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Up Against the Wall: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial & the Paradox of Remembrance

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> Has it really been almost twenty years, I thought? In all that time I never forgot his name or our first meeting or how I felt upon hearing that he was dead.
>
> It's funny about young people who die. They're forever frozen in time, as they were, young, never aging, and the mind brings back pictures of the past like an old family album. In Washington, D.C., at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, I made my way to the books that held all the names of the dead. As I turned the pages I remembered him as he was and hoped somehow that his name wasn't there, but of course it was, and of course I found it. Next to the name was the information that said so little of his life: Wayne Douglas Stigen, Chicago: Panel 25 line 91. . . .
>
> At Panel 25 I began looking for Line 91. The black granite reflected my image and clearly I saw my face, and then there he was. I stared for a moment, not at the name, but at my reflection. I had changed, my hair had some gray and the lines around my eyes showed experience and wear. I reached out to touch his name and realized my friend was the same, still eighteen, always eighteen. . . .
>
> I touched Wayne's name and I began to cry. I cried for a long time and the granite reflected my sadness and release. I was finally able to say goodbye to my friend and I knew he would always be there at Panel 25 Line 91.[1] (CSVG REPORT, p. 4)

Michael Katakis' experience at Panel 25 Line 91 is repeated hundreds of times daily among the many thousands of people who visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the most frequently visited memorial in Washington

D.C. There are few dry eyes among those who visit "The Wall," as it has come to be called, a feat of art and remembrance of such astonishing power and simplicity that it seems to work for veteran and non-veteran, hawk and dove, young and old alike.

How can we account for the immense influence of this avowedly apolitical masterpiece? What can be said about the persuasive impact of this work that purports to carry no message? And how does the pain of remembrance seem to aid the ends of healing and reconciliation?

In this chapter I will explore these questions and others first by reviewing the premises and development of the memorial, secondly by comparing several scholarly analyses of the "rhetoric of ambiguity" of the Wall which arrive at virtually opposite conclusions, and finally by examining some implications of the "paradox of remembrance" for the legacy of the Vietnam War.

From a Nightmare to a Dream

Jan Scruggs couldn't sleep. He had seen *The Deer Hunter* that night, Michael Cimino's brutal (some would say racist and inaccurate) Academy Award-winning portrayal of working-class Pennsylvania youth caught in the maelstrom of Vietnam and its homeward consequences. Scruggs had been a rifleman with the U.S. Army 199th Light Infantry Brigade—a grunt, the lowliest and most noble of all ranks.

Provoked by the film and prodded by a bottle of whiskey, in the middle of the night in the middle of his own kitchen:

> Mortar rounds hit. Twelve men were unloading an ammunition truck. An explosion. Scruggs came running. By instinct, he pulled the first-aid bandage from his trousers. Organs and pieces of bodies were scattered along the ground. They belonged to his friends. He had only one bandage. He stood and screamed for help.
>
> The flashbacks ended, but the faces continued to pile up in front of him. The names, he thought. The names. No one remembers their names.[2]

The next morning Scruggs told his wife of his idea to build a memorial to those who served in Vietnam—"It'll have the name of everyone killed." It was March 1979, and Jan Scruggs had started down a path that would change his life and the consciousness of his country forever.

Scruggs was blessed with the innocence of those who are unaware of the impossibility of the task they are undertaking. Soon Scruggs had recruited Washington attorneys Bob Doubek and Jack Wheeler to his dream. These

two highly capable, committed, and well-connected men were the perfect complement to Scruggs raw enthusiasm. As Howard K. Smith put it,

> The sheer folly of the project that Scruggs and friends so boldly set for themselves makes this an adventure story with nearly as many unlikely escapes from extinction as an Indiana Jones adventure. . . . What unthinking Secretary of the Interior would ever agree to let cloutless amateurs have such a priceless piece of real estate for so impossible a use?[3]

The gripping story of the memorial and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund that built it is well and fully told in Jan Scruggs and Joel Swerdlow's book *To Heal a Nation*, a tale of political maneuvers, hits, and near misses along the road to ultimate success. The obstacles were many: the Washington bureaucracy, the remains of the powerful antiwar movement, the radicals of the new right, even some deep divisions among Vietnam veterans themselves that were never fully resolved. Not to mention the formidable tasks of securing the right site, choosing the appropriate design, and raising $10 million dollars, all in time for dedication of the memorial on Veterans Day 1982. Symbolically, the Vietnam War was fought all over again—this time with words—as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund parried attacks and resistance from all sides.

