

# The Dead: Loss of Self in the Literature of the Vietnam War

Jeff Loeb

---

Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey, impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling.

—James Joyce, *Dubliners*

Seven winters have slipped away,  
the war still follows me.  
Never in anything have I found  
a way to throw off the dead.

—Gerald McCarthy, "The Sound of Guns"

There is no end, happy or otherwise. Nothing is fixed, nothing is solved. . . . Sorrow, it seems to me, may be the true absolute.

—Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*

---

**A**ccording to Holocaust scholar Lawrence L. Langer, the biggest problem faced by survivors in relating their memories and experiences is "how to talk about them meaningfully to an audience of outsiders" (107). He derives this observation from comparing extensive personal interviews of many surviving victims with films of the same witnesses taken later while telling their stories only to a camera with no questioner present. The stark differences Langer finds between the two types of response—the interviews, which tend toward a polite glossiness; versus the impromptu testimony, harrowing and guilt-ridden—lead him to posit that the deep shame experienced by trauma survivors ("It was my fault," "I could

have done something," or "They died instead of me.") underlies a crippling, life-long guilt only revealed under certain displaced or indirect conditions. In some respects, the phenomenon Langer describes resembles the Catholic rite of confession, with its screened-off interlocutor possessing the power of forgiveness in exchange for a "truth" too terrible to share with others. This, it seems to me (with no comparison intended between the victims of brutal violence and its perpetrators or witnesses), is analogous to the problem encountered by veteran-writers of the Vietnam War; like the Holocaust victims, their works attack the sense of shame through the creation of a special language or code, one in which ordinary terms are imbued with enhanced meanings in order to compensate for the loss of what Langer terms the "correlations on which the integrated self depends" (107). I find that certain concepts appear especially frequently in this literature, to the point that I would term them broad motifs. Two of the more obvious of these are loss of home and youth. However, a third one, personal fragmentation—the concept I explore in this essay—is the most complex of the major themes encoded in this literature.

While a sense of self-division is ubiquitous in all modes of Vietnam literature, it finds its most succinct expression in the poetry by veterans. Many describe, for instance, the painful experience of a sudden memory that involuntarily divides their consciousness. Charles M. Purcell, as an example, in "The Walk" conflates trash bags back in the U. S. with improvised body bags awaiting evacuation to the rear in Vietnam:

Streets—quiet and wet

Green bags of garbage and leaves

neatly placed by the road.

Abruptly another scene pierces my mind

Other green bags are remembered

Neatly placed by the road  
Green bags made from ponchos  
Bags with legs sticking out from the bottoms  
A nightmare awaiting the man from glad. (107)

In addition to such representations of split memory, narrators frequently speak of existing apart from the persons they once were. In one sense, this is a perception common to us all, often showing up in the form of shame or regret for having done, or failed to do, things that now bring us pain. It is much easier to regard an earlier, failed self as somehow separate or different—as being perhaps more naive or less principled—than to admit that the same impulses and characteristics that resulted in the distasteful memories are still a part of us, waiting only for the perfect bad situation in order to emerge. This is the literal component of the feeling of self-division: a form of denial, avoidance, and repression. For many American writers of the Vietnam War, however, there is an additional aspect, one they describe in words that make clear their perception of a marked dissimilarity between present and prior selves—a metaphoric transfer of personality, with the present self a diminished substitution for the "true" or "integrated" one, now irrevocably displaced.

Perhaps the first critic to recognize this sense of self-division in works about Vietnam was David J. DeRose, who notes that a "self-objectification" process he terms a "double focus," or, alternatively, a "dual presence," occurs in a wide variety of works, including novels, plays, and films. Specifically, DeRose identifies that in Charles Durden's novel *No Bugles, No Drums* the narrator is frequently "cognizant of himself as active participant and removed observer of his own experience" (112). Similarly, David Rabe's dramatic trilogy, *Streamers, The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel, and Sticks and Bones*, displays this double focus because, according to DeRose,

when vets like Rabe began reflecting on their experiences, "a simultaneous involvement in and contemplative distance from the events was necessary" (113). Stylistically, DeRose concludes, such a self-objectification process often shows up as the first-person, voice-over narration in such films as *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*, the first directed by Vietnam veteran Oliver Stone, and the second co-written by Gustav Hasford, based on his novel *The Short-Timers*, and journalist Michael Herr, author of the acclaimed memoir *Dispatches*.

