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"Responsibly Inventing History":
The Work of Tim O'Brien

presented by

Brian Cole McNerney

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"RESPONSIBLY INVENTING HISTORY": THE WORK OF TIM O'BRIEN

By

Brian Cole McNerney

A THESIS

Submitted to

Michigan State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1994

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ABSTRACT

"Responsibly Inventing History": The Work of Tim O'Brien

By

Brian Cole McNerney

This thesis examines the literature which has emerged in response to the American involvement in Vietnam using a framework of innocence, experience, and aftermath. I argue that these narratives should be recognized as a distinct sub-genre within American literature based on thematic concerns, linguistic patterns, and a self-conscious use of the "war story." I then examine the work of Tim O'Brien, using the same framework of innocence, experience, and aftermath, pointing out correspondences with other narratives, and explore O'Brien's self-conscious use of the "war story" as a narrative form. I consider the metafictional element present throughout his work and investigate his use of revision as a deliberate artistic strategy. In an appendix, I provide a transcript of an interview I conducted with Tim O'Brien in East Lansing, Michigan, on 7 April 1994, in which I pursue these topics in more depth with the writer.

This thesis is dedicated to my father--a quite fine soldier;
toTim O'Brien--whose literature inspired this work;
and to the soldiers of C Battery, 3rd Battalion, 17th Field Artillery,
who served with little complaint in the Persian Gulf War.

Acknowledgments

First, foremost, I must thank Victor Howard, Professor of English at Michigan State University, who made this happen in a sometimes inhospitable environment. While I wish him unbridled pleasure in his retirement, I also want him to remember that because of his grace under pressure, outsiders like myself periodically infiltrate academia and make our modest contributions. With Victor's help.

I wish also to thank Lino Pretto, who proved his mettle as a vet, and assured me of the value of enduring friendship. Catherine Calloway, of Arkansas State University, provided invaluable bibliographic help which foreshortened the research portion, and graciously introduced me to a number of Vietnam War critics whose work I inevitably encountered. Steven Kaplan provided me an illuminative manuscript of his work in progress, *Understanding Tim O'Brien*, which I trust will become the standard-bearer of discussion on O'Brien. Marilyn Wilson, a distinguished Professor of English Education at Michigan State, reminded me that academia need not be a constant threat. She helped me become a (future) teacher in palpable ways.

I wish to formally thank Tim O'Brien, for his willingness to come to East Lansing and tell true war stories, as well as allowing me to interview him.

Colonel Peter Stromberg deserves special thanks. Thank you for your support of my entry into the U.S. Army Advanced Civil Schooling Program as well as the opportunity to instruct cadets, future Army officers, our future.

My father and mother have been indispensable: encouraging, listening, advising.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Sarah, who demonstrated celestial tolerance. She assisted me invaluably by transcribing the interview, a painstakingly slow and difficult process. Also, my daughters Angela and Megan, and my son Brendan Patrick, born on 15 February 1991, while I was at the "office" in the Persian Gulf: You have already exhibited immaculate timing. Let's tell some war stories.

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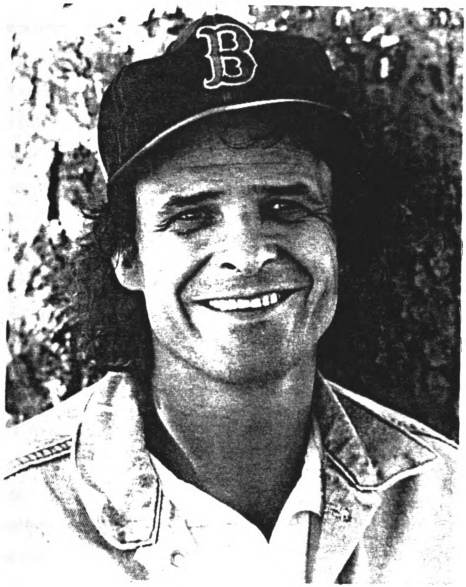

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Introduction

The Vietnam War is *not* over.[1] This assertion is made in contradistinction to George Bush's proclamation after the Persian Gulf in 1991 that America could finally, and even proudly, put this "other" long war behind us ... for good.[2] The reality is that the Vietnam War will never end, at least not in the national consciousness. Almost two full decades after the final helicopter wobbled off the embassy headquarters in Saigon, the president's pronouncement reveals how that war continues to percolate its unique blend of cultural symbolism and awareness of military defeat in a country particularly ill-adapted to failure on the battlefield. The author Tim O'Brien, a soldier-writer-storyteller, upon reflection on his own combat experiences in Vietnam 1969-70, warned Americans and particularly his fellow veterans not to forget this war:

> We should remember. Not in a crippling, debilitating way, but rather a form of affirmation: Yes, war is hell. The cliché is true. Oh, we all *know* it's true, we know it in an abstract way, the way we know that the moon is a lonely place. But soldiers, having been there, have witnessed the particulars which give validity and meaning to the abstract. That's an important kind of knowledge, for it reminds us of the stakes: human lives, human limbs. Real lives, real limbs. Nothing abstract. ("We've Adjusted Too Well," 205-06).

O'Brien's caution above, written in 1981, resonates still: his plea for remembrance coincides with what has turned out to be a deluge of films, poetry, memoirs, and both short and long fictional narratives about the Vietnam conflict. O'Brien's caution coincided with the commemoration of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C., and followed the publication of his novel, *Going After Cacciato*.[3] The country has not, in fact, forgotten. In these intervening years O'Brien followed a trajectory from ex-soldier and ex-student to the pursuit of writing fiction, much of it war stories of the war in which he proved to be a reluctant participant. Though he at times worries about being typecast as a "Vietnam war writer" (Naparsteck, 4), much of his writing is dominated by the war,

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and he acknowledges that the subject will likely remain thematically central to his works (Johnson, 41).

The present inquiry consists of an examination of O'Brien's appeal for remembrance by looking at how his work synthesizes memory and imagination, continually reworked as the writer returns to and rewrites his material in an effort to "draw out as an artist draws out his visions" (*Going After Cacciato,* 24), as part of a process to understand and communicate his combat experience. I will analyze his work across a framework of innocence, experience, and consideration by revealing how each of his principle works, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried*, might be thoughtfully examined using these three divisions. I adopt this approach from Tobey Herzog, who in *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost*, uses this strategy in his survey of Vietnam literary works. Herzog includes an additional category, "aftermath," which I conflate with "consideration." The theme of innocence focuses on narrative treatments of soldiers' expectations and indoctrination prior to actual involvement in Vietnam, but also extend to the persistence of naive conceptions of the war, such as that epitomized by Alden Pyle in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. The theme of experience explores the dimension of actual combat and the *in country*[4] experience. The theme of consideration evaluates the ways in which authors explore the post-war condition, from the depiction of the newly returned veteran as in Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* to William Broyles Jr.'s account, *Brothers in Arms: A Journey From War to Peace*, which recapitulates his return visit to Vietnam in 1984, fifteen years after he fought there as a marine.

Finally, I will focus attention on the ways in which O'Brien exploits metafictional techniques in the three works in order to stimulate his readers' reflection on how any developed response to war is a constructed one, which requires the person remembering to impose order and coherence on experience which may otherwise be disordered.

Central to this inquiry is O'Brien's conception of the "war story" and how it differs from traditional war narrative strategies. In a deliberate attempt to establish new narrative categories which might further his capacity to relate the character and lessons of war to the uninitiated, he delimits conventional approaches to depicting war and expands the generic possibilities of telling war stories across the body of his writing. I provide a hermeneutical framework for exploring the fulfillment of Thomas Myers' repeated argument in *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* that each war demands new aesthetic expressions to reconstitute the synthesis of cultural mythology of war with the most recent war experience:

> The self-conscious American war novel, however, does not merely stand in opposition to the appropriation of lived history within popular mythic texts. Most often, it enfolds the major components of popular myth within its own textual strategies to do battle with it. The best of American war fiction invariably deals specifically and deliberately with the linguistic strategies, both popular and official, that are the fuel for collective memory and offers itself as a fully realized metalanguage of warfare. And it is for this reason that the finest examples of American war writing seem so startlingly new in terms of form and style, that historical and aesthetic shifts are invariably simultaneous operations (13).

Ultimately, O'Brien's intent is to explore the truth of combat experience through fiction, even "telling lies" when necessary to evoke that truth (e.g., "'I'm a believer in the power of stories, whether they're true, or embellished, or utterly made up'," [Lomperis, 53]), and confront the reader with the horror and reality of war. To meet this objective, he insistently experiments with different literary genres to extend the range of his message: thus, one finds *If I Die* to be relatively straightforward autobiographical memoir; *Northern Lights* (1975) and *The Nuclear Age* (1985) to be conventional novels-- in the sense of being chronological tales which conform to realistic practices with regard to developing setting and plot and contain clearly delineated, developmental main characters; *Going After Cacciato* to be an experiment in form which has been described as a foray into magical realism (Freedman, 1); and *The Things They Carried*, finally, a confluence of generic possibilities, arguably an expansion into a new balance between short story and

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novel.[5] Although I will not deal extensively with O'Brien's novels *Northern Lights* and *The Nuclear Age*, I will demonstrate how the Vietnam experience is still central to those works and how O'Brien incorporates themes from his other works into them.

Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, states that "[e]very war is ironic because every war is worse than expected" (7).[6] O'Brien's work belong to that of writers' whose stories and novels confront the omnipresent absurdity and disconnectedness that characterized America's longest war had for its participants, and for those at home who tried to understand to what end the national leadership, across several generations of politicians, plunged the country into its longest war. I will examine several of these narratives using the same interpretive construct of innocence, experience, and consideration, in order to place O'Brien's work within the sub-genre of Vietnam War literature. Furthermore, the narratives I examine here belong to a number of generic categories--conventional war novels, memoirs, experimental fiction of varying lengths--and are meant to establish a basis for comparison with O'Brien's flexibility in operating within different genres. I do not attempt exhaustive consideration of all the literary works available. Although in the first decade following the end of the conflict the publishing industry proved reluctant to underwrite literary interpretations of the war, in the past decade the field has overflowed. It does not appear that the American public's appetite will soon wane.[7] Each war in American history has developed its own set of iconographical apparatus and appropriated unique symbols as its remembrance is mythologized by the popular consciousness. The works I discuss collectively reflect this conscious tendency toward reformulating a mythology of war and one will note the way a number of emblematic images resonate throughout both fictional and non-fictional accounts.[8]

Hopefully my thesis might take understanding and recollection of the Vietnam War into a new direction, particularly with regard to my evaluation of the emergence of the

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highly self-conscious "war story" in Vietnam war literature and especially in O'Brien, and simultaneously resurrect the experience which O'Brien cautions us to continually keep alive in our awareness. In this way, we might begin to answer Paul Berlin's persistent inquiry in *Going After Cacciato*, "What happened, and what might have happened?" (27).

1. Biographical Background

Tim O'Brien was born in Austin, Minnesota on 1 October, 1946, and raised in the town of Worthington, several hundreds miles west, in the southwestern part of the state. He attended college in St. Paul at Macalester College, graduating summa cum laud in the spring of 1968, when he received his induction notice.

Upon arrival in Vietnam in February 1969 (Warga, 3),[9] O'Brien was assigned to the 23rd Division "Americal" (3rd Platoon, A Company, 5th Battalion 46th Infantry Regiment, 198th Infantry Brigade 'Light'), headquartered in Chu Lai near the Batangan peninsula in the northernmost zone of military operations. "I Corps," a designation referring to the geographical military zone of operations and not to a specific organizational unit and the 23rd Division's area of operations, was comprised principally of Marine units which patrolled the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Vietnam. Significantly, it was a company from the 11th Infantry Brigade, a sister brigade to the 198th Infantry, which was responsible for the My Lai massacre which had occurred on March 16, 1968 (Boettcher, 390-92). O'Brien acknowledges the awareness of soldiers throughout his platoon of the events surrounding the atrocity of My Lai in *If I Die* and arguably sets his novel, *Going After Cacciato*, in 1968 in order to provide historical focus on My Lai as well as Tet and concurrent actions (Griffith, 1).

O'Brien was wounded by grenade fragments in the spring of 1969 near My Lai, was awarded the Purple Heart and later assigned to coveted duty as an administrative clerk at brigade headquarters for the duration of his tour. He returned to the United States in March, 1970, and was discharged at Fort Lewis, Washington (Wilkie, 287).

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One of the central themes throughout his writing is intense scrutiny of his rationale in going to Vietnam, given the alternatives of escape to Canada or even underground resistance in the United States, a fate he ultimately invents for William Cowling, the main character of his third novel, *The Nuclear Age*. It would appear that Stephen Nathanson's explanation of young men willing to go to war, in the absence of compelling patriotic rationales, might mesh with O'Brien's own explanations offered in *If I Die*:

> It is certainly true that military service is one way that patriotic people can show concern for their nation and willingness to sacrifice on its behalf. Nonetheless, it is a mistake to think that military service establishes that someone is a patriot. Patriotism is not the only motive that leads people to military service. It is no accident that military conscription is backed up by legal penalties. Some may serve to simply avoid legal punishment, while others may fear the disapproval of family or friends ... Patriotism is only one of many motivations for military service (Nathanson, 135).

The tangled issue of O'Brien's decision to observe the dictates of his draft notice and the painful internal debate he experienced are chronicled repeatedly throughout his writing, though one must with deep caution assign biographical verity at each juncture[10] In *If I Die* he informs us:

> I did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war. But neither did I want to upset a peculiar balance between the order I knew, the people I knew, and my own private world. It was not just that I valued that order. I also feared its opposite --inevitable chaos, censure, embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all (22).

Yet one must contrast his comments here with the ironic assertion by his narrator, Tim O'Brien, in *The Things They Carried* that "I was a coward. I went to the war" (63). *The Nuclear Age* consists of the recollections of a draft evader, whose chaotic and absurd existence provides imaginative counterpoint to O'Brien's real life decision to capitulate to the forces of "home town, friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile" (*If I Die*, 66); in *Going After Cacciato* he provides, through the voice of Paul Berlin across the round imaginary negotiating table in Paris, perhaps the most eloquent expression available of the complicated rationale to contradict his pacifist instincts and go to war. There, Berlin

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speaks of fear of exile and familial disenfranchisement in much the same language one hears in *If I Die*; yet in this instance the rationale is given maturity by the recognition of other external requirements:

> I knew what I was getting into. I knew it might be unpleasant. And I made promises with that full understanding. The promises were made freely ... My obligation is to people, not to principle or politics or justice ... Peace of mind is not a simple matter of pursuing one's own pleasure; rather, it is inextricably linked to the attitudes of other human beings, to what they want, to what they expect. The real issue is to find felicity within limits. Within the context of our obligations to other people. We all want peace (285-86).

However we come to regard the comments made both directly by O'Brien in his memoir or indirectly through the various personae of his more overtly fictional works regarding his ultimate decision to go to Vietnam, what is inescapable is that his decision paradoxically provided the impetus for his subsequent literary career. One might vainly speculate what kind of writer O'Brien might have become in the absence of this grounding, or whether he would have become a writer at all; it is perhaps safer to acknowledge the sufficiency of that experience in shaping his artistic goals in the terms he himself provided in a 1990 interview with Jeff Johnson in *Minnesota Monthly*: "Vietnam made me a writer; I wouldn't have been a writer without it. The stories I remember before I go to bed at night or dream about or recollect as I'm writing are in me, and I want to tell them, and that's the reason [I return] to Vietnam. It's just that there are all these great stories to tell" (41). In another interview, with erstwhile biographer Steven Kaplan, O'Brien voices his acknowledgment even more strongly: "My concerns as a human being and my concerns as an artist at some point intersected in Vietnam--not just in the physical place, but in the spiritual and moral terrain of Vietnam" (101). The war became a locus of understanding, and eventually a sieve for the writer's experiences; the grist of war and its attendant miseries and joys provided the requisite tableaux for investigating the larger issues of human nature which O'Brien engages throughout his work: courage, contending with fear, love, loss, and the great healing powers of the imagination.

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After returning from Vietnam, O'Brien attended Harvard University as a graduate degree in political science, interspersing course work with occasional internships and eventually a leave of absence with the *Washington Post* as a national affairs reporter, during which time he covered issues such as "a lot of Senate hearings, the first oil boycott, some veterans' affairs" (McCaffrey, 263-64). He abandoned his journalistic and academic endeavors in the spring of 1976, having produced both *If I Die* and his first novel, *Northern Lights*, in order to embark upon a full-time literary career (Wilkie, 287). One should remember that originally O'Brien did not intend to become a writer. He notes in the interview with McCaffrey regarding the conception of *If I Die* that "even then I wasn't thinking of myself as a writer; I was writing in the sense that we all do it--in letters and postcards" (264). Thus, his transformation mirrors, though in vital ways differently, his parallel evolution into the role of a soldier: initially each self-definition was reluctant (particularly the role of soldier), gradually accommodated ("With [the reading of T.E. Lawrence's] *The Mint* I became a soldier, knew I was a soldier," *If I Die*, 34), and eventually embraced ("I've always wanted to write good books. When you face a page in the morning, you don't think about awards. You just think about sentences and story and characters and themes --the book itself" (McCaffrey, 278). Yet with *The Things They Carried*, published in 1990, his aesthetic vision expands to include a self-conscious exploration of why and how one writes. Thus, by this point in his career, he has moved from the unconscious stirrings of literary talent while in Vietnam to the fully cognizant literary activity of examining, in the format, for example, of a story entitled "How to Tell a True War Story," the very specific gravities and essences which underpin his specific blend of historical reimagining (memory) and artistic creation (imagination).

O'Brien's career as writer substantially overcame the traditional obstacles associated with authorship with the critical acceptance of his novel *Going After Cacciato*, the National Book Award winner for fiction in 1979--an auspicious beginning considering the

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competition of John Irving's novel *The World According to Garp* and John Cheever's *Stories*. To date, *Cacciato* has elicited greater critical attention than any of O'Brien's other work, though analyses of *The Things They Carried* are beginning to appear with increasing frequency and constitute a substantial portion of Vietnam critic Philip Beidler's seminal study, *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* (28-38).[11] O'Brien followed up *Cacciato* in 1985 with *The Nuclear Age*, which Beidler calls a book about "what happened, but also in the same moment a book about what might have happened, what could have happened, what should have happened, what may be kept from happening, or what may yet be made to happen" (Lomperis, 87), in words highly reminiscent of Paul Berlin's interrogation of fact in *Going After Cacciato*. His last major work is the recent *The Things They Carried*, cited as one of the ten best books of 1990 by the *New York Time Book Review*. Excerpts from a forthcoming novel have appeared in *Esquire* ("Loon Point") and in *Atlantic Monthly* ("The People We Marry"). The novel, tentatively titled *The Secrets of Marriage*, is expected to appear in fall, 1994.[12] Superficially at least , these recent excerpts reflect a willingness to move away from Vietnam as primary subject, yet the same themes of knowledge, weakness, and courage, as well the appearance of the previously unexplored theme of magic, remain central. Perhaps O'Brien's particularly respectful status vis-à-vis his fellow Vietnam writers is simply, in part, attributable to his continuing productivity. He informed Steven Kaplan during an interview, when originally asked about the timing of Kaplan's then projected full-length study, that it was perhaps premature since O'Brien is still in the middle of his career (Kaplan, 1991, 108). O'Brien is not yet finished with his own narrative. As Beidler notes, "O'Brien continues to seek a fiction in which cultural memory and imaginative invention would find a new domain of mythic alliance, a ground of original creation on which each might most fully partake of the shaping and transforming power of the other. It is a fiction in which the vision of the merely plausible continues to trace out other and better visions of the newly possible" (*Re-Writing America*, 12).

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2. Literary Sub-Genre: Narrative Expressions of Vietnam

As much as any other single event which marked the emergence of Vietnam literature as a significant, discernible category in American fiction, the 1985 conference of The Asia Society, which O'Brien attended, commemorates the emergence of Vietnam War literature as an object of worthwhile scholarship in its own right. Timothy Lomperis described the charter of this conference as taking stock of the "Vietnam War literature and to assess its influence on present and future American perceptions of Vietnam and Asia" (vii). "The United States and Viet Nam: From War to Peace," a conference held at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana from 2-4 December 1993,[13] reflected that same objective while expanding, as part of an ongoing process, the scope of these gatherings of the conflict's participants and students--issues such as the writing of Vietnamese poets and novelists as well as the cinematography which continues to emerge received prominent articulation-- and reveal an abiding endurance of this subject in a culture still grappling with the lessons of the war. While the conferences did not limit themselves to investigations of literary value, they clearly provided a forum for discussing the divergent approaches to recording the war. Session titles from the Asia Society conference testify to the salience of literary concerns: "Combat Literature," "Fact and Fiction in the Literature," and "The Role of Literature in Understanding the War."

At the Notre Dame conference several papers reflected the sustained significance of O'Brien's work. Under the suggestive session title "Truth-Telling: Fact/Fiction," there was both a panel which explored the troubling fictive element in *If I Die* ("Writing and the Viet Nam Experience: Where is the Line Between Non-Fiction and Fiction?" by Wilbur Scott), as well as a paper which argued that "through his narratives, Tim O'Brien invites us to consider the complex reality exposed by the stories we tell--the reality we must face as individuals and as a nation if we ever hope to understand and reconcile this experience"

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(Bowie, 1). What, though, does this persistent attention to the lessons conveyed by the fiction of the period suggest? Does it mark the continued relevance of American society's attempt to finally come to terms with the experience, or contrarily, as Leon Muse argues in "A Statute of Limitations: Recent American Writings on the Vietnam War," is it possible that the salient consideration "about Vietnam War popular culture today is its passing--the TV shows are cancelled, after a flood the movies have dried up, the memoirs and novels are once again a trickle, and those interested in the War [constitute] a consuming minority" (96)?

One premise of the present study is that the importance of Vietnam literary studies is increasing, not declining, and its persistent relevance relates precisely to a cultural preoccupation lingering unresolved issues still causing national discomfort; there is, in other words, an ongoing implicit critique of the process of American mythic self-definition. That yearning for self-definition achieves sharp focus in the narratives inspired by the war and continues to emerge in the form of the enduring popularity of Vietnam as a subject in university classrooms. In "Vietnam 101: The Lessons of the War Have Reached America's Classrooms," Karen Franklin reports that "Since 1980, some 350 courses on the history of the war have appeared on campuses around the country" and that "the recent interest in Vietnam that has cut across popular culture indicates that those numbers can only grow" (20). There are at least two major collections of Vietnam War materials now in university libraries, the most acclaimed repository at Colorado State University. Another, at La Salle University in Philadelphia, specifically showcases the fiction which emerged from the war. In his assessment of the two collections, as well as those which recently became accessible through the National Archives in Washington, D.C.,"The History of the Vietnam War on Microfiche" (editor Douglas Pike) and the John M. Nichols Collection at Cornell, John Baky recently singled out the La Salle collection as "a resource that allows the researcher to discover in a vast literature .. certain persistent images, recurring ideological perceptions, and [the source of] factual distortions" (16).

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Baky reserves special praise for the sub-collection "Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection," part of the La Salle archives, which "provides hundreds of texts that reveal by way of comparative readings how a 'non-fiction' narrative becomes fiction (and vice versa) as the narrator refracts the recalled 'event' through the lens of his imagination and memory," a locus of analysis particularly germane to O'Brien's work and the present study.

Certainly, what this critical acknowledgment indicates is the presence of an already existing and fairly clearly defined domain which might be recognized as a distinct sub-genre of American fiction. Furthermore, as Robert Butko elaborates in his 1992 dissertation, "Vietnam fiction may be seen as a type of sub-genre due to the reshaping of old conventions of war literature and the invention of new ones" (1). By reviewing a handful of narratives which are rooted in the war, I hope to reveal that rather than the academic preoccupation of a small group of literary aficionados, these works do in fact define the boundaries of a distinctive "sub-genre," as Butko argues, in which the principal shared characteristic is the self-conscious use of the "war story" as a rhetorical and even historical methodology for retrieving war experience. In reading the narratives of Vietnam, we too attempt to know our own selves, even risk guilt for the events described, and participate directly in the ongoing historical engagement of reconstituting the war in American consciousness.

Where one sets the origins of a distinctive Vietnam conflict literature by Americans depends in large part on how one dates the evolution of American involvement in Vietnam. Through the structural blueprint of innocence, experience, and consideration, I will trace the way in which a variety of fictive and non-fictional accounts describe and interpret our involvement and seek to address that delineation directly. Within this framework, the category of "innocence" pertains to depictions of soldiers and others who would become involved in a state prior to actual combat, or, as in the case of *The Quiet American*, in a period of precipitant conflict. The category of "experience" relates to

those narratives dealing with the actuality of combat. "Aftermath," or "consideration," applies to narratives which focus on the experience of the soldier or participant following his or her experience "in country," in the midst of the attempt to achieve some form of reconciliation with the combat event. Thus, though these divisions might constitute artificial delineations, they correspond quite aptly both to the trajectory of phases of individual experience of the war while they simultaneously mirror a larger discernible context for studying the narratives. As Tobey Herzog suggests, "the best war stories, fiction and nonfiction, contain important lessons about the war--if readers pay attention" (2), and the thematic contexts of innocence, experience, and consideration provide means of "facilitating, understanding and evaluating the Vietnam narratives" (58-59).

Narratives of "Innocence"

Wherever one begins chronologically, the reader should pay particular attention to the problems of discriminating between attempts at "realistic" or "straight" historical recapitulation and experimental works which privilege imaginative renderings; in other words, one should keep intact an image of a continuum from direct historical recapitulation to extreme forms of artistic interpretation by imaginative reshaping. Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, for example, embodies both the quality of fictional abstraction and a nearly prophetic sensibility regarding the imminent escalation of American military and political activity in South Vietnam during the winding down of French activity following the ignominious capitulation of French forces at Dienbienphu on 7 May 1954 (Karnow, 198). Bill Ehrhart, a respected poet and essayist on Vietnam in his own right, defines *The Quiet American* as "undoubtedly the most remarkable book ever written about the war. That an English journalist could see so clearly and dispassionately the whole terrible disaster into which the United States even then was so energetically and blindly hurling itself is only slightly less amazing than the fact that no one who mattered

paid the slightest attention to Greene's warning" ("Teaching the Vietnam War," 145). What Greene's work so tellingly depicts is the innocent and perhaps self-deceptive American belief in the efficacy of the newly created the "Third Force,"[14] which would come to vindicate western colonialist interest in the face of French defeat. Alden Pyle, the ultimate representative of the presumably saving grace of American involvement, provides tragic foil to the seasoned experience of a British journalist, Fowler, who early notes the lurking dangers of naievté with regard to the internecine rivalries raging in Vietnam:

> Why does one want to tease the innocent? Perhaps only ten days ago [Pyle] had been walking across the Common in Boston, his arms full of the books he had been reading in advance on the Far East and the problems of China. He didn't even hear what I said; he was absorbed in the dilemmas of Democracy and the responsibilities of the West; he was determined--I learnt that very soon--to do no good, not to any individual person but to a country, a continent, a world (18).

Predictably, Pyle disregards the sage counsel of his wise and then-uncommitted journalist counterpart, plunging pell-mell into the plots and intrigues which later would characterize American covert activity. Despite Greene's seemingly innocuous disclaimer, that "this is a story and not a piece of history ... about a few imaginary characters," (post title page) it in fact provides a hauntingly prescient forecast of America's deepening involvement.[15] Charles de Gaulle would almost contemporaneously warn Dwight Eisenhower, to little avail, of the inextricability of involvement in Indochina (Boettcher, 219).

Pyle's enthusiastic innocence perhaps partially stimulated the characterization of Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five, or Children's Crusade*. Pilgrim's seemingly archetypal withdrawal from the mundane reality of immersion in war recall Pyle's stubborn refusal to confront the reality of his experience. Like Greene, Vonnegut teasingly resists the allure of presenting his work as straight historical fact, despite the author's own presence in Dresden during the massive firebombing raids of February, 1945: "All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (1). Yet

important differences come to light. Pyle's self-confidence as *The Quiet American* belies a lack of self-reflective insight, "impregnably armored by his good intentions and his ignorance" (163). Ultimately these intentions disintegrate when faced with the reality of failed objectives, which present the opportunist with new and ever more dangerous objectives in order to prove the worth of the "third force" plan. Fowler becomes infuriated, impotently, against the seeming impenetrability of Pyle's naive but implacable dedication. Lack of historical perspective is precisely the locus of the American's innocence, an innocence which provokes Fowler, already witness to decades of interventionist folly, to an unproductive verbal ambush, wherein he ironically finds himself portraying his own experience as that of the aborigine European with yet more child-like Asians:

> [Pyle:] 'At least they won't hate us like they hate the French.'
> [Fowler:] 'Are you sure? Sometimes we have a kind of love for our enemies and sometimes we feel hate for our friends.'
> 'You talk like a European, Thomas. These people aren't complicated ...'
> 'Find me an uncomplicated child, Pyle. When we are young we are a jungle of complications. We simplify as we get older.' But what good was it to talk to him? There was an unreality in both our arguments (176).

What lesson which finally arises from Pyle's involvement is acutely revealed to the reader but equally acutely lost on Pyle. Though he views Fowler with the jaundiced eye of romantic competition with regard toward their common love, Phuong, Pyle displaces Fowler as the new representative of western interests in Vietnam. Certainly, Pyle is an innocent wreaking havoc in a land uninnocent of the ravages of war. Perhaps the most troubling legacy of Greene's book, in fact, is its premonitory quality ... and the degree to which readers of fiction and optimistic implementers of foreign policy alike disregarded the lessons it offered for non-intervention. As Peter McInerney noted, "*The Quiet American* is a sort of history, a fiction of the actual past and the real future, a 'story in the place of 'history'" (187). With so much of the history still to be written in 1955, let alone

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created, when *The Quiet American* first appeared, the irony of the American impetus for military involvement proves that much more poignant.

By 1965, the momentum of American activity had launched a dramatic increase of ground troop commitments in response to what was construed as a tightly orchestrated series of North Vietnamese aggressions. The most significant American response was the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the "blunt instrument" of diplomacy which William Bundy, one of Lyndon Johnson's national security advisors, formulated as a means to both quell domestic anxiety toward mounting southeast Asian turmoil and providential linchpin for justifying the introduction of American ground forces (Karnow, 360-63). In March, 1965, the Marines landed the greater part of a regiment on beachheads around Danang. Shortly after, the First Infantry Division, First Air Cavalry Division (Air Assault), and 173rd Airborne Brigade of the Army arrived in country, followed by a succession of U.S. ground units. Among those present, and certainly innocent to the full meaning of his impending experience, Philip Caputo arrived on 8 March, part of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Force. His primary work dealing with this early period, *A Rumor of War*, typically described as a straightforward memoir, occasionally suggests a more overtly literary intent. Caputo's justification for going to Vietnam epitomizes the expression of idealistic, innocent ambition which characterized not only the attitude of soldiers committed early to the war, but also the early experiences of soldiers once committed, such as the internalization by Caputo of a more mature ideological conception of the war as articulated by the national leaders of the time:

> War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it, but we had also been seduced into uniform by Kennedy's challenge to 'ask what you can do for your country' and the military idealism he had awakened in us. America seemed omnipotent then: the country could still claim it never lost a war, and we believed we were ordained to play cop to the Communists' robber and spread our own faith around the world ... We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost (xii).

Caputo's early presence and ensuing disillusionment, as swift as it was profound, provides a unique testament to the cost of failed intentions. Like Ron Kovic, whose memoir of the same period reflects the simultaneous absorption in and demystification of the American warrior mystique, *Born on the Fourth of July*, Caputo's remembrance signifies a painful confrontation with the meaninglessness and directionlessness of the American effort from its ill-fated inception. Schooled in the hard lessons of military lifestyle, he informs us: "At the age of twenty-four, I was more prepared for death than I was for life. My first experience of the world outside the classroom had been war" (3); perhaps most notable was Caputo's insistence to return and witness firsthand the final outcome of the American misadventure. As he notes at memoir's end, standing shoulder to shoulder a month beyond ten year's personal involvement there, he recounts his realization that for all its participants the war engendered a sense of dislocative awareness: " .. the men who belonged [to the 9th Expeditionary Brigade] seemed a good deal more cynical than we who had belonged to it ten years before. The marine looked at the faint blue line marking the Vietnamese coast and said, 'Well, that's one country we don't have to give billions of dollars to anymore'" (345).

What Caputo's memoir most tellingly commemorates, however, is the undiluted expectation, forged in an innocence of war, of national interest and self-preservation. After all, his idealism falls hard and heavy after landfall. Most ironic, perhaps, was his assignment as "The Officer in Charge of the Dead." Then, as a staff officer routinely processing the unit's body counts, Caputo confronted the immediacy of personal danger--the ubiquity of personal vulnerability:

> I saw [the American soldier] as Lemmon had described him, lying on his back with the big bloody hole in his side. I imagined that his face must have looked like the faces of the dead Viet Cong I had seen the month before ... That is when I felt for the first time ... the slimy, hollow-cold fear that is the fear of death; the image of Sullivan's dead face had suddenly changed into an image of my own. That could be me someday, I thought. I might look like him. If it happened to him, there's no reason it can't happen to me (161-62).

As we come to see him here, and in the convoluted aftermath of his involvement in the death of innocent Vietnamese, Caputo can no longer be perceived as the innocent victim-warrior, pursuing the greater good of national defense. Instead, his actions and his image are tainted, his sense of purpose increasingly diluted if not in fact subverted by the questionable legitimacy of his own role, and his commitment inevitably poisoned by the growing conflict he experiences. Though the memoir so poignantly depicts the form of idealistic embrace early acceptance of the war took, it as clearly delineates the collapse of that innocent belief in the inherent superiority of American intentions. In that sense, this work speaks as eloquently to the corrosive effects of participation and experience as it does to the failing ideal vision, perhaps the war's earliest casualty.

