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REVERSING ABSENCE. THE EXPLORATIONS OF MEMORY IN *THE YELLOW BIRDS* BY KEVIN POWERS

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ABSTRACT. ***Reversing absence. The Exploration of Memory in* The Yellow Birds *by Kevin Powers.*** *The Yellow Birds* has been acclaimed as one of the best contemporary novels on war. It builds on the recollections of John Bartle, a soldier who strives to cope with the death of Murph, his comrade-in-arms, by revisiting episodes that took place during deployment and by probing his own level of culpability, of moral and psychological weariness, after the return home. Remembrance is central to the narrative, and therefore the main concern of this paper is to look into the multifaceted exploration of memory as a means of creating a space for reconciliation with the past and of coming to terms with traumatic events.

Keywords: *war literature, Kevin Powers, The Yellow Birds, Iraq War, memory, meaning, representation, grief, culpability.*

REZUMAT. ***Explorarea memoriei în* Păsările galbene *de Kevin Powers***. *Păsările glbene* de Kevin Powers este considerat printe cele mai bine scrise romane contemporane de război. Romanul se conturează în jurul amintirilor lui John Bartle, soldat care caută strategii de acceptare a morții lui Murph, camaradul său de arme, atât prin reexaminarea unor episoade ce s-au petrecut pe front, cât și prin sondarea nivelului propriu de culpabilitate, de oboseală psihică și morală, după întoarcerea acasă. Rememorarea este centrală întregului proces și, în consecință, preocuparea principală a acestei lucrări este de a analiza explorarea multilaterală a memoriei ca strategie de creare a unui spațiu de reconciliere cu trecutul și de gestionare a evenimentelor traumatice.

Cuvinte cheie: *literatură de război, Kevin Powers, Păsările galbene, războiul din Irak, memorie, sens, reprezentare, suferință, culpabilitate.*

"… all wars are fought twice, the first time on
the battlefield, the second time in memory."
(Vieth Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*)

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A 2012 National Book Award finalist and the winner of several important literary awards (the 2013 PEN/Hemingway Award for first fiction, Prix littéraire du Monde for foreign novel, or The Guardian First Book Award), *The Yellow Birds*, Kevin Powers' first novel, was welcome as "brilliantly observed and deeply affecting" (Kakutani), "a novel that can stand beside *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *The Red Badge of Courage*" (Burnside), "a startling and angry rant against a country that celebrates its soldiers without understanding the viciousness of the war" (Tobar), and highly acclaimed for the lyrical quality of the prose. The novel undoubtedly contributes to the emergence of what has recently been called "a new 'golden age' of war fiction" (Turrentine). Indeed, in recent years, American literature seems to have broken the silence on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan[2], both through the work of reputable professional authors and through the writing of war veterans making their debut on the literary stage.

The impetus that drives combatant writers seems to stem from a common need to share the experience of war, to find a way to tell those "uncomfortable stories", as Michael Pitre calls them, that would otherwise remain untold. Combatant writer Phil Klay strongly argues that writing about war answers a moral imperative: "Believing war is beyond words is an abrogation of responsibility — it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain." Kevin Powers confessed to a similar need to find a way to share and explain, but also admitted to a sense of failure in this regard:

> *The Yellow Birds* began as an attempt to reckon with one question: What was it like over there? Sometime in 2007 I thought I might be able to find an answer to that question, not only for the many people who had asked me, but also for myself. As soon as the first words of the book were put down on the page, I realized I was unequal to the task of answering, that if there is any true thing in this world is that war is only like itself. (Author's note, 2).

A similar sense of failure reverberates throughout *The Yellow Birds*, but it is precisely this inability to explain, to provide answers, to grasp meaning that allows the novel the specific tone and the vocabulary it needs for the narrative re-figuration of the war experience.

The Yellow Birds tells the story of John Bartle, a soldier who served in Iraq in 2004, and who strives to find a way to cope with the death of Daniel Murphy, his comrade-in-arms. Although Murph's death is announced as early

[2] Brian Castner noted that there are far more works of fiction tackling the Iraq War, while very few authors wrote about the Afghanistan War. In Castner's words, "If World War II is the Good War, Korea the Forgotten War, Vietnam the Bad War, and Iraq the New Bad War, then Afghanistan, it would seem, is the Lonely War. Or maybe the Ignored War. It is, at least, the Undescribed War."

as page fourteen[3], the novel builds towards the recollection of the moment when Private Bartle and Sergeant Sterling find Murph's mutilated body, thrown from the window of a minaret and covered with dead hyacinths. Bartle and Sterling decide to lay the body in the Tigris rather than send it home, lest anyone should ever find out the complete set of circumstances that had led to Murph's death: his breakdown, his running away naked from the outpost, and his having been tortured. It is the image of Murph's dead body and of his improvised funeral, together with the guilt of the broken promise to Murph's mother to keep her son safe, and with the responsibility of deceit after having sent her a letter in Murph's name that haunt John Bartle, triggering all his recollections and fuelling his malaise.