Unlike the two common attributes I mention earlier—the sense of no home to return to and the loss of youth—self-division is manifested in not only the words chosen but also the very forms of representation. This happens in a variety of ways, the most apparent being elliptical comments and disjointedness of narrative. However, more subtle ones exist as well, including the following: continual reference to a deeper moral loss; a resistance to closure via the creation of false endings; the emergence of an impromptu self; and disguising as an appendix the actual purpose driving the narrative.

In addition to representing the overlaying of traumatic memory onto ordinary consciousness, as Purcell does above, many narrators also describe a sense of physical division as a means of talking about a more deeply felt split. Again, this phenomenon is most easily observed in poetry. In fact, as Paul Fussell points out, every poem in the first twenty-three pages of the best-known anthology of Vietnam War poetry, *Carrying the Darkness*, somehow concerns itself with physical division.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most accomplished of these—certainly among the most anthologized—is *After Our War*, in which poet John Balaban creates an elaborate metaphor that might loosely (and somewhat inadequately) be translated as the chickens coming home to roost. In Balaban's vision, actual body parts of those killed in Vietnam seem to come alive and gravitate to the U.S. These "dismembered bits—all those pierced eyes, ear slivers, jaw

splinters, gouged lips, odd tibias, skin flaps and toes . . . —naturally return to their source," arriving "with immigrant uncertainty" in the United States, since "it was almost home" (15-16). There, they attach themselves to unsuspecting victims, sometimes appearing as "an extra pair of lips glued and yammering on [a famous man's] cheek," or sometimes the reader, also indicted, might see that "at your daughter's breast thickens a hard keloidal scar." However, in addition to the physical split implied, these images speak to a different and far deeper fragmentation, the separation of survivors from their very language. "After Our War" ends by questioning whether we can ever renew our now-exhausted myths:

After the war, with such Cheshire cats grinning in our trees,

Will the ancient tales still tell us new truths?

Will the myriad world surrender new metaphor?

After our war, how will we speak love?

Many times, the remembered traumatic event literally divides a survivor's memories, and, along with them, his or her conscience: "I was a fucking animal," says one of psychiatrist

Jonathan Shay's patients:

When I look back at that stuff, I say, "That was somebody else that did that. Wasn't me.

That wasn't me. . . . I became a fucking animal. I started putting fucking heads on poles.

Leaving fucking notes for the motherfuckers. . . . They wanted a fucking hero, so I gave it

to them. They wanted fucking body count, so I gave them body count. I hope they're

fucking happy. But they don't have to live with it. I do." (*Achilles in Vietnam* 83)

Such ethical dilemmas (whether the depictions are strictly true or not) resulting from trauma are marked by both a temporal and a spatial "discontinuity" in the testimony of survivors, according to Langer (66). He differentiates between linear memory, situated in time

and place and having a definite before and after, which he calls "*in media res*," and the temporally unhinged memory situated on the trauma itself, or "*in principio*," which "has a different beginning for each victim and provides closure for none" (67). In narratives of trauma, the key event tends to surface not as situated element of any portion of the narrative but rather as an apex of grief, a thing to be returned to and around which the linear elements then collect as centrifugal ornaments, as opposed to its being the motivating structure that we are accustomed to.

This strategy, according to Langer, "invert[s] the order of conflict and resolution that we have learned to expect of our traditional historical narrative" (67). To the person thus struggling with an unrelenting apex of *in principio* memory, this fragment of a previous moral code cannot be computed within the realities of the traumatized universe, wherein there is an ethical interregnum, a suspension of "Thou Shalt Not Kill" or any number of lesser moral outrages representing an ethos "too primitive . . . for the society he now inhabits" (68).

