The War as The Other
— A Levinasian Reading of Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried" —

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Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried" (1990), a collection of interlinked short stories that can be read like a novel, is one of the most celebrated contemporary writings on the topic of the Vietnam war (and the war in general) for a few reasons. Stepping away from O'Brien's early prose, namely his first novel "If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home" (1973), which was a prime example of a realistic war novel, the collection blurs the line between truth and fiction, or, to borrow a quote from a story on the collection, "story-truth" and "happening-truth," positioning itself in a genre that some critics call "magical realism" (Smith 20-23). Not only that, but it does this in a self-conscious, metafictional way, alternating short stories about war experience with stories that read as "follow-up," be it the narrator's (for the sake of clarity, even though the collection apparently drew on O'Brien' own experience in Vietnam, we are going to distinguish O'Brien as an author from the narrator in stories) reflection on the art of writing ("How To Tell a Good War Story," "Good Form," "The Lives of The Dead") or revisiting main characters or scenes postwar ("Love," "Speaking of Courage," "Field Trip"). It alternates stylistic devices, the rhythm of the stories, main characters, and time frames, bringing a quilt of the Vietnam war experiences before our eyes.

The collection follows soldiers from "Alpha Company": Jimmy Cross, the platoon leader, Norman Bowker, Curt Lemon, Ted Lavender, Mitchel Sanders, Kiowa, Tim O'Brien, the fictional representation of the author, and others named and unnamed men. Each story focuses on different characters to a greater or lesser extent – for example, "Spin" is a series of fifteen short sketches, some no more than a few sentences long, which center around

different platoon members. The episodes – or, as the narrator calls them, "odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end" (O'Brien, 34) – alternate between peaceful and heartbreaking: Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins playing checkers every night; Curt Lemon stepping on a mine and getting blown up into a tree; Norman Bowker confessing that the only thing he truly wants is his father to say that he doesn't need his son to bring back home any medals; Azar killing a puppy that Ted Lavender had adopted; and culminating in a crescendo of short sentence-long snippets of memories. Other stories focus on one or two characters, such as "On The Rainy River," which tells how O'Brien got drafted, or linked stories "Enemies" and "Friends," which tell a history of the relationship between Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen.

All stories are, however, held together by an omnipresent narrator – a 43-year-old writer, who is constantly trying to tell "a true war story" (68) – partly as a homage to his comrades who can't do it themselves, partly as a way to heal his own trauma. In doing so, the narrator constantly tells and retells stories, some – a few times from different perspectives. Such is the death of Curt Lemon, which is mentioned in three separate stories – first briefly in "Spin," then told and retold in detail in "How to Tell a True War Story," where we learn that Rat Kiley, Lemon's friend, has cruelly murdered a baby buffalo after his friend's death. This particular episode, when later retold by the narrator in public, tends to attract feedback from someone in the audience, usually "an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics." (80) She tells the narrator that she doesn't like war stories, but the baby buffalo moved her to tears. To this, the narrator proceeds, there is only one answer:

> All you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth. No Mitchell Sanders, you tell her. No Lemon, no Rat Kiley. No trail junction. No baby buffalo. No vines or moss or white blossoms. Beginning to end, you tell her, it's all made up. Every goddamn detail – the mountains and the river and especially that poor dumb baby buffalo. None of it happened. *None* of it. And even if it did happen, it didn't happen in the mountains, it happened in this little village on the Batangan Peninsula, and it was raining like

> crazy, and one night a guy named Stink Harris woke up screaming with a leech on his tongue. You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it. (80)

