Battlefield as Purgatorial for the American Self:

Tim O'Brien's Vindication of the Vietnam War Experience

in *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*

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Introduction

1.

Tim O'Brien (1946-) is one of a few American war writers that have pursued a long-term engagement with the Vietnam War and continued to explore experience of the war in narrative form. When considering the American soldier-authors who have developed their own individual perspectives and responses to the tangled facts surrounding the Vietnam War and sought a style and manner appropriate to representing the trauma of war, Tim O'Brien might be the first name that comes to mind among a wide range of present-day readers—from American combat veterans who served in Viet Nam to those who may have little interest in war, especially as it has been portrayed and embellished in Hollywood films. (Hereafter, "Vietnam" is distinguished from Viet Nam, the name of a country in the Southeast Asia. "Vietnam" encapsulates the traumatic war memories which revolve around the American military intervention in the Vietnam War.)[1]

O'Brien is admired as the author of a memoir, or a personal narrative, *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), and seven books of fiction—*Northern Lights* (1975), *Going After Cacciato* (1978), *The Nuclear Age* (1985), *The Things They Carried* (1990), *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), *Tom Cat in Love* (1998), and *July, July* (2002)—in addition, he has published numerous short stories and nonfictional essays, most of which thematize the traumatic experiences of soldiers in the Vietnam War. O'Brien gathered materials for most of his war writings from what he actually went through, during and after his service in Viet Nam: the irrational events and ghastly scenes on the battlefield that provoked long-lasting psychological traumata and still cast shadows on his post-war life. O'Brien, however, is not a narrowly focused writer—O'Brien's "Vietnam" is not limited to the battlefield

but is often coupled with personal narrative of his ambivalent feelings about America—his longing and disdain for his Midwestern upbringing in a small town of Worthington, Minnesota. Thus, in the process of contemplating "Vietnam," O'Brien, together with his fictional characters, attempts to meditate on his own cultural background and ideological inheritance, which eventually pushed him to join the army during the Vietnam War. When reading O'Brien's books about the war and the trauma soldiers experienced, particularly his famous war trilogy *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*, the reader finds that O'Brien's protagonists are all oppressed by the psychological pressure exerted by the townspeople in the Midwestern community; O'Brien's protagonists perceive that the people's advice would never help them deal with the difficult question of whether to fight in an unjust war. However, it was the great fear of being exposed to public censure that eventually dissuades O'Brien's protagonists from their desire to escape military service. Thus, as far as most of O'Brien's reader are concerned, O'Brien's mastery of the true-to-life war description would be helpful to those wishing to obtain a fuller picture of the complex, elusive war, but, it certainly invites the reader to consider more deeply the significance of the American military intervention in Viet Nam and the careful examination of the spiritual purgatory and the state of severe mental anguish that soldiers experienced. Today, O'Brien has won fame as one of the finest contemporary American novelists, not merely as a war writer who describes the life of soldiers in Viet Nam: he has attracted a wide general readership as well as critical acclaim both at home and abroad.

O'Brien's war stories, some of which received literary awards, have been well-received by the readers of his generation who have continued to contemplate upon "Vietnam." They also have enlightened American post-war students who knew little about what the war was like (and the way it is now viewed and should be

remembered); and thus, O'Brien's war stories have been frequently taught in high schools and college English classes in the United States.[2] Patrick A. Smith, a major critic who places great importance on O'Brien's war fictions, recalls that he read *Going After Cacciato*, "for the first time in a survey course of war literature in the mid-1980s as an undergraduate at Penn State University" ("On Tim O'Brien" 3). Philip D. Beidler, discussing American literature in the early to the mid-1970s in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (1982), notes that the postwar period was marked by "significant advances in memoir and documentary" (87) of the war. Following Beidler's analysis, Susan Farrell emphasizes that the late 70s was celebrated by "several best-selling, nonfiction accounts of the war" ("Tim O'Brien" 39), referring to examples of popular nonfiction produced by soldier-authors such as Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977). For Donald Ringnalda, many of the combat veterans seem to have been full of a consuming passion for accurate representation of their personal experiences of "Vietnam." Resonating with most of the soldier-authors' obsession with facts of their Vietnam War experiences, the audience across the country also believed "what truly matters when making a film or novel about war is accuracy, factualness, faithful attention to details--*not* vision" (Ringnalda, "Unlearning" 65). Apparently, in the early years after the Vietnam War was over, most readers considered the nonfictional accounts written by the veterans as equivalent to "red-hot coals of truth" (Smith, "On Tim O'Brien" 3) of the war. As Smith's reading of *Cacciato* in the classroom confirms, especially in high school during the 1980s, readers started putting much more emphasis on "the war's visceral realities" (Smith, "On Tim O'Brien" 3). Many of the readers might have supposed that the value of O'Brien's war writings lies largely in his past career as an infantryman and derives from his detailed descriptions in a journalistic mode and style of writing.

Going After Cacciato, however, demonstrates that O'Brien's in-depth observation of a soldier's heart and mind in the midst of the wartime chaos forms the basis of O'Brien's truth about the war. The detail and accuracy of his description may possibly help non-veterans to identify themselves with the veterans. O'Brien's examination of the war and its truth, and his endeavors to develop a way to represent the truth of war, then, finally come to fruition in *The Things They Carried*.

Tobey C. Herzog, who actually served in the military in Viet Nam and published a number of books of criticism on O'Brien's works, was one of the teachers who were inspired to teach O'Brien's war narratives in his classes. Herzog, in the preface of his critical study *Tim O'Brien* (1997), refers to his "experiences teaching O'Brien's nonfiction and fiction in a variety of literature classes at Wabash College" (ix), which seems to have arisen from his own and his students' struggles to understand the significance of the American involvement in the tumultuous war in Viet Nam. O'Brien's popularity and value in secondary-higher education, were further affirmed by the publication of *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Tim O'Brien* (2010), the collection of critical commentary and essays, edited by Alex Vernon and Catherine Calloway, which features various proposals for the practical use of O'Brien's texts in classes. Vernon and Calloway suggest that reading O'Brien's war narratives will provide today's students with an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and insight into a huge blot on American military history, or "the great *American* trauma: America's black eye, America's pulled hamstring, America's impacted wisdom tooth" (Ringnalda, "Unlearning" 66). The traumatic memory was gradually fading away from the American nation's collective memory, as Bobbie Ann Mason, the author of *In Country* (1985), claims, "America had tried not to think about Vietnam, tried to forget it" (170). While serving as the perpetual reminder of the American presence in Viet Nam, O'Brien's war fictions contribute to the reader's understanding of the accounts

of the current American wars after 9/11, such as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, critics such as Smith, Herzog, Vernon and Calloway, who read O'Brien's works in the context of full comprehension of ambiguity of the war, suggest that O'Brien's war writings serve as a "foothold" where any reader can re-consider accounts of contemporary American wars. As Vernon and Calloway declare, "Literature . . . is one of the primary methods of combating cultural forgetfulness, of passing one generation's experiences along to the next" (1).

However, this does not mean that the critics prefer to confine O'Brien's war stories within the realm of war literature (or Vietnam War literature). Some critics go beyond the scope of inquiry into the American war experience, and they certainly grasp the literary merit of O'Brien's craftsmanship as novelist. Vernon and Calloway also acknowledge that "O'Brien's writing transcends the topic of war to encompass such subjects as love, death, courage, fear, truth, memory, imagination, freedom, peace, secrecy, gender, social commitment, and the meaning of existence" (2), as well as recognize O'Brien's capabilities as a postmodern artist displaying "a skillful blend of numerous genres, including magic realism, metafiction, fantasy, picaresque adventure, and autobiography" (2). Critical analyses of O'Brien's war writings, the first phase of which appeared in the early 1980s and which continue to be updated and improved, reached agreement that O'Brien's war representations and writing techniques go beyond the old clichés in conventional war writings and the writing style, usually in the manner and mode of the traditional realism. O'Brien's war stories, most of which are based on his personal memories of actual combat experiences seen from his subjective point of view, are filled with careful observation of the American soldiers' thoughts and feelings in the midst of war in their extreme conditions on the verge of the war. O'Brien's concern for the soldiers' traumatized psyche, then, encourages him to pursue every possibility of telling the truth of the war. In

representing the war traumata, then, O'Brien tries to stay true to the soldiers' inner experiences, in a way that is unlike traditional war representations, whereas "[f]or thousands of years, warriors were depicted as heroic demigods striding into battle, and writers often euphemized the horrific nature of war by covering it over with flowery language" (Wiener 11).

Conventional realism failed to capture the manifold absurdities of the war in Viet Nam, such as "confusion over the nature and identity of the enemy, the abandonment of objectives--territory or positions--soon after obtaining them at great cost, conflicting or unreliable information about the goals and status of the war, and constant mismatches of ends and means" (Jason 75). These absurdities, however, seem to be more illuminated than ever by O'Brien's accurate war representations.[3] O'Brien displays a strong interest in the dynamics of changing human emotion at the state of "the surreal, chaotic, hallucinatory, morally ambiguous qualities that will forever haunt me [O'Brien]" ("On War" 196). His strong interest motivates his endeavors to pin down certain truths underlying the mystery of human psychology, which go hand in hand with the postmodernist interest in "looking for and then exposing contradictions in what appeared at first to be a totally unproblematic, coherent and unified whole" (Hutcheon 120-21). And thus, his art of writing adheres to "a severely limited perspective . . . passages of lyrical, surreal description that create distortions of time, place, and action (or illusions of such distortion); and little or no backgrounding of characters. They shred cause and effect assumptions, leaving us wondering what, if anything, governs human life on this planet" (Jason 75-76). O'Brien's war representations, then, are often said to resonate to some extent with writings in postmodernist aesthetics (although O'Brien himself actually does not seem to be satisfied with the oversimplified assumption that he is a postmodernist. He is not happy with the typecasting as a war writer, either) that are marked by "the absence of

closure, the question of identity (cast into doubt by doublings, parallels, disappearances), the problematic nature of language, the artificiality of representation, the deconstruction of binary oppositions, and the *intertextual nature* of texts . . . which effectively shows us the blind spots of earlier texts" (Bertens 110-11).

Taking *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried* as good demonstrations of the above-mentioned postmodernist tendencies, O'Brien's war narratives transcend empirical depictions of armed conflict on the battlefield or the jingoist war mythologies. Rather, he succeeded in elevating his war narratives to high-quality texts characterized by sophistication, complexity, playfulness, and a sense of mysteries. Herzog, for example, places great importance on O'Brien's recurrent approaches to his own art of creation and the following themes coupled with the examination of the mysteries of human hearts and minds under unbearable duress and in untenable circumstances, from multiple perspectives. Herzog describes the central themes of O'Brien's novels as "virtue, courage, evil, mortality, human relationships, quests for control, difficult choices, commitment, and the personal and global politics of life" (*Tim O'Brien* x). Stefania Ciocia, in *Vietnam and Beyond: Tim O'Brien and the Power of Storytelling* published in 2012, recognizes that:

> Vietnam is for O'Brien a productive starting point for the treatment of wider themes with a deep, universal resonance—the human need for love, the quest for meaning, the wrestling with ethical dilemmas, the coming to terms with one's failures—and for the development of thought-provoking formal experiments underpinned by a strong sense of one's moral accountability. (2)

Ciocia sheds light on the close connection between O'Brien's exploring of these wider themes and his partaking of a postmodern sensibility encapsulated in his deconstructive spirit and concern with the performative power of storytelling (3). Together with O'Brien's achievements as an acute observer of the human condition and a postmodern fabulator, Ciocia also suggests that O'Brien's account of the human cost of warfare and true representation allude to the gender issues related to the question of courage. And thus, Ciocia shows her strong interest in "O'Brien's revision of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity" (7). As Smith suggests in *Tim O'Brien: A Critical Companion* published in 2005, O'Brien's writings are not only full of observations of the Vietnam War but also display "a keen historical sense with a humanity absent from much literature that details the war and its consequences" (24), which suggests his war writings will join the canon of American literature. Like many other scholars, Susan Farrell agrees that O'Brien's rich depiction and elaborate narratives can be considered as examples of postmodernist art which display deep and profound, mysterious and thoughtful elements:

> . . . his body of work is not necessarily about war itself—about bullets and foxholes and military maneuvers—but rather the feelings, experiences, and moral decisions made by human beings who are often under unbearable duress and in untenable circumstances. Even though O'Brien frequently uses sophisticated postmodern techniques, such as including metafictive commentary on the stories he tells as he tells them, utilizing multiple narrators and complicated perspectives, as well as questioning the reliability of historical truth, nevertheless his fiction is always accessible to readers. . . . His work involves readers emotionally, making them feel what his characters feel and asking them to question

their own values and beliefs. (*Critical Companion* v)

The reputation of O'Brien's war writings is also bolstered by Don Lee's view that O'Brien is more than a Vietnam War writer. Lee perceives "something much more universal" (41) in O'Brien's works and concludes that "to categorize O'Brien as merely a Vietnam War writer would be ludicrously unfair and simplistic" (41). O'Brien's war stories are not just accounts of combat lives. His stories display close inspection of human psychology from multiple perspectives, and are marked by the postmodernist aesthetics of representation, such as questioning the distinction between truth and fiction and the hybrid quality of writing that combines various narrative genres.

2.

A quick overview of the major features of O'Brien's war stories suggests that O'Brien's endeavors to represent the American war experience and his concerns with metaphysical questions result in writing that reflects a postmodernist aesthetics of representation. It does not seem to be easy to encapsulate these aspects of his works in simple form or find the most apt term to describe them or the proper label to attach to them. Rather, it seems to be more appropriate to consider how these factors are interrelated and interwoven with one another. This dissertation, however, suggests that previous studies have failed to attach great importance to what is remarkable about the writings on the American experiences in the Vietnam War, i.e. the "diversity and tremendous range of experience" (Lomperis 44). Timothy J. Lomperis, in his commentary on the conference on "The Vietnam Experience in American Literature" held in 1985, sheds light on the comment of James Webb, the author of *Fields of Fire* (1978). According to Lomperis, Webb wrote in his keynote address that "Vietnam was

many things. It varied year by year, place by place, unit by unit" (qtd in Webb's keynote address 45). The dissertation considers that most previous analyses have made little of the fact that each of the multiple thematic features of O'Brien's war fictions resides in the conflation of many factors contributing to a chaotic situation where the pain and agony of O'Brien's protagonists (as well as the author O'Brien himself) are jumbled together. The dissertation proposes that the author O'Brien's tangle of experiences and difficulties arise from a psychological struggle, which is mirrored in his main characters' perplexity about whether to devote themselves to the war in Viet Nam even though they believe or consider the war unjust. The author O'Brien embodies his bitter memories in his war stories, where the protagonists confront the flee-or-fight-the-war dilemma and are agonized by the perplexity when confronting the need to decide. The distinctive character of the situation becomes more evident in the comments of soldier-authors such as Philip Caputo and Robert Olen Butler. Philip Caputo remembers what he believed at the time: ". . . the United States stood only for what was true, good, and right and that we were the great liberators of the world from totalitarian tyranny" (4). Caputo clearly states that he never faced the moral crisis that O'Brien frequently thematized in his works. Caputo, who joined the military five years before O'Brien, recalling his entering the military and going off to the war, mentioned the public's blind acceptance of the war: ". . . no one in the early stages questioned the rightness of the Vietnam War or the rightness of going to war with a Communist government. That seemed like the right thing to do" (10). Butler, who was contemporary with Tim O'Brien and drafted in 1969, believes that "[t]he prosecution of the war seemed bungled and misbegotten" (141) and has no doubt that "the country was flawed and prosecuting the war in inappropriate ways" (144). Apparently, Butler never gave full support to the war. Although the object of his critical attention seems to be the U.S. military strategy, he also pondered over the

deeper meaning, cause and reason of the American war in Viet Nam. Moreover, in regard to his performance in his basic training camp, he recalls that he maintained close rapport with his drill sergeant and he describes the basic training as a positive experience. As Butler explains, “I worked my ass off to be the best soldier I could be. In that restricted, utterly hostile, utterly alien world, it was an exercise in persona. I took on the persona of what was an admirable person in that enclosed world and got it right” (143).

Butler eventually admits that his decisions to enter the military and later to go to Viet Nam, unlike Tim O’Brien’s experience, were not traumatic (144). In contrast to O’Brien, Butler did not experience the flee-or-fight problem that constitutes a reiterative pattern in O’Brien’s war stories. Considering that O’Brien’s war stories and his real life get frequently intertwined and O’Brien’s protagonists reflect his actual experiences and feelings, this flee-or-fight struggle can be understood by reference to O’Brien’s personal history. Herzog, who was born in the same year as O’Brien, views his decision to enter the army as quite different from O’Brien’s situation. Herzog suggests that “O’Brien’s difficult decision not to resist the draft but to enter the army in August 1968 still haunts him to this day and is perhaps the defining moment of his life . . .” (*Tim O’Brien* ix). Now, we have to trace back again to O’Brien’s personal memories when he spent his youth growing up in an American family, in order to understand the special circumstances behind the most difficult time in his life in summer in 1968, which resulted in providing him with material for his imagination and his writing.

O’Brien was brought up in Minnesota, in the middle-western region in the United States, and generally recognized as the American heartland, where a large percentage of the state’s population is made up of descendants of white settlers, mainly immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia. The region is also marked by a

tendency to ideological conformity and the people's conservative outlook on life. He was raised in a white, middle-class family. He spent his childhood and youth during the early Cold War years, among one of the first cohorts of the Baby Boom (a period which began in 1946 and lasted to 1964). O'Brien's generation was spoiled by the affluence in the 1950s that was partly the result of American triumph in the Second World War and his generation fully enjoyed the nation's prosperity. American society reached the culmination of its development in the post-1945 period, when the whole nation was spiritually uplifted by American "victory culture." Tom Engelhardt, who focuses on the tradition of American "victory culture" in *The End of Victory Culture*, examines the American tendency to take pride in its culture of victory. As Engelhardt explains, the American mythology of ultimate victory was always the basis of the American war story, where "the savages fell in countless numbers in a spectacle of slaughter, it [the slaughter of the savages] was instantly made innocent—and thrilling—by the cleansing powers of the just victory certain to come" (4-5). The American war story, especially in conspiracy with the Hollywood film industry, has greatly contributed to the generation of its language and images, which encouraged the nation to affirm the justness of American actions. American victory culture, thus, was reinforced by the popularity of the American war story, as Engelhardt shows. Associating the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor with the American war story where "a savage, nonwhite enemy had launched a barbaric attack on Americans going about their lives" (Engelhardt 5), Engelhardt suggests that there are many who consider the Pearl Harbor attack as "a modern version of 'Indian fighting'" (5). Engelhardt's analyses of the American war story shed light on the cultural heritage of the romantic image of the American self established in the nineteenth century. The middle-western conformism and conservatism, mentioned in O'Brien's personal accounts, seem to have incorporated the tradition of American victory culture and still uphold the

optimistic image of the nineteenth-century American self. And then, since O'Brien's upbringing in the middle-western community has a lot to do with his identity formation, fighting the American war and contributing to the American victory, for O'Brien, appears to be involved in the issue of preserving the American self. However, a large part of the nation began to be aware in the early stages that the war in Viet Nam did not bring the great triumphal achievement as they had been attained in the previous wars. O'Brien was among those criticizing the unjustness of the war.

The United States launched a full-scale military intervention in the Vietnam War from 1963. O'Brien was drafted in 1969, when the national debate over the American military involvement in Viet Nam raged and citizens witnessed the political-cultural disturbance caused by the American military intervention in Viet Nam. America, in the case of the Vietnam War, could not gain a victory as the nation had succeeded in the previous war just as WWII. The American difficulties in Viet Nam resulted in public confusion, which led to citizens' skepticism about the cause of the war. Anti-war demonstrations rapidly expanded domestically and worldwide. O'Brien was majoring in political science when he was in Macalester College. After graduating from the college, he was expected to enter Harvard University. With wide knowledge of politics, he had a keen insight into the American society confronting the Vietnam War as it turned into a quagmire. He participated in active campus debates to object to the war in Macalester College and the Minnesota State University and became actively involved in the political campaigns to support the presidency of Eugene McCarthy, who was the only candidate taking a strong stand on the war. Even though he was drafted in the summer in 1968, he considered the war to be wrong. And then, he decided at one point to abandon the army and escape from the United States to Canada. However, after the perplexity with the decision, he gave up carrying out his plan to desert. O'Brien recalled this struggle and described it in the interview with

Larry McCaffery in 1979:

> It seemed arrogant simply to give them [O'Brien's family and community] the finger and say, "No. I won't go." The "gravity" . . . was a feeling of emotional pressure—a fear of exile, of hurting my family, of losing everything I held to be valuable in my life. In the end, questions of political rightness or wrongness succumbed to the emotional pressure. ("Interview" 7)

His remarks in the interview suggest that his final decision to go to Viet Nam was not made as a result of bellicose feelings. Rather, it clearly shows that he was reluctant to become a soldier. The reluctant decision to go to the wrong war was at the root of the very trauma that had been repeatedly making O'Brien feel disgusted. He refers to the bitter memory of this dilemma in many interviews.

The reader must be questioning what brought O'Brien to the battlefield. The flee-or-fight struggle was not just agonizing due to fear of physical injury in the war. O'Brien has also emphasized his struggle with public censure. Bothered by the pressure from the townspeople, O'Brien perceived that they were expecting him to be like his "father," a soldier who bravely fought and contributed to the American triumph in the Second World War. O'Brien, on the other hand, offers keen insight into the evil of the Vietnam War and how he became disillusioned with American triumphalism. As a result, he cannot help being disappointed by the people's lack of moral principle concerning the war. O'Brien sees that they are still confident of American victory and the romanticized image of the American self that was established in the middle of the nineteenth century.[4] He realizes that the huge impact of the idealized American self-image and sense of national identity is still rooted in

contemporary American civilization. Thus, O'Brien's sense of hopelessness and his identity crisis lies in the flee-or-fight struggle. However, more importantly, O'Brien eventually gave up the idea of abandoning military service since he was afraid to ruin his public reputation. Thus, he changed his mind and tried to live up to his people's expectations. His attitude toward his perplexity evokes the attribute of the other-oriented personality (to use the terms of David Riesman), which implies that he loses sight of his own autonomy.

3.

This dissertation will explore how O'Brien thematizes his bitter experience with regard to his "dangling" self and will explore how his protagonists vicariously experience the author's trauma and its connection with the crisis of the American self. Going along with the analyses of O'Brien provided by the previously mentioned studies, the dissertation will re-examine critical accounts which trace back O'Brien's (and his main characters') agony to his flee-or-fight decision. This is because O'Brien goes to great lengths to dramatize this traumatic experience and develops it in relation to the more complicated issue of the crisis of the positive American self-image in the post-1945 period. The analysis sheds light on the significance of the flee-or-fight struggle and seeks to make up for lack of much critical interest in the experience from sociological insights. This dissertation believes that O'Brien attempts to dramatize the most difficult event in American military history—the Vietnam War—as a crisis of the American self. O'Brien's war stories are often dramatized by young protagonists who are always struggling with their identity crisis. Given unique characters who are marked by the longing of youth, O'Brien's postmodernist story-telling successfully invite the reader into his fictional world. The style in which O'Brien tells his war stories would resonate with many American readers. The dissertation emphasizes that

three related war stories, *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, *Going After Cacciato*, and *The Things They Carried*, refer to the crisis of American national identity.

In the first chapter, in order to examine the crisis of O'Brien's identity, the analysis focuses on the protagonist Tim O'Brien's struggle with the problem of whether to flee or fight an unjust war in O'Brien's autobiographical work *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. Then, in the next chapter, the analysis shifts its attention to *Going After Cacciato*, where the flee-or-fight quandary that the protagonist O'Brien in *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* tackles with is re-considered by the protagonist Paul Berlin. Berlin's desperate determination represents O'Brien's special effort to re-evaluate his traumatic war experience and manage to accept the unpleasant memory. In the final section, the character-author Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* pays attention to the fact that imagination can bring great spiritual support and bridge the wide gap between the traumatized soldiers and the readers—the power of the story can comfort and aid the soldiers and the readers to survive their ordeal, that is, the lack of the full understanding of the trauma. The character-author O'Brien places emphasis on the power of storytelling. He understands how to make the most of human imagination to re-experience and investigate traumatic memories from various angles.

O'Brien's endeavors to investigate the decision-making in the flee-or-fight quandary are interspersed in the narratives of O'Brien's war trilogy. The recurrent theme of O'Brien's war narrative, the either-or quandary in relation to the problem of whether to fight the Vietnam War, seems to echoes the American struggle in the quest for the American self.

