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Soldiers, Home: Genre and the American Postwar Story from Hemingway to O'Brien and then Wolff

During Tobias Wolff's visit to the small liberal arts university where I teach, I had the chance to congratulate him on the achievement of his 1996 Vietnam memoir *In Pharaoh's Army*, only a few years old then, and ask him about the book's debt to Ernest Hemingway, to whom he writes he "turned to for guidance in all things" as a young man (Wolff 44). The debt was great, he said, and we went on to agree that Hemingway's short story "Soldier's Home" was perhaps the greatest war story either of us had read (though I have since come to understand the story, like its inheritors discussed here, as in fact a *postwar* story).

One crucial difference between Hemingway's narrative and Wolff's, of course, is that while that the former is merely "autobiographical," the latter is actual autobiography, or memoir. Nonfiction, in any case. "What a book," Gertrude Stein writes in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "would be the real story of Hemingway. Not those he writes but the confessions of the real Hemingway" (872). Indeed, what might a memoir of the real Hemingway's experience as an ambulance driver on the Great War's Italian front have been like, without the fictional scrim, the thinly-veiled avatar of his young hero Harold Krebs (or the writer's infamous bravado, so evident in things like *A Moveable Feast*)?

My claim is that such a Hemingway war memoir—intimate, confessional—does not exist simply because it could not. The literary culture of the time could not have supported it, nor could the culture at large. Consider Hemingway's own reaction (despicable whining in public, Hem called it) to his friend F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Crack-Up," now considered by a classic of the 20th century personal essay

(Donaldson 174). And we can only assume many in publishing and the wider culture shared his disdain—Max Perkins called the Fitzgerald book “an indecent invasion of [Fitzgerald’s] own privacy” (Donaldson 175). Dos Passos suggested it was unseemly to worry publicly about such things in the middle of the Depression. And yet by looking closely at subsequent postwar stories that seem clear homages to “Soldier’s Home,” like Tim O’Brien’s “Speaking of Courage” from *The Things They Carried* and Tobias Wolff’s own chapter “Civilian” from *In Pharaoh’s Army*, we can perhaps get a sense of what that “real” Hemingway memoir might have read like. By paying some attention to formal features of each narrative, we can mark changes in literary culture in the last century in the bargain.

Critics have called Hemingway’s hero Harold Krebs numb, and certainly he moves through his Kansas hometown with what clinicians might call a flat affect—his conversations, when he deigns to have them, are guarded, clipped. The narrator explains that initially Krebs “did not want to talk about the war at all,” believing “his town had heard too many atrocity stories to be thrilled by the actualities” (69). Instead he keeps mostly to himself, practicing on his clarinet before strolling down town in the evenings, reading before going to bed. But the genius of Hemingway’s third person omniscience is that we see beyond the character’s laconic presentation. David Wyatt says we misread Hemingway “when we reduce him to the champion of a ‘code’ or the rhetoric of ‘not talking,’” and can we ever read his work with the iceberg principle far from our minds, without this sense that what lies beneath the surface—what Seymour Chatman might call “story”—is at least as important as what gets represented as what Chatman calls “discourse”? (Wyatt 489).

The glimpse inside Krebs allows readers to understand his return home as an intensely emotional experience. Though Krebs does not share much of what he’s thinking with the story’s other characters, readers are privy to a great deal of his thinking. Krebs *does* come to a time when he feels the need to talk about his experiences—I would argue that the inexpressibility of combat experience is as the heart of all

three narratives I'll discuss here— but his general isolation and the nausea associated with the lying he feels he'll have to do in order to be listened to is more than he can bear. (Psychologists suggest survivors of a trauma like combat often feel paralyzed when communicating to those not initiated into violence.)

Krebs is particularly interested in the pretty girls he sees parading past his parents' home, but feels somehow “they were not in the world he was in,” a sentiment he reiterates with his mother later in the story (“I'm not in [God's] kingdom,” he tells her). To Krebs, though he likes very much the look of them, the girls in his town live “in such a complicated world of already defined alliances and shifting feuds” and he does not “feel the energy or courage to break into it.” “He would like to have one of them,” he finally decides, “but he would not go through all the talking (72). Only in a conversation with his pious mother at story's end does Krebs relax his standards and offer a lie to ease her suffering (he tells her he loves her after all), and then feels “embarrassed and resentful” afterward, “as always” (75). He resolves to leave town for Kansas City to avoid a similar scene with his father.

Tim O'Brien's postwar story “Speaking of Courage,” from his 1990 book *The Things They Carried*, seems a clear nod to “Soldier's Home,” perhaps even an update on it. Like Krebs, the hero Norman Bowker returns to his Midwestern hometown (though Bowker after a tour in Vietnam rather than Italy, and to Iowa instead of Kansas) because “the war was over and there was no particular place to go” (158). Like Krebs, Bowker returns to no parades or fanfare; “One thing I hate,” Bowker is to have written the narrator of a subsequent story, “is all those whiner vets. Guys sniveling about how they didn't get any parades. Such absolute crap. I mean, who in his right mind wants a parade? Or getting his back clapped by a bunch of patriotic idiots who don't know jack about what it feels like to get shot at or kill people... Who needs it?” (178).

