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# "So Beautiful That Mortal... Eyes Can't Take It": How Postmodernism Shows Us the Function of the Beautiful in the Landscape of the Traumatic

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**Abstract:** In her 2010 article "Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma", Griselda Pollock lamented the aperture between psychology, particularly that of PTSD, and esthetics in the search to bear witness to traumatic experience. This article explores the gray area that exists when the esthetic and the traumatic converge, arguing that such areas exist not only as direct representations of the difficulty of narrativizing trauma as described by such theorists as Cathy Caruth, Onno van der Hart, and Bessel van der Kolk, but also simultaneously as windows into the moments of what Dominick LaCapra calls "the sublime object of endless melancholia and impossible mourning". Postmodernism is argued to be the organic choice of voicing traumatic retellings, and close readings of John Hersey's proto-postmodern *Hiroshima* (1946), Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1992), and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) work to highlight the intersections of trauma, postmodern literature, and esthetics; or, in Wallace's case, theoretical discussions of traumatic tropes as facilitated by the postmodern tradition. In drawing attention to this tripartite convergence, this article hopes to continue in the vein of scholarship that reaffirms the need for evermore research in the field of trauma studies as well as substantiate a claim of the heightened importance of postmodern literature in the 21st century—an epoch indelibly marked by trauma, as noted by Pollock.

**Keywords:** trauma theory; traumatic retelling; loss-trauma; traumatic witnessing; traumatic narrativization; postmodernism; John Hersey's *Hiroshima*; Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*; David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*; esthetics; beauty



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## 1. Introduction

In 1938, at just 15 years old, Jake Larson told the Minnesota National Guard that he was of age to fight in World War II. He slipped through the cracks and managed to enlist, and six years later, on D-Day, Larson was one of the first men to land on Omaha Beach, with the ensuing bloodbath leading to the death of over 2500 Americans (Associated Press Editors 2023). In an interview with the American Veterans Center, Larson recalled that day and how, after he landed on the beach, he ran to take cover behind a berm where sustained Nazi machine gunfire had him pinned down. Gazing somewhere off to the side of the interviewer's camera, Larson related the following story:

> While they were shooting right there in front of that berm, I dragged out a cigarette. I had a waterproof cigarette holder... Put it in my mouth... My matches were wet. I could see—peripheral vision—to the back of me there was a soldier, so—so I hollered, *Hey, buddy, have you got a match*? No answer. I turned and looked and there was no head under the helmet... It probably saved my life, to turn. It's like the soul of that guy said *Get up and get out of here now*. And, by some miracle, those machine guns stopped to reload or to change barrels or somethin'. I got up and ran toward the cliffs, and while I was running they got—started again, and they were firing at me, and I said *God, what is happening? I'm gettin' fired at, I can't, I can't see anybody to shoot back at*... I made it to the cliff, without a scratch. (Landing in the First Wave 2022, 08:33–10:13)[1]

The horror of Larson's tale is not unlike the other macabre war stories that postmodernism puts on display for all to see, whether or not they are ready for it. Part of what makes postmodernism so pivotal is the force with which these scenes of terror are told—the eyelids of the reader are peeled back and made to truly *witness* and understand the treachery of trauma. With this, postmodernists seem to enjoy highlighting the oftentimes strange beauty that seems to accompany these events, a juxtaposition that slams into the reader, jumping off the page or out of the story in such a way as to somehow make the trauma *worse*, while subtly reinforcing the transcendent nature of such enigmatic pulchritude. With Larson's tale, the headless soldier is juxtaposed against the spiritual connection he felt, the divine intervention of God or the man's soul that allowed him to get out of that Omaha berm without so much as a scratch.

Relaying trauma in this manner is recurrent across postmodern works, tracing as far back as John Hersey's proto-postmodern *Hiroshima* (1946) and through to Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1992). The common thread of relating a traumatic story that has unavoidable elements of incredible beauty suggests an inherent relationship between the traumatic and the beautiful, with the postmodern tradition being the necessary vehicle for theorizing this apparent contradiction. Hitherto, the scholarly discussion surrounding the juxtaposition of beauty and trauma separates the two along the divides of the literary ("beauty") and the psychological (trauma, PTSD, etc.). This move, as Griselda Pollock states in "Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma", is apparently authorized by John-Paul Sartre's *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (1940) (Sartre 2004), which discusses (as recapitulated by Pollock) "the faculty of the imagination as the ultimate locus of the ontological freedom in the human subject" (Pollock 2010, p. 833). Sartre posited that it is only through the imagination that one may transcend the Lacanian concept of "the Real"[2] (Pollock 2010, p. 833) and come to terms with traumatic events that "breach the limits of representation" (Pollock 2010, p. 835). Such conceptualization of trauma appears only to negate the possibility of (truly) traumatic art; yet, as Pollock observes, the two—trauma, on the one hand, and art on the other—can coexist. According to Pollock, we need more work to show how "we can engage with [trauma]... through *aesthetic* practices" (Pollock 2010, p. 836), placing the emphasis on trauma *within* literature or other artistic modes.

Pollock's conversation makes the critical pivot of highlighting the value of beauty as well. The opening epigraph from Bracha L. Ettinger asserts that "The beautiful [i]s accessed via artworks in our era... [and] we are living through the massive effects of transitive trauma that different artworks capture and shed light upon" (qtd. in Pollock 2010, p. 831). Ettinger's quote, when used as a prism to exemplify Pollock's argument overall, helps shift the esthetic emphasis towards the Lacanian signifiers, or to representation itself, as opposed to relegating traumatic experience to the imaginary realm—a monumental step forward that shines light upon the beauty that traumatic works so often seek to (subtly) represent.

This is the path that postmodern literature permits and encourages, alongside a corollary urge for interdisciplinary action. As Cathy Caruth states in her *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), "The phenomenon of trauma has seemed to become all-inclusive, but it has done so precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding; if psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma, it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience" (Caruth 1995, p. 4). What Caruth calls for, and what has inspired the methodology within this paper, is an interdisciplinary assessment of the esthetics within available traumatic literature, much of which functions within the topos of postmodern literature, despite not necessarily doing so consciously. The postmodern impulse to use pastiche and asynchronous history demands interdisciplinary action and a wide scope of understanding; its underlying premise is that if we are to shine light on that which is beautiful within the realm of that which is traumatic, we must seek to encompass the multifaceted understandings of those aforementioned fields of study (psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, etc.).

