If History had been Different: Empathy and Compassion in Larry Brown's *Dirty Work*

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Many people today have personal memories of the Vietnam War. In my case, I remember draft-card burnings, my latino husband having braces put on his teeth to avoid being drafted, a girlfriend volunteering to keep her brother out of the draft, my brother-in-law coming home to a new baby and my husband's two favorite cousins returning completely hooked on drugs. Of them, the oldest soon committed armed robbery to continue the habit and had to flee the country, and the youngest, continuing to work for the military, started planning a third World War–between the US and the Russians this time–to be fought in Europe ("sorry about that," he would say, "but your home country simply happens to be in-between").

About the Vietnam War and its aftermath, a great many stories like these exist and an astonishing number of books has been written. In fact, it is said that for every ten soldiers who died in Vietnam, one novel has appeared, and this stream of publications continues up to today.[1] The reason, it has been suggested, is that Vietnam is often seen as the war that anchored itself most deeply into the collective consciousness of the American people, and more recent conflicts, those in Afghanistan and Iraq, are thus judged in the light of the neglected lessons from the earlier conflict. One of these lessons, certainly, is the lack of understanding of the other side. Milton J. Bates, himself a Vietnam veteran, analyzes the problem in his work *The Wars We took to Vietnam*,[2] seeing it as America's incapacity "to identify and therefore engage the enemy because it viewed Vietnam in politically simplistic terms, as merely another theatre in the global war between democracy and communism" (4). As Le Ly Hayslip put it, in her 1989 memoir *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*"[3]:

> Most of you [American veterans] did not know, or fully understand, the different wars my people were fighting when you got here. For you, it was a simple thing: democracy against communism. For us, that was not our fight at all. How could it be? We knew little of democracy and even less about communism. For most of us it was a fight of independence–like the American Revolution. Many of us also fought for religious ideals, the way the Buddhists fought the Catholic. Behind the religious war came the battle between city people and country people–the rich against the poor–a war fought by those who wanted to leave to change Vietnam and those who wanted to leave it as it had been for a thousand years. Beneath all that too, we had vendetta's: between native Vietnamese and immigrants... Many of these wars go on today. How could you hope to end them by fighting a battle so different from our own (quoted in Bates, 4).

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[1] Just recently three new books appeared: Karl Marlantes' *Matterhorn*, David Rade's *Girl By the Road at Night* and Bill Hayton's *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* (which is non-fiction) as well as a reissuing of Tim O'Brien's famous *The Things They Carried* of 1981 (stories).

[2] Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1996).

[3] Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (New York: Plume-Penguin, 1990).

The issue here is the Americans' inability to realize that 'the other'–in this case the Vietnamese people–had thoughts, feelings, hopes and beliefs that were not necessarily identical to the thoughts, feelings, hopes and beliefs that they themselves entertained. We could call this the lack of a collective *theory of mind*.[4]

We are used to thinking about *theory in mind* in terms of individual behavior. Indeed, the cognitive psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen coined the term to deal with the inability of autistic people to imagine what the 'other' is feeling, also commonly called empathy.[5] However, two kinds of empathy have been distinguished: a passive and an active type. The first type of empathy concerns the ability to recognize that the other is a human being capable of the same feelings that I have–such as white people are said to have discovered through the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that is to say, the discovery that a black mother will grieve over her baby just like a white one will. The second type of empathy is the more complex form that the term *theory of mind* refers to, presupposing an active putting oneself into the shoes of the other and viewing the world from the position of this other. While the passive type must be seen in close relation to sympathy, which presumes that one's emotions are shared by the other, it is the active type that I will call empathy: a concern for the other's experience and emotions, also called compassion, which presupposes a shifting of point of view, away from the self towards the other.

This viewpoint shift–or taking "the other fellow's point of view," to use the words of the linguist Charles Fillmore, in his Santa *Cruz Lectures on Deixis*[6]–is not an unusual phenomenon at all. It normally develops gradually during childhood and is essential for our functioning as social beings (Fillmore 44). Douglas Hofstädter, in his majestic work *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*,[7] expresses it, in computer terms, as follows:

> I can fire up my subsystem for a good friend and virtually feel myself in his shoes, running through thoughts which he might have, activating symbols in sequences which reflect his thinking patterns more accurately than my own (Hofstädter 386).