The novel alternates chapters recollecting Bartle's experience during his tour in Iraq and chapters describing his inability to readjust to American everydayness after the return home, all of them told retrospectively. Thus, central to the novel is, in my opinion, the way in which it probes the potentialities of memory by exploring various modes of remembrance. The novel's character-narrator accesses memory content through narrative reconstruction and reenactment in an attempt to assess the potential of remembrance to provide some sense of redemption, some feeling of coherence and meaning. If the sense of failure mentioned above clouds the quest for meaning, revisiting the past does, however, have the effect of reversing absence: it answers the ethical imperative of keeping Murph present in Bart's life by inscribing past events on the record of a very personal history, and, more importantly, it probes and reverses the absence of humanity.

Memory[4] as epistemological and identity-(re)construction mediator has long drawn the attention of philosophers and psychologists. Modern approaches to the exploration of memory owe much to the ancient models proposed by Plato and Aristotle, which tackle memory and imagination as coterminous, even if from competing standpoints[5]. As Paul Ricoeur explains,

> Socratic philosophy bequeathed to us two rival and complementary *topoi* on this subject, one Platonic, the other Aristotelian. The first, centered on the theme of the *eikōn*, speaks of the present representation of an absent thing; it argues implicitly for enclosing the problematic of memory within that of imagination. The second, centered on the theme of the representation of a thing formerly perceived, acquired, or learned, argues for including the problematic of the image within that of remembering. (7)

[3] The edition used here.

[4] Memory is taken here to refer to the categories of episodic and autobiographical memory. This paper is less concerned with procedural memory and propositional memory. See John Sutton, "Memory".

[5] See Paul Ricoeur, "The Greek Heritage" in *Memory, History, Forgetting.*

The legacy of the Greek models passed on the interconnectedness of memory and image/ imagination, stemming from what is seen as their common trait: "the presence of the absent" (Ricoeur 44). The mnemonic phenomenon, situated at the intersection between imaginative acts and cognitive processes, becomes a mediator in the representation of the past, of "an absent something that once happened" (136). Evolving from the interrogation of the relation of memory to perception, reflection, recognition, and imagination proposed by the ancient models, the conceptualization of memory is closely linked to the notions of *representation* (images, narratives) and *trace*[6].

It is within the dialectic of trace and representation that the role of memory as a major contributor to a coherent epistemology of the past is generally addressed. This affects the truth claim of memory – or, in Ricoeur's words, memory's ambition "of being faithful to the past" (21). The presumption of veridicality is embedded in the vocabulary of memory: one cannot remember/ recollect or have memories of something that has never happened/ existed. On the other hand, the assessment of this truth claim needs responsible adjustment since modern models of conceptualizing memory favor a reconstructive approach, which accounts for the psychological complexity of remembrance, and tend to refuse the archival model of memory based on the simple dynamics of storage and retrieval[7]. The reconstructive model assumes memory's dependence on representation and on activating traces[8], and consequently requires a sensible effort to recalibrate the question of accuracy in the representation of what has been remembered. This, however, does not mean that "accuracy in memory has suddenly been shown by science to be impossible or unlikely" (Sutton 3.1). The veracity claim is not necessarily effaced, but rendered more malleable, adjusted to accommodate the subjective dimension of revisiting one's past. In Ian Hacking's words,

> It is tempting to say that a new past comes into being once events are recalled and described within a new structure of causation and explanation. It need not be a false past, in the sense that it is at odds with, inconsistent with, what would have been recorded if everything had been overseen by a great camcorder in the sky. But the permanent videotape thus imagined gives pictures of events, not descriptions of them. The past becomes rewritten in memory, with new kinds of descriptions, new words, new ways of feeling.(94)

[6] Ricoeur explains the trifold nature of the notion of trace: "trace written on a material support; affection-impression 'in the soul'; corporeal, cerebral, cortical imprint" (15).

[7] See John Sutton 3.1., "Constructive Remembering" and Campbell, part I, "Our Faithfulness to the Past".

[8] As John Sutton explains, cognitive and developmental approaches to memory work with the notion of trace, but within a "dynamic vision of traces, [that rejects] the idea of permanent storage of independent items" (2.2).