It is equally important to note that the work in this article is not attempting to put forth a historiography of any given field and its understanding of trauma, least of all that of psychiatry, which has already made an appearance and which, as Christa Schönfelder writes, has a history with trauma that is wrapped up in its own "jungle-like complexity" (Schönfelder 2013, p. 27). Referencing Lacan, Sartre, or Freud (by proxy via Caruth) may appear anachronistic, but the hope is to show the tether from their thinking to contemporary theorists, to examine the link that still remains from the traditional thinkers to the modern day scholars. In doing so, we continuously work to close what esteemed psychiatrist and leader in the field of trauma research Bessel van der Kolk called the "repeated gaps and ruptures" (qtd. in Schönfelder 2013, pp. 27–28) found within the history of trauma, permitting a far more cohesive and coherent understanding of trauma and traumatic retellings to take shape.

To be precise, the terms "beautiful" and "beauty" as I use them here and as I understand a discourse grounded in trauma studies to use them, allude to Plotinus's *The Enneads* (270), wherein he writes, "the spirit of Beauty must ever induce. . . wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight" (Plotinus 1952, p. 23). That such a description appears wholly incompatible with the devastating effects of trauma and traumatic occurrences lends credence to the idea that those subjective instances of beauty are Caruthian "symptoms" (Caruth 1995, p. 5) of traumatic witnessing; the seemingly impossible instances of beauty are, it would seem, integral parts of "the link between th[e] inexplicable traumatic void and the nature of historical experience" (Caruth 1995, p. 7). Contrary to the school of thought that would separate beauty from trauma, the depictions of beauty in this understanding are marked by their relationships to nature and serendipity, and they stand out as clear juxtapositions because of the incongruity of their position within largely macabre and gruesome writing. Hersey's *Hiroshima* and O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* are both engrossed in some of the most brutal traumatic experiences imaginable, yet both postmodern (or, in Hersey's case, proto-postmodern) works highlight the presence of beauty. By using Caruth's theorization of trauma as a break in space-time and her theoretical position of the "traumatic witness" (Caruth 1995, *passim*), this essay hopes to answer Hersey's and O'Brien's calls for an examination of trauma and beauty as existing simultaneously, using the tools provided by various disciplines and schemata. It aims to show how favorable such an investigative process can be, not only for a future of trauma studies, but also for a future of postmodernism.

This paper argues that there are elements of such beauty in nearly all traumatic literature, and that these instances of beauty are the embodiment of the Caruthian failure of language and what Bessel van der Kolk and contemporary psychotraumatologist Otto van der Hart have dubbed the gap in "narrative memory" (Barnaby 2012, p. 119). Within postmodern works, instances of the beautiful amidst the traumatic are representations of what van der Kolk and van der Hart describe as the "repetition compulsion" of traumatic recall, a process in which no conscious memory of the traumatic event is available to one's memory, but the mind nonetheless holds onto "a remnant. . . of some part of an actual experience" (Barnaby 2012, p. 120). This "subconscious storehouse" (Barnaby 2012, p. 120) of memory retention, as described by van der Kolk and van der Hart, renders the possibility of creating a narrative nearly impossible, an impossibility not entirely dissimilar to the impossibility of the beautiful, as qualified above, showing up within the thoroughly traumatic.

The trauma discussed within this paper is mostly war trauma, but seeing as postmodernism is expressly nonuniform and always diverse in its purview, the trauma discussed here is not limited to war trauma. In the case of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, which many find to be the defining work of contemporary postmodern American literature, there is no war to speak of, though there is a tremendous deal of trauma to unfold, investigate, and attempt to stomach. Using Wallace's writing here to offer an analysis of terms directly pertaining to beauty and trauma instead of offering an evaluation on one of the many traumatic scenes within *Infinite Jest* will, hopefully, show that trauma theory and its influence are inescapable even when war is not part of a story, and when the discussion is

nearly entirely theoretical. The ubiquitous nature of trauma theory thereby suggests that it is well adjusted for an investigation of postmodernism and, subsequently, all contemporary literature regardless of the status of that literature as being macabre, grotesque, or any other epithet commonly attached to a description of the traumatic and, incidentally, the postmodern.

## 2. Aesthetic Glimpses within John Hersey's Proto-Postmodern *Hiroshima* and Their Implications

Having established a baseline understanding of terms and the theoretical purview that this article maintains, we may begin first with looking at John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. The truthfulness of the gruesome details is part of, if not entirely the point of his work, and investigating the harsh juxtaposition of these details against the surreal-seeming moments of beauty leads us, invariably, to the concept of the Lacanian "Real". To understand how Lacan plays a role in evaluating Hersey's work, we must first acknowledge Hersey's prescient recognition that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was not an affair to be taken lightly, and that the limited information being reported and released by the United States government was disingenuous at best. As discussed by Patrick B. Sharp in his essay "From Yellow Peril to Japanese Wasteland: John Hersey's *Hiroshima*", the United States government was engrossed in its attempt to "control narratives about the atomic bombings" (Sharp 2000, p. 439), seeking to pacify the general populace of United States citizens by propagating a depiction of Japan as "deserving no pity because of 'Pearl Harbor and the Death March on Bataan'" (Sharp 2000, p. 440). What one may notice here is the interesting use of these traumatic events to (hopefully) spark an empathetic response from the public, forcing them to witness the trauma at home while simultaneously demanding that they shut their eyes to the revengeful trauma the U.S. caused overseas. The manipulation of the pathos of trauma innate in this observation was key for Hersey's work, as it is for all investigations of trauma; that is to say, Hersey recognized that trauma is not a selective affair in which one carefully chooses to identify and empathize with one traumatic event, neglecting or justifying another even if that other traumatic event is a "justified" response to an act of violence/a morally reprehensible action. Hersey knew what postmodernists down the line would work incredibly hard to show: that trauma has no national boundary or ideology and cannot be narrativized as such. Thus, his traumatic representation in *Hiroshima* is a voicing of more than just "the wreckage of the city" (Hersey 1989, p. 69) or the "thousands of people" who, in the aftermath of the bombing, had "nobody to help them" (Hersey 1989, p. 48); it is an extension of traumatic witnessing that moves beyond the West and the narrative that only the West deserved pity for its traumatic experiences.

Focusing in on those aforementioned gruesome details, Hersey's work is abundant with imagery that seems more in line with Dante's depiction of Hell than an Earthly, corporeal environment. Post-bombing Hiroshima is described as "four square miles of reddish-brown scar, where nearly everything had been buffeted down and burned", the metropolis outfitted with "range on range of collapsed city blocks" (Hersey 1989, p. 67). As far as the eye could see, the city had been stripped and whittled down to nothing, dwindled and hanging on to its prior architectural glory by mere strings. Hersey describes "naked trees and canted telephone poles; gutted buildings only accentuating the horizontality of everything else", and streets littered with "hundreds of crumpled bicycles, shells of streetcars and automobiles, all halted in mid-motion" (Hersey 1989, p. 67). Reports from statisticians found that "sixty-two thousand out of ninety thousand buildings [had been] destroyed, and six thousand more damaged beyond repair. In the heart of the city, they found only five modern buildings that could be used again without major repairs" (Hersey 1989, p. 81). Of course, the city's infrastructure was not the only casualty induced by the dropping of the atom bomb; the true trauma was left with the denizens living in and around Hiroshima. Those who were within the bomb's range were either permanently scarred or utterly obliterated, many of the former dying soon after the bomb was dropped due to radiation poisoning or complications from their initial injuries sustained during the blast.[3]

The latter was of such a staggering degree that statisticians had difficulty generating a solid death count; they eventually settled on "at least a hundred thousand people" (Hersey 1989, p. 81) having been killed by the bomb. Hersey includes descriptions of corpses being "hauled up out [of factory air-raid shelters] with ropes" (Hersey 1989, p. 54) and of dead bodies filling the few hospitals that were still standing, with "nobody to carry them away" (Hersey 1989, p. 47).