This nonlinear, seemingly intrusive, point in the survival narrative represents for Langer the "birth of the divided self." Because this suspension of conventional morality has no vocabulary with which it might be expressed—how can it be justifiable or accepted, for instance, to greet the grim news of a colleague's violent death with laughter, or to mutilate a corpse?—the survivor-narrator must attempt to convey the impulse that motivated him or her to such primitive behavior by using a language that not only does not permit such things (which were nevertheless frequent occurrences in Vietnam) but does not even admit of their possibility. This attempt takes the form of a code, a wall of words to hide behind. Shay adds the following to Langer's definition:

Traumatic memory is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory replay of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments. . . . Often the only clue to a traumatic event may be an utterly bland statement of fact slipped into another context, such as "near the ville where Porker got his shit scattered [i.e., killed]." (172)

These narrative disjunctions displaying the sense of self-division often appear in references to a previous, more ethical self. Army Pfc. Bill Franz, for example, after "struggl[ing] for years with alcoholism and violence," nevertheless says (with a curious Yeatsian echo):

But I'd do it all again [go to Vietnam]. Yeah. I would do it . . . to find the soul I lost. . . . Because I lost my soul. It would be kinda like going for broke. To get a piece of my soul back . . . or to get just get taken out [ellipses his]. Because I feel like I died twenty years ago. I really do. You was taken out of youth and you'd go beyond manhood. (*No Shining Armor* 360)

Franz couples feelings of self-division, reflected in the pauses in his oral testimony, with a sense of having already morally died, meaning that he continues to live a sort of death in life. His feelings are very similar to those Langer describes in Holocaust survivors when he talks about the type of self-division that he calls "tainted memory" (121). The key element is that something in Franz's experience has violated his sense of what Shay has termed "*themis*"—i.e., "what's right"—hence Franz's "lost soul," and the fact that he continues to live his own death in the place of those who had actually died (6). It is no accident that Franz talks about his spiritual self-division in the same place as his sense of a physical one, whether expressed as death in life or as estrangement from youth, or who he was, because the two are entirely unified in his consciousness of loss. As one of the other members of Franz's unit, Corporal Bill Clough, says:

The worst effect the war had on me was that I had become so disunified with my beliefs that I couldn't even incorporate my life into any semblance of religious conviction. With the background I've had [i.e., a religious one], that was very difficult to overcome. (360)

Critics of Vietnam writing often fail to recognize that participants experienced a sudden irrelevancy of previously normal or viable ethical options upon their encountering that strange world with all new rules.<sup>3</sup> Certain old prohibitions were instantly gone (e.g., thou shalt not kill), their place taken by others (kill them before they kill you). They have, in Langer's words, "adopt[ed] the precepts of rational interest and self-preservation" rather than dying (11). Unfortunately, what remains of their old moral self, Langer's "deep memory," knows better and re-emerges to conflict with memory (12). For example, the central incident in ex-Marine Lieutenant Phillip Caputo's memoir *A Rumor of War* occurs when he orders one of his squads into a village to capture two suspected Viet Cong, with full knowledge that the squad leader intends to kill the suspects in retribution for some recent American losses.

Caputo, gripped by revenge and operating under the pretext of some ambiguous orders from higher ups to increase body counts, gives tacit approval to this execution. "Retaliate," he says to himself. "I will retaliate. . . . Kill VC. That's what we were supposed to do. Neal [his superior] wanted bodies. Well, I would give him bodies, and then my platoon would be rewarded instead of reproved" (299). As he waits in his bunker, trying to sleep while the patrol is out, Caputo is awakened by feelings of guilt. Recalling the incident over ten years later, he explains:

Psychologically, I had never felt worse. I had been awake for no more than a few seconds when I was seized by the same feeling that had gripped me after my nightmare about the mutilated men in my old platoon: a feeling of being afraid when there was no

reason to be. And this unreasoning fear quickly produced the sensation I had often in action: of watching myself in a movie. . . . I could not shake that weird sensation of being split in two. (300)

He refers to this other persona as his "double self," as opposed to his "normal self," which is his "calm and lucid half" (301). Later, after the patrol has indeed executed the suspects, who turn out to be ordinary villagers with no Viet Cong ties, Caputo and the squad members are court-martialed. Although the charges are eventually dropped, ostensibly for lack of evidence—essentially a political decision—Caputo recalls his feelings of being psychologically and physically split as he awaits trial: "I felt in limbo, neither a free man nor a prisoner. . . . I felt detached from everything. I felt very much like a man who has lost a leg or an arm" (314). His choosing imagery of self-division in response to the most traumatic of his reconstructed memories suggests not just that he is objectifying otherwise inexpressible feelings of outrage at himself for abandoning his principles, but also that he is actually experiencing a sort of moral double vision.