If *A Rumor of War* evokes the unbridled confidence of the soldier uninitiated in the rituals of combat, the novel *In Country* provides a contrasting example of the relative innocence of hometown Americans, particularly as revealed through the character Samantha, the niece of Emmett, a troubled veteran grappling with the likelihood that he suffers from exposure to Agent Orange. Part of what makes the exploration of *In Country* so compelling is that the author never served in Vietnam,[16] and as such must herself be considered a permanent innocent to the war, like Samantha, who seeks to understand the war and connect emotionally with her father who died in combat there. The question Mason confronts the reader and veteran alike with is whether we are not all in some sense direct veterans of the war. Like Samantha, as the American public's awareness of the war grew from a numb generalized consciousness into the full and intense awareness of its devastation, even the noncombatants must somehow make order out of the experience and mediate the pain and anomie of those veterans in our lives who continue to suffer from the war. Though the novel serves as an exemplary platform for examining the expression of an uninitiated, or innocent, stance to the war, I will later deal with it from the perspective of aftermath, focusing on the characterization of Emmett. Just as O'Brien's works do not

neatly conform to any preconceived critical structure, the best novels of Vietnam, and I would include *In Country* among them, similarly profit by suggesting multiple angles from which to explore the themes of the war.

In "Men, Women, and Vietnam," Milton Bates determines that by electing to adopt the perspective of a teenage girl, Sam, Bobbie Ann Mason "cannot realistically venture a more mature critique of the War or sexual roles. Why inflict such a handicap on one's narrative? Very likely, Mason was simply respecting the limits of her experience" (29). The underlying question Bates raises, perhaps inadvertently, is whether any non-combatant's experience can serve as a legitimate funnel for coming to terms with the horrors witnessed by those "in country." Mason goes a long way in answering this question, however, and I would argue that her use of a teenage narrative perspective encourages rather than inhibits the pursuit of an answer . At one point, Sam confronts her uncle, with whom she shares a house while trying to sort out the direction she wants to take with her life as her high school years conclude. She is bewildered by Emmett's eccentric behavior: his refusal to seriously seek long-term employment, his lack of female companionship, his growing preoccupation with digging a trench around the base of the house (a theme which appears in other post-Vietnam novels, as well--in Caputo's *Indian Country,* Chris Starkman constructs a self-contained fortress in his self-imposed exile from society. In O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age*, the main character William Cowling, though not a veteran, exhibits a similarly irrepressible need to dig, in this case a bomb shelter, arguably to protect him from the social censure of refusal to participate in Vietnam), and most importantly, his persistent denial of the possible health consequences of his exposure to Agent Orange. Borne of her drive to understand his inscrutable posture of indifference, Sam commits herself to uncovering the nature of that combat experience in order to better assist Emmett on his own road to recovery. In response to her probing, at one point Emmett closes off her inquiry by pointing out her own lack of participation, encompassing in his indictment of her inexperience the lack of participation of females

generally: "'Women weren't over there ... So they can't really understand'"; Sam refuses to submit to his emotional evasion, however, retorting that Emmett's old girlfriend, Anita, "knows a nurse at the hospital who was over there. Anita could understand what you're talking about" (107).

Later, during a dance put together by the veterans to finally commemorate the contribution made by veterans of the war, Anita explains her own "Vietnam story" to Sam, a story Milton Bates claims closely matches Mason's own personal experiences. She describes being on a bus traveling to Bowling Green, Kentucky:

> "... some boys got on at Fort Campbell. They were in soldiers' uniforms, with those baggy green pants and black boots like Pete's got on. One of them sat across from me and talked with me. I was reading a book of poetry. This boy tried to read it over my shoulder, and he told me he liked poetry. Well, that really impressed me, because how many guys will read a poem? ... And then he told me that he was shipping out to Vietnam the next day. All of them were. And that really got me. I thought--why, he could go over there and *die*! It just really bothered me. I never knew who he was or if he came back alive ... for years I thought--that was *my* Vietnam experience" (115-16, Mason's emphasis).

Anita's description of her encounter on the bus not only provides a moving counterpoint to Emmett's assertion that women can't understand the war, but illustrates the way in which the war's effect became gradually universalized. Certainly, there is a considerable gap between the recognition by Anita that strangers on a bus might soon be exposed to unimaginable dangers and Emmett's own lived experience of those dangers; but in order to eventually effect a reconciliation both with himself and with those around him who can only guess at his traumas, Sam realizes that he in turn must become aware of the way the war's effect was not reserved for the combatants--everyone experienced Vietnam to some degree.

Ultimately, Sam tries harder and harder to see into Emmett's troubled world, even attempting to replicate the experience of being in the bush so that he will finally share the inner turmoil with her, and thus put it to rest. Mason employs language which reveals the ways in which Sam's world increasingly resembles the dangerous mine-laced footpaths and

enemy-infested jungles of Vietnam; this language reaches a cathartic crescendo when she moves into the swamp for her self-imposed initiation: "The jungle was closing in [on Sam], and even the maple trees on Maple Street seemed as though they might be hiding snipers ... Sam had been feeling that if she didn't watch her step, her whole life could be ruined by some mischance, some stupid surprise, like sniper fire" (184). She deeply senses her lack of combat experience, and in a moment of anger tells Emmett, anticipating her later foray into the woods, "'That's [watching television] not the same as seeing something for yourself'," in saying so placing a premium on the importance of being there. Finally, alone amid the sounds and smells of the forest, the closest approximation she can achieve in her quest for experience, she confronts the elusive issue of her own relationship to Emmett, to her dead father, and to Tom, a veteran with whom she nearly has a romance but whose combat experiences distance him too much to permit the delicate dangers of intimacy:

> That rotting corpse her dad had found invaded her mind --those banana leaves, reeking sweetly. She knew that whenever she had tried to imagine Vietnam she had her facts all wrong ... Rice paddies weren't real to her. She thought of tanks knocking the jungle and tigers sitting under bushes. Her notions came from the movies. Some vets blamed what they did on the horror of the jungle. What did the jungle do to them? Humping the boonies. Here I am, she thought. In country (210).

Despite her brave attempt, however, Sam recognizes the limits of her own experience, and the degree to which she can imagine being in Vietnam. She briefly reflects on the immediate threat of being vulnerable to rape while alone in the woods, "It would be like that scene in *Apocalypse Now* where the soldiers met a tiger, the last thing they expected in a guerilla-infested jungle" (217). Emmett tracks her down, scolds her for the lunacy of her actions, and then engages in an emotion-charged confrontation in which he finally seems to open his pain to her, but with one last desperate retreat of hope that she might ever truly learn the nature of his experience: "'You can't learn from the past. The main thing you learn from history is that you can't learn from history. That's what history *is* ...

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There are some things you can never figure out'" (226). Emmett's closing remarks, though spoken in a moment when he at last allows Sam to realize the depth of his sorrow and anger, simultaneously acts to exclude her finally from the lessons that experience offers, if any lesson at all. Still, as Thomas Myers argues in *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam*, though "Sam's mission does not fully replicate the lost war she seeks ... like Paul Berlin, she discovers the limits of the imagination;" her attempt to live the reality of Vietnam "does produce an emotional catharsis for Emmett," thus beginning the slow and difficult self-recovery which "engenders expiation and understanding ... [and] begins to write a meaningful peace" for both Sam and Emmett (224).

Mason concludes *In Country* by establishing a frame with the novel's opening scene, in which Sam, Emmett, and her grandmother are driving to Washington, D.C. to visit the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. Just as the bus ride with Vietnam-bound G.I.s is rooted in the author's private experience, the passages surrounding the pilgrimage to the Wall also grew out of Mason's personal encounter. In an interview she explained that after her visit, "'I knew then that Vietnam was my story too, and it was every American's story'" (quoted in Herzog, *Innocence Lost*, 200).[17] What never becomes conclusively articulated within the book itself is the author's own ironic position toward the accessibility of the experience she permits Sam to pursue so obsessively. Her indeterminacy provides a more compassionate response than one which might neatly, painlessly, sweep up the remains of a vet's uneasy memory. Instead, Mason engages the reader in an ultimately unresolved dialogue; she does so, however, in a way which extends the dialogue to non-participants and combatants alike. In the end, Mason successfully deconstructs the way in which "in country" typically refers to Vietnam, demonstrating how it applies equally well to the persistence of the war on Main Street. The core of ambiguity in *In Country* signals the complexity of reintegrating veterans, particularly those from Vietnam, back into society. It is an issue still awaiting satisfactory resolution.

I use innocence here to describe a state in which soldiers' attitudes toward their impending or ongoing experience consist of complex expectations rooted in the hope of ratifying in Vietnam the tenets of the American warrior myth; in this sense, innocence takes many forms, from the anticipation of acting out the "John Wayne syndrome" to Caputo's desire to answer John F. Kennedy's call to stop communist aggression at whatever cost. Between innocence and experience lies a formidable gap, characterized by the shattering of illusions and an attempt to understand and derive order from the burden of the true, lived experience which veterans encountered. It is, in another sense, the gap between Alden Pyle's naive belief that he could justify the death of innocents in order to impose a transcendent American peace, and the deeper realization suggested by Paul Fussell that "every war is worse than [originally] expected" (Fussell, 7). Yet because the war lasted so long, and because the reality of life in country differed so dramatically among soldiers and journalists, narrative expressions of those experiences predictably reflect that diversity. Arguably, the most extreme exposure to the war, in which soldiers engaged in the extreme intensity of close fighting, proved to be the reality for a minority of participants; for all the line soldiers walking search and destroy missions (later search and clear missions, an unconvincing euphemistic improvement directed by General William Westmoreland),[18] the vast majority of American troops in country saw the war from the relative safety of firebases situated amid vast defensive networks or from the urban comfort of Saigon, Bien Hoa, Vung Tau, and other rear echelon encampments. In *Working Class Army*, Christian Appy claims that in "1967-68, when U.S. ground offensives were at a peak, less than 1 percent of American combat patrols resulted in contact with the enemy," ostensibly reducing the significance of even those who were most in harm's way (163).[19] None of this necessarily invalidates the way in which experience in country still undermined the expectations of soldiers arriving there for duty;

one need only be in one mortar attack or close firefight to begin asking difficult questions concerning one's existence in a combat zone. As the years wore on, more and more participants began asking these questions, and the novels, memoirs, and other non-fictional accounts are replete with the detailed consideration given to trying to reconcile lofty government statements justifying American involvement with the seemingly gratuitous violence, often imposed without discernible military objectives, which increasingly characterized the tempo of operations (Appy, 226-27). As Appy reports, "soldiers drew together around the shared assumption that the war itself had no meaningful purpose, that the only meaning was located in the collective unity necessary to survive" (242).

Perhaps the most striking feature evident from accounts of time spent in Vietnam, in whatever medium they are expressed, is the unique language which developed, in what seems a collective attempt to wrest the absurdity of the war away by forcing it to conform to a speech which reflected the chaos and violence. Writers consistently seem to contest Yon Yonson's decree in *Slaughterhouse-Five* that "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everyone is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again" (19). Yet they are not immune, any more than Vonnegut and his surrogate Yonson, from a Trafalmadorian observation: "Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided" (85). Michael Herr's *Dispatches* speaks fluently the soldier's argot of disenchantment, its rhythms modulating the alternating ebb and flow of battle, intense boredom punctuated by the inexpressible thrill of a sudden firefight in the bush. *Meditations in Green*, by Stephen Wright, taps into the same frenetic vernacular unique to Vietnam, language in which the enemy are gooks, zipperheads, slopes, or in moments of charitable respect, Uncle Ho or Mister Charlie. It is a language which bristles with the jargon of a newfound technological prowess: all the new and ever more efficient ways of killing require their own peculiar linguistic proficiency. Similarly, there emerges a dark and convoluted humor, a pathos of disturbing revelation, which desperately attempts to

convey the depth of experiential carnage. In *The Short-Timers*, by Gustav Hasford, language disintegrates step by step with the gradual dehumanization of the soldiers to refract a world in which only evil and death return clear, intelligible images. These works from in country parallel stateside trends toward the adoption of a new, "hip" vernacular to convey the credo of a society increasingly at odds with its political leadership and the imperatives of an unpopular war. Rock and roll music provides one idiom in which America's young and disillusioned might congregate, subvert the establishment through hidden motifs in lyrics, and envision some kind of society beyond the war and pursue ethical redemption. Expression of distaste for the war's direction explodes across a number of social registers: clothing, hairstyle, and counter-cultural activities such as increasing drug use all denote persistent attempts to define an alternative reality to the war's reductive Cold War logic. The war spawns new forms of expression to match the growing incompatibility in the public mind of the statement of the war's aims with the unvalorous representations of the life in Vietnam voiced increasingly by veterans and the media. Each writer struggles to reconcile the inevitability of war; like Billy Pilgrim, they wonder "'How the inhabitants of a whole planet can live in peace! As you know, I am from a planet that has been engaged in senseless slaughter since the beginning of time ... So tell me [Billy asks the Trafalmadorians,] the secret so I can take it back to earth and save us all: How can a planet live at peace?'" (116). Contrary to the advice Billy's hosts give him about wars, that "'[t]here isn't anything we can do about them, so we simply don't look at them. We ignore them'" (117), these writers choose to scrutinize their experiences, fulfilling what O'Brien in *If I Die* suggests is the foot soldier's only real recourse:

> Do dreams offer lessons? Do nightmares have themes, do we awaken and analyze them and live our lives and advise others as a result? Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories (23).

If the state of innocence with respect to war can be characterized by the apprehension of a warrior mythology in which Americans arrived in Vietnam with sometimes vague expectations of establishing democracy,[20] Hasford's *The Short-Timers* provides one of the clearest demarcations of how that innocence runs aground against the shattering dismemberment combat experience exerts, and details how Marines were prepared psychologically for the experience of combat and trained to become America's ultimate mythic warrior-heroes:

> I was defining myself with bullets [Joker explains]; blood had blemished my Yankee Doodle dream that everything would have a happy ending, and that I, when the war was over, would return to hometown America in a white silk uniform, a rainbow of campaign ribbons across my chest, brave beyond belief, the military Jesus (Hasford, 113).

Thomas Myers describes *The Short-Timers* as "the most unrelenting of Vietnam War dark jokes ... a first person narrative told entirely in the present tense, the novel is a moment-to moment study in cultural overload, a spare but minutely rendered poetics of evil" (112). The novel's setting is divided between the first third, which takes place in boot camp at Parris Island, the "Crotch," and the majority of the work, set in the northernmost part of Vietnam, I Corps, where the majority of Marines operated. Seen through the eyes of Joker, who, like Hasford himself, serves as a combat photographer, we are witness to the transformation of young men into killing machines from their original innocence as "ladies," the term applied to them by Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim, their boot camp instructor. Joker, who is clever at imitating John Wayne, records the vital lesson which each recruit must internalize:

> Sergeant Gerheim explains that it is important for us to understand that it is our killer instinct which must be harnessed if we expect to survive in combat. Our rifle is only a tool; it is a hard heart that kills ... If our killer instincts are not clean and strong, we will hesitate at the moment of truth. We will not kill. We will become dead Marines. And then we will be in a world of shit because Marines are not allowed to die without permission (12).

Though Joker and the majority of his platoon gradually respond to the "Marine Corp's [desire] to build indestructible men, men without fear" (17), Private Leonard Pratt, whom Gerheim calls "Gomer Pyle," fails to assimilate the finer points of boot camp training and becomes the focal point of the drill instructor's determination to forge killing machines out of young men. Initially, Pratt personifies unsullied and uncomprehending innocence, after incessant harassment, however, he responds too perfectly to the training. After a proleptic period of silence, he chants in his bunk of "Charlene," the name he gives to his rifle: "My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its accessories, its sights, its barrel. I will keep my rifle clean and ready, even as I am clean and ready. We will become part of each other" (20). Gerheim receives the newly inspired recruit enthusiastically into the fold of the enlightened, who see the intensely "white guiding light": "'You are becoming one sharp recruit, private Pyle. Most motivated prive in my herd. Why, I may even allow you to serve as a rifleman in my beloved Corps. I had you figured for a shitbird, but you'll make a good grunt'" (20). Pratt too perfectly fulfills his aspiration to become one with his weapon. After graduation ceremonies, threatened with separation from his only love, Charlene, he murders Gerheim and then shoots himself. As Myers notes, "Pratt is not to be understood as an aberrant product of the mythic machinery [of military indoctrination], but merely as a more advanced student" (115). Chillingly, Joker's reflection on the incident is not disgust or disavowal of his own growing complicity in the conversion of Pratt from his early state as ineducable "maggot" into a "lean green fighting machine." Instead, he chooses to embrace his identity as Marine, in an incantatory and erotic fixation on his marriage to his own private weapon:

> I hold my weapon at port arms, gently, as though she were a holy relic, a magic wand wrought with interlocking pieces of silver and iron, with a teakwood stock, golden bullets, a crystal bolt, jewels to sight with. My weapon obeys me. I'll hold Vanessa, my rifle. I'll hold her. I'll hold her for just a little while. I will hide in this dark dream for as long as I can (28).

For Joker, the transformation is nearly complete, requiring only the final accentuation provided by combat. Though he actively resists leadership roles, he never seriously challenges his role as participant; his resistance, in the face of an increasing discomfort with the escalating malignance of his experiences, pivots on symbolic acts --such as wearing a peace button on his fatigues or the vague disobedience of wearing his hair just long enough to receive the inevitable gentle reprimand from officers. Hasford intentionally obfuscates Joker's role as unwilling participant, carefully depicting him as a reluctant but efficient killer. His ability to mimic John Wayne underscores the progressive disillusionment of the warrior myth; his adoption of the full panoply of grunt instincts undermines our sympathy for any misgivings he has, and problematizes his representation as (absurdly) objective corespondent. He mistakenly prizes his detachment.

"Correspondents are more effective than grunts. Grunts merely kill the enemy. All that matters is what we write, what we photograph. History may be written with blood but it's printed with ink" (52). Joker fully recognizes the incongruity of the Wayne mythology. Relating a moment of relaxation in country in which he and fellow Marines watch *The Green Berets*, he sardonically muses:

> John Wayne is a beautiful soldier, clean-shaven, wearing boots that shine like black glass, sharply attired in tailored tiger-stripe jungle utilities. Inspired by John Wayne, the fighting soldiers from the sky go hand-to-hand with all the Victor Charlies in Southeast Asia ... The audience of Marines roars with laughter. This is the funniest movie we have seen in a long time (32).

Joker recognizes the incompatibility of the film legend with the sordidness of his own experience; despite the struggle of his imagination to provide a means of escape, a struggle as intense as Paul Berlin's mental peregrinations on an observation post along the South China Sea in *Going After Cacciato*, Joker entertains "erect-nipple wet dreams about Mary Jane Rottencrotch and the Great Homecoming Fuck Fantasy, back into blinking technicolor home movies of events that did not happen quite the way we choose to remember them" (132) He finally acknowledges the terrific personal damage his

experience imposes: "Those of us who survive to be short-timers will fly the Great Speckled Bird back home to hometown America. But home won't be there anymore ... Upon each of our brains the war has lodged itself, a black crab feeding" (151). In an earlier epiphany, all remaining tenuous allegiance to the warrior mythology is shattered:

> After my first confirmed kill I began to understand that it was not necessary to understand. What you do, you become. The insights of one moment are blotted out by the events of the next ... I was caught up in a constricting web of darkness and, like the ancient farmer [Joker had just senselessly killed], I was suddenly very calm, just as I had been calm when the mine detonated, because there was nothing I could do. I was defining myself with bullets; blood had blemished my Yankee Doodle dream that everything would have a happy ending (113).

Joker comes to personify the dehumanized grunt who too perfectly internalizes the Marine Corps "white guiding light;" his language, the rhythmic staccato of journalistic jargon, magnifies to the reader the depth of evil he experiences while simultaneously denuding his own distancing techniques from his actions. As O'Brien warns in "How to Tell a True War Story," "If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth ... Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty" (*TTTC*, 77); by this measurement, Joker's vernacular is one of unrelenting obscenity and violence from which neither he nor the reader can effect even momentary respite. Linguistically, the work funnels entropically toward silence--Joker abandons his role as correspondent and adopts the straightforward mission of grunt, merely killing like his brothers in arms--and Hasford's language reflects the way remorse and remembrance are smothered under the weight of cliché and platitudes. When asked by his commanding officer, Captain January, on what grounds he refuses a promotion (the full measure of complicity), Joker responds with a string of laconic assertions which reverberate age-worn aphorisms:

> "We bomb these people, then we photograph them. My stories are paper bullets fired into the fat black heart of Communism. I've fought to make the world safe for hypocrisy. We have met the enemy and it is us. War is good business-- invest your son. Viet Nam means never having to say you're sorry. *Arbeit macht Frei--"* (50).

Yet Hasford's treatment is ultimately anything but trite. The strident black humor of the "Hardass Squad" mirrors the grim predicament of the foot soldier. As Myers instructs in approaching the novel, the "key to understanding Hasford's reading of the war is the recognition that for him and his narrator, the 'arch-jokes' of grunt society are a protective device for the historically trapped, a buttressed historical pose that by novel's end crumbles before the power of human feeling and vulnerability" (117). Furthermore, what proves doubly significant to the present study is the way in which Hasford's account anticipates and resonates O'Brien's; though we are told as readers we are holding fiction, in which the "characters in this book are fictitious and any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental" (post-dedicatory page), one quickly recognizes a web of correspondences with O'Brien's work, and across the genre of Vietnam writing, which tends to validate rootedness in history rather than the result of a fictional detour. My point is that one begins to identify a set array of experiences which prove common to the majority of Vietnam narratives, which one might untechnically categorize as archetypal Vietnam experiences: the unproductive encounter with the chaplain (Hasford, 87); the repeated depictions of sheer will needed to sustain the incessant marches (84); the ironic importance of playing "games" (48-49); the preoccupation with the nicknames grunts use to mask or minimize feelings of intimacy with their comrades ("Rafter Man," "Animal Mother," "Crazy Earl"); and the inevitable moment in which death and destruction and the instruments of their imposition are perceived as objects of aesthetic beauty and wonder:

> It's a beautiful tank. Painted on the long barrel: BLACK DRAGON--*We Exterminate Household Pests* ... Military vehicles are beautiful because they are built from functional designs which make them real, solid, without artifice. The tank possesses the beauty of hard lines; it is fifty tons of rolling armor on tracks like steel watchbands. The tank is our protection, rolling on and on forever, clanking out the dark mechanical poetry of iron and guns (65).

All these events have specific and recurring correspondences in O'Brien's work , as well as the work of other Vietnam writers, fictional and non-fictional alike. Most

importantly, perhaps, are the motifs of fratricide (the pursuit of Cacciato his resultant, though ambiguous, death) and fragging (in Hasford, Animal Mother frags, or uses a grenade [a weapon without fingerprints] to intentionally murder Lieutenant Shortround; in O'Brien, Berlin's squad agrees to frag Lieutenant Sidney Martin). The definitive correspondence is the adoption of the war story narrative technique, an attempt to recreate the events of experience through a blend of fiction and fact. In Hasford's work, the principal subject is, ultimately, the language itself--the clipped and brittle "ditty-bop" of gruntspeak--and the unquenchable need to not ignore the lessons of modern massacre. Like O'Brien and his other veteran contemporaries, Hasford resists the Trafalmadorian call to "ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones" (Vonnegut, 117), and in doing so permits the slow process of reconciliation to begin its work.

Unlike Hasford *The Short-Timers*, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* does not assume a fictional framework.[21] Like Hasford, Herr was a journalist, though not a military one; he wrote for *Esquire* and proved one of the founding members of New Journalism. For him, "[c]onventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it, all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding ... " (218).[22] For Herr, the war required a new vocabulary, a new linguistic format for coming to terms with war experience.

Near the end of *Dispatches*, Herr wistfully muses that "Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods" (261). His comment completes the final atrophy of his earlier claim that "Day one, if anything could have penetrated that first innocence I might have taken the first plane out" (22). Here, in one of the most celebrated works of the war and, according to Philip Beidler, "one of the most fully wrought and authoritative works to emerge from all the literature of Vietnam" (1982, 141), the high-charged idiom of the grunt finds sympathetic expression by a non-combatant participant. With the exception of Bobbie Ann Mason, the other interpreters presented here were foot soldiers caught up

personally in the moral and physical quagmire of Vietnam; Herr, on the other hand, unequivocally dissociates himself from the soldiers' sometimes reluctant mission: "I was there to watch" (20). Yet watching entails responsibility, and what fuels his work is precisely the way his responsibility as a journalist, to present experience objectively and dispassionately, becomes overwhelmed by the discordant reality:

> I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of course you've never heard it. I went there behind the crude serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn't know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did (20).

Herr, of course, does *not* fulfill the traditional dictates of detached journalism. Instead, he searches for a new, more radically charged vernacular which might reveal a more authentic witness; in doing so, *Dispatches* transcends the strict category of objective reporting and in its place achieves a certain generic indeterminacy:[23] "It is not history exactly; it is not exactly fiction either" (Jones, 309). In this way, Herr elicits a critical response among Vietnam scholars comparable only to that accorded to Tim O'Brien. In fact, this work evokes frequent comparisons to *Going After Cacciato*. Dale Jones notes, for example, that "Two of the most important books that have emerged thus far from the American involvement in Vietnam are Michael Herr's 'journal' *Dispatches* and Tim O'Brien's novel *Going After Cacciato*" in one of two critical articles comparing the two writers (309).[24] In *Walking Point*, Thomas Myers explains the natural affiliation of the two works in claiming that

> Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*--assume not only the primacy of the imagination, but also the necessity of inventing new aesthetic strategies for the rendering of new history. In the presence of intractable official truth and ill-equipped traditional reportage, both writers have explored varieties of self-conscious Vietnam War romanticism. They assert that the only history worth recording entails the stripping away of abstractions and preestablished categories and the working outward from the individual creating imagination's encounter with new cultural data. Both writers incorporate in their aesthetic structures the official master narrative of the war in order to subject it to

> a process of textual alchemy in which it is pressurized, tested, and, finally, transmuted within the laboratory of personal sensibility (146).

Finally, in attempting to categorize the most effective writings of the war, Lorrie Smith, in "Disarming the War Story," reveals the thread of continuity between both these works and others treated substantially in this study:

> The most provocative and subversive narratives of the war succeed precisely because they capitalize on war's contradictions and do not labor to resolve them through narrative coherence or by turning 'scraps of truth' into grandiose heroic myths. Instead of glossing over the space between myths and realities, experimental narratives like O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green*, Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers* and its film version, *Full Metal Jacket*, bring those gaps to the foreground. These non-linear books are often hailed as the most profoundly *realistic* [Smith's emphasis] treatments of the war's craziness, chaos, and illogic. Though they may be truly mimetic, their deeper value lies, I believe, in their destabilization of the social order as it is perceived and understood by popular consensus. It is important to note that none of these narratives breaks completely free of the male fascination with battle. But each acknowledges its grip and at least implicitly interrogates that fascination and critiques the values which support traditional war stories (94).

Yet O'Brien and Herr implement significantly different strategies in their respective moves to capture and reconcile the war experience. Although part of their difference certainly rests in their unequal roles as correspondent and soldier, they also seek essentially different objectives in their works. While O'Brien's *oeuvre* conveniently fulfills the criteria of innocence, experience, and consideration, at different periods in his writings, I will examine Herr's work strictly as an embodiment of the experience phase only--as "illumination rounds" which in their unrestricted self-absorption into the lunacy and chaos of life in country necessarily adopt a linguistic strategy which reveals the doublespeak of MACV jargon and provide the "necessary counter-language to that which would cloak the undeniable personal realities, the new data" (Myers, *Walking Point*, 4), an intense exploration of the emergent language of the grunts and journalist colleagues until "what seems on the surface tangential confessions is most often a short discourse on method" (Myers, 157).

Part of what complicates any reading of *Dispatches* is its inherently problematic stance as authoritative witness. In dispensing with traditional journalistic claims to objectivity through the persona of an intensely involved and thus entirely subjective first person narrator, Herr imposes on the reader the same dislocating relationship to historical fact that participants in war so frequently report. He unapologetically records the elusiveness of achieving verisimilitude in his account: "In war more than in other life you don't really know what you're doing most of the time, you're just behaving, and afterwards you can make up any kind of bullshit you want about it, say you felt good or bad, loved it or hated it, did this or that, the right thing or the wrong thing; still, what happened " (20). What "happened," however, the details of the essential combat experience, disappears in the miasma of the contradictory or disturbingly laconic recapitulation. Herr's audience, in listening to his restatement of a hauntingly inexpressive account, "'Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could us what happened'," experiences the same helplessness in the absence of explanation as Herr himself does: "' When I asked him what had happened he just looked like he felt sorry for me, fucked if he'd waste time telling stories to anyone dumb as I was" (4-5). Instead, we are compelled to acknowledge that the root experience is in fact inaccessible, too terrible for the crude limits of conventional expression, "a shock so massive that the body cannot possibly absorb it" (Jakaitis, 195).

Like Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, Herr's pseudo-memoir adopts the unique jargon of the combat participants. What Thomas Myers calls the "Vietnam shorthand ... the soldier's linguistic invention and transmission from the war's dark center" (4), becomes in *Dispatches* the *modus operandi* for reconfiguring absurdity. John Jakaitis explains how the adoption of a unique vernacular operates both as a distancing mechanism from the "heavy heart of darkness" experience but also as a means of distinguishing the foot soldier's reality from the alien reality back in the United States, as a form of symbiotic experiential mediation and survival adaptation:

> The soldiers' language further evidences their distance from the values of their own culture. By creating a war jargon, they effectively increased the distance between themselves and their home culture. The 'language of fire'--'discrete burst,' 'probe,' prime selection'--would have no relevance in conversation at home. Their language would isolate returning veterans from the masses at home, create alienated small groups of veterans able to relate their experiences only to each other (206).

Herr seems to revel in the dialect of warfare. Like O'Brien, he marvels at the variety of ways for describing the killing that occurs in combat:

> Nothing [was] like it ever [had been] when we caught a bunch of them out in the open and close together, we really ripped it then, volatile piss-off, crazed expenditure, Godzilla never drew that kind of fire ... but I never saw it as various, just compulsive eruption, the Mad Minute for an hour (65).

Earlier, he notes "the jargon thinning and trickling out: *Frontier sealing, census grievance, black operations* (pretty good, for jargon), *revolutionary development , armed propaganda"* [Herr's italics] (54).

Herr's willingness to use the language of grunts as his primary narrative voice in recounting his experience suggests to Philip Beidler a "conscious choice to assume the role of public artificer, his desire to give personal sense-making a representative cultural validity" (1982, 142). His linguistic immersion and the disconnected language it exposes reflects a genuine struggle to expand the terrain of understood experience, and reveals what Beidler suggests is Herr's real subject, "finally, of writing itself in the largest degree, event" (1991, 265-66). To this degree, Beidler views Herr's experiment as eminently successful, properly not located in the mundane cloak of a realistic or disingenuously mimetic record but as vertiginously rooted and bound "in or at the place of *historical-mythic intersection itself*, somewhere between fact and fiction, experiential memory and imaginative art" (Beidler, 1991, 266, Beidler's emphasis). Not all critics prove charitable in their assessments of Herr's endeavor.

For Dale Jones, for example, "Herr's sometimes solipsistic approach to reporting and his confusion of roles--he is by turns both witness and hero of his own story--erode his

ability to attain the necessary distance from the war that would enable him to view his experiences from some kind of tempered perspective" (315), suggesting, in effect, that Herr's narrative credibility is fundamentally undermined. Jones ultimately regards O'Brien's narrative strategies in "*Going After Cacciato* more compassionate, more profound, than *Dispatches*" (320). In *Vietnam in American Literature*, Philip Melling posits a similar discomfort with Herr's narrative decision: "*Dispatches* can best be understood in terms of a modernist strategy of unreliable narration where *histoire* and *discours* become discrepant. The book tells a different tale from the text it proclaims" (69); Melling finds that what Herr:

> appears to discover, therefore, is a living metafiction, a state of mind and a place of action, a war and a landscape that constantly question their own identity, country where the search for meaning constantly extends beyond the meager resources of conventional journalism. In turning away from the notion of a verifiable reality... Herr's narrator claims to have avoided the fate of the redundant journalist: he who wanders aimlessly in an obscure world (71).

Probably the most scathing review of *Dispatches* to date is from Bill Ehrhart, the Vietnam war poet, in his brief essay "On Michael Herr's *Dispatches*." For Ehrhart, the book provides a seductively appealing interpretation of the war, "sensitive, painfully accurate, and deftly recorded" (4). Yet he warns that once "you put the book down, let it sit for awhile, and find yourself coming back repeatedly to a strange uneasiness inside, a feeling that something is very wrong with what you've just read" (5). Ehrhart then critiques, in a choleric burst, a whole string of what he views as crippling oversights and distortions, at least from the combat infantryman's perspective:

> Most appalling, however, is Herr's delighted fascination with combat, with the exhilarating perpetually right-on-the-edge-of-death adrenalin life. It matters little that he readily admits that fascination: 'All right, yes, it had been a groove being a war correspondent, hanging out with the grunts and getting close to the war, touching it, losing yourself in it and trying yourself against it. I had always wanted that, never mind why ...'

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> Never mind why?! Yet that "why" lies at the very bottom of all those dead Americans stacked in huge green baggies he professes to urge the American people to weep for ... Never mind why? (7)

Ehrhart bristles at Herr's claims of sharing the grunt experience, pointing out that the majority of grunts couldn't board the disconnecting helicopter to simply "transcend" the filth, horror, and fear of their daily experience. Finally, Ehrhart angrily argues, "Like so many of us, Michael Herr went to Vietnam in search of his manhood. The really sad part is that he thinks he found it. For all the superficial differences, *Dispatches* is just another paean to men-at-war, a glorious-grisly-romantic tribute to the ultimate insanity. It is a tragic injustice to the men he so obviously loved and admired and pitied, for in its stock portrayal of war, it does its part to ensure that there will always be young men stacked in body-bags waiting to come home" (7).

What Ehrhart's enraged response reveals, among other things, is the concept that the war in fact consisted of many wars. While Herr's commentary might accurately portray the lived experience of many veterans, clearly for Ehrhart it constitutes a clear and present danger as ideological pabulum but also as untrue witness.[25] Still, *Dispatches* outlives Ehrhart's and others' criticisms, and continues to be taught repeatedly in college classes on the war.[26]

These assessments may ultimately, and ironically, strengthen the measure of significance of *Dispatches* in the corpus of works on Vietnam. If the reader completes the work feeling uneasy and unknowing, is it in fact radically different from Paul Berlin's inventory of the soldier's vacuum of understanding and knowledge in "The Things They Didn't Know" in *Going After Cacciato*? As noted earlier, the two writers' written interpretations of the in country experience invite comparison. The difference between the works lies principally, I suggest, in their respective attitudes toward courage. As we see later in my analysis of O'Brien's work, courage for the latter is not only possible but even desirable if rendered as "wise endurance." For Herr, however, the sheer ineluctable madness of the war seems to withhold this conclusion:

> So you learned about fear, it was hard to know what you really learned about courage. How many times did somebody have to run in front of a machine gun before it became an act of cowardice? What about these acts that didn't require courage to perform, but made you a coward if you didn't? ... A lot of what people called courage was undifferentiated energy cut loose by the intensity of the moment, mind loss that sent the actor on an incredible run; if he survived it he had the chance later to decide whether he'd really been brave or just overcome with life, even ecstasy. A lot of people found the guts to just call it all off and refuse to ever go out anymore, they submitted to the penalty end of the system or they just split (69).