Hersey's description of the hospitals themselves, covered with "dirt, plaster, blood, and vomit" (Hersey 1989, p. 46) and "patients dying by the hundreds" (Hersey 1989, pp. 46–47) is enough to trigger one's olfactory system; imagining the ungodly smell quickly becomes stomach-churning. Hersey records the sentiments of the doctors, who finally reached the point where they told themselves "There is no hope for the heavily wounded. They will die. We can't bother with them" (Hersey 1989, p. 50); he tells of a man "whose burned face was scarcely a face anymore" (Hersey 1989, p. 48); he writes of a voice asking for a drink of water and discovering that the voice belonged to a soldier whose "nightmarish state" included a face that was "wholly burned, [his] eyesockets. . . hollow, the fluid from [his] melted eyes ha[ving] run down [his] cheeks", for "[he] must have had [his] face upturned when the bomb went off" (Hersey 1989, p. 51). The graphic components extend far beyond Larson's—a luxury afforded by long-form narrative as opposed to interview-style question and answer/anecdotal recapitulation—but the harrowing nature of Hersey's tale falls in line with Larson's description of the headless soldier from whom he wanted a match. The beauty of Hersey's tale—the arrival at the cliff without a visible scratch—is in his description on page 69: "Over everything—up through the wreckage of the city, in gutters, along the riverbanks, tangled among tiles and tin roofing, climbing on charred tree trunks—was a blanket of fresh, vivid, lush, optimistic green; the verdancy rose even from the foundations of ruined houses".[4]

The strangely ethereal, inexplicable nature of this line, of this chunk of truth, is a juxtaposition more tragic than inspiring. It is the Foster-Wallacean idea of something "so beautiful that mortal. . . eyes can't take it" (Wallace 2016, p. 529), made even more difficult to comprehend due to the sudden beauty of flowers or verdant green being noteworthy in the first place seeing as they are, or would have been, relatively banal aspects of quotidian life. Greenery and floral growth, while beautiful, are not typically noticed as being overwhelmingly beautiful, in much the same way that arriving at a cliff is not overwhelmingly beautiful, until the context of the surrounding world is brought into view.

The destruction of Hiroshima is rendered evermore gut-wrenching by the beauty of the flowers; the (oxymoronically) soul-crushing optimism that the flowers inspire makes the nihilism-inducing devastation of Hiroshima an order of magnitude more debilitating. Hersey certainly saw that the inclusion of the flowers and tremendous verdancy was not just a matter of relaying a fact about the post-bombing scenery, but a fundamental aspect of the trauma itself—of trauma qua trauma. The first, rather simple emotional conclusion that readers may come to after being bombarded with traumatic imagery and then blindsided by floral/vegetative beauty is a sense of survivor's guilt. For some of the Japanese that Hersey writes about, the survivor's guilt is born from national pride, as Mr. Tanimoto laments in a letter years later: "I lost my home, my family, and at last my-self bitterly injured. . . I never heard any one cried [*sic*] in disorder, even though they suffered in great agony. They died in silence, with no grudge, setting their teeth to bear it. All for the country!" (Hersey 1989, pp. 87–88). The priests of the novitiate recalled a man who said, "If there is a real air raid here in Hiroshima, I want to die with our country" (Hersey 1989, pp. 55–56), and how, when Hiroshima was finally bombed, "the priests concluded that [he] had run back to immolate himself in the flames. They never saw him again" (Hersey 1989, p. 56), quite literally choosing a death by fire over the guilt of living through the events of Hiroshima, of having to be one of the living who "wonder why they lived when so many others died" (Hersey 1989, p. 2).

To see the foliage and verdure is to be forced to acknowledge the beauty of life, to have the human inclination to compare it to the tragedy that one has lived through. The tragedy

is enhanced by the beauty's tease—for how can something so wonderful come about from something so terrible? The trauma/beauty duality is almost theodicean, echoing the question that Miss Sasaki puts before Father Kleinsorge: "If your God is so good and kind, how can he let people suffer like this?" (Hersey 1989, p. 83). But even outside of those who saw the traumatic incident and subsequently felt the impossibility of the beautiful, the duality of something so beautiful resulting from something so horrible and the inconceivability of such is not dissimilar to what Caruth has called "the witnessing. . . of *impossibility*" (Caruth 1995, p. 10). The question of how one can listen to what is impossible, to "the 'collapse of witnessing'" (Caruth 1995, p. 10), addresses the failure of the listener or reader of the traumatic event to fully *hear* the testimony of the one reciting the trauma. Ergo, when confronted with the flowers or the scratchless body approaching the cliffside, those in the position of listener need not balk at the serendipitous or fantastically contrasting nature of the beautiful moment embedded in the witness's tale; they must instead try to "listen to the crisis of a trauma. . . not only listen for the event, but. . . hear in the testimony the survivor's *departure* from it" (Caruth 1995, p. 10, italics mine). Hersey was trying to get his audience to hear then just as much as history demands we hear now, particularly with regard to the beautiful/transcendent-to-the-point-of-mystical elements that traumatic stories seem, somehow, to contain. Our failure as modern readers to understand and recognize "the crisis of truth" (Caruth 1995, p. 6) is, to be blunt, no longer excusable.

There is, however, a problem with trying to make an audience hear the traumatic retellings that Hersey was focused on. As outlined in Dominick LaCapra's "Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?", with traumatic memory "a simple postulation does not suffice to distinguish between past and present", as limitations and breaches in memory can lead to "a reliving of trauma that collapses the past into the present" (LaCapra 2016, p. 377). Due to the complexity inherent in a formulation of the traumatic memory as requiring more than a simple postulation or assertion in order to be deemed accurate, traumatic retelling has "become a concern in historiography, even with respect to events and processes in which its role should be apparent" (LaCapra 2016, p. 377). Questioning the facts of the traumatic witness's story can quickly spiral into an understanding of trauma as "blank unreadability, the unsymbolizable Lacanian 'real'," (LaCapra 2016, p. 378), which, while interesting to the postmodernist, is likely not beneficial when one is attempting to relate, without bias, the effects of a city being hit with a nuclear bomb, as Hersey was. Adding elements of beauty into the fray does not seem to help in this attempt either, only aggravating the sense that the story being related by Hersey and the survivors is too far apart from reality to be anything sensible, or perhaps even reaching into the realm of what LaCapra describes as "the sublime object of endless melancholia and impossible mourning" (LaCapra 2016, p. 378).