[1] The Vietnam War (1954-75), or the Second Indochina War, is recognized in Viet Nam as the Resistance War against America or the American War. The American military involvement in Viet Nam became much more serious after Lyndon B. Johnson, the thirty-sixth president of the United States, launched in 1965 "Operation of Rolling Thunder, the continuous bombardment of North Vietnam, *without any policy announcement*" (Levine and Papasotiriou 108). Sharon Monteith notes that Johnson's political decision provoked public unrest. According to Monteith, in the same year "American ground troops sent to fight the North Vietnamese Protests against the draft begin" (xx). Monteith adds that a "Federal law was passed to make destroying draft card illegal" (xx). As Timothy J. Lomperis suggests, some Americans "remember Vietnam as a 'noble crusade,' while others relive . . . nightmare of the war as a 'heinous crime'" (3). In any case, what happened in Viet Nam has been casting a shadow over Americans and "remains an important task if any coherence to these memories, and useful lessons from the 'Vietnam experience,' are ever to emerge" (3-4).

[2] In addition to the class room possibilities of O'Brien's texts, as Herzog introduces the chronology of O'Brien's writing career at the beginning of his work *Tim O'Brien* (xv-xvi), *Going After Cacciato* was praised as one of the most important works of O'Brien. O'Brien won the O. Henry Memorial Award, the most prestigious award granted American short fiction, for a short story from *Going After Cacciato* in 1976. And then, in 1978 a second short story from the novel won the O. Henry Award. Then, *Going After Cacciato* won the National Book Award in 1979. Following these achievements of *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried* attained international fame. It was the culmination of his earlier works and became one of the most acclaimed works of O'Brien. The short story titled "The Things They Carried" won the National Magazine Award in 1989. And then, *The Things They Carried* was selected by the *New York Times* as one of the year's ten best works of fiction and awarded the *Chicago Tribune*'s Heartland Prize in 1990. In the same year, the story collection won the Melcher Award. Moreover, it won *Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger* award in France. One of the short storied in the collection *The Things They Carried* is translated into French under the title of *À Propos de Courage.* O'Brien's war stories, especially *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*, have received universal praise and bolstered O'Brien's international reputation as a cutting-edge American war writer. However, the war traumata that O'Brien has been dealing with in most of his earlier works display some unique attributes differentiating it from the work of other soldier-authors who were producing novels and writing personal narratives about the Vietnam War. O'Brien's fame and status as an important author of American literature have been firmly established by not only *Going After Cacciato* but *The Things They Carried*, both of which received recognition from readers and won numerous prizes.

[3] Philip K. Jason refers to some of the fictions belonging to the realism tradition: he suggests that they are marked by "an enslavement to some conventional demands: where the characters come from, what pre-war circumstances shaped them, what they might have to return to" (76). Then, Jason continues to describe the characteristics of these fictions written in the traditional style and manner:

> The degree to which these pasts, presented through set stretches of exposition or labored flashbacks, inform the present is rarely questioned. They seem offered as a "given" necessity of characterization. The fighting units are rendered along socio-economic lines as we are reminded about who fought this war for us. Though these novels show us the discontinuities that the war brings to individual lives, they nonetheless work to suggest connections between the characters' experience of war and their larger (or broader) range of experiences. Indeed, the structures of these novels reflect the assuring notion of coherence. (76)

[4] The positive image of the American self established in the nineteenth century is described in the creed that Ralph Waldo Emerson introduced. The Emersonian portrait of the American self met with the popular reception and gave inspiration to authors of the American Renaissance,

the new movement of American literature running from about 1830 to around the Civil War. Emerson emphasized the importance of man's individuality and stressed man's ability to achieve happiness, which opened the door to America's intellectual independence. One of his important essays entitled "Self-Reliance" contains Emerson's recurrent themes:

> There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. . . .
>
> Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark. (42-43)

The Emersonian model of man mentioned above is associated with the optimistic view of American life.

Chapter 1

"What happens to my soul?": Vietnam War Trauma and the Quest for the Goodness in *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*

1.

A predicament—a difficult situation where the main character is in a state of perplexity about whether to serve in a war that seems to him "wrongly conceived and poorly justified" (O'Brien, *Combat Zone* 18)—is the principal catalyst giving rise to "the dramas" in Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War stories.[1] The bewilderment of O'Brien's protagonists at the either-or quandary shows traces of its original form in O'Brien's autobiographical work *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (in this chapter, hereafter, referred to as *Combat Zone*). In *Combat Zone*, the protagonist Tim O'Brien's "intellectual and physical standoff" (22) that results from his perplexity about whether to fight the wrong war inspires and motivates him to embark on a philosophical quest, especially for moral courage, which is intensified later when he experiences combat in Viet Nam.[2] In representing the Vietnam War trauma, thus, the author O'Brien inseparably relates his war depictions to the frustration he experiences when confronting the moral dilemma and embroils the reader in important ethical issues. The moral dilemma and the ethical discussion are at the center of *Combat Zone* and can be considered as the matrix of the author O'Brien's subsequent war fictions.

The flee-or-fight perplexity of the protagonist O'Brien in *Combat Zone* requires the reader engage in analyses of the moral dilemma posed when considering whether "to resist, flee, or establish a separate peace" (Herzog, "Critical Angles" 173) or "to act out of public obligation rather than personal welfare" (Herzog, "Critical Angles" 173). The protagonist O'Brien's moral dilemma, then, would involve the reader in an

either-or situation where the reader is presented with a choice between "sacrificing one principle to satisfy another or committing to self or to others, to self at the expense of others, or to others at the expense of self" (Herzog, "Critical Angles" 172-73). Thus, the protagonist O'Brien's perplexity presents to the reader an argument over a doctrinal aporia—the incompatibility between claiming the rights of the individual and pursuing the collective happiness. The flee-or-fight dilemma evokes conflicting opinions rooted in libertarian belief, on the one hand, and utilitarian principle, on the other, which have invariably emerged in the frequent confrontation between soldiers and policymakers.[3]

The protagonist O'Brien, in *Combat Zone*, emphasizes that he should not fight the war because he believes that it is sacrificing "[c]ertain blood for uncertain reasons" (168). He would choose to abandon his infantry duty and strive to preserve his life and soul. He eases his conscience by invoking the libertarian impulse. On the one hand, when putting the greater importance on collective happiness, the protagonist O'Brien would put the priority on completing his commitment and obligation to fulfill his duty as an infantryman in Viet Nam. He "cooperates with the government despite his ethical objections to the Vietnamese conflict because of an inability to face social opprobrium if he does not do so" (Wesley 63). The protagonist O'Brien actually decides to assume responsibility for his people as well as for the nation, which eventually forces him to make the final decision to go to Viet Nam. While performing his duty as a soldier and making a meaningful contribution to American victory, the protagonist O'Brien bears another responsibility and it has some cultural implications: he is expected to carry on the heritage of American victory culture, which informed American national identity and reinforced the credibility of the self-image of the ideal American with his optimism and individualism.

Persuading himself that the Vietnam War is evil, the protagonist O'Brien

foresees the social order under the influence of American triumphalism to lose its way beginning to break down. In midst of the conflicting process of making the crucial decision to fight the wrong war, through the protagonist O'Brien's eyes, the reader becomes aware of the social-cultural containment and repression, and allusions to conformism that characterized American society during the Cold War years. The protagonist O'Brien becomes seriously concerned about the uniformity of people's lives in Worthington, Minnesota, his birthplace which is a town characterized by white-middle-class conservatism, a town in the American heartland under the influence of the dominant political and cultural ideology. When receiving the draft notice, he is overwhelmed by the psychological pressure from the people of his community, most of whom have a strong sense of patriotism associated with the American mythological war stories which defend the American "just" wars and promise the nation will always achieve ultimate victory. In *Combat Zone*, the townspeople's firm belief in the American just wars, in part derived from the great American achievement in World War II and based on the spirit of the "[k]ill and fight only for certain causes" (138), contributed to their optimism about the American military intervention in Viet Nam. When finally deciding to become a soldier for fear of damaging his reputation in the town and falling short of the people's expectation, the protagonist O'Brien is astonished at the so-called "panoptical" state, to speak in Foucauldian terms, of conformism in the society "in which we are under constant surveillance and, even more importantly, in which we constantly monitor ourselves for signs of abnormality or even mere strangeness" (Bertens 119). The protagonist O'Brien laments his inability to exercise the freedom of decision, which draws the reader's attention to his failure to achieve individual and spiritual emancipation: "I was not soldier material, that was certain. But I submitted. All the soul searchings and midnight conversations and books and beliefs were voided by abstention,

extinguished by forfeiture, for lack of oxygen, by a sort of sleepwalking default. It was no decision, no chain of ideas or reasons, that steered me into the war" (22). He just describes himself as "a coward," and is ashamed at his inability to decide ascribed to his "self-imposed submission to social control" (Bertens 116). This control is maintained by the political and cultural discourses of American triumphalism, which achieved dominance in American culture in the Cold War years. The protagonist O'Brien's reluctant subordination to the usurpation of the discursive power, then, exposes the tyrannical power of the Cold War cultural ideology, which derived from the tradition of the American war stories and which was responsible for the American citizens' code of value and behavior. In *Combat Zone*, the seeming authenticity of collective justice conspires with the prestige of patriarchal ideology that informed American society during the Cold War years. Consequently, the protagonist O'Brien seems to reproach American society for its disregard of democratic freedom. The positive self-image as the ideal American, the cultural token of the American successful career, which has been reinforced by the discourses of the American victory culture, still remains romantic to most of the people. The Vietnam War, the war without reason, however, seems to have shaken the belief in the image of the ideal American at its very foundation. The American self has greatly changed from what it used to be in the late nineteenth century. The protagonist O'Brien's anxiety about the crisis of the American self is even more pointedly dramatized and complicated by his sensitivity, that of a naïve, innocent youth characterized by uncertainty about his own identity.

While the examination of the flee-or-fight decision has provided the reader with keen insights into American victory culture, it suggests that the protagonist O'Brien's perplexity at his decision is fundamentally ascribed to his torment over the crisis of his self-image, and it represents his ambivalent attitude towards the positive image of

the traditional American self. He begins to experience difficulty getting on with the people who expect him to fulfill his duty to his country. Rather, because of the responsibility he feels to become one of the exponents of American victory culture; he is bewildered by the prospect of his pure inner self —his soul—being contaminated by the immorality of the war. The protagonist O'Brien's reluctance implies that he fails to come to term with the social role: ". . . I truly believe the war is wrong. Is it then also wrong to go off and kill people? If I do that, what happens to my soul?" (60). This chapter suggests that his dilemma typifies the frequent negotiations between conscious self-images and social roles taking place within the individual—in Erik H. Erikson's theory this involved a process to combine identity located "*in the core of the individual*" (Erikson 22) and that which is "*in the core of his communal culture*" (Erikson 22). The protagonist O'Brien's psychological disturbance, thus, is caused by the loss of his "awareness of the fact that there is a selfsameness and continuity to the ego's synthesizing methods, the *style of one's individuality*, and that this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one's *meaning for significant others* in the immediate community" (Erikson 50). Thus, whether he goes to Viet Nam or not, he eventually fails to marshal these two identity elements. His cry of anguish for the divided quality of his self is symbolized in his words: "The war and my person seemed like twins. . . . Twins grafted together and forever together, as if a separation would kill them both" (20). The protagonist O'Brien's quandary is surely associated with questions concerning "conscience and philosophy and intellect and emotion" (56), including the ideological restrictions or fear of physical hurt; but, more than these problems, the either-or quandary is clearly dramatized by the turbulence he experiences as a result of his identity crisis; and then, his identity calls forth his perpetual endeavors for its restoration and survival.

2.

The protagonist O'Brien's sociological and political discernment[4] from the liberalistic viewpoint[5] perceives the socio-political and cultural menace to American society in the Cold War years: the crucial moment when America as the land of "the absence of violence, civility, decorum, felicity" (O'Brien, "Interview" 19) is, to some extent, becoming more fraught and conflicted. Although before serving in the military in Viet Nam the protagonist O'Brien takes his free will for granted, through the flee-or-fight problem he eventually finds it difficult to guarantee his freedom to do what he believes right. This is ironically implied in the epigraph which quotes some lines from *The Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri referring to *la volontà la libertate*, i.e. human "free will" in English.[6] In *Combat Zone*, he detects a crisis of liberalism within the monolithic ideology of the townspeople in his community. The protagonist O'Brien's critical perspective on the perilous state of liberalism is linked to his anxiety about the Worthington citizens' ignorance and apathy about the social-political issues, as well as their Midwestern conformism.

The protagonist O'Brien, a man of socio-political intelligence, frequently feels apprehensive of the Midwestern people without great enthusiasm, which is denoted in his disdain for some of the townspeople: he describes them as "not very spirited people, not very thoughtful people" (13), or as people of "an empty, unknowing, uncaring, purified, permanent stillness" (208). His critical insight into the townspeople's moral laxity reveals their limited interest and lack of sensitivity to the political circumstances despite the controversies that preoccupied public opinion in the United States in the Cold War years[7]: "I [the protagonist O'Brien] tried going to Democratic party meetings. I'd read it was the liberal party. But it was futile. I could not make out the difference between the people there and the people down the street boosting Nixon and Cabot Lodge. The essential thing about the prairie, I learned, was

that one part of it is like any other part" (14-15). The Worthington citizens' apathy foreshadows their ignorance and unconcern about the reason for the U.S. involvement in Viet Nam. The third chapter "Beginning" refers to the protagonist O'Brien's secret disappointment with the townspeople's "lethargic acceptance" (20) of the American military intervention in the war in Viet Nam. He becomes distressed when they continually fail to give sufficient attention to the true meaning of the war, whereas he himself maintains a critical attitude toward the significance of his infantry duty:

> The summer conversations, spiked with plenty of references to the philosophers and academicians of war, were thoughtful and long and complex and careful. But, in the end, careful and precise argumentation hurt me. It was painful to tread deliberately over all the axioms and assumptions and corollaries when the people on the town's draft board were calling me to duty, smiling so nicely. "It won't be bad at all," they said. "Stop in and see us when it's over." (17)

Larry Curtis Heinemann (1944-2019), the American soldier-author of *Paco's Story* (1987), who wrote about his Vietnam War experience, would show great empathy with the protagonist O'Brien, who is displeased with the townspeople's "lethargic acceptance." Heinemann seems to have been in the same situation as O'Brien. Heinemann recalls the days he spent in the United States just before he served a combat tour from 1967 to 1968. He talked of the days in an interview: "No one told us we could go to Canada; no one told us we could become conscientious objectors. . . . No one told us we didn't have to go" (57). Heinemann's parents' response to his draft notice, as he remembers, seems to have been much more optimistic: they believed that serving in the military was good for their son and would make a man out of him

(Heinemann 58). The protagonist O'Brien's discontent with the townspeople reflects the author O'Brien's actual feeling of "bitterness" about the political-social ignorance of the people in the Midwestern community. O'Brien, in a 1991 interview with Daniel Bourne and Debra Shostak, talks about his resentment towards the townspeople with their optimism about the war:

> One aspect [of the upbringing in Midwest] is my sense of bitterness about small-town Republican, polyester, white-belted, Kiwanis America. The people who vote and participate in civic events, who build playgrounds and prop up our libraries and then then turn around and send us to wars, oftentimes out of utter and absolute ignorance. And I'm bitter about it. I'm bitter about people who say with a knee-jerk reaction, "Let's go kill Satan." The Middle America I grew up in sent me to that war. . . . That know-nothing attitude really disturbs and angers me. ("*Artful Dodge*" 80)

In the interview with Tobey C. Herzog, O'Brien remembers his growing up in Worthington and the town's impact on his development as a person and a writer.[8] In his previous interview in 1991, O'Brien clearly shows his rage at this "polyester" mindset: he explains that he uses the term "polyester" to indicate "a kind of 'know-nothingness' and 'not-caringness' about big, important issues" ("Conversation" 89). He asserts that those people seemed to be lacking "[a] sort of willingness to go along with whatever the prevailing political and social tenor of the country might be" ("Conversation" 89). In addition to his somewhat radical and acid comments on the Middle American ignorance, he shows us this mindset is not just concerned with the townspeople but connected to the trend prevalent in the whole of America: ". . . it's not just Worthington; it's the whole country that sort of ticks me off. I go after

Worthington only because I know the place well enough to make it particular in the details of it, but it's representative to me of a whole mindset in this country [the United States] . . ." ("Conversation" 90). Like the author O'Brien, in *Combat Zone*, the protagonist O'Brien suspects that the whole nation is deflecting their attention from the war in Viet Nam as it was entering the critical phase, the period when the America was getting bogged deeper and deeper in the war in Viet Nam: ". . . the facts were clouded; there was no certainty as to the kind of government that would follow a North Vietnamese victory or, for that matter, an American victory, and the specifics of the conflict were hidden away—partly in men's minds, partly in the archives of government, and partly in buried, irretrievable history" (18). The social-political mood of the moment is mentioned in the comments of Courtlandt Dixon Barnes Bryan (1936-2009), best known for his non-fiction Vietnam War writing *Friendly Fire* (1976). Bryan acknowledges that "[t]he government certainly felt no commitment to tell them [the nation] the truth" (87) about the war. This kind of concealment, which the protagonist O'Brien (as well as the author O'Brien) believes, is deeply ingrained in the whole of the American nation, is more precisely described in Donald Ringnalda's explanations:

> Faced with chaos in Vietnam, American war managers erected a trillion-dollar Newtonian model of the universe, a model with a sure, stable epistemology based on a Westerner's sense of order, predictability, balance, logic, and the *power* that accrues from such a "sure" knowledge of reality. The model was very effective: it effectively made it impossible for our leaders to see around it. They were effectively trained *not* to see. ("Unlearning" 67)

For Ringnalda, the epistemological model has enabled American war managers and scientists to deny or ignore the chaos since early times ("Unlearning" 67-68). Thomas Merton, referring to an example of what he calls "the sickness of the language" in the official statements about the Vietnam War, focuses on the illness of both political language and thought of a whole community of American intellectuals and scholars: Merton analyzes that the words of the professionals and experts were characterized by the sort of "double-talk, tautology, ambiguous cliche, self-righteous and doctrinaire pomposity, and pseudoscientific jargon that mask a total callousness and moral insensitivity, indeed a basic contempt for man" (246). The official war talk, going along with the moral corruption, affected people's language and thought; and then, as Merton suggests, the language continues to mask the ultimate unreason and permits the nation to maintain the status quo or push forward confidently toward victory. The protagonist O'Brien's disdain for the townspeople tells a lot about the American moral ignorance during the Cold War years.

In *Combat Zone*, the townspeople's (seen as the allusion to most of the typical Americans) blind acceptance of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, a war that evokes their political-social optimism, however, is ultimately ascribed to the American mythology that glorifies the country's "just" wars. The protagonist O'Brien sheds light on the American righteousness about its war history. O'Brien offers a short history of the Midwestern states and describes one place in particular Worthington as "the site of a celebrated massacre" (12-13). During the Cold War era, the Second World War is generally accepted as the most popular war in American military history because the U.S. victory in the war yielded the country a sense of achievement, a new confidence in American culture, and material wealth. The post-1945 period can be described as "a decade of rising expectations, the emergence of youth culture, and the unprecedented availability of cultural products" (Halliwell 2).

The triumph in the war allowed America in the Cold War years to achieve greater national prosperity and play a leading "role as a superpower possessed of military might and financial clout" (Layman, Hipp, and Lynch vii) on a global scale, which ushered it into the age of *Pax Americana*. In the Cold War period, people enjoyed an affluent lifestyle brought about by the special procurement boom that helped ensure American success in WWII. This process led to an improvement in living standards and a revolutionary upheaval in the nation's moral outlook. The cultural ideology reinforced by the WWII victory and its deep impact on the citizens' psyche are found in the second chapter, "Pro Patria." The Latin title means "for one's fatherland," which refers to patriotism and devotion to country. This chapter explores the cultural background in which the protagonist O'Brien was brought up, as suggested in Patrick A. Smith's description of his breeding as "a Norman Rockwell portrait of Middle America" (*Critical Companion* 28). It is full of images of American popular culture in the Cold War years, which contributed to fostering of the nation's patriotic trust in the United States: the national pastime of Little League baseball games, the parades of American Legionnaires and fireworks during Fourth of July celebrations, and Turkey Day that express gratitude to the town and the prairie. As the chapter's Latin word *patri* connotes "fatherliness," the chapter draws the reader's attention to the American achievements in the previous wars. The U.S. society at that time was built up by the devoted efforts of the "fathers," i.e. the WWII veterans of the protagonist O'Brien's parental generation who bravely fought in WWII—ranging from the protagonist O'Brien's father "who is brave" (19) and the veterans of the Minnesota VFW to the local politicians like Karl Rölvaag and the American presidents in the 1960s who fought in WWII like John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Before them are the American forefathers who fought and died in the wars and battles for the founding of a nation; and thus, the fathers are much welcomed and the people

call them “the town hero[es]” (13).

As mentioned above, the American mythological war stories including the story about the U.S. victory in WWII, thus, emphasized the country’s cultural status, patriotism, and war heroism, which played an important role in establishing the national consensus about just American wars: the protagonist O’Brien recalls the townspeople’s belief in the righteousness of the war. They insist that WWII has “[n]othing to do with causes or reason; the war was right . . . it had to be fought” (13). Thus, in the case with the Vietnam War, it is natural that the townspeople would never think about America fighting “wrong” wars. What the author O’Brien critically describes about the people’s mindset in his essay “The Vietnam in Me” would represent the things the people actually have in their mind: “Evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology. We erase it. We use ellipses. We salute ourselves and take pride in America the White Knight, America the Lone Ranger, America’s sleek laser-guided weaponry . . .” (O’Brien, “Vietnam”). Therefore, even though the protagonist O’Brien asks the townspeople the question of “whether to serve in what seemed a wrong one” (21), few people seem to take his anxiety seriously. They no longer pay much attention to the problem; as he says, “when asked about the case when a country fights a wrong war, those people just shrugged” (21). No one of the townspeople seems to question whether the Vietnam War does honor to the pages of the history of the American victory culture. John Sack suggests that the press never wrote about the way the U.S. Army really functioned in the ignominious war in Viet Nam in 1965: but instead, “all the reportage about the war in Vietnam was written in that same gung-ho World War II style . . .” (Sack 16).

As well as American political-social recklessness and optimism attributed to the cultural impact of the U.S. victory in WWII, the protagonist O’Brien perceives that the conformism of the Midwestern community, is exerting pressure on him to act in

accordance with the socially acceptable conventions or behavioral standards of American triumphalism, that is, the glorified ideology of WWII and heroism. Since inducted into the army, the protagonist O'Brien notices that this conformist atmosphere is gradually transformed into the censure that keeps surveillance over him with "readiness to find fault" (18). Thus, in his dependence on the patronage of "fathers" the WWII veterans, he feels that he would be socially expected to perform great achievement as the "fathers" did: "It was not a town, not a Minneapolis or New York, where the son of a father can sometimes escape scrutiny" (18). In *Combat Zone*, the protagonist O'Brien's reluctance to fulfill his infantry duty under the community's censure represents the collision between liberalistic idea and a conformism that can evoke totalitarianism. It is important to pay attention to the protagonist O'Brien's implication that the social climate analyzed above was increasingly developing into a total power. This is shown in his description and evaluation of the conformity as "the growing mass society in which the new priorities of standardization, cooperation and conformity were replacing the older American values of self-reliance, competition and rugged individualism" (Levine and Papasotiriou 73). The conformism, conspiring with the American victory culture, compels the protagonist O'Brien to fight the war in Viet Nam: "Piled on top of this was the town, my family, my teachers, a whole history of the prairie. Like magnets, these things pulled in one direction or the other, almost physical forces weighting the problem, so that, in the end, it was less reason and more gravity that was the final influence" (18). In the protagonist O'Brien's autobiographical memories, the reader never gets the opportunity to see the townspeople talk about their own personal opinions. They are monitoring the protagonist O'Brien's attitude, leaving the decision-making of the matter to his discretion and keeping their oppressive silence. What the people seem to believe in their mind about the Vietnam War turns into the voice of the chaplain named Edwards,

who is an officer and a captain in the U.S. Army.

