable grains of sand” (99; ch. 5).

At other times, however, he invokes his history amidst the anxiety of the battlefield as a means to divert readers’ attention from the true horrors at work. After killing one man at the edge of the bridge, he says:

In that moment, I disowned the waters of my youth. My memories of them became a useless luxury, their names as foreign as any that could be found in Nineveh: the Tigris or the Chesapeake, the James or the Shatt al Arab farther to the south, all belonged to someone else, and perhaps had never really been my own....I gave up longing, because I was sure that anything seen at such a scale would reveal the universe as cast aside and drowned.
(125; ch. 6)

In both episodes, Bartle invokes a sense of an absent past that, despite its familiarity, lacks representation. In the first instance, readers read a sublime discourse in his inability to get a clear picture of his home or even to think beyond the horizon of the desert where he has left the best version of himself as a decent human being with a past, present and future.

In the second one, however, it is apparent in his reference to the four rivers of the Tigris, the Chesapeake, the James and the Shatt al Arab all at once, which seems to link

the killing of the man at the edge of the bridge with his past and present. Since his victim falls near the bank of the Tigris River, he disowns the waters of the Chesapeake or the James because now they symbolize death. On the one hand, he yearns for these two Virginian sites in that they remind him of his innocent youth, and, on the other hand, he gives up longing because of the horrible things he has committed and witnessed in the Tigris. Hence, Bartle's evocation of what he disclaims as a "useless luxury" and avoids describing for its immensity gives readers a sense of familiarity devoid of meaning.

By communicating the nostalgic sublime, *Birds*, much like *Naked* moves between two aesthetics – the modern and the postmodern- allowing the dialectics of the sublime to assume multiple forms. Yet, whereas Mailer favors the emotions of awe and pleasure in his evocation of the sublime, Powers prefers the concept solely for its capacity to reveal the paralysis of literature in the face of the unnamable. Like O'Brien before him, he laments the state of his artistic creation by repeatedly disclaiming the validity of his handiwork, noting that words seem "incomprehensible" (206; ch. 10) and that he cannot "answer the unanswerable" (148; ch. 7).

Of all the streams that cross his memory, Murph stands as the apotheosis of his suffering, an irreversible absence, representing the most challenging subject of description. His despicable death leaves a big hole in his memories, creating a "misguided archaeology" (138; ch. 7) full of narrative gaps. "There was simply not enough material to account for what had been removed. The closer I got to reconstructing him in my mind, the more the picture I was trying to re-create receded," (138; ch. 7) Bartle complains. Yet, shortly after his complaint, he fills the gaps with other recollections that deviate from the true essence of the subject matter, like when he recollects the time he sits with Murph in the tower, "watching the war go by in streaks of red and green and other, briefer lights" (139; ch. 7). To fill the lacuna left by the memory of his friend, the narrator finds solace

in the poetic description of the war painted in red and green colors; he finds relief in substituting grief for pleasant memories that not only compensate for his narrative reticence but also captivate readers' attention for its eloquent style.

More of this silent quality carries on throughout the novel as the narrator frequently substitutes his traumatic memories for something more bearable to himself, in particular, and the audience, in general. Although readers tend to favor narrative illusions over shocking scenarios, some argue that this freedom, which the sublime permits to the imagination, annuls the responsibility commonly entrusted to veteran authors (McLoughlin 162). Yet, since the "subject is beyond reason," (McLoughlin 162) Powers, despite all the flaws that make up his story, carries this responsibility through an imaginative endeavor that offers relief for both the speaker and the listener.

By the end of the novel, he makes this point evident when LaDonna visits Bartle in his prison cell, asking him about what happens to her son back in Iraq. Since he is the "last witness to her son's irrevocably human end," (223; ch. 11) readers expect Bartle to testify as accurately as possible to her request, but, as the following passage demonstrates, he hardly says something meaningful:

I guess all the words I used to try to explain it to her were like so much straw compared to what I'd seen. But I appreciated the way she reacted to my explanation, as roughly as I told it to her ... I can't quite say what her reaction was exactly; her face still had the dull glow of loss, faded from a feeling always felt toward something else that she would now be forced to measure. Even after talking for six hours straight I couldn't swear to any visible relief....But after she left, I felt like my resignation was now justified, perhaps hers too, which is a big step nowadays, when even an apt resignation is readily dismissed as sentimental. (223; ch. 11)

Herein, Bartle stands for the writer's inability to testify for his wartime experiences, and LaDonna for readers' demand for understanding the totality of the narrated events. Only a certain magnitude remains in this linguistic reticence, which carries a sense of the unnamable and the immeasurable. Much like the mathematical sublime that O'Brien uses in his failed depiction of Linda, Powers' explanation, although fails to compare the event or measure it against words, suffices in conveying a certain magnitude to the interrogating reader. The author, much like readers, finds solace in the illusions carried sentimentally or, as Sawyer puts it, "relief within the confines of trauma itself, utilizing the gravity of its recurring despair to nonetheless acknowledge the resilience engendered by the process of testimony and the repeated attempts to present the unrepresentable, regardless of the impossibility of doing so" (176).

Arguably, the concluding lines of the passage reveal that his relief stems from achieving a moral obligation towards the uninformed reader rather than from a psychological recovery, which overthrows the previous claim that attacks the discourse of the sublime for disregarding the responsibility generally bestowed upon veteran writers. The same obligation applies to the discourse of humor, which, as the following section will demonstrate, does not inform or make the reader understand something but rather affect his senses in a shockingly funny way.

4.2. "War Is Nasty; War Is Fun": Black Humor between Gaiety and Solemnity

In his definition of the Vietnam War, O'Brien writes, in *Things*, that war is at once "fun" and "nasty" (81-82; ch. 7). Likewise, in *Birds*, Murph tells Bartle: "everything's just so goddamn funny" (79; ch. 4); and, in *Naked*, the infantrymen release the anxiety of combat with "an ache of laughter in their chests" (705; pt. 3, ch. 14). All of them agree that humor blends with bitterness, which, together, create both a negative and positive

connotation. Like the sublime, it involves a moment of incongruity – laughter and pain – that transforms into nothing when the mind fails to interpret the operative phenomenon, urging the mind to turn this incomprehensibility into laughter. While the sublime keeps the apprehension in the mind, humor moves it from the mind to the body in order to laugh off the displeasure at work (McLoughlin 186).

In line with this argument, the three texts, thus, transmit traumatic knowledge under a burst of nervous laughter or, as in the case of the grotesque, a comic description of human deformity. Since war rejects seriousness and is inherently senseless, its literary representation by these veteran authors ironically orchestrates its nature; they all find humor suitable to the act of testimony in that it offers the speaker and the listener alike an “egress from the world of force” (Hoffman 602). Hence, this section studies the theme of humor in the three selected novels, revealing how each author makes use of this mode to achieve different yet similar outcomes.

Starting with *Naked*, Mailer creates grotesqueries to display the inhumanity of soldiers to one another, on the one hand, and to divert readers’ attention from the operative gloominess, on the other. Yet, it is important to note that, in addition to this subcategory of humor, he uses other types of humor – like therapeutic laughter – that this section cannot investigate for lack of space. In keeping with the grotesque mode, the writer refuses to treat sincerely the human subject in a state of deformity in that the object of perception lacks rationalization. After a close fight near the river, Mailer exaggeratingly compares the fallen Japanese to “bags of grain,” and their wounded stomach to “the swollen entrails of a fowl” (160; pt. 2, ch. 5). Instead of gaping at the absurdity of the imagery, readers grin at the prospect that soldiers can acquire non-human characteristics either in the form of objects (bags of grain) or animals (fowl).

In the river that marks their final destination, a beaten soldier starts to groan in Japanese, screaming terrifyingly against the placid water; unable to bear the sound of his moaning, Croft throws a grenade across the bank so that the echo ceases to disturb him (160; pt. 2, ch. 5). Again, through the character of Croft, the author shows the unnecessary butchery of one soldier to another inside this No Man's Land. "Since the grotesque is linked to a sense of inexplicable evil, its definition bears traits of the mysterious, the ineffable, even the unnamable" (Hoffman 610). In other words, since Croft tosses the grenade just for the sake of silencing the already beaten and harmless enemy, this act falls within the category of the unspeakable.

More of this unjustified violence carries on in the following campaign as Croft hunts down a prisoner of war and tortures him to death for the sake of pleasure. From a military perspective, prisoners of war do not present any danger to the captors who, in turn, must deprive them of their weapons and treat them with compassion no matter the degree of animosity existing between the two parties. However, in the novel, Croft violates this decree when he holds in custody a Japanese soldier and humiliates him in front of the platoon out of enjoyment. At first, he lets him drink water to recover from the fight and, then, offers him a cigarette to puff, which gives him a feeling of reassurance or, as Mailer puts it, "a dreamy expression" (201; pt. 2, ch. 7). Just then, Croft shoots him in the head before the time he gets to change his facial expression, which has now made him look silly. "The smile on the dead man's face amused [Croft] and a trivial rill of laughter emitted from his lips....he prodded the body with his foot. "Goddam," he said, "that Jap sure died happy." The laughter swelled more strongly inside him" (201; pt. 2, ch. 7).

