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ABSTRACT

Witnessing "Story Truth" and the Narrative of the Resurrection:
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Sarah Bachelard describes crisis as a turning point during which all previous frameworks collapse. The narrative structure of the resurrection reveals the influential role of narrative in reintegrating such crises back into a place of meaning and wholeness. Using the resurrection narrative as an interpretive framework for Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* reveals how "story truth" acknowledges the transcendent meaning that lies beyond all texts and circumstances, and so reintegrates crisis and redeems meaning for Tim and his fellow soldiers. The transcendent and transformative qualities of story truth illustrate the latter's innately spiritual nature, even within secular texts. Story truth thus carries postsecular conversation past mere "openness" to transformation through the process of reintegration and redemption. By evoking the qualities of surprise and recognition associated with the resurrection, story truth especially illustrates that theology can elucidate such transformative processes and ought to play a key role in both spiritual and postsecular thought.

Keywords: narrative, resurrection, postsecularism, spirituality, crisis

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Reintegration and Narrative

In *Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis*, Sarah Bachelard defines "crisis" as a turning point requiring decision or judgement, one in which "the basic ground of our being and the meaning of our existence is at stake" (46). While most difficult experiences happen within an existing framework of meaning, a crisis shatters it: "The distinctive suffering of crisis is the felt impossibility, the despair of ever integrating what has happened into a coherent story, into a self and life whose narrative is collapsing" (49). And while most crises are generally negative in nature, or "shattering," they can also "befall us in the shape of a new and undreamt of possibility—the invitation into a new relationship[,] . . . the call to relinquish old plans or dreams. On these occasions too, there is a turning point, a time of trial, discernment and judgement, a before and after" (48). They can set us on a new and better course. But whether good or ill, recovering from any kind of crisis involves a process Bachelard refers to as reintegration—re-telling a coherent, meaning-making narrative that builds a new meaningful framework and welcomes the crisis as a central part.

In *Resurrection and Moral Imagination*, Bachelard explores this theory relative to the transformative event of Christ's resurrection, explaining that "because of [the resurrection] everything is different" (38). The resurrection results from a crisis—the crucifixion—but also represents a crisis in its own right, a transformative revision of an old paradigm. Despite being a positive and redeeming event, rather than a traditionally shattering catastrophe, there is no doubt that after the resurrection "there is a new reality to inhabit" (38). This new reality still brings the difficult, jarring experience of the collapse of frameworks and meaning—what can it mean that death is now the "penultimate, rather than ultimate, reality" (145)? Bachelard emphasizes the apostles' "fear, amazement, [and] startling incomprehension" when encountering the risen Christ

and reminds her readers that "whatever Christian hope is, it begins in terror and utter disorientation in the face of the collapse of all that is familiar and well known" (James Alison, qtd. in 38, 40). But reintegration attends the collapse of meaning, and reintegration becomes possible through the narrative that emerges from that event: "In its light [the apostles] see more deeply into the reality of the world they inhabit, they see the limits of that reality, and they are freed to live in response to and empowered by a radically different reality" (41). In turn, the new, meaning-making narrative that emerges from the resurrection invites personal transformation, what Bachelard terms "transformed subjectivity" (47).

While Bachelard's two works are concerned primarily with moral philosophy and experiencing God, her theory is also a profound argument for the power of narrative and its transformative effects. While any spiritually redeeming or saving power comes through the risen Christ, the narrative structure of the resurrection is what makes the progression from crisis to reintegration visible. This narrative—in the broadest sense—includes an initial crisis followed by an encounter with transcendence that changes the horizon upon which reality sits. This encounter, and the transformative effects it invites, allows for the complete reintegration of that crisis into healing and wholeness. In turn, the narrative invites its modern-day witnesses to take part in the same process.

In *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, Rowan Williams makes explicit Bachelard's implication. He frequently mentions the active role of the narrative of the resurrection and explains that this event "offers a narrative structure in which we can locate our recovery of identity and human possibility. . . . It is a story which is itself an indispensable *agent* in the completion of this process. . . . " (43). In *The Edge of Words*, Williams expands his argument to narrative and language at large, arguing that language itself—its structure and very

existence—points to something beyond itself, and that to find meaning in a text is to recognize that transcendent presence.

Williams speaks of the narrative of the resurrection specifically, and of language generally (which points, again, to a rather particular transcendence). While much aligned with Williams in suggesting that language reveals something "beyond" the words themselves, Christina Bieber Lake contends that narrative is particularly equipped for revealing meaning, and by the same token is innately theological. Although she makes clear that she is "not trying to write an apology for God's existence . . . or a defense of Christian theology," she maintains that

> [s]torytelling is a theological activity[,] . . . continually affirm[ing] and reaffirm[ing] the transcendent value of personal being. . . . [S]tories invariably activate the part of a reader's imagination that suspects that this world is neither accident nor conclusion. We continue to long for what only a theistic cosmos can offer: a meaningful existence and a meaningful death. We still believe that our lives are tales told—and attended to. (7-8)

For Lake, simply the act of storytelling assigns meaning. All narratives testify that life is worth attending—that there is meaning to be acknowledged and described in every experience. Further, narratives also assume an attentive audience, suggesting that the former's meaning is collectively valued. And so, Lake continues, "aesthetic attention usually cultivates a loving vision because wherever the artist looks, she recognizes (and imparts) dignity and value. This is why . . . the artist resembles God not in being a creator but in looking on the creation and calling it good, regardless of how badly broken it may be" (126). Storytelling reaffirms meaning by witnessing it, by testifying that there *is* a story to tell, regardless of content or inspiration. So it is that in this thesis I use the narrative structure of the resurrection as an interpretive model to try these arguments. Can the reintegrating narrative of the resurrection shed light on how narrative affects

crisis at large, even in starkly non-theological texts? If storytelling truly can be redemptive, does it point to transcendence in even the darkest of crises and "call it good"?