Even if one is to see the beautiful in Hersey's report as unproblematic in this sense, the possibility remains that one will find, as Colin Davis wrote in his *Traces of War: Interpreting Ethics and Trauma in Twentieth-Century French Writing*, that "Talking of the other's trauma is an ethical minefield" (Davis 2018, p. 12). Part of the ethical difficulty innate in the telling, documentation, and further retelling of trauma is the shared weight of the trauma. As psychiatrist Dori Laub wrote in her *Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening* (1992), "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (Laub 1992, p. 57). Thinkers like Davis, concerned with the ethical implications of traumatic transmission from witness to listener, ultimately conclude that "We cannot possess our own stories, and *a fortiori* we cannot claim to possess the stories of others. And yet, as critics. . . students and readers, we are bound to attempt to do precisely that" (Davis 2018, p. 13). In trying to appropriately bear witness to Hersey's work and the stories therein, it would seem that several intellectual bulwarks need to be taken into account: first, it is a set of stories told via proxy, in which the trauma is being repackaged by Hersey, filtered through Hersey's own understanding of reality; second, that Hersey cannot claim these stories, and that, if Davis's position is to be maintained, none of the traumatic witnesses can either; and last, that the

"intellectual and ethical dangers" (Davis 2018, p. 13) of committing to what LaCapra labels a "postulation" about past and present, vis-à-vis a traumatic incident, is an area that is precarious at best and may rapidly slip into ethical uncertainty.

All of this is particularly relevant when considering Hersey's work, as the work is a proto-postmodern piece that tries to report the truth in as clear a way as possible. It is far simpler to dismiss the ethical concerns of fictitious works, but a report of the magnitude and historical significance of Hersey's deserves special attention when considering the ethical implications of traumatic retelling, as do any real-life examples of traumatic witnessing and retelling. That there is a menagerie of strangely calming, naturalistic or transcendentalist moments stochastically sprinkled throughout his report is enigmatic, beautiful, and meant to be attention-grabbing, but it is also meant to be a representation of what is true, real, and belongs in any historical account of the aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. For that reason, to point out just these elements of beauty is, certainly, to miss the greater picture in much the same way that skipping over them entirely misses it too, but for the dubious to outright deny the possibility of their existence as merely an attempted expression of the Lacanian "Real", as a tentative lapse into something akin to "the sublime object of endless melancholia" is to assume as authoritative a position over another's traumatic story as any position striving to wield narrative power could. As Sartre suggested, one must continuously work within the imaginative sphere in order to transcend the "Real" and its "limits of representation", thereby moving towards a level of "ontological freedom" that allows for traumatic retellings to be understood with a keener sense of the ethical entrapments of affirming or denying actual accounts of trauma.

We are well beyond an interpretation of Hersey's work as just being a playfully written narrative-journalism report where the fanciful imagery of greenery is deemed either a literary trope of hopefulness or a callback to home; instead, we can see it for what it is, a historical moment made "inaccessible" to our formulation of reality (Caruth 1995, p. 8), a glimpse at the "deeply disturbing insight into the enigmatic relation between trauma and survival" (Caruth 1995, p. 9), an element of traumatic experience that is contradictory to trauma and yet ever apparent in it, a beauty so shocking, so indelibly awe-inspiring, that mortal eyes can hardly bear it. Only through Hersey's proto-postmodernism, with its elements of the postmodern-tradition-to-come such as genre-blending pastiche and free-form gestalt, could this self-evident contradiction between trauma and beauty be explored in detail while being conducted in what is, ultimately, a journalistic effort.

## 3. Tim O'Brien's *the Things They Carried* and His Construction of the Almost Beautiful

Just the same way that we read Hersey with the hopes of extending our capacity to listen and hear beyond what has come to be expected of us as readers/listeners, so too do we take on this responsibility when hearing Jake Larson's testimony. Larson's mish-mash of answers to various questions about his time before and during World War II (the timeline of which is imperfect and appears to fall inherently into the tradition of postmodern non-linear timelines) ends with another story, this one about his first night after D-Day. While digging his foxhole next to fellow soldier Maddison Rich, Larson, rather luckily, found some dry litter on the ground—perfect insulation to protect from the wet sand that the men were digging their foxholes into. Right when he settled in, word came that he was needed by higher command, so he marched to the command post. The military told him then that he was the newly crowned night-shift security man on a recently created supply line. Larson headed back and told Rich about his new appointment, offering Rich the foxhole with the litter. Rich, already cozy in his own foxhole, was content with just placing his M1 Garand in Larson's foxhole. Larson went out to begin his shift, and at midnight saw a German plane flying overhead—a spy plane, trying to obtain photographs of the American position. Anti-air artillery began firing, and after a while Larson claims a gap in his memory. His story picks back up, finally, at the end of his night shift, at 7:30 the following morning:

> At 7:30 they says *You're off, Jake*. So I went to my foxhole, and here Maddison Rich was getting up from his, and he reached down and picked up his rifle off of

> my litter and it broke in two. A piece of shrapnel from our guns shooting at that reconnaissance plane. . . a piece of our shrapnel. . . came down and hit that rifle and broke that rifle in two. There is a god. There is a god. (Landing in the First Wave 2022, 13:45–14:30)

Such serendipitous moments of beauty, where one is brought to a state of feeling metaphysically in tune with their perception of a creator or supreme being, taking place amid unimaginable trauma and horror are precisely where Tim O'Brien's focus was in his *The Things They Carried*. These glimpses of light in the midst of trauma harken back to the question of the Hiroshima survivors, a sort of "why me?" that twists the theodicean question into "How can a God so good *to me* let such bad things happen to others?" O'Brien recalls how his own comrade in arms, Henry Dobbins, determined he could not become a minister due to his inability to "'explain some hard stuff, like why people die, or why God invented pneumonia and all that'" (O'Brien 2009, p. 115), the theodicean conundrum especially apposite given the circumstances[5]. But, as O'Brien explains, "The war wasn't all terror and violence. Sometimes things could almost get sweet" (O'Brien 2009, p. 30). Of course, his "beautiful" war stories are nothing like Hersey's reports of verdant fields covering Hiroshima. O'Brien recalls the time that Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley were playing hot-potato with smoke grenades, prefacing the story a few paragraphs before with "A true war story is never moral. . . If a story seems moral, do not believe it" (O'Brien 2009, p. 65). He goes on to write, "They were just goofing. There was a noise, I supposed, which must've been the detonator, so I glanced behind me and watched Lemon step from the shade into the bright sunlight. His face was brown and shining. A handsome kid, really. Sharp gray eyes, lean and narrow-waisted, and when he died it was *almost beautiful*" (O'Brien 2009, p. 67, italics mine). O'Brien draws an important distinction here: that within the trauma of war, there may never be the beautiful, there may only be the "almost beautiful", and even that, O'Brien figures, is wholly without moral or meaning. That you see the green growing over Hiroshima, that you arrive to the cliff unharmed, that the shrapnel falls into the very foxhole that you planned to sleep in before the last-minute change in plans, is all, to O'Brien, almost beautiful, almost containing a moral, almost a divine intervention—but only ever almost.