To lighten the mood, Mailer draws a silly smile on the dead man's face as means to ridicule death, and, by giving him a happy ending, minimizes the shock behind the

sergeant's ruthless killing. While the "rill of laughter" hints at the absence of logic or a momentary numbness, the shooting and the poking of the body signal the absence of humanity, which, together, point to the presence of the grotesque mode. In Hoffman's terms, this double absence leads to two contradictory feelings that form the basis of the grotesque: laughter and horror. The former stems from a "logical contradiction," or the fact that humans are unreasonable, and the latter from an "ethical contradiction," or the fact that humans are inhuman (611). Hence, since Croft acts both irrationally and inhumanely towards the prisoner, this narrative moment pushes readers to simultaneously laugh and gape at this indescribable evil.

In addition to this unfathomable horror, Mailer reduces soldiers to mere automatons scattered on an embattled ground as a means to inspire mirth and hold at bay the overlaying gloominess. This aspect takes effect when a group of infantrymen goes in search of war souvenirs in the wilderness, hoping to find valuable objects that might memorialize their journey in Anopopei. In place of objects, they come across dead soldiers, laying in different forms and positions. In one place, they find a Japanese laying on his back with a big hole in his stomach that makes his bloody intestines look like "the congested petals of a sea flower" (216; pt. 2, ch. 7). In his death position, he puts his hands all over the hole as if calling attention to the wound, and, despite his anonymity, has a relaxed and pleasant face. His swollen legs and buttocks, Mailer exaggerates, stretch to his trousers until they resemble "the skin-tight trousers of a Napoleonic dandy. Somehow he looked like a doll whose stuffing had broken forth" (216; pt. 2, ch. 7).

In another place, where the debris scatters even more, they encounter other dead Japanese "swollen to the dimensions of very obese men with enormous legs and bellies, and buttocks which split their clothing. They had turned green and purple and the maggots festered in their wounds and covered their feet" (218, pt. 2, ch. 7). Again, instead of

treating death tragically, the writer ridicules the misshapen bodies of men as a means to divert our gaze from the absurdity of combat death.

In the first instance, he substitutes the Dionysian for the Apollonian in the simile of the “sea flower” and the pleasant face; then, he compares the bloated corpse to a broken doll or a “Napoleonic dandy”. The latter is close to caricature in that it mocks a personage from the Napoleonic era who pays close attention to his personal attire. Here, he uses a recurrent motif of the grotesque that reduces human bodies to “puppets, marionettes, and automata” (Kayser 183). In the second instance, however, he rejects the Apollonian in favor of a more tragic description of men in the process of decomposition that, despite its shocking condition, carries a sense of comicality. By walking among the dead and contemplating all forms of physical deformity, the platoon experiences what Kayser calls the “fear of life” (185); instead of fearing death, the men fear life itself in that the place they inhabit exudes monstrosity, horror and revulsion.

By the end of the novel, this comic-tragic description becomes extreme as American patrols wipe out all the surviving men left in the aisle. In this patrolling mission, the “killing lost all dimension” as the troops finish off the Japanese with great joy and excitement, “smashing their heads with rifle butts or shooting them point blank” (714; pt 4, ch. 1). In one mission, they capture and kill three sick Japanese soldiers who seem to represent no threat to the marching troops. In a shockingly humorous way, Mailer writes: “One prisoner was so sick he could hardly walk, and another, a big sullen man, was looking for a way to escape. The third had gigantically swollen testicles which were so painful that he had cut away his trousers from his groin....He walked pathetically, hobbling along and groaning as he held his testes” (715; pt 4, ch. 1).

Instead of focusing on the psychological state of prisoners at the edge of death, Mailer, in the above passage, brings out taboo subjects that define the human subject

outside the official knowledge of the people (Mikhail Bakhtin 319). He also focuses on corporeal and private matters that stress the physical pain like the first soldier's inability to walk or the third's suffering from what Bakhtin calls "venereal" disease – featured in the fifteenth and sixteenth-century comic literature (161). Here, the true horrors at work remain hidden from the reader in that these taboo subjects, carried humorously, imply that "the speaker is ""only joking"" and is therefore not to be taken seriously" (Rod A. Martin and Thomas Ford 43). However, this mode of communication enables the author to represent the unrepresentable in a socially acceptable manner (Martin and Ford 43).

Hence, the writer, in using humor, aims at applying a mode of communication that can match the belligerent forces' senseless butchery of the Japanese soldiers. Since no mode of speakability can justify the killing of defenseless and physically disabled human beings, the grotesque becomes the only suitable manner of testifying to the wrongs committed by humans to each other.

The same attitude follows in *Things*, but where Mailer implements the grotesque to convey a sense of irrationality mixed with ethicality, O'Brien employs the monstrous – a radical form of the grotesque- to impart a sense of illogicality completely devoid of morality. "A true war story is never moral," O'Brien testifies, and "if [it] seems moral, do not believe it," he adds (72; ch. 7). Unlike the grotesque, the monstrous lacks in moral perspective because it normalizes the brutalization and deformity of humans to one another (Hoffman 611).

In describing the things men carry with them all along their journey in Vietnam, O'Brien notes that Norman Bowker, although a very compassionate man, carries a thumb of a Vietnamese soldier in his pocket. Mitchell Sanders, after finding the soldier dead in a ditch, takes a hatchet, cuts the thumb, wraps it in toilette paper and offers it as a gift to Bowker. Then, "smiling," he kicks the man's head and watches as the flies scatter (13;

ch. 1) in the air, leaving the corpse in panic. Soon after, Henry Dobbins says that he sees “no moral” in all of it, except that the man is truly dead (13; ch. 1). Much like Dobbins, readers see no morality in the unfolding scene since the writer does not counterbalance his characters’ actions against a particular moral code, something that Mailer strongly considers.

Indeed, it is easy for readers to expect such behavior from someone like Croft given the fact that Mailer paints him in a horrible picture, but not from a “gentle person” (12; ch. 7) like Bowker. Unlike his predecessor, O’Brien does not blame Bowker for carrying the dead man’s thumb; rather, he accuses the Vietnam War itself for forcing men to do things against their moral principles. For him, in a war where “right spills over into wrong” and “order blends into confusion,” (83; ch. 7) men no longer know what’s right and wrong and thus, cannot abide by a particular moral code. As Tamara Pace Thomson, on reading this passage, writes “the brutality of combat unearths parts of the men that would otherwise have remained buried in their civilian lives” (46). Thus, in the absence of ethicality, the writer can only temper the unfolding gloominess with a shade of humor that allows readers to simply laugh at the ridiculous act of cutting a dead man’s thumb and wrapping it in toilet paper.

Following the same line of thought, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” tells another story of Mary Anne Bell who, much like Bowker, loses her innocence after joining Alpha Company from Cleveland to Nam. In this section of the book, the writer assigns the task of storytelling to Rat Kiley because he endows the events with “exaggeration and overstatement,” heating the truth so that others can “feel exactly what he felt” (95; ch. 9). Despite witnessing the events himself, he finds it difficult to explain to O’Brien and Sanders what truly happens to Mark Fossie’s girlfriend shortly after she arrives in Vietnam. At first, she seems to enjoy the company of soldiers, the land and the mysterious

habits of the Vietnamese people (100; ch. 9). After that, she cuts her hair short, stops wearing feminine accessories and cosmetics and quickly learns how to use weapons (102; ch. 9). At last, she settles in a house near the Special Forces with the Greenies, leaving her boyfriend Fossie for good (111; ch. 9).

Desperately, Fossie goes in search of her and decides to bring her back with him, but then, in shock, discovers that she turns into a completely different person. According to Kiley's version of the story, Fossie hears strange voices as he approaches her house that resemble "a weird deep-wilderness sound" mixed with some laughter (111; 113; ch. 9). What hits him most, Rat continues, is the thick numbing smell coming out from the place, "a mix of blood and scorched hair and excrement and the sweet-sour odor of moldering flesh—the stink of the kill" (112; ch. 9). Amid this horrible stench, Mary Anne steps outside, gazing down blankly at Fossie with a stare devoid of human emotions. Yet, "the grotesque part," Rat concludes, is her jewelry. She wears a necklace of long and narrow human tongues, "one tongue overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable" (112; ch. 9).

Harold Bloom compares Mary Anne's radical transformation to that of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* who also wears a necklace of animal tongues (9), and Lorrie N. Smith notes that her new identity is a "feminized form of monstrosity," a "sort of macabre," or a "'joke'" that brings laughter to the infantrymen (106; 108). In addition to these cogent criticisms, the story of Anne, as Rat tells it, contains a level of skepticism regarding the validity of truth, urging readers to question whether the "happening-truth" matches exactly with the "story-truth" (191; ch. 18). Since the writer disclaims the validity of truth by noting that Rat uses the techniques of "exaggeration" and "overstatement", "Sweetheart" greatly departs from the intended meaning.

Unable to bear witness to the “happening-truth,” O’Brien, thus, resorts to the monstrous or, as Smith argues, to witticism to bring laughter to the men hearing the story as well as to readers. This is because “The extremity of deformation, distortion, and violence ... attain traits of the comic, the ridiculous” (Hoffman 612). Here, the monstrous mode matches more with the Vietnam War than other types of humor in that both lack a moral perspective, allowing the author to testify according to the demands of the subject matter. As Bloom notes, “despite Rat’s search for a moral, the story never yields one, thus adhering to another of the guidelines O’Brien has set down for “true” war stories” (38). Respectively, despite the underlying suspicion, “Sweetheart” ultimately testifies to the unspeakable using a mode of communication compatible with the writing conventions of the Vietnam War.

