CAN THE PEN MATCH THE SWORD?: A LOOK AT THE VALUE OF WORDS IN THE DEPICTION OF WAR

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The word "war" evokes a montage of images so extensive it seems impossible to choose just one. We hear "war" and we think of massive green army tanks rolling over a sandy landscape in Iraq, blood-streaked victims of a suicide bombing in Israel, the barrel of a gun pointing out over a stone wall during the Civil War, or a phalanx of silver armor flooding across a hillside in the Trojan War. Ask a war veteran to imagine war, however, and he will conjure a narrower set of images: the bodies of fishermen and children strewn across a riverbank at dawn; the empty space where a friend used to stand a minute before a mine went off; or blood dripping on the back of one's own hand after firing the first shot (Shay 3, 71, 78).

What distinguishes the images of war in the mind of a war veteran from those in the mind of an ordinary civilian is that the former are first-hand accounts. They have not been filtered through a camera lens or a reporter's pen. According to essayist Susan Sontag, this discrepancy is immutable and insurmountable. She ends her essay "Looking at War," a discussion of the evolution, importance, and complexity of war photography, with this very sentiment: "We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. . . . That's what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire . . . stubbornly feels. And they are right" (98). With her last lines, Sontag casts the rest of her essay in a critical, if not dubious, light. All the images of war she has spent so much time discussing—images that have occupied the global consciousness since the camera's invention in 1839—are only that: images. They will never accurately render the disorienting, dehumanizing, and transformative experience of battle.

Sontag's admission begs the question: If we are truly incapable of conceiving of the reality of war, what use are war images? Sontag suggests that one possible motivation behind a war image is to provoke the viewer to oppose war (97). But she points out that a narrative is likely to be more effective than an image in arousing protest. She explains: "Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, and to feel. No photograph . . . can unfold, go further" (98). Narrative, it seems, has more potential than a photograph to recall war faithfully enough to arouse active opposition. And unlike a photograph, whose meaning can be altered based on the caption (Sontag cites a photograph of children killed in the shelling of a village that was passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings), a narrative's meaning cannot be radically transformed by the addition of a footnote or an addendum (86). Narrative, it seems, offers a less easily manipulated depiction of war that can prompt activism more effectively than an image.

But Sontag explains that unlike a narrative, a photograph is universal—it does not exclude its audience based on the language it uses or the references it makes (86). And, according to Sontag, not all narratives are more effective (or affecting) than photographs: she uses Homer's epic poem *The Iliad* as an example of a war narrative that depicts battle in a steely, unfeeling fashion. In *The Iliad*, Sontag asserts, "War is seen as something men do, inveterately, undeterred by the accumulation of suffering it inflicts" (93). Like the two types of war photography, staged and un-staged, Sontag presents two families of war narratives: those that, like *The Iliad*, depict war in a glorified, unrealistic manner, and those that dutifully report the violence of battle to mobilize readers to oppose war. She designates only the latter category as one that can have a powerful, lasting effect on the reader.

But not all war narratives belong to these two categories. Upon closer inspection of a collection of war narratives—"The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien*, and *The Iliad*, by Homer—it becomes clear that the narrative's place in the pantheon of war depictions is as varied as the photographs Sontag presents. And while readers cannot interpret a narrative as disparately as the Serbs and Croats interpreted the photo of the dead children, the strength of the audience's response can vary widely based on the identity of the reader. But what do these narratives really do for us? What is their purpose if, as Sontag argues, they can't ever really put us in the soldier's boots?

It is an undeniable fact that certain war narratives glorify rather than accurately reflect the realities of war. Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" is one such poem. It memorializes a particularly bloody battle during the Crimean War, in which six-hundred British soldiers were ambushed on the plain above Balaklava, a town in Crimea. Tennyson's description of the men marching en masse to defend their country depicts a grand, cinematic version of the battle. He writes: "'Charge for the guns!' he said: / Into the valley of Death / rode the six hundred. . . . // . . . When can their glory fade? / O the wild charge they made!" (1). Tennyson's poem paints the soldiers riding "into the valley of Death" as glorious men nobly sacrificing their lives.