Although at this point the readers are aware that neither the episode with baby buffalo nor Curt Lemon's death happened in "reality" (either in the author's life, serving as material for the story, or in the narrator's past as an event he recalls), the narrator goes back to it again in the last short story of the collection, "The Lives of The Dead," saying: "In the months after Ted Lavender died, there were many other bodies. I never shook hands – not that – but one afternoon I climbed a tree and threw down what was left of Curt Lemon." (234) Having recognized that what he tells is "all made up," the narrator continues telling hist stories – for him, it's the only way "to get at the real truth." "Real truth," therefore, can be interpreted as the narrator's attempts to come to terms with his own trauma from "happening-truth" by inventing "story-truth." Mark Heberle argues that by fictionalizing himself O'Brien "is able to represent trauma and its consequences without merely representing his own experiences" (193) and that and recycling stories – both within the collection and outside it, as is the case of Curt Lemon's death – "shows how trauma may be recycled but can never be closed." (196) However, "real truth" can be understood not only as story that feels more "real" than actual event because the actual event is too traumatic and therefore incomprehensive, but also as a way and as a product of effective communication of war experiences to the reader. Marilyn Wesley compares "The Things They Carried" to O'Brien's first novel "If I Die in a Combat Zone," which is bound by genre limitations of realistic war novel and its typical motifs: nobility, courage, adventures of the platoon, return to a civilian world (2-3). In "If I Die" archetypical characters try to directly articulate the war experience to the reader, and the motif of courage, formal realism and traditional narrative tropes discredit the main message of the novel – criticism of war (3-4). "The Things They Carried" could evade this fate by subverting classical tropes. We can see this in the end of "On The Rainy River," where the narrator, who eventually went to war because he was "embarrassed not to" (54) says about his decision: "I was a coward. I went to the war" (55), challenging traditional

view of war as a rite of passage and a display of bravery and redefining it as an act of cowardice. Marilyn Wesley concludes that "O'Brien's contradictory depictions of violence produce the thematic assertion of the moral confusion imposed by the war, and his manipulations of textual conventions violate the comfortable reception of war modeled by its traditional depiction as a test of courage, a mode of heroism, or an assertion of superiority or virtue." (12)

The narrator of "The Things They Carried" succeeds in telling a true story in two ways. By fictionalizing himself and his experiences, he is able to project not only his personal but also universal soldiers' trauma, using the act of storytelling as a way to heal and at the same time as a metaphor for impossibility of doing so. By subverting both form and literary devices of a traditional war novel, the narrator is able to communicate his opposition to the war, which is the "real truth" that needs to be told.

The war has had a special place in literature – as Ernest Hemingway put it in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, "it groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get." (qtd in McLoughlin, 1) War literature comes in different genres and touches upon a variety of themes. Still, one thing is common – it's a literature of otherness, be it the enemy, alien experiences of war, or ourselves, as is the case of a "lost innocence" trope, depictions of postwar displacement, or re-adjustment to civilian life. Reading or re-reading a war novel from a perspective of philosophical category of "The Other" within a framework it offers might open the texts to new readings, and it is especially the case of "The Things They Carried" due to its postmodern form and post-traumatic fragmentation. Such an attempt is what follows below.

I.

"The Other" is a central element of ethics of Emmanuel Levinas and is, at the first glance, difficult to assist in narratological analysis. Levinas often wrote about literature and quoted Shakespeare as one of his early influences; his collected works include countless references to Shakespeare (Lehnhof 402), and he goes as far as saying that "the whole of philosophy is only a meditation on Shakespeare" (qtd in Lehnhof 403). However, Levinas's fascination with Shakespeare is not in any case representative of his attitude to narrative

genres, specifically the genre of the novel. In "Reality and Its Shadow," Levinas calls any artwork (literary texts included) "a statue – a stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself" (*Reality* 9), meaning that any artwork is doomed to represent a moment it is caught in: "within the life, or rather the death, of a statue, an instant endures infinitely: eternally Laocoon will be caught in the grip of serpents; the Mona Lisa will smile eternally" (*Reality* 9). He proceeds to turn his gaze to novels: "The characters of a novel are beings that are shut up, prisoners. Their history is never finished, it still goes on, but makes no headway. A novel shuts beings up in a fate despite their freedom" (*Reality* 10).

What Levinas is referring to here are qualities of a novel as a fixed, arbitrary, authoritative genre, in which the narrator *tells* the readers the events of the novels and the character's thoughts and actions. The narrator (or, in this discourse, more traditional "author") monologically constructs "truth" and "reality" from his own dominant perspective. However, it is arguable that all novels are equal in the level of authoritativeness, especially if we consider Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Within a dialogical literary work, characters do not transfer the author's ideas, but exist within their own worlds of consciousness, which sometimes might not correspond with the author's. A dialogical novel doesn't *tell* a single truth or a single reality but rather is a space for dialogue about truth and reality, and a structure of the text addresses this function. From this perspective, a postmodern novel has a strong potential for dialogism and, offering a play of truths, voices, and meanings, might well be considered an exemption from Levinas's harsh critique.