Apart from the monstrous, the writer ends his book with yet another joke played on human cadavers as a means to overthrow the fatality of combat death. In “The Lives of The Dead,” Alpha Company makes fun of an old man’s corpse that they find “near a pigpen at the center of the village” (237; ch. 22). As the title of the chapter suggests, the writer tries to undo the death of this man by allowing his characters to perform certain rituals on his body. At first, they shake his hand and greet him, saying “How-dee-doo,” then move away, except for O’Brien who remains speechless at the absurdity of the scene (237-38; ch. 22).

A few moments later, Dave Jensen asks him to be polite and go introduce himself to the old man like everyone else, but O’Brien refuses; and when he narrates the episode twenty years later, he writes:

I didn’t go near the body. I didn’t even look at it except by accident. For the rest of the day there was still that sickness inside me, but it wasn’t the old man’s corpse so much, it was that awesome act of greeting the dead.

At one point, I remember, they sat the body up against a fence. They crossed his legs and talked to him. They proposed toasts. They lifted their canteens and drank to the old man's family and ancestors, his many grandchildren, his newfound life after death. It was more than mockery. There was a formality to it, like a funeral without the sadness. (237-38; ch. 22)

Unlike his comrades, the narrator cannot join in the fun, greet the old man's corpse or drink along with the men. On the thematic level, the funeral ceremony frees the squad from the abominable and inescapable fact of human finitude; and, on the artistic level, it liberates the writer from the shackles of verisimilitude, offering a more acceptable way of narrating the wound. While the scene recalls what Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, calls "the funeral banquet" (283), apparent in the drinking of men, it does not promise a "new beginning" (283) for soldiers. However, it resembles what Ihab Hassan, in reading Samuel Beckett, calls "the bitter laugh in the face of evil" or "the mirthless laugh in the face of human wretchedness" that "do not restore man to nature or society," as Bakhtin promises, but instead "howl his alienation" (221).

Indeed, for readers unaccustomed to such literary depiction, the scene leads them to question whether this "act of greeting the dead" can truly happen or is simply a result of the imagination that the author employs to paint the realistic gloominess of the combat zone with a shade of humor. Arguably, the latter offers a more logical answer in that, despite the illusion granted by the comic mode, readers can still question the validity of truth hidden under nervous laughter.

In his short essay "The Magic Show," O'Brien noted that the act of storytelling resembles a magical spectacle where the spectator is allured into thinking that the performance is true (175-76). He also confessed that, as a kid, he used to practice magic

tricks and as he grew up, he changed this hobby into storytelling, which, for him, are practically the same. Both are lonely endeavors that strive to “create or re-create the great illusions of life” (176-77) like the “illusion of aliveness” (241; ch. 22) operative in “The Lives of the Dead”. On this illusive quality, he wrote, “a writer is someone entranced by the power of language to create a magic show of the imagination, to make the dead sit up and talk, to shine light into the darkness of the great human mysteries” (O’Brien, “Magic” 177).

In line with this statement, Heberle, in reading the above passage, notes that “Underneath the GIs’ ghoulish humor and postmortem sadism, lies an unconscious awareness of the mortality that they share with the Vietnamese farmer and an attempt to imagine beyond it” (213). By setting up the old man and making him seem alive, the narrator, thus, allures readers into believing that the incident is true, which, in reality, is nothing more than the work of imagination hoping to ease the pain of mortality with a burst of nervous laughter.

Ultimately, in the case of *Birds*, Powers employs another aspect of the comic to speak the unspeakable in a manner that at once horrifies and assuages the reader. Much like his predecessors, he overcasts the bleak realism of the war with occasional moments of humor that temporarily temper the anxiety of his characters and readers alike. An example appears when Murph and Bartle sit under a tree, drinking whiskey and laughing at the absurdity of an ongoing battle taking place in a nearby village. “It’s beautiful,” Bartle whispers, as he points to the fires shimmering in the distance like stars (83-84; ch. 4). Under the effect of alcohol, they enjoy the smell of the battle, the “ambient sounds”, and “the strange wailing” coming from the burning city, allowing them to forget, at least temporarily, their “predicaments” (83-85; ch. 4). Here, laughter is induced not from the

spectacle of horror, but from the numbing effects of alcohol that temporarily shuts down their consciousness.

In his study on the therapeutical benefits of laughter, JongEun Yim notes that substances like alcohol, drugs and caffeine induce laughter and, thus relieve the body from stress, acting as a defense mechanism against pain (245). As such, the whiskey helps Murph and Bartle overcome the horror unfolding before their eyes, relieving them from the tensions of combat life. Yet, although these funny moments offer temporary relief, readers can still smell the odor of death and the shouting of men buried under the ambient mood of the narrator.

Moreover, after Murph's death, sergeant Sterling meets Bartle in a German bar where they drink whiskey and recall the war, laughing nervously at the events leading up to Murph's disillusionment and subsequent death. Mockingly, Sterling asks Bartle whether he remembers the "funny look" on Murph's face when an Iraqi soldier blows himself up, but the latter only laughs, saying that he does not remember the details (67-68; 3). Then, he reminds him of their conspiracy back in the Tigris River where they throw their comrade's corpse, threatening him that he might one day reveal their common secret. Yet, beneath his sarcastic tone, Bartle sees for the first time that his once bold and uncaring sergeant has become "morose" and a little bit "sentimental," as if on the "edge of losing control" or shaking "loose from something" that he cannot yet identify (68; ch. 3). It is the only passage in the whole novel where the narrator describes him in such a powerless and pessimistic way, which urges readers to question if this character is truly unsympathetic or is merely wearing a mask of fortitude.

Later on, when the sergeant confesses his conspiracy to the Criminal Investigation Division and, then commits suicide (187-88; ch. 9), Bartle confirms his doubts, recognizing that he is truly a sympathetic person who can no longer bear the mask of

fortitude. Unlike Mailer's fixed description of Croft, Powers gives us some access into the inner life of this seemingly evil character who, under his "induced laughter" (Yim 245), turns into a sensitive person. Although this personality only appears under the effect of alcohol, it reveals Sterling's psychological distress when the veil of consciousness (fortitude) falls, leaving for the unconscious a certain freedom of expression and temporary relief from stress. On the one level, it allows him to testify to the wrongs committed back in the Tigris, which still haunts him despite his derisive laughter, and on the other level, it sheds some humor on the gloominess at work, offering readers moments of lightness as well as illumination.

Analogous to Mailer, Powers favors the grotesque mode in his representation of the dead body as a means to alleviate the shock associated with physical death. Although the book closely follows *Things* in its insistence on the cruelty and lack of destination and "purpose" (91; ch. 8) shaping the Iraq War, the author keeps the element of morality in his description of combat death. Like his predecessor, Powers finds the grotesque suitable in describing the indescribable especially when the subject matter deals with the deformation of humans to one another. In his interview with Jammes, he said that his fictions, whether *Birds* or his later works, always feature "the violence of individuals ... and the inherently destructive and self-destructive nature of humankind," (Jammes and Powers 4), alluding to the main characteristic of the grotesque.

For Instance, this violence appears when Bartle along with his squad push the corpses of enemy soldiers that they find in the streets with their boots to take their weapons, an instance that reads as immoral behavior. "Rigid and pestilent," the narrator writes, "the bodies lay bloating in the sun. Some lay at odd angles with backs curved slightly off the ground and others were wrenched at absurd degrees, their decay an echo of some morbid geometry" (123; ch. 6). In this passage, there is both "a logical and an

ethical contradiction” (Hoffman 611); the former appears in their disregard of the Iraqi corpses lying under their feet, and the latter in the narrator’s allusion to the inhumanity of American soldiers to their fellow race made ridiculous through the element of exaggeration in the last sentence.

Shortly after, the narrator pauses to reflect on the spectacle of other body parts scattered on an embattled ground after close-range combat assaults. During their patrolling mission, the infantrymen stop at one corner of the street to contemplate a line of rats as they wander through the detritus, looking for some human flesh to feed themselves. Forcibly, they push back a dog from one of the bodies until it gradually leaves the place with one arm clenched in its mouth (123; ch. 6). Then, as they turn their gaze towards the direction of the river, they find another body lying in the middle of the bridge; “[h]is head was cut off and it lay on his chest like some perverted Russian doll” (123; ch. 6). Regardless of the operative gloominess, the narrator finds a way to break the shock with a ridiculous comparison of the mutilated corpse to a perverted doll. It resembles what Patrick O’Neill in his essay “On Dark Humor in Literature” calls the “incursion of disorder ... associated with physical abnormalities, deformations, and perversions” (94) apparent in the feeding of rats and dogs from human flesh and the perversion associated with mortality.

