

# Return and Recovery in Modern and Contemporary American War Literature

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## Trauma and Recovery

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth argues that to cure oneself of trauma seems to those who suffer from it “to imply the giving-up of an important reality, or the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy” (vii). Indeed, one Vietnam War veteran laments, “I do not want to take drugs for my [trauma-induced] nightmares, because I must remain a memorial to my dead friends” (Caruth vii). This veteran condemns himself to suffering in order to preserve the meaning that his trauma has for him. So trauma victims sometimes face a terrible choice – to forfeit a part of their identity, or to suffer intensely and indefinitely.

Especially for war veterans, whom I will focus on in this essay, suffering may seem to be the more attractive option, as the role that their trauma plays in their identity is sometimes too great to give up. Fortunately, whereas early psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, along with his contemporaries, considered “the cure” to psychological complications resulting from trauma to be synonymous with the “permit[ting] of the [traumatic] event to be forgotten” (Caruth vii), modern trauma theorists and therapists have recognized the need for a treatment that does not entail forgetting, or even completely letting go of the traumatic experience. Caruth observes that professionals in the trauma field have been hard at work solving “the problem of how to help relieve suffering, without eliminating the force and truth of the reality

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that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us” (vii). The difficulty, Caruth implies, is preserving the positive meaning of the trauma for the victim while simultaneously removing the trauma’s power to cause pain. Ultimately, our contemporary psychological understanding of trauma has recently led to the encouragement of victims to explore their trauma constructively in an effort to synthesize it, thus providing victims with a measure of closure, albeit limited, without taking their experience away from them.

Jonathan Shay, staff psychiatrist at the Department of Veteran Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston, explains that the synthesis of trauma entails creating and internalizing a chronologically and emotionally accurate account of how the traumatic experience unfolded. He heralds the benefits of creating this kind of narrative, noting that while severe trauma can “cause lifelong disabling psychiatric symptoms [and] ruin good character” (xiii), “narrative heals ... Narrative enables the survivor to rebuild the ruins of character” (188). The synthesis of trauma by way of forging a personal narrative is the polar opposite of Freud’s approach, as it allows veterans to reclaim themselves exactly by claiming their trauma for their own.

The benefits of “getting the past straight in [one’s] head” (147), as critic William Adair puts it, though enormous, are far from easy to access, as the process of synthesis can be painful and arduous. Shay notes that there exists “a dangerous illusion of a cathartic cure” (187). He calls this view nothing short of “catastrophic,” positing, “Recovery from severe combat trauma more nearly resembles training to run a marathon than cathartic redemption” (187). Indeed, it is exactly Shay’s point that there is no finish line, or “cure,” at all, and the resolution of trauma is a continuous process that veterans must stay on top of in order to remain healthy.

This essay examines a number of modern and contemporary fictional works written by American war veterans, in which many of the characters, themselves veterans, struggle to synthesize their trauma and recover from war using a variety of methods. These stories are significant not only because the characters’ efforts to “heal” from war offer important insights into the synthesis of trauma, but also because the texts themselves represent the authors’ attempts to better understand trauma. In the works discussed herein, characters

attempt to synthesize their war trauma by verbally communicating their personal narrative to empathetic listeners. Also, both characters and authors perform various redemptive and commemorative rituals in order to process war trauma. Finally, the authors of the works manipulate narrative form in order to effectively communicate war trauma without either diminishing it or glorifying it – an endeavor that ultimately aims to help them more fully understand war trauma.

### **Communalization**

Arguably more destructive than the soldiers' initial trauma is the fact that their societies are unreceptive and less than understanding of their plight. In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay asserts that the most effective way for veterans to synthesize emotions felt as a result of their experiences in war, and thus to smoothly reintegrate into society, is to communicate these emotions to an interested and caring audience. Without feeling properly understood, Shay posits, veterans cannot synthesize their emotions and are instead tortured by them. With empathetic listeners (and the means to communicate to them), however, veterans can close the distance between themselves and society. Shay refers to this process of the synthesis of anxiety-provoking emotions through communication with a receptive audience as the "communalization of trauma." He writes, "To express to other people emotions about the event and those involved in it, or to experience the presence of socially connected others who will not let one go through it alone. This is what is meant by communalizing the trauma" (55). In Shay's model for the communalization of trauma, both the veterans' own ability to communicate and the audience's capacity to understand are equally important. For the process to be complete, not only must veterans tell their story, but their audience must also empathize with it. Shay makes little distinction between the two, suggesting instead that they are different parts of a whole, and both must be addressed simultaneously in order for communalization to occur. However, he still believes that all veterans have much to say, and it is the audience's responsibility to be compassionate and understanding, and in doing so, make veterans comfortable and secure enough to get off of their chests what they have been bottling up since their return. Shay writes of the considerable responsibility of the listener, "A listener must be ready to

experience some of the terror, grief, and rage that the victim did” (189). He continues, “Once the veteran sees that the listener authentically experiences these emotions, even though with less intensity than in combat, the veteran often loses the desire to shout in the listener’s face, “You weren’t there, so shut the fuck up!” (189). The audience’s willingness to sacrifice for veterans by enduring the emotions that the veterans experienced in war not only validates the veterans’ plight, but also relieves veterans of the burden of suffering these emotions alone. When the communalization of trauma is practiced successfully, veterans are relieved not only of the emotions that they contend with, but also of the isolation that their long struggle with these emotions has caused.

In Tim O’Brien’s “Speaking of Courage,” found in the collection of short stories *The Things They Carried*, Norman Bowker is racked with sentiments of detachment and uselessness as a result of being unable to communalize his trauma, and these feelings prevent him from reintegrating into society. The story begins with the narrator describing Bowker’s aimlessness as a function of society’s failure to reach out to him, writing, “The war was over and there was no place in particular to go. Norman Bowker followed the tar-road on its seven mile loop around the lake then he started all over again, feeling safe inside his father’s big Chevy, now and then looking out on the lake to watch the boats and water-skiers and scenery” (131). Confronted with idyllic scenery and values so different from those he learned in war, it is all Bowker can do to retreat to a safe place. His glances toward the “boats and water-skiers” represent his longing to be a part of society, but society is operating in a different world than Bowker is, and its members are not even aware of Bowker’s need to communalize his trauma. Indeed, as critic Patrick Smith observes, Bowker “returns home to find a country that has not changed with him, a country that cannot accept the man it sent to war to protect his interests” (101). The lack of interest that the country shows in Bowker triggers his detachment, worsening his already damaged mental state. As he is left alone and improperly cared for, his isolation consumes him.

Because of society’s unwillingness to listen or to “accept,” Bowker is reduced to murmuring clipped phrases to himself, and as a result of having no audience, he becomes inarticulate, further limiting his

ability to tell his story to anyone. In a letter that Bowker writes to O'Brien, Bowker asks O'Brien to write a story about him or someone like him who is frustrated by the fact that he cannot tell his own story. In the suggestion that presumably sparks the creation of "Speaking of Courage," Bowker implores, "What you should do, Tim, is write a story about a guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole. A guy who can't get his act together and just drives around town all day ... This guy wants to talk about it, but he *can't* ... I'd write it myself except I can't ever find any words, if you know what I mean, and I can't figure out exactly what to *say*" (O'Brien 151). Bowker's experience in "that shithole" undeniably impacts his functioning in society, but what really hinders his integration is his inability to communicate his experience. Whereas he would normally be able to work out his emotions by vocalizing them, his inarticulateness prevents him from putting his finger on exactly how he "got zapped." Additionally, the frustration and desperation displayed when Bowker says, "if you know what I mean," suggests that Bowker, like any veteran in need of communalization, relies on the listener to help him create meaning out of his experience – a doomed strategy considering the nature of his audience in his hometown.