For Herr, finally, though the witness must inevitably resort to telling war stories as a means of finding reconciliation with experience, he posits the efficacy of those stories in unambiguously diminutive terms: "War stories aren't really anything more than stories about people anyway" (262), a line one would have great difficulty imagining coming from Tim O'Brien.[27] Still, at least Herr pays respectful deference to the centrality of the war story itself; that he cannot ultimately find within its powers the healing effects that O'Brien discovers, in the face of such a carefully woven war story as *Dispatches* finally proves, does little to disarm the force and originality of his words.

Stephen Wright's novel, *Meditations in Green*, the last work I will discuss under the rubric of experience, shares much with its counterparts, *The Short-Timers* and *Dispatches*. Wright captures a language uniquely the soldier's possession, deftly deploying it to reveal the ways it bound the grunts together in a community of shared sets of linguistic symbolism. This novel, as experimental as the other two, provides a glimpse into the mindset and experience of the rear echelon soldier, the REMF,[28] the largest contingent of soldiers in Vietnam. It also closely parallels *Going After Cacciato* structurally, though not thematically: both works contain three identifiable narrative strands, in which their respective protagonists, Paul Berlin in *Cacciato* and James I. Griffin in *Meditations*, undertake a reordering and imaginative reconstruction of experience which has resulted in their identification as metafictional enterprises. Both O'Brien and Wright record also the

pervasiveness of drug use in country, a theme which dominates the latter's work and infuses the novel's ending with a backdrop of accumulative entropy in Griffin's life. Though *Meditations* has not achieved the same critical status as either *Dispatches* or *Cacciato*, it suggests yet another opportunity to view the fragmentary nature of the experience there, and in the haunting closing lines of the eleventh meditation, "None of this ever really happened,"[29] one is provoked to ask with Paul Berlin, "What happened, and what might have happened" then? (*Going After Cacciato*, 27).

Meditations in Green, like both *Dispatches* by Herr and *Cacciato* by O'Brien, violates readers' expectations by refusing to conform to a narrative structure in which events unfold chronologically. Wright, like O'Brien, believes strongly that the approach which offers the truest insights into the war is that of imaginative reformulation. If *Meditations in Green* seems at times to almost persistently violate our expectations of what Vietnam was "really like," Wright suggests that is precisely his method for getting to the heart of the matter in a roundabout way:

> I believe deep down that imagination is the very instrument of [this] reality. Finally, when you pursue this topic long enough, this whole thing of fact-fiction, it finally does blur to the point where imagination is just as real as a rock. For human beings I think in many ways it's more real than a rock. Because we live in our heads all the time (Lomperis, 48).

Matthew Stewart, in "Stephen Wright's Style in *Meditations in Green*," aptly summarizes the dissonant framework the author uses to launch his tale:

> [The novel] is divided into two readily identifiable story-lines; these appear alternately in lengths of several pages and are punctuated at irregular intervals by the fifteen short "meditations," which form the narrative's third part and give the book its title ... The first of these story-lines follows the doings (and undoings) in Vietnam of Griffin's unit, the 1069th Military Intelligence Group ... [and provide] an extensive exposure to the details of army life in the rear ... Griffin narrate[s] the second story-line, which follows his squalid and aimless life nearly seven years after his return from Vietnam ... [and finally there are the meditations themselves, which] call attention to the drug-influenced quality of the narrative (126-27).

The narrative strands of the book progress chronologically within themselves. Still, by superimposing a relatively complex formula for developing his theme of individual and collective disintegration, Wright adopts a framework which appropriately reflects and refracts the reader's perception of the war simultaneously with the disintegration of Griffin as he devolves in his weakening capacity to make sense out of experience.

Stewart notes how Wright "skillfully conveys the boredom and dispiritedness of life in the rear, the life experienced by the vast majority of American servicemen in Vietnam" (129). Their distance from the main combat action leads Trips, one of Griffin's colorful friends, to declare, "'It's all a grotesque hoax ... concocted for economic purposes. There is no war, there is no Vietnam. We're sitting inside a secret sound stage somewhere in southern Arizona'" (31). The reality of routine duties in country belie a company commander's dire warnings during basic training, interwoven with overtly sexual innuendo suggesting that the real threat for rear soldiers lies more in the omnipresent prostitutes than in the lurking threat of combat actions:

> The Republic of Vietnam occupies the area roughly equivalent to the foreskin, from the DMZ at the seventeenth parallel down along the coast of the South China Sea to the Mekong River in the delta. Today this tiny nation suffers from a bad case of VD or, if you will, VC. (Smiles wanly.) What we are witnessing, of course, is a flagrant attempt on the part of the communist dictatorship of Hanoi to overthrow, by means of armed aggression, the democratic regime in Saigon ...Consider the human body. What happens if an infection is allowed to go untreated? The bacteria spread, feeding on healthy tissue, until finally the individual dies. Physicians are bound by a moral oath which forbids them to ignore the presence of disease. They cannot callously turn their backs on illness and suffering and neither can we. A sore on the skin of even a single democracy threatens the health of all (9-10).

Faced with the surreal life in country, Griffin initiates his attempt to reconcile the lofty political ambitions of the United States with the mundane day to day grind of eking out the short-timer's calendar: "His literary activity had begun as a search into the structure of a moment" (50). H e exercises both the role of photographic interpreter and later decoder of the "scrambled communications" of the footsoldier's life, and increasingly comes up

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against a metafictional paradox as the words collapse and deteriorate beneath the weight of comrades killed or wounded during choreographed Viet Cong attacks and the inherent absurdity of calm camp life in the midst of a violent landscape. Originally his duties are relatively straightforward, "Wherever he put on the film there the air force would make holes in the ground" (43), but later, his complicity in what he realizes is an unlimited campaign of destruction complicates his relationship to his work, and compels him to extend his interpretive skills both to the self-assigned literary task but also to pursuing an understanding of the war's dark epicenter through an escalating experimentation with drugs. In *Walking Point*, Thomas Myers explains how "Griffin's distance from the effects he charts and interprets begins to produce uneasiness, fragmentation, dark intuition. The images he studies inch by inch, he senses, are dead signifiers of the deeper history lessons dwelling behind them, a play of light and shadow that offers surface without depth" (202). Thus, Griffin complies with the "Old Man's" or commander's encouragement to "start compiling material, in a semiofficial capacity, on a life of the 1069th." In his newly appointed role as historian and archivist he discovers how "the moment swelled and deepened. Facts, events, objects, and people, himself included scribbling away, descended daily, whirling about the hole, debris down the drain of history" (51). It is the allure of drugs, however, which proves to be the mainstay of his literary inspiration. Wright never conclusively clarifies Griffin's drug of choice, "DOUBLEOGLOBE," but suggests strongly it might be opium.[30] During one "session" Griffin describes the process of intoxication: "It's dropped in the pipe at one end, goes round and round, comes out here. The omniscient communist conspiracy wastes no opportunity to undermine our will. Our minds may no longer be in control" (88).

Griffin eventually participates in combat. He witnesses a helicopter shoot-down, and joins a search team to locate survivors. In doing so, he again engages in his metafictional enterprise, coming to terms with the intense fear and the edge of excitement characteristic of combat experience:

> Accustomed now to the muscular aches, the tightening of the nerves, the suffocating air, the claustrophobic botany, the sweat slick as slime on his face, he realized at first with a shock, then with a curious mix of pride and embarrassment, that he could actually take this torture, that *despite his intentions he truly was a soldier* [my italics], a fact he had never before been able to imagine. For a moment he *saw* himself through other eyes, the thin fatigued body in a wet wrinkled uniform, scratched rifle clutched in grimy hand ... Yes, all the details were correct. He had become a photograph, a new image to interpret (278-79).

In fact, as the narrative progresses, the reader is called to perform the primary role of interpreter, called to disassemble what might be real from the increasingly "hallucinatory haze," as Myers describes it, of Griffin's existence. The final fifty pages of the novel, in which the main character becomes fully subsumed beneath the suffocating self-destructiveness of his habitual drug use, particularly reflect what Philip Beidler, in the article "Re-Writing America: Literature as Cultural Revision in the New Vietnam Fiction," characterizes as "an equally nightmarish mix-up of fact and phantasmagoric. Literally and literarily, [the conflation of Griffin's drug haze and the indeterminacy authority of his self-generated history] blend across a whole stoned, echolalic spectrum" (7). The reader is called upon to voyeuristically engage with Griffin in his self-immolation: "Silver needles tumbled through cold space, the glitter of tooled precision. Wanna ride? He could never pick his way through a scab with straight pin and eyedropper ... Shooting up was nothing more or less than fucking yourself, in a single act combining penetration and penetrated, roles united into one entity, the circle of desire completed, the mandala of technology" (301). There is no respite as Wright subjects us to a barrage of debilitating exposures, undermining our credulity, until finally conventional expectation is shattered and we are faced with the wreckage of Griffin's postwar existence, realizing we, like him, have been cheated out of any meaningful, conclusive reconciliation of war experience. Griffin's last perceptions of his Vietnam compound deteriorate into metaphors of a game which will not only recall O'Brien's comparison of the in country environment with game motifs but also Michael Herr's: "The compound looked so neat it reminded Griffin of a

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Monopoly game. The hootches were the little houses lined up on Boardwalk and he was a metal shoe stuck on Chance" (321). As he states immediately thereafter, "There was no hope of escape now" (322). Ultimately, we are provoked to distrust the narrative, or at least its final contours, as Wright confronts us, in the final meditation, with Griffin's obsessive drug use, suggested by his "recipe":

> 1. Remove the latex from the capsules with a flat blunt metallic blade, taking care not to scrape the epicarp.
> 2. Place coagulated gum in bowl, cover with rice paper.
> 3. Set bowl in sun for period of two weeks.
> 4. Roll into balls.
> 5. Insert ball into pipe.
> 6. Ignite.
> 7. Who has a question for Mr. Memory? (340).

Finally, in Wright's final transformational scene, he invites us to dispel the myth he has fabricated. The novel's closing remarks evoke both the primary imagery of botanical activity but also echo the underlying uncertainty of Griffin's role as war witness, and inevitably, suggest the caution with which the entire narrative must be approached: "Everywhere the green fuses are burning and look now, snipping rapidly ahead of your leaping eye, the forged blades cutting through the page, the transformation of this printed sheet twisted about a metal stem for your lapel your hat your antenna, a paper emblem of the widow's hope, the doctor's apothecary, the veteran's friend: a modest flower" (341-42).

We are reminded of here Griffin's earlier comment: "None of this ever really happened" (260). How are we to sift between the lived experience of the veteran and the cacophonous drug-induced recollection? How does Wright's decentered narrative evoke the closer approximation of realism which Lorrie Smith accords it, describing *Meditations in Green* as one of "the most profoundly *realistic* treatments of the war's craziness, chaos, and illogic" ("Disarming the War Story," 94, Smith's emphasis). What Wright attains by his narrative indeterminacy is perhaps, arguably, a closer approximation of the average

grunt experience in Vietnam than other, more overtly realistic narrative attempts. As Matthew Stewart maintains, "verisimilitude may need to be achieved outside the bounds of a narrowly conceived realism delivered in conventional language" ("*Meditations*," 131). Wright's novel adumbrates a looming sense of discontinuity which echoes, though stylistically it does not mirror, techniques employed by authors in attempts to recapture the lived experience of Vietnam, and in doing so renders a closer approximation of what O'Brien describes as honest efforts to depict truth-telling as elaborated in his short story, "How to Tell a True War Story" in *The Things They Carried.*

In moving from experience to consideration, it is worth noting the numerous texts I do not examine which attempt to portray the war using less equivocal schematics. John Del Vecchio's *The Thirteenth Valley*, William Turner Huggett's *Body Count*, and Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters* all approach the war from more starkly conventional modes of representation, for instance. Barry Kroll, a seasoned professor of Vietnam War courses, argues convincingly that use should be made of books such as James Webb's *Fields of Fire* precisely because of their attempts to dutifully record the war experience in mimetic terminology, despite the disappointment of students at their apparent lack of artistic design:

> Although many of the students responded negatively to *Fields of Fire*--and some even recommended that in 'the next Vietnam class you instruct do not include *Fields*--by the end of the unit I was convinced that the novel had provided students with an important opportunity to exercise literary judgment, and that it had been useful for them to examine a flawed book after reading *Dispatches*, a brilliant one (*Teaching Hearts and Minds*, 66-67).

Despite such convictions, I trust the above considerations of Vietnam experience will prove resourceful once we examine O'Brien's writing. Their emphasis on the elusiveness of the real and fully-qualified, authentic combat experience, assumes a stance quite close to O'Brien's distrustful attitude toward narratives overly mimetic in their attempt to evoke

the reality of war experience. What is important to acknowledge at this stage is the variety of expressions of the combat experience, the plethora of inroads into consideration of time spent in country.

Narratives of Aftermath: Inevitable Reconciliations

In *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost*, Tobey Herzog distinguishes the phase of consideration as one in which "the specific theme is a soldier's contemplation of fear, courage, and cowardice on the battlefield" (139); it is not necessarily conducted in the actual aftermath of battle, but is characterized by the deep and reflective inventory of the meaning and outcome of one's experience. Following his definition, Herzog conducts an exhaustive explication of the works of Tim O'Brien, which he finds "lead to particularly important insights about the self and fundamental truths about human nature and responsibilities" as they are realized fictionally from "multiple perspectives" (140). The third element of my own discussion centers not so exclusively on the actual contemplation of the soldier in the aftermath of his experience, but on fictional and non-fictional depictions of veterans in the years following their involvement. I will briefly reconsider Mason's *In Country*, emphasizing the point of view of Emmett, the troubled vet, rather than Sam, the teenage female attempting to understand Emmett's failed adjustment back into society. Secondly, I will examine Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, the National Book Award winner in 1987, a novel which provides chilling scenes of in country experience as well as a grim example of the postwar veteran adrift in America, unwelcome, unacknowledged, and unable to reconcile his troubled memory. Finally, I will conclude my discussion of the sub-genre of Vietnam literature by looking into William Broyles' *Brothers in Arms*, a memoir of a combat Marine officer's return visit to Vietnam in 1984, a work of nonfiction which ostensibly focuses only on the encounters he makes during his (re)visit. Broyles gradually expands the scope of his reflection to include a careful

reexamination of his combat experience; the result is an amazingly detailed catalogue of life there under the worst conditions. Appropriately, as the final work to be investigated, it constitutes the most overt attempt at reconciliation: the individual soldier literally embarking on a journey to see again the battlefield, engage haunting memory face to face, but most importantly, to meet with former enemies until he discovers that "I had more in common with my old enemies than anyone except the men who had fought at my side ... We had tried to kill each other, but we were brothers now" (275). What Broyles' work additionally contributes is further testimony that engagement with Vietnam through the written record is not bound by generic conventions. His account, like Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, Lynn Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning*, and Gloria Emerson's *Winners and Losers*, all provide compelling evidence for the profound lessons to be extended through the use of memoir and relatively straightforward autobiographical writings. At the other extreme are works such as *Going After Cacciato*, *The Short-Timers*, *Dispatches*, and *Paco's Story*, works which challenge generic considerations through experimental forays which dispense with the aim (or hope) of recapturing the war in concise, historically faithful depictions. Between these extremes lies a growing body of work too lengthy to enumerate here, constituting ultimately a mature and distinct sub-genre in American literature, one which continues to provide some of the most powerful writing of our time. Writing which always seeks to locate itself against the backdrop of real experience, to define itself in terms (and counter-terms) of the inherited cultural history which has emerged in the wake of the war's aftermath, and suggests an undeniable challenge to the lingering last traces of the John Wayne myth, a fiction of heroism which emerged in the seductive warrior mythology and enticed so many into the unglamorous reality of war in this century.

Thomas Myers, in his 1988 article "Dispatches from Ghost Country: the Vietnam Veteran in Recent American Fiction," discriminates between the first generation of

Vietnam literature, which he describes as "spare, surreal slices of reality--the tour of duty as concentrated and shaped explosive charge," and a second generation of books which "move to a different rhythm--they are the dark ruminations, the whispered, haunted monologues of the homeless warrior floating unseen through a transformed American landscape, one whose real threat resides in its illusory harmony, its deadly everydayness" (417). Within this general and ever-understated lurking danger of the society to which the uncelebrated war heroes return, there is Emmett Smith of Mason's *In Country*, "the would-be avenger ... another prisoner of the war, a drifter whose only true personal movement is a painful running in place within memory" (423). Though the novel is at one level an account of Sam's coming to terms with the loss of her father and the persistent absence of meaning Vietnam imposes on her, as Matthew C. Stewart argues in "Realism, Verisimilitude, and the Depiction of Vietnam Veterans in *In Country*," "since the subject of *In Country* is the aftereffects of Vietnam on individuals and communities, Emmett's story becomes inseparable from Sam's and is coequal in importance" (167). Emmett's potential volatility is smothered in the face of his niece's persistent but compassionate struggle to uncover his failure to adapt to the "World" as he finds it upon return. Sam wants desperately to probe her uncle's cycle of depression and help him begin the road to recovery but lacks the historical insight, as Emmett in an attempt to sideline her inquiry instructs her, "'Women [and Sam as well] weren't over there ... So they can't really understand" (107), a challenge which, as discussed above, she takes on as her focal mission. Other veterans issue the same prohibition to her; Pete, another Vietnam vet in Hopewell, tells Sam "'Stop thinking about Vietnam, Sambo. You don't know how it was, and you never will. There is no way you can understand. So just forget it. Unless you've been humping the boonies, you don't know'" (194).

The novel's most poignant symbolic depiction of Emmett is in his work underneath the foundation of the house he shares with Sam. Initially his work evolves out of a real suspicion that "the floor was rotting," but in light of a growing realization that he might be

suffering the effects of Agent Orange, he considers a recent newspaper account of a "man with a tipped heart" (92), an accurate description of his emotional condition. Later, inspecting the outside of the house after a particularly heavy rainfall, he notes how "'Water seeping under a house spawns all sorts of life ... Mosquitoes, tadpoles, water bugs, dry rot, funguses, all kinds of worms and snakes'" (152), a description which is highly evocative of being in the jungle in Vietnam. Increasingly, Emmett's campaign to make minor repairs serves as an entire analogue to his experience in country, a way in which he can physically express the sense of alienation he feels. Over time, his work more closely resembles the deliberate construction of a bunker or trench than the mundane act of domestic preservation. Sam acutely senses the way his activity translates into an act of retreat, a denial of his place in the social matrix of the small Kentucky town; when Emmett, in response to another direct question about the "reality" of life in country, shrugs her aside by saying "'It was too miserable to tell. It's something you just want to forget'," Sam responds with a finely attuned assessment of his condition: "'Seems to me like you don't want to forget it at all ... You know what you're doing? You're just digging yourself a foxhole to hide in. Like the enemy was all around us" (271).

Emmett actually suffers from a combination of ailments. His psychological trench warfare indicates the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He avoids relationships with women due to a supposed impotence, a problem pervasive among the vets: "Emmett didn't want a job because men had jobs to support families, and if they couldn't have families, then why bother? Women wanted jobs to prove a point, but men had jobs because of women" (186). His unemployment and shiftlessness produces continual dissension in the lives of those around him--Lonnie, Sam's boyfriend, for example, worries about his darker side: "'I like Emmett just fine, but what if he snapped and did something crazy?'" (125). Finally there is the very real likelihood of Agent Orange contamination, which even he gradually has to acknowledge.

After Sam spends a night out in the local "bush," a park near Paducah called Cawood Pond, Emmett confronts her and experiences a cathartic unleashing. The initiation of healing for him begins in the inevitable war story, the recapitulation to Sam of a traumatic encounter:

> "There was this patrol I was on and we didn't have enough guys? And we were too close together and this land mine blew us sky-high. We was too close. We had already lost a bunch and we freaked out and huddled together, which you should never do, so we was scrambling to the LZ to meet the chopper. And first we hit this mine and then this grenade comes out of nowhere, and I played like I was dead, and I was underneath this big guy about to smother me ... Four hours, then, until the next day, I was all by myself, except for dead bodies. The smell of warm blood in the jungle heat, like soup coming to a boil. Oh, that was awful!" (320).

Emmett's strategy, his daily routine of memory avoidance, finally unravels, : "'This is what I *do*. I work on staying together, one day at a time. There's no room for anything else. It takes all my energy" (225). Now, however, he is able to perform the journey east to Washington, D.C. and fully confront the effects of his involvement. The novel ends with a searing scene in which Emmett performs the ritual hand-touching ceremony on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial: "Silently, Sam points to the place where Emmett is studying the names low on a panel. He is sitting there cross-legged in front of the wall, and slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames" (352). Ironically, the healing effect of the experience shared at the wall stands as a quiet refutation of the earlier critiques that women could not understand the war experience, not having been there. The monument itself was designed by a female non-combatant, Maya Ying Lin, then a 21-year old Yale University architecture student. Furthermore, as Tobey Herzog suggests, "An important message emerging from Mason's *In Country* is that Americans did not have to experience firsthand the Vietnam War nor even to have lived during the historical period for it to be their war. All Americans are affected by the ambiguous legacies of the Vietnam experience" (*Innocence Lost,* 213). Perhaps Mason's novel too tidily resolves the wounds of the war; in yearning for a satisfying eradication of the turbulent and unabated problems

of veterans some have found her work only a cosmetic repair of the nation's psyche at best, yet finally, as Thomas Myers states in *Walking Point*, it serves us all as "a peace offering of the most significant kind" (224).

In 1979, in an article in *Esquire* titled "The Violent Vet," Tim O'Brien captured the contemporary stereotype of the anguished Vietnam vet prior to the emergence of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) as a clinically diagnosed postwar reality:

> The typical Vietnam veteran is bonkers. Outright dangerous: a shell-shocked, frazzle-brained, doped-out psycho. In late-night reruns of *Baretta* or *Kojak*, you'll recognize the Vietnam veteran by his demented eyes and twitching trigger finger, the robber in a whole decade of cops and robbers shows, the kidnapper and hijacker and rapist. No, he's not exactly a villain, not exactly a heavy, he's just ... well, *wacko*, deeply disturbed. Haunted by his complicity in an evil war, the combat veteran is given to fits of violence, succeeded by periods of almost catatonic depression, succeeded by more violence. His own children fear him. Neighbors lock their windows. His wife, tired of being mistaken for a VC sympathizer, sleeps on the sofa. And his nation, which failed to support him in time of war, has now deserted him in time of peace--no parades, no ticker tape, no honor (96, O'Brien's emphasis).

Though O'Brien goes on to explode the caricature, strengthening a similar argument he makes in "We've Adjusted Too Well" that "Contrary to popular stereotypes, most Vietnam veterans have made the adjustment to peace ... the vast majority are *not* hooked on drugs, *not* unemployed, are *not* suicidal, are *not* beating up wives and children, are *not* robbing banks, are *not* knee-deep in grief or self-pity or despair" (205, O'Brien's emphasis), the war certainly left in its wake a sea of human wreckage conforming to the stereotype. *Paco's Story*,[31] by Larry Heinemann, provides an alternative assessment to O'Brien's. Paco, the lone survivor of Firebase Henriette, a secluded outpost overrun by North Vietnamese soldiers, pursues an empty and ultimately unfulfilled quest for peace on the highways of mid-America. Through flashbacks conducted in the voices of his dead comrades, or "ghosts," we learn of atrocities in which Paco was an accomplice,

complicating whatever feelings of sympathy we have for his condition, and we are gradually drawn to participate in his initiation into the increasingly hostile world of a veteran drifter never at home in his native land, an initiation which Thomas Myers describes as a "death-in-life drifting from one small town to another, an aimless postwar trek that becomes a dark picaresque of visible and hidden wounds, cycle of bus tickets, odd jobs, crumbling hotel rooms, and bad dreams" (1988, 223).

The question which lingers throughout Paco's narrative is the inevitable "Why me?" Paco represents what Myers calls the "postwar grunt Everyman" (223), an archetypal Emmett Smith searching as much for an elusive acceptance back into an inscrutable society --a combat veteran seeking to nurse the wounds of memory and an imagination which freewheels through episodes of ever more grisly nightmares. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Heinemann avoids a direct search for new narrative techniques to convey the depressing reality of his tale. Instead, *Paco's Story* offers an immersion in the mundane horrors of failed recognition in a landscape characterized by boredom, routine, and predictable rejection. What Paco discovers, upon his initial arrival in Boone, the mythic town in Iowa he settles in which resembles so many nondescript American towns, is a village unswervingly dedicated to the ethic of comfortable repetition. The most hopeful response he receives after inquiring for work at the town bar is a diagnosis of the town's ills and the unlikely hopes it offers, an assessment which only thinly veils its suspicious demeanor towards the newly arrived vet:

> "Ain't no work around this neck of the woods but good, is what I'm saying. Ain't that right?" [a bar regular] says, and looks around at the rest of the rednecks on his crew. "Sure a shit. Fuckin'-A. Fuckin' foundry mill's gonna close any day now. Railroad, which used to hire any goddamned gimpy deadbeat that come up the pike"--the guy has seen Paco's cane, just like everybody else in the place--"even they gettin' picky and pissy and don't hardly hire *no*body no more ..." (65).

Paco's exclusion from work establishes a rhythm of dismissal and lack of acceptance. He perseveres despite an apparent unwillingness to accommodate him by the townspeople, finally settling for a menial position as a dishwasher after a series of negative job inquiries.

He obtains a position at the "Texas Lunch," a greasyspoon across the street from the "Geronimo Hotel," establishments whose names are familiar enough to suggest any American locale. There he concocts a sexual fantasy in which he figures as the object of desire of a young unattached female, Cathy. Through the distanced third-person narrative voice of one of Firebase Henriette's ghosts addressing James, a detached figure observing Paco's tragedy, we witness Cathy's actual reflections on Paco's masculine allure: "she imagines the swirl-around scars up and down his back, and how they disappear over his shoulder and up into his hairline ... She sees herself drawing on his scars as if they were Braille, as if each scar had its own story" (101). The reader learns that each scar does in fact tell its own story.

What strengthens Heinemann's narrative are the counterpoint remembrances of combat, associations with the "real" world which haunt Paco's memory more strongly than the strongest impressions of his present environment. Interspersed throughout the novel are "lapses," flashbacks to the overrunning of Henriette. In contrast to the yawning captivity of Boone's predictability these flashbacks suggest more than merely other-worldly incomprehension. Ironically, despite the despicable glare of ugly war, one is led to wish Paco could gain access back into this more reasonable, paradoxically less deadly world. The few instances of tenderness in the novel, after all, occur either in the immediate environs of Paco's traumatic recovery or shortly thereafter: in the medevac room where he awaits treatment with all the other mass casualties of his operation, he receives the compassionate sexual attentions of a nurse (55-56). Just as we hear so much of the story through the voices of ghosts, we are led to understand that the ghosts were Paco's last meaningful human relations, and their death signifies a living death for him.

The novel reaches a crescendo of revulsion and sadness during Paco's dream-remembrance of the only sexual consummation he experienced while in country, a lurid gang rape of a fourteen year old Vietnamese girl:

> Gallagher and Paco held the girl down firmly while Jonesy tied her wrists together behind her back, then hauled on that wire the same as if they were hoisting the morning colors, just as crisp and snappy as the book says--*The Manual of Arms*, James, the twenty-two-dash-five, we called it. The girl had to bend over some or dislocate both arms, so she bent down over this raw wood thing about the size of a kitchen table. The girl was scared shitless, chilly and shuddering, glossy and greasy with sweat, and was all but tempted to ask them as one human being to another not to rape her, not to kill her, but she didn't speak English (178-79).

The language barrier proves little obstacle to the participants, just as the familiarity of English little shields Paco from the difficult nightmare of his present circumstances in Boone. Memory intrudes both as relief and garish remembrance, and in the face of such horrific knowledge, the reader's possible sympathy is mitigated by disgust and thus we too become like one of Boone's townspeople: reticent, wanting to look away, hoping Paco will leave us in peace. Yet as Renée Epstein argues in "Talking Dirty: Memories of War and the Vietnam Novel," "Heinemann wants no white-washing, no 'war is hell' excuses; instead he swaggers the narrative patter in front of us, inviting both revulsion and seduction" (475).

Despite the horror of such recollections of combat experience, most critics of *Paco's Story* comment on its adherence to conventional storytelling techniques. In *Vietnam in American Literature*, for example, Philip Melling notes how Heinemann takes issue with "the idea that contemporary life demands from the writer a postmodern narrative, and he rejects, in particular, the need to invest 'new aesthetic strategies for the new history' of Vietnam" (114). Heinemann's willingness to rely on the familiar evil effectively ensures that the audience cannot even temporarily dissociate its own responsibility from the personal tragedy, and suggests that rapprochement with veterans is a collective responsibility, just as the guilt of atrocities committed by soldiers is a collective guilt. Melling's misreading of *Paco's Story*, however, lies in his insistence that "the personal narrative of the soldiers brings intimacy to the war, an intimacy that reduces (through the heightened realism of everyday speech) the exceptional status of those who were killed" (114). In fact, the unnamed ghost-narrators' vernacular is anything but "everyday" speech,

and rather than minimizing or absorbing the novel's pervasive sense of atrocity, it underscores the potential lethality of the young American soldier. In revealing his story through such voices, Heinemann explodes the mythology of the inherent goodness of the boy down the street who goes overseas and performs innumerable small acts of kindness to the deprived victims of a foreign land. Instead, we are forced to witness rapacious creatures devoid of law, living out the grim fulfillment of their ugliest fantasies on a population ill-coped for self-defense. Heinemann offers us no heroes worthy of emulation in *Paco's Story.*

What Heinemann self-consciously exploits is the need to explore the war's meaning (or absence of meaning) through the framework of a war story. Ultimately, he does not intend to "instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor refrain men from doing the things men have always done" (O'Brien, *TTTC*, 76). We do not judge Paco in the end, nor do we judge Jesse, a veteran of the 173rd "Airborneski" who envisions the commemoration of a veterans' memorial which captures the true nature of the war for its participants:

> "Get yourself a couple of acres of prime Washington, D.C., property, see, somewhere in line with the Reflecting Pool ... Chop a couple of acres off some grassy knoll. Cover it with Carrara marble, bub, the whitest stone God makes. Engrave the marble with the names of all the Vietnam War Dead--every swinging dick, as the fella says ... Then in the middle of all that marble put a big granite bowl, a big mortar-looking thing about the size of a three-yard dump truck. Collect thousands of hundred dollar bills, funded by an amply endowed trust fund, say, to keep the money a-coming. Then gather every sort of 'egregious' excretion that can be transported across state lines from far and wide--chickenshit, bullshit, bloody fecal grop, radioactive dioxin sludge, kepone paste, tubercular spit, abortions murdered at very stage of fetal development--I don't know what and all. Shovel all that shit into that granite bowl and mix in the money by tens of thousands of dollars" (159).

What Heinemann so artfully establishes from the novel's opening pages is the centrality of war story and its problematic operation in revealing the nature of combat experience. He carefully confuses reader expectations by first warning us that "This ain't no war story.

War stories are out--one two, three, and a heave-ho, into the lake you go with all the other alewife scuz and foamy harbor scum;" he then follows by lamenting the possible loss of "some prize-winning, leg-pulling daisies--some real pop-in-the-oven muffins, some real softly lobbed, easy out line drives" (3). Then, in a deft inversion, he elevates the war story as narrative transmission by identifying its detractors:

> "The people with the purse strings and apron strings gripped in their hot and soft little hands denounce war stories--with perfect diction and practiced gestures--as a geek-monster species of evil-ugly rumor ... These people who denounce war stories stand bolt upright and proclaim with broad and timely sweeps of the arm that war stories put *other* folks to sleep where they sit. (When the contrary is more to the truth, James. Any carny worth his cashbox--not dead or in jail or squirreled away in some county nuthouse--will tell you that most folks shell out hard-earned greenback cash, every time, to see artfully performed, urgently fascinating, grisly and gruesome carnage" (3-4)

Precisely the carnage which Heinemann makes us see. There is no reconciliation, no hint of redemption, no promise of healing ... only the unswerving allegiance to obscenity and truth which O'Brien instructs us marks the true war story.

The final work dealing with the consideration phase of the veteran experience provides a carefully measured counterbalance to Heinemann's bleak vision. William Broyles Jr.'s *Brothers in Arms: A Journey From War to Peace,* suggests that reconciliation can be achieved by the veteran in the aftermath of his combat experience, however brutal. At the most basic level, Broyles' book is a non-fiction memoir recounting his return trip to Vietnam in 1984, approximately fifteen years after serving from 1969-70 as a Marine Corps officer in the heavily-contested I Corps region which straddled the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Broyles was among the first of many veterans who would eventually return to confront their memories and walk the battlefields of their youth: Heinemann, for example, has made several return trips to the region around Cu Chi and the Iron Triangle, near Saigon, where he fought as a cavalry scout. Tim O'Brien returned to Vietnam in

February 1994 to research an article for *New York Times Magazine*,[32] finally fulfilling an earlier ambition which was cancelled due to the stress of his speaking tour after the publication of *The Things They Carried* (Blades, 2). Though *Brothers in Arms* is professedly a nonfiction account, Broyles compellingly investigates the nature of war stories and the demands imagination makes on retrieving and reconstructing memory. He frequently slips into reminiscence, but not for any maudlin effect; Broyles seeks to bury the bitterness of his wartime experience by directly confronting his previous enemies as humans and as fellow soldiers, embracing them in an invitation to reconciliation. His work provides a poignant exploration of the capacity for forgiveness despite unspeakable combat viciousness, an incisive analysis of the character of the American military in Vietnam in 1969-70, and a no-holds barred engagement with the possibilities and limitations of the war story as a tool for confronting the truth of combat experience. Ultimately, Broyles suggests that all examination of combat, whether fictional or non-fictional, distills into the war story, and his discussion of the components and characteristics of war stories illuminates Herr's reductive vision and anticipates that of O'Brien, in which the war story is the only medium available for the negotiation of memory.

