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TRUTH AND THE LANGUAGE OF WAR

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submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

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We hereby approve this thesis

For

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For the department of

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And

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S

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December 12, 2017

Dedicated to Sean O’Melia

TRUTH AND THE LANGUAGE OF WAR

KELLY O'MELIA

ABSTRACT

According to modernist Friedrich Nietzsche in *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense,* language is a constructed system which fails to represent reality because of its inherent metaphorical nature. Modernist writer Virginia Woolf and postmodernist writer Tim O'Brien implicitly address Nietzsche's belief as they warn against and represent the horrors of war in the novels *Jacob's Room* and *The Things They Carried*. Nietzsche and Woolf develop new modernist styles, forsaking the conventions of nineteenth-century realism. O'Brien pays homage to high modernism and to Woolf in his novel through direct reference and through the modernist strategies utilized to present the unpresentable. The strongest bond between these two novels is each text's metafictional acknowledgement that it has failed even before it has begun, echoing Nietzsche. The novels *Jacob's Room* and *The Things They Carried* circumvent language's limitations and make the reader feel that s/he *understands war* and will therefore *seek peace*.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Modernity has been evolving since the Enlightenment; ideas of individual freedom, globalization, capitalism, and rationalization, among many others, began to affect human development and consciousness. The novel became the perfect site for the realizations of modernity. In "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" (1982), Jean Francois Lyotard details an intellectual dilemma facing us. Basically, if modernism rejects realism, then in what manner is postmodernism a reaction to or development of that rejection? His essay provides a start to understanding postmodernism, which can be described as a movement, era, or mentality. Postmodernism may be said to have begun at the end of WWII. At that point, modern writers had been subverting realism and traditional literature with tactics of: metafiction, stream of consciousness, interior narration, and unreliable narrators. Lyotard states, "I have read a thinker of repute who defends modernity against those he calls the neoconservatives. Under the banner of postmodernism, the latter would like, he believes, to get rid of the uncompleted project of modernism, that of the Enlightenment" (Lyotard

1418). According to this view, postmodernism refutes modernism by returning to conservative and traditional values. However, we might also understand postmodernism as an acknowledgment of what was learned from modernism, and thus the development of the modern movement's literary characteristics. Comparing and contrasting modernism and postmodernism's widely known characteristics reveals metafiction, and experimental language as similarities and many differences include: exteriority vs. interiority, focus on reader vs. focus on writer, parody vs. rejection of literary convention, and simple vs. complex and fragmented language.

Lyotard helps us understand the relationship among modernity, modernism, and postmodernism. At first, there is the departure from realism. Lyotard explains, "Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities" (1421). If modernist writers came to the realization that there was "lack of reality" in all representation, then postmodernist, who have already accepted this fact, are drawn to the after-effects of this realization. Furthermore, Lyotard postulates how these modernist attitudes have evolved by cross-referencing another great philosopher, Nietzsche: "What does this 'lack of reality' signify if one tries to free it from a narrowly historicized interpretation? The phrase is of course akin to what Nietzsche calls nihilism" (1421). The shift in the modernists' view of representation is what ushers in the postmodernists' view of life, which is not an end but the birth of new understanding. Lyotard contends, "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant (1422). Postmodernism, for Lyotard, is in a state of provenance

giving birth to new understandings, and its creations are fully conscious that they are creations. The understandings of the postmodernist are futuristic; they precipitate and precede the work. Unlike modernists, postmodernists are not reactionary and thus experimental; postmodernist are experimental with what they are acutely aware. And their experiments with fiction are rooted in presenting the unpresentable with forms and allusions that are "making up the rules as it goes," and this self-aware presentation is the point:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining Judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an event; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (mise en oeuvre) always begin too soon. Post modern would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo). (Lyotard 1423).

Lyotard's idea of postmodernism as a constant state of retrospective, self-aware flux is foundational to my analysis of works by modernists, Friedrich Nietzsche and Virginia Woolf, and postmodernist, Tim O'Brien. Lyotard ultimately states, "Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (1423). And I would add that the postmodernists' allusions which cannot be presented nevertheless must be presented with a nod to justice and socio-political consciousness.

Modernist Virginia Woolf presents World War I through her novel *Jacob's Room*. My interpretation of this novel affirms that it is quintessentially modernist in its fragmented language and experiments with plot structure, perspective, and narration. Woolf, a self-proclaimed pacifist, paradoxically writes a war novel with characteristic streams of consciousness and a wandering plot. Woolf presents World War I with avoidance not allusion. Postmodernist Tim O'Brien writes the novel *The Things They Carried* as one representation of the Vietnam War. O'Brien corroborates Woolfian anti-war sentiment and echoes Woolf's use of fragmented character perspective. O'Brien's novel takes on many standard, postmodern characteristics: allusion, contradiction, and meta-narration. However, in possible response to other purely postmodern works on the Vietnam War (the film *Apocalypse Now*), O'Brien draws upon Woolfian modernism and extends hope in anti-war sentiment. Woolf and O'Brien are giving warning not resignation.

We do not know for certain if Woolf read Nietzsche or O'Brien read Woolf. In addition to the historical gap separating these writers, there is also a diversity of genre which differentiates their texts. The philosopher Nietzsche is composing essays and

nonfictional work. Woolf and O'Brien are both novelists although Woolf's modernist novels are different from O'Brien's postmodern work. Despite the vast differences in chronological time-frame and genre, Virginia Woolf shares modernist values with Friedrich Nietzsche, and Tim O'Brien seems to borrow from Woolfian modernism the idea that language fails to represent reality and therefore must be manipulated to create authentic text. Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense* (date), Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (date), and O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (date), here analyzed and related, help discover the common quandary of language's relationship to reality.

Tim O'Brien has not been analyzed as echoing Virginia Woolf. Woolf's *Jacob's Room* and O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* are both anti-war novels grappling with the conundrum of representing the tragedy of war. Critics of Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* have focused on its fragmented representations of reality and its expressing characters as unknowable. Many scholars view these stylistic forms as Woolf's manner of challenging the conventions of writing during that time in history; additionally, critics explore her critique of war in *Jacob's Room*. Critics have examined *The Things They Carried* for its treatment of truth in fiction through its postmodern unreliable memoir. I contend these two anti-war novels are communicating more than the standard scholarship has expressed. I argue that in attempting to represent war, Woolf and O'Brien each write a novel that simultaneously concedes that language is a system of failure and also overcomes that failure by manipulating convention. Moreover, both novels in suggesting language is insufficient echo Nietzsche's ideas about realism and truth. I will demonstrate how Virginia Woolf and Tim O'Brien like Friedrich Nietzsche express the paradox of language. Language is pursued by both writers of fiction, Woolf and O'Brien,

as a failing system. Both go beyond language and find the literary means by which to represent the reality of war.