In the basic training that the protagonist O'Brien undergoes at Fort Lewis, Washington, when he is secretly planning to desert by migrating to Canada, he is ordered to see the chaplain by the first sergeant. Then, in the discussion of the war with Edward, he asks for some advice from him about doing good in the "wrong" war. Edwards criticizes the protagonist O'Brien for expressing his strong opposition to the war. Edward vigorously tells him to have "faith" in Christ which is "something above, far above your [his] puny intellect" (58). Edward, as the spokesperson for the people, begins to preach to the protagonist O'Brien about what Edward regards as "faith," which seems to connote some compulsion:

> . . . this country [the United States] is a good country. It's built on armies, just like the Romans and the Greeks and every other country. They're all built on armies. Or navies. They do what the country says. That's where faith comes in, you see? If you accept, as I do, that America is one helluva great county, well, then, you follow what she tells you. She says fight, then you go out and do your damnedest. You try to win. (57-58)

Edward stirs up the protagonist O'Brien's sense of guilt, saying that he is betraying the country when he refuses to fight in the war. Edward attempts to encourage the protagonist O'Brien to serve in the military in Viet Nam, suggesting that fighting the war will be "a fine, heroic moment for American soldiers" (60). Edwards's advice, then, seems to reflect the tyrannical aspect of the ideology that emerged from the victory in WWII. The psychological pressure exerted on the protagonist O'Brien to behave bravely on the battlefield comes from his secret desire to prove his manhood. This is clearly expressed in the self-analysis of Erik—the protagonist O'Brien's close

friend in the basic training camp in Washington, or his alter ego, explaining his refusal to serve in the military. Erik reveals the soldiers' fear of public censure: he says, "Fear of weakness. Fear that to avoid war is to avoid manhood. We come to Fort Lewis afraid to admit we are not Achilles, that we are not brave, not heroes" (38). The soldiers' burden of fear and shame that Erik exposes is clarified by Carl S. Horner's descriptions of "the sacred rules of a male honor code" (Horner 76):

> Rational control over the emotion of fear or doubt; strength not only of body but also mind—the tangential strength, that is, of the gifted athlete and military wizard; appropriate aggression fed by a competitive spirit; full-pitch confidence to win against overwhelming odds; and utter loyalty to duty, to God, to country, to family, and to friends collectively define the classic male hero. (Horner 76)

The public censure and the collective male honor code that Erik mentions above ideologically induces them to be soldiers who fought in a just war. Erik's insistence represents the protagonist O'Brien's secret desire to live up to public expectation, which plays an important role in forming his identity as a strong male.

Thus, *Combat Zone* closes with the protagonist O'Brien's skepticism about American triumphalism, which is symbolically epitomized in the last chapter titled "Don't I Know You?" On the battlefield in Viet Nam, from the outside of the United States, the protagonist O'Brien is objectively re-considering his country. The American soldiers surviving on the battlefield often wish that the "freedom birds," the planes to bring the soldiers back home, will take them out of Viet Nam: they dream, "ol' freedom bird lands me back in Seattle" (73), or "the ol' freedom bird takes me home" (156). Here, these "freedom birds" seem to symbolize America as the land of

liberty, as the name “freedom birds” refers to the U.S. national ideals and evokes its national bird, an eagle. In the chapter, however, being about to leave the battlefield, sitting in the plane which is filled with the smells of “antiseptic” (205) and provided with “low-cost comfort” (205), the protagonist O’Brien finds himself feeling a certain discomfort. He becomes aware that the evil of the war is to be wiped out of the collective memory and most of the people will be maneuvered into keeping up the appearance that nothing is wrong. He begins to be irritated even by the flight attendant: “The stewardess, her carefree smile and boredom flickering like bad lighting, doesn’t understand. It’s enraging, because you sense she doesn’t want to understand” (205). His anxiety about the “plastic” atmosphere of the “freedom bird” indicates that he sees through the deception of American liberalism. The stewardess, who is “blond, blue-eyed, long-legged, medium-to-huge-breasted” (206), seems to represent the American sweetheart, or the goddess of liberty (the symbol of the Statue of Liberty). She smiles at the soldiers, expressing her appreciation for the soldiers’ efforts: “. . . we [the soldiers] did well, America loves us, it’s over, here’s what you missed, but here’s what it was good for . . .” (206). However, in spite of her words, which appeal to their patriotism and justify what the soldiers experienced, through the protagonist O’Brien’s eyes, she looks as if she is in charge of “airbrushing the obscenities and absurdities of the war out of American consciousness” (Ringnalda, “Unlearning” 64): “The stewardess comes through the cabin, spraying a mist of invisible sterility into the pressurized, scrubbed, filtered, temperature-controlled air, killing mosquitoes and unknown diseases, protecting herself and America from Asian evils, cleaning us all forever” (206). She never seems to be feeling any guilt while the protagonist O’Brien, confessing in his letter to Erik, compares himself with a Roman centurion who stood and did nothing while watching the crucifixion of Christ. The protagonist O’Brien, thus, is to be haunted by his guilt, as he acknowledges in his

letter to Erik: “I watched. The observer, the peeping tom of this army. Doing nothing” (186). The protagonist O’Brien likens himself to the peeping tom, the symbolic image a person who can never take any good action even though he observes evil.

Since the protagonist O’Brien understands the evil of the war, he is eager to pursue his goodness by refusing to fight the war. However, the refusal to go to Viet Nam would have led him to tarnish the reputation of American justice and deprive him of the opportunity for cultivating his self-image as the American hero. The flee-or-fight problem mirrors not only the socio-political and cultural circumstances, but also “a kind of moral schizophrenia” (Kaplan 59) attributed to the protagonist O’Brien’s identity crisis. Carrying within himself the trauma involving his divided identity, he goes to Viet Nam, where he makes efforts to restore his true identity.

3.

The previous section has mainly dealt with the protagonist O’Brien’s flee-or-fight dilemma. This chapter also makes clear that *Combat Zone* deals extensively with the controversial topic of the cultural containment resulting from the ideology of American triumphalism, the cornerstone of American society, politics and culture that must be passed down to future generations. The analysis emphasizes that the protagonist O’Brien’s psychological trauma is caused by the deromantisization of the iconic image of the idealized American nurtured by the innocence and naivety of youth. Eventually, the protagonist O’Brien fails to abandon his infantry duty even though he is certain that the war should not be fought. While accusing the people for their blind acceptance of the wrong war, he is sure that he is expected to make contributions to America’s success in the war, which arouses his deep-rooted “desire to prove myself [himself] a hero” (56). The protagonist O’Brien becomes fixated on romantic images of American war heroes and the traditional western characters

depicted in the Hollywood films, which becomes self-evident in the process of his identity formation. Among his favorite heroes, he mentions some of the WWII veterans living in his town, John Kennedy, as well as the fictional character Captain Vere and the heroes in movies such as Alan Ladd in *Shane* and Humphry Bogart in *Casablanca*. The heroes created by the Hollywood movies or the television dramas are mostly in war story settings. These heroes are the avatars of the traditional American self-image. The protagonist O'Brien internalized a compound image of some of these heroic icons, believing that to follow in their footsteps is necessary for achieving an ideal American manhood. The protagonist O'Brien recalls that most American kids of his generation, like himself, recognized their "fathers" as the idealized, male role-model embodying traditional American heroism. This energizes them and lies behind their drive to become the idealized American male:

> We bought dented relics of our fathers' history, rusted canteens and olive-scented, scarred helmet liners. Then we were our fathers, taking on the Japs and Krauts along the shores of Lake Okabena, on the flat fairways of the golf course. 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).

The protagonist O'Brien's strong attachment to the romanticized image of the American self is further highlighted when he tries to make up a sign on cardboard where he clearly declares his firm objection to the war. After receiving the draft notice, in the basement of his house, escaping from the public eye, he secretly prepares to demonstrate against the war. He imagines, for a moment, as if he were free from his duty as well as public censure: he murmurs in his mind, "I was outside the town. I was

outside the law" (20). However, he immediately begins to feel tormented by his guilt: "I was scared. I was sad. Later in the evening I tore the signs into pieces and put the shreds in the garbage can outside. I went back into the basement. I slipped the crayons into their box, the same stubs of color I'd used a long time before to chalk in reds and greens on Roy Rogers's cowboy boots" (20-21). Here, he remembers coloring in a picture of Roy Rogers as he was a little kid, which implies that he was internalizing the heroic deeds performed by the cowboy, the representative of the traditional American hero. He is agonized by his feeling of guilt because he is aware that he can hardly abandon the idealized image of the American traditional self. One notes that the protagonist O'Brien considers American heroism in relation to Western philosophical virtue: he believes in "the kind of hero who knew right from wrong and was willing to act on this knowledge to the point of risking his life" ("Conversation" 94). Thus, engaged in embodying the American hero, the protagonist O'Brien pursues philosophical goodness.

Considering the protagonist O'Brien's personal traits, critics have argued that he is depicted as a young man who is better educated than the average American draftee. They have drawn the reader's attention to the tragic drama resulting from his unwillingness to contradict his moral principles. Stefania Ciocia notes, with regard to the protagonist O'Brien's philosophical considerations and moral judgements, that he is portrayed as an educated person with "the sense of superiority and the (ultimately naive) self-awareness of the College Joe figure" (74). For Ciocia, the protagonist O'Brien still appears to be very snobbish about his own high intelligence and strict morality even as he ironically and poignantly dramatizes his pitiful fate in the flee-or-fight decision: "For a character of strong principles, sound mind and keen sense of justice, the inability to act on one's convictions is an unforgivable ignominy, configured as a defeat, a surrender and a slow suffocation of one's true self . . ."

(Ciocia 75). It is, however, important to pay attention to her expression "true self," by which she implies that one of the significant themes of the protagonist O'Brien's story is the issue of his identity formation.

In examining the process of the protagonist O'Brien's identity formation, the second chapter titled "Pro Patria" and the third chapter "Beginning" describe in more detail issues he confronted. In these chapters the protagonist O'Brien provides a short history of his early years in the United States. In "Pro Patria," he acknowledges that he is a Baby Boomer who was born in the late 40s (11), and in "Beginning," he mentions that he became a soldier at the age of twenty-one in the summer of 1968 (18). Supposedly, when he is inducted into the army, he has already undergone a stage of individual development which the majority of those of his generation would have entered during their adolescence and young adulthood, i.e. the struggles with the emotional immaturity and still unformed. In his quest for a strong identity, the protagonist O'Brien believes he should be following instructions that would enable him to embrace philosophical "goodness," which is expressed by his "desire to live chastened by a desire to be good" (56).[9] He explains it as follows:

> . . . we know good from bad; because men are aware they should pursue the good and not the bad; and because, often, people do in fact try to pursue the good, even if the pursuit brings painful personal consequences. I believe, therefore, that a man is most a man when he tries to recognize and understand what is good—when he tries to ask in a reasonable way about things: Is it good? And I believe, finally, that a man cannot be fully a man until he *acts* in the pursuit of goodness. (56)

The protagonist O'Brien's ethical belief—the mental and physical activities done by a

rational man should be exercised for the purpose of establishing the state of being "good"—evokes *the Nicomachean Ethics* written by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who argues for the most admirable human qualities: a "good" citizen whose character contributes to organized civic community. Aristotle assigns great importance to accomplishing the purposes attributed to the one "End," i.e. the "Chief Good": "Every art, and every science reduced to a teachable form, and in like manner every action and moral choice, aims, it is thought, at some good: for which reason a common and by no means a bad description of the Chief Good is, 'that which all things aim at'" (Aristotle 1). Aristotle, in this context, takes a serious view on performing virtue, which "is concerned with feelings and actions, in which the excess is wrong and the defect is blamed but the mean is praised and goes right" (Aristotle 35). The protagonist O'Brien's admiration of Aristotelian ethics is apparently suggested in his preference in books, as he confesses, "I read . . . enough Aristotle to make me prefer Plato" (14). His enthusiasm for the Western philosophical beliefs is embodied in his aptitude for being a "good" adult citizen in the civic community. He attempts to act by making himself go along with the Aristotelian conception of virtue, in other words the mean state—a condition, quality, or course of action equally removed from two opposite extremes—in order to preserve "goodness." The protagonist O'Brien's actions in accordance with Aristotelian virtue are demonstrated in his sense of citizenship: the compatibility between his patriotism and the democratic engagement with the American political situation.

For example, he has been sharing in the benefit of the U.S. prosperity brought about by the U.S. victory in WWII, just as he considers that he has "lived under its [the country's] laws, accepted its education, eaten its food, wasted and guzzled its water, slept well at night, driven across its highways, dirtied and breathed its air, wallowed in its luxuries" (18). When he thinks of these, he is aroused to nationalist

fervor and sense of his responsibility demanded of a "good" citizen in the community; he becomes aware, too, of his patriotism when he admits that he "owed the prairie something" (18). On the other hand, in addition to his patriotic feeling, the protagonist O'Brien's interest in politics drives him to take part in liberal-political activities, such as his involvement with "the League of Women Voters" (14), the attendance at "Democratic party meetings" (14), and his vote for Eugene McCarthy (22). In college, when the Vietnam War breaks out, from the political-philosophical perspective, he gets together with his friends, and engaged in conversations which are "spiked with plenty of references to the philosophers and academicians of war" (17), including discussions of "all the big questions: justice, tyranny, self-determination, conscience and the state, God and war and love" (17). Concerning the rights and wrongs of the U.S. involvement in the war, he is ready to insist on the unjustness of the war; when he gets inducted, in the basement of his house, he secretly expresses his "intention to have no part of Vietnam" (20) by writing anti-war slogans on some scraps of cardboard and paper. He condemns the townspeople's blind acceptance of the U.S. intervention into the war.

The protagonist O'Brien's consideration of his patriotism and democratic involvement with the society seems to reflect the Aristotelian "good" man. Aristotle suggests "Human Excellence," as a soul working for "Human Happiness" in the social intercourse and interchange of words and acts; and, in this context, he proposes the importance of keeping to the mean between what he calls "Over-Complaisant" and "Cross and Contentious." The former represents the people who agree to everything and never oppose only to give others pleasure but no pain. The latter, contrary to "Over-Complaisant," suggests those who oppose everything and do not hesitate to give others pain. For Aristotle, the action of a "good" man in the society is defined as follows:

> His proper object-matter seems to be the pleasures and pains which arise out of social intercourse, but whenever it is not honourable or even hurtful to him to contribute to pleasure, in these instances he will run counter and prefer to give pain. Or if the things in question involve unseemliness to the doer, and this not inconsiderable, or any harm, whereas his opposition will cause some little pain, here he will not agree but will run counter. (94)

In inspecting the protagonist O'Brien's social activities in his community (and the United States is considered as the extension of the community), he seems to be successful in maintaining the mean state between "Over-Complaisant" and "Cross and Contentious."

The protagonist O'Brien is enthusiastic in pursuing Aristotelian "goodness," which implies that he aims at becoming a "good" adult citizen with intelligence, wit and grace or elegance. Considering his enthusiasm in the context of the formation of his true identity, the theory of Erikson is useful in explaining the protagonist O'Brien's engagement with philosophical principles. Erikson recognizes one's identity as "an active tension (rather than a paralyzing question)—a tension which, furthermore, must create a challenge 'without guaranty' rather than one dissipated in a clamor for certainty" (20). He emphasizes that one's identity should be understood as a "sense," rather than his/her characteristics or personality. Referring to a letter of William James, the American thinker and a psychologist, Erikson draws the reader's attention to the quality of one's identity and attempts to portray what this means. For Erikson, it can be regarded as the spontaneous stimulus arising in one's mind where he/she can see the essence of his/her self. This psychological state provides the person

with a feeling of bliss and desire to act, and thus, it results in defining the stable principles of one's behavior. Thus, Erikson's theory explains how the protagonist O'Brien acts motivated by Aristotelian ethics. Considering from Erikson's perspective, the protagonist O'Brien's actions in accordance with philosophical guidance can give him "a *subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity*" (Erikson 19), and this enables him to become a good citizen in the community, in other words, "polis" in the ancient Greek philosophical sense, the city-state where citizens work together to pursue the "Chief Good."

The protagonist O'Brien's intelligence and sense of morality attributed to the Aristotelian ethics, then, contributes to the construction of his role as a "good" citizen of the "polis," a city state in which the individuals attain ideal form from a philosophical perspective. The coherence of his identity is evident in his attempt to lead his life according to Aristotelian ideas. As a result of his moral principles, the protagonist O'Brien's personal judgement of the good and evil of the Vietnam War is closely linked to the Aristotelian ethical perspective. The moral inspection based on these ethical principles exposes the unjustness of the war to the protagonist O'Brien. His conviction regarding the unjustness of the war, thus, appears to be guided by philosophical contemplation. For the protagonist O'Brien, the war in Viet Nam seems to him "a war fought for uncertain reasons" (138) without evident cause. Thus, he concludes that he should not fight the war "since it was wrong and since people were dying as a result of it, it was evil" (18). However, he hesitates to decide not to fight the war because he becomes afraid that he will abandon his identity located in "the core of his communal culture" as a "good" citizen: ". . . 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).

Then, what the protagonist O'Brien suggests is a "coward" turns out to bear a philosophical meaning: he fails to hold to the mean since he becomes extremely afraid of being excluded from the Worthington community. He is haunted by his identity as a foot soldier, which he perceives as a negative image. Wearing the mask of a "good" man, he enters into the battlefield. The protagonist O'Brien is characterized as a naïve, innocent person, who is perplexed by the gap between American traditional heroism and Western philosophical virtue.

Having failed in keeping the mean state and being forced to have a false identity as a foot soldier, he falls into mental depression, and experiences fear, confusion, and the feeling that he was "restless and hopeless" (68), as well as disorders like insomnia or withdrawal from reality. These troubles arise from the anxiety and his identity crisis, rather than fear of the war. In the autobiographical narration, his identity crisis, thus, dramatizes the experiences that have "no sense of developing drama" (8), the combat lives that never appear in the American saga of WWII. The Vietnam War, then, is experienced as "a war of resistance; the objective was to save our [the protagonist O'Brien and his alter ego Erik] souls" (35); that is, the fight for the recovery and salvation of his identity located in "the core of the individual." During basic training in Fort Lewis, Washington, he attempts to be separated from the horde of boors hoping not to be contaminated by what he sees as evil in the war.

The protagonist O'Brien's anxiety about self is projected on the descriptions of some of the circumstances on the battlefield. On the battlefield, the protagonist O'Brien describes the soldiers' physical-mental struggles with the un-American war in Viet Nam, the guerrilla warfare, in which soldiers never know "which way to shoot" (2); or they find they have "[n]o targets, nothing to aim at and kill" (7) and "[n]o reason to hurry, no reason to move" (10); they can see "no one ambitious to get on

with the day, no one with obligations, no plans, nothing to hope for, no dreams for the daylight" (9). Describing the war in Viet Nam as a war fought for uncertain reasons, the protagonist O'Brien draws the reader's attention to the soldiers' battles against the mythical, phantomlike Viet Cong Forty-eight Battalion "hidden among the mass of civilians, or in tunnels, or in jungles" (127) trying to shoot at the American soldiers. The soldiers are surrounded by mines buried in the earth or booby-trapped mortar and artillery rounds hanging from trees. The protagonist O'Brien quotes the words of a young soldier who questions the uncertainty of their state: "It's more than the fear of death that chews on your mind. . . . It's an absurd combination of certainty and uncertainty: the certainty that you're walking in mine fields, walking past the things day after day; the uncertainty of your every movement, of which way to shift your weight, of where to sit down" (124). Susan Farrell describes the war in Viet Nam as the American soldiers' struggles for their "survival or success in battle based more on luck than on skill or training" (*Critical Companion* 100). The random nature of death in Viet Nam leads to a breakdown of military discipline. The American soldiers serving in the war in Viet Nam, marching without will, signification and direction, "feel powerless in a war environment where they gamble with their lives and become mere extensions of a military machine. Among soldiers of all wars, such feelings of confusion, insignificance, and powerlessness are common. Compared to other wars, however, the snarled conditions of guerrilla warfare in Viet Nam were particularly acute" (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 85). In the daytime, for instance, they have to put up with the boredom of a tedious or repetitious task during the ambush or a long wait for the guerilla warfare which may or may not come. When the ambush comes, they could think of nothing except that their bodies might be wasted on the unjust war. It is hardly possible for them to have a sense that they can control their own bodies. They can no longer keep their own bodies and their own souls whole:

> Forward with the left leg, plant the foot, lock the knee, arch the ankle. Push the leg into the paddy, stiffen the spine. Let the war rest there atop the left leg: the rucksack, the radio, the hand grenades, the magazines of golden ammo, the rifle, the steel helmet, the jingling dogtags, the body's own fat and water and meat, the whole contingent of warring artifacts and flesh. . . . Packhorse for the soul. (26)

The description of the parts of human body seems to be perceived as military devices or implements that they are carrying on the battlefield. The movement of the body is felt to be like that of machinery. The protagonist O'Brien's belief concerning his identity—"I was not soldier material, that was certain" (22)—gradually is confirmed by "the nauseous vacuity and repulsive futility of their lives at war" (Jarraway 44) in these conditions on the battlefield in Viet Nam. Nighttime in Viet Nam, on the other, confirms the soldiers' pessimism: ". . . the awful certainty that men would die at their foxholes or in their sleep, silently, not a peep" (9). As the soldiers walk through the thick forest at night in Viet Nam, they are surrounded by the darkness of the night; and then, they cannot help reaching out to the man in their front and frantically try to follow him. The protagonist O'Brien, however, projects his anxiety about his identity on "the fear of getting lost, of becoming detached from the others" (87) in marching at night in Viet Nam. The protagonist O'Brien becomes desperate to cling to self as an American civilian: "The man to the front is civilization. He is the United States of America and every friend you have ever known; he is Erik and blond girls and a mother and a father. He is your life" (88). The darkness of the night in Viet Nam also enthralls the soldiers and transports them into the realm grotesque fantasy: "What was that sound coming from just beyond the range of vision? A hum? Chanting? We would

blink and rub our eyes and wonder about the magic of this place. Levitation, rumblings in the night, shadows, hidden graves" (28). The protagonist O'Brien also feels as if the mountains and the land changed shape: "The mountains to the west dissolved . . . and Quang Ngai, the land, seemed to fold into itself. . . . The land moved. Hedges and boulders and chunks of earth—they *moved*. Things shimmied and fluttered. Distortions? Or a special sort of insight, nighttime clarity?" (28). The chaos is further intensified as a result of false reports and the rumors and it gradually is transformed into a reality for the soldiers. They have their moral sense of right or wrong no more.

Thus, for the protagonist O'Brien, the war in Viet Nam becomes a quest for an appropriate role model. Even in this unfortunate situation, the protagonist O'Brien tries hard to follow the Aristotelian moral principles, aiming at the mean between cowardice and rashness: ". . . for the man who flies from and fears all things, and never stands up against anything, comes to be a coward; and he who fears nothing, but goes at everything, comes to be rash" (Aristotle 28-29). He observes and judges each of his fellow soldiers, according to the principles. While he criticizes the soldiers who are driven to extremes, he tries to find those who can act "at the right time, with a right object, and in the right manner" (Aristotle 42) on the battlefield. The protagonist O'Brien's strong belief in the Aristotelian moral principles also summons up the Platonic idea of courage in war. For Plato, as the protagonist O'Brien claims, courage cannot be separated from wisdom, temperance, and justice, all of which are necessary to form virtue and make a man. The protagonist O'Brien recalls the dialogue in Plato's *Laches*: "Proper courage is wise courage. It's acting wisely, acting wisely when fear would have a man act otherwise. It is the endurance of the soul in spite of fear—wisely" (136). For instance, Kline is often pictured in the protagonist O'Brien's mind as a young, inexperienced soldier who often goes rigid, fidgets, whimpers,

shivers in fear, moves his eyes restlessly and easily gets "[b]ewildered and timid and sensitive" (40). In contrast to Kline the protagonist O'Brien draws the reader's attention to Barney's arrogance and optimism: the protagonist O'Brien recalls how Barney bragged of the American glory-seeking policy, asserting "there's always the chance we can surprise old Charlie. Right? Always a *chance*" (5). Barney is marked by childlike simplicity and the American optimism, which causes the protagonist O'Brien to develop a disdain for Barney: "I closed my eyes. Optimism always made me sleepy" (6). The protagonist O'Brien's old drill sergeant called Blyton represents the evil of the war: although the protagonist O'Brien considers Blyton's strict military discipline to be a part of training and a part of his role, the protagonist O'Brien explains that "for Blyton it is much more. He is evil. He does not personify the tough drill sergeant; rather he is the army; he's the devil" (41). The protagonist O'Brien's jingoish boss Major Callicles, who is enthusiastic about the WWII professionalism, seems to give no heed to the evil in what happened in My Lai. He justifies the massacre at My Lai, describing the brutal slaughter as a natural result of war. In addition to the soldiers with their distorted way of thinking and acting, such as timid Kline, reckless Barney, evil Blyton and the personification of the evil Major Callicles, the protagonist O'Brien hesitates to celebrate the soldiers such as the men of Alpha Company who never "gave a damn about the causes or purposes of their war" (80). Arizona, one of the young soldiers in the squad, is a good example of the undesirable soldier. Arizona, whose actions the protagonist O'Brien classifies as uncourageous, never tries to "think or care about courage—he simply acted without thought" (Farrell, *Critical Companion* 105). While the protagonist O'Brien regards these soldiers as undesirable, he praises Mad Mark, who seems to practice the Aristotelian virtue on the battlefield: ". . . like Aristotle, Mad Mark believed in and practiced the virtue of moderation; he did what was necessary in war, necessary for an officer and platoon

leader in war, and he did no more or less" (82). Additionally, he describes Captain Johansen as the embodiment of valor, a living hero because he "helped to mitigate and melt the silliness, showing the grace and poise a man can have under the worst of circumstances, a wrong war" (145). The protagonist O'Brien decides that the soldiers such as Mad Mark and Captain Johansen are courageous and embody the Aristotelian virtue. The battlefield in Viet Nam, thus, is represented as a place for examining virtue in which the protagonist searches for living role models in order to recover and revive his abandoned identity.