Bowker's audience's reluctance to help him communalize his trauma not only discourages him from piecing together a clear picture of his experience, but it makes him lose confidence in his words as a means of healing. As a result, he becomes convinced of the impossibility of communicating his story. Bowker reflects to himself about the unlikelihood of getting through to civilian society, "There was nothing to say. He could not talk about it and never would ... If it had been possible, which it wasn't, he would have explained how his friend Kiowa slipped away that night beneath the dark swampy field. He was folded in with the war, he was part of the waste ... And his father, who already knew, would have nodded" (147). Pained by the thought that he "could not talk about it and never would," Bowker begins to believe that there is simply "nothing to say." However, he cannot escape his need to communicate, as evidenced by the fact that he gets drawn into his own story even as he attempts to convince himself that it is not worth telling. Perhaps what he is driving at, then, is Shay's idea that his story is indeed worth telling, but it must be understood by others to

gain meaning.

After all, Bowker continuously comes back to the fantasy of gaining his father's understanding as if just thinking about it provides some relief. His father, though, is unwilling to empathize, despite the fact that he served in World War II and was in the same position when he himself returned home. Critic John Timmerman reflects on the irony of Norman's father's coldness, referring to him as "the person who, himself having had no one to listen, has buried the stories and adopted the routine manners of the present by no longer listening" (108). This problematic cycle is hardly specific to the Bowker family. Rather, the Bowker family's difficulties represent a cross-generational misgiving, that trauma is best not talked about or acknowledged; if ignored long enough, the assumption goes, perhaps it will evaporate. O'Brien symbolizes this culture of silence in the very landscape itself; the lake around which Norman circles is "a good audience for silence" (132). Bowker's silent circling of the lake, then, helps elucidate the function of the veteran in society, which is to aimlessly exist while taking care not to remind the rest of society about his trauma. As one of those who would prefer not to be reminded of Norman's experience, Norman's father, interestingly enough, is engaged in his own allegorical circularity, "watching players on TV circle the bases in the great national pastime" (Timmerman 108). As he wastes time in front of the television when he could be helping to communalize his son's trauma, the rest of the nation does the same, as represented by the professional baseball players running around in circles. Timmerman's cynical reference to this process as "the great national pastime" suggests that America is not only ignorant of the faults of this dynamic, but proudly endorses its perpetuation.

Because of the pitiful condition of communication, Bowker is reduced to trying to tell his story to a disembodied voice coming out of a speaker on a pole at a drive-in A&W. Even then, though, Bowker fails to say what he needs to in order to ease his suffering. After finishing his meal, he pushes the order button on the intercom so as to have the company of the voice, which asks, "What you really need, friend?" (146). Bowker replies, "Well ... how'd you like to hear about—", before remembering himself, shaking his head, and refusing to go any further. Despite the spark of compassion that the voice

on the intercom shows, albeit because it is “sure as fuck not going anywhere. Screwed to a post, for God sake” (146), Norman fails to take the first step in communalizing his trauma and reintegrating with society. Now mistrustful of society and skeptical of the value of communication, he can only “[drive] slowly away, the longing to tell now a deep, pervasive ache inside” (Timmerman 110). From O’Brien’s “Notes” section, the reader learns that, unable to communalize his trauma and heal his suffering, Bowker eventually hangs himself in the locker room of a YMCA.

Bowker’s story, though tragic, is by no means unique in American war literature. In “Soldier’s Home,” a short story from the collection *In Our Time*, Ernest Hemingway portrays the alienation and apathy of Harold Krebs as a function of being unable to communalize his war trauma. In the story, Krebs’s mother is astonishingly unsympathetic to his experience, and though she is aware that he suffered overseas in World War I, she is made uncomfortable by his experience and intently ignores it, focusing on anything other than his trauma. On one exemplary morning in the story, Hemingway describes how Harold reads books and maps in his bed while “learning about the war” and thinking how “he had been a good soldier” (72). After taking such pains to show readers that Harold is stuck in the past and in need of an empathetic listener with whom to communalize his trauma, Hemingway has Mrs. Krebs strike up a conversation with Harold about the furthest subject from the war – in this case, the opportunity to drive the family car. As if the car is the most important thing to Harold, Mrs. Krebs says gravely, “I had a talk with your father last night, Harold... Your father has felt for some time now that you should be able to take the car out in the evenings” (73). The issue seems ridiculous in comparison to Harold’s war experience, and he can only respond with forced enthusiasm, “Yeah? Take the car out? Yeah?” (73). Because Harold needs to discuss his trauma, his mother’s insistence on ignoring it leaves him dissatisfied and emotionally vacant from his conversations with her.

Indeed, because of society’s frenzied focus on everything but what he needs it to focus on, Krebs becomes unable to summon real enthusiasm for anything, which becomes problematic in his attempts to reintegrate into society. Critic Steven Trout agrees;

“Krebs’s indifference,” he claims, “signifies ... his sense of being cut off from a culture that in its rush to resume ‘normalcy’ treats his wartime experiences as if they never happened” (12). Because his preoccupations are exactly what society refuses to concern itself with, he has no one to speak to about his trauma.

As a result of being unable to communalize his experience, he suffers from what critic Robert Lamb refers to as “a veteran’s postwar alienation” (19). The extent of Krebs’s alienation upon his return home is evident in his indifference to women, which runs deeper than mere disinterest. The narrator writes, “He liked the girls that were walking on the other side of the street. ... But the world they were in was not the world he was in. He would like to have one of them. But it was not worth it” (72). Krebs is so alienated by society’s lack of concern for his trauma that he feels like he is in an entirely different world from the girls rather than only on the other side of the street. His alienation motivates more apathy, as he ultimately gives up trying to bridge the gap between himself and civilian society, deciding that it is “not worth it.”

A similar cycle is depicted in an exchange between Harold and his mother at the breakfast table one morning, only this time, his mother lashes out at him, blaming him for his apathy rather than examining how her own actions could have contributed to his current state (or how a change in her actions might help change his state). In both her words and disposition, Harold’s mother mirrors society’s general response to its returning veterans after World War I. Throughout the story and in this scene in particular, Hemingway creates an “Utterly unrelenting ... characterization of Mrs. Krebs as a monster” (Lamb 19), suggesting that society itself is nothing short of monstrous for the lack of compassion that it shows its veterans. As “Krebs look[s] at the bacon fat hardening on his plate” (Hemingway 75), his mother drones, “Your father is worried, too. ... He thinks you have lost your ambition, that you haven’t got a definite aim in life ... The boys are all settling down; they’re all determined to get somewhere” (75). When Krebs becomes visibly distant as a result of his mother’s words, she simply demands, “Don’t look that way, Harold” (75). Mrs. Krebs is undeniably unsympathetic in her assessment of Harold’s situation.

Indeed, she seems bent on refusing to empathize with him, comparing him to other “boys” who did not fight in the war and instructing him to change his facial expression rather than inquiring why he looks “that way.” She never realizes that her failure to be compassionate is precisely the problem. Krebs, made listless and apathetic by his mother’s resolution to ignore his war trauma, can only stare idly at “the bacon fat hardening on his plate,” and with no encouragement from her, he has no window to communalize his trauma. Harold’s apathy frustrates and saddens his mother, and his mother’s frustration forces him to withdraw even further.

Krebs and Bowker’s homecomings are decidedly different from Billy Pilgrim’s experience in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, but the three stories are linked by the problems caused by their protagonists’ inability to communalize trauma once home from war. In the novel, Billy Pilgrim finds an unreceptive society upon his return from World War II, but rather than succumb to apathy or lament his inability to communicate, he invents and convinces himself of the fatalist delusion that nothing can be changed, everything is as it must be, and all of time itself has in fact already happened. Significantly, the development of this destructive belief is a reaction to being unable to communalize his trauma in the first place.