This line from Tennyson's poem became the title for one of Roger Fenton's most famous photographs of the Crimean War, entitled "Into the Valley of Death." In the photograph, which Sontag discusses in her essay, Fenton captures a wide, rutted road that holds the remnants of the bloody battle, littered with cannonballs and rocks. In stark contrast to most of Fenton's distinctly staged photographs, Sontag describes this image as a portrait "of absence, without the dead" (92). She explains that this portrait is the only one that would not have needed to be staged—it displays no more, and no less, than a void:

Tennyson's poem, on the other hand, is characterized not by absence, but rather by the presence of six-hundred soldiers marching to their deaths. He evokes the same panorama of destruction that Fenton's photo memorializes, but in a more melodious fashion. While Fenton's photograph captures the results of the destruction—the emptiness, the lost lives, the cannonballs—Tennyson's poem depicts the march to destruction, and the battle itself: "Cannon to the right of them / Cannon to the left of them / Cannon in front of them / Volley'd and thunder'd" (1). The rhyme and meter of the poem make it lyrical, which presents a strange contrast with the dark subject of the poem. It is interesting that Fenton would choose such a contrived, heavy-handed poem to entitle a photograph that is considered (at least by Sontag) to be one of the few emotionally affecting portraits of his career. Indeed, after reading the flowery poem, one would think that it belongs to Sontag's first category of war narratives: the glorified, unrealistic depiction of war.

The fact that Fenton used a line from Tennyson's poem to title his photograph, however, means that the poem did hold some significance at the time (if only for the artist himself). Although a contemporary audience might read the poem as a tired, flat memorial, when it was first published in 1854, readers felt it was a fitting tribute to the lost troops. Indeed, Tennyson wrote "Charge of the Light Brigade" immediately after reading an account of the battle in the paper. The poem became extremely popular and was even distributed in pamphlets among the troops in Crimea (Shannon 22). Despite what Sontag might think, it seems war narrative is not exclusively useful to provoke impassioned opposition. With careful word choice and elegiac form, narrative can also become a fitting memorial. Tennyson's poem shows us that war narrative, like war photography, is an art whose meaning constantly shifts and changes with time and audience.

It is clear that war narrative is not merely, as Sontag suggests, useful as a rallying cry; it can also be a requiem for lost troops. This incarnation of war narrative must understandably distort the event it elegizes, because it is written to honor and flatter

the soldiers who died. (Tennyson even changed the name of the squadron from "the Light Calvary Brigade" to "the Light Brigade" to make it more compact and rhythmic [Shannon 13].) But while this kind of war narrative challenges Sontag's view of the optimum purpose of a war narrative—to provoke outrage—it unwittingly supports her view of the abiding efficacy (or lack thereof) of these kinds of presentations of war. In glorifying these events, we in no way gain a sense of what it must actually have been like to be there. The line "Honor the brave and bold! / Long shall the tale be told" (Tennyson 1) isn't so much a glimpse into a battleground as much as it is a eulogy. Like Fenton, who often distorted the landscape in order to take a powerful photograph, Tennyson romanticizes and elegizes the famous Crimean battle to achieve his ends. But what if a writer's aim is to achieve what Sontag believes is impossible—to capture, for a reader who has never been in a war zone, what the world under fire is like?

Tim O'Brien attempts this very feat in his collection of short stories, *The Things They Carried*, about a platoon of soldiers in the Vietnam War. The stories, told from the perspective of a narrator also named Tim O'Brien, describe the earth-shattering and bizarre life in a war zone and provide glimpses into the broken lives of the soldiers who survived the war. In "Good Form," O'Brien distinguishes between "story-truth" and "happening-truth." A "story truth" may not have technically occurred exactly as it is described but is more faithful to the overall experience than a "happening truth," which occurred in objective reality. He explains: "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (179). Both Tennyson and O'Brien distort the objective truth in their depictions of war, but for different reasons: Tennyson, to honor the lost soldiers, and O'Brien, to honor what he believes to be the essence of his experience.

