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Felt Experience and Lyricism in *The Things They Carried*

Abstract
Among the slew of Vietnam War novels, Timothy O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* stands out for its lyrical prose, packing a hefty punch of insightful speculation on the nature of war and the art of conveying it. What sets this novel apart from other Vietnam War novels is the linguistic virtuosity of the author in employing a number of counter-intuitive linguistic modes and strategies whose goal is to impart the felt experience of the soldiers, culminating in a unique lyrical flow contrapuntal to the grim reality of war.

Keywords: Vietnam War, lyricism, felt experience

As Michiko Kakutani comments in The New York Times on *The Things They Carried*:

> In prose that combines the sharp, unsentimental rhythms of Hemingway with gentler, more lyrical descriptions, Mr. O'Brien gives the reader a shockingly visceral sense of what it felt like to tramp through a booby-trapped jungle… With *The Things They Carried*, Mr. O'Brien has written a vital, important book-a book that matters not only to the reader, interested in Vietnam, but to anyone interested in the craft of writing as well. (quoted in O'Brien 1990: 12)

In this blurb included at the beginning of the novel, Kakutani zeroes in on the most-salient feature of the novel, the lyrical flow of narrative, focusing not so much on authenticity, but rather on conveying what it felt like to be a grunt in the jungles of Vietnam. This article will focus on the lyrical flow of the narrative and counter-intuitive linguistic techniques that the author deploys to shock the reader out of the serene, meditative state induced by the said lyricism, creating a poignant effect of stark juxtaposition of two seemingly incompatible realms of ontological realities, whose contrast creates the singular, visceral felt experience of this novel. The first immersion of the reader in the lyrical mood of the novel comes early on in the novel with the romantic daydreaming of Lieutenant Cross:

> First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. They were not love letters, but

> Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day's march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending. He would imagine romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire. He would sometimes taste the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there. More than anything, he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her, but the letters were mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love…The letters weighed 10 ounces. They were signed *Love, Martha*, but Lieutenant Cross understood that Love was only a way of signing and did not mean what he sometimes pretended it meant. At dusk, he would carefully return the letters in his rucksack. Slowly, a bit distracted, he would get up and move among his men, checking the perimeter, then at full dark, he would return to his hole and watch the night. (O'Brien 1990: 11)

The first paragraph illustrates the artistic strategy of O'Brien in the entire book. By contrasting romanticized representation with the stark reality of war rendered in prose, the author creates the specific lyricism already noted. The paragraph (and the novel) begins on a low note with an outline of the mundane drudgery of daily routine such as digging a foxhole etc. Once the pressing duties have been performed, Cross is carried to the high point of his day on the wings of romantic daydreaming, or as the narrator describes it, "pretending". Inevitably, the exigencies of war reassert themselves and Cross returns to the banality of soldierly life. Obsessing over Martha becomes the sole avenue of escape from the war for Lieutenant Cross. Besides the letters, he carries two photographs of Martha:

> The first was a Kodacolor snapshot signed Love, though he knew better. She stood against a brick wall. Her eyes were grey and neutral, her lips slightly open as she stared straight-on at the camera. At night, sometimes, Lieutenant Cross wondered who had taken the picture, because he knew she had boyfriends, because he loved her so much, and because he could see the shadow of the picture-taker… He remembered kissing her good night at the dorm door. Right then, he thought, he should've done something brave… Whenever he looked at the photographs, he thought of new things he should have done. (O'Brien 1990: 13)

Living in the past, regretting opportunities lost, Cross rereads the letters and looks at the photographs. It is at one of these moments of oblivious reverie that the author deploys his artistic technique of contrast, shocking the reader back into reality:

> Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried 34 rounds when he was shot and killed outside Than Khe, and he went down under an exceptional burden, more than 20 pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water, tranquilizers and all the rest, plus the unweighed fear. He was dead weight. There was no twitching or flopping… It was bright morning in mid-April. Lieutenant Cross felt the pain. He blamed himself. He pictured Martha's smooth, young face, thinking he loved her more than anything, more than his men, and now Ted Lavender was dead because he loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her. (O'Brien 1990: 14)

What is the moral of that episode? Incidentally, this is a question that figures prominently in the novel, apparently asked by the narrator, or by some of the other characters, arising after one or another scene that flatlines into moral meaninglessness. One is sorely tempted to come up with an explanation, to account for the unaccountable, to rearrange chaos into order, which seems to be one of the highly prized conceits of rational beings. For example, one possible moral from the above-mentioned episode could be that love is rendered banal by war. Or, that love has no place on the battlefield. Or, perhaps the most-self-righteous, that Lieutenant Cross should have known better than to indulge in romantic daydreaming about a woman when he should have looked after his men. However, all of these pretentious attempts to find meaning are rendered void in the context of the narrator's, and respectively, the author's unequivocal statement in the following quote:

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct; nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. (O'Brien 1990: 52)

O'Brien develops this line of thought by removing reason completely as the avenue to attain truth:

> In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like a thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And at the end, really, there is nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe "Oh."
> True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside. It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe. (O'Brien 1990: 59)

With the above, O'Brien establishes his artistic credo: no moral, no truth, no reason. The only artistically valid mode of rendering war is gut instinct, the visceral felt experience providing more immediacy than traditional accounts of war. There are several episodes which represent that credo and pack a powerful punch in the gut. One of them is the daily, monotonous account of drudgery, which lulls the reader into a somnolent state of almost being in the file of soldiers:

