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"He's not my son anymore!"

The Returning Veteran in Robert Bausch's *On the Way Home*

Since the fall of Saigon and American withdrawal from Southeast Asia, Vietnam War fiction has gradually turned from an examination of the war itself to that of the war's aftermath. Reviewers such as Bill Ott have noted a "second generation" of Vietnam War fiction, composed of works that "are most concerned with the legacy of Vietnam: the scarred minds and bodies of veterans, the difficult transition to 'normal' life, the gradual awakening of a new generation to what their fathers have endured" (324). Whereas the characters of many of the works of the "first generation" of Vietnam War fiction, especially those in the combat novels, quest to survive their tours of duty in Southeast Asia, the protagonists of this second generation of fiction seek a different kind of survival, one that involves life in postwar America. For these characters, the quest is not so much a physical return home as it is a psychological one.

Cited as "a good contrast to the blood-and-guts war novels of recent years" (Conaty 648-49), Robert Bausch's *On the Way Home*, a psychological study of Michael Sumner, a former prisoner-of-war, and his family, is paradigmatic of the way that Vietnam War literature has turned from an examination of the war itself to that of the war's aftermath.[1] Bausch explores the scarred legacy of Vietnam, a legacy that transcends the returning veteran to encompass the many friends and relatives that suffered the disasters of the same war that killed or in-

jured so many of their loved ones, and, through an examination of language and ensconced personal and cultural perceptions, demonstrates that Vietnam disturbed America's perceptions of what a returning veteran should be.

Both those who have served in Vietnam and those who have written about the war have found it difficult to describe the events of such a lengthy and diverse war in traditional terms. Writers trying to translate the Vietnam experience into words have found it necessary to replace the clichés of other wars with wholly new images, with "language events." The abandonment of old language patterns conveys our understanding that with an experience such as the Vietnam War, which defies the traditional interpretation of past wars, we can no longer rely, in Saussurean terms, on the traditional significance of words. Instead, the artist is forced to find new language to portray new meanings or "signifieds" to replace old words or "signifiers."[2] This is what Robert Bausch does so well in *On the Way Home*. He has a remarkable sensitivity for finding new expressions that measure the psychological impact of new experience. On one hand, the language he uses is unassumingly simple and intrinsic to the experience, yet at the same time it is as startingly new as the characters' perceptions of that experience, and it forces us, the readers, to appreciate the lack of precedence in the experience itself.

The importance of language in the novel is evident in the characters' focus on the very concept of language. When Michael Sumner was a prisoner-of-war, he was painfully aware of the gaps that language cannot always bridge. Then, the only words that he could hear were foreign words, spoken by "voices crying out in a language" that he could not "understand" (Bausch 56). The main connections that he could make were metaphoric ones, with the voices of the Viet Cong "sound[ing] like

the rattle of some weakened electric motor . . . like the squeals of a trapped animal" (216). The dirt in his hole in the ground "crawls on [his] skin" (214), and his "face makes a noise, a shudder like a horse" (214). When he can "see the moon shining through the thatch" (211), it seems "so perfect and safe, hanging in the universe like a street lamp on a clean boulevard somewhere else in the world" (211). Now that Michael is home, language is still foreign, because in their lack of communication, everyone in the Sumner family speaks a different dialect. Both Dale and Anne, Michael's parents, are bothered by Michael's inability to talk with them. Dale notices that Michael seems "to comprehend a language which only puzzled everybody else" (76), such as the type of language used by a retarded person, and Anne observes that Michael's voice won't come, and when he does talk the sound is out of sync with his lips, "like a film with the sound running a few frames behind" (18).

Michael's failure to fix words to thoughts suggests the inability of conventional language to measure what he has experienced in the war. Conversely, those disturbingly computer-like responses he does give—social echoes of sorts—convey the fixed perceptions under which others expect him to live. He talks in ways that will appease others just as when in Vietnam he acted in ways that would pacify the enemy. Perhaps this is why Michael states, " 'I killed her, Dad' " (194) when Dale questions him about the disappearance of Lucy, a neighbor. Michael merely says the words that Dale expects to hear, even though they are purely fictional. The only time that Michael can use language spontaneously, naturally, is when he speaks anonymously into a tape recorder. The lack of communication in the Sumner household can be seen in Dale's perception of Anne's words, which he does not hear clearly. Tired of her confidence that Michael will return to normal, Dale feels that

Anne "sounds like a commercial message, as if she is telling him he will no longer have to worry about chafing hands, athlete's foot" (26). The lack of meaningful language symbolizes the lack of communication between all of the family members. In fact, at times the "silences" in the household, which "build up like dead leaves blown by the wind against a fence" (17) appear "almost lethal, as if one of them might die from lack of words in the air" (19).