One may question if O'Brien's "beautiful" is congruent with Plotinus's "beautiful", for O'Brien is, after all, talking about the image of a mangled young man being blown apart by a remote-detonated bomb. The answer seems to come in Bowker's letter to O'Brien, in which Bowker "described the problem of finding a meaningful use for his life after the war" (O'Brien 2009, p. 149). Bowker relates that "nothing real or tangible [was] at stake, certainly not the stakes of a war" (O'Brien 2009, p. 149), and this seems to function as an impetus for the almost beautiful. What can almost be described as beautiful is not just Lemon's ephebic figure, but that *he* was the one who was blown apart, not the one relating the story. What is almost beautiful for anyone who survives a war is that they survived with everything at stake, they made it through when they could have died. O'Brien could just as easily have been playing hot-potato with the smoke grenades and/or been standing where Lemon was when the bomb went off, but he was not, and there is something almost beautiful, almost serendipitous, almost otherworldly about his having survived. Caruth touches on this premise in her first chapter of *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013) when she discusses Freud's ideas on death/eschatology and the consciousness of life. Caruth writes, "Freud's analysis. . . attempts to explain the significance and surprise of the traumatic encounter with death in terms of a new relation between consciousness and life" (Caruth 2013, p. 2). The importance between life and death is not made exclusive to one's life being threatened either, as Caruth explains, "What causes trauma, then, is an encounter that is not directly perceived as a threat to the life of the organism but that occurs, rather, as a break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth 2013, p. 2).

When O'Brien tries to verbalize the experience of witnessing Lemon's death he writes, "When a guy dies. . . you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again" (O'Brien 2009, p. 68) but then contradicts his own story, detailing Lemon's death

in what certainly amounts to more than just a moment's worth of information, describing "the way the sunlight came around [Lemon] and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms" (O'Brien 2009, p. 67). Part of the beautiful/almost beautiful lies in this breakdown of space-time, the apparent failure of the metaphysical fundamentals. One can draw a similarity to how easy it is to "lose track of space and time" when they stand in a museum, gazing at wondrous art-exhibits. Such a moment may be called beautiful, but in O'Brien's case, the same feeling of time distortion is only obliquely akin to beauty.

O'Brien's narrative tone is always careful, though, always teetering on the edge of trepidation when making such claims about beauty (hence the "almost" attached to it like a prefix) or telling/retelling his war stories. When Dobbins—the "invulnerable[,] [n]ever wounded, never a scratch" (O'Brien 2009, p. 112)—tripped a bouncing betty that "failed to detonate" (O'Brien 2009, p. 112), there is no claim of beauty. It is not even called miraculous when such a tale most certainly is. Instead, O'Brien finds it to be the foundation of "superstition" (O'Brien 2009, p. 112) among those who saw it, a "mystery" (O'Brien 2009, p. 112) that his platoon could not solve. Where Larson points to the sky crediting the Almighty when recalling these too-good-to-be-true moments, O'Brien finds it to be coincidental, little more than the arbitrary mechanics of war. O'Brien believes that all true war stories are too good to be true, they are all "jumbled" (O'Brien 2009, p. 68) and "surreal" (O'Brien 2009, p. 68), simply relations and representations of "the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*" (O'Brien 2009, p. 68) as distinct from what it objectively *was*. His advice is terse: "In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical" (O'Brien 2009, p. 68). The advice echoes a familiar Caruthian tone, though it arrives at a vastly different conclusion. Where Caruth understands the "gaps of traumatic experience" (Caruth 1995, p. 4) as a result of the "*distortion* of the [traumatic] event" (Caruth 1995, p. 4), she does not go so far as to make a categorical statement about the factual (or, nonfactual) standing of the related incident. Instead, as discussed previously, she emphasizes the need to "listen" such that "the history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can take place" (Caruth 2009, p. 11).

O'Brien seems to oscillate on this point. On the one hand, to him and the men in his platoon the truthfulness of the story was just as crucial as the witnessing; despite how influenced the story's recapitulation is by "the spell of memory and imagination" (O'Brien 2009, p. 232), the truth of the tale is the real meat and potatoes. When Rat Kiley tells his story about the sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong (O'Brien 2009, p. 85, (q.v.)), Henry Dobbins reprimands him for "clutter[ing] it up with [his] own half-baked commentary" (O'Brien 2009, p. 101), thereby "break[ing] the spell" and "destroy[ing] the magic" (O'Brien 2009, p. 101) of the story by tagging on amendments of questionable veracity. On the other hand, O'Brien seems to acknowledge that arriving at the real truth is an impossibility for those telling war stories. O'Brien recalls Azar's lines: "'What's real?' he said. 'Eight months in fantasyland, it tends to blur the line. Honest to God, I sometimes can't remember what real *is*'" (O'Brien 2009, p. 194). His own time in "fantasyland" caused O'Brien to arrive at the baffling, antinomic conclusion about truth: "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth"[6] (O'Brien 2009, p. 171). In this way, he can answer his daughter's question[7] about whether he killed anybody with "'Of course not'" or "honestly, 'Yes'" (O'Brien 2009, p. 172) as with any other question about the war.

To relay back to Caruth, O'Brien's duality of yes and no being conflated into the formless, self-contradictory "story-truth" is the zenith of distortion and the crisis of truth. The fullest attention of the listener is demanded by the witness as the story-truth tiptoes towards the traumatic departure, and that attention needs to be maintained as it crosses the bounds of comprehensibility and into the beautiful, the almost beautiful, and the outright harrowingly traumatic. O'Brien's readers are made to "*feel* the truth" of the stories (O'Brien 2009, p. 85), to understand not just the facts but the emotional tempest that overshadows those facts. The resulting work in *The Things They Carried* is not just a retelling of the trauma of the war in Vietnam but a replication of that trauma. It stands as a work which staggers

readers, slicing their certainty at key moments, tearing apart their preconceived notions about truth and stories in a postmodern package that many forget is even fiction. It even anticipates the response that readers will have to it: the simple, monosyllabic "Oh" (O'Brien 2009, p. 74).