As a cognitive function, the process of revisiting stored memories, of re-tracing the 'absent something' of the past is responsible for generating a sense of coherence that, on the individual level, functions as a mechanism of constructing a sense of self, of understanding personal identity. As Marya Schechtman puts it, "Our knowledge of what we have done is, however, at the same time knowledge of who we are and what we are like. Memory of what we have done and felt and experienced is one of the most important sources of self-knowledge we have" (8). To this, Schechtman adds essential nuances when she explains the role of memory and recollection within the epistemology of the self: "we interpret and reconstruct our experiences to create a coherent life story" (8). Thus, the emphasis is placed on achieving a sense of coherence, on finding a structural logic of continuity that would make "one's past more smooth and comprehensible" (8). The coherence of personal history is not created through the accumulation of memory content, but through a complex process of selection, revision, abridging, comingling, reconstruction, and interpretation (10). This intricate process remains at the core of the reconstructive models of memory even when coherence is not the guiding principle of the integrated whole. Ian Hacking, for instance, describes the process in similar terms for both coherent and incoherent outcomes:

> We do not reproduce in memory a sequence of events that we have experienced. Instead we rearrange and modify elements that we remember into something that makes sense, or, sometimes, that has just enough structure to be puzzling or even incoherent. (Even incoherence demands enough organization for elements to be discordant.) We touch up, supplement, delete, combine, interpret, shade. (247)

The role of memory in the construction of personal identity is generally articulated using a vocabulary that reveals the narrative structure of memory representation: memory is seen as instrumental in creating a life *story* that underlies personhood. The narrative seems to have become the preferred mode of conceptualizing the organization and reconstruction of past experience, and is seen as subject to an ongoing process of revisiting, reinterpreting, and rewriting its own experiential content. Jerome Bruner explains the appeal:

> It begins to be clear why narrative is such a natural vehicle for folk psychology. It deals with the stuff of human action and human intentionality. It mediates between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes. It renders the exceptional comprehensible and keeps the uncanny at bay – save as the uncanny is needed as a trope. It reiterates the norms of the society without being didactic. And it provides a basis for rhetoric without confrontation. It can even teach, conserve memory, or alter the past. (52)

To return to the intricate process of translating the past into memories, it should be noted that it cannot not be understood exclusively within the restrictive boundaries of the individual self. As Astrid Erll explains, interdisciplinary studies on collective memory reveal the social and present-bound nature of recollection:

> no memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts: from the people we live with and from the media we use, we gather (or "collect") schemata which help us recall the past and encode new experience. Our memories are often triggered as well as shaped by external factors – ranging from conversation among friends to books and to places. (29)

After briefly discussing Endel Tulving's concept of "ecphory" and the context-bound "retrieval cues" meant to activate memory traces, Erll concludes that "Memories are syntheses of engrams and cues, of past and present" (32). Present social, cultural, and historical factors are thus acknowledged as essential contributors to shaping individual memory, to providing the narrative schemata for the representation of an otherwise inaccessible past. The process, however, is bidirectional: the narrative of individual memory flows into collective memory and social discourse, and personal history assists in the formation of the public historical narrative. The interconnectedness of individual memory and collective history legitimates Ricoeur's invitation to a critical and sensible evaluation of history's attempt "to represent the past just as it happened—whatever meaning may be assigned to this 'just as'" (136), since history is seen as "the learned heir of memory and its foundational aporia" of making an absent thing present (236).

Memory and recollection often gain ethical nuances, both on an individual level, in the spirit of a Kantian construction of self, and in the communal space, as contributors to the reconstruction of the collective historical narrative. Ricoeur endorses the ethical nature of memory by using the notion of 'justice' and a positive approach to the past:

> The duty of memory is *the duty to do justice*, through memories, to an Other than the self.
> The duty of memory is not restricted to preserving the material trace, whether scriptural or other, of past events, but maintains the feeling of being obligated with respect to these others, of whom we shall later say, *not that they are no more, but that they were*. Pay the debt, I shall say, but also inventory the heritage. (89, emphasis added)

In a partially related vein, Avishai Margalit restricts the duty to remember to what he calls "thick relations"[9], namely relations "grounded in attributes such

[9] Different from "thin relations … backed by the attribute of being human" (Margalit 7) and regulated by morality (8).

as parent, friend, lover, fellow-countryman" (7) and regulated by ethics, i.e. by questions of "loyalty and betrayal" (8). Thick relations, Margalit argues, depend on shared/sharing past experiences, thus creating "communities of memory" and providing a sense of belonging (82). They are different from "thin relations", which are "backed by the attribute of being human" (7) and regulated by morality (8). In Margalit's view, the ethical duty to remember and share memories works both as a therapeutic strategy in dealing with past (collective) trauma and as a protective strategy against distorting the past by means of controlling and manipulating collective memory (83). To this Margalit adds a nuanced discussion on forgetting and forgiveness that partially reminds of Ricoeur's perspective on the different modes of forgetting: from the positively connoted right to forget to the abolition of the past.