The protagonist O'Brien tries to jar on the ears of the people who never want to know about the war: he emphasizes that one should have "*thought* about courage, *cared* about being brave, at least enough to talk about it and wonder to others about it" (144). However, he does not want to practice self-restraint in his consideration of moral courage; he never wants them to be satisfied with a certain kind of heroism, because he is sure that "[i]t is hard to know what bravery *is*" (23). As a result of the war traumata, the protagonist O'Brien reaches the conclusion: "You promise . . . to do better next time; that by itself a kind of courage" (147).

Conclusion

Combat Zone is supposed to be the author O'Brien's straight autobiography, rather than fiction; and as a result, a number of critics have recognized it as the original source of his later novels about the Vietnam War experience, such as *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*. The analysis in this chapter emphasizes that *Combat Zone* offers a suggestive account of the political-social circumstances in the United States during the early Cold War years. Moreover, the social-psychoanalytic approach to the protagonist's identity formation draws the reader's attention to his identity crisis. The interpretation of the work in the context of

politics, mass culture and psychology is related to his insight into the American spiritual climate during the Cold War era, where individuals were confused as a result of the contradiction between the nation's prosperity and ideological pressure to conform in the Cold War years.

The protagonist O'Brien's identity crisis and his moral searching on the battlefield that arise from the flee-or-fight decision is retold in Paul Berlin's imaginary trip to Paris in *Going After Cacciato*, where Berlin is perplexed by the issue whether to escape from Viet Nam or not.

[1] Hereafter, citations from *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* are shown by page numbers.

[2] In the interview with Eric James Schroeder, O'Brien emphasizes that *Combat Zone* was never intended to be completely fictitious, although O'Brien confesses that he in part made good use of fictional form for the purpose of drama (125). O'Brien considers *Combat Zone* as a straight autobiography, or a kind of war memoir. The protagonist in *Combat Zone* seems to be hardly distinguished from the author in this chapter, although the protagonist in this work is hereafter mentioned as the protagonist O'Brien. From this point forward, in examining the protagonist O'Brien's thoughts and feelings, the analysis recognizes that it is appropriate to refer to what the author O'Brien stated in the interviews.

[3] Jeremy Bentham and John Start Mill's utilitarian statements suggest we should do the right things to "produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people" (Sandel 9). They agree that "maximizing utility, or collective happiness, may come at the expense of violating individual rights" (Sandel 9). Meanwhile, libertarians cast doubt on utilitarianism: they believe in "the idea that each of us has a fundamental right to liberty—a right to do whatever we want with the things we own, provided we do not violate other people's rights to do the same" (Sandel 49). The protagonist O'Brien has an above average education, as he has read sociology and philosophy, which is indicated by his preference for authors such as Erich Fromm and the ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Additionally, his reading experiences had a great impact on his later interest in politics, as he puts, "I took up interest in politics" (14). He is a man with an acute sense for a political philosophy.

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[5] He declares, "I was a confirmed liberal" (22).

[6] The epigraph, a citation from Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, says "lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza / fesse creando . . . / . . . fu de la volontà la libertate."

[7] As he describes the summer as "a good time for talking about war and peace" (16) or "fine weather for discussion" (16), his reports here evoke the period of the 1960 U.S. presidential election. As a result of the heated election campaign, Richard Nixon, of the Republican Party, was defeated by Democrat John F. Kennedy. Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. was the Republican nominee for Vice President, at that time.

[8] Herzog combines the author O'Brien's comments in 1995 and those in 2005. These interviews are supposed to have been conducted between 2001 and 2005 since in the interview they refer to 9/11.

[9] The protagonist O'Brien renders many services to good-doing, which is associated not only with his philosophical understanding but also his aspiration to be a Benjamin Franklin-ish hero, the representation of the traditional idealized American personality or character, who "does nothing compulsively, irrationally, or out of weakness, but appears to be governed by reason, moderation, virtue" (Silverman xiii). Franklin, assuming a leadership position among the American founding fathers, was engaged in the "pursuit of material success, moral regeneration, and social progress" (Silverman xiii) in America in the colonial period. Benjamin Franklin wrote that he "emerg'd from the Poverty & Obscurity in which I [Franklin] was born & bred, to a State of Affluence & some Degree of Reputation in the World" (Franklin 3). Kenneth Silverman notes that "[a]s *Autobiography* makes clear, Franklin owed many of his

opportunities to Do Good, as he owed much of his business success, to the emergence of Philadelphia as the cultural and commercial center of Colonial America" (Silverman xii). In his *Autobiography*, Franklin introduced the famous "Thirteen Names of Virtues all that at that time occurr'd to me [Franklin] as necessary or desirable" (Franklin 91); and then, Franklins' Thirteen Virtues, as well as the story of his triumph over adversity and success in business, still speak to Americans today. They are one of the pillars of the American national creed of self-reliance, self-education and self-creation. Franklin sheds light on the satisfaction of endeavoring to do good to man and enlarging the power of good-doing and places great value on the attributes of a good-doer.

Chapter 2

The Quest for True Self: Paul Berlin's Identity Crisis and the Shadow of Cold War Anxiety in *Going After Cacciato*

1.

Tim O'Brien is familiar to many critics and readers as a Vietnam War writer. His reputation as a war writer derives from the thematic features of his works. He started his career as a soldier-author with the quasi-autobiographical work *Combat Zone*, and thereafter published works based on his actual experiences in Viet Nam. Critical attention began to be paid to O'Brien's works in the 1980s, the era of "a cultural zeitgeist, in which the American public finally seemed ready to re-examine the country's involvement in the Vietnam War, half a decade after the last American troops were pulled out of Vietnam" (Farrell, "Tim O'Brien" 39). As well as a re-evaluation of the Vietnam War, the anti-war movement spawned a new literature about the Vietnam experience, writing dominated by polemical debates about American involvement in the war.[1] Therefore, due to typecasting as a Vietnam War writer as a result of the influence of the earlier critical interest in the "cultural zeitgeist," O'Brien's works have frequently been read in the context of exploration of war representations or the assessment of the American involvement in Southeast Asia.

However, O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978; hereafter referred to as *Cacciato*) shows readers that he can no longer be typecast as a war writer: "To call *Going After Cacciato* a novel about war is like calling *Moby Dick* a novel about whales."[2] Surely, taking over conventional interest in the representation of armed conflict, earlier criticism shed light on much wider themes: ethical dilemmas of war such as the definition of courage, heroism, the distinction

between virtue and vice, and the postmodern concerns for the equivocality of the border between reality and fiction. To explore the moral philosophy in the novel, Susan Farrell, who adopts the feminist assessments of Renny Christopher, Katherine Kinney, and Kalí Tal, takes up O'Brien's problematic gender depiction in the imaginary trip created by the protagonist Paul Berlin, who has a Western-stereotypical worldview. Suggesting that the ideals of courage and virtue depicted in the novel are modeled on Greek classical war mythology, Farrell argues that "through this myth, O'Brien deconstructs traditional Western notions of both masculinity and femininity, showing finally that Berlin is trapped by his inability to escape the restrictions of the cultural mythologies he has been raised with" ("Labyrinth" 56). As for O'Brien's truth-telling about the war, his uniqueness in intertwining three different narrative frames is crucially significant: Berlin's memory, the present state on the battlefield, and his fantasy of the possible trek to Paris.[3] This technique can be regarded as his experimental attempt to describe traumatic war experience in a different mode and style from those applied in conventional war novels. As Philip Beidler observes that in comparison with other war literature, the Vietnam War writings published in the mid-1970s are characterized by new approaches to describing a war that seems unprecedented in the American history: "Within an ever-enlarging matrix of vision, it [the Vietnam War writing] continued to seek out the possible dimensions of memory *and* imagination, with attendant experimentation in genre and mode" (89). According to Beidler's analysis, the war representation in *Cacciato* is one of the pioneering exemplars of a new direction in Vietnam War writing in the 1970s.

Despite the universal subjects that the work embraces, however, the analyses of *Cacciato* appear to be still preoccupied with conventional notions:

such as the exploration of O'Brien's interpretation of the war experience, and the quest for new and better insights that the author's works offer concerning the Vietnam War experience and its meaning for the nation. It is regrettable that readers are too fascinated with O'Brien's narrative engagement with the limited circumstances in the Vietnam War, since this may have diverted readers' attention from in-depth readings of the complex quandary of the protagonist Paul Berlin, who takes over the cultural heritage and the mass psychology of the postwar society during the early Cold War years (the 1950s and the early 1960s) and has the anti-heroic quality that is characteristic of the protagonists in literary works in that period—the adolescent and the young adult marked by the mixture of the anxiety about postwar society and the feeling of empowerment associated with the rise of youth culture.[4]

Like the protagonist O'Brien in *Combat Zone*, Berlin is an emotionally unstable youth haunted by the dilemma of "[w]hether to flee or fight or seek an accommodation" (80) on the battlefield.[5] It is for the purpose of escaping from the harsh reality of the war that he creates the imaginary trip to Paris. However, at the end of the story he decides to abandon the fantastic world he creates in spite of his desire to remaining that world. O'Brien represents his characters' individual psychology by means of depicting their confusion about the distinction between reality and fantasy, and it is Berlin's confusion of memory and imagination that persuades him to return to reality and fulfill his responsibility in the war. Thus, this chapter, employing psychoanalytical and sociological perspectives, attempts to open up a new interpretation of Berlin's enthusiasm about the imaginary trip and his failure to see "a happy end" (23) to this fantasy trip to Paris, and to show how his psychology is influenced by the postwar culture and ideology of the 1950s and the early 1960s.

Against the backdrop of the remarkable economic prosperity in the United States in the early Cold War years, white, middle-class youth in this period began revolting against the society and its institutions. The youths in this period was marked by anxiety and uncertainty about their identity, a situation unlike that of the previous generation (Jonnes 3). Thus, observers who witnessed the unassimilable behavior and mood of postwar youth attempted to examine their culture in terms of social science and cultural studies, epitomized by David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (Halliwell 67). In addition, Martin Halliwell suggests the necessity of drawing on psychoanalytic concepts to explore identity; he refers to the rapid development of psychoanalysis between 1930 and the mid-1950s. The psychoanalytic interest, as he mentions, pervaded the American mainstream culture in this period, which is evident in the fact that the books published by the psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson were widely read for a better understanding of the youth at that time (67). Therefore, the examination of the deep psyche of Berlin, the Baby Boomer, in terms of sociological and psychoanalytic perspective can help us see the deep connection between Berlin, youth and ideology in the early Cold War years.

Moreover, considering that O'Brien was born in 1946 as a Baby Boomer and spent his youth growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, it is conceivable that he went through the transition from the stress of having to conform in the 1950s to the political activism of the mid-1960s. Supposing that Berlin's malaise is identifiable with O'Brien's own torment, the agony reflects the driving force that compelled O'Brien to write war stories. O'Brien frequently creates characters in his other novels who share Berlin's struggle concerning involvement in the war, and it is possible to infer that their struggle originated from their social experience in the homeland during their adolescence.

2.

The sudden desertion of Cacciato, a soldier in Alpha Company, gives Berlin the inspiration for the quixotic story, styled on the American road narrative, in which he treks to Paris while the other soldiers of the Alpha Company leave the battlefield to pursue the deserter and try to make him return to his post. Berlin extemporaneously creates an epic story of the long journey of "six and seven and eight thousand miles through unfolding country [Viet Nam] toward Paris" (27) while he is standing night guard duty for about six hours (from midnight until approximately six a.m.). A number of critics have focused on Berlin's fantasy and the workings of "the immense powers of his imagination" (26), which is mainly devoted to the imaginary trip to Paris. Like Mark A. Heberle, who insists that on the battlefield Berlin "tries to deal with the traumatic facts of his war by dreaming of a scenario that will allow him to escape it" (108), earlier critics have analyzed Berlin's imagination in relation to a recovery from his combat-induced trauma. They unanimously conclude that Berlin's escape into the imaginary world is an attempt at self-control by way of separating himself from the disturbance of the war or ordering the chaotic reality of the battlefield.

In *Cacciato*, Berlin's sketch of his war in Viet Nam is full of images of agonizing deaths. The story begins with a list of the names of Berlin's fellow soldiers in Alpha Company who are already dead, such as Billy Boy Watkins, Frenchie Tucker, Bernie Lynn, Lieutenant Sidney Martin, Pederson, Rudy Chassler, Buff and Ready Mix (1). In regard to Lieutenant Corson, a replacement for the previous officer of the squad Lieutenant Sidney Martin, "no vital signs" (3) except senility can be detected by Berlin. Berlin describes the war as a corpse who is "cold and pasty and rotten" (1), just as the protagonist O'Brien in *Combat Zone* dubs the war "a dying war" (O'Brien,

Combat Zone 23). Berlin's suppressed feeling of uneasiness about the war without just cause or reason is suggested from the beginning of the story.

Berlin feels "the deep-running biles" (80) rising up out of the fear, which are described as "a kind of background sound that was heard only if listened for" (29). The enormous power of Berlin's imagination, however, could create a thousand of possibilities of things that might happen in the war in Viet Nam, otherwise the "dying" war would become "always the same" (1). Astonished by the fact that Billy Boy Watkins has died of fright, Berlin, "whose only goal was to live long enough to establish goals worth living for still longer" (26), manages to control his great fear, and engages in imagining an endless number of possibilities, which is what he devises for "an accommodation" (80); for him, it is "[j]ust a way of passing time, which seemed never to pass" (46), or "how to act wisely in spite of fear" (80).

However, few readers take notice of the significance of the fact that Berlin frequently flirts with his imaginary vision off the battlefield.[6] For instance, he attempts to set goals and figure out purposes, using his imagination as "a way of asking questions" (29) and "[c]ontrolling things, directing things" (226), and on another occasion, he becomes fascinated with what he wants to happen and craving it when "just pretending" (25) and studying "a working out of the possibilities" (29). O'Brien associates the characters' anguish with their confusion when reality and imagination are frequently intermingled. From this, the reader gains insight into Berlin's deep psyche: it is observable that Berlin's eccentric habit of frequent indulgence in his imaginary vision exposes his anxiety about his future as well as his impotence to deal with reality. This suggests that he seems to have been aware of the utility of his imagination not only as a means of tranquilizing himself, but also as "a test of how to behave and what to do" (O'Brien, "Maybe So" 129). Thus, still on the battlefield, suffering from the thorny

question of whether to flee or fight the war, Berlin hesitates to make a final decision on the issue, but instead launches the imaginary trip to Paris so as to assess the possibility of a future. Yet, it is clear that before his arrival in Viet Nam Berlin was already in a deep state of perplexity about the future, and his indecision when facing the flee-or-fight quandary, states of mind related to the psychological moratorium that adolescents experienced in postwar American society.[7] Thus, his frequent indulgence in his imaginary world may result from his uneasiness about his elusive identity—a lack of recognition or a loss of "a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity" (Erikson 17)—which in a feature of the age of adolescence and young adulthood.

The fact that Berlin's unrest reflects the typical uneasiness of youth about identity is clearly seen in his personality. As Stefania Ciocia points out, Berlin's lack of a firm self-esteem in comparison with the protagonist Tim O'Brien in *Combat Zone* shows that Berlin is "with no intellectual pretensions, devoid of the sense of superiority and the (ultimately naive) self-awareness of the College Joe figure" (74). The crisis of Berlin's identity is further suggested by his indolence; he has as his only goal "to live long enough to establish goals worth living for still longer" (26). Before going to Viet Nam, Berlin confronted the uncertainty of his career path: he has been thinking about being a teacher or helping his father with his house building; even he was not sure of "[w]hether to go to college or follow his father into the house-building business" (226). Unable to choose between these two occupational alternatives, he approaches the school counselor with the idea of dropping out of college, but this does not mean he is preparing to take over his father's job. His uneasiness about his inability to decide upon a certain course, the "virtue and quality of adolescent ego strength" (Erikson 235), is experienced as "[a] feeling of vague restlessness" (227), "a sleepwalking feeling" (227), and

"no sense of reality—another daydream, a weird pretending" (227). Berlin's anxiety, thus, overlaps the period of the adolescent moratorium marked by the identity crisis that Erik Erikson analyses in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*:

> Youth after youth, bewildered by the incapacity to assume a role forced on him by the inexorable standardization of American adolescence, runs away in one form or another, dropping out of school, leaving jobs, staying out all night, or withdrawing into bizarre and inaccessible moods. Once "delinquent," his greatest need and often his only salvation is the refusal on the part of older friends, advisers, and judiciary personnel to type him further by pat diagnoses and social judgements which ignore the special dynamic conditions of adolescence. . . . In general it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which most disturbs young people. (132)

Although Berlin is not sure if the war is just or unjust, he eventually decides to serve in the military. However, the decision is made without adequate knowledge of what this entails, which also means that he suffers the perplexity associated with the identity crisis: "It wasn't really a decision; just the opposite: an inability to decide" (227). Thus, on the battlefield, he still suffers from the lack of commitment to the cause of the war, which undermines his sense of self: ". . . confused and lost, and he had no sense of what was expected of him or of what to expect from himself" (39). Berlin's indetermination suggests that O'Brien presents the main character in *Cacciato* as a spokesman of the tormented adolescence or the young adult of the age. This is shown when Berlin ascribes his affliction to his immaturity: "He was young. That was a big part of it. He was just

too young" (227).[8]

He is preoccupied with the desire to find his true identity, which is evident in his aspiration for a romance with Sarkin Aung Wan, the fictive character Berlin creates in the imaginary trip to Paris. Instead of having physical intimacy, Berlin imagines that they maintain their close relationship through frequent communication about their future. Despite feminist criticism such as Farrell's argument that Berlin is "as if afraid of tipping his story into mere sexual fantasy" (*Critical Companion* 75), Erikson's suggestion about the characteristics of adolescence affords more reasonable insight into their relationship: ". . . in this stage not even 'falling in love' is entirely, or even primarily, a sexual matter. To a considerable extent adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one's identity by projecting one's diffused self-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified. This is why so much of young love is conversation" (132). However, considering that Sarkin is incarnated as Berlin's alter-ego, the romantic relationship with the girl seems to enable Berlin to confront one side of his divided identity, which is represented by his readiness to abandon his military duty. As Robert M. Slabey argues, Sarkin Aung Wan, Berlin's love interest who never gives up her dream of enjoying Paris, seems to connote the female element within Berlin's personality, the Anima, so to speak in Jungian psychological terms; the inner female personification within man's psyche which is in touch with the subconscious (Slabey 209). As Carl G. Jung suggests, we unconsciously and spontaneously produce the symbolic terms to represent concepts that we never perceive fully and comprehend completely because of the deficiencies of our senses, in the form of the dreams, or the part of the mind not normally accessible to consciousness (Jung et al. 21). Jung analyzes the spiritual inscape:

> . . . there are both male and female elements in all of us, it was said that "every man carries a woman within himself." It is this female element in every male that I have called the "anima." This "feminine" aspect is essentially a certain inferior kind of relatedness to the surroundings, and particularly to women, which is kept carefully concealed from others as well as from oneself. In other words, though an individual's visible personality may seem quite normal, he may well be concealing from others—or even from himself—the deplorable condition of "the woman within." (Jung et al. 31)

In the case of Berlin's imaginative trek to Paris, created by "the immense power of his own imagination" (26), Berlin could discover his other inner self, or a female personification suppressed deep within his unconscious. Sarkin, who keeps conveying the vital messages to Berlin, telling him that he should "live the dream and opt for personal happiness" (Slabey 209), is engaged in "trying to balance the lopsided nature of his conscious mind" (Jung et al. 31) that has resulted from Berlin's sense of public obligation requiring that "he embrace the organizing principles of duty and the American cause" (Slabey 209). Berlin is still cast as Spec Four, one of the men of Alpha Company executing the military mission to capture the deserter Cacciato. Even in the imaginary events happening on the road to Paris, Berlin still adheres to his chauvinism and still remains "trapped by his inability to escape the restrictions of the cultural mythologies he has been raised with" (Farrell "Labyrinth" 56). Subsequently, Berlin engages in a long negotiation with Sarkin; this is why Berlin often struggles with the difficulties of finding a convincing happy-ending for his road narrative. On the fantasy trip, Sarkin falls in love with Berlin as soon as she meets him, and then Sarkin comes to stay with Alpha Company. She is eager to see Paris,

believing that she will live a peaceful life there with Berlin. She frequently encourages him to make the decision to escape from the war and to live in Paris with her. Berlin secretly hopes that Sarkin will prompt the other soldiers to continue the trip by leading them out of the tangled tunnels when the soldiers of the squad fall into the hole on the road to Paris and lose their way underground. Courageous and full of vitality, she works as a guide, leading him westward to Paris. Her words urge Berlin to flee the war: “I know you will find a way. And in Paris—” (75). She insists that he should follow his own desire and abandon his duty as a soldier. Thus, Berlin unknowingly sets up Sarkin as the mirror of his ego, a figure willing to abandon his duty. Her words imply that she is the spiritual guide to Berlin, who suffers from the indeterminacy of his identity and thus is eager to take his time to ascertain his identity. Sarkin, the alter ego of Berlin, invites him to the assessment of his self, whispering to him, “We must go on then. We must keep going until you are sure” (57).

He seeks his true identity in his romantic relationship with his alter ego, Sarkin. However, the interplay between Berlin and community in the imaginary trip also allows him to assess his behavior. In short, he can examine himself in light of how he is socially recognized and perceived as relevant by way of comparing himself with others in the society where he belongs. For instance, Berlin cannot help concentrating on the possibility of the trip to Paris and imagining leading a happy life with Sarkin, far from the harsh reality on the battlefield. However, even in his imaginary world, Berlin cannot completely forget the men of Third Squad and the mission to pursue Cacciato. It is Berlin’s job to catch Cacciato together with his fellow soldiers that prevents him from abandoning his military duties, although Sarkin, the alter ego of Berlin, relentlessly seduces him to do so. In addition, on the road to Paris, Berlin

frequently imagines that he encounters with the people who are punished for desertion. These deserters seem to mirror his sense of guilt for abandoning his war duty and some of them represent his state. The incidents suggesting the fate of deserters discourage him from deciding to desert from the battlefield and live in Paris. For example, on the road to Paris, having fallen into and become lost in the tunnels, the soldiers of Alpha Company are nearly captured as POWs (prisoners of war) by Li Van Hgoc, a major in a Vietcong battalion. But later, it turns out that Li Van Hgoc himself has been condemned in a trial to remain in the tunnels for ten years because he ran away from the war, which makes the Vietcong officer confused and furious. In addition, while they are in Tehran, Berlin and his fellow soldiers come across the execution of "a short, almost emaciated youth of about twenty" (185). While Berlin watches with great fear, he realizes that the boy tries to maintain his dignity but fails to do so, and that the tears in the boy's eyes are attributed to disgrace. Later, it turns out that the boy was executed for being AWOL (absent without official leave) from the army, which perplexes Berlin since he has already been struggling with the issue of desertion. Then, he learns that "[f]or true deserters the punishment is not so kind" (201). Doc states that the punishment is going to be a perfect "spectacle" (188) for the public; that is, the outcome of desertion is guilt and shame. As Berlin continues his trip, he feels his sense of guilt intensify, which makes him aware of his inability to imagine a happy-ending to the trip. This gradually becomes apparent when chasing the deserter Cacciato. The soldiers in the squad realize that the relationship of pursuer and pursued is reversed; they have fallen into the position of being chased. For instance, they are arrested twice by Fahyi Rhallon,[9] a captain in His Majesty's Royal Fusiliers recently transferred on temporary duty to the *Savak* or Iranian secret police. While they succeed in outwitting Rhallon using the pretext

of the “The Mutual Military Travel Pact of 1965” (193), the captain from the *Savak* disgraces them by interrogating and forcing them to acknowledge that the trip to Paris is “an alibi to cover cowardice” (231). And the captain of the *Savak* mocks the soldiers by calling them “clowns,” or unsophisticated country people. The sense of guilt is underscored by these events, which reflect Berlin’s anxiety about escaping from the war. After they manage to escape from Fahyi Rhallon and the *Savak*, they finally arrive in Paris. Even in Paris, however, the clerk of the hotel where they stay is suspicious of them and calls the gendarmes, and they have to escape again. In the course of the imaginary trip, Berlin realizes that he can no longer imagine a happy-ending for the imaginary trip. He finally reaches his decision to fulfill his duty as a soldier since he sees himself becoming more afraid of being treated as a deserter than giving up his hope: “You could run, but you couldn’t outrun the consequences of running. Not even in imagination” (226).