> They moved like mules. By daylight they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared, but it was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march. They plodded along slowly, dumbly, leaning forward against the heat, unthinking, all blood and bone, simple grunts, soldiering with their legs, toiling up the hills and down into the paddies and across the rivers and up again and down, just humping, one step and then the next and then another, but no volition, no will, because it was automatic, it was anatomy, and the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything, a kind of inertia, a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility. Their principles were in their feet. Their calculations were biological. They had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched the villages without knowing what to look for, not caring, kicking over jars of rice, frisking children and old men, blowing tunnels, sometimes setting fires and sometimes not, then forming up and moving on to the next village, then other villages, where it would always be the same. They carried their own lives… (O'Brien 1990: 20)

The monotony of soldierly life, however, is punctuated by the sheer horror of battle, but rather than focusing on describing externalities in unnecessary detail, the author relates its psychological impact on the soldiers:

> For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity. Now and then, however, there were times of panic, when they squealed or wanted to squeal but couldn't, when they twitched and made moaning sounds and covered their heads and said Dear Jesus and flopped around on the earth and fired their weapons blindly and cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. In different ways, it happened to all of them. Afterward, when the firing ended, they would blink and peek up. They would touch their bodies, feeling shame, then quickly hiding it. They would force themselves to stand. As if in slow motion, frame by frame, the world would take on the old logic—absolute silence, then the wind, then sunlight, then voices. It was the burden of being alive. Awkwardly, the men would reassemble themselves, first in private, then in groups, becoming soldiers again. They would repair the leaks in their eyes. (O'Brien 1990: 22)

The artistic force of this brief account derives from its simple, unpretentious, and yet, evocative rendering of battle stages – unadulterated horror, shame, re-assembling one's dignity. This kaleidoscopic synopsis of emotional roller coaster ends on a note of sheer poetry with the soldiers repairing 'the leaks in their eyes'. These are just two episodes in which O'Brien uses contrast to relay to the reader the exigencies of war and its emotional burden the soldiers must carry. As already noted, the author dismisses reason and logic as the artistic conduit of narrative. In the following two episodes, we see O'Brien unfurling innovative linguistic structures that seemingly defy common sense logic, and yet perfectly meet the needs of describing the perverse logic of war. The first is a counterintuitive description of boredom:

> I remember the monotony. Digging foxholes. Slapping mosquitoes. The sun and the heat and the endless paddies. Even in the deep bush, where you could die in any number of ways, the war was nakedly and aggressively boring. But it was a strange boredom. It was boredom with a twist, the kind of boredom that caused stomach disorders. You'd be sitting at the top of a high hill, the flat paddies stretching out below, and the day would be calm and hot and utterly vacant, and you'd feel the boredom dripping inside you like a leaky faucet, except it wasn't water, it was a sort of acid, and with each little droplet you'd feel the stuff eating away at important organs. You'd try to relax. You'd uncurl your fists and let your thoughts go. Well, you'd think, this isn't so bad. And right then you'd hear gunfire behind you and your nuts would fly up into your throat and you'd be squealing pig squeals. That kind of boredom. (O'Brien 1990: 32)

Raising the bar even higher, O'Brien coins an entirely new phrase in the following episode with soldier who goes AWOL, and goes back to his regiment after a few days:

> A guy goes AWOL. Shacks up in Danang with a Red Cross nurse. It's a great time—the nurse loves him to death—the guy gets whatever he wants whenever he wants it. The war's over, he thinks. Just nookie and new angles. But then one day he rejoins his unit in the bush. Can't wait to get back into action. Finally, one of his buddies asks what happened with the nurse, why so hot for combat, and the guy says, "All that peace, man, it felt so good it hurt. I want to hurt it *back*." (O'Brien 1990: 34)

A brief analysis is required here in relation to the phrase "hurt it back", which is seemingly illogical. Yet, the logic is there and it is the twisted logic of war. When he rejoins his unit, even his buddies are bewildered by his earnestness to put himself in the line of fire and perform his soldierly duties, which as we already saw, comprise an endless stream of alternating stages of aggressive boredom, drudgery and outright horror. The logic of "hurt it back" derives from the soldier's thirst to drink from

the cup of bliss again, but he can appreciate its sweetness to the fullest only against the backdrop of the contrasting bitterness of war. He needs pain to enjoy peace and he is a drug addict whose drug is war. This phrase is both ingeniously innovative, but also lyrically evocative in its unassuming capacity to distill in a few words only the upside-down logic of war and the grotesque, felt experience of being a soldier. The word "hurt" is used to denote exactly the opposite of its apparent meaning, and yet it makes perfect sense in the topsy-turvy ethics and aesthetics of war.

An interesting theoretical framework has transpired from this brief analysis of O'Brien's novel. On the one hand, the author dismisses the capacity of conceptual logic as the conduit of artistic representation of the harsh reality of war. On the other hand, we see him relying on the strategy of appealing to the emotional core of the reader to gain cognizance of the felt experience. A definition of that term is required. In the article *The Significance of Felt Meaning*, Gendlin provides a theoretical framework that is very pertinent to O'Brien's artistic belief:

> Besides the logical dimension and the operational dimension of knowledge, there is also a directly felt, experiential dimension. Meaning is not only about things and it is not only a certain logical structure, but it also involves felt experiencing… Besides logical schemes and sense perception we have come to recognize that there is also a powerful felt dimension of experience that is prelogical, and that functions importantly in what we think, what we perceive, and how we behave. (1970: 562).

A crucial element in this definition of the term *felt experience* is that it is pre-logical, that is, residing in the emotional core of the human being. O'Brien calls it "gut instinct" or "make the stomach believe" and, apparently, he believes that emotional experience/awareness far transcends intellectual understanding and the capacity for conceptualization inherent in logic. This is why he resorts to artistic ploys that target the emotional core of the reader, giving his readers immediate emotional/experiential awareness.

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