There is also a discussion to be had about O'Brien making this a work of autofiction. Naturally, when most people think of postmodern literature, they think of fiction works, but, as the analysis of pastiche makes clear, this is not a prerequisite for a postmodern piece. O'Brien's work is hard to see as fictitious because of its concern with truth and its narrator being called Tim O'Brien. It takes more of a reporter-telling-a-news-story schema, and yet it outright admits to its own falsification: "Beginning to end... it's all made up. Every goddamn detail... None of it happened. None of it" (O'Brien 2009, p. 81). This can blindside a reader, but really it should not come as a surprise. The title page says, "A work of fiction by Tim O'Brien", and yet the perception that somehow it must be true and real becomes an obstacle that the reader has to climb over. The contradictions, the story-truths, the "True war story never [being] about war" (O'Brien 2009, p. 81) seem to have meanings that transcend fiction and genre; these elements have real effects on the reader, making them wince and feel the book on a visceral level, and yet it is just autofiction. It is necessarily fiction; it is a Caruthian departure from reality in which Yes and No can both be the fundamentally correct answer. One may begin to question if all trauma is necessarily fiction, thereby harkening back to the prior conversation regarding LaCapra's comment about trauma's "blank unreadability", concluding that the answer is perhaps meaningless; for whether the work/story is fictitious, the effect of the work is real. Where Hersey's narrative contains the truth to negate a false-perception being peddled by an incredibly powerful government, O'Brien's narrative seeks to shake up the very notion of perception—of what it means to understand what perception is. The astounding nature of the beautiful, the miraculous, and the serendipitous is thus placed in O'Brien's work of fiction not only to make the horrible even (somehow) worse and make we, the readers, feel the emotional gravity of the traumatic events more than we would have without them, but also as a sort of yin and yang, a meta reminder that within fiction there is truth and vice versa, just as within trauma there is beauty.

## 4. David Foster Wallace's Discussion of Loss-Trauma in *Infinite Jest*, and How It Reinforces Traumatic Retelling in the Style of the Postmodern Testimonial

Without question, O'Brien's concept of the almost beautiful and his creation of a work that is somehow clandestinely fiction allows for a pushing of boundaries, particularly when it comes to locating (or placing) the exact site of trauma and further seeing if this site can coexist, at the same moment and place, with a site of beauty. It was precisely this experiment that was run some years later by David Foster Wallace in his postmodern magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996), wherein the titular quote appeared. An investigation of this quote may prove helpful in developing a deeper cognizance of the concept of beauty as postmodern writers use it, while also acting as a launchpad for a general discussion of the place of fiction narratives in the (re)telling of the traumatic. The idea of something being "so beautiful that mortal... eyes can't take it" (Wallace 2016, p. 529) is, in Wallace's work, conceptualized in the most literal sense; it functions within the framework of *L'Odalisque de Sainte Thérèse*, a woman so beautiful that "[w]hoever looks at her turns into a diamond or gem" (Wallace 2016, p. 529). She is a spin on Medusa that, although stemming from the superabundance of beauty of the Odalisque instead of the terrifying nature of Medusa, leads to the same end for the one who looks. Granted, people are turned into something beautiful instead of a rock, but the connotation is the same: those who gaze are killed. The site (or sight) of the beauty is therefore conflated with the site of the traumatic: the two act in conjuncture, and it becomes difficult, if impossible, to determine which precedes the other and whether the final form of those lost in the gaze is theoretically the fault of the beautiful or of the traumatic. This concept may be further explored by looking at the description of *The Medusa v the Odalisque* (endnote 24 in Wallace 2016 (q.v.)), a movie (in

Wallace's fictional universe) which showcases the two mythical beings fighting before a live audience, all of whom, eventually, "turn to stone" (Wallace 2016, p. 988). This intersection of beauty and trauma sets the stage for an extended conversation regarding the value of connotations and denotations; for if one is to focus on the denotation and posit, for example, that it is better to be turned into a gem or diamond instead of a stone (in other words, better to be killed by the Odalisque than by Medusa), Wallace counters with an explication on anhedonia as a result of loss-trauma, seeing as perhaps the largest loss-trauma is where one loses their capacity to enjoy life (or loses their life itself) for the sake of gazing. On the idea of anhedonia Wallace writes, "It's a kind of spiritual torpor in which one loses the ability to feel pleasure of attachment to things formerly important. . . a kind of spiritual novocaine. . . T[erms] have, as it were, denotation but not connotation. . . Everything becomes the outline of the thing. Objects become schemata" (Wallace 2016, pp. 692–93).

To focus on the denotation, Wallace seems to suggest, is to miss the point, to submit to the spiritual torpor of a Sartre-esque, object qua object evaluation[8] in which meaning is sucked out. As such, when the beauty is more than the mortal eye can take, it is the connotation that demands attention, and to understand this is crucial in the position of listening to the traumatic witness. When Larson describes his cliffs, the beauty is almost entirely metaphysical: the cliffs are some sort of telos for him, a place of safety that indicated a successful aversion of the Nazi gunfire, a delaying of Death's call to him. Saying that a man went to a rocky ledge while being shot at certainly denotes the story that Larson tells but nullifies the metaphysical aspect that it entails. Choosing instead to engage with the connotation, as Wallace's work promotes, is to capture Larson's trauma, hear his testimony, understand the serendipitous aspects of his stories, and feel the beauty penetrating well beyond the threshold of what we as people can typically handle.

Wallace's insistence on the connotation as the locus of meaning and importance when listening to a traumatic retelling is, in large part, in line with what Schönfelder posited in her *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction* (2013), wherein she pulls a quote from Laurie Vickroy: "'literary and imaginative approaches [to trauma] provide a necessary supplement to historical and psychological studies'" (qtd. in Schönfelder 2013, p. 29). Wallace's (perhaps unintentional) breakdown of the effects of the loss-trauma provide a sort of postmodern testimonial that is, as Schönfelder expresses, impactful "precisely because [it] operate[s] in an imaginary and textual realm" (Schönfelder 2013, p. 30). Wallace is a paragon of this mechanism of relaying trauma and traumatic concepts, being able to convey traumatic incidents with unrelenting assiduity throughout his work and then bounce, as he does in the aforementioned scene, into a theoretical breakdown of the trauma induced by anhedonia, a concept not far from the LaCaprian "object of endless melancholia" (*supra*). That contemporary research in the field of psychotraumatology has found anhedonia and its correlating symptoms to be "systematically observed in individuals with posttraumatic stress disorder" (Frewen et al. 2012, p. 1) suggests further still that if trauma is to be considered inaccessible via narrativization (following the Caruthian logos of narrativized trauma being a distortion of the truth), then there is no better avenue to relay trauma and traumatic abstractions than that of fiction, as we have seen Wallace demonstrate with his elucidation of the anhedonic and the myriad of other traumatic depictions found in his work that are not touched on here.