CHAPTER II

NIETZSCHE: LANGUAGE AS A METAPHOR FOR REALITY

Friedrich Nietzsche died at the turn of the twentieth century and had a large influence on the approaching period of modernism. Nietzsche's ideas about truth and language joined the ideas of many writers and thinkers to form the bedrock of modernism. Nietzsche's views on the distance between language and reality fueled modern writers' overall disillusionment with nineteenth-century realist literature.

In *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, Friedrich Nietzsche questions the human desire for truth:

> In a similarly limited way man wants the truth: he desires the agreeable life-preserving consequences of truth, but he is indifferent to pure knowledge, which has no consequences; he is even hostile to possibly damaging and destructive truths. And, moreover, what about these conventions of language? Are they really the products of knowledge, of the sense of truth? Do the designations and the things coincide? Is language the adequate expression of all realities? (Nietzsche 693).

According to Nietzsche, humans have a relationship of convenience with truth, and we use language as a vehicle of self-preservation that avoids truth. There seems to exist a

tone of vanity in the manipulation of language to create truth. There is a layer of lies. The first lie for Nietzsche is the once-removed-nature language takes on as it distorts reality into verisimilitude. Humans utilizing language then tell the second lie; the lie that they have created the truth of reality in their language. Nietzsche states the disconnect language has to "the thing in itself" or to reality: "The different languages, set side by side, show that what matters with words is never the truth, never an adequate expression; else there would not be so many languages. The 'thing in itself' (for that is what pure truth, without consequences, would be) is quite incomprehensible to the creators of language and not at all worth aiming for" (Nietzsche 693). This is a dismal view of something as beautiful and fundamentally human as language, but there is also a universal view that there are some things in life which words cannot express. For Nietzsche the ineffable nature of life is at the root of our darkest and most glorious moments: birth, death, tragedy, triumph, war.

Nietzsche contends that words are metaphors. Language is a system of labeling based on a multitude of constant comparisons- what something is like or not like. These comparisons keep one's consciousness away from what something "is" never achieving the unreachable true representation of reality and something's essence. Nietzsche states,

> What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are

> worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins (Nietzsche 694).

For Nietzsche, words are a shadow of what they name, and truth is elusive and constructed. Nietzsche's empirical view strives to reconcile the sensorial way one perceives her environment with the immediately following cognitive activity. For example, a child explores the world and manipulates items to understand them. According to Nietzsche, the child is making comparisons (metaphors) to create understanding and then uses language to name, label, and explain. Senses connect with the mind resulting in language.

Nietzsche complicates his views by proposing that this system of metaphors are lies told ironically to express truth: "We still do not know where the urge for truth comes from; for as yet we have heard only of the obligation imposed by society that it should exist: to be truthful means using the customary metaphors—in moral terms: the obligation to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie herdlike in a style obligatory for all" (Nietzsche 694). Society has a moral obligation to discover truth by lying through metaphors (language). Humans, or "man," are unaware of these lies: "Now man of course forgets that this is the way things stand for him. Thus he lies in the manner indicated, unconsciously and in accordance with habits which are centuries old; and precisely *by means of this unconsciousness* and forgetfulness he arrives at his sense of truth (Nietzsche 694). Nietzsche's "truth through lies paradox" is echoed in the texts of Woolf and O'Brien. Their war novels seek to tell the truth of war while conceding that language fails to conceivably represent reality or war. Like Nietzsche, Woolf and

O'Brien also acknowledge the inadequate nature of language and its system of lies that achieve a "sense of truth" in their respective war novels.

Novelists Virginia Woolf and Tim O'Brien confirm Friedrich Nietzsche's contention that life and reality cannot be authentically represented by language. Woolf and O'Brien affirm this belief in the structure of their narrative and in their story telling choices. Words fail. Language, a system of sounds and a medium of human communication, cannot be depended upon to show reality or the essence of life or truth. Specifically, these twentieth-century authors are suggesting in their works that language fails to represent the realities of war. By comparing and contrasting the texts of Woolf and O'Brien, we discover many common tactics which acknowledge language's failure: the reliance on figurative language; the paradoxical approach of telling love stories to depict the experience of war; the metafictional admission made by each text that the truth of war cannot and perhaps should not be relayed; and narratological structures employed by both authors that circumvent "realism" by directly addressing the reader for collusion in the fictional lie or by indirectly luring the reader to fill in the gaps of the unknown. These common tactics combine and work to answer the modernist writers' questions for experimentally how to present reality and the reality of war.

CHAPTER III

WOOLF: AVOIDING THE TOPIC OF WAR IN ORDER TO WRITE ABOUT WAR

Virginia Woolf uses modernist literary tools to write an anti-war novel. Woolf experiments, breaks boundaries, and changes to rules of language and narration as she writes the modernist novel *Jacob's Room*. Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* breaks conventions of Edwardian novels of the era; some critics believe she wrote it as a response to her brother's death. If Woolf is memorializing her brother with this elegiac novel, then Tim O'Brien's subtitled work of fiction *The Things They Carried* also echoes consciously or not Woolf's autobiographical tones. Why are these writers, who are grieving because of war, using fiction and the tools of language to communicate the atrocities of war? O'Brien seems to be showing that all art is a lie that makes us realize the truth. Despite the inadequacy of language, these novelists believe that making the reader feel is paramount in the search for textual truth. Of lesser concern is breaking through the Nietzscheian system of metaphors to arrive closer to representing "the thing in itself." O'Brien maintains that literal truth is insufficient, absolutism is dangerous, and the reader's role of filling in meaning leads to more than one truth.

Virginia Woolf describes language's ability to express what we see or experience: "The main thing in beginning a novel is to feel, not that you can write it, but that it exists on the far side of a gulf, which words cannot cross… a novel, as I saw, to be good should be seen, before one writes it, something unwriteable: but only visible…" (qtd. in Dalgarno 1). Woolf is juxtaposing the visible and the writable, showing that language is something separate from the physicality of reality. Woolf seems to say that we can perceive with our eyes, but once our perception is translated into language, then authenticity of reality is lost. In *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World*, Emily Dalgarno discusses this "chasm" between language and realism: "It would seem that the visible world might be represented by language that acknowledges the 'gulf' between it and the writer, or by a kind of realism that is based on the codes of photography and perspective" (1). Building on this, I argue that Woolf approaches the challenges of turning the unwriteable into the written by using narrative tactics which consciously show the visible as unknowable in order to make it writeable. Specifically, in *Jacob's Room*, Woolf develops a streaming plot which cuts in and out of her characters' lives while the reader perceives them as unfamiliar, distant, and unknown. Their lives and experiences have a language constructed visibility and a corporeality but not an intimacy with the reader. The reader finishes the novel with no sense of who the characters are. Ironically, there is a "truth" in this unknowing, possibly representing the day to day disconnect people have with each other's perceptions. I argue that Nietzsche would view this as a viable alternative for the impossible task of expressing "the thing in itself." Woolf's approach also exposes language's inadequacy as she removes herself from her characters creating another distance, a literary scenario where author and narrator appear to know nothing of

the characters. The characters seem to exist outside the author/narrator's consciousness. Woolf muses in her diary, "I suppose the danger is the damned egotistical self; which ruins Joyce and Richardson to my mind: is one pliant and rich enough to provide a wall for the book from oneself without its becoming…narrowing and restricting?" (qtd. in Flint xiv). Woolf desires to be far away from her characters; she recognizes that she needs to break language's conventions to achieve a new representation of human truth. Woolf states, "I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist" (qtd. in Flint xiv). In her claims of breaking convention to depict the human experience, we hear Woolf's awareness that the conventional systems of language are failing her aims as a writer. Her images of twilight and mist are apt metaphors for fiction as always a mere illusion of reality.