Nevertheless, certain developmental or social disabilities–autistic and psychopathic disorders–can disturb the development of this individual ability, just as certain group processes–the various preconceptions shared between members of certain clubs, mobs, nations, armies–can disturb the collective ability of active empathy. Indeed, we may wonder if Hofstädter would be able to equally feel himself in the shoes of the 'other' if he was a soldier and this 'other' was not "a good friend" but a member of a foreign army.

In any case, Bates' observation concerns the fact that the American soldiers in Vietnam did not have a well-functioning collective *theory of mind*. Indeed, they were hindered by various preconceptions about the war they were fighting, tending to see it in terms of historical struggles and conflicts of the American people: expansionist fights over Indian territories, racial struggle, and class, gender and generational conflicts. As Bates puts it, "the physical characteristics of Vietnam and its people obviously influenced the choice of historical analogy" (Bates 9). But not all soldiers used the same ones. According to Bates, white soldiers explained Vietnam in terms of frontier experience: the jungle with its wild animals and tribes that had to be conquered with the

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4 The issue is what Martin Luther King expressed when he called for "a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concerns beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation" (*Freedomways 7* [1967] 105).

5 Simon Baron-Cohen, Alan M. Leslie, and Uta Frith, "Does the Autistic Child have a 'Theory of Mind'?" *Cognition* 21 (1985): 37-46.

6 Charles Fillmore, *Santa Cruz Lectures on Deixis* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1971).

7 Douglas Hofstädter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Vintage, 1980).

"latter-day equivalents of the pioneer's ax and torch," the "straight black hair" of the Natives signaling "a racial connection to the American Indian":

> As on the American frontier, they had to distinguish between friendly and unfriendly Indians. Since both looked the same, and since the friendliest became increasingly hostile under the burden of an occupying army, many soldiers thought it safest to regard all Vietnamese–as many settlers thought it safest to regard all Indians–as the enemy (Bates 10).[8]

In contrast, the African-American soldier, according to Bates, tended more to return to the Civil War or further back to the American War of Independence and its racial configuration, the Vietnam War being "America's first integrated war since the Revolution" (Bates 55). Going back even further, to the atrocities of the Middle Passage, Vietnam became for African- Americans, "a transformative 'middle passage,' reversing the direction of the slave trade" (Bates 65), and as the war continued, for many black soldiers, "the enemy was now Charles, a term that could refer either to Charlie (the Viet Cong) or to Chuck (the white man)" (Bates 60). This difference in historical analogy between black and white soldiers, and the animosity it created, gave me the idea to study empathy, *not* between the Americans and the Vietnamese, but between a white and a black American soldier.

Empathy is studied very seriously these days, using the most sophisticated *MultiVoxel Pattern Analysis* of different brain areas.[9] Just as Freud saw the great value of literature for the study of the mind, then, so do the psychiatrists, psychologists and neurologists who study empathy these days.[10] But it is curious that just when sophisticated brain-scans are starting to show how reading texts that call for the creation of empathy stimulate the same brain areas as direct experience does, humanities departments, especially in Europe, are being dismantled for lack of economic priority. It is for this reason that the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities,*[11] has recently defended humanities departments, which she sees as crucial for, among other things, the teaching of the ability to imaginatively understand, as she puts it, "the predicament of another person" (Nussbaum 7). Reading fiction, in other words, helps to develop and extend our *theory of mind*, which seems increasingly important in our day and age.

Lisa Zunshine, in her cognitive approach to literature, calls this capacity "our mind-reading ability."[12] In her work *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, she analyzes the great value of literature in this respect, as it allows us to practice our *theory of mind*, teaching us to feel empathy for people that we would otherwise never have come into contact with. In a

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8 If Bates sees this preconception as characteristic of the white soldier, this last element, as I have shown elsewhere, also plays a role in the story of the Second World War in the novels *House Made of Dawn* by Scott Momaday and *Ceremony* by Leslie Silko, where the Native American protagonist recognizes features of his relatives in the Japanese he must fight and consequently has a nervous breakdown (see "The Long Road towards Reconciliation: World War II Veterans in Native American Literature," *Conciliation et Réconciliation: art et littérature dans le Pacifique* [Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008] 135-56). See N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (1968; New York: Harper & Row, 1989) and Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

9 See for instance J.D. Haynes *et al*. "Decoding Mental States from Brain Activity in Humans," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 7-7 (2006): 523-34.