During the Asia Society conference in 1985, in which he moderated a session called "The Role of Literature in Understanding the War," Broyles outlined the need to explore suffering as a starting point for achieving a lasting peace:

> So much great art is rooted in human suffering and intense human experience. That is, I think, one of the basic foundations for the knowledge we get as human beings: it's suffering. But I'm not sure what a guide it is to our politics ... Whether it is what Ron Kovic is suffering personally ... or whether it is the suffering of the Vietnamese that Al Santoli writes about, both these sufferings are real. But I don't think either really tells us where we should go as a people necessarily. Somehow we have to be able to engage other parts of our being and transcend that suffering and figure out what to do next (Lomperis, 85).

Perhaps the most grating reality of Broyles' reminiscence is his insistence on the ethical dimension of war; he speaks of morality, spiritual obligation, and the officer's responsibility to one's soldiers nearly interchangeably. The crux of his memoir is his conception of the war story, a hybrid tale of personal involvement and larger, historical understanding, as well as a personal testimonial to the peculiar seduction of war for young men:

> Men have always loved war, even as they hated it. But to admit such feelings about Vietnam seems inappropriate. The war was brutal and morally complex, fought by Americans who carried the terrible burden of knowing that the country which sent them didn't believe in what they were doing. We were fighting an enemy whose entire society was organized for war, and who would do anything to win ... But nothing about the life we Americans knew and cherished would be affected whether we won or lost. When the horrors of war seem without purpose, it is natural to hate them (198).

Broyles felt sufficient anxiety over the apparent tension between his ambivalent feelings of love and hate toward war to develop them more fully shortly after the publication of *Brothers in Arms* into an article in *Esquire*, "Why Men Love War." In this essay, he more clearly articulates the deep-seated internal conflict he mentions above:

> Ask me, ask any man who has been to war about his experience, and chances are we'll say we don't want to talk about it--implying that we hated it so much, it was so terrible, that we would rather leave it buried. And it is no mystery why men hate war. War is ugly, horrible, evil, and it is reasonable for men to hate all that. But I believe most men who have been to war would have to admit, if they are honest, that somewhere inside themselves they loved it too, loved it as much as anything that has happened to them before or since. And how do you explain that to your wife, your children, your parents, or your friends? (55)

In his memoir, he explores this paradoxical attitude. After recently walking one of the battlefields on which he fought, Broyles nostalgically recalls how "After I returned from the war I did my best not to talk about it, and on the rare occasions when I did I would always begin by saying of course that war was a great evil, and that I hated it. It was the proper thing to say. And it was true, but it wasn't the whole truth" (197-98). He proceeds to dissect his uncomfortably positive feelings: "The best reason we loved war is

also its most enduring memory--comradeship. A comrade in a war is a man you can trust with your life ... It is, unlike marriage, a bond that cannot be broken by a word or by boredom or divorce, or by anything other than death" (199); he continues, "Men also love war because it is a game, a brutal, deadly game, the only game that counts. War is the thrill of a great challenge, to your courage and to your endurance and, yes, to your intellect. Nothing I had ever studied was as complex or as creative as the small-unit tactics of Vietnam" (200). And finally: "war was an initiation into the power of life and death. Women touch that power at the moment of birth; men on the edge of death. It is like lifting off the corner of the universe and peeking at what's underneath" (201). I quote Broyles at length here in part to place what might seem a deeply troubling position he takes into a more fully developed context. His response, always ambivalent, echoes one made by numerous Vietnam War writers: Michael Herr, for example, describes combat as "the feeling you'd had when you were much, much younger and undressing a girl for the first time" (*Dispatches*, 144). In *Innocence Lost: Vietnam War Stories*, critic Tobey Herzog, commenting on the pervasiveness of this divided attitude toward combat experience in war narratives, describes it as the "fascination of the abomination," a phrase he adopts from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (27). This love of war in Broyles' work, always providing a foil to one's revulsion at how unremittingly vicious combat can become, underpins his conception of the war story and suggests a valuable analogue to O'Brien's blueprint for what makes a war story "true."

Although Broyles adopts a memoir format in order to convey his personal experience and record the process of reconciliation with his former enemies, he acknowledges the power of telling war stories and reshaping experience in fictional terms as a means of coming at the truth of that experience. He recognizes while the war story can never achieve the luster of the original event, it does not necessarily seek to retrieve the memory intact, anyhow. He concedes that the final objective of telling war stories is not to faithfully record the facts as they existed in historical reality, but to attempt to place

oneself, whether veteran or not, inside the feeling of the combat event. In the chapter "My Enemy, My Self," Broyles explicates the interior workings of the soldier's natural narrative format:

> At Duy Xuyen, when we began to share war stories, the children were cleared out and the beer was poured. The old saying among soldiers is that the difference between a fairy tale and a war story is that the fairy tale begins 'Once upon a time' and the war story begins 'This is no shit.' It's meant as a joke, but it makes a deeper point. War stories, in fact, are like fairy tales. There is something primal about them. They have a moral, even a mythic truth, more than a literal one ... War stories reach out and remind their audience of their place in the world. They are primitive stories told around the fire in smoky tipis after the pipe has been passed. They are all, at bottom, the same ... Its purpose is not to enlighten but to exclude. Its message is not its content but to put the listener in his place. I suffered. I was there. You were not. Only those facts matter. Everything else is beyond words to tell (195-96).

A war story can be imbedded in any narrative format: memoir, conventional combat fiction, or experimental work like Herr's, Hasford's, and O'Brien's, which strain against traditional generic classification. What all these works have in common is that they place the reader in the shoes of the teller, which often requires the listener to dispense with the pursuit of literal truth or objectivity and submit to subjective authority.

Broyles does not idealize his own experiences, either as a youthful combatant or as an observer of postwar Vietnam. He remains troubled throughout his visit by the manner in which his Vietnamese hosts, loyal communist party members, whitewash incidents committed by their forces yet relentlessly underline Americans' morally uncertain actions: "The Communists' massacre of civilians at Hue and at places like Thanh My are now inconvenient, so they have been airbrushed out of history; they no longer exist. The Communists stand in the flood of history and pluck from the water only what serves the State ... If history falls short of the ideal, it can be transformed into myth" (168). Ultimately, however, and appropriately as a final examination of Vietnam narratives other than O'Brien's, Broyles returns to Vietnam in search of a lasting inner peace, and to put

"the ghosts of Vietnam" behind him.[33] On the memoir's final page he poignantly salutes his former enemy, and buries his personal sword:

> I did find the grave of an enemy I never knew--the man I could have been. And I discovered that I had more in common with my old enemies than with anyone except the men who had fought at my side. My enemies and I had shared something almost beyond words. We had been through war, and by accepting our memories of it honestly we w were able to greet each other in trust and friendship, hoping that we would never see war again ... We had tried to kill each other, but were brothers now (275).

Broyles' journey back to Vietnam concludes a lengthy pursuit of reconciliation. Like O'Brien, his agreement to enter the war had been made with extreme reluctance. He too bent beneath the pressures of conscience only with considerable reflection. He debated, in language similar to O'Brien's reflections in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, on his stake in going to Vietnam: "I thought the war was wrong but my going was right. It was a contradiction. Since I was against the war, why should I participate in it? I had decided it was worse to manipulate the system so that another man would fill my shoes" (78). Once in country and captive to the war's grinding routine of violence, he can only muse sadly on the war's vacuous rationale: "There was no single goal in Vietnam; there were 2.8 million goals, one for every American who served there. And in the end the nation's goal became what each soldier's goal had been all along: to get out of Vietnam" (96).

Summary

What most narratives of Vietnam share in common is their engagement with experience through the war story, in an attempt to draw the reader/listener into the deeper realities of combat experience in order to test and resolve the conflicting emotions which arise out of such involvement. Whether explorations operating at the level of innocence of

the war's impending catastrophe (as in *In Country* or *The Quiet American*), the trauma of direct experience (as in *Dispatches* or *The Short-Timers*), or, finally, in the phase of consideration or aftermath (as in, again, *In Country* or *Brothers in Arms*), there is no requirement that the works, in order to evoke the meaning of such involvement at either the personal level or at the level of collective myth-making, arise directly out of accounts set geographically within the war's physical occurrence. Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, for example, takes place almost entirely outside of Vietnam, as does Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, yet both stories are as much about seeking resolution to the Vietnam experience as those works which operate solely in country. Tim O'Brien struggles between his twin objectives of rendering the war in new and ever-reshaped terminology and the process of obtaining a therapeutic benefit in telling the war stories in his fiction.[34] The two processes intertwine within the act of engaging the Vietnam war within these examined narratives. To that degree, they all share a common purpose and work to establish a distinct identification of Vietnam as a separate sub-genre in American literature and contribute to the body of earlier war narratives which arose out of this nation's previous wars. In the case of Vietnam narratives, however, it is a body of writing still taking shape, as these and other writers persist in bringing the war's meaning into the light and establish the parameters of what Thomas Myers calls the "second battlefield" of wars, which has "no geopolitical reference points, for its only map coordinates are those of collective memory and imagination" (*Walking Point*, 5).

3. "Responsibly Inventing History": The Work of Tim O'Brien

In the years following the conclusion of America's involvement in the Vietnam War, critics and observers of the emerging literature as it seemed to unanimously note the absence of any "master narrative," as Thomas Myers calls it, in any one writer or novel. At the Asia Society conference in 1985, Timothy Lomperis recorded the participants' general consensus that no work, whether fictional or otherwise, had yet come out of the war which might be considered representative of the Vietnam experience, and that such a possibility was not only unlikely but perhaps undesirable:

> From a literary perspective , one question that was addressed repeatedly throughout the conference was whether anyone was ready to, or capable of, writing the definitive work on Vietnam. Everyone who spoke on this question said they weren't nor did they suspect anyone else to try for some time ... What this conference revealed in the nearly universal rejection of any grand or transcendent vision above the fragmentary is that, even if such a definitive work has been written or is being written, America is not ready to read it (Lomperis, 8-9).

Tim O'Brien, also a participant at the conference, had already received the National Book Award for his 1978 novel, *Going After Cacciato*.

In *Walking Point*, Thomas Myers suggests that Vietnam might be incapable of producing any finally satisfying "master narrative" of the war: "Much of the trouble concerning both official truth and journalistic clarity resulted from the war's not being a single narrative but a number of successive and simultaneous wars within a war, a loose collection of political, ideological, and military vignettes that would not conform easily to the form of the collective mythic novel in which previous American wars resided (24). Indeed, though Myers sees the literature of the war elaborating certain recurring themes present in the writing on this country's previous wars, at the same time he notes the specific strains and tensions which make any coherent artistic program unlikely among this generation's "point men":

> The war would simply not support the weight of the competing readings placed on it, and the cracks and fissures in the immediate tension-ridden narrative spoke to a great number of writers of deep cultural rending, the visible separation of the indigenous impulses of idealism and pragmatism that in previous wars had seemed one balanced organism and the most typically American unitary response to national crisis (24).

For Philip Beidler, in *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation*, an update and reassessment of his earlier and still valuable critical study, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, critical analysis has become easier to perform as the literature assumes more discernible contours. He sees the literature as nearly an historical analogue to that of World War I and emphasizes the ways that the newer generation has strived to establish new mythic patterns and destroy older, more idealized conceptions of America's lasting infatuation with war: "if there now appears to have been a single distinguishing feature of the most significant American writing about the experience of Vietnam from the earliest days [to] the present, it has been the attempt to forge myriad forms of new and creative alliance between literature and the work of cultural revision" (xiii), to write what Thomas Myers calls "compensatory history" (*Walking Point*, 9). Within his reevaluation of the state of Vietnam literature, he explores the work of O'Brien, elevating him to the status of literary statesman based on his ability to encompass a variety of generic forms but also, principally, on the strength of his most recent complete work, *The Things They Carried*. Whether Beidler would define O'Brien's overall achievement in terms of "master narrative," or recommend any single work by him as the definitive expression of the war experience has come to seem almost irrelevant. There is no apparent urgency or need to ascribe a strict hierarchical relationship across the body of Vietnam literature, especially since most students of the sub-genre recognize, as Myers noted, the notably fragmented form of the war itself: even a single author would need to incorporate an array of particularized experiences in order to adequately reflect the splintered nature of the American experience over its decade-long involvement.

Still, as N. Bradley Christie noted in his presentation at the conference at Notre Dame in December 1993:[35]

> ... the present moment for Viet Nam studies in this country is critical ... this relatively new academic field is already shaping itself along lines established and perpetuated by familiar institutional practices, which means that certain individual texts like *Dispatches*, *A Rumor of War*, *Going After Cacciato*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and both versions of *Born on the Fourth of July* form part of a relatively recent canon--like all canons in flux and subject to constant reconstruction, but a canon as shapely and powerful as such a construct can be (1).

Clearly, as Christie notes here and in more detail in a forthcoming critical study to accompany Robert Slabey's full-length MLA volume on teaching the Vietnam War, the trend is toward the consolidating effect of privileging some texts above others in the evaluative process of determining which works, if any, constitute artistic enterprises which most invite sustained critical discussion. Of course, any long term trend toward "canonization" must be approached with a degree of jaundice, and represents the contest over the value of combat experience as determined by literary theorists as opposed to combat veterans, or even the general public. In "Teaching the Literature of the Vietnam War," Arthur Casciato argues that "No canon of the literature of the Vietnam War has yet been established (or, put another way, no comprehensive anthology of the literature of the Vietnam War has been published). We should not mourn this fact" (127), though he acknowledges that as teachers of the war privilege certain texts over others, a form of inevitable canon formation occurs, however regretfully. In such a reformulation (though perhaps an unfortunate one, admittedly, for inevitably this sifting process excludes as many incisive works as it seeks to exalt), O'Brien, as Christie notes above and elsewhere, will likely fare well.

Following is a close examination of Tim O'Brien's five principal literary works within the construct of innocence, experience, and consideration. Though a strictly chronological treatment which evaluates each work separately within this framework might provide certain organizational advantages, I have decided rather to conduct my analysis using each

of the three categories as the inroad into discussions of narrative content. Thus, for example, in my discussion of innocence, I treat *If I Die*, *Going After Cacciato*, and *The Things They Carried*.

During my previous analysis of what I consider a representative sampling of Vietnam narratives, I note thematic analogues to O'Brien's work, whether in the details of a specific incident or in the less narrow evocation of archetypal Vietnam experience. I will periodically return to such associations, for I believe they underscore that despite the chaotic disunity of the general conditions in Vietnam, the essential encounter of the soldier in there, like the soldier in any military conflict, is not so different as to render it incomprehensible to non-participants. O'Brien operates on an implicit assumption that the war's truth can be experienced even by the non-veteran, and, as I develop here, part of that assumption is rooted in the conviction that recurring motifs in war literature confirm the reality of its nature: one doesn't need to witness the horror of war, in other words, to appreciate the human potential to do evil.

There are three other aspects of O'Brien's work I examine to highlight what I consider keys to his aesthetic vision. First, I evaluate the manner in which O'Brien's relentless use of revision constitutes a discrete practice which reveals his belief in the dynamic nature of textual creation rather than the counter belief that literary works achieve final, unalterable form. No work of O'Brien's seems to achieve the status of final reification in its author's hands, and attention to how the act of constant revision has shaped and reshaped particular stories and even subsequent editions of specific works (such as the 1989 "edition" of *Going After Cacciato*) helps inform the reader of O'Brien's attitude toward handling literary material but also tellingly reveals his conception of the process of writing/telling war stories. As Steven Kaplan informs us in 'The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," "the facts about what actually happened, or whether anything happened at all, are not important" for O'Brien (49); instead, what is vital is that the truth connects within the listener, and every retelling of the

story, even though different in its details, constitutes a fresh effort to convey the essential confrontation with the elusiveness of experience.

Secondly, I consider metafictional elements in O'Brien's work. Numerous critics have remarked on the metafictional quality of O'Brien's writings, particularly *in The Things They Carried,* but others as well--even, in at least one case, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*.[36] To a degree, imbedded in the act of telling war stories is an unavoidable self-consciousness on the part of the teller: an awareness of how details are manufactured during each retelling (a metaphorical analogy to O'Brien's dedication to getting every story "just right" through revision), and how narrative point-of-view controls the listener's perspective. If one accepts Patricia Waugh's definition of metafiction, "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality," (*Metafiction*, 2), then it becomes relatively easy to recognize the attention O'Brien devotes to this technique within his work. For him, as for Paul Berlin, metafiction is not merely a solipsistic form of immersion in self-consciousness, but a means of providing conscious contours to the way the disordered, chaotic realities of combat are assembled into patterns of meaning. In O'Brien's work, metafictional strategies mirror the same strategies deployed by narrators of any war story and constitutes a formalization of the way in which combat veterans reconcile experience through a self-conscious reformulation of memory.

Finally, I examine the delicate balance between memory and imagination, or what I alternatively describe as an alchemical interplay between historical reality both personal and collective (memory), and the creative faculties which continually reshape memory into new, more meaningful patterns (imagination). Imagination implies the ability to look forward and envision the future as much as it constitutes a deliberate, and "real," confrontation of the past:

> "Now imagination, this act of imagination isn't "Hobbity" or "Alice in Wonderland." It's a real thing and I think influences in a major way the kind of

> real-life decisions we made, both to go to the war or not to go to the war. Either way, we imagine our futures and then try to step into our own imaginations ... For me, most of my service in Vietnam was spent in my head. I was aware of the things going on around me. I pulled the trigger when I had to and ducked most of the time. But I lived in my head a great deal (Tim O'Brien, quoted in Lomperis, 48).

O'Brien, in interviews and in his fiction, consistently underscores the vital role, both liberatory and in fixing "truth," of the role of imagination. Any final measure of the specific ways or degree to which he imaginatively reshapes actual experience is ultimately elusive; objective events which actually occurred corrode over time in memory, so they can best be verified through careful identification of instances in his work which clearly point to historical reality. O'Brien frequently grafts inventories of historical events into his work, such as the numerous interspersed "catalogues" in *The Nuclear Age*, but also in the way *Cacciato* plays on contemporaneous events during the setting of the novel (such as the Tet Offensive and the Paris Peace Talks, historical events which are "remembered" and then imaginatively reshaped to provided new significance, at a dramatically personal level for Paul Berlin). I explore critical treatments of his work which emphasize the straight historical experience, but I also examine unit records from O'Brien's battalion from 1969-70, his period of service in Vietnam, in order to clarify the depth of correspondence between the "fictional" representation of combat and the surprisingly faithful rendition of that experience which appears in his fiction and in *If I Die*.[37] I approach O'Brien's work through a close comparison of the unit duty journals, including analysis of acronyms, slang, and military jargon, and show how these archival documents at times reveal a suggestive correspondence with details from the author's works. I do not, however, wish to suggest that O'Brien's fidelity to historical minutiae outweighs his emphasis on imaginative exploration. I consider examination of historical correlations merely one of several means for exploring his material. O'Brien's literary objective is not merely the recording of historical detail. As he stated at the Asia Society conference in New York in 1985:

> For me, the purpose of writing fiction is to explore moral quandaries. The best fiction is almost always the fiction which has a character having to make a difficult moral choice ... What I'm interested in as a human being, not just as a novelist, is the interaction between memory and imagination, that is between fact and what we imagine. I think we operate as people, and in making moral choices, on the basis of those two big things" (Lomperis, 52).

At the same conference, he warned that excessive allegiance to realistic portrayals of the war constrained narratives in debilitating ways and precluded alternative methods of grappling with the combat experience: "At times, it seems to me, it is as if the writers are being held prisoner by the facts of their own experiences. The result is a closure of the imagination, predictability and melodrama, a narrowness of theme, and an unwillingness to stretch the fictive possibilities" (46). Throughout his work, whether the ostensibly non-fiction *If I Die* or undeniably fictional *Going After Cacciato*, O'Brien resists any closure of the imagination and embarks on a journey into what Joseph Conrad, in *Heart of Darkness*, described as the "hard kernel of experience." His literary mission parallels what Ernest Hemingway defined as "the job to tell the truth;" as Hemingway detailed the requisites to any authentic depiction of war experience:

> [The writer's] standard of fidelity to the truth should be so high that his invention, out of his experience, should produce a truer account than anything factual can be. For facts can be observed badly; but when a good writer is creating something, he has time and scope to make of it an absolute truth (*Men at War*, 7-8).

O'Brien echoes his forebear in "How to Tell a True War Story":

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of an old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil ... You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty (*TTTC*, 76-77).

O'Brien's Elusive Innocence

In *If I Die in a Combat Zone* O'Brien poses a question which nearly all his subsequent writing seeks to directly or indirectly realize: "Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories" (23). Much of his writing is the telling of war stories, accompanied by an increasingly sophisticated definition of the war story. Central to his pursuit of telling the truth of combat experience rests a fundamental acknowledgment by O'Brien of the tension between fact and fiction, and of the inadequacy of traditional story-telling methods in presenting the specifically elusive nature of the Vietnam war experience. Peter McInerney, in "'Straight' and 'Secret' History in Vietnam War Literature," refers to a "peculiar difference" in the narratives of Vietnam, and suggests that part of that difference potentially arises out of "the whole complex of discontinuities between the Asian war and American attitudes toward it and any previous war" (203). McInerney notes, for example, the ways in which memoirs of Vietnam, which we expect to be "autobiographies of real people" and "historical in the sense that the record of the self in each is also a narrative of the Vietnam War" somehow incongruously evade this expectation. Instead, in Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, and more importantly here in *If I Die*, there is a lapse of reliable exposition: "The text is and is not the life. Actual experience is re-presented in each, not 'presented.' Each text recalls, selects, and orders details of actual experience and thus changes them. In this sense, an autobiography is never factual, but always somewhat fictional" (McInerney, 196-97). In the case of O'Brien's memoir, the publication history of *If I Die* testifies to the uneasy classification of the work as non-fiction. "Stitched" together from a series of "vignettes" which he wrote while in Vietnam, generic descriptions of the final product have shifted between fiction and non-fiction: "though O'Brien regards the book as nonfiction, many reviewers--indeed, at one point his own publisher--have referred to it as fiction"

(Schroeder, 1988, 117). The work at times self-consciously, through a pervasive reference to epic accounts of war, assumes a literary voice which urges the reader to question the verisimilitude of the individual accounts within it. As O'Brien informed Eric Schroeder in an interview, "I tried to cast the scenes in fictional form. Dialogue, for example. Often I couldn't remember the exact words people said, and yet to give it *dramatic intensity* and *immediacy* I'd make up dialogue that seemed true to the *spirit* of what was said" (Schroeder, 1984, 136, my emphasis). As O'Brien further reveals his narrative strategy, he underlines the problematic tension between the nonfictional and fictional forms: "This [reshaping experience] creates the illusion of 'happeningness' which usually isn't there in nonfiction. Nonfiction is usually cast in the language of political science or history or sociology or whatever. And this is not. It's cast in an entirely different language" (1984, 137). Elsewhere, in a 1991 interview with Debra Shostak and Daniel Bourne for *Artful Dodge*, O'Brien notes how "parts of the book, although it's technically nonfiction, are *utterly invented*, in the same sort of ways as in *The Things They Carried*" and, elaborating yet further on his technique in *If I Die*:

> I took a scrap of event and put it together with another scrap, or I took something from an account, when I wasn't personally present to witness it, or sometimes I would take a conflicting account and choose it over my own, blending everything together to make what seems to be a convincing and coherent story about things I hadn't born witness to in their entirety ... I had to do things that weren't strictly nonfiction to make the account possible (Shostak, 75, earlier emphasis mine).

Still, O'Brien marvels that "a book which I published and intended to be straight autobiography or war memoir is now called a novel by everyone, and everyone writes about it as a novel," though allowing that at least subconsciously "the book was written as a novel; that is, the form of the book is fictional" (136). In either case, O'Brien, within the framework of the memoir itself, suggests at least one approach to reading the work:

> I would wish this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows, from one who's been there and returned, an old soldier looking back at a dying war (22).

The soldier who looks back recalls the events which anticipated his personal involvement, and painstakingly records the way in which his upbringing prepared him for the eventual decision to abide by his draft notice despite strong personal reservations. For O'Brien, the period of "innocence" which preceded his combat experience was marked by competing moral codes. He describes his Midwest origins as the son of a distinctively military family:

> I grew out of one war and into another. My father came from leaden ships of sea, from the Pacific theater; my mother was a WAVE. I was the offspring of the great campaign against the tyrants of the 1940's, one explosion in the Baby Boom, one of millions come to replace those who had just died. My bawling came with the first throaty note of a new army in spawning (*If I Die*, 11).

O'Brien grew up respecting the experiences of his parents, inwardly awed by the mementos of his father's service: "I rubbed my fingers across my father's war decorations, stole a tiny battle star off one of them and carried it in my pocket" (12). He recalls the morally unambiguous lessons proffered by the town elders: "The talk was tough. Nothing to do with causes or reason; the war was right, they muttered, and it had to be fought" (13). Yet he simultaneously acknowledges that in the case of Vietnam, the old sure knowledge seemed lacking, and reflection produced uncertainty rather than the conviction the old men expressed: "The war, I thought, was wrongly conceived and poorly justified. But perhaps I was mistaken, and who really knew, anyway?" (18).

O'Brien had taken a clear stand on the war while acquiring a bachelor's degree at Macalester College in St. Paul, becoming involved in the anti-war movement "'in the sense in which activism existed then'." He also submitted editorials against the war in the college periodical, *Mac Weekly* (Kaplan, *Understanding Tim O'Brien*, ms. 3).

In his 1985 novel, *The Nuclear Age*, the main character William Cowling appears to experience the same apprenhensions felt by the author. Attending college, Cowling, who

O'Brien described as the only "hero" created in his novels (Naparsteck, 5), develops a nagging sense of a war going increasingly awry, much as the author did. Despite the lackadaisical detachment of the campus, more like a "health resort" than a "distinguished institution," where "no one cared. No one tried" (67), Cowling finds he does care and cannot suppress his growing alarm. He counters his friends' skepticism toward his excited responses to "visions" he experiences which depict the escalating events in Vietnam that "'It *is* fact ... The war, it's a fact'." O'Brien's character then recounts the succession of events in a disarmingly non-fictional inventory of historical incidents:

> By the autumn of my junior year, October 1966, the American troop level in Vietnam exceeded 325,000. Operation Rolling Thunder closed in on Hanoi. The dead were hopelessly dead. The bodies were bagged and boxed. In Saigon, General Westmoreland called for fresh manpower, and at the State Department, Dean Rusk assured us that rectitude would soon prevail, a matter of attrition. Yet the dead remained dead. For the dead there was no rectitude. For the dead there was nothing more to die for. The dead were silent on the matter of attrition. So what does one do?

Although most of the action in *If I Die* takes place in Vietnam, it might be argued that the principal activity of the memoir is to reveal the agonizing process of deciding what to do prior to shipping out from the United States. For the young, newly graduated and newly drafted O'Brien, the contest between the sage advice of the town elders to obey the social command to defend one's country strained against his sense of the war's essential wrongness. Ultimately, his inner conflict is not so much conclusively resolved as decided by the force of social obligations. It becomes an issue of courage and cowardice, and a disparaging surrender to the forces arrayed against his conscience:

> I did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war. But neither did I want to upset a peculiar balance between the order I knew, the people I knew, and my own private world. It was not just that I valued that order. I also feared its opposite--inevitable chaos, censure, embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all (*If I Die*, 22).

Later, he contemplates fleeing to Sweden while he is in basic training at Fort Lewis, Washington. He is appalled by the ignorance and apathy of the fellow soldiers with which

he undergoes initial military training, "I did not like them, and there was no reason to like them ... I hated them *all* ... I was superior. I made no apologies for believing it ... I shunned the herd" (33).

William Broyles, in *Brothers in Arms*, records the way in which he experienced a tortuous internal debate remarkably similar to O'Brien's during the final hours before his scheduled departure for Vietnam in 1969:

> As I flew to California, I began to find my own moral scales oscillating. I thought the war was wrong but my going was right. It was a contradiction. Since I was against the war, why should I participate in it? I had decided that it was worse to manipulate the system so that another man would fill my shoes. But the higher their price, the harder moral decisions are to make. The price of this particular moral decision was, quite possibly, my life. Was it worth that? (78)

Also like O'Brien, Broyles capitulates to the formidable internal demands of conscience: "I was afraid. Worse, I had tried to hide my fear behind morality and principle. If I were going to take a stand against the war, I should have done it long before. And I knew what I had to do now" (80). Yet for O'Brien, the capitulation is not so clearly one of unambiguous moral rectitude. When he finally abandons his plans to escape to Sweden, he experiences capitulation to the forces of "gravity" while simultaneously considering himself a coward for *not* escaping:

> It was over. I simply couldn't bring myself to flee. Family, the home town, friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile: I could not run ... I was a coward. I was sick (*If I Die*, 66).

In 1990, in *The Things They Carried*, a work even more noted for its resistance to categorization than *If I Die*, O'Brien returns to an examination of his decision not to flee in the story "On the Rainy River." In recounting a flirtation with escape during a trip to the Canadian border, the narrator Tim O'Brien speaks of the anguish over whether to flee or submit to "friends, history, tradition" in language undiluted by the passage of nearly twenty-five years from the historical O'Brien's decision:

> My conscience told me to run, but some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me toward the war. What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame. Hot, stupid shame. I did not want people to think badly of me. Not my parents, not my brother and sister, not even the folks down at the Gobbler Café ... I was ashamed of my conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing (54-55).

The decision of the fictional "Tim O'Brien" of this story proves the same as the autobiographical subject of *If I Die*, though perhaps more unabashedly self-condemning: "I would go to the war--I would kill and maybe die--because I was embarrassed not to ... I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (62-63).

In *Men at War*, Ernest Hemingway provides a definition of cowardice which proves poignantly apropos given O'Brien's carefully wrought aesthetic framework in which imagination and memory interact to permit him to get at the truth of his experience. Hemingway wrote: "Cowardice, as distinguished from panic, is almost always simply a lack of ability to suspend the functioning of the imagination. Learning to suspend your imagination and live completely in the very second of the present minute with no before and no after is the greatest gift the soldier acquire" (17). Broyles, reflecting on the terrible struggle to choose between a decisive refusal to participate and what became for him submission to conscience, noted that "All that link the two worlds are memory and imagination, but even they can't really bridge the chasm" (*Brothers in Arms*, 56). For O'Brien, the pursuit of conscience and discovery of cowardice similarly constitutes a delicate balance between memory and imagination, not only in the precarious moments before his final decision not to flee, but as a dialectic which would sustain Paul Berlin, in *Going After Cacciato,* during his constant struggle to weigh the duties of staying in country guarding his observation post along the South China Sea against the competing impulse to flee in the imaginary pursuit of Cacciato. In this novel, O'Brien articulates his most sophisticated explanation of the decision to go to war rather than avoid the ironic stain of cowardice which abstaining might have permitted.

Paul Berlin chooses to join his platoon during a surreal pursuit across Asia and Europe to Paris, the setting for the ongoing Paris Peace Talks, to capture the deserter Cacciato. From the novel's beginning Cacciato's motivations are blurred in a frenzy of indistinct conjectures which plague Berlin as he considers whether to join the platoon: "Why had Cacciato left the war? Was it courage or ignorance, or both? Was it even possible to combine courage and ignorance?" (25). The locus of Berlin's sustaining internal strength, at least at the beginning of his contemplation of pursuit, rests in the powers of his imagination. Ironically, Berlin's willingness to flee (importantly depicted as a simultaneous decision to pursue) is predicated upon an ability to imagine the possibilities of action and conceive of different possible courses of action:

> Paul Berlin, whose only goal was to live long enough to establish goals worth living for still longer stood high in the tower by the sea, the night soft all around him, and wondered, not for the first time, about the immense powers of his imagination. A truly awesome notion. Not a dream, an idea. An idea to develop, to tinker with and build and sustain, to draw out as an artist draws out his visions (25).

One readily recognizes how categorically O'Brien deprives his character of the potential for slippage into a "closure of the imagination, predictability and melodrama, a narrowness of theme, and an unwillingness to stretch the fictive possibilities" (Lomperis, 46). Berlin pursues his elusive quarry, and picks up a refugee Vietnamese family along the way. He falls in love with an alter ego, Sarkin Aung Wan, who accompanies the platoon across the world and encourages Berlin to continue toward Paris and the eventual hope for peace that city symbolically represents. Once there, however, the two undergo a crisis of irreconcilable positions; for Paul, loyalty to the platoon and the mission of capturing Cacciato and returning to Vietnam, to duty, becomes the paramount concern. For Sarkin, conversely, the point of the pursuit lies in the arrival at the destination. They meet over a round table which implicitly corresponds to the real world negotiating tables over which American and Vietnamese diplomats laboriously pursued a compromise to the real war.

Sarkin pleads with Paul to observe the dictates of his conscience and surrender his sense of obligation to continue the war:

> "Spec Four Paul Berlin: I am asking for a break from violence. But I am also asking for a positive commitment. You yearn for normality--an average house in an average town, a garden, perhaps a wife, the chance to grow old. Realize these things. Give up this fruitless pursuit of Cacciato ... For just as happiness is more than the absence of sadness, so is peace infinitely more than the absence of war. Even the refugee must do more than flee. He must arrive" (284).

In Berlin's response to Sarkin, O'Brien posits much more than merely a fictional character's rationalized counterargument. By inventorying his reasons for continuing the pursuit, Berlin simultaneously itemizes alternative explanations for going to the war in the first place as explained by O'Brien in his memoir and the fictional narrator Timmy O'Brien in "On the Rainy River." Taken together, the three examinations of decision constitute a complex and bittersweet confrontation with consequences which, whether out of cowardice or its paradoxical cousin courage, will last a lifetime. Berlin explains:

> "I don't pretend to be an expert on matters of obligation, either moral or contractual, but I do know when I *feel* obliged. Obligation is more than a claim imposed on us; it is a personal sense of indebtedness. It is a feeling, an acknowledgment, that through many prior acts of consent we have agreed to perform certain future acts. I have that feeling. I make that acknowledgment. By my prior acts--acts of consent--I have bound myself to performing subsequent acts. I put on a uniform. I boarded a plane. I accepted a promotion and the responsibilities that went with it. I joined in the pursuit of Cacciato ... These were explicit consents. But beyond them were many tacit promises: to my family, my friends, my town, my country, my fellow soldiers" (285).