Jacob's Room was published in 1922, when the world was healing from World War I. This *Bildungsroman* tells the story of a boy named Jacob Flanders who comes of age, goes to university, travels, lives in London and in the end, dies in World War I. However, the relationships Jacob experiences throughout the story are more notable than Jacob passing through time and space. Woolf published the novel after the war, but the majority of the story takes place before the start of World War I thus excising the darkness of the war. Additionally, Woolf's grief for her brother shadows the novel with an elegiac tone. Flanders, Jacob's family name, was a well-known battlefield and poem during the war, "In Flanders Field." These details help situate the novel as defying the limitations of language to represent the tragedy of war.

Woolf's begins the novel with Jacob's mother, Betty Flanders, sitting in the sand,

and Jacob playing nearby with his brother. Betty digs her feet in the sand, and her eyes fill with tears as she writes a letter to Captain Barfoot, a man who has romantic interest in Betty. She is filled with grief at the death of her husband, Seabrook. Woolf tellingly begins her novel with death and grief symbolized in Betty's tear-filled eyes. The text goes further to show the literal effect the tears have on Betty's vision: "Such were Betty Flanders's letters to Captain Barfoot—many-paged, tear-stained. Scarborough is seven hundred miles from Cornwall: Captain Barfoot is in Scarborough: Seabrook is dead. Tears made all the dahlias in her garden undulate in red waves and flashed the glass house in her eyes…" (Woolf 4). Betty is seeing the world quite literally through her own tears. This scene sets up the figurative elegiac nature of the text as Betty's perception is warped by death and loss. Literal vision undulates; perception and perspective must also waver as they withstand the effects of death. By the end of *Jacob's Room*, Betty has come full circle and is left standing in Jacob's apartment holding out a pair of shoes that Jacob will never wear again because he has died fighting in World War I. Woolf determines to begin and end this novel with a maternal figure, images of feet, and a death. The beginning is the end.

Images of death and loss are recurring throughout the novel. Woolf returns the reader to images of death setting the stage for Jacob's fatal outcome. The theme of death is ubiquitous early in the text exemplified by Jacob's childhood hobby of entomology, collecting and preserving dead insects:

> The stag-beetle dies slowly (it was John who collected the beetles). Even on the second day its legs were supple. But the butterflies were Dead…Rebecca had caught the death's-head moth in the kitchen. A strong smell of camphor came

> from the butterfly boxes. Mixed with the smell of camphor was the unmistakable smell of seaweed. Tawny ribbons hung on the door. The sun beat straight upon them. The upper wings of the moth which Jacob held were undoubtedly marked with kidney-shaped spots of a fulvous hue. But there was no crescent upon the underwing. The tree had fallen the night he caught it. There had been a volley of pistol shots suddenly in the depths of the wood. And his mother had taken him for a burglar when he came home late. The only one of her sons who never obeyed her, she said (Woolf 25-26).

This passage is inconspicuously rife with captivity, death, refusal, and violence. On the beach Jacob discovers an animal skull and in doing so is separated from his mother: "He was lost. There he stood. His face composed itself. He was about to roar when, lying among the black sticks and straw under the cliff, he saw a whole skull—perhaps a cow's skull, a skull, perhaps, with the teeth in it. Sobbing, but absent-mindedly, he ran farther and farther away until he held the skull in his arms" (Woolf 7). This childish scene foreshadows the demise of Jacob and possibly the demise of his generation by the World War they will fight in. Jacob's attraction to the skull separates him from his mother and this suggests the attraction some young men have to war running full speed toward death, finding themselves lost never to experience maternal safety again. These concrete objects are part of Woolf's representation of reality and serve to foreshadow a nature of death. This concrete level of language and Woolf's reliance on symbolism echoes Nietzsche's views that language fails to represent reality in the way that Woolf writes here about skulls and avoids the topic of war as it looms over the story.

Woolf also layers the text with questions of truth and language. As Jacob lunches

with the Plumers, Mrs. Plumer exclaims, in a statement that cleverly links truth to language: "'I don't feel I know the truth about anything until I've read them both!'" (Woolf 43). Is Woolf calculating the degree that language provides truth? This simple admission by an insignificant character in the novel is a metafictional approach to the link between reading (language) and seeking the truth. Woolf returns to this quandary later in the novel:

> Captain Barfoot liked [Jacob] best of the boys; but as for saying why …It seems then that men and women are equally at fault. It seems that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown. Either we are men, or we are women. Either we are cold, or we are sentimental. Either we are young, or growing old. In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this—and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him.
>
> Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love (Woolf 96).

Woolf is challenging the idea that anyone can know another person. She proposes that truth lies more in the unknowing than in the knowing. Here shadows symbolize the schism between a true knowledge of life and the more realistic perception of the shadows of life. Despite the physical and corporeal world, one can merely perceive the shadows. Consciously or not, Woolf echoes Nietzsche's philosophy by acknowledging the unrepresentable nature of life. Woolf also laces death to this theory. She asks: Why

should we mourn a shadow as it departs?

Woolf mistrusts language as a source of truth and representation of reality, but expresses letters (language) as a tool of immortalizing oneself in relation to others and as an epistolary reflection of self not "the thing in itself." In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf's narrator considers, "Let us consider letters—how they come at breakfast, and at night, with their yellow stamps and their green stamps, immortalized by the postmark—for to see one's own envelope on another's table is to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien. Then at last the power of the mind to quit the body is manifest, and perhaps we fear or hate or wish annihilated this phantom of ourselves, lying on the table" (Woolf 125). Woolf explicates the language of letters as versions of ourselves or, a step further, versions of a momentary self which is a frozen image of what is in constant flux. A letter is a reflection, a ghost of what is real. Woolf dedicates much prose in *Jacob's Room* to the priority of letters: "Life would split asunder without [letters]…These are our stays and props. These lace our days together and make of life a perfect globe" (Woolf 125). According to Woolf, letters connect and dull the painful and lonely reality of human interaction. Woolf's narrator states,

> Masters of language, poets of long ages, have turned from the sheet that endures to the sheet that perishes, pushing aside the tea-tray, drawing close to the fire (for letters are written when the dark presses round a bright red cave), and addressed themselves to the task of reaching, touching, penetrating the individual heart. Were it possible! But words have been used too often; touched and turned, and left exposed to the dust of the street. The words we seek hang close to the tree. We come at dawn and find them sweet beneath the leaf (Woolf 126).