10 In his essay "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva," Freud writes: the "creative writer cannot evade the psychiatrist nor the psychiatrist the creative writer, and the poetic treatment of a psychiatric theme can turn out to be correct without any sacrifice of its beauty." (Quoted in Jeffrey Berman, "The Talking Cure," *Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis* [New York: New York U, 1987] 30).

11 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010).

12 Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Ohio State UP, 2006) 47.

paper given at Purdue University, I myself talk about literature stretching our capacity for empathy to its limits and I show that the difficulty readers have with Benjy's Compson's chapter in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*,[13] for instance, stems from the fact that, through his particular narrative style, we are forced to feel the same confusion that the character is in.[14]

On this occasion, I have chosen to analyze *theory of mind* in the novel *Dirty Work* by the Southern writer Larry Brown,[15] in part because the passage of the *New York Times Book Review* that is on the front cover calls it an "unforgettable, unshakable novel" in which "griefs and joys are met head-on, with a force that is both subtle and powerful–and, above all, compassionate." Obviously, it is this last word–*compassionate*–that interests me here. According to the reviewer of the novel, its author, himself a Vietnam veteran,[16] manages to approach the aftermath of the war with a more than usual capacity of investing himself in the feelings of the 'other,' thereby allowing the attentive and sensitive reader, who today is most likely *not* a Vietnam veteran, to experience a similar compassion. The question the book raises is, more specifically, whether murder can be an act of compassion, the "dirty work" of the title referring both to the war itself and to this act of compassion.

Starting from this observation, I want to look more closely at the literary text to see how exactly compassion is created both narratologically and linguistically. For this, different narratological levels must be distinguished: that of implied author/implied reader; that of narrator/narratee and that of the characters amongst themselves. In addition, a study of the formal characteristics of narrative–place, time, character, plot, point of view, voice, order (flash-backs and flash-forwards) and pace (acceleration and deceleration)–has to be undertaken, while at the same time going back and forth between the different levels of linguistics: pragmatics, semantics, syntax, lexis, morphology and even graphology.

The creation of empathy in *Dirty Work* is prefigured by certain structural elements on the level of the implied author/implied reader. First of all, the novel shows the classical, dramatic unity of time and place, as the two war veterans–Braiden Chaney and Walter James–find themselves thrown together in a VA hospital somewhere in the South for a period of about 24 hours, some 22 years after Vietnam. The close spatial and temporal position of the two characters helps the reader to see them in constant relation to one another. Two plot lines are thus superposed: the one concerning Walter, a natural suspense plot, as neither Braiden nor Walter himself knows why he is there, and the other concerning the developing relationship between the two men, the second plot thus being the consequence of the first.

As far as characterization is concerned, both are the sons of poor sharecroppers, like Brown himself,[17] therefore sharing much of their experience, even if Walter is white and Braiden is black. In addition, both have come back from Vietnam so completely handicapped that neither has been able to live a normal life since. In fact, Braiden–shot "all to pieces" (Brown 161), as he puts it, at the age of eighteen–has lost both arms and both legs and has been in this hospital for years, while Walter suffers from a facial deformation and epilepsy from a head injury and is brought in that day with complications supposedly arising from this condition. Braiden having

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13 William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929; New York: Vintage, 1987).

14 "The Importance of Deixis and Attributive Style for the study of Theory of Mind: The Example of William Faulkner's Disturbed Characters," *Theory of Mind and Literature*, Paula Leverage, Howard Mancing and Richard Scheickert eds. (West-Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2011).

15 Larry Brown, *Dirty Work* (1989; New York: Vintage, 1990).

16 Brown served in the Marine Corps from 1970 to 1972.

17 Brown worked for the Oxford, Mississippi Fire Department as a fire fighter for 17 years before he quit in 1990 to devote himself completely to writing.

lost what Walter still has–his limbs–and Walter having lost what Braiden still has–his face–they structurally make one whole. Not only that, Braiden, as Owen Gilman puts it in *Vietnam and the Southern Imagination*,[18] "desperately needs to find escape from reality, whereas Walter's problem is to keep himself within reality" because the bullet lodged in his brain periodically makes him lose consciousness (Gilman 111). Together, these structural elements of characterization form one of the author's props for moving beyond the sympathy that a shared situation can quickly put into place, towards the creation of the profound empathy that interests me here.