Perhaps the biggest problem that Wallace's (and, ostensibly, O'Brien's) work manages to avoid is the nullification of narrative that some trauma theorists argue is an ineluctable pitfall in the act of traumatic retelling. Championed by Caruth, the concept is that "The danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much" (qtd. in Schönfelder 2013, p. 31), and thus, the narrativization of trauma "is likely to distort the 'truth' of trauma and weaken its impact" (Schönfelder 2013, p. 31). This catch-22 of sorts is curtailed entirely by the work being presented as fiction; as already being a step removed from the "truth" and attempting to instead convey some distorted version of the truth. That Wallace or any other's writing

is relatable and realistic is, by and large, merely an added bonus. The true benefit of these fiction pieces seems to be that they do not have to withstand the scrutiny of historians or objective-truth based researchers; they are free to narrativize in any way they please. The autonomy immanent to fiction works in conjunction with the difficulty of "'anti-narrative tension at the core of trauma'" (qtd. in Schönfelder 2013, p. 30) and the "(un)narratability and (in)comprehensibility of trauma" (Schönfelder 2013, p. 30), with pastiche, the macabre, the shock-value, and the breakdown of space-time—elements so commonly attributed to the postmodern tradition—seeming the most organic manner of writing for any author concerned with the traumatic.

In this same vein, the beauty of the postmodernists transcends belletrism. It may be easy, perhaps, to consider the beauty of the words with Hersey, whose prose is effortlessly mellifluous and decisively so—as discussed above, the attention commanded by Hersey's prose was part and parcel of his work towards subverting the narrative of the Yellow Peril—but to be caught up in the beauty of the letters is to fail to see the larger picture being painted by Hersey. The juxtaposition of his verdant floral imagery against the other *Inferno*-type descriptions of Hiroshima is multifarious, calling attention to his authorial prowess, relaying the beauty of nature as opposed to the nature of beauty (for he does not even try to explain the otherworldly vegetative growth), and relating details that can make readers recoil with empathy when they read them. To be stuck in the denotation is to read Hersey's words without the springing of an emotional connection for the people of Hiroshima, to break it down to matter being destroyed by matter in a way that, really, does not matter. Hersey's work inspires a reading that stretches beyond the Wallacean understanding of anhedonia: it curates a lurid visualization of a foreign land, bogged down by destruction and surreally accented by beauty, so sour that any bits of sweetness seem, more than anything, to simply not belong there. Wallace's verbiage for this understanding and empathy from readers is "Identification"[9] (Wallace 2016, *passim*), and when one succumbs to the spiritual torpor of anhedonia and misses the beauty, they are "in the lingo of Boston AA, Unable To Identify" (Wallace 2016, p. 693), unable to act as the Caruthian witness, unable to see the beauty of the connotation as opposed to the functional beauty of the denotation, if they even find such a denotation to be beautiful in the first place.

All of this to say, what is so beautiful that mortal eyes cannot bear it apropos of Hersey's *Hiroshima* is more than just his wordplay and rhetorical choices—they are important but not everything. Rather, it is his subtle yet persistent invocations of the connotative, his push at the reader to read between the lines and attempt to empathize, to "Identify", to open the eyes of the literary scholar to something more than just the words. It is not an extended metaphor in which the words are the vehicle and the transfiguration/heightened emotional connection is the tenor—it is more an invitation to feel, to stare into the emotional landscape that his description of the destruction invokes, and to develop a level of interconnection that far surpasses national boundaries, contrasting ideologies, and battles of attrition and Earth-scorching. Such feeling and empathetic witnessing did seem to come to fruition too with Americans finally becoming aware of the narrativization surrounding Japan that the United States government was force-feeding them, though perhaps a conscious awareness of this, or the role that beauty necessarily played in it, has been omitted from the conversation by denotation-focused historiographies.

Embedded within this conversation is the conception of nature as a facet of beauty. Nature is pervasive throughout all of the postmodern works tackled within this essay, and in postmodern pieces in general, and this is perhaps due to the synchronicity/conflation (or association) of beauty with nature. The beauty/nature relationship—a sort of yin and yang in which both contain pieces of the other within themselves but, notably, are not oppositional as any sort of black-white, binary entities—is something that is intuitively recognized.[10] This seems to further complicate the distinction between denotation and connotation, as any denotation would be considered beautiful if nature necessarily contains beauty. Thus, when Larson describes his cliffs, the denotation is almost violently blunt, anti-belletristic, and uninspired, but it would nevertheless still be beautiful because it is

a description of nature. This, however, is an idea that is difficult to square in the face of O'Brien's work, where nature is reduced to its ugliest state; see, for example, the "shit field" (O'Brien 2009, *passim*) that consumes Kiowa's body.

When the men finally find Kiowa's body "under two feet of water" (O'Brien 2009, p. 166) and they pull him out of the Earth, they reclaim him from nature's grip. O'Brien writes, "There was a feeling of awe. . . they took hold of the legs and pulled up hard, then pulled again, and after a moment Kiowa came sliding to the surface. A piece of his shoulder was missing. . . He was covered with bluish green mud. 'Well,' Henry Dobbins said, 'it could be worse,' and Dave Jensen said, 'How, man? Tell me *how*'" (O'Brien 2009, p. 167). Kiowa's return to nature was not beautiful in denotation or connotation, it was expressly *un*beautified and a jaw-dropping moment to read, never mind bear witness to. Nature is stripped of any poetic aspect and there are no rhetorical devices shielding readers from O'Brien's tale; it is simply the traumatic moment, and, like Jensen, one wonders how it could possibly be any worse. It is important to remember that this perversion of nature is, of course, O'Brien pushing boundaries; the nature/beauty duality is a familiar, comfortable concept for many readers, and O'Brien knew this. To introduce absolute ugliness into the commonly picturesque depiction of nature *was* the device he used, a flipping of the expected pathos on its head. What is pivotal, here, are the Foster-Wallacean ideas outlined above. The Odalisque as astounding beauty and the Medusa as horrific ugliness leading to the same end of being killed and turned into some Earthly stone offer a parallel understanding to O'Brien's writing: whether nature is beautiful or ugly, bound by its denotations and connotations, it is or can be a catalyst for traumatic witnessing. The heart-stopping beauty of Hersey's greenery and the grotesque brutality of O'Brien's shit field stunt the reader in precisely the same way. Both descriptions demand attention; they highlight the traumatic incidents and place readers in the shoes of people they never knew in situations that they (the reader) could never imagine. The descriptions of nature are transformative in that they force readers' eyes open and then keep them open—to witness is no longer optional, it is mandated. Whether it is or is not beautiful, it becomes almost too much to handle, encompassing and then breaking down meaning and assigned meaning and the beauty of the letters, altogether being almost too much for mortal eyes to take.