For Woolf, a letter's words do not endure just as life. They collect dust as their meaning ages and becomes irrelevant. This shows another possible way language fails to remain currently true in the fleeting nature of the letter. Woolf's narrator reinforces these ideas around letters and language in an overt manner as she discusses different characters' letter writing personalities: "Mrs. Flanders wrote letters; Mrs. Jarvis wrote them; Mrs. Durrant too; Mother Stuart actually scented her pages, thereby adding a flavour which the English language fails to provide…" (Woolf 127). With beautiful simplicity, Woolf resolves by requiring an additional sensorial mode to complete a letter's meaning. The olfactory sense finishes where language fails.

In the following passage, Woolf articulates the distance each person truly feels from another. The anonymity is evident in each description and in the stream of images moving from one figure to the next. This collage of unnamed characters pervades the whole novel. Each image is composed as a foreign entity reinforcing Woolf's position that in reality we truly never know another. Here Woolf tries to represent that reality of unknowing. These excerpts of the text have no clarity, no intimacy, only the hint that these words are attempting to paint an image of reality. These textual examples are more visual than literary; they leave the reader with a picture flash or a snapshot of life. Woolf muses,

> Such faces as one sees. The little man fingering the meat must have squatted before the fire in innumerable lodging-houses, and heard and seen and known so much that it seems to utter itself even volubly from dark eyes, loose lips, as he fingers the meat silently, his face sad as a poet's, and never a song sung. Shawled women carry babies with purple eyelids; boys stand at street corners; girls look

> across the road—rude illustrations, pictures in a book whose pages we turn over and over as if we should at last find what we look for. Every face, every shop, bedroom window, public-house, and dark square is a picture feverishly turned—in search of what? It is the same with books. What do we seek through millions of pages? Still hopefully turning the pages—oh, here is Jacob's room (Woolf 132).

With overt metafiction, Woolf stresses her words as "rude illustrations" and that these pages in the book are eternally failing to enlighten hence the hunt through so many pages. Despite her efforts to represent the reality of unknowing and to create visibility in words, Woolf clearly expresses that language fails to end the search and the pages never end. These sentiments continue as the character Bonamy reflects on language. Woolf narrates Bonamy's thought process toward words, books, and literature:

> There are very few good books after all, for we can't count profuse histories, travels in mule carts to discover the sources of the Nile, or the volubility of fiction. I like books whose virtue is all drawn together in a page or two. I like sentences that don't budge though armies cross them. I like words to be hard—such were Bonamy's views, and they won him the hostility of those whose taste is all for the fresh growths of the morning, who throw up the window, and find the poppies spread in the sun, and can't forbear a shout of jubilation at the astonishing fertility of English literature. That was not Bonamy's way at all. That his taste in literature affected his friendships, and made him silent, secretive, fastidious, and only quite at his ease with one or two young men of his own way of thinking, was the charge against him (Woolf 192-193).

Woolf privileges precise, minimalistic language through Bonamy's views. Even with its

limitations, language should be concise and not voluminous. Thus, Woolf treats language as a paradox. Language can be a tool to build visibility and to represent the disconnect of one individual's consciousness to another. Language also falls short in representing truth in reality. For Woolf, books are limited; words ultimately fail. Literature reaches levels of verisimilitude while failing to find and communicate truth. Woolf employs methods to break literary convention which seem to validate Nietzsche's claims about language.

At the end of *Jacob's Room*, Woolf unleashes a rant against WWI. The reader learns that a war has begun. The tone is cold, and there is no intimacy as the telling involves no main characters. This description involves nameless and faceless soldiers:

> The battleships ray out over the North Sea, keeping their stations accurately apart. At a given signal all the guns are trained on a target which (the master gunner counts the seconds, watch in hand—at the sixth he looks up) flames into splinters. With equal nonchalance a dozen young men in the prime of life descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea; and there impassively (though with perfect mastery of machinery) suffocate uncomplainingly together. Like blocks of tin soldiers the army covers the cornfield, moves up the hillside, stops, reels slightly this way and that, and falls flat, save that, through field glasses, it can be seen that one or two pieces still agitate up and down like fragments of broken match-stick (Woolf 216).

The fighting men are unreal, one-dimensional, and flat. Emotion is absent as the stoic soldiers march to their deaths. Images of battlefields and suffocation create one of the only direct representations of war in this novel. Woolf ostensibly knows that language

will fail to show the truth of war; therefore, ambiguity and anonymity are employed to approach a representation.

Woolf then turns on the causes of war and clearly blames war on the systemic forces of government, economy, and greed. She also seems to be communicating the inevitable nature of the forces of war.

> These actions, together with the incessant commerce of banks, laboratories, chancellories, and houses of business, are the strokes which oar the world forward, they say. And they are dealt by men as smoothly sculptured as the impassive policeman at Ludgate Circus. But you will observe that far from being padded to rotundity his face is stiff from force of will, and lean from the efforts of keeping it so. When his right arm rises, all the force in his veins flows straight from shoulder to finger-tips; not an ounce is diverted into sudden impulses, sentimental regrets, wire-drawn distinctions. The buses punctually stop. It is thus that we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that the novelists never catch it; that it goes hurtling through their nets and leaves them torn to ribbons. This, they say, is what we live by—this unseizable force (Woolf 216-217).

For Woolf, war is unavoidable and the world has a resigned itself to its reign. Woolf details an inertia of war, an unstoppable force that figuratively destroys the novelist. Is she speaking of herself and how the world has lost so many to war just as she has lost her brother? These passages are the heart of the argument that *Jacob's Room* is an anti-war novel. The bulk of the novel with its stream of seemingly unrelated events avoids the topic until it is addressed with Woolf's unabashed words in the end. Woolf ultimately

sacrifices her protagonist Jacob who succumbs to the irresistible force and joins the war where he finally dies. The odd and ambiguous events that lead to Jacob joining are detailed in a scene in which a few characters discuss the war in fragments:

> 'Where are the men?' said old General Gibbons, looking round the drawing-room, full as usual on Sunday afternoons of well-dressed people. 'Where are the guns?' Mrs. Durrant looked too. Clara, thinking that her mother wanted her, came in; then went out again. They were talking about Germany at the Durrants, and Jacob (driven by this unseizable force) walked rapidly down Hermes Street and ran straight into the Williamses (Woolf 217).

Jacob is overcome by the unseizable force of war, and Woolf's narration succumbs to the limits of language as it seeks alternatives to represent war.