At the end of the trip to Paris, Berlin bids farewell to Sarkin, the alter ego. He relinquishes his imaginary world and decides to return to the reality on the battlefield. The solution to his perplexity about whether to flee or fight the war suggests that the circumstances of the imaginary trip enable Berlin to successfully acquire a sense of himself as a unified subject. The interplay between Berlin and his social relationships on the imaginary trip to Paris, such as the romance with Sarkin and the incidents on their way to Paris, play a significant role in the development of Berlin’s identity. As a result of Berlin’s perplexity and his adventure, O’Brien presents Berlin as one of those youths who “are sometimes morbidly, often curiously, preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the ideal prototypes of the day”

(Erikson 128). In terms of overcoming one's identity crisis, Berlin, manages to deal with his conflict, and seems to succeed in developing a strong sense of self. But here, it is important to understand that it is Cold War ideology that influences Berlin's decision; he was reared in the society dominated by Cold War ideology, which makes him sure that "always the endings were happy" (226).

3.

The inevitable connection between Paul Berlin and the postwar culture of the early Cold War period is underscored by not only the common anxiety and aspiration that Berlin shares with the adolescent of the 1950s and the early 1960s, but also by the patriotic remembrance of the American triumph in WWII. Berlin's cultural background derives from "the spoils of 1945 victory" (O'Brien, *Combat Zone* 11). This suggests that Berlin was "bred with the haste and dispatch and careless muscle-flexing of a nation giving bridle to its own good fortune and success" (O'Brien, *Combat Zone* 11). Berlin's interpretation of war and cultural background reveals that he is a product of the postwar culture of that period. The cultural circumstances in the early Cold War years are recalled in Berlin's memory. For instance, Berlin's definition of courage seems to be affected by the communal consensus regarding legendary heroism, which was associated with victory in WWII and which is represented by his father, a veteran. Berlin is obsessed with the idea of being courageous and winning some medals in the war because he believes in, wants to be like, and wants to be praised by his father, who represents justice in the just war. He likewise regards Eisenhower as a hero, a figure who symbolically stands for the righteousness of the United States during WWII. Berlin connects the manly courage and ethics in the war with the pride in his country's extraordinary achievements.

The observation post chapters also reveal Berlin's cultural heritage. Berlin frequently recalls his hometown which appears to be modernized by the economic prosperity of the Cold War period, and the education and leisure opportunities available. As Martin Halliwell explains, since the American triumph in WWII led to a special procurement boom across the country, the nation enjoyed the unprecedented material comforts provided by economic affluence, which had a tangible influence on the culture of American middle-class life, such as the expansion of opportunities of education, occupation, and leisure (2). Berlin's life under the spell of this prosperity appears to be characterized by the influence of consumerism and popular culture on the middle-class life. For instance, Berlin remembers that some electrical appliances such as his mother's Hoover, the big white stove, the refrigerator, and the black telephone were stored in a neat house (157), and that he used to drive his father's Chevy. Berlin also recalls that he enjoyed the American popular culture of the white middle class represented by "[h]amburgers and root beer on the long drive home, baseball talk, white man talk" (41). His reminiscence of his hometown reveals that he also had the chance to benefit from higher education in his college. In addition, he recalls having enjoyed a camping vacation with his father.

The prosperity of the United States has a great influence upon Berlin's personality. The most noteworthy factor is the expanding culture of the mass media. One of the characteristics of the extraordinary prosperity in the early Cold War period was unprecedented innovation, which was characterized by the revolution in media and the introduction of the domestic TV set. Due to the increased accessibility of technology in many areas of American life, television became the dominant media trend and the center of domestic life during this period (Layman, Hipp, and Lynch 297). Since television visually provides

viewers with cultural symbols, it exercised the influential function of expanding popular culture in that period. The influence of media culture on Berlin's personality is especially obvious when he first faced the reality of war on the battlefield:

> He had seen it [the Vietnam War] in the movies. He had read about poverty in magazines and newspapers, seen pictures of it on television. So when he saw the villages of Quang Ngai, he had seen it all before. He had seen, before seeing, hideous skin diseases, hunger, rotting animals, huts without furniture or plumbing or light. He had seen the shit-fields where villagers squatted. He had seen chickens roosting on babies. Misery and want, bloated bellies, scabs and pus-wounds, even death. All of it, he'd seen it before. (253-54)

Given the upsurge of the mass-media culture, the reader can presume that Berlin has seen the same images as the mass of people. In this context, the events on the imaginary trip can also be understood as products of the contemporary mass-media culture: the events on the imaginary trip are invented by stereotypical notions, which were nurtured by the contemporary mass-media culture like road narratives and action movies. Mark A. Heberle suggests the influence of the mass-media culture on Berlin in the trip to Paris: "In imagining places he has never been, Paul creates an exotic, Americanized tour of the world that reflects popular stereotypes and Hollywood adventure films, leavened by his awareness of current events and foreign social circumstances" (131). In addition, the episode in which Berlin and the soldiers fall into the hole on the road to Paris evokes a scene in the Disney animated movie *Alice in Wonderland*, which was

released in 1951 in the United States. The strong impact of mass-media culture is implied in the remark of Hamijolli Chand, Berlin's fictional character: television is "[a] means of keeping a complex country intact. Just as America begins to explode every which way, riches and opportunity and complexity, just then along comes the TV to bring it all together. Rich and poor, black and white—they share the same heroes, . . . only Americans could so skillfully build instant bridges among the classes, bind together diversity" (149). Her evaluation of television underlines the fact that Berlin consumes images through the mass media. Berlin's cultural background has much to do with the formation of his personality; he is always concerned about whether he shares the same vision and image with others. His strong interest in others is suggested in the resolution of the flee-or-fight dilemma in the conversation with Sarkin.

While the mass-media culture has an impact on Berlin's personality, the collective anxiety of postwar society also affects him. Despite the flush of economic prosperity during the 1950s, the nation simultaneously experienced an uneasy feeling about rising middle-class expectations. The social consolidation that emerged as a result of Cold War politics and new economic prosperity, thus, caused "[a] rising mass culture reflect[ing] the growing mass society in which the new priorities of standardization, cooperation and conformity were replacing the older American values of self-reliance, competition and rugged individualism" (Levine and Papasotiriou 73). David Riesman, who attempts in *The Lonely Crowd* to describe the correlation between the society and its typical individuals, identifies the source of the general uneasiness in his explanation of middle-class life in the Cold War period. In "a centralized and bureaucratized society and a world shrunken and agitated by the contact—accelerated by industrialization—of races, nations, and cultures" (Riesman et al. 34), Riesman states, individuals came

to be guided by “radar,” the control mechanism they internalize to constantly detect the preference and the expectation of others.

This anxiety represented by the “radar” that arises when one does not conform to the expectations of others is evident in Berlin’s decision to go back to reality of the war to fulfill his military duties. For instance, when Berlin thinks about the travesty of the Paris Peace talks he lays great emphasis on “the importance of viewing obligations as a relationship between people, not between one person and some impersonal idea or principle” (320). His view clearly rebuts Sarkin’s emotional plea: “You are obliged, by all that is just and good, to pursue only the felicity that you yourself have imagined. Do not let fear stop you. Do not be frightened by ridicule or censure or embarrassment, do not fear name-calling, do not fear the scorn of others. For what is true obligation? Is it not the obligation to pursue a life at peace with itself?” (318). In this conversation with Sarkin, he does not come to terms with her, but becomes convinced of his true self, saying:

> . . . 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 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 how to find felicity within limits. Within the context of our obligations to other people. (320)

What should be noted here is that Berlin and Sarkin focus not on whether or not the war is a just war, but on the pursuit of individual well-being or felicity. While Sarkin, Berlin’s alter ego, prefers “a mystique of personal quests, new frontiers, as-yet-to-be-discovered realms, a world to be transformed” (Jonnes 2)

representing the empowered youth culture of the early Cold War years, Berlin believes that a sense of well-being is possible when one is committed to helping others. Thus, his remarks about "obligation" show how he values others' expectations of him.

His conformist attitude towards others bolstered by his cultural background again reminds readers of Riesman's sociological study on personality during the 1950s and the 1960s in the United States. Riesman analyzes the changing nature of national character in *The Lonely Crowd*, introducing three character types who are identified by the nature of their relation to society or the three-character types—the "traditional-directed," "the inner-directed," and "the other-directed." What he identifies as the "other-directed" quality emerges in the Cold War period between the 1950s and the 1960s, the very era during which Berlin has spent his youth. According to Riesman, the other-directed type of character was commonly found among the upper-middle class living in the metropolitan cities during the 1950s and the 1960s, under the influence of capitalism, industrialization, and urbanization. [10] As Riesman observes, other-directed individuals need the recognition of others and being emotionally in tune with others to bolster their self-esteem; they tend to become conformists because of their "exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others" (20). Thus, if we follow Riesman's sociological theory, Berlin seems to suffer from the typical anxiety of an other-directed person. Although Riesman is careful when he considers the other-directed as entirely impersonal, he declares that other-directed types even decide what to do according to others' estimation of them: "While all people want and need to be liked by some of the people some of the time, it is only the modern other-directed types who make this their chief source of direction and chief area of sensitivity" (22). Thus, Berlin's fear of losing the love of others seems to be

tinged with an other-directed quality, which is evident from his remark: “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. Reputation, as read in the eyes of my father and mother, the people in my hometown, my friends. I fear being an outcast. I fear being thought of as a coward. I fear that even more than cowardice itself” (320).

While Berlin discusses this with Sarkin, he is startled when she wonders, “what happens if you find him [Cacciato]? If you catch him? What happens then?” (114). For the time being, Berlin answers her question, “Back to reality. . . . If we catch him, then it’s back to the realms of reality” (114). The conversation with Sarkin, however, gives rise to Berlin’s anxiety about his war in Viet Nam. Berlin’s uneasiness becomes evident in the heated discussion between Fahyi Rhallon and Doc Peret that Berlin happens to hear on the road to Paris. Berlin imagines Captain Rhallon asserting with confidence that “purpose is what keeps him [a soldier] from running. . . . It is *purpose* that keeps men [soldiers] at their posts to fight” (199); and then, in front of the men of Alpha Company, who left the battlefield in Viet Nam on the pretext of pursuing the deserter, Captain Rhallon points out that the American war in Viet Nam is a war without just cause or reason. Captain Rhallon seems to defeat Doc Peret in the argument as Doc Peret finds difficulties in providing effective rebuttals to Captain Rhallon’s critical remarks. Captain Rhallon continues, “I understand that one difficulty for you has been a lack of purpose. . . . An absence of aim and purpose, so that the foot soldier is left without the moral imperatives to fight hard and winningly” (197). This is an instance of how Berlin’s imaginary events on the road to Paris help him to discover his true beliefs hidden within himself. Berlin realizes that “[h]e just didn’t know if the war was right or wrong or somewhere in the murky middle” (264). However, he seems to be aware of the unjustness of the war, which is evident when he

compares his war in Viet Nam with his father's just war, the Second World War; Berlin feels that "he would rather have fought with his father in France, knowing certain things certainly" (264). Berlin allows himself go to the war for reasons beyond his knowledge, which suggests, as Farrell argues, that "Berlin simply can't break free from received notions of heroism, from the cultural perceptions he knows he will be judged by" ("Labyrinth" 63). Berlin examines his own thoughts and feelings: "He went to the war because it was expected. Because not to go was to risk censure, and to bring embarrassment on his father and his town. Because, not knowing, he saw no reason to distrust those with more experience. Because he loved his country and, more than that, because he trusted it" (264). Sarkin puts pressure on Berlin to make a final decision, trying to persuade him to abandon the war and have a peaceful life with her: "Spec Four, you have the alternatives. It is time to choose" (313). In his discussions with Sarkin and his symbolic interpretation of the imaginary events on the journey, Berlin is led to "an epiphany" (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 81). Although Berlin is anxious to follow the dictates of his heart—to flee or to make a separate peace—he eventually gives up examining the possibility of fleeing the war. As most critics including Herzog believe, Berlin's "courage to remain [not in his fantasy but in reality], affirmed in imagination as well as in reality, is an ordinary insignificant bravery, one based upon a wise endurance in spite of fear and found among average, decent people" (*Tim O'Brien* 102-03), whereas Farrell prefers to shed light on Berlin's "fears letting go of the cultural mythology he has been raised with" ("Labyrinth" 62). In any case, whether the ending of the story displays Berlin's courage in later being unmoved by Sarkin or his cowardice in still remaining trapped, it is plain that Berlin, unlike the protagonist Tim O'Brien in *Combat Zone*, satisfies himself that the matter of the flee-or-fight question is settled. However, one can ask whether resolution of his dilemma is provisional or one that could possibly be changed later.

Berlin's decision to remain on the battlefield derives from his anxiety regarding conformity with others, and this appears as the sense of a trial in his mind: "He imagined a court room. A judge in a powdered white wig, his own father, all the Fort Dodge townsfolk sitting in solemn-faced rows. He could hear snickers and hoots as the indictments were read. Shame, downcast eyes" (172). This vision is again similar to Riesman's metaphor of the anxiety that many experienced during the 1950s post-war society: "If the adults are the judge, these peers are the jury. And, as in America the judge is hemmed in by rules which give the jury a power it has in no other common-law land, so the American peer-group, too, cannot be matched for power throughout the middle-class world" (91). Although in Berlin's imagination the townsfolk are not literally transformed into juries, he recognizes that he is to be judged by his father and the people of his community. The sociological and cultural perspective proposed by Riesman enables us to understand Berlin's anxiety about fighting in the Vietnam War in the much wider context of contemporary American culture and its political ethos. The end of his imaginary trip implies Berlin's failure to counteract the Cold War ideology and move in new directions. Berlin's self-reflection on the imaginary trip enlightens him, since, in a sense, he controls his imaginative power to create a set of events on the road to Paris as a way to project his fear and turmoil. However, the visionary trip virtually enables him to experience the events and to awaken him to the fact that he is obliged to discharge his military duty.

Berlin can never imagine the moment when he and the soldiers of Alpha Company capture Cacciato. Rather, Berlin seems to be encouraging Cacciato to be "too slippery to be caught" (115). On the imaginary trip to Paris, Berlin and the soldiers of Alpha Company fail to catch Cacciato twice. On the first occasion, in Mandalay, Berlin spots Cacciato and almost catches him; however, one of the monks

catches Berlin and prevents him from approaching Cacciato. On the second attempt, after breaking away from Sarkin in the mock Paris peace talks, Berlin and the soldiers of Alpha Company finally locate Cacciato's hotel in Paris and they attempt to break into Cacciato's room. However, they find the room empty; and then, all of sudden Berlin gets thrust back into reality, the war in Viet Nam.

Berlin deliberately avoids the scene of his capturing Cacciato because Cacciato is the productive source of Berlin's imagination. When at night in the observation post Berlin perceives that "Cacciato's round face became the moon" (26), Berlin feels that his imagination begins to be stretching and expanding. As Farrell explains, "Cacciato, whose name means 'hunted' or 'caught' in Italian, captures the imagination of Paul Berlin, . . . partly because his daring attempt to make it to Paris seems courageous to Berlin and partly because Cacciato also seems to represent a sort of uncorrupted innocence" (*Critical Companion* 66). In spite of his eccentricity, Cacciato is not marked by well-developed features: as Berlin recalls, "[t]here was something curiously unfinished about Cacciato. Open-faced and naïve and plump, Cacciato lacked the final detail, the refinements and final touches. . . . The result was blurred and uncolored and bland" (8), including "Cacciato's association with lunar imagery" (Lucas 142), the images of the moon that becomes visible only at night but frequently changes its form, color, size and location when reflecting light from the sun. As uncertainty and constant change of the moon having many different aspects and features, "[t]he images [of Cacciato] were fuzzy. Paul Berlin remembered separate things that refused to blend together" (120). Cacciato's oddity and elusiveness play a role in Berlin's creating the imaginary character Cacciato who easily appears in unexpected places, at unexpected moments and with an unexpected appearance. For instance, in Mandalay, Berlin sees Cacciato, who is disguised as a monk, joining a crowd of monks called *Cao Dai*; and then, at one point Cacciato appears in a

newspaper photo in Delhi; at other times, Cacciato is seen enjoying shopping at a crowded market in Paris; at another point, he helps the men of Alpha Company break out of prison in Teheran. Berlin never tries to prevent Cacciato from deserting his post: "'Go,' Paul Berlin said. He shouted it—"Go!"' (323); and then, he leaves the fate of Cacciato a mystery. As Berlin already recognized that "[w]hat remained were possibilities" (323), he is likely to imagine a different version of the imaginary trip to Paris. Berlin remembers when the North Vietnamese officer Li Van Hgoc gave Berlin epistemological advice, "things may be viewed from many angles. From down below, or from inside out, you often discover entirely new understandings" (91). Definitely, the fantasy of Berlin's odyssey from Viet Nam to Paris seems to be no more than "[j]ust a possibility" (27) out of "a million possibilities" (44). In the course of the imaginary trip, which is a quest for the true meaning of his war in Viet Nam, Berlin, thus, would prefer to engage himself in reexamining the "decisions from different angles in a never-ending process of self-discovery and self-definition" (Herzog, "Critical Angles" 178).

The mayor whose name is Ovissil smiled to Berlin and shook his head, suggesting that Berlin is too young to tell his history: the mayor says to Berlin, "Come to me when you have had time to make a real history for yourself" (179); and then, he continues, "Come to me in ten years. Then you will have a history well worth telling" (179). As the mayor of Ovissil prophesies the future of Berlin in *Caccaito,* about ten years after *Cacciat*o was published in 1978, the author Tim O'Brien's introspection and preoccupation with representing the Vietnam War experience is revisited and updated by the protagonist Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*.

Conclusion

In *Cacciato,* O'Brien creates a particular mood around the imaginary trip in

which Berlin can search for his true self. The special quality of the imaginary journey derives from Berlin's always changing perspectives, which drive him to discern the "point at which what happened had been extended into a vision of what might have happened" (206). Eventually, when he imagines that he and the soldiers of the Alpha Company arrive in Paris, the imaginary trip becomes more than a fiction: "Real? He feels the wind—it's real. He licks rain from his lips. Real rain—wet and real. If you can imagine it, he tells himself, it's always real. Even peace, even Paris—sure, *it's real*. He believes what he sees. . . . Sure, it's real" (291). Having spent about six hours during guard duty on the battlefield traveling back and forth between reality and the imaginary trip to Paris, the outcome of what he went through on the road to Paris has a great influence on the settlement of Berlin's quandary concerning whether to flee or fight; he decides to remain on the battlefield in order to fulfill his duty in the war. As the imaginary world (the trip to Paris) coexists with his physical reality (his life on the battlefield), Berlin is not dreaming but actually going through the events in the what-if world parallel to those in reality.

O'Brien's aesthetic strategy—the narrative structure consisting of the interlocking of memory and imagination—draws the reader's attention to a mental process where the special power of one's imagination is applied to the determination of his/her course of future. The strategy is conceptualized as one of "how we use our imaginations to deal with situations around us, not just to cope with them psychologically but, more importantly, to deal with them philosophically and morally" (O'Brien, "Maybe So" 129). O'Brien implies that one's future course is influenced by imaginary visions as well as events in reality. In this respect, in large part, the trip to Paris in *Cacciato* derives from O'Brien's notion that "one's imagination and daydreams are real" (O'Brien, "Maybe So"

128). Berlin's motivation for creating the trip to Paris—the frequent examination of whether or not "[w]ith courage it might have been done" (323)—is in tune with O'Brien's fictionalization; Berlin intuitively recognizes, "it wasn't dreaming—it wasn't even pretending, not in the strict sense. It was an idea. It was a working out of the possibilities" (29). It is the interpenetration of reality and imagination whereby Berlin decides his future by interpreting what he has experienced both in reality and in imagination.

O'Brien frequently attempts to depict the characters' confusion as they move between reality and fiction in his prose style. Their confused state of mind can be regarded as O'Brien's means to describe the deep psyche. In *Cacciato,* shedding light on Berlin's flirtation with the possible world, O'Brien exposes Berlin's adolescent agony—the youthful struggle with a diffused self and the process of dealing with conflict and achieving a unified identity. However, in his struggle with the conflict within himself—whether to pursue individual freedom or conform to social expectation—Berlin finally decides to fulfill his duty as a soldier. This enables him to acquire a strong sense of self, one guided by interest in preserving his reputation and meeting others' expectations, which exemplifies the social personality emerging in the early Cold War period. As a Baby Boomer, O'Brien often shares Berlin's anxiety, which has much to do with the quandaries experienced by O'Brien's other protagonists, such as Tim O'Brien as narrator in *Combat Zone,* and Tim O'Brien as character in *The Things They Carried*. The protagonist in the latter novel concludes that he was a coward because he went to the war, which can be interpreted as meaning that he recognizes his surrender to the influence of the Cold War ideology. Thus, the exploration of Berlin's anxiety reveals that Cold War ideology had a great impact on the author O'Brien. This chapter attempts to avoid confining O'Brien's works within the context of

Vietnam War literature, and to shed light on O’Brien as an observer with keen insight into American culture in the early Cold War years.

[1] It was in 1980 that the diagnosis of PTSD was officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association. In addition, national memorials honoring the American soldiers engaged in the war, such as the Vietnam Wall Memorial (1982) and *The Three Soldiers* (1984), were created during this period. In Hollywood, movies in the theme of the Vietnam War experiences were produced in the 1980s.

[2] This is quoted from Richard Freedman's review, "A Separate Peace." of *Going After Cacciato* by Tim O'Brien in *The New York Times* published in February 12th in 1978.

[3] Tobey C. Herzog analyses the *Cacciato*'s narrative structure where the three-different tenses—the past, the present, and the specific period in Berlin's imagination—are frequently jumbled together: "The novel's intentional surface disorder and complexity mask an exquisitely crafted novel that has a simple structural, temporal, and thematic design—a soldier considering the present (observation-post chapters), remembering events (fact chapters), and imagining a future journey (road-to-Paris chapters) during six hours of night guard duty" (*Tim O'Brien* 83). In addition, although *Cacciato* is told by an extradiegetic narrator, Paul Berlin functions as the focalizer, a specific agent of perception who holds a single point of view throughout the whole story (Bal 18). Then, despite the novel's tripartite narrative structure, Berlin's introspection indicates that the past events and the traumatic experiences work together to construct the imaginary trip.

[4] In 1968, Paul Berlin becomes a soldier at the age of twenty.

[5] Hereafter, citations from *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Broadway, 1978) will be shown by page number.

[6] As his old teachers called him a "daydreamer" (180), he recognizes that "sometimes it seemed he'd wasted his whole life" (226) due to imagination. Still on the battlefield, surviving the harsh reality, "Paul Berlin found himself pretending, in a wishful sort of way, that before long the war would reach a climax beyond which everything else would seem bland and commonplace" (25).

[7] Afflicted with the problematic state of their unconscious identity, the young ask for postponements until they are sure whether or not they can meet the requirement of the conformist demanded by their communal world.

[8] Berlin's lack of a subjective sense of historical continuity within his identity is reflected in the scene where the mayor called the Ovissil claims that Berlin is too young to possess his own history to tell. Although Berlin insists that he is not so young, the mayor just declares, "Come to me when you have had time to make a real history for yourself" (179).

[9] Doc Peret argued with Fahyi Rhallon about the ethics of wars. When Rhallon suggests that any soldier might be just thinking whether "he [should] run or will he stay and fight?" (198), Berlin gets bewildered and feels like running away from them.

[10] Berlin's hometown is in Iowa, one of the Midwest states called America's Heartland, where the majority of the citizens are Anglos and long-standing supporters of the Republican Party. After WWII, it witnessed a rapid transition from an agricultural economy to a buoyant rise in manufacturing operations, which reflected a trend towards urbanization. Since Berlin is characterized as a typical young boy brought up in the Midwest, it is appropriate to see that he was in the transition from inner-direction to other-direction.

Chapter 3

How to Tell and Read a True War Story: Representation and Comprehension of Traumatic Experience in *The Things They Carried*

1.

In contrast with the protagonist Tim O'Brien's war narrative in *Combat Zone* and Paul Berlin's creation of the imaginary trip to Paris in *Cacciato*, the war stories created by the character-author Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* (hereafter, referred to as the character-author O'Brien, in order to distinguish him from the real-author Tim O'Brien) are replete with pathos. In the character-author O'Brien's war writing, attention is focused on the severe stress in combat in Viet Nam and the traumatized soldiers' psychological sufferings.