Billy’s first experience after creating this philosophy, an experience that powerfully reinforces his new outlook, is his encounter with Bertram Rumfoord in a Vermont hospital. After a serious plane crash in which Billy is the only survivor, he is assigned to a hospital room with Rumfoord, a former brigadier general who, because Billy does not resemble the ideal soldier, is unresponsive to him. Longing to speak about his experience in the war to someone who might understand, Billy is described as “trying to prove to a deaf and blind enemy that he was interesting to hear and see. . . . He said to Rumfoord, ‘I was in Dresden when it was bombed. I was a prisoner of war.’ Rumfoord sighed impatiently” (247). The fact that Billy considers a man who fought on the same side as him a “deaf and blind enemy” speaks to the size of the gulf between Billy and society, and his displeasure with such a rupture. Rumfoord’s impatient sigh is too much for Billy to bear, and makes his need to be paid attention to even stronger – until, that is, he is relieved by a supporting element of his fatalist outlook:

time travel.

While in the hospital and just before his encounter with Rumfoord, Billy has extensive brain surgery. Vonnegut writes, "Billy was unconscious for two days after that, and he dreamed millions of things" (200). These dreams include a visit through a time warp to the alien planet of Tralfamadore, whose inhabitants' unique views on the non-linear nature of time inform his delusion that "Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does" (254). Billy finds comfort in fatalism as it explains his failure to communicate, society's lack of understanding, and his suffering in general, as necessary and unchangeable. Of course, having this view makes it even less likely that Billy will be able to (or even attempt to) communicate his emotions effectively, and makes it nearly impossible for him to communalize his trauma.

Kurt Vonnegut, appearing as an autobiographical character in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, faces difficulties similar to Billy's when attempting to communicate his war experience, as he struggles both to find empathetic listeners and to articulate the events that he witnessed. Early in the novel, Vonnegut details the challenge that he faces when trying to find words for his experience in Dresden, asserting, "Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like 'Poo-tee-weet?'" (24). In this statement, Vonnegut touches on the culture of silence that Bowker's silent circling of the lake depicts in "Speaking of Courage." Because veterans are not expected or "supposed" to say anything, Vonnegut suggests, not only do they hold their silence, but they lose their ability to speak. For this reason, the meaningless "Poo-tee-weet" becomes "all there is to say about a massacre" in the sense that there is in fact plenty to say, but nothing that can actually be said.

As for Billy, Bowker, and Krebs, much of the difficulty that Vonnegut has in communicating stems from the inability of others to listen. In one rare moment, Vonnegut finds words for his experience in Dresden and is eager to tell his story. He optimistically recounts his experience to a member of the University of Chicago's "Committee on Social Thought" (12-13), only to hear the committee member counter it with a tale of Nazi atrocity, without so much as acknowledging

Vonnegut's experience or his need for understanding. Vonnegut writes of the episode, "I happened to tell [a professor] about the raid as I had seen it, ... And he told me about the concentration camps, and about how the Germans had made soap and candles out of the fat of dead Jews and so on" (12-13). Though one would expect a member of "The Committee on Social Thought" to be sensitive, he undermines Vonnegut's experience not only by spurning it and implying that the story of Nazi atrocity somehow trumps Vonnegut's narrative, but also by devaluing Vonnegut's experience by implying that it is commensurable with any other trauma.

The committee member's treatment of Vonnegut's account of Dresden is strikingly similar to what Shay describes as "pissing contests" (205), in which survivors of trauma put down the experiences of other survivors to make their own experiences seem more deserving of attention. Shay explains, "Veterans call it 'pissing contests' when one veteran denies the validity of another veteran's war trauma. Different survivor groups eagerly start these competitions as well, each claiming that their experience is the only significant one" (205). In "pissing contests," trauma survivors belittle the experiences of others in an attempt have their own experiences validated. While this process alienates those survivors who are put down, and is counterproductive to their communalization of trauma, it is also a phenomenon that results from survivors feeling like they are not being listened to in the first place. Like the fate of Norman Bowker's father, who becomes an apathetic listener after having been confronted with apathetic listeners himself, the perpetuation of "pissing contests" is a good example of how a precedent of indifference can breed alienation and more indifference.

When attempting to use communalization to promote the synthesis of trauma, the veterans' capacity for recovery is dependent on the willingness of the audience to listen, and in many cases, the audience is unwilling. The repeated theme throughout the works discussed in this chapter is the fact that the reality of war trauma makes civilians, and in some cases, even veterans, so uncomfortable that they resolutely ignore it when other veterans desperately need them to pay attention. Harold Krebs's mother demonstrates the best example of this self-induced ignorance, but Norman Bowker's father and Bertram Rumfoord are

no less guilty. Though some civilians are well aware that veterans need their compassion, they withhold it due to the discomfort that offering it would invite. As Trout notes, this attitude is informed by an “almost complete indifference toward . . . former soldiers,” and it results in “the mistreatment and misunderstanding of American veterans in general” (7). Because veterans feel the need to communalize their trauma in order to properly synthesize it and in order to rejoin society, society’s refusal to offer empathy is both destructive and insulting to them, as it sends the coexisting messages that their plight does not matter and they are not wanted back in society. Because of society’s abandonment of veterans, veterans often take it upon themselves to look for ways to synthesize their experience that do not require the cooperation of civilians.

### **Rituals**

Though Shay, along with many other critics, argues that “the best treatment . . . actively encourages communalization of the trauma” (187), to say that communalization is the most effective way to synthesize trauma does not mean that it is the only effective way. Veterans often use rituals that have personal meaning to them as a way to process their experience without the need for civilian cooperation. Whereas communalization helps veterans come to terms with their trauma by sharing it with others, other rituals encourage veterans to commemorate or otherwise mark the significance of their trauma for themselves, ultimately helping them to feel redeemed in the face of a traumatic experience. Trauma theorist Katharine Schramm makes no distinction between rituals and what she calls “commemorative activit[ies]” (5), writing that the exploration of trauma “with regard to the performance of commemorative rituals” lends itself both to “healing” and “triumph” (5). When veterans engage in rituals to commemorate trauma, they recontextualize their trauma by re-experiencing a taste of it in a constructive, emotional setting that is designed to promote healing and redemption rather than destruction. Importantly, almost any action can be ritualized, as long as the veteran perceives the ritual as meaningful.

Rituals do not make the veterans’ trauma disappear, but they

provide veterans with new information about their trauma that can be used toward a limited measure of healing, provided the veteran is inclined to use it that way. In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay likens the postwar difficulties that Vietnam veterans face to the difficulties that Achilles faces in *The Iliad*, and the performance of rituals plays a prominent role in both. He details how Achilles fails to synthesize the death of his dear friend, Patroklos, even after performing two traditionally redemptive rituals, one of which is also commemorative. He writes of Achilles entering a berserk state after the end of the Trojan War, "Achilles ... has just won the war for [the Greeks] and is still visibly crazed even after the first funeral feast for Patroklos" (91). Even after securing victory for his country and grieving for Patroklos at a ritualized ceremony, Achilles is still ravaged by Patroklos's death. For Shay, the persistence of his grief illustrates the limited healing power of any ritual. That is, rituals make up part of the veterans' effort to synthesize their experience, but they cannot effect a "cure." They can, however, make veterans healthy enough to stand a chance.

Anthony Swofford records his engagement in several rituals in his memoir about his experience in the Gulf War, *Jarhead*, in which he resembles Achilles in that he struggles to synthesize the death of his friend. In the memoir, Swofford and his fellow veterans ritually binge drink at a bar while grieving for their fallen comrade, Troy Collier. Troy is much more than a "war buddy" to his fellows, and his death causes severe trauma for the survivors, which they try to reconcile ritually constructing redemptive meaning for the act of drinking. Writing of the significance of the bond between soldiers, Shay claims that "combat calls forth a passion of care among men who fight beside each other that is comparable to the earliest and most deeply felt family relationships" (39). By comparing "the passion of care" between soldiers to that between a soldier and the soldier's mother and father, Shay hints at the sense of loss and confusion that a soldier feels when his comrade is killed. "We often hear that the death of a special friend-in-arms broke the survivor's life into unhealable halves," he writes, "with everything before his death radically severed from everything after" (39). A comrade's death causes two distinct problems that need to be addressed. The first is emotional pain and sentiments of loss, and the second is a mental rift from one's compassionate (or

motherly) side that must be bridged in order for a soldier to have any chance of either healing from the trauma of his friend's death or of resembling his former self.