Indeed, all through the passage, readers feel that the narrator normalizes this absurdity as if the scattered corpses are essential to the Iraqi landscape and do not seem to trouble the marching troops at all. In Brian Crew’s words, he does not allude to “an absent normality” but rather the abnormal or the grotesque “has become the accepted norm” (641) in his fiction. Arguably, he further reinforces this point when, after contemplating the corpse, goes on to say that “Grief is a practical mechanism, and we only grieved those we knew. All others who died in Al Tifar were part of the landscape

as if something had sown seeds in that city that made bodies rise from the earth” (124; ch. 6). Again, this points to a “logical contradiction” (Hoffman 611) whereby the narrator confirms that human deformation has become something habitual and does not cause grief to the passing spectators.

Yet, for readers, this shockingly humorous tone points to the impossible task of bearing witness to the abnormal using ordinary language or seriousness since the experience resides beyond human comprehension. Most importantly, it permits them “to envisage the facelessness of the void and yet be able to laugh rather than despair” (O’Neill 100) at what unfolds between the lines. In addition to the effect triggered by the humorous, Powers, along with his predecessors, make use of common figures of speech to provoke yet another narrative effect that makes as well the scenes of war bearable and the task of testimony possible.

4.3. Devices of Unspeakability: Euphemisms, Ellipses, and Similes

While euphemisms, ellipses and similes form an important part of almost every literary text, in the three selected war novels, they act as a protective shield against the silences of language when faced with the impossible task of describing the indescribable. Instead of falling into silence, these devices support veteran writers in their mission of bearing witness to the ineffable in a more acceptable manner; and, despite their ability to fill in the gaps through rewordings, comparisons or three dots, they eventually communicate a silent speech for their lack of precision. As such, this third and final section argues that Mailer, O’Brien and Powers use euphemisms, ellipses and similes to not only facilitate the process of testimony but to also divert readers’ attention from the true horrors at work.

Starting with euphemisms, Mailer employs some inoffensive expressions as a means to alleviate the shock associated with violence and mortality. Although he uses

many other euphemistic terms related to, for example, taboo subjects – like body parts and sexual activities– the most pertinent and recurrent ones narrate the atrocities of the combat zone. Instead of terms like killing or shooting, he uses the verb “to pot,” which, according to R. W. Holder, signifies to “kill by shooting” (309). Examples of this term appear frequently throughout the story as when “the division was going subtly and inevitably to pot” or when Gallagher says, “I’m gone to pot” (687; pt. 3, ch. 13) rather than to shoot.

Similarly, he substitutes the verb to kill for smoother alternatives like to finish off (195; pt. 2, ch. 7), “knock off,” (636; pt. 3, ch. 10) “take care of,” or clean out (54; pt. 2, ch. 1) the Japanese. All of them signify to kill another human being without stating it directly, making it easy for readers to follow along with the narrator without feeling repulsion or disgust at this horrible act. For McLoughlin, this type of “distancing effect” is common in war literature in that, rather than illuminating the subject matter, it conceals it from the stage altogether (140). Certainly, it disappears when words that generally designate affection for someone else – as in taking care of the Japanese – assume an opposite meaning. The same applies to the statement of “cleaning out the Japanese ... left in the rear,” (54; pt. 2, ch. 1) which seems to dehumanize the enemy who, like trash, offer an unpleasant spectacle to the patrolling troops and, thus need to be cleaned out.

Likewise, the euphemism of “mopping out” parallels the term “cleaning out” in that it refers to the action of killing or capturing the surviving opponents (Holder 258) left on the battlefield. When the campaign for Anopopei ends, the narrator repeats this euphemism eight times, one after the other to point out the unnecessary butchery of the remaining Japanese by American soldiers. In one instance, he writes, “the campaign was over except for the mopping up” (654; pt. 3, ch. 11), and in another, he states that “the

mopping up was comparatively pleasant, almost exciting” (714; pt. 4, ch. 1), which both testify indirectly to the brutality of human beings towards each other.

The same evasive technique appears in *Things*, yet, unlike Mailer, O’Brien directly informs his readers that he uses euphemisms to soften the brutality operative in his fiction. In “The Things They Carried,” he writes that soldiers:

[U]sed a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased* they’d say. *Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping*. It wasn’t cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn’t quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. (18; ch. 1)

According to Holder’s dictionary of euphemisms, the terms “greased,” “offed,” and “zapped” all mean the action of killing another human being (175; 276; 448); however, by calling it differently, soldiers alleviate the shock associated with their collective participation in acts of homicide that they are all ordained to commit. Indeed, these words all have a comic tone aimed at destroying the reality of combat death, as O’Brien indicates.

In the story of “The Man I Killed,” this confluence of the comic with the tragic reappears when Azar mockingly tells O’Brien that the man he just kills looks like “Wheat,” “oatmeal,” or “Rice Crispies” (132; ch. 12) rather than a bloody mash. Likewise, when Lemon dies, the narrator calls his body a “waste” in the middle of a “much wider wastage,” (248; ch. 22) rather than a corpse among the number of the dead. Here the euphemism “waste” means getting killed (Holder 432) and, thus, the “wider wastage” refers to the innumerable number of soldiers killed during service. By using this

term, he belittles the reality of death because of the impossibility of counting or measuring the number of all those who have died on the battlefield.

As a variation, he uses other synonymous terms that define the corpse like “a kicked bucket,” “a crispy critter,” “a roasted peanut,” and “a crunchie munchie” (248; ch. 22). While O’Brien borrows some of these euphemisms like the expression “a kicked bucket” or “kicked the bucket” (247; ch. 22), used in many contexts “to detract from the seriousness of death” (Bulman 84), he invents others typical to his fiction like “a roasted peanut” and a “crunchie munchie” meaning badly burned or wounded. These euphemisms “make a difference” because, as O’Brien puts it, “it’s easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse” (248; ch. 22). As Thomson argues, the men of Alpha company use jokes and tough words to escape the horrors of combat death (45). Hence, by calling death by other names, O’Brien testifies to the wrongs witnessed and committed in a euphemistically funny way that allows readers to both laugh and gape at the narrated events.

In the case of *Birds*, new euphemistic expressions, in addition to those employed by his predecessors, enter the scene as the nature of the conflict changes from Vietnam to the Iraq War. Since euphemisms change from one context to the next, Powers use words that sometimes differ from those employed by O’Brien or Mailer. As Bulman argues, “euphemisms tend to arise in connection with subjects which society at a particular time is sensitive about” (85). At times, the novel focuses on expressions that differently speak of America’s unjustified occupation of Iraq and the senseless killing of the indigenous population, which both the American people and the veteran author himself may consider as sensitive topics. One example appears when, instead of saying defeated territory, Powers says, “occupied buildings,” (151; ch. 8) or “the scratched-out positions we

occupied” (78; ch. 4); and, instead of the attacker or aggressor, he uses the word “intruder,” which means “an armed invader” (Holder 210).

Another example shows up when he describes the condition of the city of Al Tafari after their occupation. “We wore [the city] down to the bone with our modern instruments” (122; ch. 6). According to Holder, the term “modern” means new weaponry used to differentiate between old and modern ways of killing (256). At other times, however, he uses euphemisms common to the subject of war like those employed by O’Brien to designate mortality. Whereas O’Brien transforms the corpse into a “waste,” a “kicked bucket,” or a “roasted peanut,” Powers simply calls it a “body” – meaning a corpse (Holder 35) – to make it seem alive without necessarily inducing laughter. An example pops up when he portrays the body of a dead nurse after the explosion of the medical headquarters, noting that her body looks “blue tinted” (172; ch. 8), a color that generally appears on corpses.

The same euphemism describes Murph in the final section of the novel as Sterling and Bartle find his “body ... twisted at absurd angles” (205; ch. 10) beneath the mosque’s tower, a position that characterizes a corpse rather than a living human body. Although it is contextually clear that, in these two episodes, the writer describes the condition of human beings in a state of deadliness, he certainly chooses to do so in a less offensive way.

In keeping with the same idea of speaking inoffensively, Mailer makes use of yet another device of unspeakability that follows a similar yet different narrative approach. Through similes, he compares the ineffable to lifelike experiences, hoping to place his readers in a more familiar atmosphere. Since *Naked* deals mostly with combat stress, Mailer compares nearly all the traumatic episodes, because of their intensity and unreality, to realistic events that grant readers access to the true fervor of combat. Unable

to give a precise description of the naval invasion of Anopopei, he writes, “the night rocked and shuddered like a great log foundering in the surf” (27; pt. 1, ch. 2) from the unceasing fire that sounds “like immense freight trains jerking and tugging up a grade” (27; pt. 1, ch. 2). From these two similes, readers can feel, at least imaginarily, how combat looks and sounds like; how the personified night, in its shuddering, resembles a large piece of wood surfing in the water, and how the gunfire sounds like trains making a particular noise while carrying goods.

Similarly, in another combat assault, Hennessey associates the vibration of falling mortars to the “tearing squeals of a car braking to avert a crash,” (44; pt. 1, ch. 2) which indicates the proximity of the artillery and the probable threat in case the following mortar reaches his position, causing him to shit his pants for fear of death. In another skirmish between the Japanese and the US soldiers, the narrator contrasts the melody of the “Jap rifles” to that of the Americans, noting that, while the former makes a weak “tic-boom” sound, the latter sounds “more powerful, like a leather belt slapped on a table” (136; pt. 2, ch. 5). This comparison points to the superiority of the American forces whose weaponry has a strong and swift sound compared to the slow clocklike rate of the Japanese soldiers.

