The Human Narrative

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Before Homo sapiens walked, he crawled; before he hunted, he gathered; before he killed, he crafted tools from sticks and stones. But once man developed more weapons and began to focus less on other tools, the evolution of the human narrative took a troubling turn. Humans began devoting more effort to domination, to war, than to their original need to thrive in nature, and, paradoxically, the system of evolution that helped to preserve and expand the human race began to destroy it. In the aftermath of the relatively recent conflicts of World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War, civilians and soldiers alike have shared their stories in an effort to expose the animalistic atrocities committed in war, humanize the victims, combat evil with factual truth, and reach a common understanding of morality for the purpose of promoting peace.

Author John Berger initiates the monumental task of understanding the progression of human history by first exploring the hardships of a few of its characters. In his essay “Hiroshima,” he examines those affected by the Allies’ dropping of the atomic bomb; he quotes six survivor accounts from the book Unforgettable Fire in an effort to “re-insert that [event] into living consciousness today.” He argues that the use of nuclear bombs “can never be justified” (Berger 106-7). Berger classifies the dropping of the bomb as an act of terror and evil because it was done with the intent of killing innocent civilians and producing a “shock effect on political decision-making by their government,” but he acknowledges that these abstract appeals or “epithet[s]” do not enrage us as much as the words of the “bibakuska—‘those who have seen hell’” (106, 104). In survivor accounts of Hiroshima, Berger discovers the idea that a weapon’s victims provide a more authentic representation of a weapon’s destruction than statistics provided by the attackers, and he hints at a much larger realization: truth, a nonfiction retelling of events, implicitly opposes evil weapons without invoking abstractions such as morality. The bibakuska don’t generalize; they don’t pass judgment. They have no need to. They

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describe hair standing straight up, skin peeling off, and parents dying before their children’s eyes. Our resulting outrage and instinctive inclination declares that “this should not happen again (here)” (106). And so we, as the audience to these horrific stories, reach a level of consciousness in regards to our own powerlessness, an awareness of truth, but we lack the tools necessary to “release an energy for opposing evil and for the life-long struggle of that opposition” (106). As observers in a state of paralysis, we respond to our neutralized desire by listening to more stories in an effort to experience truth and evil in different forms, to understand the inner workings of the human narrative, the result and the outrage.

In his essay “How to Tell a True War Story,” Vietnam veteran Tim O’Brien portrays truth as a malleable entity that changes and evolves with every telling of a given tale. The storyteller, as a function of his telling, adds and subtracts details, “making up a few things to get at the real truth” (81). O’Brien writes, “In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen” (67). The holistic, emotional impact of the story supersedes the boundaries of the actual occurrence, and, therefore, truth depends more upon the authenticity of a story’s fiction than it does upon the facts themselves. According to O’Brien, “You can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil” (65–6). O’Brien works effectively by crafting and reshaping the classic core elements of “story”: exposition, plot, and conflict. Ultimately, he creates a lasting and deep impression.

Such tales live beyond the death of their authors because they not only capture the author’s mind but also manage to speak directly to us as if we were listeners. Storytellers like O’Brien also help preserve and expand the human race not by producing literal offspring, but rather by giving birth to stories that have the strength to survive on their own; they compel us to pay attention. Ernest Hemingway, a WWI veteran, often encapsulates truth through the exploits of his fictional character Nick Adams, who only loosely reflects Hemingway’s own war experiences as an ambulance driver but who nonetheless remains true to the human narrative. In his novel Death in the Afternoon, Hemingway states, “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them” (192). Hemingway and O’Brien’s war stories resonate because they draw the foundations of their fiction from within their own real-life, nonfictional narratives; the derivative story upholds the authenticity of the original. Each truthfully effective story inherits the char-
acteristics of its author and adapts to the reader’s worldly context to become slightly different, slightly more evolved. Indeed, even non-autobiographical fiction maintains both the writer’s authentic voice and fruits of experience.

Regardless of the subtleties among Berger’s, O’Brien’s, and Hemingway’s three different shades of truth, all agree that the truth depends on details. O’Brien writes, “True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis” (74); Berger writes, “I refrain from giving the statistics. . . . Such statistics tend to distract. We calculate instead of judging. We relativize instead of refusing” (105-6); and Hemingway writes in *A Farewell to Arms*, “Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates” (161). Ultimately, the abstract words that Berger and O’Brien allude to and that Hemingway lists dehumanize conflict and fail to account for the people ravaged by war’s weapons, the people blistered, blinded, and burned by the mustard gas of WWI, the people charred, radiated, and evaporated by the nuclear bombs of WWII, the people roasted by the napalm of the Vietnam War.

Thus far, we have examined narrative methods for raising consciousness of evil, but before we can equip ourselves with the necessary tools to oppose evil and promote peace, we must weigh the narratives of civilians and soldiers against the arguments of those who propagate war so that we can see if the human side of the story actually withstands the destructive paradox of man’s evolution towards conflict.

Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968, embodies the ideal opposition to Berger, O’Brien, and Hemingway. To justify the escalation of the Vietnam War, he relied solely on number crunching, aggregate statistics, and mass-generalizations. In the documentary *The Fog of War*, directed by Errol Morris, McNamara explains the “false interpretation” of “political and military arguments” that Berger references but does not fully contextualize (Berger 105). McNamara says, “Killing 50% to 90% of the people of sixty-seven Japanese cities and then bombing them with two nuclear bombs is not proportional,” but he doesn’t criticize the bomb itself: “What one can criticize is that the human race prior to that time and today has not really grappled with what are, I’ll call it, ‘the rules of war’” (Morris). McNamara proposes that we reach a common understanding of morality by externalizing ethical right and wrong into a set list of do’s and don’ts. This yes/no mentality for combatting evil, however, vastly oversimplifies its complexity and our willingness to be influenced by it.
Evil, like the human narrative told to subdue it, has evolved and adapted to withstand opposition. Berger writes, “The concept of evil implies a force or forces which have to be continually struggled against so that they do not triumph over life and destroy it” (106). Evil embeds itself in the same arena as truth; it attempts to hide behind a “mask of innocence” (107). Evil doers tell the same types of narratives as Berger, O’Brien, and Hemingway, but do so using lies to pass off evil acts as if they were justifiable. Berger suggests, “Nobody can confront the reality of 6th August 1945 without being forced to acknowledge that what happened was evil. It is not a question of opinion or interpretation, but of events” (106). Only by telling the stories of the truth and reality that contain implicit evil, evil in its purest form, can we expose indifference. Once we clearly identify and deconstruct “evil’s principal modes of being,” people may call themselves to action (107).

Our initial urge, however, to simply ban weapons has repeatedly failed. Bombs, grenades, landmines, chemical agents: they all kill people in horrific ways, and always will. Every now and then, though, I’ll turn on the History Channel and watch Vietnam in HD. I’ll hear stories of the Vietcong capturing American soldiers, chopping their penises off, and stitching them inside the 18-year-olds’ mouths. This can be done with nothing but a butter knife and floss. We don’t criticize butter knives and floss; we criticize torture, the intent behind violence. But even rules of war such as the Geneva Convention do not prevent terrorists and large nations alike from committing atrocities such as 9/11 or the torture of prisoners at Guantanamo. Evil lives within our ignorance of its origins, within the very fabric of what came before the weapons and the intent to harm.

Without acknowledging this record, we are doomed to make the same mistakes over and over again. We cry evil without examining the words that are evil: “He looked miserable—burned and sore, and naked with only pieces of his gaiters trailing behind as he walked. . . . Skin of a girl’s hip was hanging down . . . a girl of about three years of age brought some water in an empty can she had found. She was trying to let her [dead] mother drink from it” (Berger 104-05). We return in a loop to McNamara’s original flawed logic of oversimplification. Without an exploration of the human side of things to further our understanding of truth, evil, and morality, we return to where John Berger says he started at the beginning of his essay “Hiroshima.” After receiving a copy of the book Unforgettable Fire, Berger did not open it for three months. He writes, “I didn’t consider the book urgent; I believed that I already knew what I would find within it,” but we cannot know anything until we read the stories themselves, until we retrace our reasoning back to the human level (103). To wit:
August 9th: On the west embankment of a military training field was a young boy four or five years old. He was burned black, lying on his back, with his arms pointing toward heaven. (Berger 107)

Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast, but it’s a killer grenade and everybody dies anyway. Before they die though, one of the dead guys says, “The fuck you do that for?” and the jumper says, “Story of my life, man,” and the other guy starts to smile but he’s dead. (O’Brien 80)

Norman Morrison was a Quaker. He was opposed to war, the violence of war, the killing. He came to the Pentagon, doused himself with gasoline. Burned himself to death below my office. He held a child in his arms, his daughter. Passersby shouted, “Save the child!” He threw the child out of his arms, and the child lived and is alive today. (Morris)

In all of these stories I see redemption: an appeal to a higher power, an attempt to save comrades, the sparing of a child. I see a desire to alert others to the destructiveness of war. I see an emerging movement to salvage humanity. I see storytellers using the effects of war’s worst weapons as tools to promote peace. For us to do the same, we must become consciously competent, not only aware of truth, evil, morality, and evolution, but also capable of telling and being aware of the human narrative. For us to begin the lifelong struggle against evil that Berger outlines, we need storytellers, perhaps storytellers like Berger who spread the word of others, perhaps storytellers like O’Brien who blend fact and fiction, or perhaps storytellers like Hemingway who apply real life inspiration to the realm of fiction. Or, better yet, we might imagine a new species of storyteller evolved from those who came before us, seeking to capture both truth and evil so that we might live in peace.

WORKS CITED