A further structural element that goes towards the creating of empathy concerns point of view and voice. Indeed, the book is divided into short chapters that alternate between Braiden and Walter's first-person narration, giving them equal exposure. As Gilman puts it, "two points of view are balanced, back and forth, as the thoughts of Braiden and then those of Walter emerge, surge, recede, and then finally come to a kind of union" (Gilman 109). Only one chapter, towards the end, forms an exception to this rule, as it presents an external narrator who conveys, in third-person narration, the exact reason for Walter's admission to the hospital that neither Braiden nor Walter himself is aware of.

In the first few chapters, the characters each contemplate silently their own experience. That of Braiden, the black man, tends to be in the form of daydreams–he calls them "trips"– which go beyond what Bates analyzed as the African-American Vietnam veteran's "transformative 'middle passage,' reversing the direction of the slave trade" (Bates 65). Indeed, from amongst the diverse psychological defense mechanisms discussed by Freud, Braiden does not choose the "reversal narrative" but the more radical one of "undoing," moving to a situation in which his people would never have been taken out of Africa in the first place. He muses:

> This is the trip I took that day, the day they brought Walter in. This what things would have been like if it hadn't been for slave traders about three hundred years ago. If history had been different" (Brown 1).

Indeed, "if history had been different," Braiden would have been a young boy sent to the river by his father to watch the cows and so prevent them from being eaten by the lions. But when his father warns him that if he does not look out, the lion will "bite [his] head one time" so that "it's all over with" (Brown 4), this does not just evoke his imaginary life in Africa but also the loss of the one thing Braiden still possesses in real life–his head. In addition, these words–"all over with"–prefigure Braiden's expression of his death-wish as well as the ruined face that he will be forced to watch as soon as they bring Walter in. At that moment Braiden thinks to himself:

> ... his face. Most of it had been blown off and they'd tried to put him another one together. RPG probably. Rocket-propelled grenade. On top of that it looked like somebody had clawed the shit out of it. Had scabs on it. Anyway when they rolled him up next to me, I *saw* what the load of shit he was toting was (Brown 6, my emphasis).

Particular lexical choices immediately present themselves. The verb *to tote*, meaning *to carry*, for instance, invokes a southern dialect shared by black and white Southerners. In addition, the choice of the verb *saw* is worth noticing; with its double function as perception verb and epistemic verb, it opens the way to the double understanding of the position of the 'other'–the emotional and the rational–which is necessary for the emerging of real empathy or compassion.

18 Owen W. Gilman Jr., *Vietnam and the Southern Imagination* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1992).

Syntactic structures, obviously, play an important role as well: Walter's "load of shit" is not Braiden's, and the history of Braiden's people is not that of Walter, yet the conditional clause "if history had been different..." concerns them both and functions as a sort of prolepsis, becoming the foundation of the empathy developing between them.

Walter, meanwhile, continues to pretend to be asleep so that he might overhear what is said about him. When he finally opens his eyes, he does not know what to say to Braiden, not being able to "quit looking at those four black nubs" where his limbs should have been (Brown 15). Curiously, when he imagines what might have happened to Braiden, Walter fantasizes *not* about a grenade ripping off Braiden's arms and legs, but of a claymore antipersonnel mine. Indeed, avoiding the use of a noun to refer to the Vietnamese soldiers, Walter remembers:

> they loved to slip up on sleeping lookouts and take some white paint and paint the side that said FRONT TOWARDS ENEMY white and turn it around and wake the lookouts up so they'd pull the string and shoot themselves in the face with about three pounds of buckshot" (Brown 16).

It is clear, then, that Walter's *theory of mind* is not in place; that he is so far unable to see beyond his own suffering.

This may not be surprising, as his suffering has obviously become very acute again. It is interesting, however, to bring in some recent findings of cognitive science here. Indeed, cognitive scientists of the University of Wisconsin have recently shown that a paralysis of certain facial muscles causes a distinctive alteration in the comprehension of the emotions of others. What they found out is that the movements of our facial muscles help to identify the corresponding emotion in others–in face-to-face contact but also when we are watching a film or reading a text–because we imperceptibly reproduce them.[19] Facial deformities, especially if they have been existing for years, as in Walter's case, will hinder this unconscious imitative reaction, thus forming a severe physical handicap for the putting to work of *theory of mind*.