In answer, I examine the role of what Tim O'Brien calls "story truth" in his collection of stories *The Things They Carried*, and argue that when used as an interpretive framework for literature, the narrative structure of the resurrection reveals the active role that story truth plays in navigating crisis and reaching reintegration. *The Things They Carried* is a volume of fictional short stories based on O'Brien's experience in the Vietnam War. The factual accuracy of these stories is deliberately vague throughout, as O'Brien explores the concept of "story truth" (opposed to "happening truth"), suggesting that while largely fiction, story truth expresses meaning and reaches an understanding more accurately than plain facts (179). Unsurprisingly, much of the scholarship already surrounding *The Things They Carried* concerns storytelling and trauma[1]; comparatively little includes healing and redemption[2]. My argument differs from the former through my focus on crisis and reintegration as Bachelard defines it,[3] and most obviously through my use of the resurrection narrative to suggest how "story truth" functions within those crises in ways otherwise unexplored.

I readily admit that *The Things They Carried* is not easily read as a religious or spiritual text. Rather, it provides ample opportunity to explore the meaning-making and redemptive

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[1] Jarraway, David R. "'Excremental Assault' in Tim O'Brien: Trauma and Recovery in Vietnam War Literature." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 1998, pp. 695-711; Tran, Jonathan. "Emplotting Forgiveness: Narrative, Forgetting and Memory." *Literature and Theology*, vol. 23, no. 2, June 2009, pp. 220-233.

[2] Vernon, Alex. "Salvation, storytelling, and pilgrimage in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2003, pp. 171-188.

[3] While many crises may also result in trauma, not all traumatic experiences can be called a crisis, because most traumatic experiences still occur within the existing framework of meaning. A crisis, however, interrupts the existing structure completely. I focus specifically on the way storytelling aids in reintegrating crises, rather than its effects on trauma, although the two concepts do of course have some overlap in that reintegration would hopefully diminish psychological and emotional trauma.

qualities of narrative through its well-known themes of meaninglessness, trauma, and loss. O'Brien renders the crisis of Vietnam meaningful simply by attending to it, as becomes evident through the narratives he creates. However, Tim (O'Brien's own character) and his fellow soldiers do not reach a place of healing or wholeness in the full or complete way which Bachelard suggests. They do not come to know God or attain spiritual salvation and neither is the pain or trauma of the war fully washed away. However, story truth still brings reintegration by assigning their crises a place in an otherwise collapsed and meaningless world, by confirming a belief "that our lives are tales told—and attended to" (Lake 8). Far from suggesting a crisis never happened, reintegration builds upon it and gives it meaning, which is rarely painless. And in this way, *The Things They Carried* implicitly attests to the workings of resurrection as Bachelard invokes it, expanding the possibilities of her work for literary theory and criticism.

To be clear, I am not arguing that story truth (or literature) can or ought to act as a non-theological surrogate for the transformative effects of the resurrection. Nor do I use 'redemption' or 'wholeness' to refer to spiritual salvation; narrative cannot, of course, go the full length of the resurrection in this way. Rather, I am arguing that the resurrection provides a narrative structure, even a model, capable of expressing how and why storytelling aids in reintegrating crisis. In turn, this model reveals narrative's ability to provide transcendent meaning, to create and reaffirm value where it may have been lost before and in so doing make crisis navigable.

Crisis

It hardly needs stating that the story of the resurrection begins with crisis. The crucifixion, of course, represents the ultimate shattering event: the death of one's God. With it comes the loss of hope and the loss of the past, present, and future as it was known before.

However, not just the loss itself, but the *manner* and *experience* of this loss give this crisis a crucial role in the narrative structure that leads to reintegration. O'Brien's story "On the Rainy River" exemplifies this manner and experience, rehearsing how Tim is unexpectedly drafted and flees to the border. After spending six days with his mysterious host, Elroy, Tim undergoes a vision-like experience in which he sees versions of himself as well as almost everyone he's known or will know standing before him. During his vision he realizes that he will, after all, go to Vietnam, but not for the reasons he hoped. Tim explains, "I would go to war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to" (59). He comes to this realization twenty yards from the Canada shore as he sits in a fishing boat with Elroy. He feels a "sudden swell of helplessness . . . a drowning sensation," and admits that "even in my imagination . . . I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment. That's all it was" (59).

It can be tempting to look at this moment as a straightforward epiphany—perhaps Tim's first glimpse of the harsh reality of war—but this simplistic view ignores the depth of his experience. "On the Rainy River" follows Bachelard's definition of a crisis as a turning point requiring decision or judgment where previous meaning-making frameworks collapse. Tim does more than learn a personal lesson: his world changes, permanently. It changes because it means he will go to Vietnam, but also because it changes his view of his own moral standing and identity. Before his experience on the river, going to war was a matter of morality, or at least of following one's conscience—after, it is not.