Indeed, O'Brien attempts to describe the turmoil going on inside of him by telling stories about the experience that caused it. O'Brien provides an example of a happening-truth: "I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief" (180). He juxtaposes this testimony with a story-truth: "He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him" (180). With story-truth, O'Brien can give a face to the "faceless responsibility" and "faceless grief" he feels. Story-truth can, in O'Brien's words, "make things present" (180). The nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach twenty years after the war is over can be realized on the page as a "slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty." Story truths, surprisingly more vivid than happening-truths, do not contain happening truths' uncertainty of things unseen. They give faces, names, and places to tenebrous memories.

Story-truths depict war very differently from a staged or a candid war photograph. These stories neither glorify war nor offer the methodical, painstakingly accurate depiction of violence that Sontag sites as a testimony to the power of narrative (98). Instead, O'Brien attempts to combine the control of a staged war photo with the emotional charge of a candid one. Sontag notes that the Vietnam War marked the end of staged war photography (93). It seems O'Brien inherited the legacy of the "lost art." He renders his experiences as he thinks they should be seen, not as he saw them.

O'Brien certainly challenges Sontag's claim that it is impossible to give civilians a sense of what being in a war zone is actually like. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether or not he achieved his goal. Readers cannot go back in time and find themselves in the midst of battle to see if they would share O'Brien's impressions. But O'Brien's stories can be seen as an antidote to a particular problem Sontag has with war photography: "The problem . . . is that people remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding—and remembering" (Sontag 94). O'Brien's stories enable a reader thinking about war to conjure up more than an out-of-context image. The reader can recall, as soldiers do, snippets of a larger story that are rooted in complex turmoil and emotion.

Both "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and *The Things They Carried* challenge Sontag's limited definition of a war narrative and pose answers to the question of what a war narrative can do for the reader. It can not only provoke opposition, as Sontag argues, but also can act as a memorial, and even venture to give readers a sense of what war is like. But what about the works that Sontag dismisses as unrealistic depictions of war, like *The Iliad*? If we have found prose and poetry that challenge Sontag's original characterizations of war narratives, might it be possible to see beyond Sontag's confining definition of *The Iliad* as a depiction of war that is devoid of emotion?

Sontag argues that *The Iliad* callously presents war as a fact of life:

> Descriptions of the exact fashion in which bodies are injured and killed in combat is a recurring climax in the stories told in the *Iliad*. War is seen as something men do, inveterately, undeterred by the accumulation of suffering it inflicts; to represent war in words or pictures requires a keen, unflinching detachment. (93)

She explains that this view of war—as inveterate, inevitable, and even normal—is a product of the epoch in which Homer wrote *The Iliad*. She explains that, in stark contrast to contemporary belief that "war is an aberration," *The Iliad* reflects a time at which "war has been the norm and peace the exception" (93). Homer's world exists in a continual state of combat, and seems far removed from contemporary America, in which wars involve a select few instead of entire nations and empires. Indeed, the idea of battle as a way of life seems not only archaic but also unrealistic, considering the large number of war veterans suffering from severe Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder. (Without even mentioning the ever-increasing number of Iraq War veterans suffering from the disease, a quarter-million of the three-quarters-of-a-million combat veterans from Vietnam are still living with severe PTSD [Shay xix].) According to Sontag, *The Iliad* depicts war as ubiquitous, but this view of war is unrealistic, because war ravages a nation so thoroughly that the populace of a prosperous country could not maintain a perpetual state of war. Sontag sees *The Iliad* as a chronicle of a type of warfare that does not, and cannot, resemble our own.