As each of the men revisits and silently contemplates memories dating from before the war, the creation of compassion takes place mostly on the level of the implied author/implied reader. Thus we know before Braiden himself does that Walter sees him as "a bro" (Brown 13), installing the idea of brotherhood, which, as Owen Gilman puts it, "becomes deeper and deeper until at last it transcends its original demarcation of color" (Gilman 110), and we also find out before Walter does that Braiden silently calls him "my man" (Brown 18). What is more, we learn about their largely fatherless youths, their search for some sort of honor and dignity and their feelings about joining the army. Bates argues that for the black man military service was often "a way to 'become somebody' or measure up to a parent's expectation" (Bates 65),[20] but it seems that for the poor white this may not have been so very different. It is soon clear, in any case, that

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19 Using botox injections, the researchers discovered that depending on the particular facial zone involved, the comprehension of emotions is altered differently. For instance, a paralysis of the muscles of the forehead hinders the understanding of anger, while a paralysis of the muscles around the mouth hinders that of fear. See D. Havas *et al. Psychological Science* 21 (2010): 895.

20 Many argued the point that fighting in Vietnam would uplift Blacks. George Shaffer, himself a Black lieutenant colonel in Vietnam commented on the high number of Black casualties: "I feel good about it. Not that I like bloodshed, but the performance of the Negro in Vietnam tends to offset the fact that the Negro wasn't considered worthy of being a fine soldier" (Jack D. Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History* [New York: Praeger, 1974] 205). Major Beauregard Brown said: "The notion has been disapproved on the Vietnam battlefield... that Negroes can't produce the same as white soldiers. Given the same training and support, the Negro has shown that he can do the job just as good as anyone else" (Wallace Terry II, "Bringing the War Home," *Vietnam and Black America*, Clyde Taylor ed. [Garden City: 1973] 201).

the memories of a difficult childhood passing through each of the men's head have a twofold function. First, they show the implied author's compassion–the compassion that the book review talks about–which will communicate itself to the implied reader and hopefully create compassion in the latter. Secondly, by showing the lack of compassion that both men have experienced in their youths, they prepare the way for each of them to deeply feel the pain of the other.

Finally, a chapter narrated by Walter begins with the pronoun *we*: "*We* were down at one end of the ward by ourselves" (Brown 49, my emphasis). This consciousness of being in it together proves a turning point. Indeed, Braiden must feel it too, because soon he invites Walter to get himself a beer from under his bed. But Walter has no thought for Braiden's needs as yet; he does not offer to help Braiden, who obviously cannot hold a bottle, to have a drink too, and when he lights a cigarette that someone has left on the bedside table, he omits offering Braiden a puff. In fact, he is thinking only of his own escape: "that there were loopholes... if you found the right loop, you could leap" and get your "ass out of there" (Brown 50). Still, it is this realization that jolts Walter into a certain awareness of Braiden's fate: "I looked at him and thought: How would it be to be flat on your back with no arms or legs, unable to blow your nose, turn on a TV, smoke a cigarette, drink a beer, read a book, wipe your ass" (Brown 51). Even if the question is still very much focused on Walter's own situation–his own deformed face that undoubtedly makes it hard to blow his nose–and his own habitual behavior–watching TV, smoking and drinking alone in his room: the only things that he himself ever does–it nevertheless seems to serve the creation of compassion. When Walter next asks for another beer, Braiden answers, as if he has understood Walter's soundless musing: "Don't never stay here... Got too many places to go" (Brown 57), referring to his recurrent daydreams. Thus Braiden somehow mysteriously lines up his own escape–the magical "trips" that undo the history of slavery–with what he can only have assumed was going through Walter's mind.

From here on chapters in which Walter tells his story to Braiden alternate with Braiden's musings and occasional reactions to Walter, showing the gradual building-up of empathy. Braiden muses: "I was thinking about what it must have been like for him, face full of shrapnel one second and a bullet in the head the next" (Brown 68) and reports:

I told him I knew he was scared and everything...
I told him I knew where he was coming from (Brown 74).

The empathy is not lost on Walter. Soon he is telling Braiden what he suspects is the reason they brought him to the hospital this time.