The most important rhetorical document from the early days of the process was a statement of purpose for the design competition written primarily by Bob Doubek:

> While debate and demonstrations raged at home, these servicemen and women underwent challenges equal to or greater than those faced in earlier wars. They experienced confusion, horror, bitterness, boredom, fear, exhaustion, and death.
>
> In facing these ordeals, they showed the same courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty for which Americans traditionally have honored the nation's war veterans in the past.
>
> The unique nature of the war—with no definite fronts, with vague objectives, with unclear distinctions between ally and enemy, and with strict rules of engagement—subjected the Vietnam soldier to unimaginable pressures.
>
> Because of inequities in the draft system, the brunt of dangerous service fell upon the young, often the socially and economically disadvantaged.
>
> While experiences in combat areas were brutal enough in themselves, their adverse effects were multiplied by the maltreatment received by veterans upon their return home . . .
>
> The purpose of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is to recognize and honor those who served and died. It will provide a symbol of acknowledgment of the

> courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty of those who were among the nation's finest youth.
>
> The Memorial will make no political statement regarding the war or its conduct. It will transcend those issues. The hope is that the creation of the Memorial will begin a healing process.[4]

It is important to note here that the expressed purpose of the Memorial is to "recognize," "honor," "acknowledge," and "heal." Thus the design of the Memorial "will make no political statement," a nearly impossible objective if one believes the communication theory axiom that "one cannot not communicate." To make "no political statement" is akin to making no statement at all, and even having no memorial at all would communicate, at least to some, a political point.

Perhaps the most stunning irony of the design process was the identity of the memorial designer, selected in an open national competition by a blue ribbon panel from among 1,421 entries. Maya Ying Lin was a 21-year-old Yale undergraduate, raised in Ohio, with only vague knowledge of the Vietnam War and little interest in politics in general. An apolitical young Asian-American female! What more poignant counterpoint to the seasoned vets, the political opportunists, and the cynical bureaucrats who populated the landscape of Scruggs' dream. If the design itself could make "no political statement," still the designer herself communicated an instrinsic messsage. At the very least, no one could fault the competition's openness. At best, Maya Lin's selection was the sort of "Only in America!" event that would foster the hoped for healing process.

Maya Lin had decided that "the way to build a memorial would be to cut open the earth and to have stone rise up as part of the healing—something that would be like two hands opening to embrace people."[5] At first she created an "architectural pun," a row of dominoes falling in front of a wall of names, a concept that satirized the "Domino Theory" of "communist aggression" used to justify intervention in Vietnam. In a later moment of frustration and cynicism she recalled another joking idea she had had—to leave the two acre memorial site empty, and every day at a set time a plane would fly over and drop napalm.[6] (Students everywhere should take heart: for Maya Lin's final design, which has been called "the great American work of art for this century," she received a grade of "B" in her Yale architecture seminar!)

The design competition committee was unanimous in its choice of Maya Lin's design. Jack Wheeler immediately declared it "a work of genius." But Jan Scruggs was not so sure. To the untrained eye, unaccustomed to visualizing three dimensional space from flat drawings, the design looked like:

> A big bat. A weird-looking thing that could have been from Mars. Maybe a third-grader had entered the competiton and won. All the Fund's work had

> gone into making a huge bat for veterans. Maybe it symbolized a boomerang—the names of dead GI's bouncing back right in front of the White House and Congress—where it had all begun.[7]

Nonetheless, Scruggs put his faith in those whose judgment he had chosen to trust, and put his support behind the design.

Maya Lin's proposed memorial was designed for the two acre site at the foot of the Lincoln memorial that had been miraculously secured from Congress with the help of Senators Charles Mathias and John Warner. "The Wall" is a five hundred foot long open "V" of black granite panels, with "the angle formed solely in relation to the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument to create a unity between the nation's past and present."[8] The panels diminish in height from the apex of the "V" as they taper outward, giving the impression that the wall descends into (or rises from) the earth. Carved into the wall, in chronological order, are the names of the more than 58,000 Americans who died in combat in Vietnam or are still listed as missing in action. Nothing more, nothing less.