Throughout the novel, fresh, incisive figures of speech are used in relation to a number of the characters, and these poetic devices reflect each character's personality and define his or her individual perceptions of reality. This is particularly true of Dale, whose perceptions of life are static and fixed. Michael's illness is described in terms of a weed that has choked Dale's entire existence: "Nothing in his life grows anymore" (13). Dale's need for a fixed order is reflected in his garden, which Bausch tells us is "plant[ed] in rows, neat rows" (13). When "weeds begin to grow faster than cancer, choking the delicate vegetables" (13), Dale cannot stand to work in the garden, just as he cannot bear to be around the changed Michael for very long. Through the imagery of an overgrown, disorderly garden, Bausch creates an appropriate and vivid analogy of the way that Dale perceives Michael and the disorder that Michael has imposed upon Dale's previously orderly life. We see Michael reflected in Dale's garden, now "overgrown with weeds" and "stand[ing] out of the normal grass like the wild hair of the hopelessly insane" (220). Dale's fixed perceptions are also illustrated in his view of life as "a problem he must solve, a complex mental equation which does not balance" (15). This disorderly equation disturbs Dale's whole view of life just as Michael has disturbed Dale's perception of his son and the war:

> Count all the days and nights, divide by moments like this—everything he has experienced, but failed to collect in peace and remember—add Michael, a changed being. This will reduce all of life to a finite number, the numerical value of existence. The thing he has lived for. (16)

Language also functions in other important ways in *On the Way Home*, apropos of Saussure's discussion of "syntagmatic" chains of association (128).[3] Words used later in the novel have their meanings affected by words used earlier and vice versa, so that language takes on a circularity of structure. The word "touched," for instance, is a word that accumulates meanings as the novel progresses. In Chapter IX of Part One, one character remarks in regard to the war that " 'We're all touched by it' " (48). This statement is certainly true, for each character has indeed been touched by the war and each in a different way. In addition to the Sumner family whose lives have been drastically changed by the war, we see how Vietnam has affected even the minor characters, who add a multiplicity of angles to those already present, making the novel an "open" stage on which a number of different views of life are portrayed. Everyone has been destroyed by the war in some personal way, and everyone copes with that destruction in his own manner. Eddie has lost two sons of his own in the war, and Lucy has suffered mistreatment by her first husband, a Vietnam veteran. Lucy's current husband, Ben, has to deal with the agony of wondering whether a veteran has seriously hurt, perhaps even murdered, his wife. The veteran Dale meets in a bar will spend the rest of his life with only one arm, compliments of the war. Even the owner of the appliance store who hires Michael must live

with the memory of his brother-in-law whose body was found "on a spit, in the jungle—" (112).

People are more than emotionally "touched" by the war, though. The novel also provides examples of physical touching, suggesting the need for emotional closeness, or the alienation of Michael's family, such as when Michael and Anne "step down each holding the other, as if they are descending into cold water" (71) or when Dale, impatient with Michael's emotional illness, touches Michael roughly. There are times when Michael wishes he could touch another person, but cannot. When he sits next to Lucy on a bench, he imagines himself touching Lucy's hand, thinking,

> I picture myself putting my hand on hers. I smile at her, caress her hand. I am breathing new air.
>
> "Sometimes, you need someone to talk to." Her hand is still there, next to me. I could put my hand on it if I would only move, but I can't make it happen. (126)

The idea of touching leads to the imagery of hands that also appears and reappears later in the novel when Michael flashes back to his imprisonment by the Viet Cong. There the enemy use their hands to reach through the hole in the ground and pull Michael's hair, while he covers his face with his own hands. At one point, thoughts of the hands of the enemy change to the hands of Michael and his parents:

> Hands took hold of me. Took hold of me.
>
> A sound at my door removes the blankets and sends shocks to my hands.
>
> "Leave me alone," my father says.

I hear my mother whispering. I know her
desperate hands are holding him away. (212)

Such an image subtly networks its way through character after character, situation after situation. And, as the reader sees or, better, feels, the many ways that the word "touched" is used in the novel, he, too, is touched, palpably involved with the war, which has "touched" or devastated so many lives.