Twenty years after the end of the war, the character-author O'Brien in *Things* (hereafter referred to as *Things*), as a traumatized veteran of the Vietnam War, has been meditating obsessively on his Vietnam War experiences, which impels him to keep writing fictions that thematize the soldiers' war traumata. Here, what distinguishes clearly the war representation in *Things* and that in *Combat Zone* and in *Cacciato*—is the difference in their attitude toward their own traumatic war experiences. The protagonist O'Brien in *Combat Zone*, for instance, reflecting his elitism and belief in his superiority to those who accept without question the American involvement in the war, feels so much hostility toward the war that he becomes inclined to expose "the brutality and injustice and stupidity and arrogance of wars and men who fight in them" (O'Brien, *Combat Zone* 93). Thus, he has persuaded himself that the war is definitely wrong. In the case of *Cacciato*, Berlin's escapism, demonstrated by his absorption in the imaginary trip to Paris, manifests his secret ambivalence about his obligation to fight the war that seems to him to render "no sense of reality" (O'Brien, *Cacciato* 227).

Unable to engage in the war, Berlin, who feels anxious about his poor sense of responsibility, is bothered by the ethical dilemma revolving around the problem of whether to flee or fight the war. The protagonist O'Brien in *Combat Zone*, who is guided by excessive love for the good and deep-rooted hatred toward the wrong, seems to be associated with some of "Seven P's (*Peccato*) for the seven deadly sins" (Dante 108), which correspond to the terraces of the Purgatory of Dante Alighieri; as Arthur John Butler explains, the terraces are connected to the sins of "Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, Lust" (xiii). The protagonist O'Brien in *Combat Zone*, thus, is tormented by pride, envy, and anger corresponding to the three of the seven deadly sins and the anxious "desire to be good" (O'Brien, *Combat Zone* 56). As for Paul Berlin, who is marked by a weak sense of obligation towards other people, his state of perplexity might have something to do with "the sin of sloth" (Dante 200), described in a Dante-esque manner. In *Things*, on the other hand, the character-author O'Brien never allows his readers to be completely focused on the ethical objection to the armed conflicts in Viet Nam and the nightmare-ish vision of the evil war, or "the illusions of separation from a morally deficient culture or abdication of personal responsibility" (Wesley 63). Instead, the character-author O'Brien tries to perceive the mental or emotional state of soldiers who were suffering from physical pain as well as the psychological traumata of their Vietnam War experiences. As for *Things*, in the dedication the character-author O'Brien offers his sympathies for these traumatized soldiers' plights. By mentioning his fellow soldiers' names, he pays respect to their service as well as expressing his feeling of guilt as a survivor. As he declares in the epigraph, "*This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa*." The character author O'Brien, thus, seems to enter a new phase where he has been purged of the sins of pride, envy, anger, sloth and desire. The

character author O'Brien seems to be filled with love for the traumatized soldiers.

However, the character-author O'Brien does not honor the memory of the soldiers, which would risk creating another American myth. He does not romanticize their Vietnam War experiences. Rather, when writing about the traumatized soldiers, he places emphasis on the "reality" of the circumstances which left the traumatic impact on the soldiers. Thus, the stories in *Things* are intended to sound "real"; the reader may feel as if they were listening to the soldiers' narrating voices. Along with the graphic descriptions of the war experiences, the character-author O'Brien invites the reader to indirectly "experience" the psychological confusion of reality and imagination in the soldiers' minds. Thus, the border between fact and fiction is often blurred and they are jumbled in the character-author O'Brien's war stories. The character-author O'Brien, however, admits a certain truth in the war stories about the soldiers' inner experience, which he dubs "story-truth" (171).[1]

Through his sympathy for his fellow soldiers, the character-author O'Brien focuses on the working of human imagination and on how it is expressed by storytelling. He produces the imaginary arena named "story-truth" where the audience can empathize with the soldiers and deepen their understanding of the truths of war. The character-author O'Brien thinks that these truths are not fully expressed in non-fictional writings. Instead, he proposes a writing style which can dramatize the characters as lifelike. Only such a style can produce discourses that capture the truths as "the story-truths."

2.

Soldiers in war may sometimes become bewildered by enigmatic "dreams." Paul Fussell, an American cultural and literary historian, was himself a soldier in WWII who indulged in and was afflicted by such dreams. Fussell, recalling his experiences as

an infantryman during his service in WWII, draws the conclusion that "the general human impulse to make fictions had been dramatically unleashed by the novelty, immensity, and grotesqueness of the proceedings" (140-41) that soldiers underwent in combat. Siegfried Sassoon, one of the leading WWI poets, suggests that "*Soldiers are dreamers*" in the epigraph of *Cacciato,* which seems to approve of the gist of Fussell's remarks. In the Vietnam War, seeking survival under the harsh condition of the guerilla warfare in a thick tropical rain forest, the protagonist Tim O'Brien in *Things*, a soldier author writing Vietnam War stories, introduces to the reader strange dreams that the soldiers happen to have in the "days" as well as in the "nights" in Viet Nam.

In the daytime in Viet Nam, the character-author O'Brien remembers agonizing over the frequent monotony of his life in combat: as he mentions in the story titled "Spin," the soldiers were "humping the boonies," otherwise they were doing nothing but waiting. He recalls that the days were often filled with "a strange boredom" (33): ". . . you'd feel the boredom dripping inside you like a leaky faucet . . . it was a sort of acid, and with each little droplet you'd feel the stuff eating away at important organs . . . right then you'd hear gunfire behind you and your nuts would fly up into your throat and you'd be squealing pig squeals" (33). His reference to the sense of oppression draws the reader's attention to the psychological pressure experienced by the soldiers because of the constant menace of the enemy, the Communist guerrillas, who are "invisible" in most cases but reside permanently within the soldiers' imagination. At night comes the dark which can be felt as "the kind of clock-stopping black that God must've had in mind when he sat down to invent blackness" (209). When the soldiers were marching at night in Viet Nam, this purest blackness "turned their minds upside down; all the rhythms were wrong" (210). The character-author O'Brien recounts in the story titled "Night Life" that the soldiers found themselves caught in "[a]lways a lost sensation" (210), where they felt themselves separated from

their fellows and caught in a situation where there is no way out, and one just had "nothing to do but stare into the big black hole at the center of your own sorry soul" (195). They find themselves wandering into a mysterious world where "the imagination takes over" (195). In the darkness, the soldiers are surrounded by their sinister visions, which develop into a terrible nightmare-ish vision: ". . . your mind starts to roam. You think about dark closets, madmen, murderers under the bed, all those childhood fears. Gremlins and trolls and giants. You try to block it out but you can't. You see ghosts" (195).

The character-author O'Brien's war stories repeatedly refer to "forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth-century science" (192), perhaps because "[t]he result of inexpressible terror long and inexplicably endured is . . . a plethora of very un-modern superstitions, talismans, wonders, miracles, relics, legends, and rumors" (Fussell 140). The character-author O'Brien, gathering materials from his memories, thematizes these baffling dreams, which often disturb the soldiers' sensation (an external stimulus), perception (understanding and comprehending) and feeling (emotion). Through the soldiers' dreams, the character-author O'Brien sees how the soldiers become disenchanted with the many immoral acts and atrocities they witness in Viet Nam, and lose their innocence, their romanticized view of war and their self-esteem as good patriotic Americans with their toughness, justice, and courage. This is how the character-author O'Brien may make the audience including those who are blind in their patriotism and ignorant of "Vietnam" feel ashamed and become upset with the war and its obscenity, dirtiness, ugliness, and contradiction.

In the 1980s, the American public began to inquire into the truth about the U.S. military intervention in Viet Nam. The United States in the 1980s is marked by the public's growing interest in re-examining the war experiences, which suggested a giant leap out of "Vietnam Syndrome." The term "Vietnam Syndrome" stands for the public

aversion to the traumatic memories of the Vietnam War in the latter half of the seventies. Right after the war was over in the middle of the 1970s (it is generally recognized that the war ended when Saigon was conquered in 1975), post-war America became reluctant to acknowledge the great emotional distress associated with the U.S. failure in the Vietnam War. Since the war had caused sociopolitical and cultural controversy, the nation went into a period of upheaval when the war entered into a more difficult phase after the American bombardment of North Vietnam in 1965. Thus, it was not until the beginning of the 1980s, when the people finally began to show their readiness to face up to their distress over the Vietnam War traumata, and that the writings about the war experiences became the object of attention of general readers as well as academics in a broad range of fields. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, the general public, who had thus far shown little interest, started to reevaluate the war. In the eighties, then, the audience began to pay much more attention to what actually happened in Viet Nam, which encouraged the soldier-authors to put their own personal experiences into their writing.

As for truthful representation of wars, readers are generally inclined to place greater trust in nonfictional writings, such as oral history or testimonial accounts provided by those who were involved in war. Along with the public expectation for authentic and realistic war depictions, a number of the soldier-authors preferred to write about their own "Vietnam" in a nonfictional mode and style.[2] In the midst of the public demand for the "truth" of war, the mass-media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television) rapidly developed and became popular outlets through which stories about the Vietnam War were disseminated. The journalistic reports, which allowed citizens to access information of the U.S. government, were regarded as truer to the principles of American democracy. Therefore, the reader had a taste for journalistic writings that seem to be reliable and to give them an objective portrait of the Vietnam

War, even if they never went "there."[3] As mentioned above, the writers' endeavor to write in an adequate way about the Vietnam War experiences was closely linked to American public enthusiasm for the "truth" of the war.[4]

The real-author O'Brien, as a veteran of the Vietnam War, seems to have been aware of the public zeal for the re-assessment of the war as well as the popularity of nonfictional writing. He responded to the public interest in the truth of the Vietnam War in *Things.* (*Things* was published in 1990, but most of the stories collected in *Things* were written and revised in the 70s and the 80s.) O'Brien creates a protagonist who is a war writer (the protagonist who has the same name as the real author Tim O'Brien) and depicts the character-author O'Brien engaged in developing an original approach to truth-telling about his "Vietnam." The character-author O'Brien's quest for a true war representation is coupled with suggestions about the proper way of interpreting it. He frequently emphasizes the significance of a mutual interaction between the acts of "telling" and "reading," which is evident in the following stories, such as "Spin," "How to Tell a True War Story," "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," "Notes," "Good Form," "Field Trip" and "The Lives of the Dead." Since the character-author O'Brien represents a true war, occasionally writing metafictional narrations, the reader can learn how to perceive the truth through the writer's appropriate use of language. The character-author O'Brien introduces the reader to his unique concept "story-truth," which is achieved by the power of fictionalization. As for telling the truth, the character-author O'Brien's emphasis on the inevitable connection between fact and fiction may sound somewhat paradoxical to a number of readers in the Cold War era.

The character-author O'Brien's experimental attempts, which are most evident in his metafictional narrations commenting on his own truth-telling, have been interpreted in relation to postmodern literature. His aesthetics of "story-truth" is often

associated with the magic-realist or the New Journalist style. However, the character-author O'Brien is unwilling to employ derivative forms of writing in his accounts of the war. Instead, by inventing original narratives, the character-author O'Brien is pioneering another way of establishing rapport between the traumatized soldiers and the reader who never have the trauma of the Vietnam War.

The character-author O'Brien's quest for truth-telling derives from his examination and reconsideration of soldiers and their understanding of "true" knowledge. In defense of the truthfulness of his war representations, he introduces the reader to the examples of Mitchell Sanders's trauma-narrative and Rat Kiley's fabrication. The character-author O'Brien's re-evaluation of Sanders and Kiley as truth-tellers may contribute to removing any stigma associated with always telling surreal stories with their obscenity, dirtiness, ugliness, and contradiction that might embarrass the audience. For instance, the character-author O'Brien's sympathy with the soldier-narrators becomes evident when he empathizes with Sanders's "frustration at not quite getting the details right, not quite pinning down the final and definitive truth" (72).

The character-author O'Brien draws the reader's attention to the indispensability of "the role that imagination plays in helping to form our memories and our own versions of truth" (Harris 50). For instance, the power of imagination is evident in the war stories told by Mitchell Sanders. The character-author O'Brien remembers that Sanders, who often persuaded himself that "there's a definite moral" (12) in any situations on the battlefield, was telling the character-author O'Brien baffling anecdotes. The first story is about a soldier who seems to be attracted to the addictive danger and physical extremes of war and is eager to return to combat in Viet Nam. The second tale is about the six-men squad terrified at the eerie, uncanny noises which are coming from the mountains in Viet Nam during their night patrol.

Essentially, Sanders is a great believer in “the power of morals” (183), which results in “the comfortable reception of war modeled by its traditional depiction as a test of courage, a mode of heroism, or an assertion of superiority or virtue” (Wesley 66). Therefore, he could not tolerate the subversion of the traditional narrative by the mysterious episode of Mary Anne Bell that he heard from Rat Kiley. Sanders becomes irritated with Kiley, who is notorious as an unreliable narrator, since Kiley never tells a story without decorating facts with exaggeration, overstatement and excitement (85):

> “The story,” Sanders would say. “The whole tone, man, you’re wrecking it.”
>
> “Tone?”
>
> “The *sound*. You need to get a consistent sound, like slow or fast, funny or sad. All these digressions, they just screw up your story’s *sound*. Stick to what happened.”
>
> Frowning, Rat would close his eyes.
>
> “Tone?” he’d say. “I didn’t know it was all that complicated. The girl joined the zoo. One more animal—end of story.”
>
> “Yeah, fine. But tell it right.” (102)

Sanders, who has a reputation as a man of conscience, however, makes a confession to the character-author O’Brien after telling his own stories about the soldiers’ war traumata. Sanders acknowledges, through his own experiences of narrating his war stories, that in order to tell a true war story he finds it difficult not to “make up a few things” (73) and embellish the facts. Sanders finally realized that “the unplottable violence of the Vietnam experience is structurally contrasted to the assimilable violence of war as popular fiction” (Wesley 58-59), i.e. the pervasive cultural

discourse that Sanders and the rest of the men in the squad have been raised with. However, he eventually realizes that his own war narrative has the power to convey "God's truth" (68), which is necessary if an audience is "to feel truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling" (70). The character-author O'Brien, thus, seems to show a generous attitude toward the inconsistency between Sanders's expressed belief and his actual behavior because the character-author O'Brien could imagine Sanders's true feeling; the war truth that the traumatized soldiers try to tell cannot be comprehended without the listeners' empathy.

The character-author O'Brien knows very well about Sanders's difficulties in giving convincing explanations to an audience who never knew about the war and persuading them of the reality of a profound mystery in Viet Nam. Then, as Sanders confesses, he committed the unscrupulous act of making up some parts of his story about the six men bothered by the eerie noises. However, Sanders's invention never makes the character-author O'Brien feel like criticizing Sanders for cheating him. Rather, he seems to have a proper understanding of Sanders's true intention: the character-author O'Brien feels compassion towards Sanders because he understands that Sanders managed to get the character-author O'Brien "to feel the truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling" (70) with his original version of "truth." The character-author O'Brien, thus, sheds light on "a quick truth-goose" (34) in Sanders's fictionalized war experiences.

Together with Sanders's truth-telling, the case of the medic Rat Kiley also seems relevant to the character-author O'Brien's examination of the proper way of perceiving "truth." The character-author O'Brien recalls that among the soldiers in the squad Rat Kiley was notorious for frequently exaggerating, overstating and dramatizing the facts when recounting his experiences. The character-author O'Brien gives supportive comments on Kiley's motives for his propensity to "lie": "It wasn't a question of

deceit. Just the opposite: he [Kiley] wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt. For Rat Kiley, I think, facts were formed by sensation, not the other way around" (85).

The character-author O'Brien's keen insights into a certain "truth" in the war narratives emerged as these "unreliable" narrators—Sanders and Kiley—draw the reader's attention to the character-author O'Brien's set of principles of perceiving and appreciating the "truth" of war. The character-author O'Brien seems to stress that understanding the truth of war depends on innate human emotional response; comprehending truth is better established at a profound level of the mind than gained from factual knowledge. As he asserts, this truth "comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (74). He suggests that the traumatized soldiers' true war stories are to be "felt" since these stories, unlike factual stories, become much truer through the soldiers' psychological sensations and emotions.

The traumatized soldiers' drive for producing the felt-truths lies in their craving for the audience's empathy, which often tempts them to make their actual experiences much more dramatic than they really were. The soldiers, there, make their stories more exciting, emotional, or important to themselves as well as their audience. Thus, the character-author O'Brien appreciates that the war narratives by Sanders and Kiley hold the importance and value of the raw materials from which truth-telling can be produced. Focusing on the natural human impulse to embellish stories about one's own experiences and efforts to re-fashion the facts into the felt-truths, the character-author O'Brien never seems to be concerned about the boundaries between factual events and the products of imagination. The question of distinguishing the true from the false no longer matters for the felt-truths. The traumatized soldiers, thus, try to make the most of the power of storytelling, to make things seem more lively and vivid, and to make

their audience feel as if the events were occurring before their very eyes. This creed is endorsed by the character-author O'Brien's words, "What stories can do, I guess, is make things present" (172). The felt-truths can contribute to providing the reader who was not "there" with the chance to empathize with the soldiers who suffer from war traumata. Janis E. Haswell points out the inseparable connection between fact and fiction in the character-author O'Brien's truth-telling, and she becomes convinced of its power to bridge the gap between the victims of trauma and the audience. Her belief in the character-author O'Brien's true war representations is proved by her students' (the younger generation in the twenty-first century and distant from the war) interpretation of *Things*. After careful observation of the students interpreting *Things* in her lessons, Haswell concludes:

> . . . fact alone cannot inspire understanding, which springs from an author's attempt to "tell" and a reader's embrace of the resulting language that modifies the event. O'Brien's story-truth speaks to students; they feel it in their gut: they recognize it as human and valid, offered by an author willing to refashion experience through fiction . . . to connect with readers. (236)

As a Vietnam War veteran and a professional war writer, the character-author O'Brien induces the reader to empathize with the traumatized soldiers, by way of providing them with his felt-truths.

Referring to the traits of the character-author O'Brien's (and other soldiers') war narratives—a mixture of fact and fiction—the character-author O'Brien cautions the reader, "it's not a game. It's a form" (171); and then, he adds, "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth"

(171). The character-author O'Brien's aesthetics of the felt-truths are reminiscent of Victor Shklovsky's idea about art. Shklovsky discusses the meaning of art: ". . . art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things. . . . The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (20). The character-author O'Brien's stories may be consistent with Shklovsky's way of understanding art. Shklovsky conceives of artfulness chiefly as the technique of de-familiarization, "to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (20). As for the character-author O'Brien's true war representations, the reader can find some evidence of his attempts to radically de-familiarize the Vietnam War experiences.

For instance, in the title story "The Things They Carried," which thematizes the soldiers' psychological trauma resulting from the harsh reality of guerilla wars in Viet Nam, Lt. Cross and his soldiers are astounded at the chaotic reality of guerilla wars and the harsh conditions of the mined land of Viet Nam. The story draws the reader's attention to a long list describing the things that they carried on the battlefield. The catalogue of their belongings, which sounds "like a government report" (Kaplan 72), covers a variety of the necessities in their combat lives as infantrymen as "[t]hey were called legs and grunts" (3) to let the reader understand the soldiers' individuality. By referring to the weight of these items, it encourages the reader to imagine the soldiers' physical burdens as well as the psychological pressure of the battlefield. The character-author O'Brien intends these descriptions to make the reader feel as if they were marching with the soldiers in Alpha Company into battle in the guerrilla war. Lt. Cross wears letters from a girl named Martha and her photographs next to his skin. These items suggest that his obsession with Martha results in his creation of a fantasy, which allows him to escape from the reality of war. Ted Lavender, a young soldier who

is terribly scared, carried "6 or 7 ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity" (3) to cope with the harsh realities of the war. Kiowa, a Native American soldier, devotes himself to his Baptist beliefs, and often tells stories of life after death in "an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father, who taught Sunday school in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma" (3).

As for the catalogue of the things the soldiers are carrying, the character-author O'Brien's "obsession with even the minutest detail . . . is the academic tone that at times makes the narrative sound like a government report" (Kaplan 72) which seems scientific in its precision. The character-author O'Brien, however, attempts to gradually shift the reader's attention from the catalogue to the "lists of actual and emotional burdens toted by the soldiers" (Wesley 57), which is inscribed in the soldiers' personal belongings, such as Ted Lavender's drugs, Kiowa's bible and Jimmy Cross's love letters. The character-author O'Brien's way of representing the soldiers' war traumata involves the technique of de-familiarizing the war in Viet Nam. Wesley describes the technique:

> . . . by presenting violence in terms of burden rather than battle through deliberately non-dramatic structure, by stressing the continuous pressure of war rather than the climactic action of combat through the metaphor of weight to be borne, "The Things They Carried" deflates the excitement of traditional portrayal of the violence of the military adventure, and it deflects the ascription of moral purpose to the violent events of war. (58)

The character-author O'Brien's craft of storytelling invites the reader to "sense" the experience of marches in the midst of a guerrilla war together with the soldiers of Alpha Company and induces readers' empathy with the soldiers' plights in the war.

The character-author O'Brien's war depictions, where the soldiers' psyche and their physical sense are highlighted, are intended to de-familiarize the soldiers' trauma resulting from the guerilla war in Viet Nam. The tarnished image of these soldiers stigmatized as men belonging to a defeated army is transformed into an image of young, naïve and innocent American sons. The character-author O'Brien's engagement with the art of de-familiarization helps to bridge the great gap between veterans and non-veterans.

In addition to the art of de-familiarization, in *Things*, O'Brien deploys some other techniques to invite the reader into the stories. The war stories may appear to be unreliable because they are presented to the reader in "a fragmented form rather than in a straightforward, linear fashion" (Wesley 95), which seems to mirror O'Brien's suggestion that "[w]hat sticks to memory, often, are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end" (34). The character-author O'Brien's "truth" cannot be grasped unless the reader uses the power of their own imagination "to piece together information, such as the circumstances surrounding the characters' deaths, in the same manner that the characters must piece together the reality of the war, or, for that matter, Curt Lemon's body" (Wesley 95). The character-author O'Brien writes the war stories, interspersing the definitions of the "truth" of war as well as the examples to illustrate it, which is also considered as "a technique that actively engages the readers in the process of textual creation" (Wesley 94). The technique enables the reader go back to the text and review what story-truths is really about.

The character-author O'Brien's truth-telling possesses the power to bridge the gap between the traumatized soldiers and those who never knew about "Vietnam." Elevating the war narratives to a work of fiction, the character-author O'Brien attempts to stimulate the reader's imagination and arouse their own emotions whatever the circumstances. This means that his true narratives can appeal to multiple generations

of readers, which suggests that his stories may protect the war memories from being buried in oblivion. The war truth in the character-author O'Brien's narratives will never be endangered by the passage of time.

The character-author O'Brien implies that what we perceive and memorize is inevitably partially distorted, misunderstood, and sometimes completely forgotten as time passes. Emphasizing the link between memory and imagination in terms of truth-telling, he points out that it is substantially impossible for one's memory to record every aspect of the event, which is related to the fragmentary quality of things recollected. He suggests that what remains in the soldier's memory is rarely coherent, exemplifying what he saw when Curt Lemon stopped on the mine in the thick rainforest: "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*" (68). As a result of the limitation of one's perception, "[w]hat sticks to memory, often, are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end" (34).

Second, as time passes, it becomes more difficult for one to remember what one actually experienced. About twenty years after the end of the war, the character-author O'Brien confesses: "I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and the war has been over for a long while. Much of it is hard to remember" (31). For instance, around twenty years after the end of the war, the character-author O'Brien goes back to Viet Nam with his ten-year-old daughter Kathleen. He takes her to Than Khe, where his close friend Kiowa sank and disappeared in the mud field. The character-author O'Brien, with Kathleen, searches out the site where the body of Kiowa was found. However, even though he stands in the exact place where Kiowa's body was found, he finds it difficult to recall the details of what really happened there: "I pictured Kiowa's

face, the way he used to smile, but all I felt was the awkwardness of remembering" (176).