Tim's experience on the border is also a poignant example of narrative's role and influence within crisis. The story arc in this selection appears almost exaggerated: It begins with Tim's tension-filled summer, mulling over his draft letter as he sprays blood clots off carcasses at the meatpacking plant where he works. As he reaches a breaking point, the narrative quickly

sinks to the six long days of waiting and despair at Elroy's lodge. These days juxtapose suddenly with Tim's vision, presented "like some weird sporting event: everybody screaming from the sidelines, rooting [him] on—a loud stadium roar" (58). The arc ends on the seventh day of rest, when the tension resolves and Tim accepts his cowardice. Yet despite all this, little has been said as to how and why the narrative within Tim's crisis leads to the conclusion it does and what the impact of that conclusion entails. Tim's draft letter instigates a crisis, but what exactly happens to Tim during that experience—what is the process that takes place? Bachelard emphasizes the complex nature of such events:

> In profound crisis, we can lose a sense of who we are and of where we are. . . . There is no new story that we can just decide to adopt in this place—for who is it that would adopt it? There is no map that we can follow from this place—for where are we and where is it that we would go? (*Experiencing God* 60)

Using a pilgrimage for illustration, Bachelard goes on to explain that although "the destination towards which the pilgrim walks is wholeness," the shape of that destination "does not exist in advance" and is made on the journey, as is the pilgrim himself (60-61). For Bachelard, meditation is one practice that propels this journey. She argues that the practice of meditation mirrors the Triduum (the three days from Christ's crucifixion to his resurrection) and "will lead us on the same journey. . . . [It] will take us through a time of crisis regardless of our tradition" (61). I suggest that narrative also often mirrors this journey, as seen in "On the Rainy River." This pattern, in turn, reveals the process that takes place during a crisis that opens the possibility for reintegration and wholeness.

For Bachelard, this path begins with Good Friday, the day of crucifixion, the initial crisis. As the crisis shatters all previous meaning, one must consent to be in a "story-less space," a

space full of the realization that all prior meaning-making narratives and frameworks no longer apply (*Experiencing God* 67). Consenting to this space is an act of faith. At this stage, there is no guarantee of finding a new narrative; a way out of "the abyss" may never be possible (61). It's important to remember that Christ's followers did not know what was to come. That is, entering this abyss necessitates the faith to believe that—despite no understanding of how or when—eventually it will end.

The next stage, Holy Saturday, extends the story-less space of crisis to an interval of waiting, where one must resist the overwhelming "impulse to resolve the tension" (*Experiencing God* 68). One resists the urge to immediately turn back and cling to past frameworks, and likewise resists the urge to immediately "move on" from the crisis. Rather, this empty space must be consented to and inhabited, for "it is significant that what has been surrendered to death is really dead. . . . Saturday is the space in which our old story, our old self is given time to loose its hold on us (or perhaps, it is the space in which we are given time to loose our hold on it)" (Bachelard, *Experiencing God* 70). Holy Saturday provides the necessary space to accept the crisis and underscores the subsequent collapse of meaning. Without this acceptance, the crisis can never become the foundation for reintegration.

Tim's crisis begins when he receives his draft notice and flees, and accepts the fact that—no matter his decision—he will never be able to go back to his previous life. He describes his run to the border "like running in a dead-end maze—no way out—it couldn't come to a happy conclusion and yet I was doing it anyway because it was all I could think of to do" (47). The six days spent near the river begin his Holy Saturday. Tim waits under the full weight of the crisis: while his "conscience told [him] to run . . . some irrational and powerful force was resisting" (51). Had he continued to the border or never fled in the first place, he would have

continued being unknown to himself, caught in crisis indefinitely. In Bachelard's view, Holy Saturday is a particularly significant stage because the interval ensures that "the new life that arises, though contiguous with our previous life is also not something latent or dormant in what has died . . . the new life is from the future, not the past" (*Experiencing God* 70). Once brought back into wholeness, one can claim to "have entered the abyss of this loss and found it habitable" (73). Coming to the realization of his cowardice, Tim simply states "And right then I submitted" (59). As uncomfortable as it is, before the crisis can be overcome it must first be inhabited. True reintegration comes from the future, from beyond the crisis, and does not simply attempt to reconstruct past frameworks.

Next, of course, comes Easter Sunday—reintegration of the crisis into wholeness and healing. Bachelard again emphasizes that Easter Sunday does not simply restore pre-crisis existence, but incorporates it and expands it. The reality of Easter Sunday does not resume on the previous plane, because one now recognizes "the fragility of all stories" (Bachelard, *Experiencing God* 71). "On the Rainy River" does not encompass Tim's full story, and it does not culminate in a full Easter Sunday experience by itself. Tim emphasizes this himself at the end of the selection when he admits,"it's not a happy ending. I was a coward" (61). As Tim accepts that his decision to go to war is not a matter of morality, but merely a facade of it, he begins to recognize the meaninglessness of the war itself.

The collapse of Tim's previous paradigm is subtle, but like a fulcrum, it has a broad impact on the reality he experiences in Vietnam. Tim evidently no longer feels the need to defend his bravado, at least compared to many of his comrades. For example, after an airstrike that results in the single death of "an old man who lay face-up by a pig pen" in an otherwise deserted village, Tim reports that Dave Jensen "went over and shook the old man's hand. 'How-dee-doo,'

he said" (226). Others in the unit followed suit, with phrases such as "Gimme five," and "pleased as punch," while offering fake toasts (227). Tim is the only one in his unit who refuses to take part, and Jensen mercilessly ridicules him for doing so. However, that evening a fellow soldier (Kiowa) tries to compliment Tim for his steadfastness and tells him "[I] should've done it myself. Takes guts, I know that," but Tim responds, "It wasn't guts. I was scared" (225). Although Tim resists joining his comrades in their dehumanizing mockery, he denies any moral motive for doing so, emphasizing the meaninglessness of "On the Rainy River." Later, Tim's account of being shot noticeably lacks any heroic pretense. He complains, "Getting shot should be an experience from which you can draw some small pride. . . . All I know is, you shouldn't feel embarrassed," making a clear nod to his motivation for going to Vietnam in the first place—to escape embarrassment (191). In both instances, Tim looks for integrity and purpose, but finds only a void. Tim's epiphany of cowardice—and more especially, the meaninglessness it signifies—thus becomes a motif throughout the book.