Bausch further invites such visceral interaction by readers, along with new perceptions, by revitalizing old words which have lapsed into clichés. For example, the word "burning" which ordinarily lends itself to inferno-like situations, is used in a variety of imaginative ways. The sun is "burning the air" (31), and "the air burns [Michael's] nose" (32). The novel opens with Michael's fear of fireworks and his memory of seeing a burn victim of a fire as a child. Such images are used not only in relation to Michael, but to his family as well. Michael's mother feels "as if something has caught fire spontaneously deep inside her and it is burning outward toward sinew and flesh" (41). When the Sumners received the telegram informing them of Michael's supposed death, Anne placed "the telegram on Dale's lap as if it were something burning" (42). Even "Dale looks at his own hands expect[ing] to find a tiny element burning in each fingernail" (221). The word "burn" draws readers into the text so that they also feel as if they have been "burned" by the war, and they recognize the comprehensiveness of the blaze. The images are viscerally as well as imaginatively gripping.

By playing with language, Bausch leads his readers to experience the numerous metaphorical possibilities of the nature of hell. What does "hell" mean to the woman burned in the fire, whose "face was cracked open, like a coconut" (6)? What does "hell" mean to Ben,

who waits anxiously for news of his abducted wife and for Lucy who suffers the actual abduction? What is "hell" like for Anne and Dale, who thought their son dead and who daily deal with the torment, each in a different way? And what does "hell" mean to Michael, who lived in a hole in the ground in Vietnam for forty-one days and nights, a pawn to be played with by the Viet Cong? Bausch takes a simple word like "hell" and presents it kaleidoscopically throughout the novel, illuminating the subjectivity of each character's experience and challenging the reader to find new meanings for it.[4] Such an approach permits an internal point of view that draws the reader into the complexity of the characters' emotional worlds and portrays their unique personal suffering. We see the absolute inner torment and frustration of a family who cannot adjust to their postwar environment, and we experience a multiple, sometimes contradictory, layering of reality that permits us to view the world without necessarily becoming entrapped by the same ensconced perceptions that entrap the characters.

In focusing the novel around Michael, Anne, and Dale, who are described as "Three strange vessels in [a] cold darkening house" (18), Bausch portrays a web of tangled family relationships that have been complicated by the war. Thinking that Michael has been killed in action, Dale and Anne retire from their life in Chicago and move to Florida to begin anew, only to have their retirement intruded upon by a son who suddenly emerges from the dead and returns to their household but not to their home. First they must accept the fact that they still have a son; then they must deal with the fact that emotionally and psychologically he is not the same young man that they raised. When Michael returns home, they expect him to fit their stereotyped perceptions of the returning soldier and are shocked to find that their way of life no longer accommodates him. Michael disturbs

Anne and Dale's set perceptions of a returning veteran, of themselves as parents, and of the Vietnam War in general. This action sets into motion the interfused moral and epistemological concerns of the novel. In order to accept Michael and in order to come to terms with Michael and the family's alienation, the Sumners must learn to accept that change and complexity which they feel have created their collective misery. They want Michael to be well in a way he cannot be, and they want their lives to be normal, a conflict, of course, that cannot be resolved. In response to Michael, each character suffers a different nightmare, a loss that is intensely personal, even though all are members of the same family.

Bausch's interest in the subjective nature of reality is displayed in his omniscient treatment of Michael, whose psychic pain haunts both the other characters and the reader. We are privy to Michael's detailed thoughts, his lengthy conversations with fellow characters, and his private sessions with Kessler, his psychotherapist. Revealed, for instance, are Michael's innermost anxieties: he confuses his father's punishment of him as a boy with his mistreatment by the Viet Cong; he knows that other people fear him; and he remembers seeing one American soldier kill another American during the war. His psychiatric sessions indicate that he hates being forced to remember the war's atrocities, that he would like to be a child again, and that he feels most peaceful while floating in "the holy water" (7) of the ocean. The chapters entitled "The Tapes" are especially important because the private monologues Michael speaks into the tape recorder are soliloquies where, alone on stage, he can express feelings without worrying about other characters' shocked reactions to them because such feelings threaten conventional understandings.