But some see *The Iliad*—the story of warrior Achilles' anger in the Trojan War—not as an unrealistic depiction of war, but rather an extremely astute chronicle of a PTSD victim. Psychologist Jonathan Shay won a Macarthur Fellowship for his work treating PTSD in Vietnam War veterans using Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In the introduction to his book, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, he explains how that the story of *The Iliad* was actually similar to that of many Vietnam War veterans:

> Achilles . . . is tortured by guilt and the conviction that he should have died rather than his friend; he renounces all desire to return home alive; he goes berserk and commits atrocities against the living and the dead. This is the story of Achilles in the *Iliad*, not some metaphoric translation of it.
>
> This was also the story of many combat veterans, both from Vietnam and from other long wars . . . I have brought them together with the *Iliad* not to tame, appropriate, or co-opt them but to promote a deeper understanding of both, increasing the reader's capacity to be disturbed by the *Iliad* rather than softening the blow of the veterans' stories. (Shay xxi)

In contrast to Sontag, Shay sees *The Iliad* not as an unflinching, unfeeling depiction of battle, but rather as an accurate chronicle of the emotional turmoil of a soldier in wartime. Reading *The Iliad* helped him better understand—and therefore, better treat—Vietnam War veterans. By adding that he hopes the juxtaposition of the soldiers' stories with *The Iliad* will increase the readers' sensitivity to the epic poem, Shay implies that the emotional potency of the poem might be hard for modern readers to access. This implication sheds new light on Sontag's statement that *The Iliad* presents war as "inveterate" rather than exceptional or life shattering. It is possible that Sontag misread Homer's dutiful descriptions of Achilles' breakdown as detached, when they were, in fact, careful chronicles of a man losing his mind.

Indeed, it seems hard to imagine that Sontag could read Homer's description of Achilles' treatment of his rival Hektor's corpse as "unfeeling." Blinded by grief and rage, Achilles violently abuses the body of Hektor, the Trojan general who murdered Achilles' best friend Patroklos. The brutality of his actions is certainly vividly rendered, but the emotion behind it is apparent:

> [A]t that hour he [Achilles] yoked his team, with Hektor
> tied behind, to drag him out, three times
> around Patroklos' tomb. . . . / . . . Akhilleus [Achilles]
> in rage visited indignity on Hektor
> day after day. (Homer 562)

This description honors Achilles' grief in the wake of his best friend's death by revealing his inability to cope. Homer depicts Achilles dragging Hektor's body around Patroklos' tomb three times and abusing Hektor's body "day after day." As Shay points out, particularly traumatic events, such as betrayal by a leader, death of a friend in arms, or being wounded often leave a soldier at risk of entering a "berserk" state, one of unnecessary and uncontrolled violence. Shay characterizes Achilles—who has suffered all of these events—as "berserk" at this point in the poem.

But the berserk state is not exclusively a product of the Trojan War: a Vietnam veteran's description of his own abuse of a dead victim, included in Shay's book, could just as easily be read as Achilles' internal monologue. He says: "I lost all my mercy. I felt a drastic change after that. I just couldn't get enough. I built up such hate, I couldn't do enough damage. . . . [It] made some of the hurt go away" (quoted in Shay 78). It seems that Achilles is not merely a bloodthirsty warrior; like many soldiers, he is so overcome with emotion that he loses touch with the material world around him.