Yet this simple notion provoked intense reactions pro and con. Most fell into the "work of genius" camp. "Totally eloquent." "Presents both solitude and a challenge." "Reverential." "It's easy to love it." "Understated brilliance." "Extreme dignity and restraint." "There's no escape from its power." "The most moving war memorial ever erected." But the design had its detractors, some of them very influential. "It's something for New York intellectuals." "A tribute to Jane Fonda." "A body count on the Mall." "A wound in Mother Earth." "Inane." "An erosion control project." "A wailing wall." "Orwellian glop." "A black ditch." "A black gash of shame and sorrow." This last comment, by Veteran Tom Carhart, received considerable press coverage and symbolized the heated struggle between those who wanted to kill the project and those who were committed above all else to its realization.

There were many bones of contention. Some vets thought that the names should be listed alphabetically for ease in finding them. Maya Lin argued that a chronological listing was essential to her design, which should read like an epic Greek poem. Maya Lin prevailed, preventing the wall from looking like a giant granite telephone directory. Also, the vets wanted an inscription; Lin was hard to persuade. After much consultation with dozens of people, it was decided the inscription would read:

> Prologue: In honor of the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in the Vietnam War. The names of those who gave their lives and of those who remain missing are inscribed in the order they were taken from us.

> Epilogue: Our nation remembers the courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty and country of its Vietnam veterans. This memorial was built with private donations from the American people.

One interesting rhetorical feature of this inscription is the choice of the word "war" over "police action" or "conflict," a deliberate decision made after much discussion and debate. Vietnam, the war that was never officially a war, had been declared one at last.

Negotiation with the design's detractors eventually yielded two additions to the memorial: a representational sculpture of three GIs by Frederick Hart, and an American flag. In the process, Maya Lin herself became an opponent of the memorial. She said of Hart: "I can't see how anyone of integrity can go around drawing mustaches on other people's portraits."[9] Lin thus joined the powerful ranks of those who wanted to delay dedication, but the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund kept their single minded focus: every name would be on the wall by Veterans Day 1982. And so it was.

The Rhetoric of Ambiguity

> Son,
>
> I didn't know what to expect or what my reactions would be at seeing this black wall. I just had to go . . .
>
> The weather was unseasonably warm and sunny when we arrived in Washington, D.C. We got out of the car and started walking toward this Memorial. I could feel pulled toward this black wall and yet my feet didn't want to move. I was so scared. I was afraid I would find your name on this wall and yet I was afraid that maybe some mistake had been made and the name was left out . . .
>
> Then I saw it. My heart seemed to stop. I seemed to tremble. I shook as though I was freezing. My teeth chattered. I felt as though I couldn't get my breath. God, how it hurt . . .
>
> From the wall, like a mirror reflecting through my blurry tears, I seemed to see faces. Then I realized it was not the faces of the ones who had died, but of the living, who were here, like me, to find the name of a loved one[10] . . .

For a memorial with "no message," the wall certainly packs an emotional wallop. And from a rhetorical point of view, the message received by visitors to the wall and the way we relate to the wall as a representation of more than what it is are of special interest. On one hand, the wall may be the perfect "landscaped solution" to a design problem. Its harmony with and relation to the environmental context are worthy of note. But of more

interest here is what and how the wall communicates with its viewers; its rhetorical power to teach, to please, to move.

Maya Lin saw her design as "visual poetry,"[11] a circle where "one part is the two arms of the wall. The final segment of the circle is the living person who visits and through his presence fills in the part of the circle that has been omitted."[12] This is precisely the structure of the enthymeme of classical rhetorical theory, wherein part of a chain of reasoning is supplied by speaker and part by the listener, completing the circle of communication.

Lin knew her design would communicate. "I never expected it to be passionless," she explained. "The piece was built as a very psychological memorial. It's not meant to be cheerful or happy, but to bring out in people the realization of loss and a cathartic healing process."[13] Earlier she had made an even stronger statement in explaining the evolution of the design concept: "I wanted to describe a journey—a journey which would make you experience death."[14] Not surprisingly, the memorial evokes almost universal feelings of great sadness. Even the several half-size plastic replicas of the wall on tour around the country under the aegis of the Vietnam Combat Vets of San Jose, California, have an enormous and surprising power to move the viewer. Most people cry.