Sue Campbell takes things even further in her emphasis on the responsibility to remember. In her attempt to renegotiate the interplay between individual memory and official history, Campbell insists on reconsidering the norms of faithfulness to the past and allowing a higher degree of accuracy to recollection, by proposing a merger of archival and reconstructive models of memory. She defends the thesis of "the compatibility of truth and interpretation in memory" (66) with a view to consolidating self-construction memory narratives and validating the input of personal memory to the public discourse of history.

Reconstructing the war experience is arguably one of the most illustrative examples for the interplay of individual memory, communal memory, and official history. Its scope includes all of the aspects of memory discussed above, from the aporia of re-presenting the absent, from self-constitution and self-perception, from coherence, meaning, and accuracy, to therapeutic strategies, collective memory, history, and to questions regarding the ethical dimension of remembrance. In his exploration of the memory of war Viet Thanh Nguyen starts from a conventional understanding of the ethics of recollection: "The problem of war and memory is therefore first and foremost about how to remember the dead, who cannot speak for themselves" (4). Indeed, the responsibility to re-present the absent is essential, but the nuances Nguyen adds as he develops his argumentation become fundamental to a broad understanding of the workings of memory and recollection in such a specific context. Nguyen writes:

> When it comes to war, the basic dialectic of memory and amnesia is thus not only about remembering and forgetting certain events or people. The basic dialectic of memory and amnesia is instead more fundamentally about remembering our humanity and forgetting our inhumanity, while conversely remembering the inhumanity of others and forgetting their humanity. *A just memory* demands instead a final step in the dialectics of ethical memory—not

> just the movement between an ethics of remembering one's own and remembering others, but also a shift toward an ethics of recognition, of seeing and *remembering how the inhuman inhabits the human*. (19, emphasis added)

Thus, Nguyen's notion of "just memory" extends to encompass all the layers of war memory narratives, ranging from political propaganda to the very act of redefining humanity, both ideologically and individually. It is within this complex framework that Powers' novel *The Yellow Birds* addresses the potentialities of memory.

In *The Yellow Birds*, the exploration of memory stems from a deeply rooted sense of comradeship, and seems to answer the ethical imperative that federates what Avishai Margalit calls "thick relations", while simultaneously endorsing Nguyen's "ethics of recognition". Comradeship is, indeed, the thickest relation people form in the theatre of war and is impossible to develop in other circumstances[10]. In *The Yellow Birds*, the stream of memories springs and flows backward and forward from the moment of Murph's death, and is guided by the fundamental need to find a way to make sense of what had happened. Told retrospectively, from 2012[11], Private Bartle's war story conjoins two temporally successive stages, the deployment (2004) and the period following his discharge (2005), including part of his imprisonment in a Regional Confinement Facility in Fort Knox (2009) for writing a letter to Murph's mother, in her son's name, after his death. The series of deployment episodes offer the chronography of what happened in Al Tafar[12], and consists of an arrangement of powerful and subjectively relevant war scenes, filtered through Bartle's reflections, interpretations, and desperate attempts to understand. The post-discharge episodes insist on Bartle's inability to readjust to civilian life, on his callous indifference to human interaction. The exploration of the workings and the potentialities of memory shapes the narrative of all the episodes in the novel and revolves around one particular scene that Bartle seems to be simultaneously trying to reconstruct and avoid, namely the moment in which he and Sergeant Sterling found Murph's dead body, under a pile of dead hyacinths:

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[10] As Nigel C. Hunt explains, "Comradeship is seen as deeper than ordinary friendship, the depth of the relationship arising because of the shared hardships, the shared personal lives, and the sense of dependency for one's life on others" (157).

[11] The 2003 episode, when John Bartle meets Daniel Murphy in Fort Dix, New Jersey, right before deployment, allows the temporal estimation of the moment of narration: "And now, as I remember it, I can feel how young I was. I can feel my body before it was scarred. . . . '*Twenty-one*,' I'd said, and I was as full of time as my body would allow. *But looking back from where I am, almost thirty*, old enough, I can see myself for what I was. Barely a man. Not a man. Life was in me, but it splashed as if at the bottom of a nearly empty bowl" (38-39, emphasis added).