Michael takes on different identities to different people, whose choice of words indicates that they experi-

ence reality as colored by personal values or moral conditioning. To Eddie, Michael is only a "coward" (199) and, to the other soldiers in Vietnam, he was a "pussy" (147). A neighbor, Ben, considers Michael "not right" (191), whereas Ben's wife, Lucy, sees him as a "sensitive" (139) individual. Michael perhaps assumes the most roles for Dale, who has the most difficult time accepting Michael's current lack of identity. To Dale, Michael is many things: "my son" (210), "not my son anymore" (203), "not Michael anymore" (187), not "anybody" (204), an "alien who comes into rooms like a criminal" (27-28), "a zombie" (12), a walking time bomb, a potential murderer, and a "son of a bitch" (195). In contrast to Dale, Anne is more accepting of Michael's postwar role. She views him as "Michael now. *Now*" (204) rather than as the Michael that everyone remembers. By including so many perceptions of Michael, Bausch demonstrates the subjective nature of individual reality and implies the paramount challenge to this devastated family: the acceptance of complexity and change as life's one constant.

Bausch's emphasis on ways of seeing is reflected in the eye imagery that recurs in the novel and that reflects the perceptions of the characters. The lack of genuine compassion by Kessler for Michael, his patient, can be seen in Kessler's eyes, which are described as being "like soap bubbles" (7), a suggestion that his view of Michael is obscured by a soapy film, a set perception, that does not allow him to see Michael clearly. Furthermore, Kessler's "eyes don't move. It's like his head carries them from place to place, moving them into position to gaze at the world" (9). Eddie, Dale's fishing partner, who also has fixed perceptions, has eyes that are "fiercely aligned" (54). Even the man who helps Michael in the beginning of the novel when the July 4th fireworks frighten him has "impartial" eyes (3), "dry" eyes, eyes that alert Michael that the man really fears him: "He had

his eyes out, airing them, letting them dry. He was afraid of me too" (4). Dale, who feels that Michael will harm someone, thinks of Michael's eyes as those of a murderer. He envisions seeing Michael's photograph in the newspaper, "a high-school picture, kind of blurry, with the eyes focused on something beyond the camera, something horrible" (75). The Sumner family members constantly look into each other's eyes, yet see little except what they have already programmed themselves to see. Their fixed perceptions of reality have limited their vision to a one-dimensional view of life. The one character who has no set perceptions, Lucy, has "eyes so wide" that Michael does not "know how they stay in her head" (79). Michael fantasizes Lucy's eyes as "drop[ping] into her lap, like eggs from a torn carton, and only the sockets there . . . and her husband embarrassingly picks them up, puts them back, saying, 'Sorry, old buddy, this happens once in a while' " (79). In contrast to her husband, Ben, who is set in his ways, Lucy views the world openly, with no rigid, fixed value systems. Because she sees with a multiple vision, she is able to help Michael far more than those characters who are limited in their perception.

Significantly, Michael even takes on different roles to himself, suggesting the ambiguous nature of his own reality. He no longer knows who he is, who he is supposed to be, or how he is supposed to act. When he was imprisoned in Vietnam, he "was someone else, assuming shapes the way some fish change colors" (211). Once home, when he thinks of Hall's, an officer's, shooting of Caswell, another soldier, he wants to be "a land mine" (211) that could "kill Sergeant Hall" (211); he would like to assume the role of a "tortured explosive, waiting to be tripped" (211). Thoughts of trying to escape both the Viet Cong and his postwar problems lead him to desire to be "a little boy" (195) or "a fish, hiding in the reeds" (136). Michael feels as if he is "a character in a movie"

(129) or "a forgotten piece in a chess game" whom "no one will move" (129). The face that he sees in the mirror is no longer himself and leads him to remember his first view of himself in a looking glass after his return from the war: "I didn't see anything behind the eyes. No one could convince me that the figure in the glass was alive, was Michael Sumner" (113). Now that he is "home," he sometimes feels as if he is "inside [his] eyes, hiding from everyone" (172).

Through the eyes of Michael's parents, we learn more about Michael's psychological devastation, his confusion and void and how this state has affected his family. Anne, the mother and "the only one holding on anymore" (16), attempts to achieve a sense of emotional equilibrium and serves as the symbol of stability in the Sumner household. Externally, she tries to remain as nonjudgmental, as patient with Michael's strangeness, as possible, yet inwardly she dislikes having a son who resides in the house "like a pet" (18). Naturally Anne feels happy that Michael survived the war, but

> She never thought his being alive would turn out to be such a useless miracle. . . . She was glad for it, for the resurrection of her son, but now she cannot understand what the miracle was for. (42)