Maya Lin anticipated this reaction. All during construction she believed that the vets did not know what they were really building. "They did not understand what it would really be. At one point, for example, Doubek asked her, 'What will happen when people first see it?' She swallowed and said something encouraging. She wanted to say, They'll cry."[15] Lin herself was not exempt from the spell of her own creation. "Later, when I visited," she wrote, " I searched out the name of a friend's father. I touched it and I cried. I was another visitor, and I was reacting to it as I had designed it."[16]

It is as if the memorial that communicates nothing in general communicates everything in particular about the tragedy of war and the profound sadness of human loss. That the wall does indeed communicate to the viewer who then participates in the creation of its message is best seen in the fact that so many people communicate back to the wall. Each day hundreds of mementos are placed along its length as if in atonement with the dead: flowers, medals, photographs old and new, letters and poetry, bits of uniforms, a ragged teddy bear, a model of that '57 Chevy he hoped to come home to. "Tokens of grieving, of greeting, and of letting go."[17] All of these artifacts are carefully stored and curated with the goal of documenting the legacy of the Vietnam era through them.

The intentional ambiguity of the message of the Wall sometimes leads viewers to very different opinions about its meaning and implications. Two studies of the memorial published in communication journals arrived at opposite conclusions regarding its rhetorical significance. Sonja K. Foss,

writing in *Communication Quarterly* in 1986 concludes that "the memorial functions as an effective anti-war symbol."[18] On the contrary, Harry W. Haines, writing in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* in 1986 argues that "the design's ambiguity allows for a wide variation in responses and simultaneously makes the Memorial vulnerable to political manipulation." Indeed, he asserts even that "the administrative attempt at co-opting the Memorial for political purposes is clear, and it is linked to the power strategies for future wars."[19]

It would seem that we have here the makings of a prima facie case in support of the success of the design's intentional ambiguity. Let's take a closer look at Foss and Haines in order to better understand their reasoning in support of apparently conflicting claims.

Sonja Foss aims to identify the characteristics of the Memorial that make it appeal to nearly everyone, and that "enable it to perform this function and thus to serve both as a symbol of opposition to the Vietnam War and as a symbol of honor to those who participated in it."[20] Foss begins by offering an interesting discussion of "the rhetoric of the visual image," wherein she distinguishes between "aesthetic" and "rhetorical" responses to art and other non-discursive forms of communication. She states that "visual works of art may be considered rhetoric in that they produce effects and are intentional and purposive objects."[21] The aesthetic response is more sensory; the rhetorical response more instrumental. Of course, most viewers have both aesthetic and rhetorical responses to the Memorial, which Foss distinguishes thusly:

> If a viewer responds primarily to the regularity and pattern of the names on the memorial, for example, the response is predominantly aesthetic. . . . But if the viewer attributes meaning to the names and they are used to consider the tragedy of war, the response has become a rhetorical one. . . .[22]

Foss suggests that five major features account for the visual appeal of the Memorial. First, the Memorial violates the conventional form of war memorials because it does not provide any variant of the heroic "general on a horse" pseudo-realism." Also, because the Memorial focuses upon the specifics of the names, "our conventional expectations of a war memorial as abstract and general and thus lacking in capacity to involve its visitors personally in the war are violated."[23] So because conventional expectations about form are not fulfilled, more is demanded from the viewer to account for the work's meaning.

A second appeal of the Memorial, writes Foss, comes from its "welcoming stance." The Open "V" shape has been characterized as an "embrace," or "two open hands" that seem to safely envelop the viewer. The Memo-

rial's "female sensibility" has been contrasted to more "phallic memorials that rise upwards." The Memorial seems secure and non-threatening partly because of its integral relationship with the earth from which it appears to rise and its harmonious balance between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. We feel safe because the Memorial does not dictate to us, but rather supports whatever message the viewer chooses to attribute.