[12] A fictional town the name of which derives from Tal Afar. As Daniel O'Gorman argues, choosing to change the name "is a clear attempt on Powers' part to create a degree of distance between Bartle's experiences in Iraq and his own." (550)

> We pulled Murph free from the tangle of brush and laid him out in some shadow of respectability. We stood and looked him over. He was broken and bruised and cut and still pale except for his face and hands, and now his eyes had been gouged out, the two hollow sockets looking like red angry passages to his mind. His throat had been cut nearly through, his head hung limply and lolled from side to side, attached only by the barely intact vertebrae. We dragged him like a shot deer out of a wood line, trying but failing to keep his naked body from banging against the hard ground and bouncing in a way that would be forever burned into our memories. His ears were cut off. His nose cut off, too. He had been imprecisely castrated. (206)

Murph's death was anything but heroic or meaningful. He had a nervous breakdown, he ran away naked from the outpost, and was presumably captured, tortured, and killed. These are, however, circumstances that Private Bartle and Sergeant Sterling decide to conceal and consequently resolve to dispose of Murph's body in the Tigris. The memory of the improvised funeral is just as vivid and disturbing as the image of Murph's mutilated body: instead of a solemn funeral cortege, two American soldiers, an Iraqi hermit, a lame mule, a dog, a cart to carry the body; instead of candles, a minaret in flames; instead of a funeral floral arrangement, a pile of dead hyacinths, symbolic of mourning and remembrance[13]. Instead of a eulogy, a curse: "'Fuck 'em, man. Fuck everyone on earth. Amen.'" (210); instead of the three-volley salute, Sterling's shot in the hermit's face. This episode is the key to Bartle's recollection process: it is always there, indelible and elusive at the same time, tormenting, haunting him, always intruding on other memory fragments: "Perhaps that is how it was: a field full of hyacinth" (14); "Still, there went Murph, floating down toward that bend in the Tigris, where he passed beneath the shadow of the mount where Jonah was buried, his eyes just cups now for the water that he floated in, the fish having begun to tear his flesh already" (61); "perhaps one beat of his heart remaining as they threw his tortured body from the window of the minaret" (80). Bartle's memory seems to simultaneously provoke and resist the full articulation of this particular episode, until he feels he has achieved some sort of coherence in the organization of his past. The process is, however, long and complicated and involves a desperate, albeit doomed to fail, attempt to make sense of what had happened.

After his return home, Bartle is completely estranged from the present, desensitized and unresponsive to American everydayness, drowned by waves of bitterness, anger, guilt, and an acute sense of failure that make him compulsively revisit past events[14]:

[13] See the legend of Hyacinthus in Greek mythology.

[14] The symptoms John Bartle exhibits are consistent with the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. See Hunt, 52-53.

> Back home, everything had begun to remind me of something else. Every thought I had blossomed outward and backward until it attached itself to some other memory, that one leading to another, impermanent, until I was lost to whatever present moment I was in. (134)

From the temporal vantage point of the moment of narration, when all the pieces of the puzzle are available, Bartle remembers his struggle to overcome the elusiveness of memory when he left Iraq. Not enough memory content and no logical principle to guide the organization of events were then the main sources of his torment:

> I hadn't known what I was doing then, but my memories of Murph were a kind of misguided archaeology. Sifting through the remains of what I remembered about him was a denial of the fact that a hole was really all that was left, *an absence I had attempted to reverse* but found that I could not. There was simply not enough material to account for what had been removed. The closer I got to reconstructing him in my mind, the more the picture I was trying to recreate receded. For every memory I was able to pull up, another seemed to fall away forever. There was some proportion about it all, though. It was like putting a puzzle together from behind: the shapes familiar, the picture quickly fading, the muted tan of the cardboard backing a tease at wholeness and completion. (138-139, emphasis added)

The numbing of the ability to remember as well as the (in)voluntary avoidance to recollect as a form of self-anesthesia count among the diagnosis criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. This 'misguided archeology' of incomplete and likely distorted memories on which Bartle attempts to build his own "misremembered history" (125) reminds of the above-discussed aporetic presence of the absence. It also addresses the role of memory in gaining a sense of coherence in the process of self-construction. Bartle's desperate and apparently unachievable attempt to re-present the absent by reconstructing Murph from memory only fuels his agony, and his inability to articulate a coherent version of his past experiences removes him from the continuous temporal sequence of his own personal history: "I had less and less control over my own history each day. I realized, as I stood there in the church, that there was a sharp distinction between what was remembered, what was told, and what was true" (59-60).