Both Anne and Dale are painfully aware that their lives were much simpler when they thought that Michael had been killed in Vietnam. Now Anne understands that

> A part of her wants Michael to go away. He has been unknowable since his return. She cannot get close to him, get him to talk. She fights the thought whenever she discovers it,

but she knows it is there. If he would just go away, *be dead.* (17)

Thus, at times even Anne is as guilty as the other characters in seeking a simplistic view of reality. She feels a double loss—that of both her son and herself, neither of whom she really knows. Such a drastic change has resulted in "a strange and unavoidable evolution, which makes the world another country, and her husband and son idle strangers sipping coffee in a foreign kitchen" (165).[5]

However, Anne, unlike Dale, first possesses the qualities Michael needs to help him return to normalcy. She is willing to break with precedent—to set aside her love of her husband and her responsibilities as a wife in order to place first her obligations as a mother and her love of her son, a commitment that might require her to leave Dale. As the chapters which focus on "Anne" indicate, making such a decision causes Anne great agony. The complexity of the reality that she must face is illustrated in a passage in which she thinks of Dale's treatment of Michael:

> Inside the house she watches Michael rise up the stairs toward his room, as if he is leaving the earth. *Dale left him by the road and went on with his day.* She goes into the kitchen, looking for something to do. She cannot bear another night in this house, waiting for the sun to disappear out of the sky, waiting for the windows to go dark. *How could he do that, leave his own son next to the water, and go off to fill his day with events?* (65)

In spite of Dale's close-mindedness, his stubbornness, Anne never stops loving him or being loving to him.

She, like the other characters in *On the Way Home*, is a multi-dimensional character, but Anne discovers and accepts her multi-dimensionality before Dale does—she is, in part, the catalyst which frees the rest of the family from its world of emotional stasis.

Particularly relevant to Bausch's epistemological concerns, Anne's awareness of the moral limitations of such narrow, socially prescribed attitudes that close Dale off from his son, her refusal to react stereotypically, provides her with her transcendent capacity to love. Anne, herself, though, is far from static; she must undergo a crisis of fear and confusion. Anne's fears add another important dimension to the novel, particularly in regard to Lucy, whom Anne feels will not really help Michael. Because Lucy is first presented to the reader from Anne's perspective, the reader's concept of Lucy is colored by the strange perceptions of Anne, who is hung up on the clichéd nature of Lucy's 1960's jargon. The reading of reality that Anne passes on to the reader is influenced by her feeling of the looser morality of that generation. Instead of really looking at Lucy, Anne looks at Lucy's values from the position of her own generation's biases. She disapproves of Lucy's marriage to Ben, a man more than twice her age, and of the hours that Lucy spends engaged in leisure activities, such as sunbathing and backyard barbecues. In fact, prior to talking to Lucy, Anne had merely assumed that Lucy lived with Ben, noting that something about the couple "seems faintly illicit" (37). Lucy and Ben contrast with Anne and Dale, who are too entangled in their own personal tragedy to enjoy each other's company. Lucy's girlish outlook on life, her youthful notions, and her forthright honesty irritate Anne, who is painfully aware of both her own aging and the words that she cannot utter in her own home. When on a shopping trip to the mall Lucy tries to get Anne to see her as she is outside stereotypes, Anne's ensconced

cultural assumptions get in the way and trap Anne into a stereotype of Lucy, a stereotype that is also imposed on the reader. Anne rejects Lucy's notion that Lucy can help Michael, yet ironically Michael accepts Lucy's offer of friendship. The reader is startled to find that the Lucy that Michael perceives has little in common with the girl that Anne has presented to us. She is, in fact, much more complex and likeable.

Dale Sumner, who is not as accepting of the changed Michael and who must struggle to learn to love his son again, is an important foil to Anne. A former policeman, Dale believes that Michael's return from the dead has ruined both his life and his perceptions of what "retirement" should be. Instead of the enjoyable end product of a lifetime of hard work, "retirement [now] seems like an endless vacation turned sour in the heat" (120). What Dale wants is the old "*Michael back*, the boy who left home for the Army in that other life back in Chicago" (27). "He's not my son," Dale repeatedly cries. He perceives the new Michael as only "a stranger claiming to be his son. A person, from somewhere in the dark, who has brought about the only unbearable change in a life of changes" (15). The solution, Dale thinks, is to send Michael to a hospital and let professionals take care of him, for, as he tells Anne, Michael's problem is "the mind. The *mind*! You can't unburn toast'" (27).