O'Brien's language at this point is practically a verbatim echo of the explanation of failing to flee to Sweden expressed in *If I Die* and the similar language in "On the Rainy River," in which embarrassment, not social obligation, prevails. In *Going After Cacciato*, however, in the words of Paul Berlin, a distinctively superior moral decision is expressed, which suggests the transformative capacity of not only the imagination, but the retrospective powers of memory as an "old soldier reflects on a dying war":

> "I believe ... I *feel* ... that I am being asked to perform a final service that is entirely compatible with what I promised earlier. A debt, a legitimate debt, is being called in. No trickery, no change in terms. I knew what I was getting into. I knew it might be unpleasant. And I made promises with that full understanding. The promises were made freely. True, the moral climate was imperfect; there were pressures, constraints, but nonetheless I made binding choices. Again, this has nothing whatever to do with politics or principles or matters of justice. My obligation is to people, not to principle or politics or justice" (285).

In the final justification for his decision, Berlin inventories the negative aspects of the pressures he feels to continue the pursuit. Yet here, and perhaps no where else so clearly in O'Brien's writing, there is an amplification of that purpose, one sufficiently powerful that it might be an adequate rationale, though a tragically sad one as well, for a young man who does finally submit to the force of social obligations.

> "I confess that what dominates is the fear of abandoning all that I hold dear. I am afraid of running away. I am afraid of exile. I fear what might be thought of me by those I love. I fear the loss of their respect. I fear the loss of my own reputation ... I fear being thought of as a coward. *I fear that even more than cowardice itself* [my emphasis].
>
> "Are these fears wrong? Are they stupid? Or are they healthy and right? I have been told to ignore my fear of censure and embarrassment and loss of reputation. But would it not be better to accept those fears? To yield to them? If inner peace is the true objective, would I win it in exile?
>
> "Perhaps now you can see why I stress the importance of viewing obligations as a relationship between people, not one between one person and some impersonal idea or principle. An idea, when violated, cannot make reprisals. A principle cannot refuse to shake my hand. Only people can do that. And it is this social power, the threat of social consequences, that stops me from making a full and complete break. Peace of mind is not a simply matter of pursuing one's own pleasure; rather, it is inextricable linked to the attitudes of the other human beings, to what they want, to what they expect ... We all want peace. We all want dignity and domestic tranquillity. But we want these to be honorable and lasting. We want a peace that endures. We want a peace we can be proud of. Even in imagination we must obey the logic of what we started. Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits" (286).

What O'Brien achieves in Berlin's defense of his decision is an astoundingly complex articulation of the moral and psychological struggle any young man (or woman) undergoes when faced with the prospect of going to war. O'Brien confesses to acquiring what

Hemingway describes as the soldier's ideal gift, "[l]earning to suspend [the] imagination and live completely in the very second of the very minute." As O'Brien noted in an interview with Larry McCaffrey:

> There are two essential answers that Paul gives there. One has to do with this issue of emotional baggage--that constellation of emotional pressures ... But of equal importance is his argument--*and my own*--that he can't mold his imagination to fit what ought to be there. The decision to run or not run is based on that process of the imagination (265, my emphasis).

Yet what Berlin does here is a willing embrace, though perhaps a wistfully reluctant one, to the web of human relations, relations which will stubbornly outlive the war.

Some critics find the conclusion to *Going After Cacciato* a thoroughly disappointing rejection of the hope suggested at the novel's beginning as Berlin muses over the powers of the imagination. Arthur Saltzman, in "The Betrayal of the Imagination: Paul Brodeur's *The Stunt Man* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*," argues that throughout the platoon's pursuit "the dubious capacity of art to redeem falters more radically as the journey continues," finally, pessimistically concluding that "the sad irony of *Going After Cacciato* is that Berlin has unwittingly assured the *disqualification* of imagination as a means of salvation" (36, Saltzman's emphasis). Other critics emphasize the novel's break with combat narrative tradition in achieving "the end of vision" in which Paul Berlin, unlike his literary predecessors Nick Adams and Frederic Henry, "makes no separate peace" because he "never learns to see clearly the absurdity in which he is caught" (Busby, 63-64); and even, in a specious denunciation and misreading which seeks to reduce the level of moral debate within the novel to the simplicities of polarized political positions on Vietnam:

> Anti-war sentiment is by now as much the routine business of combat novels or memoirs as keeping the sides straight and the slang accurate. It is not, however, always as convincing. Tim O'Brien's Vietnam novel, *Going After Cacciato*, borrows, for reasons not entirely clear to me, from the conventions of anti-war fiction as they are laid down in such books as *A Farewell to Arms* and *Catch-22* (Pochoda, 344).

Saltzman mistakenly overlooks the manner in which Berlin's resolution at the end of the novel, rather than constituting the defeat of imagination, bravely recognizes its practical limits. Since Berlin's decision is arrived at only after the journey west and the fruition of the possibilities which originated within the imagination, it in fact represents the culmination of imaginative activity, tested by the experience not only of the fictional journey to Paris but the experience of the physical Berlin's wakeful guard duty in his observation post throughout the interminable night in one strand of the novel's several narrative strands--the one most closely associated with the actual actions of a soldier resembling the historical O'Brien in Vietnam.[38]

Busby's suggestion that the determination to press forward with the platoon signals the "end of vision," in an article which otherwise strongly praises O'Brien's skills as a writer and ability to forge new literary enterprises in order to reconcile the peculiar experience of Vietnam, is accurate in interpreting the end of a vision of conventional combat narratives rooted in realistic depictions of war. Michael Raymond, in "Imagined Responses to Vietnam: Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*," notes how "the narrative is not realistic in the mimetic tradition ... Even if one ignores the interruptions of Berlin's narrative by the other two narratives, one notes quickly that his story is not fully rendered, is not chronological, and is not cohesive" (98). Certainly, as a number of critics have concluded, the result of exploding those conventional narrative patterns is the inscribing of new methods of discussing war and the war experience, and until *The Things They Carried*, *Going After Cacciato* represented the most revolutionary expression of that emerging form.[39]

What is clear is that *If I Die* presented several thematic concerns early on which O'Brien would take up with increasing diligence throughout his literary career. The inadequacy of conventional narrative options convinced him that new experimental techniques would ultimately provide more satisfying alternatives in describing his own war experience. Critical to his realization of the restrictions of the memoir format was its

overreliance on supposedly accessible history. Thus, in *If I Die,* he notes that "only to say another truth will I let another half-truth stand," for example (124); the soldier, in the face of experience which is continually altered in the repository of memory, "can only do his walking, laughing along the way and taking a funny crooked step" (125). What O'Brien realized early in his writing career was that the opportunities of conventional storytelling would not suffice in penetrating the war experience, in arresting the "truth" of lived combat. It is not only excusable, but a requisite strategy of arriving at truthful representation that he resorts, therefore, to manipulation of detail in *If I Die.* When O'Brien records the letters of his collaborator Erik Hansen but suppresses his responses, for instance, one must recognize that it is solely "for dramatic purposes ... [that he shapes] his material by the principles of fiction rather than those of memoir" (Kaplan, ms. 22). What he discovers, in recording the tormenting experience of a young man faced with the seemingly unredeeming assignment to Vietnam, is the opportunity of displaying how cowardice, in whatever form it occurs in retrospect--as either lost chance or future possibility--provides a natural contrast with courage. There are, after all, lessons to be learned from the detested self-involvement. At the conclusion of *If I Die* O'Brien recounts the lessons learned:

> You add things up. You lost a friend to the war, and you gained a friend. You compromised one principle and fulfilled another. You learned, as old men tell it in front of the courthouse, that war is not all bad; it may not make a man of you, but it teaches that manhood is not something to scoff at; some stories of valor are true; dead bodies are heavy ... you have to pick the times not to be afraid, but when you are afraid you must hide it to save respect and reputation. You learned that the old men had lives of their own and that they valued them enough to try not to lose them; anyone can die in a war if he tries (202).

O'Brien experimented with traditional narrative technique in *If I Die* and found it wanting. His sense of needing to tell the remaining truths of combat led him to experiment with alternative forms of expression in order to arrive at more satisfactory accounts. By discovering his own complicitous cowardice in his willingness to submit to societal

pressures by going to Vietnam in the first instance, in other words, O'Brien would discover the natural environment for an examination of cowardice's corollary, courage, a theme which dominates his work. As his work progresses into increasingly fictive representations, however, it is necessary to remain sensitive to the ways in which personal and collective history tamper with imaginative reconstruction, and to the specific manner in which O'Brien, while always aware that "[g]ood stories can be true or untrue ... It doesn't really matter too much, provided that the story does to the spirits what stories should do" (Kaplan, interview, 106), recollects and reshapes experience in ways which quite deliberately draw upon historical events. Innocence is rooted in anticipation, and as such constitutes a type of diagnosis of the future: what will combat be like?; Will I show courage under fire? The assessment of experience, alternatively, arises precisely out of the elimination of uncertainty, and anticipates the eventual reconciliation of factual events with the fictions of expectation. In his work which centers on the experience of the combat soldier in country, O'Brien uncovers the moral issues which extend from the problems explored concerning the debate about whether to go to Vietnam in the first place, without moralizing. He pursues the most overt metafictional strategies, and inquires into the meaning of his experience.

O'Brien's Experiences in Vietnam (Part 1)

In "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," Hayden White asks:

> What is involved, then, in that finding of the "true story," that discovery of the "real story" within or behind the events that come to us in the chaotic form of "historical records"? What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that *real* events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story? (8).

White's questions about the tenuous relationship between factual events and the ways in which they are "narratized" into stories, though principally concerned with formal historiography in his essay, address issues which assume great importance in the works of

O'Brien. Certainly, any reading which attempts to isolate the historical basis in his work must first contend with O'Brien's own problematic statements concerning how he transposes lived reality into fictional form. For example, while most critics note the surreality of *Going After Cacciato*, or as Richard Freedman described the novel, "magical realism" (1), O'Brien himself suggests that "*Cacciato* is the most realistic thing I've written" (McCaffrey, 272).[40] In the same essay with Larry McCaffrey he stresses what he considers the vital role substance must play in the creation of fiction, and part of substance consists of the need for real, lived experience out of which to imagine alternatives: "I want to stress here that I'm a believer in substance--that is, I feel the fiction writer should have something to say. I mean this in all sorts of ways--*in terms of a body of witnessed experience*, the physical things that are seen and felt" (268, my emphasis). O'Brien's comments concerning *The Things They Carried* prove even more disconcerting, and confront the reader with a nearly insoluble paradox concerning the relationship between reality and invention in the hands of O'Brien.

During an interview in 1989 with O'Brien, Martin Naparsteck asked the author "Is the Tim character [in *The Things They Carried*] Tim O'Brien? In "The Lives of the Dead" there's a Timmy O'Brien" (7). O'Brien's answer evades while it confirms, and provides considerable insight into how he views his work in terms of its generic indeterminacy:

> Yeah, it is, in part. It's made up, but I use my own name. *The Things They Carried* is sort of half novel, half group of stories. It's part nonfiction, too; some of the stuff is commentary on the stories, talking about where a particular one came from. "Speaking of Courage," for example, came from a letter I received from a guy named Norman Bowker, *a real guy*, who committed suicide after I received his letter about how he just couldn't adjust to coming home ... All he could do was drive around and around in his hometown in Iowa, around this lake. In the letter he asked me to write a story about it, and I did. This was after I published *If I Die* (7, my emphasis).

Naparsteck then asks, "Was this somebody you knew?" and O'Brien seems to confute reality with invention, by both affirming Bowker's real existence and simultaneously denying its actuality:

> Yeah, in Vietnam. I sent him the story after it was published, and he said he liked it. Then, I didn't hear from him for a long time. His mother finally wrote me. I wrote her and she wrote back saying he committed suicide .. [contrast with] The story about Norman Bowker is made up. There was no Norman Bowker. The point, among others, that in fiction we not only transform reality, we sort of invent our own lives, *invent our histories*, our autobiographies (8, my emphasis).

Later, speaking about "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien confesses that "even with that nonfiction-sounding element in the story, everything in the story is fiction, beginning to end" (9), claims he makes elsewhere, further blurring the apparent "fact" from the nearly indistinguishable invention. Certainly, there is a deliberate strategy in doing this, as Steven Kaplan notes in his essay "The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*": "O'Brien demonstrates nothing new about trying to tell war stories--that the 'truths' they contain 'are contradictory,' elusive, and thus indeterminate ... what is new in O'Brien's approach in *The Things They Carried* is that he makes the axiom that in war 'almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true' the basis for the act of telling a war story" (50, 1993). In a similar vein, Catherine Calloway, in her forthcoming article "'How to Tell a True War Story': Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*," discusses the "Notes" section following the story named in her title, emphasizing the complicating effect produced by circulation of different versions of the story:

> Which version of the story, if either, is accurate? The inclusion of a metafictional chapter presenting the background behind the tale provides no definite answers or resolutions. While we learn that Norman Bowker, who eventually commits suicide, asks the narrator to compose the story and that the author has revised the tale for inclusion in *The Things They Carried* because a postwar story is more appropriate for the later book than for *Going After Cacciato*, O'Brien's admission that much of the story is still invention compels the reader to wonder about the truth ... Even more significantly, the reader is led to question the reality of many, if not all, of the stories in the book (7).

Part of the way O'Brien communicates this indeterminacy of fact is by pursuing narratives strategies which elude conventional assignment. For example, in a review of the work by Dan Chow, it is noted that "Although [*The Things They Carried*] is presented as

a work of fiction, one cannot escape the conviction that there is more truth here than in a score of documentary works" (35). In one interview O'Brien informed Steven Kaplan that "it would be unfair for me to say that's it's a collection of stories; clearly all of the stories are related and the characters reappear and themes recur, and some of the stories refer back to others, and others refer forwards. I've thought of it as a work of fiction that is neither one nor the other" (96, 1993). Elsewhere, O'Brien calls it a "hybrid, blending the nonfiction or essay form with fiction" (Johnson, 40). Philip Beidler describes his work as the need to "extend relationships of factual and fictive meaning into new dimensions of creative reciprocity" (*Re-Writing*, 6). In "The Author Reinvents Himself--The Fiction of Tim O'Brien," Philip Gerard incisively notes how "The reader may feel he has fallen into an endless identity crisis: authorial personalities bouncing back and forth between mirrors. Each layer unpeeled reveals the reader not *closer* but *further* from the 'actual truth,' though closer to the 'story truth'--what he can use, what he can take away from the story, what will matter long after the literal truth of events ceases to matter" (542-43, Gerard's emphasis).

In part, what contributes to the generic instability of his writing is O'Brien's insistent refusal to ever definitively complete a work. In the hands of a writer who views himself as an inveterate reviser, always returning to his material to resurrect a "truer" account, the very notion of categorizing his work proves enormously risky. O'Brien's story "Speaking of Courage," for example, was originally intended for *Going After Cacciato*, but was reworked (such as changing the main character from Paul Berlin to Norman Bowker) and instead incorporated later into *The Things They Carried*. Of course, that alone does not constitute a major artistic strategy of revision-cum-creation. In an interview with David Streitfeld for *The Washington Post*'s *Book World* O'Brien confessed he quietly slipped textual alterations in between the hardback editions of *TTTC*, such as a scene in "Field Trip," in which O'Brien exchanges Kiowa's buried hatchet of the earlier version for the moccasins of the later: "'When I was writing the novel, the phrase 'bury the hatchet' didn't

occur to me. But when I read it in the hardcover version, I thought "Ohmigod. That's kind of heavyhanded symbolism." It hadn't been intended that way, so I changed it to moccasins'" (15). Streitfeld observes that O'Brien also incorporated textual changes, in some instances major, into recent reprintings of *If I Die* and *Going After Cacciato*. O'Brien informed him also that "he'll do a substantial rewrite [of *The Things They Carried*] a decade or so from now" (15). In Martin Naparsteck's interview with O'Brien in 1989, the author noted that "I think that if at some point I were to run out of ideas I might go back to *Northern Lights* and rewrite it. I've done that with *Cacciato* over the last year or so; I've rewritten substantial portions that are appearing in the latest edition" (2).

Later, I will discuss specific ways in which O'Brien alters key passages of *If I Die* and *Going After Cacciato*. At least one major study has already examined the evolution of passages from the latter; in "Pluralities of Vision: *Going After Cacciato* and Tim O'Brien's Short Fiction" Catherine Calloway provides a key toward excavating textual changes and how they coerce the reader to "attempt to distinguish between illusion and reality and in so doing [how O'Brien] creates a continuous dialogue between himself and the world around him" (213). First, however, I wish to put in context the fictional elements he manipulates against a backdrop of historical events which underpin all his work by consulting unit records which depict in starkly nonfictional ways the reality that feeds O'Brien's work. In doing so, I do not intend to necessarily create one to one correspondences between specific scenes, rather, I intend to demonstrate that the "story truth" we encounter in "How to Tell a True War Story" and his other work conforms to his demand for physical substance. In the process, one might recognize resonances of specific scenes, of course; one might even recognize occasional characters and events which resurface from time to time throughout O'Brien's writing. These factual events might then become a benchmark for measuring the precise power of the artist as he responsibly reinvents the personal history of a year in Vietnam and the more important lessons he wishes to impart through

continually revisiting the memory of those events. As Paul Berlin asks in *Going After Cacciato:* "What happened, and what might have happened?" (27) persistently remains the questions lingering throughout O'Brien's writing.

War Stories/War Records (Experience, Part 2)

Tim O'Brien arrived in Vietnam in February, 1969, and was assigned to 3rd Squad, 1st Platoon, A[lpha] Company, 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry (Regiment), 198th Infantry Brigade (Light), 23rd Infantry Division ("Americal"--the only modern U.S. Army division denoted by a nickname rather than its numerical identification). Nearly a year before his arrival, a sister brigade in the northernmost I Corps area of operations had experienced an atrocity which was coming to light at the time of O'Brien's arrival in country: the My Lai massacre, in which 300-500 civilian Vietnamese were slaughtered, had taken place in "Pinkville," an area which O'Brien recalls visiting on a routine search and destroy mission:

> In the next few days it took little provocation for us to flick the flint of our Zippo lighters. Thatched roofs take the flame quickly, and on bad days the hamlets of Pinkville burned, taking our revenge in fire. It was good to walk through Pinkville and to see fire behind Alpha Company. It was good, just as pure hate is good (*If I Die,* 117).

This routine search and clear mission took place in May, 1969, when O'Brien's company "learned some hard lessons about Pinkville" (*If I Die,* 114). O'Brien pointedly acknowledges the lingering discomfort divisional soldiers felt about association by implication with the massacre when he states that "I was not at My Lai when the massacre occurred. I was in the paddies and sleeping in the clay, with Johansen and Arizona and Alpha Company, a year and more later. But if a man can squirm in a meadow, he can shoot children. Neither is an example of courage" (*If I Die,* 132-33). One immediately wonders what combat was therefore like; how vicious was the fighting; how transparently does O'Brien transmit the details of unit activity to us, given the already acknowledged

straightforward history we encounter in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*? What was, therefore, the daily grind of the experience O'Brien so succinctly describes in *Going After Cacciato* when he tells us "It was a bad time" (1)?

On 13 July, 1969, A Company began to experience an increase in the tempo of operations. The adjutant at the time, First Lieutenant Stuart Shelk, notes in the Daily Staff Journal: "A Co called D/O [dustoff] at 0715 grid 772838 for amputation of both legs & frag wounds of face. D/O completed 0740, taken to 312th" (NAR, 13 Jul 69, No. 14, 2). Later that morning Alpha would locate tunnels, described as "fresh," in which "a 6 ft man could stand without bending & that there were 3 additional small tunnels. Request an air strike" (NAR, 13 Jul 69, No. 14, 3). These are metaphorically the same tunnels in which Frenchie Tucker dies in *Going After Cacciato*: "They heard the shot that got Frenchie Tucker, just as Bernie Lynn, a minute later, heard the shot that got himself" (*GAC*, 79). After Bernie's unsuccessful attempt to rescue Tucker, "[his] feet were still showing when he was shot" (81), O'Brien tells us. He provides the additional grueling details of the aftermath of the tunnel clearing operation:

> Frenchie lay uncovered at the mouth of the tunnel. He was dead and nobody looked at him. He was dirty. His T-shirt was pulled up under the armpits, which was how they'd finally dragged him out. His belly was fat and unsucked in. Black clumps of hair were matted flat against the white skin. He had been shot through the nose. His face was turned aside, the way they'd left him" (59).

Several days later, however, O'Brien's company is struck again, with one American killed in action (KIA) and five wounded: "FW [fragmentation wound] left side of face ... Traumatic ampt [amputation] of rt. [right] foot ... Fractured right foot ... Possible frac [fractured] ribs, laceration left side, sprained left knee ... PFC Roger D. M-- Co A KIA ... Blevins Co A Abrasion & conusion [sic] left arm & buttock ... FW rt. hand & left leg ... Condition--Good" (NAR, 16 Jul 69, No. 4, 1). A single incident produces five soldiers wounded or dead on one hot day out of a company of 250 men. The singular

"ordinariness" of reportage in the casualty report undermines the brutal reality, a phenomenon which O'Brien perceives and expands upon. Unfortunately, as the day wears on, casualties mount.

By July, as O'Brien states in *If I Die*, Captain Smith had taken command of A Company. Replacing Captain Johansen, "the best man around ... it was sad he wore his bars" (101), Smith finds himself in the midst of a dire situation in which he has allowed armored vehicles to roll backwards, crushing the bodies of American soldiers: "Captain Smith tried to regain his leadership, but the lieutenants gracefully avoided him. He was openly ridiculed by the men" (153). Later in the afternoon on July 16th, A Company (platoon unspecified) encounters increasingly bad luck:

> (U) Casualty Reports: (Called to Brigade)
> PFC Thomas J. T-- Co A Lt. [Light] FW left thigh Treated in field
> PFC Benjamin C. B-- Co A Lt. FW rt. [right] foot Treated in field
> PFC James H. T-- Co A Contusion & laceration on rt. leg Treated in field
> 1LT Frederick H. L-- Co A Lt. FW back of head Treated in field
> CPT Billy R. C-- Co A Lt. FW in rt. calf Treated in field.
> PFC Charles L. R-- Co A Blast wound to head
> PFC Allen A. S-- Co A FW in back
> PFC Leo J. A-- Co A FW in thigh
> PFC Joseph V. P-- Co A FW in chest
> PFC Scott S-- Co A FW left leg
> PFC Richard J. H-- Co A FW in left side Condition--Good" (NAR 16 Jul 69, No. 6, 2).

Indeed, "It was a bad time." On 23 July, in one incident, six more A Company soldiers were wounded. The company's combat encounters were on the increase that summer and predictably the soldiers' morale steadily deteriorated. In other words, the actual events which O'Brien fictionalizes were if anything worse or as bad as fiction might render them. A Company's history parallels, in fact, the experiences of O'Brien's characters throughout his works.

What is the relationship of the characters O'Brien invents and the real personnel in his unit? In *If I Die* he writes, "The people were boors ... But I hated them *all*.

Passionate, sad, desperate hate. I learned to march, but I learned alone" (32-33). Still, he learns to bear his isolation more easily with the help of his friend Erik Hansen, to whom he dedicated *Cacciato*. He formed strong opinions about his fellow platoon members once in Vietnam, feelings which surface in *If I Die*, *Cacciato*, and *The Things They Carried*. In *Cacciato*, for example, he devotes an entire chapter, "Who They Were, or Claimed to Be," to exploring his comrades' personalities. Eddie Lazzuti enjoys the calm strains of classical music, which he listens to devotedly on Saturday evenings. Oscar Johnson possesses a hard-boiled no-nonsense attitude toward the war and toward life: "Diplomacy, he was fond of saying, is the art of persuasion; and war--never citing his sources--is simply diplomacy continued through other means" (127). Jim Pederson , "While he was not a Catholic, .. considered it his duty to reinforce Christianity in any of its forms ... Once he stopped the Third Squad from burning down a village in Pinkville" 128). Pederson's religiosity suggests the later incarnation of Kiowa in *The Things They Carried*, "a devoted Baptist, [he] carried an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father, who taught Sunday School in Oklahoma City" (*TTTC*, 4-5). Likewise, if one might infer Kiowa's character as a distillation, or reinvention, of Pederson, Sidney Martin in *Going After Cacciato* might be interpreted as a fictionalization of Captain Smith of *If I Die*, who effortlessly evokes the contempt of the soldiers in O'Brien's platoon. Smith, a Tennessean, a Southerner "Like seventy percent of the officers around" "wanted a good, tough fighting unit ... He wanted to sound authoritative, but it did not work. No one trusts a green officer, and if he's short and fat and thinks he's a good soldier, he had better be Patton himself" (*If I Die*, 144-45). When O'Brien, the radio-telephone operator (RTO) for the company, advises Smith to abandon his dutiful search and destroy operation on a village, the inexperienced ROTC graduate responds with a sense of unthinking commitment to mission: "'Well, Timmy boy, that's why I'm an officer. We've got our orders'" (*If I Die*, 150). When the unit incurs casualties from mines and small arms fire, Smith himself receives a minor abrasion. His assessment of the situation, after some of his

men die in the confusing staccato of events, tellingly captures the disgust O'Brien and predictably his fellow soldiers feel toward Johansen's replacement:

> Captain Smith ambled over and sat down on the dike. "Got me a little scratch from that mine. Here, take a look. Got myself a Purple Heart." He showed me a small hole in his shirt. It looked like a moth had done it, that small. "My first big operation, and I get a Purple Heart. Gonna be a long year, Timmy. But wow, I've lost a lot of men today." (151)

On 31 July, 1969, the Battalion Adjutant, still Lieutenant Stuart Shelk, recorded the day's casualties; it was only six-thirty a.m. when he submitted his report:

> (U) Casualty Reports: Called to Bde
> SP4 Joel R S-- Co A Minor FW rt. arm & rt. hand
> SSG Maurice W. J-- Co A Minor FW rt. side of face
> PFC Charles L. R-- Co A Minor FW neck
> PFC Wayne C-- Co A Minor FW in left arm & left leg ...
>
> (U) Summary: Daily office routine carried on as usual. All required reports submitted on time as required. (NAR, 31 Jul 69, No. 2/4, 1).

In *Going After Cacciato*, the soldiers of Paul Berlin's squad develop an abiding respect for Lieutenant Corson, who accompanies them on their trip in pursuit of Cacciato. Corson, unlike Sidney Martin, "did not believe [in the war] as an intellectual imperative, or even as a professional standard ... Lieutenant Corson did not order his men into the tunnels ... The men loved him" (129). Lieutenant Sidney Martin, on the other hand, like Captain Smith, represents the dreariest aspects of failed military leadership. As much as anything else, the novel revolves around the decision among the platoon to murder, or "frag," kill through the use of a fragmentation grenade, Martin. Cacciato's refusal to signify his own complicity, through the simple act of touching a grenade which will be used to take revenge against Martin for the unnecessary deaths of fellow platoon members Tucker and Lynn (and others), represents the central struggle in the novel which precipitates the flight westward to Paris, towards which Cacciato flees as an act of disavowal. Berlin is tasked with obtaining Cacciato's acceptance of the planned act, and has to track him down to a "lake," actually a bomb crater, where Cacciato is fishing.

Cacciato repeatedly seeks to deny Berlin the simple symbolic act of ratifying the intended murder:

> "I won't do it." [Cacciato says].
> "You think that'll stop them?" [Berlin]
> Cacciato shrugged. "He's not all that bad. Once he let me carry the radio. Remember that? Along the river. Martin let me carry the radio. He's not all that bad." ...
> "They want you to touch it, [Berlin] said.
> Cacciato was silent. His head turned, and he looked for a moment at the grenade, then he looked away ... Bringing up the grenade, Paul Berlin pressed it firmly into the boy's hand (213).

Clearly, at best Cacciato's acquiescence is unconscious or forced, not a willful endorsement of the mission to kill Sidney Martin. It is also never entirely clear whether Lieutenant Sidney Martin dies of fragmentary wounds or not. What is clear is the degree to which he, like Captain Smith in *If I Die*, represents the dangers American leadership impose on the soldiers of Berlin's platoon. Martin, a name as casually nondescript as Smith, is depicted as methodically detached from the results of his obedience to orders. After Frenchie Tucker and Bernie Lynn are killed in the tunnels, he sets out to organize the next mission: "The lieutenant still worked with a pencil, using his map and compass and code book to work up the coded coordinates. He worked calmly and without hurry" (60). Oscar Johnson, methodical student of war, caustically notes the lieutenant's apparent unconcern with the death of his platoon members: "'Codes,' Oscar said ... 'Man messes with *codes* an' ... Codes.' He looked at Lieutenant Sidney Martin and spat. 'Codes!'" (63). The contempt is undisguised. In the chapter "The Way It Mostly Was," we learn that although Martin "did not enjoy fighting battles" and "knew something was wrong with his war. The absence of a common purpose" (148) he also "prided himself on his knowledge of tactics and strategy and history ... his ability to maximize a unit's potential. He believed in mission. He believed in men, too, but he believed in mission first" (146). The lieutenant, unlike Berlin, unlike Timmy O'Brien, and unlike Tim O'Brien, "knew that in war purpose is never paramount, neither purpose nor cause, and that battles are always

fought among human beings, not purposes. He could not imagine dying for a purpose" (148).

In the chapter on "Who They Were, or Claimed to Be," we again encounter Paul Berlin. He "was almost always called by both names, first and last together, which suited him fine" (130). He had no nickname, though many did. Names, as Berlin informs us, were sometimes "known in full, some in part, some not at all" (130). O'Brien himself was nicknamed "College Joe" at times , though he additionally notes that of his fellow platoon members "Most didn't know I had been to college" (Schroeder, 1984, 137). Perhaps one of the most colorful characters to appear in his work is Major Callicles in *If I Die*, with whom he works after a transfer to brigade headquarters at Chu Lai in August 1969 (*If I Die*, 173), several months after receiving a wound which won O'Brien the Purple Heart. Callicles was a flamboyant officer schooled in the old discipline of American warfare:

> He was the battalion executive officer--second in command. He bragged that he'd started out as an NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer], thrived on the discipline, and gone on to become an officer, avoiding West Point and doing it the hard way ... Barrel-chested--staves and beer and all--he was a last but defiant champion of single-minded, hard-boiled militarism. He listed his hates in precise order--moustaches, prostitution, pot, and sideburns. And since all four were either tacitly or explicitly permitted in Vietnam, he harbored a necessarily silent hate for the new, insidious liberality infecting his army (186).

Callicles' head-on approach to the Vietnam War (he says of My Lai: "you assume the *worst* about [the enemy population]. When you go into My Lai, you know--you assume they're all VC. Ol' Charlie with big tits and nice innocent, childlike eyes. Damn it, they're all VC, you should know that" (*If I Die*, 191) leads him to perform several acts of intoxicated bravery. He plans a nighttime ambush in which he enlists O'Brien's reluctant support, the officer "spinning around in booze and courage" (*If I Die*, 197), for which he later receives a sharp rebuke. In fact, it appears that O'Brien's model for Callicles might have been another flamboyant major equally possessed with the need to confront the

enemy face to face. Major Disney, a name as suggestive as O'Brien's compassionate screen provided in his memoir,[41] conducts military theatrics rivalling, if not depicting, those of Major Callicles. Disney arrives in Vietnam in the summer of 1969 and by September proves himself battle-worthy:

> TDI [acronymn unknown] 1030 HRS while on VR [vicinity reconnaissance] of area VIC 795851 in LOH [light observation helicopter] MAJ Disney spotted approximately 5 VC in water near ledge & engaged with .45 cal & M-60 MG [machine gun] fire. Results 5 VC KIA. At 1120 HRS LOH broke station for POL [petroleum, oil, lubricants]. As LOH was leaving area MAJ Disney reported seeing an arm reaching out of water to retrieve a KIA VC. MMII [Minuteman II, a local landing zone] called to transport troops from LZ Minuteman to VIC 795851. MMII called for gunships and muskets 38 came on station at 1050 HRS & coordinated with MAJ Disney for targets (NAR, 23 Sep 1969, 27, 7).

Is Callicles Disney? O'Brien suggested during his interview with me in East Lansing on 7 April, 1994, that in fact Major Roman, another character who appears in the offical military records, served as the model for Major Callicles in *If I Die* (see attached appendix for transcription of the interview). What I seek to demonstrate here is that O'Brien's narratives frequently find their prototypes within the community of soldiers recorded in the journals. Throughout the late summer of 1969, as noted earlier, A Company sustains heavy casualties. The incidents O'Brien records repeatedly throughout his work reveal an undeniable kernel of authenticity, for the "happeningness," as he describes the events, as much as for the authenticity of events O'Brien witnessed. The inventories of combat losses which permeate his work are substantiated by the unit records of the 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry.

Lastly, I will examine the character of Cacciato, for whom O'Brien at one point provides a compressed image which dramatically conveys the transition of soldier from innocence to experience:

> [Paul Berlin] remembered how the kid used to carry a tattered photo album at the bottom of his pack ... inside, arranged in strict chronological order, were more than a hundred pictures that somehow stuck better to memory than Cacciato himself ... Cacciato smiling and shoveling snow, Cacciato with his head shaved

> white, Cacciato in fatigues, Cacciato and Vaught posing with machine guns, Cacciato and Billy Boy, Cacciato and Oscar, Cacciato squatting beside the corpse of a shot-dead VC in green pajamas, Cacciato holding up the dead boy's head by a shock of brilliant black hair, Cacciato smiling (107).

Elsewhere in the novel, we are told he is "a smudged, lonely-looking figure ... a shiny pink spot at the crown of his skull" (*GAC*, 6), "Dumb as a dink" (6), about whom there was "something curiously unfinished" (7), "rockhead" (16), "ding-dong" (17), "the light of the world" and even "The happy-assed light of the world" who in the end "had somehow torn himself free of physical fact" (279). In the final analysis, what provides the grist for O'Brien's mill is both rooted in reality, the substance of lived experience, and borne of his imaginative faculties. His struggle to resolve for Paul Berlin the quest for Cacciato dissolves in the mist of a military pursuit and ultimately requires the redemptive capacity of the war story to convert the inventory of events into the meaning of reconciliation: "War stories. That was what remained: a few stupid war stories, hackneyed and unprofound. Even the lessons were commonplace. It hurts to be shot. Dead men are heavy. Don't seek trouble, it'll find you soon enough" (*GAC*, 255). Who, in fact, is Cacciato, and why escape the war to pursue his mythical shadow?