Parallels between Achilles' narrative and O'Brien's narrative further challenge Sontag's characterization of *The Iliad* as an unfeeling report of the Trojan War. In "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien describes his comrade Rat Kiley brutally murdering a baby water buffalo after the death of his best friend, Kurt Lemon. Like Achilles, and many war veterans Shay describes, Rat Kiley goes berserk in the wake of his best friend's death. O'Brien describes the scene: "Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear. . . . It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. . . . [Rat] shot randomly, almost casually, quick little spurts in the belly and butt. Then he reloaded, squatted down, and shot it in the left front knee" (79). O'Brien, like Homer, describes with languishing detail the violent acts of soldiers in mourning. Both men brutally attack defenseless victims to displace the rage they feel in the wake of the loss of their best friend: Achilles abuses a corpse, and Rat, a baby buffalo. Both men also find it difficult to stop abusing the vulnerable victim. Interestingly, both soldiers' desperate desire for control leads them to abuse defenseless victims. Their testimonies help us begin to comprehend how and why war crimes are committed. The close parallels between the two narratives also shed light on Homer's epic. Like O'Brien, Homer so vividly describes his character's horrifying actions to impress upon the reader how unhinged and nearly inhuman war can make a person. His poetry is not, as Sontag seems to think, a testament to the normalcy of war. Quite the contrary: in fact, it is intended to display the extent to which war can remove a solider from both morality and reality.

Throughout her essay, Sontag looks exclusively at the way in which war photographs have affected viewers unconnected with war. It is not until the end of her essay that she ties in the view of the solider, stubbornly maintaining that the everyday civilian cannot understand what it's like to be in a war zone. But war narratives do not only serve the non-soldier. Unlike photographs, which are taken largely to document events for those who are not present, narratives can be employed in therapy for war veterans. O'Brien explains how his own writings helped him deal with his war experiences: "The act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse" (156). It seems that O'Brien's embrace of "story-truth" is inextricably linked to the efficacy of his narratives. Through story truth, he explains, "I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God . . . I can make myself feel again" (180). Sontag argues that war narratives are incapable of making us feel what war is like. But she leaves out the fact that war narratives can allow soldiers, hardened and withdrawn after the ravages of violence, to feel (something, anything) again.

In his descriptions of his own writing, O'Brien links his ability to remember with his ability to feel again. And O'Brien is not the only war veteran who had difficulty accessing not only emotions but also memories. Amnesia is common in the wake of traumatic events (Shay 172). And as Shay explains, narrative plays a substantial role in the healing (and re-remembering) process for war veterans: "Virtually all treatment methods direct the survivor to construct a personal narrative at some time in his or her recovery" (187). Shay explains that the construction of narrative is often difficult for veterans because sequential time is antithetical to the disorienting experience of battle. His description of the individual fragments that compose a trauma narrative recalls O'Brien's description of "story-truth":

> We see the paradox that narrative temporality can never be completely true to the timeless experience of prolonged, severe trauma. . . . The paradox disappears when we look at narration as a step in the survivor's larger move to communalize the trauma by inducing others who were not there to feel what the victim felt when he or she was going through it. (Shay 191)

Shay connects the two different audiences of war narrative—those who were there, and say we could never understand, and those who want nothing more than to understand. It seems the two parties are inextricably linked. In order to truly recover, a soldier must relay his experiences to a sympathetic audience. Depictions of war, then, can serve at least two audiences: those on the home front and those behind enemy lines. It also seems that war narratives can serve multiple purposes: they can memorialize and elegize soldiers; they can open one's eyes to the horror of war; and they can also allow those who know war all too well to close their eyes and move on with their lives.

When Sontag claims that depictions of war are in some way futile because we—those who have never seen war—just "couldn't get it," she seems to have missed the point. As Tennyson's poem displays, war narratives are not exclusively written to provide an accurate account of a battle. In fact, "accuracy" in war narrative is barely relevant at all. Shay displays that the writer's ability to capture war with emotional acuity, as O'Brien and Homer do, is what enables the soldier and the civilian to better understand each other. The soldier remembers how to feel, and the civilian gains some semblance of understanding the soldier's experiences. The war photograph gives the viewer a false sense of certainty; having seen a photograph, we are bound to think we have a sense of the milieu the image captures. The war narrative, at its most effective, has the opposite effect. It shows the reader just enough of the horrors of war to make him or her understand what soldiers must wrestle with daily—the utter incomprehensibility of it all.

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