For better or worse, veterans often use alcohol as a means of addressing both problems. As Shay notes, "Mind-altering substances ... seem to have been the main shrines to which American soldiers brought their grief" (62). This comes as no surprise, as alcohol has been traditionally linked with the drowning of sorrows in Western culture. While its role in addressing the problem of emotional pain may be obvious, alcohol is not commonly accepted as being able to inspire mental healing and the synthesis of trauma. However, because Swofford and most of his fellow veterans place meaning on drinking as a ceremony that redeems Troy's death, the act of binge drinking can be read as a ritual on which Swofford and his platoon mates rely to help synthesize the death of their friend as well as digest their war experience as a whole.

Often, though, even veterans who sometimes place meaning on the ritual of drinking as an act that promotes synthesis are compelled to use alcohol as a numbing agent, and when they do so, they experience only numbing, and no healing. For example, ravaged by the anxiety caused by the loss of Troy and desperate to extinguish it, six marines, Swofford included, begin drinking hours before Troy's funeral and do not stop for months afterward. Swofford recalls, "We stayed drunk for many months. ... Why was our friend dead?" (83). In suggesting that he and his friends "stayed drunk for many months" because they could not explain Troy's death, Swofford does not represent the ritual of drinking as able to help him find the answer. Rather, he drinks in this instance to cope with the fact that an answer will never be found.

Some who grieve for Troy Collier do not seem concerned by the distinction, and are thankful for the brief respite that the alcohol provides. One marine, Atticus, has the singular goal of forgetting his trauma altogether. Swofford writes, "Atticus sat at the bar and told the bartender ... that if she could get him so fucked up that he forgot Troy was dead, he'd give her \$100" (80). Atticus seeks only to distract himself from Troy's death, and is not troubled by the fact that alcohol will not help him synthesize Troy's death.

Atticus's treatment of alcohol resembles one of Shay's patients

who also relies on alcohol after the death of his “special friend-in-arms” to address his emotional pain. The veteran tells Shay in a therapy session, “I mean, I did it with the alcohol. . . . For that two days I stayed fucking shitfaced, just to numb it. Just so I wouldn’t have to think about it” (Shay 63). The veteran’s use of alcohol is strictly to “numb” his pain and to put the tragedy of his friend’s death out of his mind. Because he sees no opportunity to heal the “unhealable halves” of his consciousness by indulging in alcohol, he experiences none of the healing that those veterans do who depend on it for the synthesis of their trauma in addition to the numbing of their pain, like Swofford and the other four marines grieving for Troy.

Those five marines understand the ritual of drinking to be both meaningful and redemptive. During their binge, they often drink in Troy’s name as a way of paying tribute to him. Swofford recounts, “The bartender made us drinks she called Troy Colliers . . . and we each emptied a few of those” (80). By consuming drinks named after their friend, the marines believe that they are performing a noble act that honors Troy’s memory and brings them closer to him. Additionally, the symbolism invoked by the scene of the marines drinking “Troy Colliers” after Troy’s death suggests a ceremony in which Troy rejoins the combat unit, literally becoming part of his fellows. In temporarily welcoming Troy back to the unit and back to life, the marines who place more stock in the power of drinking than Atticus does are able to affirm Troy’s life while simultaneously healing the wounds created by his death.

In this way, the ritual of binge drinking plays a pivotal role in the veterans’ synthesis of their war trauma. The marines, with the exception of Atticus, are not merely numbed by the chemical composition of the alcohol, but they are also healed by the nearly spiritual meaning that they attach to it. The healing power of the act of drinking is best expressed when Swofford speaks sentimentally of Troy and drinking in the same sentence. He writes, “I knew that if Troy had had any choice in the matter, he’d have wanted us spending the evening of his funeral drunk” (81). Swofford’s belief that he is drinking not only for himself, but for Troy as well, makes all the difference in terms of the role of the ritual in the synthesis of trauma.

While the marines in *Jarhead* attach significant meaning to the ritual

of binge drinking, other veterans ascribe meaning to all kinds of other rituals. Veterans establish their own relationships with their respective rituals, and while most rituals are designed to help veterans synthesize their war trauma, depending on the ritual and on the veteran, synthesis can take place in radically different ways. Whereas ritualized drinking in *Jarhead* helps heal the trauma incurred as a result of a lost comrade by ceremonially healing a mental rift, Tim O'Brien's ritualized return to the war site helps him synthesize his experience by re-exposing him to his trauma, but in a new context.

While O'Brien values "literary exploration of the terrain of the Vietnam war" and its ability to "save us" (Bonn 2), he puts equal weight on the healing power of physically exploring the land where his trauma occurred. Essentially, by confronting the war site and the memories associated with it, allowing himself to feel the anxiety linked with those memories, but then forcing himself to view those memories through a new lens, informed by the recognition that life has moved on, O'Brien hopes to be freed from constantly reliving those memories. In his true account of his return to Vietnam, "The Vietnam in Me," he writes of his good fortune to be at the war site with Kate, a romantic partner who helps him see Vietnam from a new perspective. After remarking that he has shared his past with Kate, he notes, "As it turns out, the sharing has gone both ways. I would have returned to this country almost purely as a veteran, caught up in memory, but Kate's presence has made me pay attention to the details of here and now, a Vietnam that exists outside the old perimeter of war" ("Vietnam"). O'Brien's use of the phrase "caught up in memory" suggests that simply reliving past events at the war site would hinder synthesis and be counterproductive to recovery. By referring to his more open perspective as a gift that Kate has "shared" with him, O'Brien affirms the value of approaching his return not "purely as a veteran," but as a whole person. This approach allows him to redefine himself as being more than his war experience, and it helps him experience Vietnam differently his second time around. The latter is important in freeing him from being "caught up in memory."

One way that O'Brien experiences Vietnam differently during his return trip is through his relationship with the land itself. In "Field Trip," his fictional account of his return to Vietnam, published in *The*

*Things They Carried* four years before his actual trip, O'Brien displays sentiments of faith in the healing power of the land. He writes, "I returned with my daughter to Vietnam, where we visited the site of Kiowa's death, and where I looked for forgiveness or personal grace or whatever else the land might offer" (173). Though "Field Trip" is fictional, the idea that the land can "offer" "forgiveness" and "personal grace" is O'Brien's own, and it primes him to be healed by the land during his actual trip, as represented in "The Vietnam in Me."

Like Swofford, O'Brien struggles to synthesize the death of his friend, at least to a degree, by engaging in his ritual. In "The Vietnam in Me," O'Brien visits the site of the death of McElhaney, one of his platoon mates. In his return to the site, he experiences the land differently than he describes it in "Speaking of Courage" (which is presumably how he experienced it while at war), suggesting that the trip makes him see Vietnam in a new way. Describing the land in "Speaking of Courage" as "a deep, thick muck for a quarter mile on either side" (136), he writes of the same site in "The Vietnam in Me," "We stand looking out on a wide and very lovely field of rice. The sunlight gives it some gold and yellow. There is no wind at all. Before us is how peace would be defined in a dictionary for the speechless." By establishing a new relationship with the land, one that encourages both peace and quiet, O'Brien distances himself from his past experiences by forging a new experience in its place.