## 5. An Inconclusive Conclusion

As with all discussions of trauma, those given to objectivity and historical hard truths are, likely, dissatisfied. The outright fiction of O'Brien's work can be disregarded as just stories, and the tales reported by John Hersey can be chalked up as misremembered, the narrators unreliable because of their trauma. The beauty within these stories can be brushed aside as wrong, impossible, or meaningless instances, simply coincidental moments that are neither miracles nor representative of divinity, perhaps not even beautiful or almost beautiful at all. But such an interpretation—or, rather, devaluation—of the stories would seem to be missing the point. That beauty is as real as trauma is self-evident, and the two are not mutually exclusive despite how fantastic it is when they appear next to one another. Many writers have tried to bring to light the existence of beauty within trauma and the proximity that the two paradoxically maintain, gravitating towards the techniques engendered by postmodernism in order to do so, regardless of their having a conscious awareness of this proclivity. Through the blending afforded by the style of pastiche and the collapse of time and space that synchronic history strives for, the postmodern tradition sets the playing field for writers who want to talk about trauma; then war and its effects take the field, granting these writers more than enough material to work with.

Of course, as embodied through the discussion of David Foster Wallace and his work in *Infinite Jest*, one does not need to limit their focus when discussing trauma, least of all, it would seem, when the discussion incorporates fragments of the beautiful within the traumatic. Trauma theory is a dynamic and far reaching field, proving to be not just poignant but ubiquitous, applicable even when the writing on hand is densely theoretical, notional, or slipping into the abstruse. Much the same can be said apropos of fiction writing

itself, which perhaps calls all the more clearly for a trauma theorist's investigative process and which presents a terrain that is truly capable of hosting the sundry complexities of any traumatic (re)telling. With this, a conversation about the postmodern tradition most naturally occurs, as the very problems facing/surrounding traumatic retellings, as outlined above, are some of the most pivotal and fundamental aspects of postmodern writing; ergo, to commit to a traumatic retelling is almost invariably to commit to a postmodern methodology, whether or not one is conscious of this commitment.

War and the trauma it induces need to continue to be talked about, and those traumatic experiences are neither omissible nor to be pushed aside as spectacle. The importance of war stories, be them journalistic reports, anecdotes recited during interviews, or retellings that are labeled as fiction but may somehow also be nonfiction, is to set the listener into a position where they are hearing a story that is "'outside the range of usual human experience'" (Caruth 1995, p. 1). In this way, the impossibility of the listener's goal (fully understanding the witness/the one telling the story) coincides with the impossibility of the witness's goal (telling a fully true, objective, verifiably factual precis of the traumatic event). The entirety of this dynamic—the incongruousness of reader/listener and speaker/witness—appears to deny all preconceived notions of reading and literary comprehension, breaking down not just the barriers of what is considered reasonable in a literary/historiographical sense, but also in determining what truth is, what it means, and how to navigate a landscape in which "truth" is shaky at best. The result is a nearly tragic, mind-numbing sensation that comprises both extreme confusion and total empathy, and it is almost, in a word, beautiful.

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## Notes

1 The simple innocence of the *Hey, buddy* line seems to have a similitude to modernist John Dos Passos's writing in his epic *U.S.A.* trilogy, with his soldier interrupting the narrative voice: "*Say feller tell me how I can get back to my outfit*", later asking "*Say buddy cant you tell me how I can get back to my outfit?*" and finally letting out "*Say soldier for chrissake cant you tell me how I can get back to my outfit?*" (Lauter et al. 2014, pp. 2348–49).

2 Per Lacan: "The real has to be sought beyond the dream—in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack of representation of which there is only one representative" (Lacan 1978, p. 45). Pollock's own interpretation is that "the Real. . . cannot be known or represented, being prior to and beyond signification" (Pollock 2010, p. 833, and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (q.v.) for Lacan's work on signifiers/the signified).

3 "'All these bomb people die—you'll see. They go along for a couple of weeks and then they die'" (Hersey 1989, p. 74), among myriad of other heartbreaking lines with regard to radiation poisoning, infections, and other slow, after-effect predicated deaths. (For more see Hinnershitz's article, Hinnershitz 2021).

4 Back to Dos Passos in *U.S.A.*, the floral imagery is a little different but hits the reader in much the same fashion as this line does. Talking about a soldier so destroyed by the war, so unrecognizable (his "brains oozed out of [his] cracked skull and were licked up by the trenchrats" (Lauter et al. 2014, p. 2349), that he was buried alongside the other John Does in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Dos Passos finishes with the following lines: "and thought how beautiful sad Old Glory God's Country it was to have the bugler play taps and the three volleys made their ears ring. . . All the Washingtonians brought flowers. Woodrow Wilson brought a bouquet of poppies" (Lauter et al. 2014, p. 2350).The floral imagery here is more symbolic, with poppies being a *memento mori* token/talisman for (deceased) soldiers. (For more on poppy symbolism see Arlington VA's article "The Significance of Poppies for Remembrance 2024").

5 Note that the U.S. government reports "58,220 in-theater deaths" per the Vietnam Conflict Extract Data File (as of 29 April 2008 ("Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics 2022")). The Defense Casualty Analysis System reports another "153,303" wounded, requiring hospitalization but not resulting in death (U.S. Military Casualties 2024). Another 150,375 were wounded but required no hospital care (HQ CP Forward Observer 1997). The sum total of Americans sent to fight in Vietnam is 2.7 million—thus making the odds of being a casualty (injured or killed) roughly one in ten. All of this to say, thinking about death, eschatology, or why God would let this happen was a rather understandable result.

[6] O'Brien seems to formulate a "story-truth" as something that exists only within the confines of the story itself, not necessitating an accurate depiction of reality outside of the tale. In this way, truth is whatever the teller of the story says it is. "Happening-truth" depends on outside reality, referring to what actually occurred instead of a recapitulated and possibly fabricated version of it.

[7] His "daughter" being a part of the fantasy and only "real" in the story-truth sense.

[8] *Being and Nothingness* (q.v.). Sartre's work focused on strict denotation: a table is a wooden object with a long flat surface held horizontally by four vertical pieces of wood in all four corners. That you would use the table for meals, etc., is, to Sartre, beyond the point—merely connotative. Wallace appears to argue that it is connotation that drives us, that creates meaning and gets us out of any spiritual torpor/psycho-somatic or -spiritual troubles we may be experiencing. (Sartre 1966).

[9] As Wallace writes rather simply, "*Identify* means empathize" (Wallace 2016, p. 345), at least when used in his Boston Alcoholics Anonymous groups.

[10] My purpose here is not to confirm or deny the veracity of this relationship. If one wishes to argue against the beauty of nature or state that the two are, in fact, mutually exclusive, then the suggestion is to skip this section.

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