This outcome may seem bleak, but in Christological terms, this void is evocative of the empty tomb: it signifies the reintegration and wholeness that is to come. Referring to a non-possessive or non-defensive state similar to what Tim is experiencing, Bachelard explains that

> At one level, this feels a more vulnerable, precarious kind of existence. But at another level, it is a life increasingly at peace and at rest. We are no longer seeking to secure our own meaning or safety. We receive our lives and our meaning as gift and adventure rather than desperately trying to defend ourselves against a hostile fortune. (*Experiencing God* 74)

In “On the Rainy River,” Tim’s prior identity and, arguably, view of morality collapses. The moment and impact is painful—to say that such a collapse is “not a happy ending” is something of an understatement (61). But as Bachelard suggests, the void it creates removes resistance to a new paradigm in which the crisis has a place; it makes room for new and greater meaning. Unquestionably, the crucifixion was necessary to the resurrection. And as the structure of the resurrection and O’Brien suggest, the way to reintegration is very often through narrative.

Encountering Transcendence

Within narrative, story truth reveals a transcendent meaning, even reality, which makes reintegration possible. Although this transcendence may at first seem subtle, once encountered it has the potential to change the framework through which reality is viewed. O’Brien’s concluding chapter, “The Lives of the Dead,” illustrates such an encounter and, in turn, changes the backdrop against which the previous selections are read. In it young Tim experiences death for the first time when his nine-year-old friend Linda dies from cancer. Her death represents another crisis as Tim tries to digest that “she lived through summer . . . and then she was dead” and understands for the first time that death comes suddenly and to all (246). He goes to her viewing and is shocked to find that her corpse “didn’t seem real . . . a terrible blunder,” and he comes to the realization that the real Linda somehow remains beyond the reach of death (241). That night, he envisions her still living and sees “something ageless in her eyes . . . just a bright ongoing everness, that same pinprick of absolute lasting light,” and as he cries she scolds him, “Timmy, stop crying. It doesn’t *matter*” (238). From this, he learns that he can “[keep] the dead alive with stories,” and therefore “once you’re alive, you can’t ever be dead” (239, 244). In effect, he recognizes a new, transcendent reality which cannot be negated by Linda’s cancer or death.

There's no doubt that this experience—both the crisis of Linda's death and the discovery of her transcendent identity—colors the way Tim views the violence of Vietnam. It does not change the content of his reality or the fear and trauma that are its natural accompaniments, but it does change Tim's framework for perceiving and making meaning of his reality. For instance, in the example above when Tim refuses to follow his unit in mocking and shaking the hand of the civilian corpse, he eventually explains, "All day long I'd been picturing Linda's face, the way she smiled. 'It sounds funny,' I said, 'but that poor old man, he reminds me of . . . I mean, there's this girl I used to know'" (228). His comrades see a prop, "a body without a name"; Tim sees Linda's smile.

Tim's response to the death of another Vietnamese man also echoes his childhood experience with Linda. His unit moves into an ambush site and waits tensely in the brush for five hours. During the last thirty minutes, Tim is on watch and sees a young enemy soldier who, despite being armed, seems "at ease" and moves slowly (132). Before the soldier can come closer, Tim "had already pulled the pin from the grenade . . . it was entirely automatic . . . [he] did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty" (132). The soldier dies as the grenade explodes, and O'Brien's selection "The Man I Killed" begins jarringly with a detailed description of the man's wounds. His description is initially repulsive, even excessive: "[T]he eye "was a star-shaped hole . . . his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny. . . . There was a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, a sprinkling of blood of the forearm" (124). Yet juxtaposed with the casual and profanity-laced compliments of his comrades, the reader comes to realize that Tim's careful attention to detail is in fact humanizing (125). The more he studies the young man's corpse, the more the young man's story comes to life ("Clean fingernails, clean hair—he had been a soldier for only a single day"); eventually Tim imagines a

full life narrative including the young man's family, girlfriend, and aspirations. And so while emphasizing the grenade's destruction, Tim simultaneously testifies that the grenade somehow leaves untouched the young man's transcendent identity (130). As he stares at the body much as he stared at Linda's corpse, he builds a story of the young man's life, reprising his daydreams of Linda and the transcendent identity they reveal.

Tim later denies throwing the grenade himself, but argues instead that he "was present . . . and [his] presence was guilt enough" (179). Such ambiguity, found throughout the collection, emphasizes O'Brien's contention that narrative both discovers and expresses meaning that transcends "happening truth," or mere facts and events. Williams describes this transcendence as a sense of recognition, "a point [acknowledged] between or beyond speakers . . . a point to which both are gesturing," and argues that "[t]o be in search of 'meaning' is to be in search of this sort of recognition" (*Edge of Words* 91-92). This point of recognition—which is meaning—is story truth. Story truth acts as a form of testimony, which has two parts, "both what happened (narration) and its meaning (confession)" (Bachelard, *Resurrection* 38). Story truth witnesses to the meaning of its own narration by revealing a point of acknowledgement between speakers or between author and reader. This acknowledgement transcends the material world and, as Williams describes it, is beyond or at "the edge of" the words themselves.

The climax of the resurrection, of course, is also an encounter with transcendence—in this case, with the risen Christ. Like story truth, this encounter greatly affects one's "background state," which may also at first appear minor but in reality has a far-reaching impact (Bachelard, *Resurrection* 57). To describe this state, Bachelard asks her readers to imagine slipping into a habit of generalized anxiety—or of being in love (57). While neither mindset may be conscious, each necessarily affects one's relationships, sense of enjoyment, sense of self, and even pattern of

thought. That is, they affect the backdrop against which reality takes place; either state can change mundane, daily tasks to either horror or delight. Her central argument is that the impact of the resurrection occurs at this background level: "the resurrection and the form of life to which it gives rise affects not simply the *content* of particular moral norms or values . . . but the *horizon* against which moral life assumes its shape, force and meaning" (*Resurrection* 58). This horizon constitutes "a filter for experience," similar to how Tim's war experience is filtered through his experience with Linda. The impact of the resurrection, like story truth, becomes implicit in one's existence moving forward.