On 31 July, 1969, one Richard Cacciato reported for duty as the battalion adjutant. The archival record reads, in typically detached military prose: "(U) Incoming Officers: CPT Richard Cacciato MOS 1542 [Infantry]" (NAR, 31 July 69, 5, 1). At the most superficial level, the new battalion adjutant shares the name of O'Brien's fleeing character in the novel *Going After Cacciato*. Whether he modeled his character directly in the image of the actual Cacciato is very difficult to assess short of O'Brien's own clarification, but certain facts surrounding Captain Cacciato are clear. First, Steven Kaplan, in *Understanding Tim O'Brien*, notes that O'Brien "ultimately ended up carrying the Captain's radio" after serving as a rifleman and machine-gunner, the "Captain" in this case referring to his unnamed company commander (ms. 3). As a radio-telephone operator (RTO) O'Brien called in medevacs and other routine reports of an administrative nature:

"I became the radio guy for the squad and had to call for medical evacuations and deal with the stuff head on" (Shostak, 76). Such duties inevitably would have led him to at various points communicate with the battalion adjutant, or at the very least non-commissioned officers or enlisted soldiers working for the adjutant, and thus O'Brien would likely have been aware of Cacciato's presence. Even if he did not, after his transfer to Chu Lai, he pulled security duty and worked as "an adjutant battalion clerk" (Kaplan, ms. 4), or as O'Brien describes the new job, "It was there beside the ocean that I got my rear job [in late August, 1969]. They wanted a typist in battalion headquarters; they wanted me" (*If I Die*, 173). In this new capacity, O'Brien inevitably would have come in routine, almost daily contact, with Richard S. Cacciato. The irony of selecting such a name, however, lies in the daily staff journals under whose name, Cacciato, the daily casualty lists were published. For example, within five days after being assigned to 5th battalion 46th Infantry, Cacciato's signature authenticated yet one more combat incident attriting Alpha Company's ugly days of summer:

> (U) Casualty Reports:
>
> PFC Robert D. E-- Co A rt. foot injury (from M14 mine) 27th Surg--Good
> PFC Eddie L T-- Co A dust-off for high temp (104) & fast pulse 27th Surg ...
> RICHARD CACCIATO, CPT Adjutant

There are, of course, other possible explanations for O'Brien's selection of of the name Cacciato. Etymologically, the name derives from Italian, and depending upon its usage syntactically can mean to hunt, to ensnare, to drive out or chase away, to expel, to go shooting. In one intransitive verb construction, *"dove ti sei cacciato*?" its meaning translates, quite appropriately to the novel, as "Where have you got to?"[42]

In *The Things They Carried*, of course, O'Brien names his primary narrator "Timmy O'Brien" but discounts its direct autobiographical reference to himself repeatedly in interviews. At a certain level, whether Cacciato refers to the Captain serving as O'Brien's adjutant at Chu Lai or whether Timmy in *The Things They Carried* necessarily relates

events which happened to O'Brien personally becomes irrelevant. O'Brien's interest is always more on the capacity to create in the reader's mind the "happeningness" of an event, whether combat or otherwise, much more than to tell the dry facts of experience. He deliberately and relentlessly undermines the reader's (and listener's--for every war story told in *Things* suggests an implied listener) credulity with regard to fact and fiction in *The Things They Carried*. For example, he begins "Good Form" by notifying his audience that "It's time to be blunt. I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier," all events autobiographically authentic to the writer O'Brien telling stories at the time he was writing the work of fiction. Yet later on the same page, after recounting a specific, "historical" instance from that year in Quang Ngai, he warns us "Even *that* story is made up" but importantly clarifying his aesthetic purpose by noting that "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (204, emphasis O'Brien's). In his interview with Eric Schroeder, he explained equally tersely: "You tell lies to get at the truth," very closely echoing earlier comments about the purpose and the value of telling war stories (141).

Recovering the reality of O'Brien's experience in Vietnam, in other words, cannot be assessed other than through the medium of the war story, which requires on the part of the reader an acute sensitivity to the way in which experience is manipulated to arrive at a more qualitative personal history for O'Brien. The principal story which exercises both a metafictional strategy and achieves the supreme articulation of this process is, quite aptly, "How to Tell a True War Story." The story begins with the assertion that "This is true"[43] later reinforced with the statement that "It's all exactly true" (*TTTC*, 75, 77). Yet despite these assertions, the reader is confronted almost immediately by a series of qualifications, seemingly factual back-pedalling, and convoluted self-critiques by the narrator which severely complicate the notion of truth. In order to approach the "story-truth" of the events he depicts, however, O'Brien requires the reader to abandon traditional

expectations of narrative reliability and to accept in its place the liberatory constraints which arise out of the specific narrative construction of the war story. The war story has its own logic, which blends fact and fiction in order to arrive at a morally and philosophically more authentic (and more experientially satisfying) representation of what happened:

> In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed ... The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed* (78, O'Brien's emphasis).

Shortly thereafter he adds, "In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility" (79). During the central portion of the story, Mitchell Sanders tells the story of a patrol on an isolated hilltop listening post in Vietnam. The story becomes the practical lesson in demonstrating the principles of telling a war story elaborated earlier by O'Brien. Sanders, in telling his story, advises his listeners: "'This next part you won't believe ... And you know why? ... Because it happened. Because every word is absolutely dead-on true'" (81). Yet later, reflecting on the story he has told, Sanders quietly confesses that "Last night, man, I had to make up a few things" (83). The narration reverts back to the narrator Tim O'Brien finally, who then provides further metacommentary on the nature of Sanders' story. He notes how "any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life" (87) and that "the only certainty [in war] is overwhelming ambiguity." He further defines the precise contours of a genuine war story when he instructs us that "In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (88).

O'Brien insistently confounds the reader's expectations as he meticulously sketches in the final details which make up the true war story. The ending of "How to Tell a True War Story," for example, sudenly jars one back into a literary reading in which a woman who "hates war stories," despite her usual dislike of all the "blood and gore," inexplicably likes this one. Yet she fails to truly grasp the essential purpose of the war story she has just heard: "It *wasn't* a war story. It was a *love* story" (90, O'Brien's emphasis). Thus, in the final comments, O'Brien explains: "Beginning to end, you tell her, it's all made up. Every goddamn detail ... None of it happened" (91). Instead of being simply a war story, whether Sanders' account of the patrol or the instance of Curt Lemon dying by means of an exploding 105mm artillery booby-trap, the narrator-author suggests that "a true war story is never about war ... it's about love and memory. It's about sorrow" (91).

In closing out his definition of the war story, O'Brien subtly incorporates several other critical components; for example, when recounting the story of killing a small baby water buffalo, O'Brien emphasizes how "This one does it for me. I've told it before--many times, many versions--but here's what actually happened" (85). This technique, of retelling the story endlessly, fulfills the requirement that "You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it" (91). It is this principle which operates, in fact, throughout the fiction of Tim O'Brien. Concerning the account of the baby water buffalo, for example, the author details the slaughter of the beast in *If I Die* and more graphically yet in *Going After Cacciato*.[44] Even in *The Nuclear Age*, a novel often noted for the way in which Vietnam does not operate as the central theme, one encounters the same archetypal narration of the incident with the water buffalo:

> Then he [Ebenezer Keezer] discussed the particulars of Vietnam. It was a firsthand account, largely anecdotal. He talked about the effects of white phosphorous on human flesh ... He described the consequences of a foot coming into contact with the firing mechanism of a Bouncing Betty, the reds and whites, the greenish-gray color of a man's testicles in bright sunlight ... [he] spoke quietly about a morning in 1966 when his platoon of marines had gone on a buffalo hunt in Quang Ngai province, how they'd entered the village at dawn, and burned it, and

> how, afterward, with the village burning, they had moved out into a broad paddy where the buffalo were--and how the platoon had lined up in a single rank, as if on a firing range, and how without hunger or provocation the platoon had gone buffalo hunting--like the Wild West, he said, Buffalo fucking Bill--how they put their weapons on automatic ... and how those slow stupid water buffalo stood there and took it broadside, didn't run, didn't panic, just *took* it, how fat chunks of fat and meat seemed to explode off their hides (177, O'Brien's emphasis).

The stories, the essential actions in the novels, recur, just as O'Brien's definition of the war story requires. Thus, when one discovers Stink Harris at the end of the "How to Tell a True War Story" (as well as later in "The Lives of the Dead"), though he is a character who exists in *Going After Cacciato*, one is little surprised (91).

Yet the instances might ultimately refer once again back to the actuality of events as depicted in the daily staff journals. On 13 July 1969, for instance:

> A Co: A2 (2nd Platoon) was inspecting & throwing grenades into some fresh tunnels. One pack [soldier] stepped across gully. When pack was across he dragged his foot along a pile of logs setting off mine. Said mine was 81mm mortar pressure release type mine. Said mine was about 5 meters from hootch. Injured was Sgt [Sergeant] E5 M--, lost left foot and rt [right] leg, also had frag wounds in face, grid 772838 (NAR, 13 July 1969, 15, 2-3).

This event, though not in O'Brien's platoon, resembles in its essential meanness the event he records in *If I Die*: "Chip, my black buddy from Orlando, strayed into a hedgerow and triggered a 105 artillery round. He died in such a way that, for once, you could never know his color" (120-21). One recalls that in *The Things They Carried*, "Curt Lemon stepped on a booby-trapped 105 round" as well (85). The facts, even in the memoir, no longer need conform to the rigorous explication of what happened. The reader already understands that even in the memoir details have been reshaped to convey the general "happeningness" rather than to articulate the exact actuality. For example, during the month of August O'Brien informs us in the edition of *If I Die* cited to this point that "the month of August was not bad. Only two men were killed" (172), while in an earlier edition of the same memoir he notifies us that "No one was killed. Few were seriously hurt" (*If I Die*, 1983, 175), which conforms to the memoir's first published

edition in 1973.[45] In other details, successive iterations of the story constituting a form of retelling which characterizes the telling of a true war story, and in them O'Brien incorporates numerous other minor alterations. In the chapter titled "The Man at the Well," for example, his platoon takes a brief respite to obtain water and rest during ongoing search and destroy operations. A blind old man helps shower the soldiers, while Vietnamese children play with the soldiers and assist in the cleaning of weapons and cleansing. Suddenly, "a blustery and stupid soldier, blond hair and big belly, picked up a carton of milk and from fifteen feet away hurled it, for no reason, aiming at the old man and striking him flush in the face" (98). The tale concludes after the old man, "with the ruins of goodness spread over him," resumes washing the soldiers, revealing no response to the evil act (98). In the earlier editions, the story ends with the brief phrase, "The kids watched" (97, 1973 edition), which is absent from the edition of 1989. O'Brien's deletion of the phrase in later printings changes the outcome of the story in a subtle but important manner. The earlier rendition implies that not only did the children witness the entire event, but they likely internalized their shock and anger at the American soldiers, and potentially later acted against them in order to avenge the old man. Careful comparison of O'Brien's different printings reveals innumerable alterations of this type. I suggest that rather than an obliteration of fact, they collectively satisfy the need for a true war story to be retold time and again, each telling seeking a refinement of the truth, particularly the "story-truth" which "is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (*TTTC*, 204). Similar instances of revision occur in successive "versions" of individual chapters in *Going After Cacciato*, as noted earlier. In my concluding section on O'Brien, "consideration," I will examine one instance of such retelling, in the story "Speaking of Courage," originally intended for inclusion in *Going After Cacciato* but ultimately published in *The Things They Carried*.[46]

In the face of O'Brien's insistent blurring of fact and fiction and his conception of what constitutes a "true" war story, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that at a certain level, all of his work constitutes a form of nonfiction. The point here is not to suggest that the details reveal specificity of lived experience, but rather, that they convey the feeling of what his experience in Vietnam consisted of from February, 1969, to March 1970. When Debra Shostak asked the writer whether he would have become an author if he had not gone to Vietnam, O'Brien responded, "No. At least I don't think so. These things are always mysterious and so any answer has to be equally enigmatic" (74-75). The war continues to inform his work, providing talismanic motifs which resonate throughout his writing, reshaped in their details from one account to the next but all sharing some deeper level in which literary, moral, and psychological truth intersect. O'Brien adopts the war story as the principle narrative means of confronting experience. The war story permits him the artistic latitude he requires to blend imagination with memory, in order to responsibly invent a new, altered history, both personal and collective. Ultimately, however, for O'Brien, as for many of the other Vietnam authors discussed earlier within this thesis, the destination of the writer's quest is not simply in retelling the horrific events of combat. Eventually, O'Brien pursues reconciliation with the past. He not only provides a warning, that "anyone can die in a war if he tries" (*If I Die*, 202), but explores universal themes of human nature such as courage, fear, and magic. Finally, in his writings which take place in the "postwar" environment, O'Brien even attempts, though perhaps somewhat obliquely, to perform a variety of therapy--a means of quieting the ghosts of memory in order to more bravely confront the uncertainty of the future. In "'Vietnam Made Me a Writer': An Interview with Tim O'Brien," he explains that "there is a kind of catharsis that can come out of writing. I denied that for a long time; I just didn't feel I'd suffered any problems as a consequence of Vietnam ... But in hindsight, as I say in "Notes" [in *The Things They Carried*], it's possible--and, I suppose, even probable--that writing had a hidden

therapeutic effect for me" (Johnson, 41). O'Brien cautions his listeners to understand, however, that finally:

> What matters is writing a book that is important and therapeutic for *other* people, not for the author--and therapeutic not in the sense of 'Nam stuff' or 'war stuff,' but therapeutic in the human sense, in that it moves us or expands our capacity for emotion and response to the world, which is what art is all about (Johnson, 41).

Healing and Consideration in O'Brien

Compared to O'Brien's other works, *Northern Lights* received relatively sparse critical attention.[47] Most scholars note that its themes only "tangentially" engage the subject of Vietnam (Schroeder, "The Past and the Possible," 133), although Philip Beidler, in a recent reassessment of O'Brien's first novel, suggests an alternative way of reading the place of the war in this work:

> *Northern Lights* ... is indeed, explicitly, beyond all else, a profound and insistent meditation on the very idea of courage, its origin, its definition, its promise, its possibility ... Set in the dark, northern forestlands of upper Minnesota, *Northern Lights* nonetheless does concern itself almost immediately once again with the experience of Vietnam, in this case the predicament of the returned, half-blinded veteran Harvey Perry; but it also quickly comes to locate Vietnam so considered as the "case" of Harvey's brother, Paul Milton Perry, as well and as a condition of the larger domestic landscape both now inhabit (*Re-Writing*, 17).

Ironically, Beidler is less severe on O'Brien than the author himself is; in his interview with Martin Naparsteck, Tim O'Brien calls it "a terrible book. I'm embarrassed by it; it's hard to talk about it" and submits that "Overwriting is probably the chief flaw of the book" (2). In "Tim O'Brien's Myth of Courage," Milton J. Bates provides another sympathetic corrective to O'Brien's self-criticism: "Apart from its concern for courage, *Northern Lights* would not seem to be a war novel, much less a Vietnam War novel. Yet it is implicitly both of these" (269). I will briefly examine ways in which *Northern Lights*, a novel not only of the postwar veteran who returns to his hometown wounded (blinded) and in need of spiritual as well as physical reconstitution, but a book which, as Bates

illustrates, "in its juxtaposition of masculine and feminine, woods and pond, apocalypse and salvation, endurance and love, nevertheless has that 'mythic quality' O'Brien considers essential to a good story" (268).

Harvey Perry's service in Vietnam makes the war "real" for the population of Sawmill Landing, the setting of *Northern Lights*. O'Brien informs us that "a rascal and a bull like Harvey was the one to go off to the war. In that sleepwalking, slothful departure [of Harvey's] there had been no time to counter the thought of it all, the blinding foggy invisible force behind it, was a sure sign that Harvey would come home maimed" (20). Later, he notes how "It wasn't a war until Harvey got himself wounded and the paper carried a front-page story" (21). Yet immediately upon his return, Harvey inquires as to the absence of the traditional, expected homecoming parade: "'Where's my parade [he asks his brother Paul's wife, Grace]? Shouldn't they have trumpets and flags and things?" (22). Later, after Paul and Harvey become lost in the woods during a blizzard, managing to survive only due to the non-veteran brother's refusal to capitulate to the forces of nature, the town plans a parade to redress the improper reception of its war hero, and veterans of Korea and World War II turned out to march proudly with Harvey: "[Harvey] marched erect, the only veteran of Vietnam. He did not seem much different from all the others, except that he fit his uniform and he was alone" (317).

In the chapter, Harvey reflects on his uncertain expectation of whether he could react with courage to the hardships of the war: "'Did I worry? Yes, I worried ... It isn't the pain I was scared of. I think it was that I wanted to ... react right when my legs got blown off or my chest got shot open or something, you understand, seeing the stuff inside and not going bananas. I used to worry some about that, but not a lot" he confides in Paul (189).

In another sense, the novel suggests larger, mythic parallels to America's role in Vietnam. As Bates also suggests, the "Indian-baiting" during Paul and Harvey's childhood points to another analogue: "Addie, the Perrys' less than dependable ally, may or may not be part Indian; Jud Harmor calls her 'Geronimo,' and her black eyes look sometimes

Indian, sometimes Asian" (269). Yet in important ways, the novel, rather than reflect back onto Vietnam, anticipates the themes O'Brien is currently (spring, 1994) wrestling with as he completes his work on a novel scheduled for publication in fall, 1994. The novel has been variously and tentatively titled, at different points in its conception, *Lake of the Woods*,[48] *The People We Marry* (named after an excerpt by the same name published in the January, 1992, *Atlantic Monthly*),[49] and, as communicated during a telephone conversation between myself and O'Brien in March, 1994, *The Secrets of Marriage*. He ultimately notified his publisher that the work will be titled *In the Lake of the Woods*.[50] Regardless of the title, it is the impenetrability of human nature, the impossibility of ever reading another's mind, which preoccupies his current literary activity:

> What we don't know is inherently intriguing to the human spirit. That includes big metaphysical things like death and God, and it includes little discrete daily things like, what is she thinking now as I'm having this drink at the bar? There is always that mystery because one can't read other people's minds. What fascinates us in part about character, about other human beings, is that we just will never be that person, live that person's life ... The mystery of what we can't know is what's dominating the novel I'm working on right now (Kaplan, 1993, 104-05).

In *Northern Lights*, likewise, Harvey muses on the same types of concerns: "Sometimes I think you never think I'm serious, but I am. You can't ever know for sure what people are thinking. And sometimes, sometimes people are thinking just the opposite of what they pretend they're thinking" (246-47). Thus, one might consider the ways in which O'Brien, while not necessarily producing a "rewrite" of *Northen Lights*, returns to certain themes not fully explored in his previous work. Again, obedient to the dictates of "How to Tell a True War Story," there is the need to return and retell a story relentlessly. As he expands the metaphor in his interview with Shostak and Bourne, "Stories, retold, carry the force of legend ... Legends have to do with the repetition of things" (89).

As much as any other single story he has dealt with over the years, O'Brien has continually revisited his story "Speaking of Courage." As noted above, the work

originally was intended as part of *Going After Cacciato*, but "it just didn't have a proper home in that book ... It's a postwar book" (Naparsteck, 7). The story is complicated in its final form as an excerpt in *The Things They Carried* by the presence of an explanatory section called "Notes." In this "epilogue" to the story proper, O'Brien engages in what is perhaps the most metafictional ploy within his work, in that he almost obtrusively calls attention to the history of the story, "Speaking of Courage," noting how "At the time [that the character Norman Bowker approached him and asked him to write a story about a character like himself, who 'just drives around town all day and can't think of any damn place to go' (179)] I was at work on a new novel, *Going After Cacciato*, and one morning I sat down and began a chapter titled 'Speaking of Courage'" (180). O'Brien's willingness to draw out such overtly autobiographical details not only suggests that the relationship between himself and his narrator, Tim O'Brien, is perhaps closer than he admits at times in interviews, but in the following discussion anticipates almost verbatim descriptions he would later use during interviews to examine the problematic note following the story:

> To provide a dramatic frame, I collapsed events into a single time and place, a car circling a lake on a quiet afternoon in midsummer, using the lake as a nucleus around which the story would orbit ... For the scenery I borrowed heavily from my own hometown. Wholesale thievery, in fact. I lifted up Worthington, Minnesota .. As the novel developed over the next year, and as my own ideas clarified, it became apparent that the chapter had no proper home in the longer narrative. *Going After Cacciato* was a war story; "Speaking of Courage" was a postwar story (*TTTC*, 180-81).

O'Brien further undermines his reader's sense of what is true when he comments on the "Notes" section during his interview with Debra Shostak for *Artful Dodge*. Shostak asks, "Given your statement that everything in *The Things They Carried* is fiction, can we believe "Notes" is nonfiction, when at least the surface assumption is that here you're giving us the truth about what went on in the composition of another story?" (82). O'Brien responds with now self-indulgent evasion:

> You ought *not* to believe it. In fact, it's utterly and absolutely invented. It's an example of one more seduction on top of the rest. No Norman Bowker, and no mother. It's a way of displaying that form can dictate belief, that the form of the footnote, the authority that the footnote carries, is persuasive in how we apprehend things (82).

At least some facts can be extracted from his note, however, which seem to contradict his assertion of utter invention. For example, the story, "Speaking of Courage," underwent an actual revision process in which earlier versions of the story corroborate the claim that it was intended originally as a chapter within *Going After Cacciato*. Specifically, the story was originally published separately in *Massachusetts Review* in 1976 and anthologized in *Prize Stories 1978: The O. Henry Awards*; in both versions Paul Berlin appears as the story's main character. Later, it was also published "in an edition of three hundred numbered copies and 26 lettered copies," all signed by the author.[51] The only readily apparent difference between these early versions is that toward the end of the story, when Paul Berlin orders a burger, root beer and french fries, in the numbered copy the waitress "bent forward. She shook her head dumbly" (18) whereas in the copy published in the *Massachusetts Review* her action is more austere: "She leaned down" (252). Both versions differ considerably from the later incarnation which appears first in *Granta* (volume 29) and its close model published in *The Things They Carried*, in which the death of Kiowa is importantly introduced, Norman Bowker emerges as the main character, and the section "Notes" is added (though "Notes" might legitimately be considered an entirely separate story, I refer to it here as "part" of "Speaking of Courage" because it operates as a commentary upon the preceding tale).

What all three stories have in common, however, is foremost the central action of driving around the lake and Sunset Park. What especially proves interesting is the manner in which all of these versions echo a scene from *If I Die* (which again, among themselves, provide slightly variant readings). There, O'Brien tells us that "I took a long drive around the lake, past Sunset Park, with its picnic tables and little beach and a brown wood shelter and some families swimming. Past the Crippled Children's School. Past Slater Park. Past

a long string of split-level houses, painted every color" (1989, 19). In all the versions of "Speaking of Courage," one finds again Sunset Park (i.e., *TTTC*, 158) as well as the nearly identical description of Slater Park: "He [Norman Bowker] followed the road past the handsome houses with their wooden shingles. Back to Slater Park, across the causeway, around to Sunset Park, as though riding on tracks" (*TTTC*, 165-66). At this point, one might reasonably connect O'Brien's admission of driving around the lake as an autobiographical acknowledgement of an activity he engaged in during the nervous weeks leading up to his departure for Fort Lewis, Washington, for induction into the Army. It is in the precise details which follow, in this case to be found in the two early versions of "Speaking of Courage" (though not entirely transmitted in the copy found in *The Things They Carried*), where the slight alterations produce sometimes significant shifts in thematic purpose. Just as I argued that in the closing scenes of *Going After Cacciato*, as Paul Berlin confronts his alter-ego Sarkin Aung Wan over the negotiating table in Paris, and reveals his commitment to see the war through *despite* his acknowledgment that the war is "ill-conceived," I wish to suggest that as Paul Berlin discusses the war with his father in this central scene of "Speaking of Courage," we again glimpse O'Brien himself, at an especially poignant transition from a soldier returned from the war, grappling with the tremendous guilt and simultaneous wish for recognition, and the O'Brien who would later amend his tale to suit the purposes of his new role as artist-writer:

> "How many medals did you win?" his father might have asked.
> "Seven," he would have said, "though none of them were for valor"
> "That's all right," his father would have answered, knowing full well that many brave men did not win medals for their bravery, and that others win medals for doing nothing. "What are the medals you won?"
> And he would have listed them, as a kind of starting place for talking about the war: the Combat Infantryman's Badge, the Air Medal, the Bronze Star (without a V-device for valor),[52] the Army Commendation Medal, the Vietnam Campaign Medal, the Good Conduct Medal, and the Purple Heart, though it wasn't much of a wound, and there was no scar, and it didn't hurt and never had. While none of them was for valor, the decorations still looked good on the uniform in his closet, and if anyone were to ask, he would have explained what each signified, and

> eventually he would have talked about the medals he did not win, and why he did not win them, and how afraid he had been (245-46, *The Massachusetts Review*).

In his need to explain his lack of bravery in helping to rescue Frenchie Tucker, Berlin then explains how he nearly won the Silver Star in addition to all the other medals he did win. The concluding dialogue, absent from the final version of the story as published in *The Things They Carried*, suggests the finally redemptive potential implicit in the war story:

> "I almost won the Silver Star," [Paul Berlin] would have said.
> "How's that?"
> "Oh, it's just a war story."
> "What's wrong with war stories?" his father would have said.
> "Nothing, except I guess nobody wants to hear them" (246) ...
> He knew a lot of things. They were not new or profound, but they were true. He knew that he might have won a Silver Star, like Frenchie, if he'd been able to finish what Frenchie started in the foul tunnel. He knew many war stories, a thousand details, smells and the confusion of the senses, but *nobody was there to listen, and nobody knew a damn about the war because nobody believed it was really a war at all*. It was not a war for war stories, or talk of valor, and nobody asked questions about details ... nobody wants to hear war stories because everyone knows already that it hadn't been a war like other wars. If Max or his father were ever to ask, or anybody, he would say, "Well, first off, it was a war the same as any war," which would not sound profound at all, but which would be the truth (249-50, my emphasis).

In the final version of the story, of course, we do listen to O'Brien's war stories. In *The Things They Carried*, Bowker tells the war story of Kiowa's death in the shitfield, a narrative O'Brien is unable to relate in his earlier conception of the story. What we do know now, however, is that we have learned, through writers such as O'Brien, how to listen, how to hear the stories of war.

O'Brien fulfills the promise made by Paul Berlin to his father, if he could only speak to him. As surrogate listeners, we hear the same lesson again and again:

> Another bit of popular folklore has it that Vietnam was somehow different from other American wars. Fundamentally different ... for the soldier on the ground, the combat veteran, every war is identical in its most basic elements: fear, death, destruction, pain, anger, despair, loneliness, boredom, guilt, anguish. It doesn't make it any easier to charge an enemy bunker knowing that the folks back home

> are behind you; it doesn't make it easier knowing that your war was sanctioned by a vote in Congress. Morale is not so much affected by bright home front fires as by good battlefront food. And a corpse does not look any prettier, any less dead, in a so-called popular war ("The Violent Vet," 104).

Elsewhere, O'Brien makes the same point in slightly altered terminology:

> It's very nice and easy to say that Vietnam was special because it was formless and absurd. But certainly World War I must've seemed equally chaotic and absurd to Siegried Sassoon or Robert Graves or Rupert Brooke or Erich Remarque. And it *was* absurd--men were slaughtered like cattle for reasons that no soldier really understood. We like to think our own war is special: especially horrible, especially insane, especially formless. But we need a more historical and compassionate perspective. We shouldn't minimize the suffering and sense of bewilderment of other people in other wars (McCaffrey, 267).

Finally, and lastly in this vein, there are the comments Doc Peret makes to the Iranian major, Fayhi Rhallon:

> "The point is that war is war no matter how it's perceived. War has its own reality. War kills and maims and rips up the land and makes orphans and widows. These are the things of war. Any war. So when I say there's nothing new to say about Nam, I'm saying it was a war just like every other war ... It pisses me off to hear everybody say how special Nam is, how it's a big aberration in the history of American wars--how for the soldier from Korea or World War Two. Follow me? I'm saying that the *feel* of war is the same in Nam or Okinawa--the emotions are the same, the same fundamental stuff is seen and remembered. That's what I'm saying" (*GAC*, 176).

O'Brien clarifies, with finality and without ambiguity, the closing line of Herr's work *Dispatches*: "Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there" (278).

Conclusion

Paul Berlin, and more importantly, Tim O'Brien, found their voices and communicated the universality of the combat experience. O'Brien's subject matter extends naturally to other topics in which universal qualities of the human heart are engaged: love, fear, courage, desire, and magic. While he has, I contend, already provided Vietnam war literature with the fullest articulation of the method, framework, and ultimately purpose of

the war story, O'Brien has yet to exhaust his literary potential. I wish to conclude the present thesis by turning briefly to selected remarks he has made concerning his work, his future ambition, and the abiding capacity of literature to speak to us all.

Acknowledging the manner in which his work acts as an ongoing act of seduction for his reader, O'Brien responded to an inquiry by Debra Shostak by commenting that:

> I'm trying to write about the way in which fiction takes place. I'm like a seducer, yet beneath all the acts of seduction there's a kind of love going on, a kind of trust you're trying to establish with the reader, saying "here's who I am, here's why I'm doing what I'm doing. And in fact I do truly love you, I'm not just tricking you, I'm letting you in on my game, letting you in on who I am, what I am, and why I am doing what I am doing." All these lies are the surface of something. I have to lie to you and explain why I am lying to you, why I'm making these things up, in order to get you to know me and to know fiction, to know what art is about. And it's going to hurt now and then, and you're going to get angry now and then, but I want to do it to you anyway--and for you (80).

Here, O'Brien's reveals his methodology not as the embellishment of historical fact, but as an artistic sleight-of-hand which conceals in order to reveal. O'Brien confesses to Steve Kaplan during their interview that "One's attention as a writer is on trying to put down one word after another with a kind of grace and a kind of beauty that's a constant, never-ending balancing act of billions of variable" (1991, 198). O'Brien further clarifies the final purpose of such commitment (during his interview with Martin Naparsteck): " ... ultimately I'm not writing for my contemporaries but for the ages, like every good writer should be. You're writing for history, in the hope that your book--out of the thousands that are published each year--might be the last to be read a hundred years from now and enjoyed" (6). In other words, he remains faithful to the responsible invention of history, and in his paradoxical flourish, invites his readers to accompany him in his journey to resolve the fictional evidence created in his work.

Notes

[1]William Broyles, Jr., "The Ghosts of Vietnam," *Newsweek* 73.4 (14 February 1994): 30-32. I make my complain despite William Broyles Jr.'s argument that "Life *has* gone on, and the war is over." My position is that the war will continue to haunt us mythically, politically, culturally; Broyles speaks more directly to President Bill Clinton's lifting of trade the embargo against our former adversary. The continued prominence of Vietnam-related articles in the media suggests the position I use in opening my thesis (spring, 1994).

[2]President George W. Bush, quoted in Ann Devroy and Guy Gugliotta, "Bush to 'Move Fast' on Mideast Peace," *The Washington Post* 2 March 1991: A13.

[3]Unless otherwise noted, references hereafter are to the Delta/Seymour Lawrence paperback edition of 1989. Additionally, unless otherwise noted, all references to *Northern Lights* are to the Delacorte/Seymour Lawrence edition (New York, 1975); all references to *The Nuclear Age* are to the Collins edition (London, 1986); and references to *The Things They Carried* are to the Penguin Books edition (New York, 1990).

[4]The term "in country" is a figure of speech peculiar to Vietnam. Throughout this thesis, though I will no longer mark its usage, the reader should recall that the term refers to a particular, Vietnam War application.

[5]For a review and characterization of how *The Things They Carried* suggests new generic possibilities, see, for example, Catherine Calloway, "'How to Tell a True War Story': Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*," forthcoming in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Culture*. Calloway notes how the work is "a combat novel, yet it is not a combat novel. It is also a blend of traditional and untraditional forms" (ms, 2). Calloway granted this writer written permission to quote from her unpublished article (letter, Calloway to McNerney, 24 March 1994).

[6]Gordon O. Taylor, in "Cacciato's Grassy Hill," *Genre* 21 (1988): 393-407, refutes the applicablity of Fussell's position with regard to Vietnam literature. For Taylor, the genre is still too new and under-developped: "For the moment, however, many attempting to recount or reimagine American experience in Vietnam ... find themselves--or *feel* themselves to be in a position quite different than that posited by Fussell" (393).

[7]See Alasdair Spark's review essay "A Statute of Limitations: Recent Writings on the Vietnam War," *Journal of American Studies* 27.1 (1993): 97, for a conflicting viewpoint of the continuing influence of Vietnam studies, historical and literary, on college campuses. See Timothy J. Lomperis, ed., *"Reading the Wind": The Literature of the Vietnam War* (Durham: Duke UP, 1987) 22, for a discussion of the early difficulties experienced by Vietnam writers in bringing works to publication.

[8]John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), is the seminal study of Vietnam narratives as the regeneration of the American frontier myth. He defines myth as "the stories containing a people's image of themselves in history;" "our explanation of history that can also serve as a compelling idea for the future" and he admits that "myths may often distort or conceal, but ... are nevertheless always true in the sense that they express deeply held beliefs" (ix). Hellmann further

importantly explains that "On the deepest level, the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and vision of the future" (x).

[9]Though presently unpublished, the essentials of O'Brien's biography are recounted in the first chapter of Steven Kaplan's *Understanding Tim O'Brien*. In February, 1994, Kaplan provided a manuscript copy of his forthcoming full-length study of O'Brien to this writer (letter, Kaplan to McNerney, 9 February 1994) and subsequently granted written permission to quote from his study (letter, Kaplan to McNerney, 8 April 1994).

[10]At least one critic considers autobiographical interpretations of O'Brien works other than *If I Die* potential misreadings. In "The Author Reinvents Himself -- The Fiction of Tim O'Brien," *The World and I* 7 (1992), Philip Gerard insists that "The character O'Brien [in *The Things They Carried*] is *not* the author O'Brien" (Gerard's italics; 543); yet I suggest his discussion is reductive: O'Brien consistently introduces himself, with excellent effect, into his own narrative. Gerard percieves O'Brien's intentional dissolution of biographical/factual and fictive/imaginative boundaries as merely another device in the service of his artistic purposes.