So how does Levinasian concept of the Other apply to the reading of a postmodern novel? To answer this question, we must summarize other central concepts of Levinas's philosophy, namely encounter, Saying and Said, face and responsibility.

According to Levinas, the self does not exist prior to an encounter with the Other. Only in communication with the Other does the self start to contemplate itself. It is important to notice that here communication is not limited to (and not bound by) verbal exchange, but is the act, the process of greeting the Other, addressing the Other. Levinas uses an example of a neighbor – however, while ethics is, as a branch of philosophy, concerned with

concepts of "good" and "right" and therefore behavior, and Levinas's ideas are centered around interactions between people, they are not limited to them. In the following example, a neighbor should be read as a metaphor for anything, or anyone, we encounter:

> The neighbor concerns me before all assumption, all commitment consented to or refused. I am bound to him, him who is, however, the first one on the scene, not signalled, unparalleled; I am bound to him before any liaison contracted. He orders me before being recognized. Here there is a relation of kinship outside of aIl biology, "against all logic." It is not because the neighbor would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely *othe*r. (*Otherwise* 87)

"The neighbor" here holds a greater meaning of the ultimate Other, which cannot be cognitively appropriated in any way. It is our instinct to capture the Other, to understand it, but it always escapes our grasp. The Other always precedes and exceeds us and is above us – we offer ourselves to it, we are exposed to it "as a skin is exposed to what wounds it, as a cheek is offered to the smiter." (*Otherwise* 50) As the Other is above us, it commands us in its superiority, and we are responsible before it and for it. Responsible before it – because our relationship with the other is never a relationship of equals, but an encounter with infinite, a trace of which we call the Other's "face." It is a kind of responsibility that comes from inferiority. Responsible for it – because in this encounter we substitute for the Other, possibility of which comes from its innate otherness:

> The Other is not other with a relative alterity as are, in a comparison, even ultimate species, which mutually exclude one another but still have their place within the community of a genus – excluding one another by their definitions, but calling for one another by this exclusion, across the community of their genus. The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity. (*Totality* 194)

Precisely because the Other cannot be compared to us in any way, comprehended by us, expresses and thought about, it has the power to command us, and it commands us to be responsible for it, to be guilty for anything it does. To explain this, Levinas uses a quote from Dostoyevsky's "Brothers Karamazov" – "Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others." (*Otherwise* 146) This infinite, eternal subjective responsibility is a pivotal concept in Levinas's ethics.

The encounter with the Other is the act of Saying, which happens before the Said. Said, as a language with its system of codes and meanings, does not define or enable Saying. Saying is "antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification." (*Otherwise* 6) Facing the Other, we give it a message "Here I am," which in itself is communication, but it is communication as exposure, a communication which enables all other communications, and in which we don't transfer a message as truth because at that point we don't have the language to do it. What we communicate is our presence in the face of the Other and readiness to be constructed by the Other.

The concept of the Other is applicable in narratology on two levels. On the first, internal level, the act of narrating the world of a novel to the reader is an act of trying to capture the Other. This is the act which Levinas himself calls "a stoppage of time" or "death" in the quote at the beginning of the chapter, and which results in locking up beings that are supposed to be free. The desire to narrate – the only action and a state of being available to a narrator – is precisely our desire to understand the Other, to capture it and make it a part of ourself, to reduce its "otherness" to our "sameness." This connection also exists on the second level, external to the world of a novel, between a reader and a novel as the Other. The reader appropriates the novel, but its meaning is forever out of his reach, and the only thing a reader can do is to substitute himself for everyone and everything in the novel and be responsible for everyone and everything happening there. In the following chapters, we will investigate how the concept of the Other appears in "The

Things They Carried" on these two levels.

Ⅱ.

"The Things They Carried" consists of twenty-two stories, which paint in front our eyes a patchy Vietnam experience of the narrator. The stories are linked together (some more than the others), and there is some temporal continuity (we learn the aftermath of some events, some other events are narrated in great detail through time), but separate pieces are disengaged as if the characters (and the narrator) exist in some sort of limbo, where separate stories, images, snippets of memories float freely.

Based on a narrative strategy employed in the story, all texts can be roughly divided into four groups.