A third feature Foss finds significant is the Memorial's "lack of information," although I think she means here "lack of a specific message," because the Memorial certainly communicates a great deal of information. As Gregory Bateson wrote, "In the world of information, nothing can be a cause."[24] For instance, sometimes silence is the most powerful message of all. In communication as in design, "less is more." But what Foss seems to be actually saying is that it is the lack of a specific message that "allows supporter and protester of the war alike to see the memorial as eloquent."[25]

Fourth, the Memorial's focus on the dead rather than on the war itself strengthens its appeal by reminding us of the tragic human loss rather than reminding us of the deep divisions of opinion about the war itself. Writes Foss: "The repetitive form of name after name continually restates the message of waste and provides a common feeling and experience of sorrow in which all visitors share."[26] This is Maya Lin's "epic poem" read rhetorically.

Fifth and finally, Foss finds appeal in the Memorial's ability to generate multiple referents. The abstract form invites the viewer to attribute various meanings. For instance, the "V" shape can be seen as a peace sign or an index finger pointing in shame. The black color of the Memorial can signify shame, sorrow, or mourning. The submersion of the Memorial into the earth can be read as guilt or as healing.

Foss concludes that by prompting reflection upon the waste and loss of war without taking an ideological position, the Memorial functions as an effective anti-war symbol. She suggests that contemporary anti-war rhetoric should "avoid confrontative strategies," and "must communicate not that one group's view is right and that another is wrong, but that everyone is right to some degree and that all kinds of 'rightness' can be accorded room and value in the movement."[27] This highly debatable opinion goes a long way toward establishing Foss' point about the ambiguity of the Memorial's message. Foss also concludes, somewhat less controversially, that the Memorial indicates the need for new visual images and the effectiveness of focusing anti-war rhetoric not on ideology, but rather on the *essence* of war—death.

Harry Haines, in an essay at once somewhat deeper and more obscure than Foss' study, analyzes the role of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the

"mediated struggle" to explain: "What did the war mean?"[28] Haines notes that "the struggle over the war's meaning now approaches the size of a major communications industry," including more than 750 books about Vietnam released in the decade following the end of the war. (And Haines writes pre-*Rambo* and *Platoon*.)

Haines proposes a very provocative thesis, stating that "The Memorial's brief history now reveals administrative powers' attempt to naturalize the Vietnam experience, incorporating the war's memory in a context similar to the memory of other, more successful, wars, a project with profound psychological implications for Vietnam veterans."[29]

Haines' analysis centers upon the evolution of the Memorial as a "sacred site," as it moves through MacCannell's five phases of sacralization once reserved for holy places and now also ascribed to tourist attractions. These phases are naming, framing, enshrinement, mechanical reproduction, and social reproduction.

The "naming" phase includes all the ways in which the Memorial came to be as it is, including the various rhetorical struggles cited earlier in this chapter. One of the outcomes of this, Haines writes, is that "Lin's design transcends the Vietnam debate through ambiguity, or rather her design mutes the debate, making it inappropriate in the shadow of the dead."[30] To name, but not to speak.

The "framing" and "enshrinement" phases came naturally to the Memorial because of its placement in the already hallowed national ground between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. As Haines puts it, "The memory of Washington and Lincoln enshrine the memory of Vietnam."[31]

"Mechanical reproduction" is what authenticates the original, duplicating its presence in mediated culture. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial received extensive press coverage, including *Time* and *Newsweek* covers the same week. Much Wall memorabilia is available, from keychains, postcards, and T-shirts, to a commemorative postage stamp issued in November 1984. Most significantly, since Haines' writing several versions of a one-half size "Moving Wall" have been traveling around the country. These replicas, typically treated with great reverence by local veterans groups and visitors, are every bit as capable of eliciting a powerful response as is the "real" thing.

"Social reproduction," the final phase of site sacralization, is seen in the community of veterans who have become a "priestly group" that guards the wall and guides visitors to the names they seek. "For these veterans and many others like them," writes Haines, "The Wall is more than a sacred depository of memory; the wall is Vietnam."[32]

The social reproduction of the wall and the struggle for meaning that emerges from it is part of an inescapably political process. Even Maya Lin

recognized that in addition to remembering the dead, "What is also memorialized is that people still cannot resolve that war, nor can they separate the issues, the politics, from it."[33]

Through the use of little known statements about The Wall by "administrative powers" such as Ronald Reagan and Caspar Weinberger, Haines tries to establish an establishment attempt to co-opt its symbolism in justification of future wars. For instance, Reagan avers "There's been rethinking on all sides, and this is good. And it's time we moved on, in unity and with resolve, with the resolve to always stand for freedom, as those who fought did, and to always try to protect and preserve the peace."[34] Thus the Vietnam War is "normalized"; we now remember to forget.