Having passed out after a sudden epileptic fit, Walter had found himself in the front seat of a car belonging to Beth, a young cashier at the neighborhood market where he was used to buying his beer under cover of darkness. His seizure seems to have somehow taken him back to Vietnam, leaving him to feel "like in the jungle at night when it's so quiet you know something's fixing to happen" (Brown 96). Yet, to Walter's surprise, Beth, who carries her own scars from severe dog bites she received as a child, had wanted to see him again and they had become friends. That night they had parked her car in a dry riverbed in order to have some privacy, when something dramatic must have happened. Walter does not remember it, but thinks it surely was another epileptic seizure. This becomes clear in the one chapter of the novel that has third-person narration. The previous chapter, in any case, had led up a telephone call from his mother, and ends with Walter picturing in his mind what had happened, seeing it "in little flashes of memory"

before everything goes black, like "how it would have seemed, like somebody watching a movie" (Brown 229).

Consequently, in the chapter in third-person narration, Beth's and Walter's direct discourse is presented without quotation-marks, so that there is little distinction between narrator-text and quoted character-text. As the couple start making love for the first time, safely sheltered from a "drizzling light rain," the narrator engages in a process called "deictic projection." That is to say, in a passage of third-person narration, which should normally depict the point of view of the narrator himself, deictics presenting the world from the point of view of the characters are used without attributive clauses like "he said" or "she said" and without quotation marks.[21] This linguistic technique, essential to *theory of mind* and close to what in narratology is known as free indirect speech, melts the borders between subject and object, between speaker and listener, thus merging characters, narrator, narratee *and* reader in an act of ultimate compassion:

> Oh. Please. Yes. Am I hurting you? No. I just. I never thought anybody would want me. I want you. I want you for the rest of my life (Brown 232).

But soon Walter is reminded again of the Vietnam jungle, which "had been like this, so dark there was no form or shape to it, only the blackness that made your eyes ache." Indeed, it is clear that the excitation and emotion of the moment carry Walter back once more to Vietnam, just like the previous time Beth and he were together:

> The rain and the jungle and the wounded people and the crying babies and the white phosphorous blooms in the air that etched images on the wall of the retina, slow pinwheelings that smoked across the black sky. The red tracers coming every four rounds so slowly you could watch them fly, watch them shatter the brush, watch them seeking you (Brown 232).

Just how deeply Walter is involved in his former experience is reflected in the linguistics of this passage. There is the hallucinatory stacking of elements through the repetition of the sentence connector *and*: "The rain *and* the jungle *and* the wounded people *and* the crying babies *and* the white phosphorous blooms in the air"; then there is the incompleteness of the sentences with their post-positioned clauses, and most interestingly, there are the three parallel attributive clauses with their complements in the form of *small-clauses*:

> you could watch them fly
> [you could watch them] shatter the bush
> [you could watch them] seeking you

As defined by the linguist Frederike van der Leek, the term *small-clause* refers to the complement of a mental activity verb that can be verbal or not. If it is verbal, as is the case here, it is either an infinitive without its marker *to*, such as in the complements *them fly* and *them shatter the bush,* or a progressive such as in the complement *them seeking you* in the sentences above.

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21 *Theory of mind* demands the partial suspension of the "ego-centric orientation" of language, that is, the automatic relating of things in the world to one's own position in time and space through the use of deictics. When speakers use deictics that connect aspects of the worlds they create to the position of a person other than themselves, one speaks of "deictic projection." See John Lyons, *Semantics*, vol 2 (Cambridge: CUP, 1977) 579.

These small-clause complements of a mental activity verb–the verb *watch* in this case–refrain from making any reference to a truth-judgment on the part of the experiencing character. Indeed, rather than conveying the assessment of a situation, the awareness of a process or the reaching of a conclusion, as do the other types of complements–the *to-infinitive*, the *how-clause* and the *that-clause* respectively–they convey the experience without any intellectual mediation, "raw" as it were. Because this construction conveys phenomena as experienced rather than epistemically–that is, in terms of what is considered true of the world–such a construction lends itself especially well to the attributing of states of altered consciousness to an experiencer, such as reveries, dreams, psychological stress, drugs-induced conditions, hallucinations and, as is the case here, to the onset of an epileptic seizure.

After thus having entered Walter's mind at the exact moment of his losing consciousness, the narrative point of view changes abruptly from internal focalization to an external, birds-eye, point of view. Notice how the profusion of definite articles, parallel clauses linked through parataxis, and post-positioned sub-clauses with progressives give the passage an otherworldly atmosphere, reminiscent of the prose of William Faulkner.[22]

> The rain flowed under the tires and rose over the patterns of logs laid like ties over the low crossing and covered them, rising steadily, the water flowing toward the river. The rain fell over the elms and beeches and water oaks... It rose up under the wheels and covered the axles, bellying up under the frame. It poured down the gravel road and channeled its own escape, washing the gravel with it, seeking lower ground. It thundered, and the lightning snapped, and the car kept rocking gently as the water flowed in over the rocker panels, pooling in the floorboards and rising towards the front seat (Brown 233).