The visit to Viet Nam, the character-author O'Brien believes, can offer his daughter "a small piece of her father's history" (174), which is "as remote to her as cavemen and dinosaurs" (175). It seems to the character-author O'Brien that she neither understands, nor makes an effort to gain access to, "what all this was about, why I'd insisted that we search out this spot" (174). Kathleen asks:

> "This whole war," she said, "why was everybody so mad at everybody else?"
>
> I shook my head. "They weren't mad, exactly. Some people wanted one thing, other people wanted another thing."
>
> "What did *you* want?"
>
> "Nothing," I said. "To stay alive."
>
> "That's all?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> Kathleen sighed. "Well, I don't get it. I mean, how come you were even here in the first place?"
>
> "I don't know," I said. "Because I had to be."
>
> "But *why*?"
>
> I tried to find something to tell her, but finally I shrugged and said, "It's a mystery, I guess. I don't know." (175)

The character-author O'Brien can never forget "[s]ome dumb thing happens a long time ago" (175), which Kathleen sees as something pretty "weird" (175) and hardly comprehensible. Kathleen tries to stop her father from wading into the river, watching

him doing “business here” (176), which is to wedge Kiowa’s moccasins into the river bottom. When Kathleen says, “I tell Mommy, she’ll probably make you sleep in the garage” (179), the character-author O’Brien feels it difficult to fill in the psychological gap felt by those who never experienced the war and never want to know about it. The character-author O’Brien wades into the water to reach the spot where Kiowa died, which reminds the reader of Norman Bowker entering into the town lake where his old friend Max Arnold drowned. The place now seems to be “at peace” (173), a place where they can see yellow butterflies flying in a wide blue sky and enjoy a comfortable breeze. Kathleen is completely ignorant of the field which swallowed the character-author O’Brien’s best friend Kiowa, as well as his pride and belief in himself “as a man of some small dignity and courage” (176) and his “old ambitions and hopes” (176) for himself. For the character-author O’Brien, the war trauma he experienced in that place, which embodies “all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror” (176), awakens the coldness that has never disappeared from his thoughts. This episode sheds light on the great gap between the victims of trauma and those who have never been traumatized. However, at the end of the story, the character-author O’Brien has overcome his best friend’s loss by placing Kiowa’s old moccasins at the bottom of the swamp. About twenty years after the war was over, the character-author O’Brien finally relinquishes these moccasins, the reminder of Kiowa. The character-author O’Brien has learned that storytelling is the only way to preserve the memory of Kiowa.

The character-author O’Brien’s feelings about the cruelty of oblivion evokes the aesthetics of Marcel Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. There are some similarities between what the character-author O’Brien has in mind in creating stories and the theme Marcel Proust sets out in his novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In the critical biography of Proust *The Quest for Proust*, André Maurois regards Proust as the first writer to make the intricate relation between sensations and memory as the

primary theme for his work. According to Maurois, for Proust, holding our individuality, identification, and permanence of "self" (a person's essential being that distinguishes them from others) is impossible because this "self" is subject to disintegration by the passage of time. In addition, time not only alters our minds, but also transfigures our physical worlds and societies. We are incessantly affected "by the flight of the passing moment, by the perpetual state of flux of everything that makes up our environment, by the changes wrought by time in our bodies and our minds" (Maurois 176-77). Thus, Maurois examines human frailty in relation to time's devastating power:

> All human beings, whether they accept the fact or not, are plunged into the dimension of Time, are carried away by the current of the moving days. Their whole life is a battle with Time. They seek to find an anchorage in friendship or in love, but these sentiments can remain above water only if they find expression in beings who, themselves, disintegrate and drown, whether because they die, whether because they pass out of our lives, or whether because it is we who change. Slowly forgetfulness mounts upwards from the great depths and sets a wall about our loveliest and dearest memories. (177)

However, in spite of this notion of "Time the Destroyer," Proust rejects the impossibility of an eternal "self." Maurois argues that there is a certain moment "which continues to live on in an object, a taste, a smell: and if, by chance, some day, we can give to our memories the support of a sensation in the present, it will come to life again, as the dead, in Homer, having drunk the sacrificial wine, find for themselves a habitation of flesh and blood" (180-81). Since only memory can prove the continuity

and permanence of our "selves," at the moments when the past comes back to us and renews itself in the present, we feel that the past is still incorporated in ourselves, and consequently realize the eternity of our "selves." This is another theme Proust is obsessed by—our bodies and our consciousness act as reservoirs of time. This notion is called "Memory the Preserver." As Maurois suggests, memory represents the moment when the past that seemed to have been lost forever suddenly feels so real to us that the artist gets the feeling that they have gained eternity. For them, time is conquered and the "recreation by memory of impressions which, later, must be plumbed, irradiated, transformed into intellectual equivalents, is the essence of every true work of art" (Maurois 180). Thus, one of the main subjects of Proust's novel is the possibility of finding eternal "selves" in a work of art. Yet, since not pleasant memories but horrible ones come back to us, survivors of war are often haunted by traumatic experiences. It means that extremely upsetting events that they experienced a long time ago recur in their memories. Some are condemned to relive the past as long as they are alive. It is very difficult to hold back such memories, which, whether they are deliberately remembered or not, tend to suddenly awaken in a person's mind outside their control. Traumatic memories have the power to violently conquer the present. Eventually, the character-author O'Brien, as a novelist, shapes his stories into art that makes possible the eternalization of war memory.

In the character-author O'Brien's metanarrative titled "Spin," the narrative's self-consciousness is immediately made evident in the narrator's comments on the nature of his memories:

> Much of it is hard to remember. I sit at this typewriter and stare through my words and watch Kiowa sinking into the deep muck of a shit field, or Curt Lemon hanging in pieces from a tree, and as I write about these

> things, the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening. Kiowa yells at me. Curt Lemon steps from the shade into bright sunlight, his face brown and shining, and then he soars into a tree. The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over. (31)

While he says he almost forgot the war, the visions of the deaths of his fellow soldiers Kiowa and Curt Lemon are written in the present tense, as if the events were occurring directly in front of him. The idea that the past is still fresh and vivid in one's mind has some similarities to the main purpose that Marcel Proust sees in art.

In addition, in the story titled "Field Trip," where the character-author O'Brien returns to Viet Nam with his daughter twenty years after the end of the war, he revisits the place where his fellow Kiowa died a tragic death. A lapse of twenty years, however, has changed almost everything and "it [is] hard to picture what ha[s] happened on this ground some twenty years ago" (173). Even though the field is so different from the past that it is no longer possible to find traces of what happened there, the sight of Kiowa's body and the smells of the place still come back to him with the same intensity. Carrying the burden of his death, and looking for "signs of forgiveness or personal grace or whatever else the land might offer" (173), he discovers the continuity of his "self" as a soldier within himself in the fictional space of the story.

One may argue that those who experienced traumatic events generally want to erase them from their memory. However, it is also true that they cannot be separated from their traumatic memory, because what they remember is a part of "who they are." For the character-author O'Brien, his memory is intimately connected with his identity. What is more, it is only in his memory that he can see the dead—his fellow soldiers, Linda, and himself before the loss of his innocence. Still, like other memories, even his

traumatic memories will not last forever, because they can be distorted, reworked, or transformed. Only stories can prevent this disappearance. The significance of what he calls "stories" lies in their ability to mirror the struggle or the spiritual feeling of a person who faces the cruelty of the real world:

> . . . sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story. (36)

The significance of a story depends on its capacity to replace fading memories and bring a justification for the enduring pain. The character-author O'Brien does not try to free himself from the past. Rather, like Proust, as an artist who creates literature, he strives to retain even traumatic memories by creating a world within stories, a space that is unique in allowing him to find his continuous "self." Stories allow him to preserve his war experience and prevent it from being forgotten forever. Literary anamnesis is necessary to preserve the memory of the war.

In sum, the character-author O'Brien's storytelling makes possible the following: an aid to a person's life, the resurrection of the war dead, the acknowledgement of one's traumatic memory, and the integration and perpetuation one's "self." The character-author O'Brien will keep writing war stories because "the act of writing had led me [the character-author O'Brien] through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse" (152). The character-author O'Brien has imagined Linda, who was a classmate and in love with him, speaking

directly to him in his dreams since the time she died of a brain tumor at the age of nine. The imaginary Linda explains the state of being dead: ". . . it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading" (232) and "the book hasn't been checked out for a long, long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody'll pick it up and start reading" (232). As she suggests, death seems to represent a situation where one slips out of others' memory, which is the loss of the person, of the sense of their existence; in short, here, death is metaphorically suggested as the lapse of memory. Regarding death as forgetfulness, the character-author O'Brien believes that his (and the traumatized soldiers') true story-telling can forestall the writers and the readers from forgetting the past by subsuming them into his fictional world. He speaks to the reader: ". . . stories can save us . . . in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world" (213).

3.

The title story "The Things They Carried" sets forth one of the main themes of the story collection *Things*: the violation of the American self-image as a courageous hero. The character-author O'Brien deals with the subject in the episode focused on Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's masculinity.

In "The Things They Carried," Lt Jimmy Cross, the platoon leader, is preoccupied by thoughts of a girl named Martha, whom he dated before being sent to Viet Nam. Although the story is narrated in the third person, the narrative is presented through the eyes of Lt. Cross, who is the "focalizer," i.e. "the perceived centre of consciousness" (O'Neill 86). However, the following story "Love" suggests to the reader that the character-author O'Brien as a war writer composed "The Things They Carried," which induces a vignette dedicated to Lt. Cross. Thus, the narration of "The Things They Carried" is structured in such a way that the character-author O'Brien

becomes “a subjective filter through which readers gain information” (Colella 28). As a first-person narrator who can only know what he sees and experiences (in fact, the character-author O’Brien, a first person narrator who has knowledge of every circumstance in his stories), the character-author O’Brien juxtaposes the various descriptions of the things the soldiers in the Alpha Company are carrying with them, both tangible and intangible. In the case of Lt. Cross, who had deep affection for the soldiers, as well as a sense of “the responsibility for the lives of his men” (5), constantly recalls his unrequited love for Martha, looking at the girl’s letters and photographs that he always handles with great care. In “The Things They Carried,” the character-author O’Brien draws the reader’s attention to Lt. Cross’s psychological dilemma: the difficult situation in which Lt. Cross has to make a choice between these “two” loves, the bond of friendship and the cords of love. In the narration, Lt. Cross’s dilemma often confuses his perception of reality and his fantasy about Martha.

Lt. Cross finds himself often being indulged in his “pretending.” For instance, in his foxhole, he secretly diverts himself by imagining “romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire” (1) with Martha; or, even while on duty, he becomes deeply absorbed in dreaming of “walking barefoot along the Jersey shore, with Martha, carrying nothing” (8) necessary for combat life. The fantasy can provide Lt. Cross with warmth and consolation, which help him to recover emotions and a humanity that he misses in the harsh reality of the war that requires a hard, unemotional masculinity. The character-author O’Brien attempts to shed light on Lt. Cross’s inner turmoil where the power of reality is confronted with that of memory and imagination. When Lee Strunk (a soldier in Alpha Company) engages in the perilous mission of searching out and destroying the tunnel complexes (the Viet Cong tunnels used as hiding places to store food and weapons) in Than Khe, the Martha fantasy still distracts Lt. Cross. No longer concentrating on the war, he lets himself slip into the

realm of his daydream of the girl. Through Lt. Cross's mental lapse, the character-author O'Brien describes the immense power of the illusion that eventually overcomes the harsh reality of the war:

> Lieutenant Cross gazed at the tunnel. But he was not there. He was buried with Martha under the white sand at the Jersey shore. They were pressed together, and the pebble in his mouth was her tongue. He was smiling. Vaguely, he was aware of how quiet the day was, the sullen paddies, yet he could not bring himself to worry about matters of security. He was beyond that. (11)

However, the absurd reality of Ted Lavender's sudden death (a soldier in Alpha Company) awakens Lt. Cross from the imaginary world. When Strunk crawls out of the tunnel without getting injured and the other soldiers are all greatly relieved to see he has survived; however, at that very moment, Lavender is unexpectedly shot in the head. This makes Lt. Cross blame himself for neglecting his duty as he believes that "he loved her more than anything, more than his men, and now Ted Lavender was dead because he loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her" (6). The episode of Lt. Cross's devotion to the girl is more than a mere story of pure love. As explained in the psychologist Abram Kardiner's analysis, soldiers' admiration for a pinup is regarded as one of the signs of their escapism: psychological distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, such as homesickness, solitude, sexual frustration, and failure to develop good relationships with their fellows (Kardiner 19). In addition to these common combat stresses, under British and American military regulations especially in the Cold War period, officers had been often assigned to the battlefield so as to fight in the front line with infantrymen. This was intended to help them prevent

collapse of morale in their units. Thus, as both a squad leader and a foot soldier, Lt. Cross's psychological stress can be seen as resulting from a set of complicated circumstances. From Kardiner's perspective, Lt. Cross can be seen not only as "just a kid at war, in love" (11), but as a young man of only twenty-four who is trying to overcome his incompetence and deal with the harsh reality of the war. His imaginary Martha, then, can be seen as a figment that Lt. Cross creates to protect himself from the stress of traumatic war experience.

After the chopper takes Lavender's body away from the battlefield, Lt. Cross burns the mementos of Martha—her letters and photos—so as to persuade himself not to love her, but to devote himself more to his men. He reconfirms his obligation to protect his soldiers' lives. He resolves to become much more rigorous as an officer even though the men would not love him:

> He would dispense with love; it was not now a factor. And if anyone quarreled or complained, he would simply tighten his lips and arrange his shoulders in the correct command posture. He might give a curt little nod. Or he might not. He might just shrug and say, Carry on, then they would saddle up and form into a column and move out toward the villages west of Than Khe. (25)

Lt. Cross's conduct on the battlefield reminds the reader of the idealized images of the disciplined and competent soldiers, such as Mad Mark the platoon leader and Captain Johansen praised by the protagonist O'Brien in *Combat Zone*. The protagonist O'Brien in *Combat Zone* regards them as living examples of courageous heroes (as far as the protagonist O'Brien is concerned, they are characterized by the professionalism attributable to western philosophical virtue). Similarly, Lt. Cross, who undergoes

hardships in the process of his psychological metamorphosis, seems to resolve to be a competent officer who evokes the manner of John Wayne, the emblem of Hollywood macho in American popular movies. Thus, the story "The Things They Carried" seems to conclude by celebrating the very moment when Lt. Cross metamorphoses into the American war hero. "The Things They Carried" expresses compassion for Lt. Cross's innocence and inexperience and dramatizes his youthful agony, which results in his radical transformation. Many might agree that the character-author O'Brien in "The Things They Carried" considers "the masculine mystique of the violence of war as the litmus test" (Wesley 65) and dramatizes the episode of Lt. Cross so as to recount a kind of romantic tale of the American hero. The character-author O'Brien, however, as an omniscient narrator, becomes an acute observer of Lt. Cross's anti-heroic aspect. Whereas the character-author O'Brien sheds light only on Lt. Cross's heroic aspect, he also observes Lt. Cross having a hard time responding to the random violence in unproductive ways: Lt. Cross feels great guilt and responsibility for the deaths of his men that occur under his command, especially those of Ted Lavender and Kiowa, the Native American soldier who is "a fine soldier and a fine human being, a devout Baptist, and there was no way Lt. Cross would allow such a good man to be lost under the slime of a shit field" (156). The character-author O'Brien here refers to Lt. Cross's incompetence:

> Jimmy Cross did not want the responsibility of leading these men. He had never wanted it. . . . He was unprepared. Twenty-four years old and his heart wasn't in it. Military matters meant nothing to him. He did not care one way or the other about the war, and he had no desire to command, and even after all these months in the bush, all the days and nights, even then he did not know enough to keep his men out of a shit field. (160-61)

Lt. Cross's immature, unrequited love for Martha results from his egoistic sense of self-importance as a male. Although the story describes Lt. Cross's devotion to Martha, his self-analysis regarding what makes him love her so much is never mentioned in the narrative. Whenever Lt. Cross is engaged in picturing Martha in his mind, he seems to be little concerned about imagining her real thoughts and her true feelings. Rather, in Lt. Cross's eyes, Martha appears to express things that he can hardly understand. For instance, he is not capable of guessing what she is trying to suggest to him by her inclusion of lines of poetry in her letters. Lt. Cross carefully analyses each word in her letters, only to consider these letters as "mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love" (1). The narrative never introduces her writings to the reader as evidence, contrary to the character-author O'Brien quoting part of the letter sent by Norman Bowker (the character-author O'Brien's fellow soldier, who commits suicide after returning to America). This suggests that Lt. Cross does not place great importance on Martha's true feelings, which makes him unable to understand her. Lt. Cross's misunderstanding of Martha become more evident in the imaginary Martha's lack of a "self," i.e. her particular nature or personality and the qualities that make her an individual or unique. Lt. Cross never succeeds in imagining Martha herself speaking directly to him and he has no clear image of her; her eyes appear to Lt. Cross to be "gray and neutral" (4), which symbolizes her expressionlessness and obscurity. The imaginary Martha's lack of human qualities suggests Lt. Cross's failure to create an intimate relationship with Martha, which cannot provide him with specific memories and information about the girl that could become material for his imagination. Still on the battlefield, the miscommunication between Lt. Cross and Martha makes him keep wishing to know more about the girl's "[i]ntimate secrets: Why poetry? Why so sad? Why that grayness in her eyes? Why so alone?" (11). Lt.

Cross's immaturity becomes evident in the comparison between Lt. Cross's love for Martha and the character-author O'Brien's love for Linda (his girlfriend died of a brain tumor at the age of nine). The character-author O'Brien, describing his relationship with Linda as "all the shadings and complexities of mature adult love" (216), refers to their cord of love: "It was pure knowing. Neither of us . . . would've thought to use that word, love, but by the fact of not looking at each other, and not talking, we understood with a clarity beyond language that we were sharing something huge and permanent" (218). Lt. Cross's affection for Martha seems to be anything but mature adult love.

In spite of Lt. Cross's inability to comprehend Martha's thoughts and feelings, he is obsessed with images of her body. Looking at the photograph, where she is playing volleyball, he is inspecting her physical traits: "Her legs, he thought, were almost certainly the legs of a virgin, dry and without hair, the left knee cocked and carrying her entire weight, which was just over 117 pounds" (4). Lt. Cross's excessive attention to her body reveals his sexual desires: he is visually attracted by Martha's attractive body, and his prime concern is about her virginity. Lt. Cross's worry about Martha's chastity is derived from his anxiety about his manliness, which comes from his obsession with missing the opportunity to perform what he believes to be "something brave" (4). He remembers the day when he was dating Martha: he touched Martha's left knee while watching a movie in the theatre; and then, all of a sudden, he felt impelled to confine her in a room. Since then, he has repented not having "tied her to the bed and touched that left knee all night long" (4). This raises a suspicion that he attempted to commit a rape (but he did not actually do so, which may make the reader speculate about whether he is impotent). What he considers courageous to do appears to be nothing but a phallocentric wish-fulfillment. Lt. Cross is just trying to reassure himself as regards his manliness.

In the story “Love,” after the war was over, Lt. Cross and the real Martha run into each other at a college reunion. He confesses that he tried to do something courageous for Martha, whereas she shows her strong feeling of hatred for “[t]he things men do” (28), which suggests that she is indirectly blaming Lt. Cross for having tried to act like all the men who suppress women. keeping the male omnipotent gaze at females. She suggests resistance to male dominance by implying to him that she will never be married. However, all he can manage to do is infer that “there were things about her he would never know” (27). The character-author O’Brien observes that his love for Martha will always be love, i.e. sexual love or desire, never agape, or transcendent love. In “Love,” by referring to the real voice of Martha, the character-author O’Brien represents the sterility of Lt. Cross’s male understanding of love. The frequent interaction between reality and memory and imagination—the war reality versus the imaginary Martha, and Lt. Cross’s memory of Martha and the real Martha—draws the reader’s attention to Lt. Cross’s duality, which shows the reader his failure to embody the genuine American war hero. These unglorified images of the platoon leader reduce the American war hero to just a phallocentric fantasy.

Blurring the line between a hero and a non-hero, the character-author O’Brien attempts to broaden the reader’s scope of inquiry and “overturn convictions by muddling oppositional categories of truth and fiction, good and evil, and love and war. The effect of the true war story will be to replace certainty with confusion” (Wesley 61). This also occurs in the depiction of Curt Lemon, who the character-author O’Brien casts as a symbol of American innocence and “the momentary emblem of youthful American guilelessness” (Wesley 60), i.e. a kind of outdated model of masculine heroism. The character-author O’Brien focuses on Kiley’s terrific letter addressed to Lemon’s sister which refers to a few examples of Lemon’s bravery. In the letter, Kiley dubs Lemon “[a] real soldier’s soldier” (64); viewed from a different

angle, however, as the letter reveals, Lemon was "[p]retty nutso sometimes" (65) as he viewed the war as great entertainment. The character-author O'Brien also remembers Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon playing catch with smoke grenades throwing them back and forth. Although the carefree game turns the war into a momentary scene of pastoral innocence, Lemon steps on the hidden booby trap, which suddenly explodes and in a split second blows his body up into a tree. Lemon's fragmentation and evisceration "are converted from organs of life to signifiers of death" (Wesley 60).

The idea of traditional American heroism is in a crisis, which is inscribed in the vignette entitled "On the Rainy River." The character-author O'Brien's inducement to meditation is predicted on the moral lessons that the character-author O'Brien took from Elroy Berdahl, an elderly man whom the character-author O'Brien refers to as "the hero of my life" (45). The character-author O'Brien develops a deep admiration for the man, which is something unusual for the character-author O'Brien in *Things*. O'Brien never believes in a "perfect" hero whose power of action is supreme. There remains an intriguing possibility that Berdahl is one of the make-believe heroes that exist only in the character-author O'Brien's imagination, which becomes evident considering the character-author O'Brien's remarks: "Looking back after twenty years, I sometimes wonder if the events of that summer didn't happen in some other dimension, a place where your life exists before you've lived it, and where it goes afterward. None of it ever seemed real" (52). If that is the case, Berdahl should be identified with "the typical hero of *romance*" (Fry 33): Berdahl seems to have the attributes of the hero of romance, "whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him" (Fry 33). First, Berdahl is marked by an accurate and deep understanding as the character-author O'Brien recalls that "the old man took

one look and went right to the heart of things—a kid in trouble" (46). Second, Berdahl seems to be a man who practices the virtue of moderation as the character-author O'Brien recalls that he was greatly impressed by "[t]he man's self-control" (49); although Berdahl avoids doing or making something in excess or extreme, he makes every endeavor to do exactly what is necessary. Although Berdahl is reticent to act, he takes special care not to put the character-author O'Brien in "a position that required lies or denials" (49) for fear that his words would mislead the character-author O'Brien into self-deception about his flee-or-fight quandary. Instead, Berdahl provides the character-author O'Brien with the opportunity to think over his own situation and make his own decision about his life. Berdahl, as a living witness, prefers to give the character-author O'Brien the opportunity to decide for himself: ". . . as we live our lives, as we make our choices or fail to make them" (57). Thus, Berdahl takes the character-author O'Brien to the Rainy River, as the line between two different worlds—the United States and Canada—and which for the character-author O'Brien "separated one life from another" (45), which prompts him to confirm his real intention. The character-author O'Brien concludes, "I think he meant to bring me up against the realities, to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge and to stand a kind of vigil as I chose a life for myself" (53). As Susan Farrell argues, "Berdahl acts in the role of mentor/guide" (*Critical Companion* 287) during the journey of "the young O'Brien kid" (43) distraught at "some irrational and powerful force" (49) that pushes him toward the war. Berdahl leads the character-author O'Brien to embark on "a hero's journey, in which a young man at a crossroads in his life enters into a liminal space, receives a vision, then changes forever" (Farrell, *Critical Companion* 287). Although in "On the Rainy River" the character-author O'Brien narrates the episode of his flee-or-fight dilemma in an autobiographical or memoir-like fashion, the story can be considered as a derivative imitation of a Bildungsroman. It is

not until the character-author O'Brien spent the unforgettable six days in the Tip Top Lodge together with Berdahl that the character-author O'Brien assigns the responsibility for his bad fortune—the military service in the war where "[c]ertain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons" (38)—to the townspeople:

> . . . I'd sometimes carry on fierce arguments with those people. I'd be screaming at them, telling them how much I detested their blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all, their simpleminded patriotism, their prideful ignorance, their love-it-or-leave-it platitudes, how they were sending me off to fight a war they didn't understand and didn't want to understand. I held them responsible. (43)

In addition, the character-author O'Brien had no doubt of "a conforming theory" (38), the theory about "a secret reservoir of courage" (37): as he firmly believed, "Courage . . . comes to us in infinite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down" (38). The character-author O'Brien believes that his crisis in a moral emergency can be resolved by his "moral capital prepared for that day when the account must be drawn down" (38). The heroism the character-author O'Brien sees in Berdahl is in a different class from the character-author O'Brien's pat image of the old fashion American hero: the cowboy hero "The Lone Ranger" (37). Berdahl can no longer be examined through the lens of American triumphalism. Berdahl, although still in silence, encourages the character-author O'Brien in a series of personal choices since Berdahl knows that the character-author O'Brien can be the only one who make decisions about his own life and is in control of his own destiny.

In the character-author O'Brien's war stories, the reader rarely encounters descriptions of the actual Vietnamese troops; they are never highlighted in the stories. Instead, the reader witnesses the soldiers being haunted by their nightmares of "the ghosts," i.e. members of the Viet Cong soldiers.