Like the sound of the belt, Mailer, also, compares the same voice with that of a “fly-swatter being struck against a table” (42; pt. 1, ch. 2) and, then, to a “great muffled bell in the heavy moist night air,” (122; pt. 2, ch. 5) pushing readers to question which simile best designates the sonority of the battlefield? At first, he likens the melody of the battlefield to “freight trains” and a braking car, then to the sound of a slapped belt, a crashed fly or a big faint bell, including numerous other examples, that none truly communicates the intended meaning.

More of this silent figure of speech appears in O'Brien's fiction, but unlike its function in *Naked*, in *Things*, it assists the narrator in carrying out his illusionary task of storytelling. Since O'Brien confirms that illusions make up his art, "the illusory quality of the simile" (Glinski 116) seems to work in favor of his artistic creation. This appears when, in "The Lives of the Dead," he compares his craft to the practice of "magic" where if he tries "to explain it, or even talk about it, the thrill and mystery would be gone" (252; ch. 22). As such, similes are just one way through which he avoids talking about some terrible things, hoping to keep the magic alive to the reader.

For example, to keep Linda alive in his imagination and the text alike, O'Brien writes, "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" (253-54; ch. 22). To overthrow mortality, he tells readers that he can still see her despite their former knowledge of her death at the beginning of the story; he uses two similes in a single sentence, revealing the extent of his troubled memories apparent in his inability to give a fixed image that can clearly describe his state of mind.

In a like manner, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," told through Rat Kiley's – the narrator of this story – technique of embellishment, further exemplifies this illusionary practice because it tricks the reader into believing the validity of its premise. According to his version of the story, when Mary Anne joins the Greenies in the wilderness, she turns into a shadow marching along with the seven other shadows (Greenies) that look neither like humans nor like ghosts; however, Rat says, their "silhouettes seemed to float across the surface of the earth, like spirits, vaporous, and unreal" (108; ch. 9).

To heat the events, the narrator compares their silhouettes to "spirits," an analogy that does not give the full picture for its inability to match reality. Differently speaking, readers cannot formulate a mental picture of the presented simile since spirits do not

visibly exist in real life, yet, it gives them some access to Mary Anne's radical transformation once she crosses the realm of no man's land. Several other similes reinforce this character transformation like when Rat compares the smell of her new house to "the fumes of some exotic smokehouse" or "an animal's den", and the movement of her body to "electricity ... glowing in the dark" or to "fire ... burning away into nothing" (113; ch. 9). Despite saying nothing, all these analogies succeed in transmitting to the reader Mary Anne's descent into savagery while keeping alive the mysterious practice of storytelling.

A similar practice appears in *Birds* to throw a beautiful veil on the ugly scenes of combat. Since Powers poetically describes the indescribable, his handling of similes adds up to the aesthetics of his narrative style, making it easier for him to testify inaccurately to the horrors witnessed at the Iraqi front. As Patrick Deer notes, Bartle, a war survivor, "authors a lyrically beautiful narrative of combat," yet, the true horrors remain hidden and unexplained (321).

Also, in his interview with Jonathan Ruppin, Powers said:

In trying to demonstrate Bartle's mental state, I felt very strongly that the language would have to be prominent. Language is, at its essence, a set of noises and signs that represent what is happening inside our heads. If I have faith that these noises and signs can be received and understood by another person, then I should also have faith that they can be made more finely tuned. (*Birds* 232)

Similar to O'Brien's use of similes to heat the event of his stories, Powers' handling of this literary device appears to solidify the lyricism behind his narrative style, hoping to soften for readers the crudeness of Bartle's wartime experiences. Thus, standing halfway

between Mailer and O'Brien, Powers employs similes not only to name the horrors of combat but also to strengthen the poetics of his fiction.

In trying to describe the aura of the battlefield, the narrator paints the Iraqi landscape with bleak hues that shed some beauty on the dark game. Despite his desire to explain what happens in Al Tafari with "a level of profundity" (Powers, *Birds* 62; ch. 3), he, nonetheless, writes, "gray smoke flung like dirty paint on a washed-out canvas" (167; ch. 8), "the sun set like a clot of blood on the horizon" (173; ch. 8) and "the desert stretched out on all sides like an ocean of twice burned ash" (183; ch. 9). In these three similes, there is a mixture of beauty and ugliness moving between speech and silence. Although the beauty of language gives readers a pleasurable reading experience, the dark images of "gray smoke," "clot of blood," and "burned ash" still communicate something deeper and more horrible than what the surface meaning of language anticipates. In the first and third similes, the deeper meaning might unravel that an explosion has taken place, which causes the Iraqi landscape to look opaque from the concentration of smoke; and, in the second, the setting sun looks like a clump of blood probably from the immeasurable quantity of blood Bartle witnesses along the way, causing him to compare all things with red hues, like the setting sun, to the color of blood.

In a similar episode, dealing as well with quantity, he notes that the Iraqi soldiers who lay dead on the floor form part of the Iraqi landscape "as if something had sown seeds in that city that made bodies rise from the earth ... like flowers after a frost, dried and withering under a cold, bright sun" (124; ch. 6). Here, Bartle uses a double simile in a single sentence, which reveals his inability to give a single image that can measure the immeasurable; he compares the number of the dead to seeds and, then, to frozen flowers becoming dry and devastated under the sun. These opposing images, like in "sown" and "dried," or "frost" and "bright sun," suggest both deadness and aliveness as the dry and

sterile field of Iraq becomes fertile after the death of the locals. Hence, these similes, including many others, give the survivor narrator some sort of freedom that allows him to testify to the horrors of combat and combat death in a way that pleases both parties – the speaker and the listener.

Finally, the ellipsis speaks yet another language in the aforementioned tales, demonstrating each writer's deliberate omission of words to achieve particular narrative ends. Although this literary device, just as the previous ones, thrives in the three selected texts, for lack of space, only a few examples will be considered.

Starting with the first novel, Mailer punctuates the silent in his description of immediate traumatic scenes to help him carry out the overall theme of combat stress. To demonstrate, when Croft asks Toglio to aim at enemy lines, the latter, unable to tell him that he broke his wheeled machine gun, shouts back saying: "We had ... trouble," (143; pt. 2, ch. 5; ellipsis in orig.) leaving the rest of the story punctuated. Yet, in Freudian terms, "by analyzing the speech preceding the mumble or the ellipsis," ("Censorships" 138-139) it turns out that Toglio, along with Wyman and Goldstein, hides the full truth from their inquiring sergeant for fear of being court-martialed (141; pt. 2, ch. 5).

A similar emotion occupies Wilson's thoughts when he buries himself in the grass, fearing that the inspecting Japanese might discover his hiding spot. With a "choking horror," he thinks, "If the Japs get me ..." then, he fathoms on all the possible scenarios of "Jap torture" without clearly stating them (516; pt. 3, ch. 5; ellipsis in orig.), which suggests that the omitted speech in the conditional sentence silently narrates one of these torturing scenarios.

Other feelings of shock and horror, however, preoccupy Roth as he tries to remember the color of blood on Wilson's uniform. He thinks the color is dark, "somehow ... arterial ... venous ...?" (571; pt. 3, ch. 7; ellipses in orig.). Unable to give a precise

shade to this grim color, he fills in the gaps with three ellipses while still comparing it to the bright red of arterial and venous blood. Then, he tries to imagine himself wounded instead of Wilson, wondering how, in a few seconds, someone can be in good health and “then ...” (573; pt. 3, ch. 7; ellipsis in orig.). Since the sensation is unknowable to him, he cannot find the appropriate words to define it and, thus, leaves three dots to mark the undefinable.

In *Things*, however, this dotting technique reveals the unreliability of the narrator who, despite the illusions carried in his stories, remains speechless in front of certain traumatic episodes. In “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes,” O’Brien neither speaks of Norman Bowker’s journey back home, as the title of the story suggests nor writes a story that can truly describe what happens the night Kiowa dies in the shit field. When neither similes nor euphemisms suffice, he resorts to the ellipsis to dot certain passages made unspeakable by the impact of the war. Looking across the lake, Bowker imagines himself telling his father what happens that day in The Song Tra Bong and how the field turns into a “thick muck” (153; ch. 15) ready to suck down anyone standing on it. Instead of describing Kiowa’s sinking into the muck, he just says “this one night out by the river ... I wasn’t very brave,” (153; ch. 15; ellipsis in orig.) which reveals his inability to save his friend from the muddy field as well as his speechlessness during the event.

In the following story “Notes,” O’Brien receives a letter from Bowker containing some narrative gaps, making it hard for the reader to grasp its full meaning. Unable to forget his friend’s death, he writes: “there’s no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean. 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 ... Feels like I’m still in deep shit” (167; ch. 16; ellipses in orig.). In this short passage of the letter, the speaker cannot speak of the events leading up to Kiowa’s sinking into

the mud because he, too, feels like he is still there in the shit field witnessing the event all over again in his memory. Despite his desire to explain his feelings, as when he compares his trauma to death in the first simile, he ultimately punctuates the unnarratable for his inability to describe what truly happens in Nam. Unlike the ellipsis in *Naked*, the three dots in *Things* show the narrator's inability to tell a story from the perspective of a troubled memory forever broken by the impact of the war.