Redemption and Reintegration

In addition, the transformative effects of the resurrection are redeeming and salvific. The risen Christ comes as forgiveness, appearing first to his condemners. Consequently, "their sorrow, and guilt, and confusion, could be loosed within them, because the focus of their sorrow and guilt and confusion had come back from right outside it, and was not affected by it" (James Alison, qtd. in Bachelard, *Resurrection* 43). However, while it's clear that story truth, and particularly Linda's death, affects Tim's perception of Vietnam, whether or not those effects carry as far as redemption has been open to question. Alex Vernon attempts to answer what he sees as O'Brien's central question: can storytelling bring moral or spiritual redemption? He concludes that while O'Brien's narratives all suggest storytelling may bring temporary peace, any sign of redemption is mere illusion, and that "salvation through storytelling . . . seems based on an empty hope" (188). In contrast, Jonathan Tran uses the story of Linda's death to explore "divine forgiveness as re-narration," suggesting that storytelling is a way of seeking redemption and forgiveness and ultimately claiming that God "gives" new narratives as a redeeming gift—that is, a future not hindered or bound by the trauma of the past (220, 232).

My argument differs from both these views. The theories presented by Bachelard strongly suggest a more optimistic outcome than the "illusion" spoken of by Vernon. The story truth discovered or created through Linda's death certainly appears to have real effect, and surely Tim does not continue to tell war stories for only superficial peace. While I agree with Tran that story truth redeems, I differ with his term "re-narration," described as "creat[ing] the 'as-if'" (220, 231). He claims, "What was gone is remade, what was killed is given life" and continues, "we emplot for good, telling stories as if they turned out well" (231). For Tran, narratives effectively replace past suffering through revision, by re-imagining a more hopeful or "concordant" account of the past (231). And yet (as Vernon points out) *The Things They Carried*, as a whole, seems to protest loudly against re-telling narratives "as if they turned out well." With the possible exception of "The Lives of the Dead," every selection is heavy with meaninglessness, violence, and loss. As is made clear by Tim's habit of writing war stories, in addition to accounts of his comrades (such as Norman Bowker, who commits suicide), one could just as easily argue that *The Things They Carried* reprises the trauma of Vietnam, rather than revises it.

However, like Tran, I do argue that narrative offers redemption—but a redemption reliant on a dynamic, ongoing narrative process, and not a single act of restoration. Story truth redeems not by retelling a more hopeful narration, but by acknowledging the meaning already inherent in the original, by looking at the crisis and "calling it good, regardless of how badly broken it may be" (Lake 126). Following the necessary components of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, reintegration accepts and even embraces the crisis in order to build upon it. Referring to the scars still evident on Jesus's hands, feet, and sides, Bachelard explains that "the new life is not ruled by the power of death, but rather contains it. . . ." (*Resurrection* 72). The healing and wholeness implicit in reintegration is not brought about by erasing scars, but by identifying them—by

recognizing the crisis anew from a framework that transcends the former's negative impact. This recognition "redeems" the crisis not by rendering it painless, but by rendering its suffering meaningful.

This rendering happens through the narrative process. It's significant that while Tim admits to having some creative role (how much, exactly, is never quite clear) in his daydreams of Linda, he also admits that he would "slide into sleep knowing that Linda would be there waiting for [him]" (244). The envisioned Linda exists prior to his actual dreaming. She tells him, "I'm *not* dead. But when I am . . . it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading" (245). Tim knows that Linda's transcendent identity exists independently of himself or his visions, but makes clear the role of narrative in making that transcendence accessible and recognizable, both for himself and others. Perhaps Linda waits for him as he slides into sleep, but he does not see her until he "writes" his dreams; it is through Tim's recognition of Linda *and then his telling of it* that she comes alive.

The "telling" of the narrative places story truth within an ongoing discourse and reaffirms the transcendent meaning it reveals. Williams continually emphasizes that no word is the last word and defines "understanding" as "knowing what to do or say next" (*Edge of Words* 68). He stresses that true understanding in this sense is more like a learned skill than a mental procedure; it is "closer to knowing how to ride a bicycle than performing a calculation" (69). In a linguistic context, this means that

> What we say cannot be understood except as an event that requires further speaking, 'following.' . . . [B]y the sheer fact of being *spoken* [or written,] . . . by being there, [the words] can be echoed, agreed with (although never . . . simply or neutrally repeated), challenged, contradicted. They do not stand as fixed tokens of the distinct objects they

> refer to. The challenge to . . . move from description to representation . . . is implied in the decision to 'stake' a position, to venture a perception in language, knowing that what you say will not and cannot be the last word. (69)

Understanding, then, is found and evinced in further speaking. Williams makes his argument as evidence, ultimately, for a transcendent presence beyond our material world and language—as evidence that God exists. By itself, story truth is not likely to go this full distance. However, like Williams, it does testify of transcendent meaning beyond narrative content or the events that inspire them. Tim writes war stories because he understands the story truth behind his experience and so "[knows] what to . . . say next" (68). He understands that to redeem crisis—to reinstate meaning in an otherwise shattered framework—he must respond to it, that meaning is found in articulation.