Upon his return, Bowker shares Krebs's sense of isolation and his expressive paralysis. “The town seemed remote to him somehow” (159) explains the narrator, a character named Tim O'Brien (more on that in a moment), and “seemed dead” (163). Like Krebs, Bowker assumes townfolk don't want to hear

his story. Bowker believes the people in a “nice, little town, very prosperous, with neat houses and all the sanitary conveniences” wanted not real war stories but only “good intentions and good deeds” (169). “The town could not talk,” he thinks, “and would not listen” (163).

Bowker also shares Krebs’s special interest in the girls he’d known in high school, whom he reasons are “mostly gone or married” by the time of his return (159). His former sweetheart, Sally Gustafson, née Kramer, “whose picture he had once carried in his wallet,” is one who has been married while Bowker was in country. Driving through town on his third day home (over the course of the one day represented in the story, Bowker does some 300 revolutions around the town lake in his car), he sees Sally out mowing her lawn and for a moment thinks of pulling over just to talk. “He’d keep it light,” he tells himself, “he wouldn’t say anything at all” (160). But instead Bowker had “pushed down hard on the gas pedal” when he saw her, deciding that Sally had “looked happy. She had her house and her new husband, and there was really nothing he could say to her” (160).

Like Krebs, Bowker does ultimately desire to discuss his war experiences, one story in particular: the drowning death of his buddy Kiowa in a sewage field in Vietnam, a death for which he feels unduly ashamed and responsible. “A good war story,” Bowker thinks, “but [the Vietnam conflict] was not a war for war stories, nor for talk of valor, and nobody in town wanted to know about the terrible stink” (which Bowker is afraid prevented his saving Kiowa) (169).

The O’Brien story’s most remarkable moment comes, near the end of the story when Bowker finally parks his car at a burger stand and orders through a small drive-up intercom. The box at first bewilders him, but the voice at the other end almost manages to coax a story from him:

“Hey, loosen up,” the voice said. “What you really need, friend?”

Norman Bowker smiled.

“How’d you like to hear about—“

He stopped and shook his head.

“Hear *what*, man?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, hey,” the intercom said, “I’m sure as fuck not *going* anywhere. Screwed to a post, for God’s sake. Go ahead, try me.”

“Nothing.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. All done.”

The intercom made a light sound of disappointment. (171)

The first few days home “would have been a good time to talk,” Bowker thinks, “if Sally had not been married, or if his father would not have been such a baseball fan” (160). Bowker finds the prospect of discussing his war experiences with his father particularly daunting, just as Krebs does. In a vulnerable moment, he imagines his father actually encouraging him to talk about Vietnam: ““Hey, I’m your father!”” the elder Bowker says.

Of course that exchange never actually happens, but as in “Soldier’s Home,” third person omniscience allows readers many moments like this one, where we can move beyond the (self-erected) barriers that isolate Norman Bowker. “Speaking of Courage” is in fact full of what Bowker *might* have said, had he believed anyone cared to hear it. His whole story gets told in all its fecund detail (save one moment, the point of Kiowa’s death, which Bowker says will be forever inexpressible), if only to the reader. What most distinguishes Norman Bowker’s story from Krebs’s is its generic hybridity; if Hemingway’s story is loosely autobiographical and Krebs a thinly veiled avatar for Hemingway, the veil separating the “real” Tim O’Brien from his narrator Tim O’Brien is even thinner. Often termed “autobio-fiction,” we can’t safely assume the characters in O’Brien’s book didn’t exist or that the events didn’t occur. Or that they did.

“Notes” is a bit of metafiction that follows “Speaking of Courage” in the narrative and serves as a postscript on Norman Bowker’s life. The narrator, “Tim O’Brien,” reports he received a letter from Bowker shortly before Norman’s suicide (he hangs himself with a jump rope in his hometown YMCA) which details the problems Bowker faced “finding a meaningful use for his life after the war” (174). The real point of Bowker’s letter, according to the narrator, “is the simple need to talk” (180). Tobey Herzog believes O’Brien’s use of autobiographical metafiction in *The Things They Carried* is commentary on “the complicated nature of truth as it pertains to the personal and historical traumas of Vietnam” (135). No doubt there’s truth in that: Hemingway’s is the quintessential modern postwar story, O’Brien’s the quintessential *post*modern one. But I believe these choices—the use of the author’s own name and the title of one of his novels in the story particularly— may also represent the “real” Tim O’Brien’s tentative tipping of his hand regarding the autobiographical nature of the material. With “Speaking of Courage” serving as a cautionary tale about the dangers of stifling the urge to share one’s story, in “Notes” Tim O’Brien the narrator offers his thoughts on the benefits of doing so:

I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don’t. Yet when I received Norman Bowker’s letter, it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. (181)

And perhaps O’Brien’s choices, and the great success of the book, represent literary culture’s growing tolerance for autobiographical material in literary culture by 1990.