The first group is the stories written clearly as memories, from the perspective of a forty-three-year-old writer, who is married, has a daughter, and has been writing war fiction for twenty years. The majority of stories ("Love," "Spin," "On The Rainy River," "How to Tell a True War Story," "The Dentist," "Stockings," "Ambush," "Notes," "Good Form," "Field Trip," "Night Life," "The Ghost Soldiers," "Sweetheart of The Song Tra Bong," The Lives of The Dead") can be put into this category, but the amount of narrator's presence, or the level of self-consciousness in narration of his "I" differs significantly. For example, "Love," which is a follow-up from the first story from the collection, "The Things They Carried," continues telling the story of Jimmy Cross, platoon leader, who was a focus character in the previous story. Jimmy Cross and the narrator get together and reminiscence about war, and when the narrator asks about Martha, the girl Jimmy liked, whose photo he used to carry with him, Jimmy replies: "'You writer types,' he said, 'you've got long memories." (25) Some stories from this category are clearly metafictional, like "How to Tell a Good War Story," in which the narrator uses Curt Lemon's death as a material to help him tell the truth, even though he later confesses that all of it was made up. The narrator here retells Curt Lemon's death from a few different angles, changing a number of details as if reliving it – or inventing it – anew every time. In other stories, told from a perspective of a first-person narrator, the narrator is more difficult to define. Such is the case of "The Ghost Soldiers," which starts with "I was shot twice" and then tells

about those two times, although most of the story happens after the narrator gets shot the second time and has to leave the Alpha company. A direct personal discourse of the narrator who fully identifies with one of the characters (as seen in quote 1 below) is framed with the perspective of the narrator from some time later (quote 2).

(1): During the first full day of Alpha's stand-down, I didn't run into Bobby Jorgenson once. Not at chow, not at the EM club, not even during our long booze sessions in the Alpha Company hootch. At one point I almost went looking for him, but my friend Mitchell Sanders told me to forget it.

'Let it ride,' he said. 'The kid messed up bad, for sure, but you have to take into account how green he was. Brand-new, remember? Thing is, he's doing a lot better now. I mean, listen, the guy knows his shit. Say what you want, but he kept Morty Phillips alive.'

'And that makes it okay?'

Sanders shrugged. 'People change. Situations change. I hate to say this, man, but you're out of touch. Jorgenson – he's *with* us now.

'And I'm not?'

Sanders looked at me for a moment.

'No,' he said. 'I guess you're not.' (197)

(2): I guess the higher-ups decided I'd been shot enough. At the end of December, when I was released from the 91st Evac Hospital, they transferred me over to Headquarters Company – S-4, the battalion supply section. Compared with the boonies it was cushy duty. (192-193)

Two of the stories stand aside from others in this group as they have a unique structure. "Sweetheart of The Song Tra Bong" is a story within a story and has two narrators. The usual narrator, a writer in his forties, wants to tell a strange story that "keeps returning" to him and which he heard from Rat Kiley. He starts with the question of credibility, stressing that if Rat exaggerates some of the aspects of his stories, it's because "he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt." (87) The

central part of the story is narrated by Rat from a third person perspective, but the narrator reappears at times, adding comments about the way Rat was telling the story and the Alpha soldier's reaction.

"The Lives of The Dead" is another short story with two narrators, one of whom is a nine-year-old Timmy. The story begins with narrator's thoughts about the power of fiction: "But this too is true: stories can save us. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, but even still, right here, I kept dreaming Linda alive." (221) He remembers the first corpse he saw at war, and how seeing it made him remember the girl he loved when he was nine. The story of the girl, Linda, who had brain cancer and tragically died, is told from a perspective of a younger narrator.

Therefore, it's safe to say that stories that can be put in this group, which is the majority of stories in the collection, are explicitly written as memories with a different amount of narrator's self-presentation as a character.

The second group is short stories narrated by a third person narrator with either limited ("The Things They Carried") or omniscient ("Speaking of Courage," "In The Field") perspective. An omniscient narrator demonstrates either complete knowledge of a character's thoughts and feelings, as is the case of "Speaking of Courage," which centers around Norman Bowker after he gets home from war and has trouble readjusting, or a limited knowledge as in "The Things They Carried," in which narrator takes a position of a distant observer. "In The Field" offers both perspectives: while the story follows Alpha company while they search for Kiowa's body in the muddy field, it shifts its focus from Jimmy Cross, who is in his head composing a letter to Kiowa's father and wonders about the soldier whose name he forgot, to other soldiers, who finally find the body. This way, even in an impersonal detached discourse of third-person narrative, the narrator finds a way to communicate a character's thoughts to the reader.