From this elevated and otherworldly viewpoint, the scarred young woman, Beth, is next seen struggling with the large inert body of her lover on top of her, finally managing to push "his torn face" up and wedging it "into the steering wheel," while she herself is immersed by the water. That is how they are found by "a road crew checking bridges and crossings for flash flooding" (Brown 234): the young woman drowned and he with his scarred face all scratched up freshly by her nails.

Having reached some sort of imaginative understanding of his own recent history, his own predicament, Walter has come to the end of the line. This makes him finally able to really see the one in the other bed. We realize now that all along, Walter's preoccupation had been with *Beth* while Braiden's had been with *death*, the rhyming of the two words a sign of their fates moving toward a point of combined action. Indeed, all through the novel, Braiden had hinted at wanting to die, no longer being able to support the life at the VA hospital, and according to Diva, his sister and nurse, his mind had actually been deteriorating for some time because of it.

In addition to the "trips" to Africa, which were meant to 'undo' history, Braiden's daydreams had evoked Jesus sitting down on the side of his bed and talking to him. In one of these daydreams, Jesus had told him, in southern dialect, so we clearly recognize Braiden's own voice: "Ain't nothing for you to do but lay here. I can't take your life." Still, Jesus had added, referring to Walter: "This guy over here, that's something else. I ain't got no control over what you talk him into" (Brown 92). In another daydream, Braiden had asked Jesus directly: "how

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22 As a matter of fact, Larry Brown is from the town of Oxford, Mississippi, Faulkner's home town and admitted working "in Faulkner's shadow," but, he added, "Mr. Faulkner and I don't have much in common, really, besides dealing with the same kind of people in the same area. I'm writing at a much later date. And he wrote so much that went back before his time. I don't get into that. I write about the here and now."

long I gonna have to lay here, Jesus... How long? How much longer?" (Brown 94). When Jesus had replied: "You better talk right to this guy," and "No, Braiden. It won't be much longer" (Brown 95), Braiden had started to consider Walter as his savior, in fact, as his only chance. But when he had hinted to Walter about this, the latter had refused to listen, his thoughts returning to himself time and again:

> What the hell does he mean talking that kind a shit to me. Like I ain't got enough on my mind already (Brown 106).

and

> I couldn't do anything for him. I wished there was something I could do for him, but there was nothing. There was too much in my head (Brown 172).

Later Diva had asked Walter directly for compassion with her brother–to put himself in Braiden's place–and even if Walter had thought that he had tried, he realized that he could still feel his legs taking him down the road at night, to the market where Beth worked, to take her in his arms (Brown 223). But now that he knows Beth is dead, now that he knows this is no longer possible, his arms and legs are empty, as useless as if they, like Braiden's, were not there at all.

Standing over the sleeping Braiden now, while images of Vietnam and of his youth flash by, Walter's emotions are first limited to those of sympathy, imagining their dreams to be similar:

> Peace and serenity, or kids like we used to be catching lightening bugs flying. Cotton picking in the Mississippi Delta and the long rows of white and the slow rides back to the barn in the trailers, the wire mesh we used to cling to, the people waving as we passed (Brown 236).

But soon Walter moves beyond this easy sympathy and realizes that Braiden's dream is different, going back much further, not just to where it reverses the history of the Vietnam War or even the Middle Passage, but to where all of his people's painful history is undone: to Africa; to the vast plains with their animals, cheetah, lion, elephant, rhino, crocodile; to the impala meat cooking; to the "orange ball of the sun" over the horizon and finally, to the silhouette of "a man with a spear" *walking*... With these last words, which are at the heart of Braiden's suffering, the fact that he will never walk again, Walter's compassion seems finally complete. As Gilman puts it, "Walter has acted for honor, and he has acted for duty. Now he must act for love" (Gilman 113). Indeed, Walter closes his hands around Braiden's throat and helps him to die because in this world history cannot be different. The death of a black man by the hands of a white, that is of course a heavily loaded subject, an ugly piece of "dirty work," unacceptable yet done for all the right reasons, out of compassion.