He does recall some of the horror associated with the place, but only in order to address his anxiety over his experience before trying to put it to rest. He recalls his conversation with Kate while gazing at the rice field, writing, "I tell her how Paige lost his lower leg, how we had to probe for McElhaney in the flooded paddy, how the gunfire went on and on, how in the course of two hell-on-earth hours we took 13 casualties" ("Vietnam"). His recollection of the trauma he suffered here is important in its own right because it is disclosed to an empathetic listener and thereby helps him to communalize his experience, but it is further significant that the ritualized return to the land itself provides a forum for him to attempt to get his demons out of his system. After recounting his experience, he abruptly stops speaking in order to more strongly feel his new relationship with the land. He continues, "I fell silent after a time, just looking out at the golds and yellows, joining

the peace, and how in those fine sunlit moments, which were ours, Vietnam took a little Vietnam out of me” (“Vietnam”). O’Brien’s ability to look past the war and see the beauty of the rice field allows him to “[join] the peace” that the land has to offer, at least momentarily. His statement, “Vietnam took a little Vietnam out of me,” reads as his recognition of the power of the new Vietnam to undo some of the damage done in the old Vietnam. Ultimately, the land offers O’Brien a measure of relief from his painful memories because it gives him new memories that serve to water down the old ones. Though his trauma is not erased nor fully resolved as a result of his relationship with the land, the potency of his war experience is at least tempered by his new perspective.

O’Brien’s newly forged relationship with the land is not the only part of his ritual that helps him synthesize his war trauma, as he creates equally meaningful and effective relationships with the Vietnamese people he encounters during his fictional and non-fictional returns. In the fictional “Field Trip,” he imagines a powerful non-verbal encounter with a local farmer, writing, “As we stared at each other, neither of us moving, I felt something go shut in my heart while something else swung open” (179). The sensation in his heart caused by his interaction with the man indicates his notion that new relationships can help him close the door on his past experiences, thereby enabling him to be open to new experiences. This notion lends healing power to the real relationships that he makes in “The Vietnam in Me.”

An important way that new relationships with locals help O’Brien synthesize his war trauma is by enabling him to confront his guilt in a new context. He begins by exposing himself to the innocence of the locals, which makes him feel an immense amount of guilt when he contemplates the havoc that he and the rest of the U.S. army wreaked on their homeland. During a “reunion” with Vietnamese civilians who were present for the war, the earnestness of the civilians prompts O’Brien to realize regretfully, “Dear God. We should’ve bombed these people with love” (“Vietnam”). His observation that the Vietnamese deserve love rather than bombs has the air of a revelation for him, and does not seem stale like the guilt that he has rehearsed by reliving his experiences. The new context in which he can realize his guilt not only makes the guilt more potent, but it makes it new and not entangled

with memory. Because of the fact that his guilt is not mired in the past at this point, he is able to effectively address it before letting it fade into the background. He addresses it with a redemptive gesture at a feast put on by the village elders. He tells readers, “Do not forget: our hosts are among the maimed and widowed and orphaned, the bombed and rebombed, the recipients of white phosphorus, the tenders of graves. Chew, they say, and by God I chew” (“Vietnam”). Though he refers to the food as “foul” and “not to [his] liking,” he endures it to make the elders happy, and his chewing then relieves some of his guilt. The fact that he chews something unpleasant in order to facilitate the locals’ happiness is a metaphor, too, for his willingness to empathize with them to help relieve them of their trauma. Through his return to the war site, O’Brien gains the valuable ability to take what he can from the past and then let go of it. The new relationships that he forges both with the land and the locals allow him to partially synthesize his war trauma and give him the motivation to try to move forward with his life. He writes about his resolve to move forward, “I try to plug up the leaks. ... For too many years I’ve lived in paralysis – guilt, depression, terror, shame – and now it’s either move or die. ... At least the limbo has ended. Starting can start” (“Vietnam”). After synthesizing his trauma to a degree, his war experiences no longer haunt him, but instead motivate him to continue on the right path. His statement that the “leaks” have been “plugged” and that “starting can start” suggests that his anxiety and guilt have been resolved enough as a result of his trip to Vietnam that he can now begin from neutral.

In addition to the ritualized return to the war site, the ritualized escape from the war site to the outdoors is also successful in healing war trauma, particularly for Ernest Hemingway’s Nick Adams in “Big Two-Hearted River.” Much like the consumption of alcohol for Swofford and his platoon mates, the exploration of the outdoors is effective in helping Nick deal with his trauma in two ways. First, the exploration of the outdoors acts as an apotropaic ritual that soothes his pain and allows him to temporarily forget about his war experience, gaining valuable respite from torturous memories. This aspect of the ritual is decidedly more constructive than the apotropaic drinking in *Jarhead*, as Nick is able to heal from his trauma as a result of pulling his mind away from it. Second, Nick uses fishing and hiking

to synthesize his war trauma, as his experiences outdoors help him mentally organize and understand his experiences at war. While these two roles that fishing plays for Nick may seem contradictory, there is enough significant evidence on both sides to suggest that both kinds of healing occur simultaneously, though perhaps on different levels of Nick's consciousness.

To begin with, fishing and hiking allow Nick to escape his painful memories and give his mind a rest from continuously going over his war experiences. While immersed in nature, Nick distances himself from war and refocuses on the positive, simplistic joys to be found outdoors. Nick's refocusing of attention, like many of the mental states of characters in Hemingway's writing, is paralleled by the landscape. The story begins with Nick in the "burned-over" town of Seney, so decimated by war that "Even the surface had been burned off the ground" (133). At this point, Nick is mired in the tragedy of World War I, and it is all he can do to pull his attention away from the "burned-over country" (133). The story, narrated from Nick's point of view, references burning and fire no less than four times in the first paragraph alone, signifying Nick's preoccupation with the destruction. Once Nick has seen enough, however, he strikes on a trail that takes him out of Seney and toward a flowing river and a vibrant forest, further away from his concerns both physically and mentally. As Nick gets further from the town, his mindset changes for the better, with the change in the nature surrounding him both encouraging and reflecting his improved psyche. The narrator writes, "Seney was burned, the country was burned over and changed, but it did not matter. It could not all be burned. ... On ahead ... Nick ... caught glints of the water in the sun" (135). Written into the account of the changing landscape is Nick's changing perspective, which becomes increasingly optimistic and confident as he treks deeper into nature. While in the outdoors, Nick is able to literally and figuratively put the damage done by war behind him as he shifts his attention to the beauty ahead.

Having embraced his surroundings and allowed himself to stop being haunted by past trauma, Nick revels in his present state of peace. Hemingway writes that among nature and away from Seney, "Nick felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him" (134). The narrator

significantly classifies “needs” as draining, time-consuming habits that must be carried out in order to reduce the anxiety surrounding traumatic experience. Hemingway’s emphasis on the fact that Nick is no longer bound by these needs suggests that Nick’s trauma has faded to the background, and it now lacks the potency to make him need to think or write. While Nick is exploring nature, his trauma loses all hold over him, and he can devote his attention to his good mood and to simpler tasks at hand. The narrator details, “Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. . . . Now he was hungry” (139). Not only is Nick in “a good place to camp,” but he is “there, in the good place” mentally as well, suggesting that he is not bogged down by memories of war. Self-assured and feeling untouchable, Nick is able to pay attention to food and shelter, and need not worry about anything else.

While Nick’s solitary immersion in nature helps him stave off painful memories of war on one level, his experience in the wild, specifically the way that it parallels his war experiences, also helps him digest and synthesize his trauma by allowing him to address it in a constructive, unthreatening, and carefully measured way. Critic William Adair asserts that Nick’s trek through the outdoors is an allegory for his combined war experiences, and that each event in “Big Two-Hearted River” represents an important war event that Nick experienced. He writes, “The story is in a sense an imitation, brief and parable-like, of Nick Adams’ entire history at the front” (146). By systematically re-exposing himself to his war traumas in a controlled environment in which he feels comfortable, Nick affords himself the opportunity to come to terms with his trauma. He can deal with each experience at his own pace, and once he feels comfortable with one, he can move on and revisit the next.