The third group consists of four short stories ("Enemies," "Friends," "Church," "Style") written from a first-person perspective, but without the overlooking presence of the forty-three-year-old writer-narrator. These stories are relatively short and tell of a single event (or a single short period, like in "Church," which briefly tells of eight days when the soldiers were stationed in a shrine with monks), and therefore it is possible to assume that the composition

excluded a possibility of "framing" the stories with a twenty-years-later-narrator's comments. The function of these few stories is to offer pieces of bigger memories, fragments of a larger story, and because of that, they are supposed to be short and "unfinished." However, technically the narrator retreats and is not clearly represented, so these few stories might well be categorized into a separate group.

What comes to attention here is the composition of the collection, an order in which the stories are presented. The first story of the collection, "The Things They Carried," introduces characters in an impersonal, detached manner. After it, with each consequent story, the reader learns more and more about the main narrator – that he is a writer, he has a daughter, and telling war stories is a way to find "truth" for him – but the narrator also goes through some changes. He starts with a third person limited perspective, distancing himself from his character significantly, then changing to first person discourse, but maintaining his self-representation within the story, as in "Love," "Spin," "On The Rainy River." Eventually, though, with the stories like "Enemies," "Friends," and "Church," which are scattered through the middle part of the collection and which show a clear shift in pronoun usage from "they," as in "The Things They Carried," to "we" when referring to soldiers from Alpha company, the narrator shows clear attachment to the characters – he is one of them, he identifies and empathizes with the group.

A structural culmination of this collection is a short story "The Man I Killed," which might be considered to be written from the first person, highly subjective perspective. While it features speech acts that allow us to categorize it as first-person narrative, there are no pronouns clearly marking it as such, which is why this short story can't be categorized into any of the three groups and deserves more attention by itself. In the following chapter, we will put the narrator's development in the context of the events of "The Man I Killed" and analyze it from the perspective of Levinasian "the Other."

Ⅲ.

"The Man I Killed" starts with the description of a dead man's body. The story doesn't have a plot; there is no event that the narrator describes, even the surroundings of the narrator are mentioned only to the extent that they

relate to the body. There is only one narrative point in this story – the death of a Vietnamese man, or rather its aftermath. The story opens with the narrator describing the man's appearance, clothes, and devising a backstory for him:

> His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole, his eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman's, his nose was undamaged, there was a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, his clean black hair was swept upward into a cowlick at the rear of the skull, his forehead was lightly freckled, his fingernails were clean, the skin at his left cheek was peeled back in three ragged strips, his right check was smooth and hairless, there was a butterfly on his chin, his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny and it was this wound that had killed him. (121)

> He was not a fighter. His health was poor, his body small and frail. He liked books. He wanted someday to be a teacher of mathematics. At night, lying on his mat, he could not picture himself doing the brave things his father had done, or his uncles, or the heroes of the stories. He hoped in his heart that he would never be tested. He hoped the Americans would go away. Soon, he hoped. He kept hoping and hoping, always, even when he was asleep. (122)

These short excerpts are only a part of the narrator's reaction to seeing the death he caused. A long descriptive sentence in the first quote shows how the narrator can't pull his eyes away from the body, taking in all the horrible details, while the repetition of simple sentences and moreover the fact that they are combined into one, as if said in one breath, gives a strong impression of mental trauma. The narrator didn't just see a dead man – he killed him. This is something that he has never done before and something that shook him to his very core. This is a deeply traumatic experience, but also it is the encounter with the ultimate Other – with infinite, with unknowable death.

In a war novel death is a kind of Chekhov's gun – it's there from the beginning, the reader expects to read about it. However, death can be shown

as something mundane or unavoidable, which is probably true at war, or it can be shown as singular and incomprehensible, which is also true – in this case, for the narrator of "The Man I Killed."