Because the publication of Tobias Wolff’s coming of age memoir *This Boy’s Life* marks for many the dawn of the late twentieth century memoir boom, we shouldn’t be surprised that Wolff’s account of his postwar experiences manifest themselves as memoir, namely the chapter “Civilian” in *In Pharaoh’s Army*. Memoir

had by 1996 become the coin of the realm, as it were, and much as I have praised the third person omniscience employed by Hemingway and then O'Brien, we see immediately the advantages of first-person narration when that "person" is a craftsman of Wolff's caliber. Returning to San Francisco after a year as an advisor in Vietnam, Wolff experiences the same disorientation and isolation as the fictional Krebs and Bowker, and enacts a similar "self-imposed quarantine" (194). He reports being sharply aware that he was no longer a soldier: "As I walked I kept surprising myself in windows I passed, a gaunt, hollow-eyed figure... Without cap or helmet, my head seemed naked and oversized. I looked newly-hatched, bewildered, without history" (194).

Yet what Wolff's first-person nonfiction point of view sacrifices, perhaps, in terms of indirection, which Hemingway masters in his fiction, and which he and his modernist contemporaries would have prized, the prose makes up for, to my mind, in its fluency and meditative depth. Here is Wolff on the isolation he felt even from family:

I thought of my friends and family as a circle, and this was exactly the picture that stopped me cold and kept me where I was. It didn't seem possible to stand in the center of that circle. I did not feel equal to it. I felt morally embarrassed... San Francisco was an open, amiable town, but I had trouble holding up my end of a conversation. I said horrifying things without knowing it until I saw the reaction.

My laugh sounded bitter and derisive even to me. When people asked me the simplest questions about myself I became cool and remote. Lonesome as I was, I made damn sure I stayed that way. (195)

I imagine this as the kind of "real story" to which Gertrude Stein must have been referring, and it is hard to imagine the characters of Bowker and Krebs managing as much perspective, or articulating it as skillfully. Bowker hardly lives long enough, and it seems Hemingway would have submerged a great deal of this response beneath the surface of Krebs's story.

What may account for the depth here is that memoir allows for the presence in the text of both the writer's current and former selves. While we're left, in "Notes," with narrator Tim O'Brien's interpretation of Norman Bowker's last letter (which serves as a kind of suicide note), in "Civilian" Wolff is able to render his emotions and experiences with great immediacy as his former self but also able to comment on those experiences as his presumably wiser current self.

Unlike the characters of Krebs and Bowker, Wolff *does* tell his war stories shortly after returning home. Having a drink with a woman he's just met, Wolff encounters some other veterans and shares a story of how he humiliated a detestable superior officer, having him call a helicopter to land in the center of a South Vietnamese village, destroying all the hooches in the process. His telling has the sort of disastrous results Krebs and Bowker must have feared:

As soon as I started the story I knew I shouldn't tell it. I couldn't find the right tone. My first instinct was to make it somber and regretful, to show how much more regretful and compassionate I was than the person who had done this thing, how far I had evolved in wisdom since then, but it came off sounding phony. I shifted to a clinical, deadpan exposition. This proved even less convincing than the first pose... How do you tell such a terrible story? Maybe such a story shouldn't be told. Yet finally it will be told... And in the end who gives a damn, who's listening? What do you owe the listener, and which listener do you owe? (207-8)

Of the three "characters" examined here, Wolff's persona is the one who becomes, or remains, fully expressive regarding his war experiences. At the end of the chapter "Civilian," near the end of the memoir, Wolff recounts the experience of drafting an early, unpublished novel while at Oxford immediately following the war.

In the very act of writing I felt pleased with what I did. There was a pleasure of having words come to me, and the pleasure of ordering them, re-ordering them, weighing one

against another. Pleasure also in the imagination of the story, the feeling that it could mean something... I could feel it happening. I was saving my life with every line that I wrote, and I knew it.” (213)

Wolff’s conviction about writing’s lifesaving properties at the end of *In Pharaoh’s Army* has always put me in mind of these other stories by Hemingway and O’Brien, and, frankly, of these two other writers. As a teacher and writer of nonfiction, I have to check my impulse to credit Wolff’s peace of mind to the genre he works in, to suggest that the telling the “real story” carries with it a catharsis perhaps not available to the writer of fiction. I know this is overreaching, a result of my burning desire to read Stein’s “real story of Hemingway.” At least a close look at these stories, as I suggested earlier, offer perspective on the shifts in literary culture over the last hundred years, particularly as pertains to war narrative and confessional nonfiction writing. If Hemingway is the representative of the restrained Modernists and O’Brien of the cagey postmodernists, Wolff may represent our time, what some have called “the age of memoir.”

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