Woolf writes no scenes of battle or death. The last pages of the novel plunge the reader into an almost mundane moment in which Jacob's friend Bonamy and Jacob's mother Betty Flanders discover how Jacob has left his room. The title of the novel is taken from the last scene, the last pages. It is Jacob's room that symbolically shows the horrors of war. Language's attempt to represent war must remain in the figurative realm for Woolf. Woolf will not permit a literal communication of war; it is her elegiac tone that must suffice. Bonamy enters Jacob's room:

> 'He left everything just as it was,' Bonamy marvelled. 'Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for any one to read. What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?' he mused, standing in the middle of Jacob's room. The eighteenth century has its distinction. These houses were built, say, a hundred and fifty years ago. The rooms are shapely, the ceilings high; over the doorways a rose

> or a ram's skull is carved in the wood. Even the panels, painted in raspberry-coloured paint, have their distinction. Bonamy took up a bill for a hunting-crop. 'That seems to be paid,' he said. There were Sandra's letters. Mrs. Durrant was taking a party to Greenwich. Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there. Bonamy crossed to the window. Pickford's van swung down the street. The omnibuses were locked together at Mudie's corner. Engines throbbed, and carters, jamming the brakes down, pulled their horses sharp up. A harsh and unhappy voice cried something unintelligible. And then suddenly all the leaves seemed to raise themselves. 'Jacob! Jacob!' cried Bonamy, standing by the window. The leaves sank down again. 'Such confusion everywhere!' exclaimed Betty Flanders, bursting open the bedroom door. Bonamy turned away from the window. 'What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?' She held out a pair of Jacob's old shoes (246-247).

According to the state of the room, Jacob did not anticipate death. His belongings strewn in an unfinished manner hang suspended in time beckoning back their owner. There is a mood of expectation in the room along with the unstoppable forward motion of the rest of the world outside that room of death. Jacob will not return to his letters, to his flowers, to his wicker chair. Woolf's metaphors show what he has lost and show the "truth" of war by allowing language to strategically avoid direct descriptions of war.

In high modernist fashion, Woolf manipulates language to create "the truth of war" for World War I. Woolf makes language's limitations textually evident as she transforms these limitations into an advantage. Woolf shows language to succumbing to

its intrinsic limit thus figuratively exposing the horrors of war. Woolf breaks the conventions of language and writing to express the inexpressible following ideas similar to Nietzsche's theory in *Truth and Lies in an Extra Moral Sense*.

CHAPTER IV

O'BRIEN: LYING ABOUT THE STORY OF WAR

O'Brien makes reference to Virginia Woolf on page one of *The Things They Carried* as he describes the character Martha and "her respect for Chaucer and her affection for Virginia Woolf" (O'Brien 1). Martha is a girl who is loved by Jimmy Cross, a soldier. And so, O'Brien begins his war story with a love story and with a reference to literary society as Martha is an English major who writes letters and loves writers such as Woolf. O'Brien narrates, "More than anything, he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her…" (1). Love dominates Jimmy Cross's mind even more than the fear or horror of the war in which he is entangled, and as all the characters carry something to comfort them, Jimmy Cross carries love letters. These initial allusions seem to fortify the nature of O'Brien's text as already showing an acute awareness of the power of language. Furthermore, by naming Woolf O'Brien connects them, connects the two writers, the postmodernist calling upon the modernist. It is my hypothesis that O'Brien's novel is postmodernist homage to Woolfian modernism. It also offers a Woolfian response to the postmodern film *Apocalypse Now*.

Apocalypse Now, released in 1979, is Francis Ford Coppola's presentation of the

Vietnam War. This postmodern film has been described as anti-climatic and has no emotional closure in the end. The film is dark, bleak and devoid of hope. Of course, *Apocalypse Now* seeks to present the horror of war, but as a postmodern work, the film also displays a pluralism of themes of a postcolonial world and tragedy of war. The film opens with the rock band The Doors singing the bleak "The End." As Morrison sings the words "this is the end," this protagonist in the film has hit rock bottom in a scene filled with alcohol, violence, and an overlaid voice that begs to be put-out of its misery. The narrating voice confesses, "when I am in the jungle, I want to be home, and when I am home, I want to be in the jungle." The protagonist is Captain Willard, and he is assigned a final mission to return to the jungle of The Vietnam War. Which he yearns for because at this point, he is completely obsessed and addicted to the violence of the war. Captain Willard must go on a mission to find a decorated officer who has gone AWOL and has gone mad acting outside the sanction of the United States government.

Apocalypse Now is a dark movie, figuratively, literally, and physically. The story of an American soldier searching to assassinate another American soldier was filmed in low light and in a blood bath of mud and filth. Captain Willard's thoughts betray his truth about the Vietnam War. He thinks, "…saying there is an insane soldier inside an insane war is like giving out speeding tickets at the Indy 500." The film leaves the audience shocked, ashamed, helpless and hopeless.

Nearly ten years later, Tim O'Brien writes a novel presenting the unpresentable of the Vietnam War. Perhaps responding to *Apocalypse Now* and representations like it, O'Brien's novel is more akin to the modernist writer's closure, awareness of ineffability, and the streaming stories that link to reveal an interior experience for the reader.

O'Brien's work is a more loving approach to a tough topic whereas the film has given up all hope- it is the postmodern resignation to what the modernist sought to understand and alleviate about the artist unattainable task of presenting the unpresentable.

In a public talk, Tim O'Brien presented his decision to find truth in fiction. He surmised that stories do not need to be the "truth" but they do need to be honest. O'Brien explained that silence is not an option, yet language is insufficient. Therefore, write fiction instead of nonfiction because the literal truth is not enough to express war; you need to make the reader feel something in order to discover the truth. O'Brien eloquently warned of absolutism and the danger of final truths because there is no one single truth. O'Brien relies on the reader to fill-in meaning solidifying truth in the story's words and in the white space between the words: "Truth exists in the murky center, truth is relative, and art is a lie that makes us realize the truth." O'Brien personified war by describing it as a braggart opposing shy, personal, and unnoticed peace. His final message to his audience was: "We will find personal peace if we stop sloganism, bullyism, tyrannyism, vanity, and complacency; grow two heads and always see two sides." O'Brien's words on truth and the reader's relationship to fiction echo Nietzsche's belief in the subconscious failure of the metaphorical system of language to represent reality. O'Brien's overt contention that literal prose will fail to show war strongly agrees with Woolf's admission that the writeable is relegated to the visible but cannot cross the gulf to become realism. Echoing Nietzsche, the truth of war is somehow tangled in Woolf's disregard for convention and in O'Brien's willingness to lie, making things up for good reason and believing that in a story you can make miracles happen.