The second quote shows that the first reaction of the narrator is to give the event a meaning. He doesn't know anything about the man and, judging by the description of the man's appearance, doesn't have enough information to deduce much about him, but he proceeds to "create" the man in his imagination. At the core of this traumatic experience, of the encounter with the Other, there is a natural desire to understand it, to make it a part of our world – familiar and safe, bound by rules, categorizable and knowable. Attaching meaning to random events – whether it's a minor superstition or explaining away a tragic accident – is an example of such human behavior. The narrator tries to appropriate the man and his life, creating a rich backstory for him – which, on the one hand, shows deep remorse, which is a common interpretation of this episode, but on the other hand shows a desire to know, which comes from facing the otherness of death, the otherness of war for the first time.

While the narrator stands and looks at the body, Azar and Kiowa briefly talk to him. Azar is rude, so Kiowa makes him leave, and after that tries to make the narrator feel better:

> 'Just forget that crud,' he said. He opened up his canteen and held it out for a while and then signed and pulled it away. 'No sweat, man. What else could you do?' (122)

It's worth noticing that the narrator, who is also a character in the story, doesn't narrate himself, which is quite uncommon for a direct discourse. In the quote above, for example, the narrator doesn't narrate either his reaction to Kiowa offering him a canteen (because there was none) or its absence. Kiowa uses second-person pronouns when addressing the narrator, and that, combined with descriptions of what the narrator sees and hears, clearly points to the direct discourse, but there are no pronouns that clearly mark this, and the narrator avoids any references to himself, which is more common in indirect discourse. The narrative is detached and impersonal, but this time,

this detachment is different from the one narrator displayed in "The Things They Carried" – it is a detachment from himself. Facing the Other, trying to give meaning to the death of this man and failing, the narrator is not himself anymore. Or, more precisely, at this specific point, there is no narrator's "I" present – either formally on a sentence level or a level of emotional representation in the story.

The story proceeds in circles: the narrator looks at the body and sees the same things: a stars-shaped hole, light skin and how it peeled in three strips, a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, clean fingernails, delicate build, and many others. He keeps inventing a story of the man's life, but this is not a therapy for him – rather the opposite. In the story that he keeps inventing, the narrator tells in a few sentences at a time about the man's studies, his love of poetry, his girlfriend, his avoidance of politics, thus making the man quite similar to himself – at least, from the perspective of the reader:

> And as he waited, in his final year at the university, he fell in love with the classmate, a girl of seventeen, who one day told him that his wrists were like the wrists of a child, so small and delicate, and who admired his narrow waist and the cowlick that rose up like a bird's tail at the back of his head. She liked his quiet manner; she laughed at his freckled and bony legs. One evening, perhaps, they exchanged gold rings.
>
> Now one eye was a star.
>
> 'You okay?' Kiowa said.
>
> The body lay almost entirely in shade. There were gnats at the mouth, little flecks of pollen drifting above the nose. The butterfly was gone. The bleeding had stopped except for the neck wounds. (124)

The time has stopped for the narrator. The reader doesn't know how long two men stood in front of the body of the third. The only markers that signal the passage of time are the butterfly, which first sits on the dead man's chin, makes its way along his forehead and then flies away, the bleeding, which almost entirely stops, and Kiowa's remarks:

> 'Think it over,' Kiowa said.

Then later he said, 'Tim, it's a war. The guy wasn't Heidi – he had a weapon, right? It's a tough thing, for sure, but you got to cut out that staring.'

Then he said, 'Maybe you better lie down a minute.'

Then after a long empty time he said, 'Take it slow. Just go wherever the spirit takes you.' (123)

Kiowa covered the body with a poncho.

'Hey, Tim, you're looking better,' he said. 'No doubt about it. All you needed was time – some mental R&R.'

Then he said, 'Man, I'm sorry.'

Then later he said, 'Why not talk about it?'

Then he said, 'Come on, man, talk.'

He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay with one leg bent beneath him, his jaw in his throat, his face neither expressive nor inexpressive. One eye was shut. The other was a star-shaped hole.

'Talk to me,' Kiowa said. (125)

The event central to "The Man I Killed" – not the killing itself, which is never shown but referred to later in the following story, "Ambush," but facing death, the reality of war, the fact that it's either kill or be killed, this impossible choice which transcends reason, cause and effect – is the moment when the narrator felt the war, and with it the world, as something ultimately different from self, unknowable and unreachable, something that can never be put into words. The narrator killed a man, but in that act, he also made himself completely vulnerable and exposed in the face of what it means to be a soldier at war. He can't pretend anymore like all soldiers did, as told in "The Things They Carried" (story) and "The Lives of The Dead" – talking to corpses as if they were alive or avoiding death-related language. At that moment, he felt responsibility, which was centered around, but not limited to, the life he just took – it was responsibility for the war as a whole, for both sides in it and every casualty, a kind of responsibility that never lessens.