[11]See also Steven Kaplan, "The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," *Critique* 35.1 (Fall 1993): 43-52; and Catherine Calloway, "'How to Tell a True War Story': Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*."

[12]Tim O'Brien related information to this writer regarding the forthcoming novel during a telephone conversation, 7 March 1994.

[13]The conference was held at the Center for Continuing Education, University of Notre Dame, from 2-4 December 1993. Notable participants include Neil Sheehan, Larry Heinemann, W.D. Erhardt, Robert Olen Butler, Lynn Van Devanter, and John Balaban. Thesis author attended the conference.

[14]William Broyles, Jr., *Brothers in Arms: A Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986) 225. Broyles attributes the origination of the concept of the "third force": "In the winter of 1951-52 Graham Greene went to a party given in Ben Tre by Colonel Leroy, on a barge stocked with brandy and dancing girls. Greene rode back to Saigon with an American attached to the economic aid mission, and the American talked the whole way of the need for a 'third force' between the French and the Communists. On that ride, Greene recalled, 'the subject of *The Quiet American* came to me'."

[15]Peter McInerney, "'Straight' and 'Secret' History in Vietnam War Literature," *Contemporary Literature* 22.2 (1981): 187, insightfully comments that "*The Quiet American* is a sort of history, a fiction of the actual past and the real future, a 'story' in the place of 'history.' The collapse of the distinction between these two terms occurs in much of the literature of the American war in Vietnam." James C. Wilson, in the first sustained multidisciplinary study of the Vietnam War called Greene's novel "probably the best ... to have been written about the Vietnam War" (9) and later echoed this remark by claiming that "Greene's prophetic account of the beginning of the second Indochina war remains unequalled among the literature of the Vietnam War (14). See James C. Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (Jefferson , NC: McFarland & Co., 1982).

[16]W.D. Ehrhart, "Who's Responsible?" *Viet Nam Generation* 4.1-2 (1992): 95-100, details the substance of advice he gave to Mason prior to publication of the novel. His

review of the novel reflects the problematic issue of credible witness inherent in writing a war narrative as a non-veteran.

[17]Tobey Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 226 (fn. 13). In the same interview, Mason additionally stated that she "had a right to tell a small part of that story [Vietnam]. Seeing the mothers, the fathers, the brothers, sisters, wives, children--the families--there that rainy day, I knew we were all in it together."

[18]See General William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976) 99-100.

[19]Appy's precise source for this figure is not clear from the text, though claims surrounding the one regarding ratios of contact are derived from Senator Mike Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon P, 1971) [5 volumes], and Guenter Lewy *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978).

[20]See, for example, W.D. Ehrhart, "Why Teach Vietnam," *Social Education* 52.1 (1988): 25-26. Ehrhart notes how he "had been taught that we were in Vietnam to defend the Vietnamese from outside aggression, but I found that we were the aggressors and the people we were supposedly defending hated us because we destroyed their forests with chemical defoliants, burned their fields with napalm, and called the people of Vietnam gooks, chinks, slopes, and zipperheads, turning their sons into shoeshine boys and their daughters into whores" (25).

[21]Interestingly, Herr and Hasford collaborated on the screen production of *The Short-Timers*, Stanley Kubrick's 1987 screenplay *Full Metal Jacket.* See David E. Whillock, "The Fictive American Vietnam War Film: A Filmography," *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, eds. Owen Gilman and Lorrie Smith (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990) 309.

[22]Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Discus, 1980) 218. Page numbers for all further citations are included parenthetically in the text.

[23]Philip Beidler, *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1991) 264. Beidler positions *Dispatches* along a broad continuum of Herr's work which he characterizes as being generically unstable: " ... beginning in the postmodern triumph triumph of journalism and art in *Dispatches*, continuing in major work on the scripts of the films *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*, and extending along the way, in new domains of the verbal and visual, the narrative and documentary-cinematic, into the further mixed-media experimentation of *The Big Room* and, as mentioned earlier, *Walter Winchell*--in its challenge to our very ideas of genre, medium, authorship, and textual authority, and indeed finally to our very ideas of symbolic representations themselves."

[24]Dale W. Jones, "The Vietnams of Michael Herr and Tim O'Brien: Tales of Disintegration and Integration," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 13.3 (1982): 309-20 and John M. Jakaitis, "Two Versions of an Unfinished War: *Dispatches* and *Going After Cacciato*," *Cultural Critique* 3 (1986): 191-210.

[25]See James C. Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1982), in which Wilson condemns *Dispatches* for a lack of "consistent moral stance," and for failure "to go beyond a surface description" of Vietnam (45-47).

[26]See Barry M. Kroll, *Teaching Hearts and Minds: College Students Reflect on the Vietnam War in Literature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992) 6-7. Kroll locates the strength of *Dispatches* as "neither a simple narrative, nor a chronological account, nor a conventional analysis" (6); in other words, the experimental quality provides a pedagogical talisman to the intrepid teacher.

[27]Jones, "The Vietnams of Michael Herr and Tim O'Brien" 319 interestingly recounts O'Brien's discreditation of views such as Herr's regarding courage; Jones also attributes O'Brien's low regard for the film *Apocalypse Now*, which O'Brien described as "a simple solution to a complex set of questions," to Michael's Herr's partial authorship of the film script. Jones emphasizes Herr's and O'Brien's divergent conceptions of courage.

[28]"Rear-echelon mother fucker; support and noncombat troops": See John R. Elting, Dan Cragg, and Ernest Deal, *A Dictionary of Soldier Talk* (New York: Scribners, 1984) 166.

[29]Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green* (New York: Scribners' Sons, 1983) 260. Page numbers for all further citations are included parenthetically in the text.

[30]See Matthew Stewart, "Stephen Wright's Style in *Meditations in Green*," *Critique* 34.2 (1993): 135, for a convincing explanation regarding the drug's likely identity (footnote 3).

[31]Larry Heinemann, *Paco's Story* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986). Page numbers for all further citations are included parenthetically in the text.

[32]Tim O'Brien, letter to the author, 18 January 1994. Commenting on research he did at the National Archives in preparation for his trip, in which O'Brien reviewed unit records from his battalion for the period he served in country, O'Brien remarked "Fascinating to find the exact coordinates for all those terrible events!"

[33]William Broyles, Jr., "The Ghosts of Vietnam," *Newsweek*, 14 February 1994: 30-32.

[34]See Jeff Johnson, "'Vietnam Made Me a Writer': An Interview with Tim O'Brien," *Minnesota Monthly* (1990): 41, for O'Brien's comments on the "hidden therapeutic effect" writing provides him.

[35]N. Bradley Christie, "Reconciling with Our Work: The State of Vietnam Literary Studies," unpublished paper presented at *The United States and Viet Nam: From War to Peace*, a conference at the University of Notre Dame from 2-4 December, 1993.

[36]Steven Kaplan's suggestions in *Understanding Tim O'Brien* (forthcoming study, 1994), appear typical of comments by numerous critics: "Everything O'Brien has written since *Going After Cacciato*, up to and including a story which recently appeared in *Esquire*, can be viewed as metafiction," (ms.,8). See also Catherine Calloway, "'How to Tell a True War Story': Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*"; Philip Gerard, "The Author Reinvents Himself--The Fiction of Tim O'Brien," *The World and I* 7 (1992): 537-47; Tobey Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 156-66.

[37]Unit records were obtained in November, 1993, at the Suitland Branch of the National Archives in Suitland, Maryland. I covered the "Daily Staff Journal or Duty Officer's Log"s (hereafter "Daily Staff Journal") from the adjutant, intelligence officer, and operations officer (S1/S2/S3); selected operational "Plans and Summaries;" and selected daily intelligence reports ("intsums" or intelligence summaries). All records examined are from 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry, 198th Infantry Brigade ("Light"), 23rd Infantry Division ("Americal") for the period 13 July-24 November 1969, which essentially covers the bulk of O'Brien's duty as a combat infantryman before assignment to brigade headquarters at Chu Lai as a clerk in the personnel administration division. All material quoted has been declassified and original copies contain declassification code numbers. Materials come from boxes 9-14, range 472, "United States Army, Infantry Units," of the Military Records Section, Textual Reference Division, Suitland. Verbal confirmation of permission to quote excerpts from the material was obtained on 22 February, 1994, via telephone, from David A. Giordano, chief of military documents. All references parenthetically will be by date, National Archival Record (NAR), Item Number (No.) and page number if a multiple page document. For example: (NAR, 13 Jul 69, No. 7, 2) refers to National Archive Record, Range 472, 13 July 1969, item 7, page 2. Range 472 is always implied, since all material was culled from the same range. While this method of documentation is admittedly cumbersome, the *MLA Style Manual* omits citation methods for this type of material, and all items noted above are necessary for later independent corroboration of material.

[38]Numerous outstanding explications of the complex structure of *Going After Cacciato* exist. Among the more challenging and informative, see G. Thomas Couser, "*Going After Cacciato*: The Romance and the Real War," *Journal of Narrative Techniques* 13.1 (1983): 1-10; Tobey Herzog, "*Going After Cacciato*: The Soldier-Author-Character Seeking Control," *Critique* 24.2 (1983): 88-96; Dean McWilliams, "Time in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*," *Critique* 29.4 (1988): 245-60; William J. Palmer, "The Literature and Films of the Vietnam War," in *Forgotten Warriors: Combat Art from Vietnam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992) 169-86; and Eric Schroeder, "The Past and the Possible: Tim O'Brien's Dialectic of Memory and Imagination," in *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*, ed. William J. Searle (Bowling Green: Bowling Green St. UP, 1988) 116-34.

[39]I cannot exhaustively evaluate the almost unanimously positive treatments of the novel *Going After Cacciato* here, but refer the reader to some of the more convincing and laudatory explorations. See, e.g., Thomas Myer's discussion in *Walking Point*, in which he calls the novel "the most experimental fiction any writer on Vietnam has produced ... a voyage through inner space where facts confront imagination" (171); Philip Beidler in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* calls it a "conscious imaginative tour de force ... one that recpatures the truth of the experience as well ain the whole impact of its concrete particularness and actuality" (172); James C. Wilson notes how *Cacciato* "explores the problem that arises from the absence of historical perspective" (*Vietnam in Prose and Film*, 56). Numerous other critics have reseved special praise for O'Brien's National Book Award winner (1979), many of whose essays are listed in the Works Cited at the conclusion of this thesis.

[40]Ironically, later in the same interview O'Brien explains that his dissatisfaction with movie scripts for *Cacciato* stem from the fact that they "take all the dreamlike, fantastic, surrealistic elements of the book out and tell a pretty straightforward, *realistic* story, which to me violates the whole aboutness of the book" (8, my emphasis). See Martin Naparsteck, "An Interview with Tim O'Brien," *Contemporary Literature* 32.1 (1991): 1-11.

[41]O'Brien included the curious (in this case) disclaimer: "Names and characteristics of persons depicted in this book have been changed" opposite the title page in *If I Die*.

[42]See Vladimino Macchi, ed., *Dictionary of the Italian and English Languages*, Volume 1 (Firenze (Florence), Italy: I Grandi Dizinoari Sansoni, 1985, 2nd ed.) 175.

[43]In his interview with Debra Shostak, "Artful Dodge Interviews Tim O'Brien," *Artful Dodge* 17 (1991): 80-81, O'Brien informs us that in writing these three words, "This is true," "the form of the book *The Things They Carried*] wasn't present by any means, but the thematic 'aboutness' of the book was there."

[44]See Eric Schroeder, "Two Interviews: Talks with Tim O'Brien and Robert Stone," *Modern Fiction Studies* 30.1 (1984): 141, in which O'Brien discusses the recurring appearance of the "water buffalo scene." For example, O'Brien notes how "In *If I Die* the guys shoot this water buffalo, and they all watch the bullets ripping huge chunks of flesh from it. There's a similar scene in *Cacciato*. But it's not a whole bunch of guys; it's just one guy, Stink Harris, in the scene in which they meet the three women."

[45]See works cited for listing of earlier editions of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* which reflect that *no* soldiers were killed in August.

[46]See Martin Naparsteck, "An Interview with Tim O'Brien," *Contemporary Literature* 32.1 (1991): 7, in which O'Brien explains with regard to "Speaking of Courage": "It was a piece I took out [of *Going After Cacciato*]. It's kind of an orphan. I've since rewritten it, in fact, changing everything except the lake, driving around the lake, but all the war stuff has been completely changed, and now I'm really fond of the story. I didn't care for it at all when it was originally written" and further clarifies its removal from *Cacciato*, " ... it just didn't fit. It's a postwar story; *Cacciato* was a war story, and it just didn't have a proper home in that book." See also explanatory Tim O'Brien, "Notes," in *The Things They Carried*, 180-81.

[47]See Bates, "Tim O'Brien's Myth of Courage," and Marie Nelson, "Two Consciences: A Reading of Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato*, and *Northern Lights*," in *Third Force Psychology and the Study of Literature*, ed. Bernard J. Paris (London: Associated UP, 1986) 262-79. Also, Steven Kaplan devotes an entire chapter to *Northern Lights* in his forthcoming *Understanding Tim O'Brien*.

[48]See Johnson, "'Vietnam Made me a Writer'" 41, in which O'Brien hinted "I'm working on a book called *Lake of the Woods*, set up in that boundary area near the Rainy River, about a defeated politician ... it feels good to get away from Vietnam and back to Minnesota. It's really nice now to be writing about that."

[49]See Steve Kaplan, *Understanding Tim O'Brien*, ms. 171.

[50]O'Brien revealed his final title selection during a discussion with students at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, on 6 April 1994. The previous evening, in a public reading, he indicated he had selected a title but playfully withheld its name from the audience. The book will be titled *In the Lake of the Woods*.

[51]See Tim O'Brien, "Speaking of Courage," (Santa Barbara: Neville, 1980). Thesis author obtained a photocopy from number 264 (of 300 signed copies), maintained in the Special Collections at the Michigan State University main library.

[52]See Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, the story "Speaking of Courage" 155-73, for a comparison of essential differences between the early and later versions of the story. For example, the later version omits the differentiation "without a V-device for valor" (cited in the excerpt in the thesis), found in *the version published in The Massachusetts Review* 17.2 (1976): 243-53.

APPENDIX

Appendix

"Responsibly Inventing History": An Interview with Tim O'Brien

The following interview was conducted by Brian C. McNerney with Tim O'Brien at the Kellogg Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, on 7 April 1994. The purpose of the interview is to explore O'Brien's attitude toward his work, his conception of the relationship between fiction and fact--"happening-truth" and "story-truth"--and the way in which he manipulates the happened event into the larger moral concerns of fiction. Additionally, I investigate O'Brien's response to his recent visit to Vietnam, the first since his departure as a footsoldier in the 198th Infantry Brigade in March 1970. Finally, O'Brien commented on his upcoming work, a novel titled *In the Lake of the Country* due to be published by Houghton Mifflin in the fall of 1994. Catherine Calloway, a Professor of English from Arkansas State University, who has compiled the most complete bibliographic record of works by and about Tim O'Brien, additionally participated in the interview and provides selected questions during the interview.

McNerney: Tim, you spoke once in an interview of the need for writers to have substance. Among examples of substance you included "a body of witnessed experience." During a recent trip to Vietnam you got to go back and look at the ground in which you obtained your own body of witnessed experience. Were there some surprises?

O'Brien: In a funny way there weren't any surprises, thank God! Vietnam ... the geography of Vietnam to me is sacred ground in a funny way. In the way that for any of us our backyards, our front yards, are sacred in our memories. Where our sandboxes and

swings used to be. Those memories we carry with us for the rest of our lives, because of the important events that occurred on that ground. And when I returned to Vietnam, about a month or so ago [17 February-4 March, 1994], I found a few backyards and a few front yards and a few places where I spent my adult-childhood, and the terrain, in a funny way, hadn't changed at all. The paddies were shaped exactly as they were by events which occurred twenty years before. My firebase, in a funny way, was more my firebase this time than it was the first time, because now there is nothing left on it in terms of barbed wire or buildings, not a scrap. But the outline of the hills on which the firebase was placed is exactly the outline as it was a long time ago minus all the buildings. In a spooky way it looks as if ghosts are inhabiting that place now. It's not used for anything because it's heavily mined. The ARVN took it over after we left. After the Americans left they took this base over and they mined the place and hence none of the villagers use it for anything. It's not tilled--the soil--it's just there, preserved in a vacuum as it was. Precisely as the land was all those years ago. And I have a feeling it will be that way for a long time to come. At least until the mines are taken out.

In 1973, when I wrote *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, there is a line somewhere in that book, in the chapter called "Step Lightly," you can get the exact quote but it's something like "Years and years from now, some veteran will take his wife, or girlfriend, or children over here, then walk the same soil and I'll bet the mines will still be here. The earth will not yet have swallowed and disarmed them." It's a kind of bitter statement saying that this stuff is still here and if you think this war is right, come over and walk this land and see how you like it. At least that prophecy was in a way fulfilled when I returned. The ghosts are still there. It's as if you closed your eyes , [you can] see these paddies and villages and firebases and so on, and almost hear the soldiers laughing and drinking still. It makes you believe in a spirit world in a funny way.

McNerney: In "Field Trip," in *The Things They Carried*, you wrote about your vision of what it would be like to go back, on an imaginary trip with the character Tim O'Brien's daughter Kathleen. In what ways did your trip confirm the expectation you portrayed in that story?

O'Brien: Again, pretty much identically. The human imagination is a powerful faculty. We use it all the time in our lives, we live our lives by it. It has to be powerful. You imagined the questions you were going to ask today and you imagined the answers. If I were to say I saw a Martian in Vietnam with a green head, you would be surprised. But you are going to hear the answer you imagined. That's kind of how we live our lives. That's why when we take a sip of coffee, and we've taken a lot of sips before, the next sip is going to taste pretty much as the sip before it. In all kinds of little ways we use our imaginations to live our lives. We worry about smoking because we imagine dying of cancer. It doesn't stop us from smoking but it makes us worry, we imagine it, and then that worry, that bad feeling we have now and then as we take that drag on that cigarette is based on the imagined event for the future. Our own death, our own suffering, our own pain. We imagine it more or less fully at times. Sometimes not so fully, other times more fully. And so when I imagined returning to Vietnam I was basing my imagined chapter or story on prior events, what Vietnam had meant to me--what it had been to me--what I had seen there. My knowledge of how geography [operates is that it] changes very very slowly. My imagination of what I would want to do when I got to Vietnam-- if I were ever to go--would be to find a kind of interpreter. To find hallowed ground. The spot where Kiowa died is the made up event in the "Field Trip" story. And when you imagine these things and then you act on your imagination you are bound to find some correspondences., including emotional ones. And the emotional correspondence was very precise. A kind of quietude, that sense of ghosts I talked about. There is something just out there, the sense that things just hadn't changed a lot geographically. I could find

places, a sense of barely heard voices in the background. In the case of the story it was the interpreter and the daughter laughing and the guy showing her magic tricks. In my own case it was a camera clicking. The *Time* photographer took pictures. And the villagers' voices are the present voices and I was hearing the voices of yesterday. The voices of twenty-five years ago. So in a lot of ways the feeling of going back was exactly the way I had imagined it. That is the power of the human imagination. That's why I think we love stories so much. They are kind of future predictors.

McNerney: You reviewed your unit records at the National Archives before you went back to Vietnam. What were you looking for specifically and what did you find?

O'Brien: I was looking for two things. First, I was looking just to jog my memories, the names of people who had died. You remember faces often but as you had mentioned you don't remember the names and you certainly don't remember whole names. I remember a lot of nicknames, for example. We had so many of them. So, first, to jog my memory as to who died, just the names of people. And in a couple of cases, more than a couple, in ten cases, I had forgotten the guys entirely who had died, because I didn't know them very well. You get a company of guys and they rotate in and out. They are just bodies essentially. So that was one thing, to jog my memory.

The more important reason for going there though was to find military coordinates, six digit numbers where events occurred, so I wouldn't go over to Vietnam and blindly hump around looking at all the hedges and paddies and villages not knowing what was what. I knew that would happen and it would have happened if I'd have gone there without these coordinates. As it was, I had to take the coordinates, you know--here is where this occurred ... the day the tracks ran over us. Here is the day where I was wounded; here is the day that this guy died, that guy died, where this happened. By compiling a set of coordinates I was able to go over to Vietnam with a map and

fortunately could go precisely where I wanted to go. I was being escorted around by a former VC soldier, now a retired Colonel in the Army-his last name is Thanh--who was taking me to places and by and large he hit it. In a few cases he said "you're there." And I looked around and said I know I'm not there. I would finally have to get the coordinates out, and say *this* is where I want to go, here. And he would say, well, you're here and I would say I know I'm there and I don't want to be there, I want to be *here*. And it helped. That way I was able to find a couple of villages that I really had to find.

A third thing happened in going to the archives that I should mention. This is important in terms of your research. As far as I know you are the first researcher to have gone back to find some of the primary stuff, including myself. I had never gone back to it either. It seems to me that that is an important thing for someone to do, to find the soil that literature grows out of. They do it with all other writers, visiting their haunts and such. The Brontës--not just war writers--but all kinds of writers. [In the case of] Hemingway, they visited Key West and Cuba and talked to people he knew. You wouldn't write for example a history of a battle in a story without going to look at the ground of the battle to get a feel for it. And for me, for my own purposes, I had forgotten as we all do a great deal of my own history. And to recover some of that history, some of that ground, see it freshly and see it anew, it invigorated me as a writer. It's like going back to your backyard and seeing it again and it invigorates you in a funny way. It gives you courage to go on and it brings new stories to mind--things you've forgotten. And it makes possible another five years or ten years of writing for me in a lot of ways. So that is the third purpose I didn't intend but that occurred anyway.

McNerney: One thing I found when I looked at the archival material was the name Richard Cacciato, who arrived in country on 31 July, 1969, and assumed the duties of battalion adjutant. How, if in any way, did this individual affect your character Cacciato in your novel, *Going After Cacciato*?

O'Brien: You sly devil [laughter]. The character of Cacciato did not affect the character in the book at all. The real Cacciato, that is to say, did not affect the character, nothing like him. All I did was I stole the name, the guy's name, the way you would steal the name Smith if you liked it. Except there's a lot of Smiths and very few Cacciatos. I liked the sound of his name. I remember the first time I saw it, I was out in the field and some document had come in. I was the RTO [radio-telephone operator] for the company commander and the document came to me and I saw the name printed and I said, "how the hell do you pronounce this?" And I went catch-chee, cache-shee-ah, we were joking about it. And then for some reason somebody said Cacciato--somebody who knew him, and I laughed--what a funny name. The name stuck partly because we laughed at it, thinking this is not much of a soldier's name. It sounded like the guy should be cooking spaghetti somewhere. And also because when I did learn the name I loved the way it came off my tongue. Sort of like "catch." And I was already probably thinking that I would be going back to the States if I survived and trying to write about this thing. Not knowing whether it would be fiction or non-fiction or what--I was young. But the name obviously stuck with me. You know the story that followed. There is no reason to retell it now. But the real Cacciato discovered that I had used his name and assumed that I was trying to portray him as a deserter running for Paris and [he] let me know in no uncertain terms that he wasn't any fucking deserter. And he's right, he wasn't. He was a great guy. A lot of officers in Vietnam I didn't care for a lot. They seemed full of themselves and full of their officerhood, career tracks. So this one guy I really admired a lot. He is a very nice man and very firm but he still preserved his humanity in a situation that was tense. He was an adjutant in a firebase, but this firebase was a real firebase, we weren't back in the rear, even though it was back at our so-called "rear. It was a forward firebase. We got attacked and mortared often. He was a good soldier. He later became a company commander out in the field and acquitted himself well. And I want to make it clear that

the real Richard Cacciato is a terrific officer and all I did was swipe his name because of the sound of it.

McNerney: Let's talk for a moment about the officers. We were talking yesterday about how some officers emphasized mission. Sidney Martin comes to mind in *Cacciato* and maybe also Smith in *If I Die*. And there are other officers that probably have more of a connection with the men, a Lieutenant Corson or Captain Johansen in *If I Die*, who doesn't make the fellows go out, but allows them to report events from a safe haven. How did you respond to the officers over there and how did the soldiers make distinctions among how these officers emphasized mission or men?

O'Brien: That's a good question and the answer isn't long, thank God. The enlisted men, the common grunts, preferred an officer who put the emphasis of man over mission. That is to say, if we were in a situation, a village let's say, and we discovered a bunch of tunnels, we wanted an officer who would say, "Look, the mission here is to find weapons, find the VC, and here are these tunnels" ... the mission would dictate let's go down in the tunnels, find the weapons, find the VC if they are down there. Whereas an officer emphasizing the men ... [that] man would say we shouldn't go down into those tunnels; someone will die or could die. These things were heavily trapped and mined heavily. They would say, "Let's just blow the damn things." That's an example I use often in my work because it occurred on a regular basis. Almost a daily basis in Vietnam. That is, there are tunnels everywhere, bunkers are everywhere. And if you were to search them all pretty soon you'd have no men left because they would be all hitting mines. There would be no men left to do the searching.

Now officers who we liked would make adjustments based on the situation. That is to say, if there'd been a firefight and we'd seen a VC go down into a tunnel it would be worth sending a man down because we knew there was something there. There is

something to get. Whereas if you don't know, it's just a tunnel and nothing has happened and there it is, and the officer just says "Blow it. Let's not lose a man for no reason." For me though, my intellect told me that hell, it was a war, you are supposed to win the war. That's what the Army's objective is supposed to be and I understood intellectually why some officers said let's just search. Let's follow the book, search these things. It's SOP [standard operating procedure], we're supposed to do it. I understood why, I just didn't like it. Just like I understand you are supposed to stop smoking. I don't like to stop smoking. I'll do it anyway. Your intellect can know one thing but your emotion can prefer something else. The men preferred the "men" approach.

The officer I most remember emphasized mission over man. I wrote about him in *If I Die*. I think I called him Daud. His real name is Julian Barnes. He died. He was a black Colonel. He was our battalion commander, and he was killed on LZ Gator in an attack one night in May [1969]. I think it was May 12 or so. You might have the records of this attack. We were out in the field at the time and saw it from a few miles away, saw the firebase all night long. I found the records myself in the battalion [duty logs]. It was a bad attack. Not just Barnes died, I think four others died, Americans. A lot of the sappers. And I discovered in my trip back to Vietnam, in talking to some of the villagers and to the VC, that this was a planned attack to kill that man alone. They knew where to find him, where his bunker was, where his hootch was. Because he was such a good officer. Because he emphasized mission so much. That is to say, he was an ass-kicking officer. And we lost a lot of men in May, as you know, because of the things he was making us do, but the VC lost a lot of people, too. And they didn't like it. I remember the day he gave us a speech. We were in stand-down in Chu Lai for three days before going on to Pinkville for an operation where many people died and were wounded. And I was wounded myself in this operation. Before going out on it, we all knew we were going to Pinkville. We didn't want to go, we hated this place. We had heard about it from some other soldiers who had been there. I hadn't been there yet. It was my first time going

there. And he came out and gave us this talk and said, "I'm Colonel Barnes, you guys are going out to Pinkville. It's going to be bad. We are going to lose men. I know that in advance and I don't like it but I'm going to sacrifice you. Some of you guys are going to die and be wounded. But I have to do it. And I know you don't like it and you probably don't like me. I'm sorry, but you're in the Army and when you are in the Army, you have to do things you don't like."

The guys sort of snorted at him during this speech and yet it was a hell of a good speech. He was being honest in any case; he wasn't lying to us. I think we sort of respected him while also hating him simultaneously. In some ways we hated him more than we hated the VC, to be honest. When he died, we heard it in the night over the radio. And that is the little episode where we sang "ding-dong, the wicked witch is dead" out in the field. I started it. Other guys were too dumb to know the right song to sing. I knew the song to sing. I admit it's a horrible thing. I'm embarrassed by it now. I would apologize to God, say I'm sorry to him. And yet did it anyway, knowing it was a sinful, evil thing to do. A man was dead and you shouldn't be celebrating anybody's death. At the same time I felt, I may live now if the next Colonel isn't quite so gung-ho. That is a long answer to your question but I had to get it said.

McNerney: There are several instances in *The Things They Carried* where you intentionally frustrate reader's comfort with distinguishing the seam between the real and the invented. For example, the "Notes" section to "Speaking of Courage." In an earlier version of that story in *The Massachusetts Review* in 1976 Paul Berlin figures as the main character instead of Norman Bowker and the whole incident of Kiowa and the shitfield is omitted. Also, when Paul's father asks him in the earlier version what's wrong with telling war stories, Paul responds, "Nothing, except I guess nobody wants to hear them." Yet in the revised story as it appears in *The Things They Carried*, you had the character tell a

war story. Did your conception of the war story change from that first telling to the later one?

O'Brien: A couple of quick things. One is the main character in *The Massachusetts Review* story is Paul Berlin but in the new one is me, not Norman Bowker. Norman Bowker is the guy that died right. Second thing is that in the first version, in *The Massachusetts Review* there *is* a war story told. It's not as lengthy, I think, but it's about going into tunnels and almost winning the Silver Star. I had to change that for the novel because I didn't want to repeat myself from *Going After Cacciato*, for one thing, but beyond that I wanted to have an integrated novel in which an episode in one chapter, the shitfield business with Kiowa, had a reprise or echo in this chapter so that the thing would carry on throughout the novel. So that the shitfield wouldn't just be there once, it would be there a few times in the book. Beyond that, I was kind of honest, when I talked in *The Things They Carried*, about revising the thing. There were things in the first version I just didn't like. The writing, about going down in the tunnels and so on, I didn't like the writing of it. I thought I could improve on it. So that was another part of the revising process. My notion of the war story itself didn't change much. It still hasn't. I pretty much believe what I believed when I wrote *If I Die*. Which is that war stories don't carry morals. You should keep them as close to the bone as possible without embroidery, without much but the facts. But my notion of what's factual changed, not [the notion of the war] story. I began to distrust facts more the older I got. Probably because I realized I didn't know many of the facts of Vietnam and those I did remember I filtered through my own memory. That is to say, I'd reworked them. Dialogue you forget, the things people say. You forget the sequence of events or the chronology of events. It evaporated very quickly. What happened first, what happened second? You can't remember after a certain period of time and hence how do you know it's factual? Again, the older I get the more I'm convinced fact itself is a malleable liquid sort of thing. It changes form, it changes

shape, yet still for some reason is called fact even though it may well not be. Beyond that, there is the whole question of what's true. One of the reasons I went to Vietnam was to find out what really happened there. Yet, even going back and talking to the VC people who were present and villagers who were around, there were all kinds of versions of what happened in various places. The numbers of people killed, where everybody was, and what transpired that day. I guess I decided to become a fiction writer so I wouldn't have to obey the normal rules of fact and truth. You are allowed when you write fiction--in fact you have to--imagine and make up your own truths. You have to make them up. You have to manufacture a system that is coherent and meaningful and moving without having to wade through all these layers of competing versions of fact.

McNerney: That sounds a little bit like what you told Eric Schroeder one time. You said you tell lies to get at the truth.

O'Brien: It is. It is often what you find yourself doing. They are *noble* lies. I've sort of amended what I have said. The word lie has a sort of pejorative connotation to it that I don't intend. I intend the word "lie" to mean that state which one knows is not true, but to do it with a noble purpose. I'm stating things as if they were true knowing they are not. That is, I know there was never any Kiowa yet I stated there was a Kiowa as if there were. Nor was there any Jimmy Cross, nor did any of these events occur exactly as I render them. I know they are not true. But that's what every fiction writer does. That's what Mark Twain did when he wrote *Huckleberry Finn*. He knew there was no real Huck Finn. It's based on a person he knew, but he knew there was no raft, no Jim, no Duke, none of the events happened, yet he presents it *as if* it happened. That's what every novel does. That's why dialogue was invented. Little quotation marks make you believe for a moment someone is really talking, when in fact nobody is really talking, and there is no character who could talk. Because this character is just air. That is what fiction is all about. Make

readers believe something is happening even though you know it's not. It's done for a purpose. You don't just do it willy-nilly. You do it for a purpose, which is to somehow approximate emotion and approximate moral values at stake. You approximate the world as it once was or could be without having to obey the rules of the historian.

McNerney: A little more on this issue of the war story. Could you explain how the war story differs from stories in general? For instance, what effect do you intend the war story to have upon the listener?

O'Brien: I think not only war stories but all stories are meant to put a reader in the shoes of a storyteller or at least in the shoes of, if not the storyteller, then the characters in the story, one of the two. It's almost always the purpose. That's why when you're sitting in a bar and you say, "Gosh, I gotta' tell you this, something happened today. I was driving down the street and I saw this clown come out a bar and the clown asked me for directions." What you are trying to do to that person listening to the story is have that listener imagine driving down the street and see a clown come out of a bar and whatever transpires after that. That's why you tell the story, because of something that happened that you need others to identify with. How would *you* feel if this happened to you? And that's kind of what war stories do. They say, how would *you* feel if you suddenly were drafted? How would *you* feel if you hated the war and thought it was wrong? What would *you* do? What would you do if your best friend were to sink into the muck of a shitfield and you felt responsible for it in some funny way? If you turned a light on when you knew it was against regs [regulations] to do it, and it was against common sense to do it. How would you feel? Would you feel guilty? How would you feel if your daughter asked, "Did you ever kill anyone?" All these things are ways of asking the reader to put himself or herself in the shoes of the person telling the story or the characters in the story.

War stories have other functions too, though. Among them is the moral function, which again is not just for war stories, but all stories have at their heart I think an essential moral function. Which isn't just to put yourself in my shoes but to go beyond that and put yourself in my moral framework. If you believe what I believe how would you behave in the world? What is the moral thing to do and not to do? This business of man over mission is a good example. What would you do if you were a company commander and you knew you had to try to win a war but also preserve your men? Sometimes these two things compete. Sometimes you *can't* preserve your men and win a war. How are you going to make the moral judgments? How are you going to solve this paradox? Well you can't solve a paradox. It's insoluble. Still, how would you behave in the world?

I think fiction in general, and war stories in particular, serve a moral function *not* to give you lessons, not to tell you how to act. But simply to present you with philosophical problems and then ask you to try to adjudicate them in some way or another when you know adjudications are never perfect. As you were telling me the other day, it's an imperfect world, and we can't find perfect solutions in an imperfect world. And yet, even in this imperfect world, we have to find proximate solutions. Not ever perfect, but proximate, and that's the business of living and fiction tries to address that.