Not only has Michael disturbed Dale's perceptions of what his life in Florida should be like, but he has also disturbed Dale's fixed views about his role as the head of a family. In contrast to Anne, who "has never had any stereotyped idea about motherhood" (18), Dale has definite ideas about fatherhood. He laments the loss of "the son who would grow up and be friends with his old man" (13). Dale particularly finds Michael's confusion of him as "the enemy" (178) devastating because he has al-

ways thought of himself as a good father and cannot bear the thought that his son now fears him.

By revealing Dale's attitude toward his veteran son, Bausch subverts the John Wayne myth in which soldiers must return from war acting heroically after having been initiated into manhood.[6] Once again, we see the relevance of Bausch's epistemological concern with subjective reality—the knowledge that ensconced myths create static perceptions which in turn suffocate growth. The return of Michael Sumner from Vietnam without a physical scar only contributes to his suffering. People who have not served in the war, especially Dale, cannot comprehend how a veteran who has no obvious physical wounds can return from Vietnam emotionally impaired. Dale could accept a physical wound if Michael had one, but he cannot accept an emotional disability, a psychological stigma. Such are the limits of his imagination to enter into any reality other than that which he personally knows. Dale can merely respond, "There's not a mark on him!'" (204), when Anne tries to justify their son's behavior by stating, "We don't know what they [the Viet Cong] did to him'" (204). If Michael literally harbored a "red badge of courage," some type of physical wound that offered a rationale for his emotional weaknesses, then Dale could more easily accept Michael's condition. Dale would rather that Michael had "lost an arm or a leg than for this to [have] happen[ed]" (4).

Eventually Dale meets a veteran who is physically wounded, a one-armed man whom he buys a beer in a bar. When Dale tells the veteran that his own son was a prisoner-of-war who escaped, the man unwittingly disturbs Dale's settled view of his son's experience by stating, "Brave kid" (73). " 'You don't know him,' " laments Dale. " 'He's not brave at all' " (73). " 'Got to be brave to get out of there alive—especially if he was captured,' " the veteran replies (73). Dale's fishing partner, Eddie,

particularly thinks Michael a weakling and tells Dale that the problem is that " 'there's no discipline anymore . . . no manhood' " (47). Young men are " 'too affected by the whole thing' " (47). Because he imposes his views of what a returning veteran should be on both the other characters and the reader and because he condemns Michael for not playing that role, Eddie is an especially important character. Having lost children of his own in Vietnam, Eddie labels Michael a coward who should not be allowed to stand in the "shit, much less [the] shoes" of Eddie's sons (199). That Michael endured torture and mistreatment at the hands of the Viet Cong and that he ran directly into American gunfire in order to save himself is irrelevant to Eddie's middle-class, jingoistic perceptions of the proper soldier. At the same time, Eddie realizes that it is not Michael's fault that he is a weakling.

One of the special insights offered in *On the Way Home* is that the Vietnam generation is a different generation, one that has not been prepared for this kind of war. Through the stolid mentality of Eddie, the old soldiers who never questioned the purpose of war or their own rights are placed in contrast to a younger generation who do so—that is, who have learned the primacy of individual value systems. According to Eddie, " 'young people aren't suited for war anymore' " (47). Also ironically contributing to the psychological devastation of this generation, Bausch shows us that more than any generation of American warriors in history they were conditioned to love life and hate war. Consequently, though unwittingly revealed, Eddie is quite right when he explains this generation's susceptibility to psychological crippling:

> "Nowadays, kids don't know about things like suffering and death and all that. They think death happens to old people like

> me. Or to Negroes in dark alleys . . . So when they get over there and see somebody's brains strewn all over the place—stretched out like a goddamned dead rabbit—it does something to them." (47)

The older generation, states Eddie, " 'come from a different time' " and thus " 'don't let things get to us. Kids today, they don't have any backbone. No inner strength; they've had it too easy' " (48).