In "Ambush," the narrator, now from a perspective of a 43-tear-old-writer,

reminiscences about the events that led to him killing the man. He remembers that this man was not a threat and it wasn't necessary to kill him:

> It was not a matter of live or die. There was no real peril. Almost certainly the young man would have passed by. And it will always be that way. (131)

The last phrase shows the narrator's antiwar position, and while this worldview might have originated some other time (as we learn in "On The Rainy River," the narrator has been opposed to war since college), the moral core of it lies here, in the encounter narrated in "The Man I Killed." This can be further supported with the last sentences from "Ambush":

> Even now I haven't finished sorting it out. Sometimes I forgive myself, other times I don't. In the ordinary hours of life I try not to dwell on it, but now and then, when I'm reading a newspaper or just sitting alone in a room, I'll look up and see the young man coming out of the morning fog. I'll watch him walk toward me, his shoulders slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side, and he'll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into the fog. (131)

While the narrator says that sometimes he forgives himself, "other times I don't" raises questions about whether forgiveness can be an act rather than a state. The narrator clearly didn't forget what happened, but the way the man appears to him – not in his death, but peacefully, smiling at some thought – hints that a man is a symbol rather than a tormentor. "And it will always be this way" suggest that the man is, indeed, a symbol of eternal responsibility the narrator bears.

IV.

"The Things They Carried" employs a variety of narrative techniques to narrate personal experiences of Vietnam war. The analysis of the composition of the collection as a whole (and because it can effectively be read as a novel,

it can also be called an analysis of the structure of the novel) shows that the narrator, who starts as a detached observer, gradually becomes more invested in his stories, identifying with the characters, narrating himself among them. This process goes in roughly three stages: impersonal observer, third person narrative – identifying with the group, using the pronoun "we" extensively, first person narrative – first person narrative, but the characters address the narrator directly, as is the case of later stories and first can be seen in "The Man I Killed." This short story can be considered a culmination of the collection – it has a different mode of narration and doesn't fit into any of the categories other stories can be put into, and it tells of that one encounter that changed how the narrator felt the war – an encounter with death of the man, and therefore war, and with it the world, as the infinite incomprehensible Other. This encounter makes the narrator lose his "self," which can be seen on the textual level, and leaves him with responsibility for the war and the evil it brings. While, of course, the war traumatized the narrator, and telling stories is a way for him to work around this trauma, reading this collection from the perspective of Levinasian "the Other" opens a possibility for a different interpretation. Because the narrator feels an eternal responsibility for everything he did, the others did, and everything that possibly might have been done (both "happening-truth" and "story-truth"), the only way for him to bear this responsibility is to tell stories. And while this responsibility started with the event that served as an encounter with the Other, it is not limited to one life the narrator took.

"The Man I Killed" successfully communicates the moment in which self catches a glimpse of the face of the Other. The reader doesn't know exactly how the narrator felt, but precisely because this experience was not possible to be put into words, we also feel it as exactly this – something that cannot be put into words, but something that is already there, waiting for us to face it.

However, "The Things They Carried" translates the encounter with the Other to the reader on a different level as well. The reader learns that all the events and characters in the stories were made up, as the narrator explicitly explains. This means that the event in the center of "The Man I Killed" might well have never happened. However, for a reader, it doesn't matter because the textual space of the collection (or the novel) is the event of Saying, not Said.

The focus in this collection shifts from a textual "object" (character, theme, storyline, motif) to "space" between a reader and the narrator, to the relationship between them, and within this relationship "truth" as a representation of the Said is not available. And because of its form of a postmodern novel, the narrator of "The Things They Carried" doesn't lock his characters up in a limited space of a text as Said but gives them an opportunity to be invented and reinvented in an encounter of the reader and the text. To put it in other words, metafictionality of "The Things They Carried" and the narrator's remarks about two kinds of truth ("happening-truth" and "story-truth") allow a reader to fully experience this text as the event of Saying, facing the text as the Other – something that can never be caught, something which eternally resists any efforts to appropriate it, but something that commands and makes feel responsibility at the same time.

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