Tran's argument suggests that this meaning must be hopeful to be redemptive, pointing towards a future unhindered by the past. And yet, as the acceptance of crisis inherent in Good Friday and Holy Saturday illustrate, reintegration does not reject suffering, but contains and transcends it. When Ted Lavender is shot unexpectedly "on a bright morning in mid-April," Kiowa can't stop telling how Ted fell, "Boom-down . . . like cement" (7). In fact, Kiowa says "Boom-down" six different times, along with many other descriptors such as "like watching a rock fall" and "like so much concrete" (7, 16). As unlikely as it may seem initially, Kiowa's "Boom-down," is the story truth Tim sees behind Lavender's death. While Kiowa's original repetitions may be early symptoms of trauma, from it Tim clearly understands that there is "something" beyond Lavender's death that ought to be acknowledged—not only the shock or suddenness of it, but what that *means* to him and others who witnessed it. As Tim echoes "Boom-down" again and again as part of his own narrative, he humanizes Kiowa's experience

and finds affirmation of its meaning through his audience's anticipated acknowledgement and response.

Again, O'Brien illustrates this process through the story itself, as the dialogue within Tim's account portrays the acknowledgment of story truth and its affirmation. As Kiowa becomes increasingly repetitive, his fellow soldier Norman Bowker tells him emphatically, "I've heard this. . . . Alright, fine. . . . That's enough," and "I *heard* man. Cement" (16). But after Kiowa is (finally) silent, Norman rescinds "What the hell . . . you want to talk, *talk*. Tell it to me" (17). His initial frustration actually suggests very strongly that he does acknowledge and understand the "story truth" Kiowa expresses, along with its gravity. Norman's last response confirms this and shows its effect, as he realizes that he finds more peace (arguably, more healing) through listening to Kiowa's blunt narrative than brooding silently in the dark. By hearing Kiowa's story he confirms that he understands, too, and so reaffirms the story truth Kiowa continues to tell and redeems the crisis of Lavender's death.

This example reprises Lake's argument that "We continue to long for what only a theistic cosmos can offer: a meaningful existence and a meaningful death. We still believe that our lives are tales told—and attended to" (7-8). This meaning is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed, for "telling a story is an affair of persons engaged with one another, not individuals (in isolation). . . ." (Lake 24). The redemption offered is not a finalized revision, but a living dynamic. Narratives always exist in conversation, a conversation that comes from a shared understanding of the transcendent meaning to which the narrative gestures, or story truth. This is why, for Lake, storytelling is innately theological.

If, however, a story truth appears to be one of *meaninglessness* (as in the case of Ted Lavender), one may be tempted to echo Bachelard in asking, "what difference does it make?"

(*Experiencing God* 92). Perhaps it cannot be said, conclusively, that story truth brings salvation or individual forgiveness, but it does testify of a transcendent reality beyond "happening truth" which undoubtedly places crises back into a meaningful framework.[4] Through story truth Ted Lavender's death is not undone, but it is acknowledged as meaningful; in "The Man I Killed," Tim may not be fully exonerated, but a measure of his victim's humanity and dignity is redeemed. Story truth makes way for reintegration by inviting us to "remain answerable and responsive" (Bachelard, *Resurrection* 51). Throughout *The Things They Carried*, Tim's accounts continually emphasize the trauma, loss, and meaninglessness of his experience in Vietnam. Yet the very act of telling the story shows that he understands that—despite "how badly broken [Vietnam] may be"—there is meaning that transcends it (Lake 126). In addition, his narrative is an act of faith that it, too, will not be the last word—that his audience will understand and reaffirm its meaning by knowing what to say next. Every time Tim writes a story, he moves his crisis beyond its shattered and meaningless paradigm and places it in an ongoing discourse of recognition and understanding. The narratives he constructs may not erase the trauma of his experience, but they do redeem its meaningfulness.

The narrative structure of the resurrection closely mirrors this same process. Like story truth, the resurrection surrounds crisis with meaning and understanding, and reaches a living, dynamic reintegration rather than a final conclusion. Just as story truth redeems crisis by taking part in an ongoing discourse of "understanding" or reaffirmation, Williams explains:

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[4] For Bachelard, the resurrection instigates a "transformation of subjectivity," a deeply personal transformation found in divine forgiveness (*Resurrection* 47). The effects of story truth hold many similarities with the transformative process Bachelard describes, such as inviting an individual to accept "the full truth of [one]self"—as in Tim's experience in "On the Rainy River" (48). Still, story truth's main transformative effect is reintegrating crisis, with personal transformation being a secondary effect.

> The Church is not the assembly of the disciples as a 'continuation' of Jesus, but the continuing group of those engaged in dialogue with Jesus. . . . Jesus grants us identity, yet refuses us the power to 'seal' or finalize it, and obliges us to realize that this identity only exists in an endless responsiveness to new encounters with him . . . [T]o absolutize it, imagining that we have finished the making of ourselves . . . is to slip back into that unredeemed world; to turn from the void of the tomb to the drama of a cheapened Calvary for the frustrated ego. (*Interpreting* 76)

Like story truth, the meaningfulness of the resurrection relies on continued conversation that testifies of understanding, both among believers but perhaps more importantly with the risen Christ. Understanding the resurrection narrative brings one into a living relationship with Jesus, into a state of responsiveness, dialogue, and continued affirmation where no "last word" is ever spoken.