In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien is telling the story of war. This novel

announces the subtitle "A Work of Fiction" on its cover page, yet beyond this claim, the reader consistently slips into the feeling that the book is a memoir. One fact remains. Tim O'Brien fought in the Vietnam War. He experienced this part of history and committed to showing the world what happened during that war. Notably, O'Brien writes fiction rather than an autobiographical account. He removes himself from the weight of the genre, yet he inserts himself as a character in the work. O'Brien would likely agree with Nietzsche's contention that language inevitably fails to represent reality. Like Woolf, he relies on fiction (a lie) to tell the "truth" of the reality of war thereby instructing human beings to avoid this horror of our condition. In an epigraph to chapter one, O'Brien includes a citation from John Ransom's *Andersonville Diary*: "This book is essentially different from any other that has been published concerning the 'late war' or any of its incidents. Those who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once, and to all other readers it is commended as a statement of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest" (vi). Truthfulness is of great concern to O'Brien. It is detrimental to a soldier to express their experience. But what is the appropriate literary vehicle? O'Brien's decision to compose fiction is a telling affirmation of Nietzsche's belief in the failure of language. O'Brien may contend that he needs a *lie* to tell the truth of war.

O'Brien apparently needs storytelling to expose his experiences, and I believe this is because he has come to agree that literal language fails to represent the truth of reality. In a mighty paradox: factual does not equal truthful. Writers need fiction and storytelling to get closer to the truth of reality. In a lecture O'Brien stated, "Abstraction may make your head believe, but a good story, well told, will also make your kidneys believe, and

your scalp and your tear ducts, your heart, and your stomach, the whole human being." And in an interview, when asked about *The Things They Carried*, he explained,

> It's a book that centers on Vietnam and a platoon of soldiers. In one sense, it's about the Vietnam War, but it's also about storytelling, how stories rule our lives, how they are told and retold as we look for an elusive truth. And finally, it's about writing itself- writing as an effort to pin down with language the truth about a subject.

A close reading of the text reveals what O'Brien explains about the distinction between truth and accuracy:

> What we see accurately with our eyes can sometimes be very deceptive. We don't see everything. No historian can fit into a textbook the thoughts of every single soldier in every single war and every single episode. Much is being selected and generalized. So in *The Things They Carried*, I'm trying to get at this sense of how difficult it is to pin down the truth with a capital "T." In a way, it's a warning against absolutism, against black and white declarations of what's true and what's not true. So part of the effort is trying to display through fiction the ambiguous, blurry, complicated, grayish fog of event the most plainly historical events.

In an explication of O'Brien's text, I will work to illuminate his warnings against absolutism and the discovery of his "T"ruth.

O'Brien's voice has different levels of strength in the narration. At times in the novel, O'Brien is an omniscient but invisible narrator telling us stories which are made up. Other times in the novel, O'Brien is a character of different ages, and the reader is

fully involved with the action surrounding Tim the character in the story. And on a few rare occasions in the novel, O'Brien inserts himself into the text as the author and speaks directly to the reader with instructions or admissions regarding the text. Therefore, there is a Tim O'Brien triumvirate: Tim the character, Tim the narrator, and Tim the author. Each voice assists the text in a different way to weave together the verisimilitude necessary to find and tell the truth. This novel is structured as a string of vignettes which assist O'Brien's many voices and the level of their presence in each of the individual short stories. O'Brien believes this novel tells the truth; he sets out to overcome the limitations of literal language and factual prose with the intent to represent reality. This is both textually evident and textually aware.

O'Brien juxtaposes the concrete and the abstract. He employs concrete nouns to represent abstract truths. This embodies O'Brien's method of shifting the paradigm for his agenda and purposes: a lie can tell the truth, the concrete communicates the abstract. In chapter one, O'Brien includes a list of items carried which appear to symbolize the weight of war: "more than 20 pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers and all the rest, plus the unweighed fear" (6). The unweighed fear being the heaviest of all. Even death is presented as real weight when the first character Ted Lavender dies and his body is also carried. O'Brien describes Lavender's death, "Kiowa kept explaining how you had to be there, how fast it was, how the poor guy just dropped like so much concrete. Boom-down, he said. Like cement" (7). Within this fictional frame, the reader must discern real and figurative even as the fictional characters float between figurative and literal to make determinations. As seen in this character's literal reaction to Lavender's death, "'Oh shit', Rat Kiley said,

'the guy's dead. The guy's dead,' he kept saying, which seemed profound- 'the guy's dead. I mean really'" (13). O'Brien constantly flows between concrete and abstract to tell the truth of war using fiction. This acknowledges Nietzsche's modernist philosophy of language and echoes Woolf's reliance on the concrete world for representation.

O'Brien beautifully blends the concrete and the abstract to tell the story of war: "They carried lice and ringworm and leeches and paddy algae and various rots and molds. They carried the land itself-Vietnam, the place, the soil- a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity" (15). O'Brien's text is in constant flux of representation migrating from one linguistic device to another. The apparent limitation of language sets O'Brien on a hunt, a hunt for the truth in a lie. Within the textual world of his "lie," O'Brien is experimenting with all manners in which language is manipulated to represent reality. O'Brien's characters figuratively carry gravity and the atmosphere just as they literally carry lice and disease, and this blend gets closer to the truth. O'Brien narrates, "They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing- these were intangible, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight" (21). O'Brien juxtaposes literal and figurative with tangible and intangible contorting literary devises, demonstrating language's limits.

O'Brien distorts the written, literary representation of reality, depicting the ineffable nature of war. The soldiers use euphemism to accept death: "They used 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 war itself" (20). Here, O'Brien's soldiers dramatize war-time death within the frame of a piece of fiction creating a double layer of unreal, and the euphemistic tone mixed with humor tells the tale. These characters need to destroy the reality of war as the war destroys them, so they engage in horrific acts to wage a war against war: "They kicked corpses. They cut off thumbs. They talked grunt lingo. They told stories about Ted Lavender's supply of tranquilizers, how the poor guy didn't feel a thing, how incredibly tranquil he was" (20). After shot to death, the character Ted Lavender's tranquil facial expression in death is a harsh blend of contradictory images. O'Brien here again employs irony in representing war. No literary tool is sufficient, his novel suggests, but some get the reader closer to the experience. O'Brien's textually rich concoction of what can seem like a "fictional bag of tricks," works to show the reality of war.

One poignant character, who embodies the failure of language, is an old man named Elroy who owns some cabins on a lake very near the Canadian border. Elroy provides the Tim O'Brien character safe refuge. O'Brien considers fleeing the draft and running to Canada. This old man gives O'Brien food, shelter and work. Elroy is a stoic character and kind, but his textually significant trait is how very little he speaks: "…I think, the man understood that words were insufficient" (51). Elroy rarely speaks and more importantly does not question O'Brien about his seeming decision to flee the country presumably to dodge draft. O'Brien notices how reticent the man is and begins to hold him in high regard for this reason. Elroy gives O'Brien the wide-berth he needs

to unpack his feelings about the war. O'Brien marvels at the man's restraint and lack of words:

> One morning the old man showed me how to split and stack firewood, and for several hours we just worked in silence out behind his house. At one point, I remember, Elroy put down his maul and looked at me for a long time, his lips drawn as if framing a difficult question, but then he shook his head and went back to work. The man's self-control was amazing. He never pried. He never put me in the position that required lies or denials (51).