This process gives him a chance to organize his thoughts and memories by using his hike as a roadmap of sorts through his past. Adair notes that Nick’s journey to the river outside of Seney “parallels a situation we get in ‘A Way You’ll Never Be’ [a different Hemingway short story, found in *The Nick Adams Stories*, in which Nick is the protagonist]: Nick had been wounded in the early summer of 1918, and, presumably in the late summer of the same year, he makes a solitary return on a hot day to a deserted, shattered, and burned-out

town by a river” (145). If Nick’s journey to the river in “Big Two-Hearted River” can be said to take place after the trip in “A Way You’ll Never Be” in Hemingway’s fictional world, as Adair suggests, then the journey in “Big Two-Hearted River” can be understood to function much like O’Brien’s return to the war site, in that it gives Nick the chance to forge a new relationship with an old traumatic experience (being wounded), and thereby resolve it. Though, unlike O’Brien, Nick may not return to the exact site where his trauma occurred, he is still able to feel “all the old feeling” while gazing at the river in his more recent journey, suggesting that the newer trip reminds him enough of his war trauma to evoke an emotional response (134). Adair considers such a response integral to synthesizing his experience, writing, “His remembered river and familiar feeling seem to constitute a first step in getting the past straight” (145). In his trip, Nick comes closer to “getting the past straight” by using the river to recall “the old feeling” of past war experience. By organizing his memories while simultaneously re-exposing himself to the anxiety that those memories cause, Nick begins to synthesize his trauma.

Though effective for most of Nick’s traumatic experiences, this method of exposure to trauma via a symbolic trip to the river is by design limited by how much exposure Nick can handle. For a time, at least, he avoids particular “old feeling[s]” by avoiding the physical locations on his trip that correspond to traumatic incidents. Such is the case with the swamp that corresponds, according to Adair, to the “marshes of the Portogrande region where . . . Nick fought during that winter of 1917-18” (148). Hemingway describes Nick’s feelings upon sizing up the swamp, writing, “Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits” (In *Our Time* 155). In “A Way You’ll Never Be,” Nick remembers seeing enemy soldiers “come wallowing across the flooded ground holding the rifles high until they fell with them in the water” (161). Interestingly, in “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick seems unaware that his traumatic experience in Portogrande produces his aversion to the swamp. Nick’s inability to understand the effects of the fighting at Portogrande on his subconscious suggests that he has not yet synthesized the traumatic events. This is not a major problem for Nick, as he is equipped with the resolve to eventually confront

his past, though at his own pace. At the end of “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick accepts that he is not yet strong enough to conquer his aversion to the swamp, but he determines to come back and try again. As he heads away from the swamp and back to camp, Nick “He looked back. ... There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (156). The nonchalance of his resolution to eventually “fish the swamp” speaks to his knowledge that because he will not confront his trauma until he is better prepared, he is assured of success when he comes back. This mindset lends strength to the ritual, as “getting the past straight” is easier and more effective for Nick when done on his own terms.

The idea of veterans engaging in their ritual at their own pace, rather than as dictated by others, is important to their recovery because it gives them control over their own healing. Shay endorses the essentiality of agency to healing when he writes, “Healing is done by survivors, not to survivors” (187). This distinction provides insight into why engaging in rituals can sometimes be more effective than the communalization of trauma. Though communalization gives veterans a measure of control over their story, the veterans’ ability to tell their story is inherently limited by how much even the most well-meaning listener can take, and when. Performing rituals, on the other hand, does not depend on anyone but the veterans themselves, and so the agency to be gained through rituals is unlimited. Because of war veterans’ seemingly paradoxical need both to have agency and to communalize trauma, some have contrived a ritual in which they have complete agency but are still able to get the experience of war across to an empathetic audience.

### **Form**

Just as characters in war literature strive to communalize their trauma with other characters in order to synthesize it properly, so do the authors of these texts, themselves veterans, put extensive effort into communalizing the experience of war with readers. Though the authors may not need to synthesize or communicate their own personal experience, successfully communalizing with readers helps authors understand trauma in general. To this end, authors aim to create specific emotions in their readers so the readers can more easily relate to the experience of war. By using writing as a medium to reach their

audience, authors bypass the constraints of verbal communalization; their ability to communalize war trauma does not depend on the immediate availability of an audience.

It does, however, depend on the audience being willing and able to access the authors' work, so in order to make their writing effective in terms of healing, authors experiment with and manipulate form to incite empathy and understanding in the reader. The most effective way to accomplish this goal is often to tamper with structure and content to the point that it emulates the disorientation and confusion of war, absorbing readers and forcing them to experience imaginatively some of the feelings that the author associates with war. However, each author has a different experience of war as well as a different idea of how best to communicate elements of that experience, resulting in an array of styles that are each conceived out of the same need to communicate trauma.

The manipulation of form and temporality in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, for example, though it appears haphazard, is in fact precise and calculated, with each adjustment being motivated by the desire to communicate war trauma accurately. Vonnegut seeks to tell the soldier's story in a way that gives him control over how the audience feels when reading it. His obfuscation of temporality can be read as a means to make his readers feel as soldiers may have felt during World War II, that is, confused, overwhelmed, and disoriented.

Vonnegut's choice to radicalize the structure of his novel reflects the difficulty of communicating the chaotic experience of time during war within the confines of a traditional linear narrative. Shay remarks on the limitations of the traditional narrative written in the English language, observing, "Narrative time is built into the very structure of the family of languages to which English belongs. This may form part of the enormous difficulty that many survivors of severe trauma have in putting their experience into words; their experience is ineffable in a language that insists on 'was' and 'will be.' The trauma world knows only *is*" (191). According to Shay's definition of "the trauma world," a veteran's experience of trauma is much like the Tralfamadorians' experience of time, which sheds light on Billy's motivation for inventing Tralfamadorian philosophy, as it aligns with his own view of temporality as a veteran. Tralfamadorian philosophy states that a traumatic event

does not cease happening when the moment in which it happens passes, and that “it is just an illusion we have here on Earth ... that once a moment is gone, it is gone forever” (34) – a convoluted concept that Vonnegut himself has trouble explaining simply with words, but can convey effectively with the structure of his novel (the book’s title page claims the text within to be “somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore”). When faced with the challenge of putting his own experience into words, Vonnegut is at a similar loss as “many survivors of severe trauma,” and recalls instances of being literally speechless during the writing process. He remembers, “Not many words about Dresden came to my mind then ... And not many words come now, either” (3). This sense of ineffability, presumably, is what motivates him to convey “the trauma world” with the very form of his novel rather than only with its words. The result is a novel that at times seems to stray from war trauma, but is nonetheless optimized for inciting feelings in the reader that are diluted versions of what soldiers may have felt while at war.

Vonnegut structures the narrative that follows Billy Pilgrim as either independent of or directly at odds with linear time. To add to the confusion, he recounts Billy’s narrative (complete with time travel) linearly as it appears to Billy, making Billy the perfect vehicle for guiding the unsuspecting reader into disorientation and bewilderment. Indeed, Billy’s knack for “coming unstuck in time” creates a unique narrative pattern that is well suited for creating a sense of disorientation in the reader. In one exemplary scene, Billy comes only “slightly unstuck in time” (93) as he watches an old war film backwards. Because of his different experience of time, Billy interprets the war as a process that heals preexisting damage rather than one that destroys. As Billy sees it, “Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at [American planes] backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation” (93). Billy’s experience of the film at once metaphorically parallels the confused experience of time that many soldiers felt in the war and creates a similar feeling of disorientation in the reader, as the reader is unsure of what actually can be said to happen in this scene. Vonnegut offers no hints before the scene abruptly changes, leaving the audience

filled with the same anxiety over its inability to separate reality from perception that afflicts soldiers. In addition, Billy's understanding of the role of war in the movie can be read as a metafictional testament to Vonnegut's belief that good things (and, importantly, the undoing of bad things), like the healing of war trauma, can come out of the distortion of time. Just as the soldiers and planes in the film are restored by Billy's backward view of the events within it, Vonnegut is able to communalize war trauma by using the distortion of time as a literary technique.