McNerney: You once said that William Cowling, from *The Nuclear Age*, is the only hero you've ever created in your fiction. That was before *The Things They carried* and the novel you're working on now due out in the fall. If you still feel that way, might it in some way be related to the way you have Cowling deal with courage and with cowardice and the specific discoveries he makes dealing with things that he finds terrifying?

O'Brien: Yeah, and I still feel as I felt when I made that story and even in my new book I've not created a hero. What is a hero? Well, a hero in my view has all kinds of definitions. You have to define what you mean before you describe it. What I mean by

hero is someone who behaves in such a way that corresponds with his or beliefs. That is what I mean by heroism. That if you believe you should be doing a thing then you do it. It's a correspondence between a moral judgment and one's behavior in the world. So it's not determined by any outside criteria; it's determined by the criteria that are inside one's own psyche, by one's own conscience. Cowling is the only character I've created who behaves in the real world in a way that corresponds with the things he believes about the world. That is, he believes that the Vietnam War is immoral and he doesn't go to it. Instead, he runs from it. He believes the world is going to end, and not just in a literal sense--apocalypse or nuclear war. That is only a metaphor for something much larger in the book, which is the business that we are all going to die. The whole business of mortality, human mortality. And not only human mortality but the mortality of the universe which is talked about in the book in the psychiatrist sections. The sun is going to flare up and roast the earth and then die out. If you believe in the big bang then you also believe the corresponding idea, as most scientists now do in some form or another, that the universe will collapse on itself again at some point. Or else, if it doesn't it will just continue to expand to eternity and everything will dissolve. These are huge questions and yet they are questions most of us aren't bothered by because they are so far in the future. Our own deaths are in the future. The end of the universe is millennia away. Most of us don't worry about them because they are so far in the future. But now and then in our dreams and in our daydreams we do stop and say, "hey, I *am* going to die someday and there *are* bombs out there than can blow up East Lansing in a second. The universe may well collapse on itself. When we hit those moments of realization of the endingness of things, ordinarily we just shut off and make ourselves stop thinking about it or go to a bar or eat our next meal. Cowling is the kind of person who can't shut himself off. In that sense he is abnormal or the way a lot of obsessed characters in fiction have been abnormal--Captain Queeg in *The Caine Mutiny*--all kinds of characters. Lord Jim is obsessed by his own failures, and so on. When one creates characters in fiction one

usually goes for the extraordinary. You don't go for the common Joe on the street who doesn't think about anything or care about anything. You ordinarily go for a character who cares in a magnified way about the world. That's what fiction writers do--they go for the extraordinary that's offbeat. He is an amazing anomaly in the world, a person who can't stop thinking about the question of mortality. The emptiness of things. And he acts on his beliefs. As weird as his behaviors are, they are still courageous behaviors. The funny thing is that in literature, most people who behave as Cowling does end up defeated, the way Ahab ends up defeated by the whale. He ends up dead. Heroism involves in a funny way defeat. It ends up in self-defeat. It involves *both* things.

The way to survive in this world is not to be a hero. The way to survive is to act in a kind of ordinary, not cowardly way, but a sort of forgetful way. The way an insomniac in the middle of the night sort of forgets himself and sort of just breathes. That is how most of us behave in the world. Heroes behave in an extraordinary yet self-defeating fashion. That's what I think Cowling does.

McNerney: You once said you might rewrite *Northern Lights*. Then you did rewrite and republish substantial portions of both *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried* ...

O'Brien: And *If I Die*. I did a lot of revisions in that.

McNerney: ... and *If I Die* as well. Could you talk for a moment about your process of revision. For example, you say in "How to Tell a True War Story" that one of the characteristics of a true war story is that it must be continually retold. Is this emphasis on reworking your fiction part of that idea of working toward the ultimate true war story?

O'Brien: That is a good question. It's hard to answer it, because there are layers of answer. One layer is a simple layer. I revise often simply for writerly reasons. That is, I make writerly kinds of mistakes. In *Cacciato* I remember I have a character say some dialogue--"[blank]," he smiled. Well you can't smile words. You can't say "'Hello,' he smiled." You don't smile words. So I think it was changed to "[blank] he said. He smiled." or maybe I took out "He smiled" entirely. I can't remember how I fixed it. That is one category of things. All kinds of things like that. They involve things like sound. They involve things like cliché. If things sound clichéd in dialogue I try to make them less clichéd. In *Cacciato*, a lot of writerly things I changed had to do with the section in Teheran when they are making their escape. They seemed to be too cartoonish. I wanted a cartoon feel to this, some kind of dream-like feel to this escaping from this jail. I can't find any solutions out of this. Berlin's imagination fails him in that jail and so he just imagines this cartoonish escape. But the effect on the reader, at least on this reader--me--is that it was too cartoonish. It could be toned down a bit and I spent a lot of time trying to cut, just to tone it down.

A second category of revision has to do with this business of the multiplicity of truth, or the multiplicities of truth. That is, there are different versions to some of these stories. "Speaking of Courage" is probably the most obvious. A version of going around this lake. Here is one guy going around a lake in one story thinking abut this event. Here is a different guy, but the same persona, going around a lake thinking of this story. Subtly different things happen in these two versions, as you know from reading my work, and as I know from writing the work I'm always up against conflicting possibilities. As you are composing a world, making a world up, there are always alternatives. She could say *this* or she could say *that*. He could do this or he could do that. The book could end *this* way or it could end *this* way.

I've tended through these revisions to give alternative cuts on possibilities. I've taken it to an extreme in my new book that is coming out in October. Essentially what I

have done is, the situation is that a woman is missing and no one knows what has happened to her and no one will ever know. So I make up alternatives throughout the book. Maybe this happened to her, maybe that happened to her, in each separate chapter. Maybe she drowned; maybe she got on a bus to go to Seattle; maybe she left her husband for another man; maybe she got lost. Each one is a convincing little story, little "Hypothesis" these chapters are called. Maybe she and her husband planned to run away together because she and her husband couldn't stand the world as it was pressing in on them anymore. All kinds of possibilities. So in this book it is taken to an extreme way. I've actually built into one version all kinds of alternatives as to what might have transpired. The reason I do this is not just as a game; it's because that's the way the world is. That is to say, think of someone you knew when you were in high school. Where is the person now? Maybe dead, maybe a stockbroker, maybe a mortician, maybe in jail, maybe a lot of things. And you base the maybes on those few scraps of memory you have from what you knew in high school about the person. And you make up little hypotheses. Some seem more probable than others. But you remember the person was kind of morbid, so that is the mortician. You remember the person who had stolen some candy when he was six years old, hence the jail one. You build up these possibilities and if you were ever to really discover what happened to that person maybe none of the possibilities you had built up was what really occurred to the person. So there is that whole array of possibilities that you haven't even considered.

And there is that whole business of that mortality thing. When people die, you know, what happens to us? Where do we go? Do we go to heaven? Do we rot and that's it? Is there life after death? There's no way we're going to know in the waking world. We live our lives more than we know it in the world of hypothesis. Christians live by the hypothesis--strict Christians--that we are going to heaven. The Hindus live by the hypothesis that we are going to be reborn, by good acts we will come back at a higher and higher plane. And each of these religions or philosophical systems is simply a hypothesis

about maybe this or maybe that. I guess if I wanted to phrase it, for me what echoes is the phrase "maybe this or maybe that." And we all live by these maybes much more than we know. The world is not as certain as we pretend it is. I try to write fiction that takes this "maybeness" into account. Maybe this, maybe that. Remember, in *Cacciato* the last line of the book I think is "Maybe so, the lieutenant says." Maybe he is out there still. Maybe he will make it but we will never know.

Calloway: In literature that is what we call an open text.

O'Brien: Oh, is that what that's called [laughs playfully].

Calloway: Open text, where it's open to multiple possibilities. Like in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles does three different endings for the book. Or the reader could create his own ending. Were you influenced by John Fowles?

O'Brien: I've always loved John Fowles' writing. Yeah. Just as an afterthought, he is one of our most underrated writers I think. Not so much for that book, which I didn't like as much as a book called *The Ebony Tower*. A book of short stories, long stories. But yeah, Fowles also rewrote the ending of *The Magus* as you probably know. Not just the ending but other parts as well.

Calloway: Yeah, he completely revised it.

O'Brien: And the thing is, he is open about it. A lot of other writers do it subtly and slyly. You don't even know about it. They just slip their revisions into the next revision of a paperback. Most scholars don't notice. Because you don't go back and ordinarily read a book unless you announce you've done it as Fowles did. You don't know it's been done.

Calloway: Louise Erdrich has recently done that too, with *Love Medicine.*

O'Brien: Did she really? I didn't know that.

Calloway: It's a new revised copy. A revised and expanded *Love Medicine.*

McNerney: You stated in an interview with Larry McCaffrey once that books can also work as magic acts. In the story "The People We Marry" from your upcoming novel, the character John Wade dabbles in magic as a hobby. And you state at one point that magic was his life. Do you see a relationship between magic and writing? Do you see yourself as a type of magician?

O'Brien: Yeah, I do. I was a magician as a kid. It was my hobby. A lot of lonely kids who later become public in some way are magicians--were magicians. Among them Dick Cavett, Johnny Carson, Orson Welles. All partly from a sense of isolation in their childhood, and I was that way. Where you try to make up a better world than the world you are living in through the power of manipulation of that which can't be manipulated ordinarily. You can't usually make things vanish or appear out of nowhere. And yet if you are a magician you can at least have the illusion of doing that. That has flowed I suppose into my career as a writer in a lot of ways where I can make miracles happen in my stories. I can make people wake up from the dead. Which I do in *The Things They Carried*--they sit up and talk. Where the impossible can suddenly seem to be possible. Again, it's not just a game, it's not just an act in the sense of a magic act. It has a serious intent behind it. Which was to explore the world of make-believe and the world of the human imagination. It's power. If we can imagine the dead sitting up and talking then in a way the dead have ... just sat up and talked if you can imagine it.

If somebody dies you are close to--say a father or mother--and you are lying in bed a week later and they are in the ground. It's two in the morning and you can't sleep and your dad's face comes to mind. You see him walking down the street and talking to you. Partly as a memory, partly as something you are just sort of imagining happening. You can see his face and you hear him laugh and talk. Those moments when you are imagining that, he is *with* you. He is as alive, in a funny way, as he was before. He's not dead exactly when you see him doing these things. If he were dead he would be lying in his coffin. But he's talking. What is animation and what is life ultimately? Really, what is it? All kinds of philosophical issues. It's not quite as easy as we always think it is. When we see movies we know things aren't real and yet they seem real. We watch the images going on. There is a kind of happening with a reality to it that we just can't deny. When you are reading a book, Huck Finn on the raft or Ahab chasing the whale or Cacciato going to Paris, if the thing is vivid enough there is going to be a kind of "livingness" to it that is not the same as the waking world we're in but *like* the waking world we're in. It's a kind of aliveness. That's what I mean. That is part of a key phrase, "is a kind of." There are kinds of things. There are kinds of being alive. There are kinds of immortality. Shakespeare has a kind of immortality. He is not immortal; he is dust now. Yet when we say he is immortal we are saying that because when we watch one of his plays or read it we're living his thoughts anew. We are living for him. When those lines of dialogue are spoken we are living his words. In a way living his thoughts again. It's not exactly the same as the living Shakespeare speaking to us but it's like it. A kind of life. See what I'm saying? It's *like* it, an approximation.

McNerney: Your books now are read in a lot of college courses. *Cacciato, The Things They Carried*, and your other writings have received considerable critical attention. How has your public activity as a writer affected your private activity as a writer?

O'Brien: Well, not at all. That is one of the peculiar things about me as a human being. People who know me well comment on how I am able to isolate the problems and the realities of the world and sit down. It is a fault; I'm not saying it's a virtue. There is something about my personality where I can shut out the most traumatic, horrible things that are occurring in my life all around me. There are like bombs going off in the room next door and I can still sit and write. I can do that with good things as well. I can have wonderful things happening in the world next to me. Awards or meeting people on trips and so on and utterly shut them out. When I left you guys last night I was in my own world. I can just shut it off. There is something about my personality that can just do that. It's not always good. So the answer is really--it probably doesn't sound true, but sometimes the truth doesn't--that I can shut off everything and write. That is to say, when I am praised it doesn't mean a thing to me. When I am trying to write a sentence, because the sentence is so hard to write that you are not thinking, "Boy, I'm a good writer." You're thinking, "God, I can't make this sentence go the right place. I can't make it sound right. I can't give it a unique quality that makes it jump the way I want to make my sentences somehow seem alive. Sort of jump at you and be memorable." If you can't do it you don't take solace in the fact that you have done it before. You're just lost in the world of the sentence, the paragraph, and the story. You're utterly lost in it. It's like a lead room I walk into and when that door closes I'm utterly alone and nothing that has ever happened in the world means anything. So I don't even think of it. It's gone. I'm just in a world of that page and words and the story I'm trying to tell. It's a fault. I wish I could not be that way at times because I ignore the outside world and then it catches up with me years later or months later or weeks later and I've got to pay the price. The friends that I've forgotten to call back. All the things that you forget to do.

McNerney: Tim, you were recently singled out in a Vietnam War literature journal for your work, in the way that it was perceived as possibly anti-feminist. You have also had

to defend yourself at times from accusations in which you use the words of the Vietnamese themselves, saying that you have not presented the Vietnamese perspective. Does this type of attention bother you? Do you expect to make any overt accommodations in answer to these?

O'Brien: Well, I'm making an accommodation by answering now. It bothers only insofar as it would bother any human being that has something negative said about their person. You don't want to have bad things said about you. It's like being called a shitball and you'd prefer not being called a shitball if you don't think of yourself as one and even if you do think of yourself as one you don't want to be called a shitball. To that extent it bothers you.

The question then becomes one of fairness. You have to ask yourself in a quiet moment if the criticism valid or not. So if someone says, well, you're not answering my letters and you're not acting like much of a friend, you look at your life and you have to admit to yourself or to the person, well, I haven't been answering your letters and I haven't been acting as much of a friend as I should be. If the criticism is valid you try to acknowledge it and improve. And I think I do my best to be honest with myself even if I don't improve. The friend thing, for example, and the letters. I'm not a very good letter-writer and I don't treat my friends very well. But at least I acknowledge it. I don't get any better at it but I acknowledge it. This one I'm not going to acknowledge in either case. They are invalid criticisms.

We'll do the Vietnamese one first. I think because it is easier. I don't in my fiction even pretend to present a Vietnamese viewpoint in my books except for one or two occasions. One of them is *Cacciato*, when I present a character Li Van Hgoc who is a fictitious guy, kind of a fable-like character, living down in the earth. I try to give a little bit of the sense of what I imagine it would be like, in a grossly distorted, almost cartoonish way, to be a Viet Cong or NVA soldier living in the earth. As they basically did. Having

said that though ... there was a man I killed in *The Things They Carried*. I try to imagine what it would have been like to have been a scared, young VC draftee. Except for these two occasions, I haven't. Why haven't I? Well, the reason I haven't is I don't *know* it. I don't know the life of the VC and the life of the Vietnamese. I know only a smattering about what Buddhism and Confucianism are. I know only a smattering of the culture. I don't know the language at all. And I'm not going to deign to speak for people who can speak very well for themselves.

I was recently in Vietnam, as you know, and talked this very issue with five or six Vietnamese writers at a literary magazine I visited there. I said I and other American writers have been criticized for not presenting your point of view enough. They laughed and said well we don't present your point of view. It was obvious among us as writers that you can't. They said to me and I said to them: you are capable of speaking for yourself, and I am capable of speaking for myself. To don the mantle of another alien, in almost all ways, culture and pretend to speak for that culture as if you knew it somehow seems to me an incredible pride and hubris beyond even the most ordinary standards of human humility.

I don't know the Vietnamese and don't want to write for them. They are capable of writing for themselves and have done very well. Even though a lot of their stuff hasn't been translated yet, they have a thriving literary community in Vietnam that is under incredible pressure from the government. They are always being blackballed and so on but nonetheless they are speaking for themselves.

The other issue is much more difficult. It is hard to talk about because things will sound anti-feminist in their sound but which I think are utterly and absolutely feminist. In fact I think I am much more a feminist than the so-called feminists criticizing me. From what I've heard--I haven't read their work to be honest--I've just been told about it. So maybe I am wrong. But I'll try to respond a little bit.

There are certain facts in the world. One fact in the world we have to live with, and like all facts there are layers of it, is that women don't serve in combat in western societies, much. I think in some cases the Israeli women did. And so in my stories I don't have women soldiers walking around. Just as an environment, women are excluded. The question then becomes what do you do when women are by nature excluded from participation in events? What do you do with women? Which view do you take? And what role do they play dramatically in the making of a work of art? If to place a woman in a combat setting would be to violate the rules of credibility that rules verisimilitude--of seeming verisimilitude--then you end up having to have characters talk *about* women.

There are a couple of lines--I'll just take a couple of examples--one is in *If I Die* where a soldiers says "she's sort of pretty for a gook." Well, on the surface it seems like an utterly misogynistic statement and a racist statement at that. Which it *is*. But my role as a writer is not to make up a world that is better than it is. My role in part is to report the world as it is. And that statement is a very delicate way of saying something that is said in much stronger language and much more offensive language every day by men in a war. It is like being criticized for obscenity for having my character say after being shot, "Oh, poop, I've been shot!" instead of "Oh, shit!" It would be laughable. "Oh, poop, I've been shot." To have something like that would be ridiculous. And similarly you wouldn't have soldiers talking about women or making comments that they wouldn't ordinarily make in the real world. What I'm trying to say is that while I'm recording a thing I'm not necessarily endorsing it. Dostoyevsky, when he writes about murder in *Crime and Punishment* is not endorsing the acts of Raskolnikov. Instead he is, I think--I hope and I trust--that his thoughts were to say: here are the complications and complications of a man pretending he is superman. So when I have characters saying misogynistic things in dialogue or making misogynistic declarations I am not endorsing them, I'm reporting them. You don't blame the messenger for the news. That's one level of response.

Another level of response to the criticisms--I picked that example by the way--I just looked at Cathey's chronology [of articles on O'Brien's work listed in a bibliography compiled by Calloway] and one of the things was titled that, wasn't it? One of the articles? I just now glanced at it. I think one of the titles of one of the articles was the "gook thing." "She is Pretty for a Gook." Is that right?

Calloway: Yes.

O'Brien: That's why I picked that example. Let me just pause there. Ask me a more specific question to respond to. What are some of the statements made about my work in particular that would make it seem anti-feminist?

McNerney: For example, there is the business at the end of "How to Tell a True War Story," where the woman comes up and says that she doesn't like war stories. And I guess some critics have said that this implies that somehow women are not smart enough or not intuitive enough to understand a war story, and as you were talking about yesterday, in part the story "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is a kind of answer to that. To the depiction of women which maybe presents them as less understanding or less in contact with the emotional force of what's going on in these stories.

O'Brien: There are two levels of response to that. One is this: that I will submit as a hypothesis that can be verified or disproved through scientific means that by and large women in America don't like war stories. That if you were to do a poll, and ask a cross-section of women demographically selected statistically, "Would you read a war story?" or "Would you prefer war stories to love stories, father stories, mother stories, son stories," that you are going to find the dominant statistical answer being, "Women don't *like* war stories." It doesn't mean that they're not perspicacious. It doesn't mean that they are not

smart. It doesn't mean that they are not intuitive. All it means is that they don't like them. They prefer not to read them. The question then becomes why. Why is it? And my answer to that again is a cultural answer. It is that because women are excluded by law from serving in combat, and up until recently were really discriminated against from serving in the armed forces in general. I think that they still are to some extent. There is discrimination that still occurs but nevertheless there is an exclusion, a cultural exclusion, which explains, I think, why women would prefer not to read about something with which they cannot identify for cultural reasons. That is, in the culture they have been excluded from a phenomenon, which is the phenomenon of combat. Beyond that, another reason that women may not like war stories has to do with how war stories oftentimes are bad stories. That is to say, they are full of cliché, blood, death, bullets, bombs, purposeless stereotypes, oftentimes glorifying war. All these are valid reasons not to like war stories. They are perfectly valid. And so when I say at the end of that story, "ordinarily I don't like war stories, this one I liked"--that's what the woman says at the end of that story, "this one I liked"--it is supposed to be a backhanded compliment to that woman. This one she liked because, I hope, it isn't stereotypical, isn't predictable, isn't melodramatic. It touches a woman's spirit the same way it would touch a man's spirit. "This one I liked."

What I am criticizing is the culturally caused statistical propensity on the part of women to not give war stories the same open-minded consideration that I would give to a story about a feminist and a professor in a college. There can be good stories about women and bad stories about women. Good stories about mothers and bad stories about mothers. And if it is expected that I should be able to read *Madame Bovary*, a book about a woman written by a man, I can expect that a woman would some day write a war story as good as any I could write through acts of the imagination and acts of cultural identification ... through acts of socialization. The essence of the first level of response is a cultural answer. That is to say, I am criticizing a culture, not women. I am just

criticizing the culture that has unfairly excluded women from the responsibility of taking part in a social phenomenon.

There is another level to it that is a little more angry. And that level is it seems to me that women are going to have to acknowledge that men are being treated unfairly. And women I don't think have thought about it much. I think women by and large in western society take it for granted that they don't have to serve in combat and it's not even thought about much. It's just a given. It's as if God had somehow granted a divine right to women: You don't have to die in combat. You don't have to go through this horror. Well, God didn't do it, man did it. Law did it. Tradition did it. Culture did it. It seems to me that excluding women from combat is a clear violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to our Constitution. We should *all* be treated fairly. Why not only draft blacks, or only draft Albanians, or only draft Italians? There would be a revolution in this country in any of those cases.

That story is meant to call attention to a fundamental inequity in my opinion. Half of our population is excluded from the horror of serving in combat. And I wanted to call attention to that fact because I think it has caused a lot of difficulties in our history.

The third thing I want to say is that I think there is an unsubstantiated belief that gender determines bellicosity. I wonder if that is true or not. Again, based on people like Lizzie Borden or Catherine the Great, I can't say that women are absolutely and utterly non-violent creatures. It seems to me to be a kind of denigration of women to try to contend such a thing. To say "we are not capable of belligerence, we're not capable of anger. We're not capable of this." It seems to me to denigrate women to say such a thing. These so-called feminists who somehow say "we are the nurturers; we are the lovers; we are the child-bearers of the world; we are endowed with a God-given goodness that men are not endowed with" is to violate a fundamental humanity about women. That women are somehow not capable of things men are capable of when in fact I think they are. I think history, and my own experience and the experience basically of the human race is

that women know what sin is, know what evil is. Have participated in it themselves in their own ways. I guess I am trying to rebel against a stereotype. That one would think a feminist would be applauding me for. One would think a feminist would be saying "you are right!" That our gender doesn't make us less than human. Those are the layers of response I have. What I am curious about is what have I missed? What have I overlooked in my response?

McNerney: In the story "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," you envision the possibility of a woman in combat. Of a woman in Vietnam who goes there, and there is a sort of very "heart of darkness" quality to what she undergoes once she is there. And as I understand it, and as you have explained it in the last couple of days, to a certain degree that story is a working hypothesis of exactly what you are talking about. That women just as much as men under the right conditions, or really under the worst conditions is what we mean, can experience the same reduction of the soul or the reduction of the self.

O'Brien: Yeah, that's essentially what seems to me an utterly feminist story. It seems to me to be saying in part if women were to serve in combat they would be experiencing precisely what I am, the same conflicts, the same paradoxes, the same terrors, the same guilts, the same seductions of the soul. They would be going to the same dark side of the human hemisphere, the dark side of the moon, the dark side of their own psyches. It seems to me that the story is a fable in a funny way. That it's meant to make explicit that which I though was implicit all along in my own writing.

I remember a character named Sarkin Aung Wan who is in *Cacciato*, who is a figment of Paul Berlin's imagination. I would guess that if I were to read this literature, I'm going to find some feminist writing about this character incorrectly. I haven't read the stuff but I would say she might be brought up as an example somehow of O'Brien's view of women. She to me is an extraordinarily strong character. In fact, she might be the

second example of a hero. Maybe she is a second hero. She is a woman who is fleeing with her aunts from horror and from terror, acting on her convictions. She is made up by Paul Berlin. She is sort of a made-up character within a made-up character within a made-up book. Nonetheless, she is an aspect of Paul Berlin's personality. Within the Paris Peace Talks table scene she speaks for part of Paul Berlin's personality, speaks for the *good* part, I think. Saying, you've walked this far in your imagination, why don't you keep walking out of this war? Why don't you be brave? Why don't you walk away from the horror of this war the way Cacciato did and the way I'm urging you to? Let's live in peace and civility. She is the guide away from that war for Paul Berlin. She is this made-up guide. She gets him out of trouble when they are down in Li Van Hgoc's tunnel. That is, she is the guide out of that horror. She has a tenacity of spirit. she has a strength of endurance that belies her fragility as she is described physically. So I imagine some female critic of mine has probably written that she has found the language describing her physically offensive. But what I think they have overlooked is, despite her physical characteristics--which are youthful, like that her age is sometimes twelve, sometimes twenty--she is not sure. Nonetheless she has an abiding obstinacy of purpose and an abiding strength of both physical and spiritual that is meant to represent part of Paul Berlin's own personality. That which would act bravely, that which would flee from war, that which would do something difficult. So, in that character, which is written, I don't know, twenty years ago, a long time ago, I try to place a woman in a situation of incredible stress and terror and have her act nobly and well. In the character of Mary Anne [Bell], she doesn't act so nobly or well. She acts as others would act. She's seduced by it. But the capabilities of one woman, to act just as men, sometimes respond this way, other times this way, is to show that so too can women [succumb to violence].

McNerney: *Northern Lights* and *The Nuclear Age* over the years haven't received quite the same attention as your novels which are very Vietnam specific or Vietnam-oriented.

What these share in common, among their concern for issues of courage and cowardice and so on is that they are both set in the Midwest. The ending to *If I Die* also takes the reader over the farmlands of Minnesota as your plane comes back in to home. What significance does locale play in these instances and what are your feelings now towards those small towns which created such a strong gravity in you and in your decision to go to Vietnam?

O'Brien: My feelings are always ambivalent. The way we all look at our hometowns if we are sane. I see virtue in the Midwest. But I also see horror. I see a kind of grotesque horror. The same kind of horror probably that Flannery O'Connor saw in Georgia and the South. I see lines side by side like parallel railroad tracks. I see one track through the Midwest of independence of spirit, belief in the human individual, almost the inviolable sanctity of the human individual. As virtue is. But the line next to that track is a peculiar sort of in-grown smugness. I want to say this as delicately as I can, it's hard to do. A kind of smugness with respect to personal virtue. A kind of smugness that takes delight in ignorance in a funny way. Those high-falutin' Easterners, those crass Westerners. Those redneck Southerners. A kind of delight in ignorance.

I wrote in several places--I'll try to get Vietnam specific now--about how the people in my hometown didn't know Bao Dai from the man in the moon, is one little phrase I use. Didn't know the first thing about French colonialism. And it's true. They *didn't* and probably to this day don't, by and large. If you were to give a quiz, "Name three prominent Vietnamese figures during the last forty years," I'd say that most people in my hometown would not be able to come up with more than say one. Which would be Ho Chi Minh. That would probably be it. They would scratch their heads and say, "Who was that president of South Vietnam? Who was that guy I wanted to have my son die for again?" I'm not sure they would remember Khanh or Ky or Thieu or Diem. I doubt they would. In fact I know they wouldn't. It's not a doubt. And yet these are the guys who

personified a South Vietnam that they would want to send their sons to die for. Well, that kind of smugness and that kind of delight in their own ignorance. They don't want to know. They think, "Fuck, I don't care about that." It made me very angry. And you can tell now that I am just barely controlling my anger. When I go home to this day--I go home once a year to play in a golf tournament in my hometown--I go out to the golf course and there are these people in their white shoes and polyester pants. Which to me represents smugness;I don't have anything against polyester, but I have a lot against what polyester represents in my imagination, which is an attitude of smugness. And now it's an attitude of ignorance of the world and a delight in Worthington as the center of the universe. And America as the center of the universe. Everything beyond that I don't have to know about. My country right or wrong. Well, it got us into a lot of trouble in Vietnam, that attitude. And it almost got me dead. I have struck back oftentimes at that place. I recognize the virtues such as they are. But I'm glad I don't live there anymore. In a way I *never* lived there. That's what I meant by that lonely feeling, that isolation feeling. I always felt uncomfortable. You talk about ways to answer your question. This "maybe" stuff we have been talking about and possibilities and layers of truth. I'm not the kind of guy that's going to fit into Worthington. Truth [there] is just with a big "T."

McNerney: This last question is one I had really wanted my students to ask you yesterday during the lecture. Can the non-participant understand the combat experience through literature? In the same vein, can the non-participant convey the essential quality of war ... or is there even such a thing as an essential quality of war?

O'Brien: No, there's not. War is everything. I mean, in one of the stories, I think in "How to Tell a True War Story," I make a long list: war is adventure; war is holiness; war is pity; war is longing; war is love; war is ghosts. I mean it is long. War is a multiplicity of events. Maybe always but certainly now, for me, the environment of war is the

environment of life, magnified. That is, instead of mortality pressing on us twenty years from now, the possibility of cancer, it is pressing on me now. It is the only real difference [of war]. The stakes of living in a war, the stakes are enhanced only because of the awareness of the proximity of death. That is to say, I'm almost dead. With every step I take in a war as opposed to fifty steps to the day I get cancer or have a first heart attack. We are *all* living in a war. It's just that the wolf isn't quite at the door. The wolf is sort of baying in the woods, in the lives we live in the ordinary world. The wolf is out there baying but it's a ways away. Whereas in a war the wolf is right at the door scratching and the door is unlocked and partly open and you're trying to keep it closed but that's the war. The enemy is right there; death is right there. But nonetheless it is right there, we just don't recognize it, with every puff of the cancer stick and in every sip of coffee and in every breath we take of the air, we are one breath closer to the grave. I hope that my work will ultimately have its effect not in understanding war with a small "w" but the big war of living. That the stakes are always high. We are always almost dead in our lives we just don't know it. The problems and dilemmas that are presented in a war setting are essentially the problems and dilemmas of living itself. It's hard to be brave in the world. The ordinary world. It's hard to know what bravery is in the ordinary world. It's hard to know what rectitude is in the ordinary world because we are often put into situations of paradox much as this officer I mentioned--man and mission. In the daily world you are in these situations constantly. Of trying to adjudicate that which is ultimately insoluble. I love *her* [but I also] love *her*. What should I do? I love them both. You can't do both. Who are you going to live with? Who are you going to marry? Who are you going to be faithful to? That is just one example which should hit home to women, men, Martians, Albanians. It should be specific to nothing except to humanity itself. Those paradoxes which war presents with the wolf at the door therefore become so important and make your nerves jangle, are there all the time. I hope that when my books are read they'll

reverberate for those reasons, for those who have never experienced war and never will, but experienced a different war, the war of life itself.

I should say just as a factual addendum that I receive a lot of letters about my work. I would say--I haven't counted so the numbers are not going to be accurate--but I would say that at least 80% of the letters I receive are from women. Maybe more. My instinct is to say 90% because I think that's right but I'll be conservative. In any case, the letters are from the mothers of soldiers who served in Vietnam and Desert Storm and other wars. They are from sisters. People married to these guys. Saying essentially all the same thing, "Thank you for writing this book because now I feel something in terms of identification, and in terms of participation that I didn't feel before. My husband can't talk about it, but now I sort of understand why he doesn't, why he can't." There is a joy that you get through receiving that kind of a letter as opposed to a letter from a vet saying I read your book and thank you for writing it. It echoed my experience. I don't have to echo his experience. He knows what his experience was. He's been there. It's nice to have an echo but he doesn't need it the same way that a child of nineteen needs it before trying to make up his mind or her mind whether to join the Army. Or the citizen needs when it comes time to enter the booth to vote. Or that a woman needs to be able to give comfort or counsel to a husband suffering or a child trying to decide whether to join the Army or not. That we all need in our lives.

What I'm trying to say is the joy I get is probably the same joy Conrad got when he would get letters from people who weren't sailors. Saying, God, you know, thank you for that experience of going through that typhoon. Now I've had an experience I couldn't have otherwise, without being able to read Conrad's art. That is the joy. The joy is not the joy of touching veterans or touching people who have lived what you have lived. The joy is just the opposite. Maybe that's what hurts me when I hear that articles are being written by women saying I am anti-feminist. The whole creative joy is to touch the hearts of people whose hearts otherwise wouldn't be touched. That's why it hurts I guess to have

these things saying I am antifeminist. It hurts me badly because the purpose of art is to touch the human heart in its solidarity and solidity. It has very little to do with the differences among us but has a lot to do with the similarities we share.

Calloway: You mentioned yesterday that you don't want to write another novel.

O'Brien: Right.

Calloway: What kinds of future writing projects do you have in mind?

O'Brien: What I want to do is write short stories. There are two things about a novel. One is that it takes so much out of your life. How many years do I have left? I am 47 and let's say I live to 80. Well I haven't got a lot of years left. For a novel on average it takes me five to eight years, somewhere in there. Give or take. They used to take less but now they're taking that long. That's not many more books. And I don't want to have to be able to concentrate for the rest of my life on just three more people, main characters, or groups of characters. I'm aware of the limits of my life now as we all are when we get older. I would prefer to be able to do fifty stories about different facts of the world as opposed to just three or four more books which is all I would be able to finish.

Calloway: But you turn so many of your short stories into books.

O'Brien: Yeah, but this time I can let the reader turn them into books if they want to. You know what I mean.

Calloway: A big, open text. Yeah.

O'Brien: A hugely open text! But there is also the business of gratification. There are so few gratifications that come to the writer. And to have to wait eight years to receive your gratification of a book coming out is too long to wait now for me. I need to be able to feel that I am accomplishing things in the world. Say if you were a lawyer and you were just stuck on one case forever and ever. You'd feel you weren't accomplishing much. You are just stuck in it. So I'm pretty sure. You should never trust what a writer says about his goals for the future because they are so fluid. Given the way I feel now I can't imagine writing another book. And if I can't imagine it, as I said earlier, the odds are very slim that I'll do it. I have to be able to imagine a thing before I can do it. Before I could. I could imagine writing this book I'm writing now. I could imagine the hardships; I could imagine the joys. Now I can't imagine that. What I can imagine instead is writing stories. Maybe forty pages, fifty page stories. But still just stories.

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