Langer, comparing a Holocaust survivor's earlier sense of agency in raising a family with his memory of impotence in not being able to protect them, calls this phenomenon "simultaneously a diminished view, eroding prior stabilities and increasing the rift between past and present" (54). It is, he says, not so much a split "but a parallel existence"—i.e., not a sequence of back and forth but a "simultaneity," "a dialogue between the two selves," a "permanent duality" (95). This sense of being two parallel selves comes, Langer continues, from the "illogic of juxtaposing contradictory [moral] positions," precisely the situation in which Caputo finds himself.

It is simple enough to extend critically the "meaning" of such stories as Caputo's by

stressing their cultural or political dimensions, but doing so exclusively, at the expense of the words on the page, blunts, and even negates, the private pain and loss of moral center that the human being behind the story wants us to encounter. Faced by narratives like this, we should perhaps suspend judgment for a time, not to excuse behavior—they don't want this; they know it's their fault—but to listen, even to imagine how we might have done differently, essentially to admit that situations can arise for which our past value systems simply do not prepare us. We should thus also recognize that the type of vocabulary erected by trauma survivors to deal with their ethical dilemmas argues against such inherited romantic distinctions as heroism and cowardice because these values are revealed to be false and inadequate.

Also, we should see that in inheriting an irrelevant vocabulary to describe their quandaries, Vietnam narrators have also inherited an irrelevant way of viewing the self. Accustomed to thinking of themselves as unified and their existence as predicated on individuality, when they attempt to locate this unified individual, they find only a chasm—what they describe as a split between former and present selves—and are thus forcibly yanked to the cutting edge of postmodernity.

**Jeff Loeb** is a writer who lives in New York. In prior lives, he enjoyed long careers as, in roughly this order: US Marine, bartender, construction worker, waiter, truck driver, furniture mover, carpenter, college and university teacher, radio reporter (WBAI - D.C. Bureau), assistant city manager, cable television company manager, photography studio owner, farmer/rancher, academic writer, and high-school teacher. He has a PhD in English from the University of Kansas. He has published over 40 critical and personal articles in such journals as *Adelaide* (multiple), *American Studies*, *African American Review* (multiple), *English Journal*, *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood*

(multiple), and *War, Literature & the Arts* (multiple). Book entries include "Foreword" in *Black Prisoner of War* and "Afterword" in *Memphis, Nam Sweden*. Often-reprinted portions of a memoir-in-progress include "Epiphany in Memphis," "Brisance" and "Measuring the Seasons," all originally appearing in WLA.

#### Works Cited

- Caputo, Phillip. *A Rumor of War*. 1977. New York: Ballantine, 1978.
- DeRose, David. "A Dual Perspective: First Person Narrative in Vietnam Film and Drama." In *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature of the Vietnam War*. Eds.: Owen W. Gilman, Jr. and Lorrie Smith. New York: Garland, 1990.
- Fussell, Paul. "The Poetry of Three Wars: World War I, World War II, and Vietnam." Cockefair Chair Distinguished Writer in Residence Lecture, 16 Nov. 1994, University of Missouri-Kansas City.
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. New York: Viking, 1967.
- Langer, Lawrence L. *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- McCarthy, Gerald. In *Winning Hearts and Minds*, Eds. Rottman, et. al. Brooklyn: First Casualty Press, 1972.
- O'Brien, Tim. *In the Lake of the Woods*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994.
- Purcell, David. In *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans*. Eds. Larry Rottman, Jan Barry, and Basil T. Paquet. Brooklyn: First Casualty Press, 1972.
- Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York: Atheneum, 1994.