The same speech paralysis hunts the narrator of *Birds* as he tries to narrate his traumatized journey back in Iraq. An example appears when, like Bowker in *Things*, Bartle finds it difficult to confess to the priest of the German cathedral how Murphy dies in Al Tifar. When the priest asks him about his friend's name, he answers in three short sentences that together form an incomplete speech: "Daniel Murphy. My battle. He got killed in Al Tifar. He died like ..." (60; ch. 3; ellipsis in orig.). While his name and the fact of his being killed are fully communicated, the way he dies remains hidden. However, in the second short sentence, he calls Murphy his "battle," which probably hints at the struggle he faces each time he tries to speak of his despicable death; it also points to the fact that he cannot speak of this internal battle even to the priest who might relieve him of this heavy burden by listening and sharing his traumatization.

Another example shows up when the narrator uses the ellipsis as a substitute for killing the Iraqis saying "they'll be too scared to do much shooting at us before we ..." (17; ch. 1; ellipsis in orig.) Similar to Mailer, Powers avoids speaking of what comes after the personal pronoun "we," but by reading what comes before the ellipsis, readers can deduce what the narrator wants to say.

Although similes, euphemisms, and ellipses lack in exactness and precision, they, nonetheless, succeed in communicating something deeper and more acceptable to readers than the straightforward words and expressions of direct speech. All three authors use

these literary devices as a protective shield against the violence of language, thus, turning their horrible journey into beautifully crafted narratives. Through euphemisms, they turn bitter terms into unoffending concepts that allow readers to appreciate rather than condemn the narrated events. Likewise, with similes they bridge a gap between reality and illusion to make us believe what the narrator says; and with the ellipsis, they dot unpleasant passages so that we can imagine what lies behind the silence. While these figures have always formed the basis of every literary work, in war fiction, they seem to greatly facilitate the act of bearing witness not only for veteran writers unable to speak of the atrocities witnessed and committed at the front but also for readers unaccustomed to violent speech.

In the same way, the sublime allows the three authors to testify to the horrors witnessed at the front while acknowledging the impossibility of ever doing so. Mailer locates the theme in the physical world, which, despite reflecting the object of fear in the enemy, the storm or the mountain, fails to communicate the total picture of the operating wonder. He moves the passions belonging to physical objects without representing them fully (Burke 159). Stuck between two literary periods, *Naked* represents a version of humanity torn between a need for reflective judgement and a degree of reverence for tradition attributed to the deity and the military.

In *Things*, the sublime makes its presence visible in the paralysis that haunts literature in carrying its mission. O'Brien's recurrent disclaimers, explicit repudiation of truth and frequent editions of his craft delegitimize historical thinking, thus conforming to the metafictionality of postmodern aesthetics. In contrast to Mailer, he breaks free from tradition – like when Gallagher calls Nam the Garden of Evil instead of the Garden of Eden – in favor of a more profane picture of reality.

In *Birds*, however, readers detect a modernist nostalgia and a postmodernist delegitimization of meaning, which, like *Naked*, resists categorization. Powers shares with O'Brien the immanent relationship of the sublime to literature, and with Mailer, the inevitable gaze at history unredeemed by the workings of the imagination. Yet, for the most part, the three texts, regardless of their differences, share one common mission: expressing the inexpressible. All awaken readers to the fact "literature can adapt so radically in order to attest to its 'inaudible' existence ... [and] to disrupt its own established forms in order to echo Silence and so *become* a constitutive part of the *differend* itself" (Sawyer 158).

Indeed, regardless of their different contexts and techniques of representation, the three veteran writers find the comic mode compatible with the ridiculousness of the subject matter. In their novels, the incongruous – the funny and the horrible – helps in the process of testimony or, as O'Neill puts it, becomes an "approach that is artistically acceptable" (83) in the face of the unacceptable. In *Naked*, Mailer uses the grotesque to speak of the inhumanity he witnessed at the front and the utter deformation of soldiers to one another, hoping to testify to the wrongs witnessed and committed to an oblivious audience.

Conversely, in *Things*, O'Brien aims at communicating to the reader the monstrosity shaping the Vietnam War and the difficult task of narrating that experience using ordinary language. Instead, he adopts the illusive power of storytelling to trick readers into believing in what the narrator says, allowing them to laugh rather than gape at the narrated events.

Comparatively, *Birds* moves between Mailer's need to represent the inhumanity of individuals to each other and O'Brien's insistence on the inevitability of evil inside the battlefield. For him, the grotesque is immanent to the Iraqi landscape alone and necessary

to the status quo while pointing to the brutality of American troops towards their fellow Iraqi soldiers. Yet, despite their apparent differences, they all manage to create some narrative distance between reality and its representation, making it easy for readers to see the unseeable in a somewhat humorous way.

Hence, the three texts analyzed here triumph over the limitations imposed on language by bearing witness to the traumatic events of the war using modes of speakability highly compatible with the subject matter. Despite its apparent failure at communicating the full truth with accuracy, testimony, as these three survivor narrators convey it, turns the inaudible into an interpretable discourse capable only of igniting readers' emotions. As readers, it is important to encourage the endeavor and the difficult task bestowed upon these veteran authors rather than judge or condemn the failure of their narrative truths. By substituting the cognitive for the affective, Mailer, O'Brien, and Powers hope to share their experiences with sympathetic listeners willing to bear witness to the events without interrogating the incomprehensiveness of their discourse.

Reading their stories of survival, the listener not only feels the aura of the battlefield and the ordeals of the narrator but also discovers the malleability of their skillfully crafted narratives, and how their carefully chosen words cover up the language of pain. It teaches them, for instance, that a simple literary device or an insignificant moment of humor can speak more powerfully than the unequivocal words of direct speech. As such, *Naked*, *Things*, and *Birds* bring out the differends of language to testify to the ineffable and, thus, turn the meaningless business of war into a meaningful subject matter.

General Conclusion

This study examined the subject of trauma in three post-1945 American war novels. Starting from Mailer's description of immediate traumatic events in his Second World War novel *Naked*, moving to O'Brien's experimentation with the illusive power of language in his Vietnam War story, *Things*, to Powers' complex structuring of his Iraq War fiction in *Birds*. In these narratives, the three veteran authors uncover the elusive nature of trauma and the intricacies involved in bearing witness to such an unnamable subject matter. Through a close reading of the selected novels, the study, ultimately, disclaimed the possibility of ascribing clear-cut answers to a topic that does not adhere to pre-constructed frameworks or ordinary speech. As the last chapter indicated, the three authors resort to other modes of expression that appeal to the senses rather than logic to answer the dilemma at hand. Reading war stories through dualistic modes of expression ultimately disclaimed the possibility of unequivocal discourses and claimed the potentiality of unlimited interpretations.

Additionally, the thesis sought to understand the disillusionment of the postwar era, revealing how trauma wrecks the structure, characters, memory, language, and chronology of war stories. When pre-existing frameworks no longer hold sway, the three authors adopt new narrative modes, which simultaneously combine truth and deceit. Through an elegantly reticent speech, these dialectics paint the dark game of the combat zone with bright hues, offering readers a disturbingly beautiful canvas.

Surely, not all the stories examined here follow the same literary artifices in narrating the wound; however, their divergent techniques revealed not only the elusive aspect of trauma but also the unsettling nature of war fiction. While *Things*, for instance, openly informs readers of its appropriation of the comic or the euphemistic mode to

narrate O'Brien's troubled recollections, *Naked* does not, leaving the reader with the difficult task of identifying the writer's distinctive style.

In seeking to gaze at the aura of the battlefield, Chapter One explored immediate traumatic episodes in Mailer's debut novel. The book's exhaustive consideration of the sociocultural, political, and psychological characteristics of the twentieth century – in Lacanian terms, the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real themes – offers readers countless venues for criticism. Yet, since trauma looms beneath the surface level of representation, the first chapter sought to extract themes depicting the characters' actions on the battlefield, leaving passive developments unaddressed. These active narrative actions, filled with combat stress, brought other secondary themes to the stage such as the trials of manslaughter, the perception of deadliness, and the dehumanization of soldiers. Following these immediate encounters, the chapter ultimately uncovered the cost of surviving the deadly encounter, proximate killing, and military stress with an enduring sense of disillusionment.

Through the minor character of Red Valsen, Mailer unravels a version of humanity unscathed by the demonic demands of the battlefield. Although he engages in a close contest with the enemy, he refrains from attacking or hurting him, despite Croft's orders, by running away from the gladiatorial arena. As a response to stress, he flies away from the scene, leaving for Croft – the psychopath – the pleasurable task of executing the enemy. Unlike Valsen the platoon's sergeant, based on his background experiences mirrored in the *Time Machine*, enjoys the ardor of combat and the exhilarating feeling of killing another human being. Through this character, Mailer presents a version of humanity that in peacetime represses its sadistic drives but becomes highly qualified for manslaughter in times of war.

Also, through the spectacle of death, exhibited in various shapes and forms on the battlefield, Valsen comes across a brand-new human picture far removed from ordinary landscapes. For the first time, he gazes at human bodies in states of utter deformation and absolute anonymity that, despite their powerlessness, exude feelings of anxiety. Such feelings come from the realization that he, too, shares with these species the unescapable fate of mortality; they also derive from the Real gaze at an original event unanchored in his individual prehistory or, in philosophical terms, in Heideggerian phenomenology. Surviving both the experience of killing and the death encounter, thus, Valsen breaks ties with his pre-existing history for a new consciousness marked by abnormal phenomena in the physical world.