The difficulty of recalling followed by the impossibility to make sense of the little memory content he could retrieve make him blame memory's kinship to imagination: "I think maybe it was my fault, fuck, I did it, no it didn't happen, well, not like that, but it's hard to say sometimes: half of memory is imagination anyway" (186). Thus, questions of accuracy and veridicality emerge to fuel Bartle's anger towards the past and instigate his distrust in

absolutes. History seems too definitive to accept and too unreliable to trust, so he replaces its mechanisms with those of imagination:

> The rest is history, they say. Bullshit, I say. It's imagination or it's nothing, and must be, because what is created in this world, or made, can be undone, unmade; the threads of a rope can be unwoven. And if that rope is needed as a guideline for a ferry to a farther shore, then one must invent a way to weave it back, or there will be drownings in the streams that cross our paths. (100)

Questions regarding the reliability of remembrance become irrelevant when confronted with the imperative of weaving back the rope of time, of reversing absence. Temporal distance, however, seems to offer Bartle the tools he needs; it helps him regain access to his past, to his repressed memories: "my memories would seem closer the farther I got from the circumstances that gave birth to them" (51).

On the other hand, even when he gathers enough memory content, the sense of failure is still present. The simple retrieval and listing of the events stored in the memory archive is insubstantial; hence the stringency of understanding which haunts Bartle's entire effort to re-collect and reprocess memory content. The awareness of his incapability of producing a meaningful version of the past, beyond simple causality and chronology, only fuels his rant:

> What happened? What fucking happened? That's not even the question, I thought. How is that the question? How do you answer the unanswerable? To say what happened, the mere facts, the disposition of events in time, would come to seem like a kind of treachery. The dominoes of moments, lined up symmetrically, then tumbling backward against the hazy and unsure push of cause, showed only that a fall is every object's destiny. It is not enough to say what happened. Everything happened. Everything fell. (148)

Simply chronicling past events, without distilling their meaning is tantamount to desecration, hence the imperative of exploring alternative, seemingly more substantial modes of remembrance. The combined strategy of engaging memory content through narrativization and reflecting on the narrated episodes extends to include the experience of reenactment. An unpremeditated and involuntary form of reenactment, an active reconstruction of a past event: this is the reading I propose for the near-drowning episode.

The acute manifestation of Bartle's chronic culpability informs the stream of consciousness episode that culminates with his wading into the James River, where he would have drowned if it had not been for his friend Luke. "The river had a dream in it" (146), he recalls, and the dream was of a wounded palomino, bleeding in the river, its eyes "black and soft" (147). A

naked body in a bloodied river and a bruised old horse form an image that alludes to the burial ritual of Murph's body. Moreover, for Bartle, all rivers are Charonian; they all remind him of death. If Murph's improvised funeral seals forever the association between rivers and death, another memory of another dog and of another beheaded body, stuffed with a bomb, on a bridge over the same Tigris that would become Murph's grave, leads to its articulation:

> I moved to the edge of the bridge and began firing at anything moving. I saw one man fall in a heap near the bank of the river among the bulrushes and green fields on its edges. In that moment, I disowned the waters of my youth. My memories of them became a useless luxury, their names as foreign as any that could be found in Nineveh: the Tigris or the Chesapeake, the James or the Shatt al Arab farther to the south, all belonged to someone else, and perhaps had never really been my own. (125)

This association makes it clear for Bartle that the ultimate understanding of the world is reserved for the moment of death: "I might realize that to understand the world, one's place in it, is to be always at the risk of drowning" (125). Thus, the near-drowning scene reveals itself as a connective gesture meant to enhance the process of recollection and bring it closer to the moment of ultimate revelation.

Probing memory for some redemptive justification only takes Bartle to the point in which he has to face the absurdity and pointlessness of his entire war experience:

> It's impossible to identify the cause of anything, and I began to see *the war as a big joke*, for how cruel it was, for how desperately I wanted to measure the particulars of Murph's new, strange behavior and trace it back to one moment, to one cause, to one thing I would not be guilty of. And I realized very suddenly one afternoon while throwing rocks into a bucket in a daze that the joke was in fact on me. Because how can you measure deviation if you don't know the mean? There was no center in the world. *The curves of all our bells were cracked*. (155, emphasis added)

In Bartle's articulation of the absurdity and nonsense of the war I read a subtle intertextual reference to Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* denouncing Bartle's mounting distrust in the cause he was fighting for. The lack of ideological support for the war in Iraq is thus set against the sense of righteousness that used to drive the soldiers of the past wars. Bartle's disenchanted attitude is echoed throughout the novel and informs his acute sense of meaninglessness: "I thought of my grandfather's war. How they had destinations and purpose" (91), Bartle remembers thinking. The ideological

void shakes Bartle's notion of patriotism, heroism, and purpose. Knowing the war intimately, Bartle cannot accept the justifications offered by the public discourse, and whatever story history might tell about this war, he will always have his own take on what he came to see as an "ordered war" (12). Knowing war intimately has made him realize that war is only interested in taking its death toll on all the parties involved, and that there is no grand discourse that could ever justify it:

> I couldn't have articulated it then, but I'd been trained to think war was the great unifier, that it brought people closer together than any other activity on earth. Bullshit. War is the great maker of solipsists: how are you going to save my life today? Dying would be one way. If you die, it becomes more likely that I will not. (12)

Instead of heroes fighting for the good cause, he comes to see himself and his comrades-in-arms as anonymous, disposable pawns of history: "I didn't die. Murph did. And though I wasn't there when it happened, I believe unswervingly that when Murph was killed, the dirty knives that stabbed him were addressed 'To whom it may concern.' Nothing made us special. Not living. Not dying. Not even being ordinary" (14). The randomness and purposelessness of Murph's death cancels any attempt to mythicize it as heroic sacrifice. In Iraq, the war was clearly pointless: they were engaging in inertial yearly fights over a city they would afterwards give back to those they had taken it from; they would kill enemy soldiers they might have gotten to know as children:

> We'd go back into a city that had fought this battle yearly; a slow, bloody parade in fall to mark the change of season. We'd drive them out. We always had. We'd kill them. They'd shoot us and blow off our limbs and run into the hills and wadis, back into the alleys and dusty villages. Then they'd come back, and we'd start over by waving to them as they leaned against lampposts and unfurled green awnings while drinking tea in front of their shops. While we patrolled the streets, we'd throw candy to their children with whom we'd fight in the fall a few more years from now.
> "Maybe they'll make it an annual thing," Murph snapped. (91)

No echo of the official justification of the military invasion of Iraq is to be found in Bartle's mnemonic process: no weapons of mass destruction, no word on protecting the homeland. Moreover, the episode in which the outpost was visited by a reporter and a cameraman only widens the gap between the motivational discourse of war propaganda and the harrowing first-hand experience of war, a gap completely effacing the ideology of sacrifice for a higher cause.

With no justification whatsoever for the war mission he and Murph were involved in, Bartle finally understands the futility of probing memory content in the hope of finding meaningful answers and explanations. He comes to understand this when imprisoned in a Regional Confinement Facility in Fort Knox. Private Bartle's literal imprisonment in Fort Knox is only the materialization of his having been thrown in the prison of memories by the traumatic circumstances of the death of his comrade-in-arms: "memories themselves aspired to be the walls in which I was imprisoned" (218). At first he believes that he cannot escape from the prison of the past unless he begins to make sense of Murph's death, to assess his degree of culpability, and transform the entire war experience into a coherent whole: "My first few months inside, I spent a lot of time trying to piece the war into a pattern. I developed the habit of making a mark on my cell wall when I remembered a particular event, thinking that at some later date I could refer to it and assemble all the marks into a story that made sense" (216). A coherent story, indeed, the translation of harrowing experiences into narrative episodes in an attempt to piece together the fragments of traumatic events into a coherent, meaningful whole is what he is looking for. The sense of failure, however, reasserts its position of power over Bartle's quest:

> Eventually, I realized that the marks could not be assembled into any kind of pattern. They were fixed in place. Connecting them would be wrong. They fell where they had fallen. Marks representing the randomness of the war were made at whatever moment I remembered them: disorder predominated. Entropy increased in the six-by-eight-foot universe of my single cell. I eventually accepted the fact that the only equality that lasts is the fact that everything falls away from everything else. (217)

The process of probing memory for meaning is disrupted by the impossibility of finding any kind of justification for war itself. However, Bartle's exploration of the past achieves something that goes beyond finding reasonable explanations. The narrative he constructs by piecing together and reflecting on the memory fragments he retrieves becomes a form of commemoration, a redemptive gesture that fulfills an ethical duty and subtly extends to address a moral imperative. Bartle's remembrance performs the "ethical duty" in Margalit's understanding of the notion. Through recollection, he reverses Murph's absence, by inscribing their common war experience and the secret circumstances of Murph's death in the record of a very personal history. Moreover, Bartle's retrospective interrogation tackles aspects beyond the ethical dimension of memory: it explores the morality of Margalit's "thin relations", and maps the territory of Nguyen's understanding of "just memory"

by exploring the dynamics of humanizing and de-humanizing and by pointing out what Nguyen sees as the inhuman inhabiting the human (Nguyen 19).