Elroy, literally wordless, embodies how this text is aware of its own limits.

In one scene in the novel, Tim, the character, confides in a former, fellow soldier during a post-war reunion: "At the end, though, as we were walking out to his car, I told him that I'd like to write a story about some of this. Jimmy thought it over and then gave me a little smile. 'Why not?' he said" (29). The character version of himself here suggests the autobiographical nature of *The Things They Carried.* This moment in which the text expresses awareness of itself also cultivates the inevitable questions that must be asked by the characters. Jimmy anticipates the delicate task of converting war into words: "[Jimmy] got into his car and rolled down the window. 'Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever.' He hesitated for a second. 'And do me a favor. Don't mention anything about— 'No' I said, 'I won't'" (30). A dash, a punctuation mark, becomes the representation of war. Words will not suffice for Jimmy as he tries to discuss the potentiality of his war experience distilled into language.

O'Brien also places the burden of discovering truth on the reader. He knows

words will fail; therefore, the reader must help to construct truth. This idea is echoed in a haunting mantra used by the soldiers, "There it is." This idiomatic phrase becomes quintessential for the soldiers in *The Things They Carried*. Without words to assist their expression of their reality they resorted to "There it is, they'd say. Over and over—there it is, my friend, there it is—as if the repetition itself were an act of poise, a balance between crazy and almost crazy, knowing without going, there it is, which meant be cool, let it ride, because Oh yeah, man, you can't change what can't be changed, there it is, there it absolutely and positively and fucking well *is*" (21). Words cannot fill the hole of their reality. Therefore, in an act of surrender, the soldiers acknowledge that there is no language for them. O'Brien is confirming language's limits and exemplifies this with the soldiers' decision to distill their experiences with the pronoun "it" and the resignation that lies there in.

At another point in the novel, O'Brien offers a "peace story" which is almost overshadowed by the comparable abundance of war stories in the novel. O'Brien segues to an alternate tone, "The war wasn't all terror and violence. Sometimes things could almost get sweet" (31). This peace story begins with a soldier going AWOL; ostensibly, that is the reason for the peace:

> As a writer, all you can do is pick a street and go for the ride, putting things down as they come to you. That's the real obsession. All those stories.
>
> Not bloody stories, necessarily. Happy stories, too, and even a few peace stories.
>
> Here's a quick peace story:
>
> A guy goes AWOL. Shacks up in Danang with a Red Cross nurse. It's a great time—the nurse loves him to death—the guy gets whatever he wants whenever he

> wants it. The war's over, he thinks. Just nookie and new angles. But one day he rejoins his unit in the bush. Can't wait to get back into action. Finally one of his buddies asks what happened with the nurse, why so hot for combat, and the guy says, "All that peace, man, it felt so good it *hurt*. I want to hurt it *back*."
>
> I remember Mitchell Sanders smiling as he told me that story. Most of it he made up, I'm sure, but even so it gave me a quick truth-goose. Because it's all relative. You're pinned down in some filthy hellhole of a paddy, getting your ass delivered to kingdom come, but then for a few seconds everything goes quiet and you look up and see the sun and a few puffy white clouds, and the immense serenity flashes against your eyeballs—the whole world gets rearranged—and even though you're pinned down by a war you never felt more at peace (35-36).

O'Brien is consistently crafting a self-aware text which reads as a memoir. He states, "Stories are for joining the past to the future" (38). O'Brien relies on stories to glue together his depiction of our reality; however, he also questions the art of storytelling as a vehicle with a mind of its own and as an undependable source. The relative nature of stories creates an elusive truth of any memory. In the previous excerpt, Mitchell Sanders tells a "made up" story, giving O'Brien a "truth-goose." O'Brien is constructing thick layers of fiction with a character's tall tale nestled inside the landscape of the broader novel, stories within stories seeking for truth in layers of lies. How can war be beautiful? Is the absence of war peace? These questions pose contradictions to our sensibility and what we believe war to be.

O'Brien juxtaposes ideas of antithesis and incongruence throughout *The Things They Carried*. Upon returning home, the O'Brien character ruminates: "I survived, but

it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (61). This type of opposites are found throughout the text and aid O'Brien in constructing an authentic reality. Society deems fighting a war an act of bravery while O'Brien claims it was his act of cowardice. In the novel, O'Brien does not want to go to Vietnam, and the character almost runs away to Canada, yet O'Brien is petrified of how his family and the citizens of his town will view him if he runs away to Canada and dodges the draft. In the end, he is more frightened of their opinion of him than he is frightened of dying in Vietnam. Again, O'Brien uses metafiction to question and then to clarify: "How do you generalize? The truths are contradictory. War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory" (80). O'Brien finds great fault with generalizing war, which is an innocent way in which society tries to describe war out of ignorance. O'Brien forgives us this, but he forces his audience into exposure. O'Brien seeks to immerse his audience into repetitive and over-abundant ironic language, returning over and over to similar contrasting images to tell his story. O'Brien repeats, "To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life" (81). O'Brien goes on to confess the feeling of being alive that follows a battle or firefight.

Like Nietzsche and Woolf, O'Brien grapples with truth throughout this novel. He oscillates from confessional narration of supposed full disclosure to direct statements of

withholding the truth: “Most of this I’ve told before, or at least hinted at, but what I have never told is the full truth” (46). This *lying about telling the truth* is pervasive in the text. O’Brien warps the concept of truth to create an “experience of truth” for the reader. O’Brien warns, “In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It’s a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn’t, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness. In other cases you can’t even tell a true war story. Sometimes it’s just beyond telling” (71). O’Brien flips truth on its head changing its essence permanently. His deepest call to action being the ardent desire to tell a true war story, yet in this quest is the realization that a writer cannot proceed along a linear direction. Truth is elusive is the first tenet of this work. I would argue that O’Brien forsakes truth in an act to discover truth. Additionally, O’Brien finds it vital to accost the reader with the constant knowledge that he will not simple tell the *truth*: “The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*” (71). O’Brien wants a spectrum of truth which can be utilized with words like: seemingness, represent, exact, believe, untrue, jumbled… O’Brien dances along this spectrum of truth, moving left and right between fiction and memoir, desperately trying to relay what war is.