The Resurrection, Spirituality, and Postsecular Studies

What does this "endless responsiveness," along with the reintegration of crisis it brings, mean for narrative—and more broadly, for literary studies? It illustrates the innately spiritual nature of story truth and offers a compelling argument for openness to spirituality—and even theology—within the branch of literary studies known as postsecular criticism. Mary Frohlich defines spirituality as the study of "constructed expressions of human meaning," recalling Williams' argument that those (endless) expressions evince transcendence ("Spiritual" 71). Frohilch sets boundaries on this otherwise broad definition by arguing that the formal object, or the angle from which this topic ought to be studied, is "the human spirit fully in act" (71). She explains:

> Even though all constructed expressions of human meaning may be potentially eligible for study under the rubric of spirituality, the ones we are most frequently drawn to study have a specific character—they actually or potentially engage the whole human person to the fullest degree possible. . . . [This engagement] involves "some disclosure of reality in a moment that must be called 'recognition' which surprises, provokes, challenges, shocks and eventually transforms us." (72)

Spirituality is concerned with expressions of meaning that fully engage the "whole human person"—but that engagement, crucially, includes a moment of recognition. As Williams has illustrated, "recognition" in this sense is akin to encountering transcendence, or at the very least gestures towards it. It reveals that the human spirit is involved in a dynamic irrevocably beyond itself. Following Bachelard and the resurrection narrative, this *transcendent* moment of recognition arguably constitutes a crisis of its own. It shocks, tries, and transforms; after it, "everything is different" (Bachelard, *Resurrection* 38). Story truth is at least one occurrence of that recognition. Through it, transformation through reintegration becomes possible.

> Philip Sheldrake expounds on Frohlich's definition when he explains that spirituality refers to the deepest values and sense of meaning by which people seek to live . . . [and is related to] the desire for some sense of ultimate values in contrast to an instrumentalized or purely production-oriented approach to life. . . . [Spirituality is] primarily concerned with how to live our lives meaningfully, reflectively and usefully. In other words, spirituality relates most explicitly to practice and action. ("Spirituality" 8-9, 55)

Like story truth, spirituality reveals a "sense of meaning" in what may otherwise appear a meaningless framework. Just as Williams describes the resurrection narrative as an "indispensable agent," story truth's transcendence relates to practice and action: as in spirituality,

it is "not only *informative* but also *transformative*" (*Resurrection* 43; Sheldrake, "Interpretation" 459).

Bachelard, Williams, and Lake are concerned specifically with Christian theology, and their theories have proved useful in revealing the redemptive qualities of story truth, particularly pertaining to crisis. However, story truth and narrative are not beholden to any one theology and as a whole better identify with spirituality as described above, being concerned with recognizing "the human spirit fully in act," meaning, and transformation (Frohlich, "Spiritual" 71). Story truth comes under the discipline of spirituality through the transcendent meaning it offers and also by concerning "a kind of sensuous reflection or felt quality of engagement that accentuates not only ideas but also ideals, values, things we deem special" (Wickman 328).

These values and ideals are complicit with personal belief and, consequently, identified through the same. In "On the Rainy River," Tim's revelation of his cowardice is based on his belief that going to war is morally wrong. And while it is also based on the perceived opinions of those around him, such opinions also rely entirely on Tim's belief—what he believes his envisioned audience values, and what he believes their opinions are worth. Further, Tim's reaction to the civilian corpse he refuses to mock, and the story he builds of the young soldier killed by the grenade, rely on his personal beliefs that formed through his childhood dreams of Linda. Story truth, along with the ideals and values it concerns, cannot be identified—and in some aspects cannot exist—outside of Tim's prior experience with it. Tim is always complicit in the stories he tells.

Similarly, "a spiritual event involves a heightening of the experiential sense of interior connection, communion, or union with the primordial ground of meaning in that person's life," and so "it is the orientation to contemplative interiority that specifically identifies an event as

'spiritual'" (Frohlich, "Contemplative Method" 17). Thus, whenever we recognize something as "'having to do with spirituality,' we do so based on our own living of spirituality" ("Spiritual" 73). Story truth undoubtedly engages this sort of interiority. It is O'Brien's term for the heightened, "experiential sense" of recognition that occurs when meaning beyond the narrative is acknowledged and understood. It follows then that our understanding of story truth is also based on our own experience with it.

However, it doesn't follow that the "interiority" of this kind of experience is limiting; its acknowledgement can also become "a point of entry to engaging others" (Ludwig 516). Story truth reaffirms meaning through ongoing discourse, through continuous narrative and response indicative of understanding. While identified through interiority, story truth, like spirituality, "is founded on the practice of a common human everyday life rather than on private experiences" (Sheldrake, "Chrstian Spirituality" 20). Story truth engages the full range of human experience, from the violence of the Vietnam War to theology and redemption. It does not stop at the strictly religious but includes the material as well. Most importantly, it witnesses that the boundaries between these categories are blurred. Postsecular criticism explores the artificialtiy of these boundaries and their impact on literary studies and the humanities. Story truth contributes to this conversation by revealing how narrative, even within a so-called "secular" discipline, is innately tied to spiritual matters. In turn, the resurrection narrative elucidates story truth's transformative effects, adding to the call for postsecularism and the humanities to be open to all perspectives.

This openness is a hallmark value within postsecular thought. Postsecularism heavily emphasizes that rather than being purely materialist, subjects are "embodied souls whose knowledge about the world is shaped by their beliefs"—a truth which O'Brien's text also reveals (Branch "Postsecular" 99). Most especially, *The Things They Carried* creates an opportunity to

practice what Lori Branch and Mark Knight argue to be a core function of postsecularism: to welcome interdisciplinary conversation, from which "we might begin to glimpse a scholarly culture in which spiritual, religious, experiences of hope, belief, love, and longing are not routinely dismissed or secularized" (504). They emphasize that postsecularism is fundamentally about dialogue and recognizing our collective implication in belief. To engage in such dialogue is to engage in "openness [to] religious and spiritual experience" and a non-provisional suspension of disbelief (Branch and Knight 503).