Haines comes to the conclusion that what he sees as the developing Vietnam consensus serves administrative power by signaling that the war and postwar debate are now closed, by requiring of ailing veterans a "strategic forgetting" in the service of reconciliation, and by allowing those in power to pursue future Vietnams.

Thus, it is precisely because of the Memorial's ambiguity that it becomes susceptible to political manipulation. Contrary to the popular myth that the Memorial places the Vietnam War beyond politics, its noncommittal message makes it especially vulnerable to exploitation. So it is that Haines is left with the impression that "The Memorial's profound meaning is not so much in how the dead are remembered by those of us who survived Vietnam at home or abroad, but in how that remembrance is used by power to explain—to justify—future sacrifices in future Vietnams."[35]

While Foss and Haines agree that the Memorial's rhetorical ambiguity is the source of the wide range of potential meanings attributed to it, they differ in their assessment of what sorts of meanings will predominate and possibly prevail. Foss sees the Memorial as primarily a potent anti-war symbol; Haines sees it as a highly co-optable potentially pro-war symbol. Which case is more convincing? By definition of the legitmacy of the rhetoric of ambiguity, both cases can be allowed to stand, although I personally think that Haines makes the stronger and more arresting case. Foss seems to suffer a bit more from wishful thinking in speculating that the Memorial can shape a whole new genre of anti-war rhetoric. On the other hand, Haines offers a dark view of administrative power that goes beneath and beyond the popular wisdom of the Memorial's "healing and reconciliation" theme to give fair warning about its potential for abuse.

The Paradox Of Remembrance

The realization of Jan Scruggs' dream in a short three and one half years was nothing short of miraculous. In a city where the process of monument

building typically takes decades, America's most unpopular war was memorialized in an unconventional way in record time.

How can we explain such good fortune? While few seemed to object in principle to the idea of a memorial, Maya Lin's design itself had many powerful opponents, some of whom remained unreconciled even after the compromise that added Hart's statue. Also, the task of raising ten million dollars from scratch, supervised by the young and energetic Sandie Fauriol, was no minor venture. Against nearly impossible odds, Scruggs' Vietnam memories went from a nightmare to a dream.

Jack Wheeler, who was Chairman of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, has said that the "poetry of events" that characterized the process were miraculous enough to lead one to believe that it was "grace" that created the perfect vehicle "to heal a nation." Wheeler saw themes of "surprise" and "economy" at work in the process. There was surprise at the designer's identity, surprise at the silence of the huge crowd that gathered for the dedication, surprise at the number of people who visit the memorial and who leave a part of themselves, surprise at the sight of one's reflection in the black granite and at the impulse to touch the names. And "economy:" at every step of the way just enough money and resources materialized. In every dark hour another major contribution or supporter appeared to keep the memorial alive.

What accounts for the Memorial's power? A power so personal it moves nearly all who experience it to tears and so great it has fostered what Haines calls a "cult of remembrance."[36] I think that three features of the Memorial are especially important: its chronological listing of the names of the dead and missing, its enthymemic structure that invites the viewer to participate in making its meaning, and its rhetorical ambiguity that confirms attribution of varied and even conflicting messages about the Vietnam War.

"The names have a power, a life, all their own. Even on the coldest days, sunlight makes them warm to the touch. Young men put into the earth, rising out of the earth. You can feel their blood flowing again."[37] It is said that no sound is so precious to a person as the sound of one's own name. Naming is a fundamental human activity; it is what distinguishes an object from its context, naming identifies this person as different from that one, thus validating the existence of the individual.

Jan Scruggs' most inspired contribution was his idea to include all the names of the dead and missing. Maya Lin's stroke of genius was to arrange the names chronologically on the memorial so that they take on a narrative structure. For instance all men lost in the same battle are listed together, buddies forever. The Wall thus tells the story of the war; it even rises in height just as the war escalated, athough the names start at the high midpoint, taper off on one arm, metaphorically encircle the viewer, and start

from the end of the other arm to build to the war's conclusion. Thus does Maya Lin write the epic poem of the Vietnam War, etched in the blood of those who paid the ultimate price. It is a stunning story, and the names tell it all.