By having Michael completely disrupt Eddie's conception of a patriotic veteran, Bausch takes *On the Way Home* into important psychological territory. Old and familiar ways of looking at human experience, as well as closed language systems, are challenged, and new perceptions are generated by the complexity of point of view and irony of character. Such imaginative reach opens us up to thinking about the war in new ways. As a result, philosophical issues such as fear and courage—even the words themselves—resist fixity of meaning. Fear, for example, becomes more than Dale and Eddie's fear that Michael will harm someone. Both the Sumners fear for what will happen to their family, and Michael fears the rain and his memories of war. While Eddie thinks that Michael lacks courage, he admires Dale's courage in not completely sheltering Michael. The complexity of philosophical and psychological concerns is subtly interwoven into *On the Way Home*; it is not a direct topic of conversation but is implicit in the novel's effects. The stereotype of the veteran as a time bomb becomes a fixed reality the Sumner family imposes on Michael due to the fear felt by themselves and by others. Not only in use of technique is this novel an argument against viewing reality in terms of fixed perceptions, but such simplistic thinking becomes a major example of the family's inability to understand Michael's tragedy.

Michael belongs to the Vietnam era, which precludes the notion of heroism. As a result, his presence is disturbing to others who see him as a potentially "violent vet."[7] Such a stereotype is an example of how the other characters have become fixed by structured perceptions that distance them from Michael and disallow an understanding of and a compassion for his disabilities. For example, a neighbor whose husband does not want her to befriend Michael for fear that he will physically harm her in some way asks Anne if Michael is "safe" (105), and Eddie chastises Dale for allowing Michael to walk around town unescorted because " 'There's no telling what he might do' " (49). Even Michael's own family question the potential for violence in their son, wondering if he is a bomb that might suddenly "explode, and kill someone" (75). Dale particularly has succumbed to the myth of the "violent veteran, constantly echoing, " 'He's going to do something, I just know it' " (27) and " 'He's going to do one of those things loners do' " (68). Dale speculates on the atrocities that Michael might commit: "Assassinate a president. Axe-murder somebody—maybe a family or an old man on social security" (68). To complicate the situation, people that Dale meets tell him horror stories of Vietnam vets who lost their minds and vented their anger through murderous sprees. He wonders how to explain his ill son to other people: "Will they lie about him—say he's in business in Denver? *My son lost his mind*" (49). Dale does not know how to meet the ultimate challenge: "How to make him [Michael] come back to the world, before he [takes] someone out of it" (77).

The reader potentially falls prey to the stereotype, the fear, and thus becomes entangled in the paradox surrounding Michael's potential for violence. Is Michael really a time bomb, or does the reader wonder about him merely because the other characters question his ability

to be dangerous? The readers' perceptions become paradoxically intertwined with the characters' as we accept Dale's interpretation of Michael's potentiality as a killer on one hand and Michael's insistence upon his own gentleness and humanity on the other. In chapters that focus on Michael's inner thoughts and his attempts to cope with the everyday world, we learn that Michael sees himself as a sensitive and caring person, not as a Rambo waiting to vent his rage with a machine gun. We see his sensitivity to other people with problems. When a neighbor makes fun of an extremely obese lady whom they pass on the street, Michael reminds Lucy that there is a human being with feelings inside the lady's body. He is particularly affected by a retarded woman who panics after being left alone in a grocery store, for he, too, knows what it is like to have to "haul [an] alien soul through life" (54).

On the Way Home thus becomes, in the terms of Catherine Belsey, a "plural" text, "open to re-reading, no longer an object for passive consumption, but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning" (104). The reader simultaneously sympathizes with both Dale's and Michael's points of view. This paradox encompasses both the other characters and the reader near the end of the novel when everyone's fears reach a climactic point. When a neighbor disappears, people's thoughts turn immediately to Michael, whom they suspect may have harmed Lucy, yet Lucy has not been kidnapped by Michael, but by another Vietnam veteran, her first husband. However, Michael is so traumatized by the situation that his mental health worsens and his thoughts revert back to his childhood, stilting the progress that he has made thus far.

In an ironic reversal, Dale is taken further into himself in his psychological descent than is Michael. When out of anguish over Michael's deterioration, Anne

withdraws her support of Dale and condemns his antagonism toward his son, Dale realizes that he must renounce his impatience with Michael or find himself more alone and lost than ever. It is clear that Anne has recognized the fixed perceptions and biased views in the Sumner household and plans to free herself from them, a recognition that helps to bring about Dale's own epiphany. When he thinks of Anne and Michael leaving, "In the glass of the window he sees his tired face, the light making shadows under his eyes. It is a visage like a death mask" (220). Dale's realization that Anne is going to leave him puts him more profoundly in touch with his inner self than at any time in the novel and causes him to acknowledge his obtuseness to Anne and to accept Michael as he is, not as he would like him to be:

> "I understand now," he says. "I didn't before. I was angry and hurt and—like you said—I was feeling sorry for myself . . . I'll love him, if you'll let me," he says. (222)