This dialogue relies on postsecular criticism's "heightened attention to religious feeling as well as to religious practices" (Wickman 327). However, Matthew Wickman explains that

> [s]uch feeling, often described as spirituality, enjoys broad cultural currency, though it is far less frequently an object of scholarly attention in the humanities. For this reason, spirituality remains an undertheorized and widely misunderstood category in the humanities, even as it implicitly informs several sites of humanistic inquiry. (327)

Branch and Knight seek openness and conversation inclusive of belief, yet spirituality takes this openness past mere conversation to transformation—and as a result, often remains overlooked (327).[5] Similarly, spirituality (of which story truth is one modality) brings to light what the "dialogue" referred to by Branch and Knight gestures towards: transcendent meaning. Like the "endless responsiveness" of reintegration, such meaning is evinced by the conversation itself and acknowledged by those who take part, reaffirming why "a scholarly culture [that embraces] spiritual, religious, experiences of hope, belief, love, and longing" ought to be. Through its

[5] Being open to transformation, more than just dialogue, is reflective of what Bachelard terms "resurrection ethics" (*Resurrection* 183). Resurrection ethics calls "not simply on our capacity to engage in reasoned argument . . . [but] for a willingness to experiment with the forms in which that [transformative] reality may be truthfully communicated as something living" (183). Through *The Things They Carried*, I argue that narrative is one of these forms.

innate spirituality, story truth inhibits the postsecular from stalling at conversation and inquires how the conversation came to be in the first place and why it continues to matter.

Within this context, *The Things They Carried* is unique in its ability to extend "religious feelings," or spirituality, into areas traditionally considered profane—meaning, here, not just the non-sacred, but the extensive use of death, violence, profanity, and hopelessness. In doing so, O'Brien's work reveals the underlying prospects for transcendence and redemption that remain. His narrative portraits of Vietnam emphasize confrontation and dialogue with others but especially with the material and transcendent. The text can be read as a crossroads for theology and secularism, the sacred and the profane, and in this manner does illustrate one of postsecularism's greatest aims: to break down such barriers and to have a conversation.

Yet, *The Things They Carried* also pushes the boundaries of conversation through the spiritual qualities of story truth. Story truth does not—*cannot*—end at conversation. It insists on pointing towards transcendence, to meaning beyond the narrative that is unexpectedly witnessed and affirmed continuously. The narrative structure of the resurrection underscores story truth's agentive and transformative qualities by offering resolution to the confrontation between the material and spiritual and providing a language capable of exploring the process of reintegration that emerges from it. The processes that take place during Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and the ongoing, responsive witnessing of Easter Sunday reveal the transformative—and not just conversational—impact of story truth, as Tim and his fellow soldiers navigate their collapsed reality and witness the truth of the stories they share.

In this manner, story truth within *The Things They Carried* addresses the tension between postsecular studies and theological discourse. Postsecular studies are often criticised for their

indeterminacy[6] and for being "inchoate" and "undefined" (Branch, "Postsecular" 93). Tracy Fessenden, for instance, highlights the "inadequacy of [postsecular] descriptive vocabularies" and the "diagnosis of our age as one in which the breakdown of religious authority has left a crisis of intelligibility in its wake" (164, 161). She continues that, for some scholars, "openness to the sacred is openness to the 'whooshing up' of 'shining moments of reality.' . . ." (161). This means that postsecularism is saturated with "weakened religiosity," and despite the problems this presents conceptually, culturally, and disciplinarily, postsecular thought has yet to make room for spirituality based in theology (McClure 3). As a result, Fessenden claims, postsecular studies often support, rather than resist, the secularization thesis.

However, using the narrative structure of the resurrection as an interpretive framework for story truth makes room for both spirituality and theology within postsecular criticism. Rather than cloud postsecularism—or the humanities—with dogma, theology can offer a model and language that enables us to examine what is "special" more closely, resulting in a more precise understanding of spirituality and its intrinsic role within the humanities, particularly literary studies. By evoking the quality of surprise and recognition Bachelard associates with the resurrection, story truth places itself decidedly within Christian theological interests as well as the more broadly spiritual, while still remaining firmly within the more "secular" discipline of literary studies and narrative. Story truth testifies that the boundaries between these categories are indeed blurred and artificial and that narrative is implicated with the spiritual—but pushes this dynamic past mere "openness" to transformation via the journey from crisis to reintegration. In this way O'Brien's text emphasizes that spiritual *and*

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[6] See Hungerford, Amy. *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

> postsecular reason grants a place in literature and the cosmos as real as grammar and gravity. . . . The wager of this humbler though no less athletic form of reason is that there are other ways of thinking than materialist determinism or religious fundamentalism, ways of thinking for which better arguments can be made and which answer better to the full range of inner, spiritual experience, especially the experiences of questioning and of believing, of coming to trust or hope. (Branch, "Postsecular" 162)

Story truth's redemptive qualities rely on its spiritual or transcendent nature and the feelings of recognition it evokes. More specifically, the resurrection narrative reveals how story truth renders the suffering and trauma Tim experiences in Vietnam meaningful, indicating that anxiety between the spiritual and material is an intrinsic part of narrative.

This anxiety makes place for story truth and so reintegration, even in the worst of crises. Bachelard defines crisis as a collapse of all previous paradigms, where "the basic ground of our being . . . is at stake" (46). *The Things They Carried* recognizes the meaning already inherent in the broken realities of Tim and his fellow soldiers, reintegrating their crisis into a more whole and meaningful framework. The transcendent, meaning-making, and ultimately redeeming qualities of story truth support Lake's argument that storytelling is a theological activity, not (merely) by way of creating but through attending, as we recognize the transcendent meaning that lies beyond all texts and all crises and in our recognition continue the narrative and "call it good."

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