I mentioned earlier that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial expresses the classical rhetorical form of the enthymeme, which invites the viewer to participate in making its meaning. It does this discursively through the narrative of the names that leaves construction of the story of the war or of individuals involved in the war to the viewer. Non-discursively, the engulfing and encircling form of the Wall itself invites the viewer to share in its memorialization. Many have commented, too, upon the reflective quality of the granite, whereby the viewer sees himself and the world mirrored among the names of the dead. The eerily seductive appeal draws one into the horror and loss. It is thus not surprising that viewers reach out to touch the wall in completion of the circle of remembrance, and that they leave behind the myriad offerings that signify their part in the communication process.

The communicational structure of the Wall can also be seen as what Umberto Eco has called an "open text," which demands much from the reader in that it does not satisfy our "hunger for redundancy" the way a "closed text" (such as a traditional war memorial) would.[38] The Wall does not tell us what to think; it demands that we think for ourselves. Marshall McLuhan would no doubt term the Wall a "cool" medium, since it offers low sensory definition and thus invites a high degree of participation from the receiver. Said William Blake: "Wise men see outlines, so they draw them."

Finally, the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial rhetoric of ambiguity is consistent with the confused, contradictory, divisive, and unresolved character of that war. Jan Scruggs was arguing with an anti-war protester about the memorial when "The irony hit. People being memorialized usually did not do it themselves. Yet here were Vietnam vets building a memorial to honor service to a country that still seemed anxious to forget. "What the hell," he figured. "It had been that kind of war."[39]

It is precisely the Wall's ambiguity that confers its appeal and power. The appeal comes from its openness to all points of view about the war, and the power from the fact that it is the viewer who then constructs the personalized message in a process of self-persuasion. Haines writes that "Lin's achievement is a war memorial (perhaps, the first) which simultaneously comforts the visitor while evoking an interpretation of loss."[40] He might have added that the memorial also manages to simultaneously satisfy many conflicting message expectations in a way that a more polemic memorial could not.

And so we have the Vietnam Veterans Memorial poised on the edge of the paradox of remembrance: to remember the Vietnam War is unbearable; but to forget it is unthinkable. Peter Marin cautions against allowing the memorial to become an instrument of forgetting through its ability to mythologize the past, "making it a part of memory rather than thought, an object of sentiment rather than sentence."[41] There is something to this, for by selectively remembering the Vietnam War we can choose to conveniently forget its full meaning. By focusing exclusively on "healing and reconciliation" we can overlook the wounds that have yet to be opened. By seeing the Wall as the fnal chapter on Vietnam we can ignore the many thousands who suffer still and for whom the story is just beginning.

Marin shares similar concerns. What we owe the dead and ourselves, he argues, is serious contemplation of the ideas of moral value, conscience, generosity, solidarity, and community. "If the Vietnam memorial manages to remind us that this is what is missing and what must be begun," Marin writes, "this is fine. If not, then it will simply become—no matter how moving or lovely—simply another means by which, in the name of memory, we destroy the past."[42] We must not use the Memorial as a means of remembering to forget.

Combat poet David Collins is one of those for whom the Vietnam War has not yet ended. Reflecting on a visit to the "Moving Wall" in 1986, he wrote:

Up Against the Wall

The boy I took to Vietnam
Died and went to hell
And this old man
Brought his conscience home
With a sad story to tell

The draft is the cool breath of death
On a napalmed peasant's funeral pyre
And every day my heart grieves
For the souls set on fire

See the writing on the Wall?
The words are the names
Of those who served the call
See the empty in America's eyes
See the hollow in our lives
Notice the scars on the heart
If healing is coming, when does it start?

That granite wall is but one chapter told
Of the largest tombstone in the world

Notes

1. Center for the Study of the Vietnam Generation. Report. Volume 2 (3), March 1987, p. 4.
2. Scruggs, J.C., and J.L. Swerdlow. *To Heal a Nation*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985, p. 7.
3. Ibid, p. xiv.
4. Ibid, p. 53.
5. Ibid, p. 54.
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