This new awareness results in Dale's finally agreeing to Anne's earlier request to give up his retirement in Florida and return "home" to Chicago. The use of the word "home" is ironic, for it is apparent that Michael is not really "home." In fact, the reader is led to question the meaning of that word as well. What does it mean to Dale and Anne to have a son who isn't really at "home" in their house? And what is it like for Michael to return from the war to find that his parents have sold the house he grew up in, the only "home" he can remember? The Sumner family no longer know the meaning of the word "home," but Anne and Dale eventually realize that they must give up their own individual perception of what a home should be if they are to truly help Michael return there. At the end of the novel, the Sumners decide to

return to their former "home" in Chicago, an illustration that they have accepted reality, complexity, and change and are no longer running from them. They now realize that little in life is simple or static.

Bausch's imaginative portrayal of war proves that when used effectively and innovatively an age-old subject can still have tremendous emotional and philosophical power. By focusing on language, he dramatizes the complexity of hellish experience the war has produced while involving his readers in an act of creative correspondence. Our conventional perceptions are disturbed as are those of the characters. In addition, Bausch has used the story of one family's relationship to the war to reflect the predicament of a nation as a whole—a nation unable to understand and assimilate a conflict whose patterns refused to conform to previous models of war. In other words, Bausch does for readers what Michael does for those around him—disturb semantic and conceptual stereotypes and force them to face up to the painful complexity of the Vietnam experience. In so deftly intertwining the moral and the epistemological, the personal and the social dimensions of his story, Bausch gives us a picture of the Vietnam War that is more socially, philosophically, and humanely complete than that of many of his contemporaries. ❑

Notes

1. For additional Vietnam War novels that deal with the returning veteran, see Madison Smartt Bell's *Soldier's Joy* (New York: Penguin, 1989), Larry Brown's *Dirty Work* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin, 1989), Robert Olen Butler's *The Alleys of Eden* (New York: Ballantine, 1981), Philip Caputo's *Indian Country* (New York: Bantam, 1987), Richard Currey's *Fatal Light* (New York: Penguin, 1988), John Del Vecchio's *Carry Me Home* (New

York: Bantam, 1995), Clyde Edgerton's *The Floatplane Notebooks* (New York: Ballantine, 1988), Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters* (New York: Fawcett, 1977) and *Paco's Story* (New York: Penguin, 1987), G. C. Hendricks' *The Second War* (New York: Penguin, 1990), John Jacob's *Long Ride Back* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1988), Tim Mahoney's *Holleran's World War* (New York: Laurel, 1985), Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), Robert Stone's *Outerbridge Reach* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1992), Stephen J. Thorpe's *Walking Wounded* (New York: Bantam, 1980), and Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983).

2. For further discussion of Saussurean theory, see Ferdinand De Suassure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

3. For further information, see also Terry Eagleton's discussion of semiotics in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), Chapter 3.

4. In addition to words like "touched," "burn," and "hell," the word "insect" also expands in meaning throughout the novel. For example, not only does Anne think of her unpleasant thoughts about Michael as insects, but Michael remembers the insects that he played with as a child and the Viet Cong's treatment of him as an insect. And, when Caswell is shot by another American soldier, Michael sees him "squirming on the ground as if he were an insect on a pin" (199).

5. The word "evolution" suggests that the Sumner family has evolved into something else, something more complex and unknowable. They no longer fit the molds of their past life.

6. For further discussion of the returning veteran, particularly the "sick vet," in Vietnam War fiction, see William J. Searle, "Walking Wounded: Vietnam War Novels of Return," in *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*, Ed. William J. Searle (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988): 147-159; Marilyn Durham, "Narrative Strategies in Recent Vietnam War Fiction," in *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, Eds. Owen W. Gilman, Jr. and Lorrie Smith (New York: Garland, 1990): 100-108; Maria S. Bonn, "A Different World: The Vietnam Veteran Novel Comes

Home," in *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, Ed. Philip K. Jason (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991): 1-14; and Tobey C. Herzog, "Managing the Elusive Veteran: Blank Page, Tripwire, or Interstate Nomad" in *The United States and Viet Nam from War to Peace*, Ed. Robert M. Slabey (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Co., 1996): 113-22.

7. An important article on the stereotype of the violent veteran is Tim O'Brien's "The Violent Vet," *Esquire* (December 1979): 96-97, 99-100, 103-104.

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