Somewhere in O’Brien’s argument of truth is conversion; the untrue becomes the true. The backbone of this memoirist fiction is the layers of stories inside stories. In a scene in the novel, a soldier, Sanders, tells O’Brien an unbelievable story of a squad of soldiers and what happens when they go on a mission on a mountain side in a Vietnam

jungle. The soldiers on the mountain wait in the dark, hiding, waiting to ambush or to be ambushed. Suddenly, they hear what seems to be a radio playing cocktail party music. The soldiers are affected mentally. They feel like they are going crazy and "Naturally they get nervous. One guy sticks Juicy Fruit in his ears. Another guy almost flips" (73). They become so freaked out that they call in a air raid to bomb the whole area. As Sanders is telling the story, he expresses:

> 'This next part,' Sanders said quietly, 'you won't believe.'
>
> 'Probably not,' I said.
>
> 'You won't. And you know why?' He gave me a long, tired smile. 'Because it happened. Because every word is absolutely dead-on true.'
>
> Sanders made a sound in his throat, like a sigh, as if to say he didn't care if I believed him or not. But he did care. He wanted me to feel the truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling. He seemed sad, in a way (73-74).

Sanders asserts incredulity is linked to dead-on truth, another conversion. Untrue is true, and dead-on truth equals disbelief. O'Brien is using the voice of Sanders to introduce the idea of believing by feeling. O'Brien develops this angle with the following logic: "True war stories do not generalize…For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside. It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (78). According to O'Brien, untruth converts to truth, and one way to believe is "to feel."

O'Brien's thus uses a truth spectrum based on gradations of truth, juxtapositions, and antithesis. Truth, not an absolute but an elusive concept, can be found by looking at

what it is not or by accepting the opposite of what is thought to be true. Accordingly, absolute truth is flexible. This statement is incongruent, but O'Brien echoes this concept in his text as he concedes:

> Mitchell Sanders was right. For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great, ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old rules no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery…the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity (82).

O'Brien is more direct, "In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (82) similarly, "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (83). O'Brien needs these lies of truth to represent war. It is evident that O'Brien, once committed to fiction as a means to an end, comes to grips with the unconventional tools he must use to create an anti-war novel that is authentic over authoritative. O'Brien resolves, "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth" (179). Nietzsche and Woolf would likely agree that words fail, so a writer must create a new system.

Elementally, the art form of storytelling dominates *The Things They Carried*. Tim O'Brien relies on storytelling as the convention to meet the needs of representing reality. Many lenses express the angles of O'Brien's stories and storytelling agenda and technique. Consequently, he addresses the deceptive nature of morality:

> 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 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" (68).

O'Brien creates a paradox out of lying. In one sense O'Brien uses a lie to tell the truth of war, but if the war story seeks moral ground then it is a lie with no truth. This acts as the premise upon which O'Brien builds all storytelling. O'Brien describes the character Rat's storytelling mode of operation: "Whenever he told a story, Rat had a tendency to stop now and then, interrupting the flow, inserting little clarifications or bits of analysis and personal opinion. It was a bad habit, Mitchell Sanders said, because all that matters is the raw material, the stuff itself, and you can't clutter it up with your own half-baked commentary… trust your own story. Get the hell out of the way and let it tell itself" (106). O'Brien is advocating for an unadulterated story, free of the teller's bias and opinion: "By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened…and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain" (158). O'Brien's aim is to segregate story from teller. The method involves actual and embellished events in a dance of representation. This process begins with ostensible objectivity and ends with subjectivity, and in that binary system of perception the reader may find some truth of the reality of war, "What stories can do, I guess, is make things present" (180). O'Brien has transformed fiction into the truth and the now.

At the start of the chapter entitled "Good Form," O'Brien declares to the reader that he is not a just a character and the author, but that he is a writer fabricating his stories. O'Brien begins, "It's time to be blunt. I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented. But it's not a game. It's a form" (179). The lines between memoir and fiction have been blurred to this point in the text when O'Brien reveals he has another identity- a writer concocting the whole book, the fictionalized memoir. O'Brien's stories are seem intended to cure the reader and himself of the effects of war: "But this too is true: stories can save us" (225) and "...I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story" (246). O'Brien slowly reveals his identity as a character within fiction, as a writer in the text, and as the author who has not written an intimate memoir but instead has written the self-aware and truth-seeking, *The Things They Carried*.

O'Brien ends this "work of fiction" by telling a final story from the character Tim's childhood. As a boy, the O'Brien character falls in love with a girl. Their relationship is quite touching and sincerely beautiful. The girl dies of cancer, and a young O'Brien goes to her funeral to see her body in the casket. The experience impacts O'Brien, and he begins to deliberately dream about her. O'Brien recalls that many nights he eagerly anticipated sleep in order to return to his deliberate dream of the dead girl. This was how he made amends for what seemed, to a child, unbearable. He needed the dream to make her whole and to heal his soul. This final story embodies a parallel to O'Brien's intention for *The Things They Carried*. The parallel exists in the deliberate dreaming. If O'Brien's final stroke of what is classified as fiction is an explicit

proclamation of the lies he has told, then this text is O'Brien's deliberate dream of Vietnam for the reader. *The Things They Carried* is a deliberate dream- explicitly stated and implicitly symbolized by the story of the untimely death of a girl and a grieving, dreaming boy.

Ostensibly, Tim O'Brien employs many literary devices as he grapples with the postmodern dilemma of presenting the unpresentable. O'Brien seeks a modernist solution to this dilemma, and in borrowing from high modernism, he could be writing homage to Virginia Woolf and to her modernist experiments with language. Both writers face the unimaginable task of writing about war, and their literary response is comparable. First Woolf and later O'Brien demonstrate Nietzsche's theory of language's failure. Both Woolf and O'Brien capitulate not by abandoning their vision but by using experimental forms and metafictional devices. These two writers have written novels that share a common objective, therefore tying them together. They suggest that there is and will always be a "lack of reality" in any representation of reality. Lyotard and Nietzsche would likely agree. O'Brien's page one tribute to Woolf alludes to their connection; the postmodernist looks to the modernist to create a work that forsakes realism and embodies an interior awareness of its limitations.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

According to modernist Friedrich Nietzsche, language is a constructed system which fails to represent reality because of its inherent metaphorical nature. Modernist writer Virginia Woolf and postmodernist writer Tim O'Brien must address Nietzsche's belief as they seek to warn against and to represent the horrors of war. These writers utilize and manipulate literary devises to accomplish their goal. Nietzsche and Woolf are writing the new rules of modernist styles in order to forsake the contrived realism of the nineteenth century. O'Brien pays homage to high modernism and to Woolf in his novel through direct reference and through the modernist strategies utilized to present the unpresentable. I contend the strongest bond between *Jacob's Room* and *The Things They Carried* is each text's metafictional acknowledgement that it has failed even before it has begun. The novels *Jacob's Room* and *The Things They Carried* are attempts to circumvent language's limitations and somehow make the reader feel that s/he *understands war* and will therefore *seek peace*.

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