However, through the character of Julio Martinez, Mailer presents a different category of people absorbed by the chimera of the American dream. Coming from a Mexican, Catholic background, Martinez joins the US military to receive a medal of honor no matter the trials crossing his way. Unlike Valsen Martinez resorts to fighting rather than flight as a stress response to a proximate fray with the opponent. Out of his heroic dreams, Martinez kills a guard in his patrolling mission behind enemy lines, returning to his battalion with conflicting emotions torn between his desire for a new status in the military and fear of eternal damnation. His catholic background collides with his heroic ideals, which, in turn, engender feelings of guilt, shame, and pride at the prospect of surviving death.

Martinez neither abandons his socio-cultural values nor relinquishes his heroic ideals. Stuck between two extremes, the Mexican soldier holds his pre-constructed morals at bay while executing the enemy, then revisits them after his crime. Here, the novelist shows that, unlike the ancient wars depicted, for example, in *The Iliad* or *The Aeneid* fought with no moral ethics, the Pacific struggle forces soldiers, like Martinez, to measure

their actions against a moral standard acquired in peacetime; and, since civilizational values supposedly mark the modern age, Martinez loses both his values and the heroic entitlement that define the American dream of the wartime period.

At last, the novel moves from stressors in the physical world to military stress exercised from the top down. Military leaders, instead of increasing morale, occasion stress on inferior members of the army. As the third section of the initial chapter demonstrated, lieutenant Robert Hearn's conflict with General Cummings over the cigarette butt shifts the focus from the political discourse of the novel to the Real manifested in the lieutenant's stressed reaction. While most critics approach this incident from a political outlook, reading it from a psychoanalytical angle, turned the event from an ideological clash into a traumatic moment endured by Hearn both during and after Cumming's humiliation.

When Cummings orders him to pick up the cigarette from the tent's neat floor, Hearn feels shame and a deep resentment for the General's misuse of power. He obeys the order for fear of being court-martialed for offending his superior. Later on, the embarrassing act of submitting to a totalitarian tyrant triggers a stress reaction once he joins Croft's platoon. Each time he enters combat, the sensation of shame and guilt revisits him to paralyze his mental and physical faculties, creating a double-traumatic effect.

By transporting readers to the aura of the combat zone, Chapter One, thus, allowed readers to gaze at the ordeals of battle from the lens of active narrative actions that depict extreme events in the physical world. Starting with Valsen's contest with death and impossible acts of homicide and Martinez's own perpetuation of stress, to Hearn's submission to tyranny, the study exposed the horrors of the Pacific struggle and the serious consequences accompanying that experience. Despite their different social

backgrounds, all of them experience trauma through fight, flight, or submission, reactions that temporarily shut down consciousness. However, as the initial chapter finally argued, Mailer, even with the unconscious states of his characters, succeeds in translating their emotions by way of their automatic reactions, something which O'Brien and Powers fail to do through acts of recollection.

To understand the complex relationship between memory and trauma, Chapter Two examined O'Brien's art of storytelling in *Things*, revealing how the narrator invents new narrative illusions from the shattered remnants of the Vietnam War. By deconstructing O'Brien's skillfully constructed illusions, the chapter uncovered the nullity of meaning as well as the double space that the novel occupies. Torn between speech and silence, *Things* both affirms and negates the truth as well as covers up and uncovers the wound, making it impossible for readers to pin down signification. On the whole, the inquiry overthrew the critical claims that read the novel as a therapeutic practice, relieving the writer from his troubled recollections. On the contrary, it argued that O'Brien's power of storytelling covers the ugliness of experience with a veil of beauty that gives the illusion of salvation, redemption, and restoration at the end of the story. By scrutinizing language, the chapter ultimately revealed the impossibility of interpreting the cracks that make-up *Things*.

The first section examined the dichotomy of sameness and otherness apparent in the narrator's strong disillusionment with axioms defining the self, in particular, and the world he inhabits, in general. As the initial story of the novel demonstrates, characters metaphorically carry the emotional and physical weight of Vietnam, which, together act as forces that ward off individual freedom. Unable to define the true motives of America's engagement in Vietnam, Tim decides to flee to Canada to escape his call of duty, but the emotions of shame, fear, and embarrassment impair his judgement.

In a moral dilemma, he joins the war effort because he can never win against America's authoritatively unjust morality. As such, once in Vietnam, he acts both in favor and against this morality by committing horrible deeds while still nonconforming to the laws guiding his actions. An example appears when he thinks of frightening Bobby Jergenson by throwing a hand grenade in his bunker, imagining himself a dark ghost committing evil as an act of retaliation, an episode that proposes a series of possible interpretations. Thus, the narrator fails to expose the brutality of morality using definite terms since this entails exposing his own deeds.

The second section, however, discussed the relationship between speech and silence in the chapters "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes". In these two stories, the narrator wishes to speak of the events leading up to Norman Bowker's traumatization back in Vietnam, yet since he, too, witnesses the events along with him, cannot turn this experience into words. Both the stories' titles contradict the content of their recounted episodes, creating a binary opposition between the speech of the former and the silence of the latter. Bowker asks O'Brien to write a story on his behalf because he can neither find the appropriate words to name the void nor sympathetic listeners to share his wound. Since Tim and Bowker die along with Kiowa in the shitty field of the Song Tra Bong, the medium of expression that follows this permanent event comes undone. Unable to answer his friend's request, O'Brien, thus, remains stuck between a nameless responsibility (Bowker's request) and a nameless agony (uncommunicated trauma); and, his two stories turn from appearing like acts of speakability to mere acts of writing.

The final section eventually illustrated O'Brien's illusory art of storytelling in his concluding chapter "The Lives of the Dead," which, as the title suggests, creates the illusion of aliveness despite deadliness. Like most of his stories, the last part substitutes the Dionysian for the Apollonian in order to trick readers into reading the gory truth of

mortality as O'Brien's final saving grace. By combining memory and language, the narrator brings Linda, Bowker and Kiowa alive in the story, letting them perform some actions in a triadic spatiotemporal order. Although Linda dies in America in 1956 and Bowker and Kiowa in Vietnam in 1969, the narrator allows them to breathe when writing his story in 1990, which brings two distant traumatic events into a single moment. This appears when Tim links the funeral scene of his childhood friend Linda with the grave pit of the battlefield, where Kiowa along with others dies without a decent funeral, to write a beautifully shocking story.

By constantly diverting readers' gaze from the Dionysian face of mortality using images of brightness, timelessness, and innocence, O'Brien overthrows the unpleasant in favor of a more bearable version of reality. Anyhow, the story curbs this satisfactory version with shades of darkness and ephemerality that turns readers' gaze back to the horrors at work. Yet, regardless of its nuanced signification, "The Lives of the Dead," much like the rest of the stories, transports readers to a new dimension of reality located neither in truth nor in deceit but somewhere in the middle.

Likewise, *Birds* follows *Things* in its disregard of spatiotemporal markers when narrating the ineffable; but, while Chapter Two linked O'Brien's distant chronological recollections to reveal the illusion of storytelling in the novel's final story, Chapter Three studied the chronology of *Birds* in its entirety to reveal the extent through which trauma wrecks the pathway of the plot and the character's perception of time. Indeed, while Chapter One sought to study Real events in immediate narrative actions, Chapter Three strived to analyze Real time in misguided narrative recollections, nullifying pre-constructed notions of time in favor of a strange temporality. Reading *Birds* from this perspective allowed readers to imagine time outside the parameters of the ordinary clock,

share with Bartle the extraordinary timescape of the battlefield and, most importantly, construct meaning out of the meaninglessness of the storyline.

The first section scrutinized the recollected and bizarre chronology of the combat zone during and after extreme events. In the Iraqi desert, soldiers fail to notice the simple transition of the natural cycle in that, unlike at the homefront, death and deformity mark the change of seasons, which points to the extent through which war imaginatively alters the natural rhythm. Indeed, time during combat either quickens or slows down, making it difficult for soldiers, who temporarily enter a state of numbness, to catch hold of the moment.

Within this reconceptualization of time, however, Powers grants some authority to manmade chronology apparent in the soldiers' automatic reactions to life-threatening events, as when Bartle shoots back the enemy in response to the clock's demand. This quick or slow movement of events takes a similar shape at the homefront, which suggests the persistence of the wound long after the cessation of the conflict. Examples appear when Bartle notices, for the first time, wrinkles on his mother's hands, Murph's quick passage into maturation as well his strong desire to return to the safety of the womb, all of which reveal a condition of traumatic homeostasis.

Along these lines, section two countered Newtonian time in favor of Einstein's space-time continuum manifested in Bartle's occupation of three spatial horizons and one temporal dimension. The narrator travels back and forth between Iraq, America, and Germany in a single moment that constitutes at once the past, present, and future. Through his imagery of light, Bartle sees his entire history playing in his mind like a movie that, in a matter of milliseconds, displays past, present, and future events without describing them to the reader. At home, he links the unpleasant noise of Iraq to the harmonious sound of the Virginian landscape, creating some sort of a traumatic realism where the traumatic

past interweaves with present events. This unique version of realism creates as well a condition of simultaneity in which the narrator can revisit the past and travel to the future through immediate recollections. Yet, despite his ability to travel back and forth in time and space, Bartle cannot tie his experience to a single spatiotemporal order, which suggests the enduring and repetitive aspect of his traumatic memories.