Bartle's recollection often prompts thoughts about the de-humanization of the other, the enemy. Malik the interpreter is the only Iraqi mentioned by name. When he is killed, Bartle and Murph feel absolutely nothing, even though Malik's blood is all over their uniforms. The case can be made that Malik was not exactly one of them. Indeed, the traditional demonization of the enemy is there, articulated in the most pejorative of words and Bartle is very much aware of its mechanisms. He embraces it because he finds in it an easy justification for killing other human beings, but he simultaneously hates himself for this immoral entitlement:

> I felt like a coward until he [Sterling] screamed into my ear, "Shoot these hajji fucks!" I hated the way I loved him when I inched up out of the terror and returned fire, seeing him shooting too, smiling the whole time, screaming, the whole rage and hate of these few acres, alive and spreading, in and through him. (Powers 19)

On the other hand, de-humanization and anonymity envelops everyone, both the "hajji fucks" (17, 19) and the American soldiers who become mere numbers on limitless list of kills. Death cancels everyone, erases their identity, and paralyzes their humanity. Retrospectively, Bartle becomes aware of the depth of his chronic moral weariness: "I was not surprised by the cruelty of my ambivalence then. Nothing seemed more natural than someone getting killed" (11). Barbarism and dehumanization is the dominant condition of everyone directly involved in the war. The disintegration of humanity manifests itself in a very selective empathy: "Grief is a practical mechanism, and we only grieved those we knew. All others who died in Al Tafar were part of the landscape". (124).

Desensitized, emotionally numb, Bartle looks into his past for some semblance of humanity. He needs to find signs that compassion, kindness, and mercy still exist in the world. It is the same thing that Murph was looking for at the medic's station. A few days before Murph's breakdown, Bartle found him staring at a female medic, not because of her looks, but because she was the only one capable of showing real human emotions, the only one who still cried when someone died, even people she did not know. Murph was becoming aware of his emotional numbness, so he kept on staring at the medic's display of feelings, as if hoping they were transmissible: "He wanted to choose. He wanted to want. He wanted to replace the dullness growing inside him with anything else" (164). The moment the medic was killed, Murph's hope seems to have died with her. This symbolical annihilation of humanity is the most likely trigger of his nervous breakdown, resulting in his running away naked from the outpost.

Murph and Bartle are very similar in their awareness of the emotional and moral void caused by the war. Bartle's mnemonic process is often guided towards retracing signs of humanity, feelings and emotions other than fear, anger, hatred and helplessness. Bartle's self-flagellation in stream of consciousness preceding the near-drowning episode is the best articulation of his exploration of the dehumanizing effect of the war experience:

> Or should I have said that I wanted to die, not in the sense of wanting to throw myself off of that train bridge over there, but more like wanting to be asleep forever because there isn't any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed, or for that matter killing men and shooting them in the back and shooting them more times than necessary to actually kill them and it was like just trying to kill everything you saw sometimes because it felt like there was acid seeping down into your soul and then your soul is gone the one person you promised would live is dead, and you have seen all things die in more manners than you'd like to recall and for a while the whole thing fucking ravaged your spirit like some deep-down shit, man, that you didn't even realize you had until only the animals made you sad, the husks of dogs filled with explosives (144-145)

Bartle's guilt is an omnipresent shadow, continuously fuelled and potentiated by the awareness of his emotional numbness, of the disintegration of any trace of humanity. What Bartle seems to need is something to reassert the possibility of human connectedness against the brutishness of the war. The exploration of his ability to feel starts with Murph, with the compassion and love that Bartle might have felt for his comrade: "Still, I like to think there was a ghost of compassion in me then, and that if I'd had a chance to see those hyacinths I would have noticed them" (14), "It makes me love him a little, even now, to remember him sitting beneath the hawthorn tree, sad that his girl had left him, but without anger or resentment, despite being only a few hours removed from all the killing of the night before" (79-80). Through the reconstruction of the circumstances of Murph's death, however, Bartle's quest extends to encompass grander aspects pertaining to the polarizing dynamic of the human and the inhuman. It is in this aspect that Bartle's mnemonic quest is successful. Although it might not compensate for the loss of humanity, it recollects the inhumanity of war and succeeds in re-presenting the absence of humanity.

In *The Yellow Birds,* the exploration of memory ranges from hypomnetic difficulty to reenactment and eidetic representations, and touches upon a series of aspects that concern contemporary theoretical approaches to the workings and potentialities of memory, from the strategies of self-construction through coherent narratives of personal history and from the role of memory in the assignation of meaning, to questions regarding the

reliability of memory and its kinship to imagination, the collision of memory and history, and the ethical and moral imperatives of remembrance. Most importantly, in *The Yellow Birds*, the strategies and purposes of revisiting and actively engaging memory content extend to address the question of the danger of forgetting humanity. By reconstructing Murph's image and re-presenting his absence, Bartle implicitly probes and recollects the process of emotional deterioration and the disintegration of humanity. The very attempt to address this question shows a type of awareness that empowers a reversal of the absence of humanity.

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