Vonnegut's twisting of temporality in *Slaughterhouse-Five* also helps to convey the meaninglessness and chaos of war trauma. In confusing cause and effect by jumbling the order of events in the novel, Vonnegut at once disorients his readers and discourages them from constructing any positive meaning from the events he depicts. Vonnegut takes pains to refrain from any "slipshod storytelling" (138) that may cause readers to draw unintended lessons from the text, his point being that trauma is senseless and has no moral. Miller writes that Vonnegut "distance[s] his narrative from the novelistic providential chronology with which one might attempt to find a hidden purpose in mass destruction" (305). Whereas a traditional narrative might have a resolution (and an illusory moral) built into its linear temporality, Vonnegut's scrambling of events ensures that readers will not find comfort in his account of trauma, and will therefore feel the anxiety felt by the veteran conscious of the pointlessness of war trauma.

Vonnegut further tampers with the idea of the traditional linear narrative in his metafictional musings, which add to the reader's sense of disorientation. In the very first chapter, Vonnegut reveals part of his creative process to the audience, and in doing so, gives away the climax of the novel. He recalls a conversation he had about the book with a friend, in which he said, "I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby. ... The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's shot by a firing squad" (6). Vonnegut's choice to give away the ending at the beginning with tongue in cheek gives the entire novel a feeling of circularity and redundancy, especially when the book arrives at the

ending for the second time. By the time Vonnegut gets there, on the penultimate page of the book, he is decidedly less enthused about the event, writing curtly of the chaos, “Somewhere in there the poor old high school teacher, Edgar Derby, was caught with a teapot he had taken from the catacombs. He was arrested for plundering. He was tried and shot. So it goes” (274). Conventionally, a climax is the most exciting point of a novel, but in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it is merely an afterthought. The novel ends more or less exactly where it begins, and if anything, the reader feels deflated when reading the ending again. This is all according to Vonnegut’s plan, as his aim is to make the reader witness and experience the meaninglessness of trauma.

Kurt Vonnegut is not alone in using the manipulation of form as a means of communicating more effectively with the audience. Tim O’Brien also relies on gaining the readers’ empathy by manipulating form in *The Things They Carried*. But whereas Vonnegut blurs temporality in order to communicate confusion and meaninglessness, O’Brien ironically blurs the line between fact and fiction in an effort to capture the “truth” of war more completely. O’Brien’s blurring of the truth works on two levels. First, it gives him the freedom to accurately convey the intensity of feeling caused by any given event simply by manipulating the facts of the event. Second, the blurring of truth functions as a literary device that creates uncertainty and ambiguity in the reader – feelings that the narrator reportedly felt at all times while in Vietnam (78). As O’Brien writes, “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (170).

Where O’Brien’s approach differs from Vonnegut’s distortion of reality, though, is that in order for O’Brien’s method to work (i.e. to have the full, desired effect on the reader), he must represent his altered version of the events as if they actually happened. Temporarily, at least, he must represent “story-truth” as “happening-truth,” provoking him to throw the reader off by prefacing stories with statements like, “This is true” (64), or even, “Here is the happening-truth” (171), only to remark at the end of the story, “But listen. Even *that* story is made up” (171). These prefacing statements are far from lies when operating under O’Brien’s definitions of truth, as he believes that “what seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way” (67-8).

Indeed, the sensation of war becomes its own experience for O'Brien, so anything made up in order to make the reader feel this sensation is truer than the facts of war that may give readers an inaccurate idea of how war feels. For O'Brien, Maria S. Bonn argues, "writers must be less concerned with the facts than with the truth and that 'lying is a way one can get to a kind of truth ... issues can be clarified sometimes by telling lies' [Lomperis 51]" (2). By dichotomizing "fact" and "truth," Bonn suggests that the answer to "why 'story-truth' is truer sometimes than 'happening-truth'" is that it clarifies the right kind of truth, truth of feeling, rather than obscuring it. This method of clarification is only "lying" in the narrowest sense of the word. At its most basic, it is exaggeration, but at its most complex as employed by O'Brien, it is the creation of a "surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*" (68). The communication of the "truth as it *seemed*" is most effective in gaining the readers' empathy, as its successful communication makes the readers experience the "surreal seemingness" for themselves.

O'Brien endows his characters, who are apt to tell war stories to each other, with the same appreciation for "story-truth" as he has, and his own motivation for embellishment becomes clear in the stories that his characters tell. Before detailing Rat Kiley's story in full, he explains, "Rat had a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement, a compulsion to rev up the facts ... It wasn't a question of deceit. Just the opposite: he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt. For Rat Kiley, I think, facts were formed by sensation, not the other way around" (85). Importantly, O'Brien refers to Rat's adjustments to the facts as the "opposite" of "deceit." His "exaggeration and overstatement" does not obscure the truth, but in fact magnifies it. Though Rat's story diverges from "happening-truth," the language that O'Brien uses to represent Rat's exaggeration ("revving up the facts," "heating up the truth") suggests that Rat, and O'Brien, can reach a deeper, purer truth of feeling through exaggeration than by telling a factual account of the events.

While O'Brien's manipulation of facts is effective in making the reader feel a wide variety of emotions that the soldier felt in Vietnam, it is also contrived as a literary device for a specific end, that is, to create

a feeling of wariness, uncertainty, and ambiguity in the reader. Because O'Brien warns readers before Rat's story to "discount sixty or seventy percent of anything [Rat] [has] to say" (85), he keeps the readers on edge throughout the story, as they are unsure which truth to believe, "story-truth" or "happening-truth." In this way, O'Brien is able to make the reader empathize by using the uncertainty surrounding the blurring of truth itself to create a specific feeling of anxiety in the reader that correlates to what the soldier feels while at war. O'Brien summarizes this feeling in "How to Tell a True War Story," writing, "War has the feel ... of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. ... Order blends into chaos. ... The only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity. In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself" (78). The desire to make readers lose their "sense of the definite" is a large part of what motivates O'Brien to blur the idea of truth in his stories. By capturing the "overwhelming ambiguity" of war on the page, he purposely strands the reader in the liminal space between fact and fiction.

For O'Brien, the right blend of the two kinds of truth creates a uniquely true story. Bonn remarks on O'Brien's career-long struggle to find the perfect ratio of the two truths. "Throughout a memoir and two novels," she observes, "he has investigated the polarity of fact and fiction, lived experience and texts, documentation and art, memory and imagination. In the creative space between these poles he locates 'story' and 'truth' as agents of reconciliation and education" (2). O'Brien's desire to be as honest as possible in as many ways as possible requires that he settle "in the creative space between these poles," and in doing so, he is able to most effectively communicate war trauma. Jonathan Shay observes the importance of accepting both types of truth, noting, "Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness. When a survivor creates a fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused" (188). Shay's "knowledge of what happened" correlates to O'Brien's "happening-truth," and likewise, Shay's "emotions," "meanings," and "sensations" correlate to O'Brien's "hard and exact truth as it seemed." Though

Shay is speaking in general terms about any veteran, he perfectly addresses the benefit of O'Brien's reconciliation of the two truths. O'Brien's willingness to embrace both kinds of truth, and transitively, his ability to show this truth to his audience, helps him to synthesize war trauma effectively.

Like O'Brien and Vonnegut, Hemingway deliberately disrupts the cohesion of his narrative in *In Our Time*, and while he does not play with temporality or trust between author and reader, his work is the most visually radical. Between each story, Hemingway inserts an italicized vignette that has a more urgent feel and pace than the stories. According to Matthew Stewart, "the book has a fragmented feel; and, with the *In Our Time* vignettes italicized and inserted as 'chapters,' it has an even more fragmented look" (26). Hemingway's interspersion of the vignettes may be unnerving at first, but whereas O'Brien and Vonnegut's fragmentation is designed to cause anxiety and confusion in the reader, Hemingway's alternating presentation of stories and vignettes is designed to give the reader a more complete picture of a soldier's experience than either stories or vignettes could do on their own.