In a final attempt to understand Powers' representation of time, the last section turned to the complex architecture of the novel, linking events in a metonymic chain rather than chronological order to reveal the overall meaning of the novel. By quilting metonymies in a chain of similar yet different signifiers, the final metaphor undoes presupposed interpretations carried across the plotline to reveal an opposite signified. Signifiers, rather than chronological events, push the plot of the story forward until they exhaust all the objects of possible *différence*. In the end, the chapter argued that *Birds* unfolds meaning through substitution and delay that leave the end of the story unresolved and the narrator's desire unappeased. All the same, the constant detours of the plot, despite its unsettling nature, not only teach readers to structure meaning outside the conventions of the Aristotelian plot but also to imagine time outside the boundaries of manmade chronology.

While the three chapters demonstrated how the experience of pain infects the make-up of war stories both in terms of form and content, the last chapter turned to the question of legitimacy in the three novels, comparing and contrasting how each author makes use of modes of speakability to testify to the Real. It argued that the survivor's tale bears witness to trauma through five modes of speakability that include but are not limited to the discourse of the sublime, humor, euphemisms, similes, and ellipses. All these discourses fall within the rubric of testimony because they tend to say one thing to mean something else that eventually communicates both truth and falsehood.

Standing halfway between eloquence and reticence, the art of the sublime occupies a significant place in the three war stories, marking its presence through the authors' direct allegations of language and its inability to communicate loftier emotions. While in *Naked*, Mailer makes use of the sublime to speak of uppermost phenomena in the physical world, in *Things* and *Birds* the writers employ it to reveal the paralysis of language caught in the grips of traumatic memories. Mailer finds solace in the Burkean sublime because it marvels before the sound of combat, the boldness of military commanders, the spectacle of the mountain, and the exoticism of the jungle. However, O'Brien and Powers' postmodern sublimity stumbles before the faculty of reason and solicits that of the imagination, which authorizes infinite versions of truth and, thus, turns this linguistic paralysis into limitless narrative possibilities.

Comparably, the dialectics of humor moved between gaiety and solemnity to transport the reading experience from the faculty of the mind to the body, allowing us to laugh rather than gape at the gloominess in force. Like with the sublime, each veteran author adopted the comic mode available at hand to transform the unpleasant into a burst of nervous laughter, on the one hand, and to carry different narrative aims, on the other. Whereas Mailer favored the grotesque for its ability to expose the inhumanity of twenty-century military organization, and O'Brien the monstrous to overthrow the shallow morality shaping the Vietnam War, Powers circled between the former's desire to expose the inhumanity of soldiers and the latter's insistence on the absence of morality guiding the Iraq War. Whatever their motives, however, each writer succeeded in turning the difficult practice of testimony into an entertaining enterprise that temporarily escapes the world as such.

Finally, the study closed the investigation with the authors' employment of common figures of speech such as similes, ellipses, and euphemisms to carry out the

toilsome project of testimony. In this final endeavor, the study argued that, while literary devices are part and parcel of almost every literary work, in *Naked*, *Things*, and *Birds* they operate in favor of the subject matter, making it possible for the survivor narrator to include obscenity under acceptable forms of literary expression.

As Chapter One demonstrated, although *Naked* gives us some access into the game of battle, it tends to blur some scenes by comparing, for example, the sound of mortars to a near car crash or a giant faint bell. In a different vein, O'Brien and Powers, while keeping the same effect, make use of similes to maintain the illusions or the poetics that make up their stories; and, where Mailer and Powers unconsciously employ euphemisms to substitute harsh expressions, O'Brien directly informs readers of his adoption of the euphemistic mode. All the same, when neither similes nor euphemisms suffice, the three authors ultimately turn to the ellipsis as a final calculation in the complex equation of their literary testimonies.

By probing the confines of representation in the selected fiction, the thesis largely denied the possibility of definite answers to a topic as problematic as war traumatization. The three novels, despite the guise granted by the power of the imagination, caress but do not soothe the sporadic aches of the wound. As Adorno's introductory statement advocates, any artistic endeavor after the sickness that contaminated the post-1945 era inevitably calls for the rehabilitation of the word. By building its argument around Adorno's dictum, the thesis confirmed the cogency of the statement in *Naked*, *Things*, and *Birds*, all of which emerge as a result of extreme and unconventional historical events.

Parallel to the selected novels, the theoretical framework guiding this research rejected the possibility of prescriptive discourses but, at the same time, authorized unlimited venues of criticism that adhere to the inexorability of the Real. While Blanchot's deconstructionist vision made it possible to read the disaster through the ruins

of words, it did not impose a dogmatic reading for O'Brien's fiction. Similarly, Lacan's Real and Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* agreed on the inscrutable nature of trauma while ushering readers to unlimited possibilities within the confines of language. All the same, Lyotard's and Felman's conception of the Holocaust, as an event without a witness, questioned the legitimacy of the act of testimony by trauma survivors, but, at the same time, authorized infinite modes of speakability, which all point to the duplicity of meaning. Reading war stories from the perspective of speakable yet unspeakable approaches perpetually paved the way for novel interpretations of narratives of pain without ascribing absolute significations.

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Résumé

Cette thèse interroge l'état de l'expression esthétique dans trois récits de guerre d'auteurs vétérans, traitant trois conflits majeurs de l'histoire américaine. Les trois romans révèlent les subtilités de la représentation de la blessure et la difficulté de témoigner à des événements humains extraordinaires à l'aide d'un langage ordinaire. *Les Nus et les Morts* de Norman Mailer, *Les Choses Qu'ils Emportaient* de Tim O'Brien et *Yellow Birds* de Kevin Powers évoluent entre un désir inextinguible de transformer la douleur en récits cohérents et réparateurs et une conscience écrasante des limites imposées par la langue.

Cependant, selon la thèse, cette pauvreté linguistique autorise des possibilités illimitées d'interprétation de la blessure, d'une part, et libère le texte du fardeau de la signification absolue, d'autre part. Ainsi, dans les limites imposées par le sujet, les romans entraînent les lecteurs vers des possibilités illimitées et leur permettant de reconstruire le sens à partir des vestiges brisés de la langue.

En examinant les questions liées à l'expérience narrative, la mémoire, la structure, la temporalité et le témoignage en termes de forme et de contenu, la thèse révèle à quel point l'expérience du traumatisme infecte l'expression artistique. Enfin, elle soutient que la meilleure façon de comprendre les récits de douleur est d'accepter leur adhésion à la duplicité du sens, déchiré entre la vérité et le mensonge, la parole et le silence, ainsi que la tromperie et la sincérité.

Mots clés : guerre, traumatisme, désillusion, illusions, témoignage.

الملخص

تشكل أسئلة المصادقية و الوثوقية هاجسا في الأعمال البحثية المعاصرة التي تتقصى ظاهرة الصدمة في أدب الحروب. يستعصي وضع أدب الكفاح ضمن حدود الخطابات الجلية في عصر يتسم بالإبادات الجماعية و اللتباس الجماهيري فخييات الأمل التي تنتج حقبات ما بعد الحرب تشكك في ماهية اللغة و المعنى في عالم يتجه نحو النكبة. بناءا على هذا، أصبحت شرعية اللغة الأدبية محل نقاش يستدعي أنماطا للتعبير قد تستطیع وصف ما ال يمكن وصفه. تبحث هذه الأطروحة حالة هذا التعبير الجمالي في ثالث قصص حرب تتناول ثالث صراعات أساسية في تاريخ أمريكا من تأليف كتاب شاركوا سابقا في الحرب. تكشف الروايات الثالثة عن التعقيدات التي تتداخل في الحديث عن الجراح و صعوبة معاينة أحداث بشرية عظيمة و التعبير عنها بلغة عادية. تنتقل روايات "العراة و الموتى" لنورمان ميلر، "الشيء الذي حملوها" لتييم أوبراين، و "الطيور الصفراء" لكيفن باورز بين رغبة في تحويل الألم إلى قصص متناسقة و إصالحية و بين الوعي بالحدود التي تفرضها اللغة. على الرغم من ذلك، كما تبينه هذه الأطروحة، يسمح هذا النقص اللغوي بتشكيل إمكانات ال حدود لها في تفسير الجراح من جهة، و من جهة أخرى يزيل هذا النقص عبء الدالة المطلقة عن النص. و عليه، توجه الروايات، ضمن الحدود التي يفرضها الموضوع، القراء إلى إمكانات ال متناهية مما يسمح لهم بإعادة بناء المعنى من حطام اللغة المتبقي. تكشف الأطروحة من خلال دراسة القضايا المتعلقة بالتجربة السردية، الذاكرة، البنية، الزمانية، و الشهادة من حيث الشكل والمحتوى، إلى أي مدى تؤثر الصدمة على التعبير الفني. أخي ُرا، يؤكد البحث أن أفضل طريقة لفهم سرديات الألم هي قبول التهامها بازدواجية المعنى الكائن بين الحقيقة والباطل، التعبير والصمت، وكذلك الخداع والصدق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحرب، الصدمة، الخيبة، الوهم، الشهادة