Importantly, together, the vignettes and the short stories comprise a complete picture of the soldier's experience, and only by reading them with their role in the full text in mind does one get the whole experience. Representing all aspects of this experience is paramount to Hemingway. In 1925, in a letter to John Dos Passos in which he frets over the prospect of his publisher removing the vignettes from the compilation, he writes, "'Of course they can't do it because the stuff is so tight and hard and every thing hangs on every thing else and it would all just be shot up shit creek'" (qtd. in Stewart 31-2). Hemingway's anguish over the threat of the removal of the vignettes is at once a testament to their integrality in telling the complete story and an argument for the fact that *In Our Time* only appears fragmented, and is in fact highly, meticulously cohesive. His exclamation that "the stuff is so tight and hard and every thing hangs on every thing else" drives home the interconnectedness and unity of each story and vignette.

In his letters, Hemingway maintains that the vignettes are intended to provide a general picture of "the times," while the short stories are meant to show the reader "detailed, exemplary illustrations of those

times” (Stewart 31). He expounds upon the roles of the vignettes and the short stories, noting that there is a vignette “between each story – that is the way they were meant to go – to give the picture of the whole before examining it in detail. Like looking with your eyes at something, ... and then looking at it with 15X binoculars. Or rather, maybe, looking at it and then going in and living in it” (qtd. in Stewart 31). Hemingway’s use of the lens metaphor to describe looking at the same thing from multiple perspectives speaks to his desire to represent the soldier’s experience comprehensively. Additionally, the supreme importance that he places on including both perspectives “as they were meant to go” suggests how badly he wants readers to see the “picture of the whole” complete with the details.

While Hemingway himself insists that the vignettes are meant “to give the picture of the whole,” they are in fact detailed snippets of scenes that are decidedly more corporeal than his short stories. Often, the vignettes depict nightmarish scenes that infect readers with a certain negative energy until they move on to the following short story, which contains a more diluted form of the same feeling. Perhaps, then, rather than providing readers with a general knowledge of the war, as one would gather from Hemingway’s letters, the vignettes provide readers with a general idea of how the war *felt*, and the stories fill in the emotional and intellectual details of how the war *was*, a distinction that O’Brien might appreciate. In addition to writing the vignettes exclusively in italics, which imply more feeling than regular text, Hemingway interestingly describes the vignettes as having an auditory quality, which speaks to their ability to efficiently yet thoroughly represent emotions, as sound is widely known to do. He writes, “In between each [story] comes bang! the [vignettes]. I’ve tried to do it so you get the close up very quietly but absolutely solid and the real thing but very close, and then through it all between every story comes the rhythm of the in our time chapters” (qtd. in Stewart 30). Just as the rhythm of a piece of music gives it its character, the “rhythm of the in our time chapters” sets the emotional tone of the work, giving the collection a consistent general feeling that matches the feeling of war. Hemingway’s assertion that the vignettes make a “bang!” is evidence of their ability to be emotionally powerful, and even surprising and poignant. His claim that “you get the close up

very quietly,” in reference to the stories, adds an interesting contrast to the noise of the vignettes, and lends itself to the idea that if the short stories are “solid and the real thing,” the vignettes comprise the more abstract emotional backdrop that can still be heard above “the close up[s].”

One exemplary vignette, “Chapter V,” details in one paragraph the death of six ministers at the hands of a firing squad. In characteristic Hemingway fashion, the author includes no judgment of his own, nor does he include anything to give away his personal disposition. Rather, he seems to urge readers to draw their own meaning. Critic James Phelan describes Hemingway’s narrative style as, “one that allows the reader to build appropriate inferences” (53) – a style that ultimately forces the reader to be less passive and more emotionally involved in the text. “Chapter V” tersely delineates the death of one minister in particular, who cannot stand against the wall to be shot because he has typhoid, so he is shot sitting down. Hemingway writes, “*They tried to hold him up against the wall but he sat down in a puddle of water. The other five stood very quietly against the wall. Finally the officer told the soldiers it was no good trying to make him stand up. When they fired the first volley he was sitting down in the water with his head on his knees*” (51). The grim death of a sick, wet minister in the fetal position portrays above all an overwhelming sense of helplessness and desperation. The standing ministers can only look forlornly on, the soldiers cannot disobey orders, and the sick minister cannot even stand before facing his death. The last sentence of the quotation, also the last sentence of the vignette, captures the futility of the traumatic experience, and the reader is left discouraged and demoralized.

Each vignette, like “Chapter V,” has a definite emotional effect, and informs the reader’s understanding of the short stories. The story that follows “Chapter V,” “The Battler,” has a more level plot arc, but the emotions dredged up by “Chapter V” remain with the reader while reading “The Battler.” In the short story, Nick Adams meets Ad Francis, a former professional boxer, and though Ad is friendly at first, the reader is still wary, having just read of the minister’s death. Ad, who is mentally deranged, soon turns on Nick, accusing him menacingly and seemingly out of nowhere, “How the hell do you get that way ... Who the hell do you think you are? You’re a snotty bastard ...

You're going to take a beating, see?" (59). Ad does not stop advancing until his companion, Bugs, knocks him out with a blackjack. Nick is unharmed at the end of the story (he even manages to escape with a ham sandwich), and if the story were read without the preceding vignette, the reader may be inclined to be relieved for Nick that he slips away from a fight unscathed. Primed by the vignette, however, the reader recognizes that the story is not about a potential fight, but about war itself, and namely the powerlessness to reason with others and the lack of agency that soldiers feel and witness while at war. When read in the context of the rest of the volume, the story becomes a detailed and more complex example of the emotions presented in the vignette. By using the vignettes to control the "rhythm" of the stories, Hemingway is able to present not only a complete picture of war, but also a picture that is as nuanced and as emotionally penetrating as a soldier's experience.

By replicating the feeling of war to the best of their ability, authors not only are able to communalize war trauma, but they also have the opportunity to ritually process it, as the act of writing itself is a ritual that can help them access war trauma in a constructive way. Functioning much like O'Brien's ritualized return to the war site, writing about war allows authors to revisit the experience of war through a new lens, for the purpose of commemorating, explaining, and, ultimately, understanding the trauma experienced in war. Having their stories read and empathized with only adds to the healing power of literature.

Though veterans in general ought to be commended for the resiliency and ingenuity that they manifest while creating ways to synthesize their trauma in spite of the obstacles in front of them, the fact that society's lack of compassion drives them to take such measures to heal is shameful. Nevertheless, American society as a whole has historically perpetuated an unreceptive disposition toward veterans, mostly due to a "multilayered institutional illusion, denial" of the existence of war trauma (Shay 205). The sheer coldness that soldiers come up against when they return home is something that no trauma survivor should have to face, and yet, as the literature examined in this essay elucidates, veterans still continue to grapple with civilian indifference to this day. Though the works herein span nearly one hundred years and cover four different wars, the difficulties that the

veterans portrayed in them have when attempting to reintegrate into society remain remarkably consistent.

Authors like Hemingway, Vonnegut, O'Brien, and Swofford have already helped this cause, and advocates like Shay are arguably contributing even more. Still, awareness remains less widespread than veterans need it to be, which is due in part to the relative silence of those civilians who are already aware of the issue. Authors can only reach so many, but their multitudes of readers can reach a potentially unlimited number of people simply by being outspoken. It is not sufficient to feel passionate about the mistreatment of veterans after reading Hemingway or Vonnegut and then merely lament the fact that too few second the emotion. Rather, it is the responsibility of the reader to direct that passion toward making widespread awareness a reality by sharing that awareness with others. Though healing from war will never be an easy process, if an environment of understanding is cultivated in this fashion, veterans will have less of a need to go to such great lengths to synthesize their trauma. Instead, they will be able to focus most of their energy on reintegrating into society, knowing that they have the support and compassion of those around them.

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