The complexity of the human relationship between Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk also has a lot to do with the soldiers' impulse to create strange and grotesque illusions. In the vignette "Enemies," as well as in the case of Lt. Cross in "The Things They Carried," Jensen can no longer distinguish reality from his imagination. Jensen is annoyed by the constant menace of the enemies that can never be seen; however, Jensen is the only person who can certainly perceive their existence. These "invisible" enemies, thus, drive him mad. Jensen begins to beat Lee Strunk's face because Jensen believes that Strunk has stolen his jackknife. For many soldiers' their military equipment and weapons can be regarded as extensions of the soldiers themselves and become fetishist objects. When the soldiers find their armaments missing or broken, they begin to feel their morale decline and the loss is experienced as an existential crisis. Jensen's uneasiness is closely related to the soldiers' mundane psychological state on the battlefield. However, Jensen begins to suffer from his hallucinations, "hearing strange noises in the dark, imagining a grenade rolling into his foxhole or the tickle of a knife against his ear" (60). Jensen's episode suggests that soldiers' traumatic neurosis, which is related to phobia, chronic nervousness, and sudden outbursts of rage, is brought about by intense psychic pressure experienced under guerrilla warfare.

Jensen's excessive uneasiness with the "invisible" enemies (although they appear only in his imagination) is closely related to an anecdote about the six soldiers in the war, which the character-author O'Brien heard from Mitchell Sanders after joining the army (in order to convey what he considers truth, he tends to dramatize parts of his narrative, which makes him an unreliable narrator, though he never

deliberately teases the reader. The character-author O'Brien's intent is to make the audience "feel" the events as if they were actually experiencing them). According to Sanders, the six men went on patrols to observe the enemies' movements in the frightening jungle for a week. During the patrol at night, however, the men began to be disturbed by the eerie noises that are unlike any they have heard. They noticed that the strange noises did not have human qualities: they were all different, such as chamber music, an opera, a glee club, funky chanting, a sort of recitation of a Buddhist scripture and the sounds of a cocktail party. Since they were not able to cope with these strange noises, they decided to blow away whatever was around them with massive firepower. Sanders describes the jungle: "The rock—it's *talking*. And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses. Everything talks. The trees talk politics, the monkeys talk religion. The whole country. Vietnam. The place talks. It talks. Understand? Nam—it truly *talks*" (71). The tension from guerilla war makes the soldiers nervous, which stimulates their imaginative power and they create the visions of enemies in their heads even though they never appear before them.

The character-author O'Brien introduces another war story by Mitchell Sanders about Rat Kiley at the baffling nights in Viet Nam. Kiley is tormented by hallucinations of bugs that do not really exist: in Kiley's words, they are as "[b]ig giant killer bugs . . . mutant bugs, bugs with fucked-up DNA, bugs that were chemically altered by napalm and defoliants and tear gas and DDT" (209). These bugs were biting Kiley and humming in his ears, which made him go mad. He could not stop having a vision where these bugs are eating him. Kiley, describing the war as "[j]ust one big banquet" (212), considers the soldiers as "[m]eat for the bugs" (212), which occurred to him after the absurd deaths of his fellow soldiers, such as Ted Lavender, his close friend Curt Lemon, Kiowa, as well as his own death. Kiley's illusion of these killer bugs derives from his mental stress caused by the "invisible" enemy in a guerilla war.

Exemplifying the soldiers' strange dreams, the character-author O'Brien seeks to arouse the reader's interest in the chaotic aspects of the Vietnam War. When he recalls Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins playing checkers, he remembers that the rest of the soldiers became attracted to the game; oddly enough, the soldiers regard the game as a space filled with a certain serenity:

> There was something restful about it, something orderly and reassuring. There were red checkers and black checkers. The playing field was laid out in a strict grid, no tunnels or mountains or jungles. You knew where you stood. You knew the score. The pieces were out on the board, the enemy was visible, you could watch the tactics unfolding into larger strategies. There was a winner and a loser. There were rules. (31)

Watching the game can help the soldiers remember they are fair and reasonable, which ironically serves to emphasize the soldiers' trauma and the de-romanticized war in Viet Nam.

The character-author O'Brien provides an example of the fictional world that emerged from soldiers' anxiety and resentment at their loss of innocence. The story titled "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" evokes the mysterious rumors or legends that arise on the battlefield. This story's plot is rather implausible: the young girl Mary Anne Bell suddenly travels to Viet Nam from the U.S. to meet her boyfriend Mark Fossie, Rat Kiley's friend, but then, she is gradually transformed into a killing machine. Yet, what matters most is the mystery that endows Mary Anne with particularly rich symbolical resonance, not the veracity of the story. The name "Mary Anne" evokes Marianne, the famous French personification of liberty. Like the Goddess of liberty agitating men on the battlefield in Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix's well-known

work *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830), Mary Anne becomes a symbol of freedom especially for American soldiers overwhelmed by Viet Nam. Since her trip to Viet Nam is motivated by the pure love for her boyfriend, she also symbolizes love. Her beautiful feminine body, especially in this exclusively male society, also evokes maternity and fertility that remind them of the mother country. Moreover, she is the symbol of innocence and purity in that she is not afraid of visiting the front. At the same time, these characteristics are contrasted with her willingness to acquire the new survival skills for which the other soldiers admire her. All of this renders a picture of Mary Anne as a symbol of American innocence and as the embodiment of the feminine mystique, the personification of the anima of the American males. The public image of the iconic woman in the 1960s, as Betty Friedan portrays her, is pictured as "young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home . . . the only passion, the only pursuit, the only goal a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man" (Friedan 23). Mary Anne is a woman who is marked by the characteristics of the idealized American female in the 60s. Mary Anne also seems to be full of a passion for the American typical middle-class suburban woman's pursuit of fulfillment as a housewife and mother. Mary Anne, forming a love relationship with her boyfriend mark Fossie, evokes "the proud and public image of the high-school girl going steady, the college girl in love, the suburban housewife with an up-and-coming husband and a station wagon full of children" (Friedan 21). Mary Anne's outlook on her life with Fossie is described as follows:

> . . . someday they would be married, and live in a fine gingerbread house near Lake Erie, and have three healthy yellow-haired children, and grow old together, and no doubt die in each other's arms and be buried in the

> same walnut casket. That was the plan. They were very much in love, full of dreams, and in the ordinary flow of their lives the whole scenario might well have come true. (90)

There is almost no mention of the world beyond the home, which implies that Mary Anne's "world was confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children, and home" (Friedan 23).

Nevertheless, such romantic mythological symbols that Mary Anne is endowed with give way to signs, such as her necklace of human tongues, and especially her strong desire for being native to Viet Nam, which she describes as an "appetite" (106). For Mary Anne, being a part of Viet Nam is the strength of her soul, which distances her from the woman she is. The girl's transformation into a kind of genius loci is grotesque and pushes her far beyond conventional notions of femininity into the realm of the supernatural:

> . . . Mary Anne was still somewhere out there in the dark. Odd movements, odd shapes. Late at night, when Greenies were out on ambush, the whole rain forest seemed to stare in at them—a watched feeling—and a couple of times they almost saw her sliding through the shadows. Not quite, but almost. She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. (110)

She becomes mentally and physically superior to the men, eventually turning into an incarnation of the wilderness. At this point, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" ends without giving readers any way to assess its credibility. Moreover, the sheer number of narrators also contributes to the uncertainty surrounding this episode. While at the

beginning of the story the character-author O'Brien begins the narrative, seemingly he reports a story he heard from the unreliable narrator Rat Kiley, a storyteller known for exaggerating. Moreover, Mary Anne's fate in the above quotation is, according to the same Kiley, something he heard from yet another storyteller, Eddie Diamond, who in turns claims that he himself heard it from another soldier whose name is not even mentioned. The story of Mary Anne is thus told by several storytellers in a manner reminiscent of the oral culture which arose among soldiers on the battlefield. In light of Fussell's comment on the relationship between war, terror, and the fictional impulse, it may be fitting to regard this story as a kind of legend or rumor bred by the imaginations of soldiers struggling to cope with their turbulent psychic state. The gist of the story—the young female representing freedom and the heroism of the frontier spirit suddenly discards these values in the course of fighting—seems to mirror the anxiety of young American soldiers who realized the hopelessness of the war and the gradual contamination of their personalities by its irrational realities. This is suggested by Kiley's speculation at the end of the story: "What happened to her . . . was what happened to all of them [soldiers]. You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterwards it's never the same" (109). Kiley, also, describes the Vietnam War using the metaphor of a powerful drug:

> . . . that mix of unnamed terror and unnamed pleasure that comes as the needle slips in and you know you're risking something. The endorphins start to flow, and the adrenaline, and you hold your breath and creep quietly through the moonlit nightscapes; you become intimate with danger; you're in touch with the far side of yourself, as though it's another hemisphere, and you want to string it out and go wherever the trip takes you and be host to all the possibilities inside yourself. (109)

His description explains how soldiers all fear war addiction where "after a time the wanting became needing, which turned then to craving" (109).

Mary Anne's episode has been frequently seen as a story about the perversion of traditional gender roles. Katherine Kinney claims that Mary Anne's change is "the social transformation in traditional mores associated with the sexual revolution and women's liberation movements of the 1960s" (Kinney 134). However, considering this story is one in the character-author O'Brien's war story collection, it is more appropriate to regard this episode as an illustration of soldiers' emotional stress at their lost innocence.

The burst of "the adrenaline buzz" (93) that goes with "the war's pulsating rhythms and nerve-racking dangers" (Harris 50) induces Mary Anne Bell to transgress "not only gender boundaries but also the line separating the Americans from enemy soldiers and even the border between human and nonhuman, between the sane and the insane" (Farrell, *Critical Companion* 286-87), which evokes what Rat Kiley described as "the goddam bugs" (212) in Nam transmuted by the violence of the war. Kiley, in his imagination, feels the mutant bugs chewing tunnels through his body, which seems to echo Mary Anne's "appetite" (106): Mary Anne mutters, "I want to *eat* this place. The whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to swallow it and have it there inside me" (106). However, if Mary Anne Bell personifies anima, so to speak in Jung's term, and can express the soldiers' inner thought, as Rat Kiley explains it, Mary Anne Bell's transformation from a high school sweetheart to a bestial fighter can be seen as "an analogy for the loss of innocence through which all soldiers of Vietnam go" (Colella 51). Kiley affirms: "You [soldiers] come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it's never the same. . . . it seemed, Vietnam had the effect of a powerful drug" (109). The reader witnesses the character-author O'Brien personally experiencing the

ambiguities, mysteries and unknowns of “Vietnam,” all of which also happened to Mary Anne Bell. The character-author O’Brien becomes bewildered when he perceives that he can hardly see in himself the clear-cut boundary separating the good American hero and the evil enemy, the Viet Cong soldier. The vignette entitled “The Ghost Soldiers” questions what the reader thinks about the character-author O’Brien: the story is considered to be an accurate record of the process of the character-author O’Brien’s degeneration and transmutation, which seem to be foreshadowed in Mitchell Sanders’s words, “People change. Situations change” (188). The character-author O’Brien describes “the sharpest pangs of hatred and yearnings for revenge against” (Colella 78) a new medic Bobby Jorgenson, who is assigned to Alpha Company as the replacement of the previous medic Rat Kiley. Kiley, showing great courage and taking risks during battle, tried to take care of the character-author O’Brien when he was shot for the first time. The second time, the character-author O’Brien recalls that he almost died of shock when he got shot in the buttocks. The character-author O’Brien has a grudge against Jorgenson because the character-author Obrien’s wound developed into gangrene as a result of Jorgensen’s poor medical care, and he had to be sent back from the front line. The character-author O’Brien, remembering Jorgenson’s incompetence and inexperience, feels “the soft, fluid heat of my [his] own blood” (191), “the rage” (191) and the “coldness down inside my [his] chest” (191). Eventually, the character-author O’Brien hates him just “the way some guys hated the VC, gut hate, the kind of hate that stays with you even in your dreams” (182). Here, the character-author O’Brien begins to realize that he is no longer on the side of the good; but rather, he has now become evil:

> Something had gone wrong. I’d come to this war a quiet, thoughtful sort of person . . . but after seven months in the bush I realized that those high,

> civilized trappings had somehow been crushed under the weight of the simple daily realities. I'd turned mean inside. Even a little cruel at times. . . . I now felt a deep coldness inside me, something dark and beyond reason. It's a hard thing to admit, even to myself, but I was capable of evil. (190-91)

In addition to the character-author O'Brien's blurring the boundary between good and evil, the story thematizes how he transgresses the line separating a civilian from a soldier. After leaving the hospital, the character-author O'Brien is transferred to a supply restocking area, away from combat. The character-author O'Brien's fellow soldiers in Alpha Company, such as Mitchell Sanders, Azar, Henry Dobbins, Dave Jensen and Norma Bowker, visit his base for a break from their combat duties. It is not until the character-author O'Brien becomes distant from the front that and meets up again with his fellow soldiers that he notices that he suffers from the loss of "being a soldier": he thinks he can no longer be like a soldier, but now feels "like a civilian—and it made me [him] sad" (185) because "[t]hey were soldiers, I [he] wasn't" (188). At this point, the character-author O'Brien is able to represent what Mary Anne was really thinking about the circumstances occurring within herself: "In an odd way, though, there were times when I missed the adventure, even the danger, of the real war out in the boonies . . . the presence of death and danger has a way of bringing you fully awake. It makes things vivid. When you're afraid, really afraid, you see things you never saw before, you pay attention to the world" (183). The character-author O'Brien seems to convert his loss of "the war's pulsating rhythms and nerve-racking dangers" (Harris 50) into rage at Jorgenson. Finally, the reader sees the character-author O'Brien returning to his combat duties as a soldier; however, he will never be like the American soldier, but transforms himself into the ghost, i.e. the Viet Cong soldier:

> Late at night, on guard, it seemed that all of Vietnam was alive and shimmering—odd shapes swaying in the paddies, boogiemen in sandals, spirits dancing in old pagodas. It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong was the main ghost. The way he came out at night. How you never really saw him, just thought you did. Almost magical—appearing, disappearing. He could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass. He could levitate. He could fly. He could pass through barbed wire and melt away like ice and creep up on you without sound or footsteps. (192-93)

Trying to enact revenge against Jorgenson, the character-author O'Brien begins to move "at night in order to be like a soldier again against Jorgenson" (Colella 78): he says, "it felt as if I were gearing up to fight somebody else's war" (193); and thus, he remembers, "I felt like a soldier again. . . . Old times, I thought. A kind of thrill, a kind of dread" (196). It seems strange, but he feels that "a swell of immense power. . . . a feeling the VC must have" (198) is bestowed on him: "Eyes closed, I seemed to rise up out of my own body and float through the dark down to Jorgenson's position. I was invisible; I had no shape, no substance; I weighed less than nothing. I just drifted" (198).

The de-romanticized image of the American war is also evident in the vignette "Stockings," which is an account of the idiosyncrasies of Henry Dobbins, a fellow soldier of the character-author O'Brien. The character-author O'Brien recalls that Dobbins had the eccentric habit of wrapping his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck. It seems that Dobbins considered the pantyhose to be a sort of a talisman which kept him safe in several of the perilous situations he encountered in combat. With the pantyhose, Dobbins would never be injured: "Never wounded, never a scratch. . . . he

tripped a Bouncing Betty, which failed to detonate" (112). Even caught in a fierce little firefight, he survived the hardship. As well as having the properties of a good-luck charm, the stockings allow Dobbins to be carried away by illusions about his girlfriend: "They gave access to a spiritual world, where things were soft and intimate, a place where he might someday take his girlfriend to live" (112). Indulging in the illusion, Dobbins feels the protective power of the stockings, which encourages the other soldiers of the Alpha Company to appreciate its magic.

Dobbins's attachment to the stockings evokes his sexual fetishism. He liked putting his nose into the pantyhose so as to breathe in the scent of his girlfriend's body, which suggests that the stockings sexually arouse him. Thus, the magic of the pantyhose seems to be more enhanced by Dobbins's self-esteem as a male. This contributes to Dobbins's manhood and courage on the battlefield. Moreover, it is worth noting that the character-author O'Brien compares Dobbins to America. The character-author O'Brien describes Dobbins as:

> . . . a good man, and a superb soldier, but sophistication was not his strong suit. The ironies went beyond him. In many ways he was like America itself, big and strong, full of good intentions, a roll of fat jiggling at his belly, slow of foot but always plodding along, always there when you needed him, a believer in the virtues of simplicity and directness and hard labor. Like his country, too, Dobbins was drawn toward sentimentality. (111)

The description reminds the reader of the positive self-image Americans have of themselves, symbolized as the man of physical strength, with a strong belief in goodness, optimism, generosity, trustfulness and diligence. Dobbins, a son of America,

believes that he is protected by the mysterious power of the pantyhose, describing them as his body armor. Dobbins seems to be ignorant of "the way luck worked and didn't work and how it was impossible to calculate the odds" (187) even though he is put in a difficult situation where "[t]here were a million ways to die" (187). However, considering that the miracles are the products of his imagination and the pantyhose made of nylon never deflects any bullets, this episode envisages that American triumphalism would reveal itself to be an illusion.

Conclusion

The character-author O'Brien draws the reader's attention to the connection between reality, memory and imagination in the soldiers' war experiences. The reader learns that the hallucinatory world the soldiers in a traumatic state create is hardly ruled by reason. The stories telling about the soldiers' "dreams" never seem to be generalized, as the character-author O'Brien describes them as complex and multiple: "War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead" (76). As the character-author O'Brien indicates in his metafictional narration in the story titled "How to Tell a True War Story," an accurate description of Vietnam War experiences includes chaotic situations, which may cause those who were not "there" to be upset, embarrassed and skeptical:

> 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 that

> some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. (65-66)

The character-author O'Brien's true war stories, especially for a patriotic audience, sound like the antithesis to the American modern war mythology which represents just wars and honors the courageous deeds of the WWII heroes.

Steven Kaplan suggests that the confidence and assurance of the American grand narratives are responsible for the atrocities Americans committed against the Vietnamese. However, it is "the overwhelming ambiguity that characterized the Vietnam experience" (Kaplan 70) that threatened the credibility of the American grand narratives and rendered them obsolete. As Kaplan states:

> . . . the United States decided what constituted good and evil, right and wrong, civilized and uncivilized, freedom and oppression for Vietnam, according to American standards . . . and attempted to make its own notions about these things clear to the Vietnamese people—ultimately by brute, technological force. For the U.S. military and government, the Vietnam that they had in effect invented became fact. For the soldiers that the government then sent there, however, the facts that their government had created about who was the enemy, what were the issues, and how the war was to be won were quickly overshadowed by a world of uncertainty. (70)

The “American standards,” which Kaplan mentions above, stand for a coherent American, i.e. a unity of theory and practice (or better still, a discourse Jean-François Lyotard defines as grand narrative, or meta-narrative) that “offers a particularly vivid representation of one solution to the problem of the legitimacy of knowledge” (Lyotard 34). The philosophy, as a matter of course, has a lot to do with “romantic attitudes and ideals which had held sway in the nineteenth century” (Hague 3); and thus, too, American justice has been explained in terms of American grand narratives that legitimate knowledge. Donald Ringnalda seems to second Lyotard’s view on “the decline of the unifying and legitimating power of the grand narrative” (38) in the American psyche: “. . . because America was blinded to the fictionality of its ‘essay,’ it was . . . self-lured into the Vietnam quagmire. In its cockiness, America was epistemologically [in regard to the scope of its knowledge] crude and naive” (Ringnalda, “O’Brien” 83). Thus, the character–author O’Brien, as a novelist, calls the role of the imagination into question: how the nation can use the power of its imagination to gain full-comprehension of the Vietnam War experience. Lt. Cross requests that the character-author O’Brien embellish the portrait of Lt. Cross so as to refashion himself as a hero. Lt. Cross aspires to remove an indelible stain on his name; Kathleen is willing to forget the quagmire of the Vietnam War. Norman Bowker loses his way when telling his war story and eventually decides to confine himself to eternal silence. The old woman, shedding tears over the story about Rat Kiley killing a baby buffalo, prefers to reduce the character-author O’Brien’s true war stories into an opportunity for catharsis, which makes it possible for her to relieve her own distress. The character-author O’Brien never allows the readers to limit the power of their own imagination. Instead, the character-author O’Brien emphasizes the significance of “the mind that is remembering and retelling a story to remember and retell it one more time in a different form, adding different nuances, and then to tell it again one more time”

(Kaplan 74). The character-author O'Brien requires the reader to have a critical understanding of his Vietnam War stories without the preconceptions of the American war stories. For these reasons, he is eager to subvert the power and authority of "the Western paradigm of Manichaean dualism [that opposites are separate from and unrelated to each other], which convinces most of the people most of the time that they can tell the difference between reality and fiction" (Ringnalda, "O'Brien" 86). Furthermore, he seems to blur the border between himself and other soldiers. For instance, Susan Farrell argues:

> Sounding very much like Mary Anne Bell here, the character-author O'Brien imagines himself merging with the landscape itself, which American soldiers often saw as their real enemy, largely because of the hostile jungle terrain, the overwhelming heat and drenching monsoons, the treacherous mines and tripwires embedded in it, and the elaborate system of underground tunnels used by Viet Cong soldiers. (*Critical Companion* 284).

Farrell's suggestions correspond to the character-author O'Brien's experiences:

> I was part of the night. I was the land itself—everything, everything, everywhere—the fireflies and paddies, the moon, the midnight rustlings, the cool phosphorescent shimmer of evil—I was atrocity—I was jungle fire, jungle drums—I was the blind stare in the eyes of all those poor, dead, dumbfuck ex-pals of mine—all the pale young corpses, Lee Strunk and Kiowa and Curt Lemon—I was the beast on their lips—I was Nam—the horror, the war. (199)

And eventually, shedding light on the criteria with which the writer or teller and the reader or listener must be concerned (Calloway 93), he attempts to transgress the boundary between a storyteller and a reader. Kaplan's remarks are very much to the point: the character-author O'Brien wants his readers to "step outside their everyday reality and participate in the events that he is portraying: he wants us to believe in his stories to the point where we are virtually in the stories so that we might gain a more thorough understanding of, or feeling for, what is being portrayed in them" (76). For the character-author O'Brien:

> . . . the act of telling a given story is an on-going and never-ending process. By constantly involving and then re-involving the reader in the task of determining what "actually" happened in a given situation, in a story, and by forcing the reader to experience the impossibility of ever knowing with any certainty what actually happened, O'Brien liberates himself from the lonesome responsibility of remembering and trying to understand events. He also creates a community of individuals immersed in the act of experiencing the uncertainty or indeterminacy of all events, regardless of whether they occurred in Vietnam, in a small town in Minnesota, or somewhere in the reader's own life. (Kaplan 79)

[1] Hereafter, citations from *The Things They Carried* will be shown by page number.

[2] It may be that the audience who had not served in the military in Viet Nam tended to rely on the information provided by nonfictional accounts of the war which were published by the soldier-authors for full comprehension of the Vietnam War experience. Most of the non-fictional writings about the Vietnam War were published and read in the late seventies and early eighties, such as Mark Baker's collection of the testimonies *Nam* (1983), Al Santoli's *Everything We Had* (1985), and *Charlie Company* (1981), Philip Caputo's memoir *A Rumor of War* (1977), and Michael Herr's work of New Journalism *Dispatches* (1977).

[3] In an interview, Bobby Ann Mason (1940-), author of *In Country* (1987), confesses that while working on *In Country* she was unwilling to confront the topic and get involved with the Vietnam War experience since she was feeling anxious about dealing with the subject in her novel because of her ignorance of the war. She admits that she chose to consult the oral histories, which enabled her to understand clearly "what veterans were going through, and what the guys had gone through in Vietnam" (170).

[4] Philip Beidler suggests that the authors writing about "Vietnam" were eager to establish their own cultural myth-making as a new literary genre. Their works are classified by Beidler into the following three types of writing: the first is testimony based on the authors' actual experiences, the second is fictional works, and the last is an experimental style mixing memory and reality.

Conclusion

This dissertation has focused on the recurrent motif informing Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War fictions: O'Brien's main characters are soldiers traumatized by the mental anguish caused by their inability to decide whether to flee or fight the war that they consider to be unjust. They are afflicted by physical agony and the nerve-racking dangers in the war that is all around them. Among O'Brien's war stories, the war trilogy—*If I Die in a Combat Zo*ne: *Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973)*, Going After Cacciato* (1978) and *The Things They Carried* (1990)—most thoroughly investigates and demonstrates the soldiers' war traumata deriving from the flee-or-fight conundrum.

The Vietnam War trauma portrayed in O'Brien's first published work *Combat Zone* reflects O'Brien's real-life experience of that conundrum. His decision to fight in the war seems to have left a lingering trauma that still haunts him. O'Brien's protagonists featured in the Vietnam War trilogy—the protagonist Tim O'Brien in *Combat Zone*, Paul Berlin in *Cacciato* and the character-author Tim O'Brien in *Things*—could be looked upon as surrogates for the real-author O'Brien as he seeks to re-investigate the decision-making in the face of that conundrum from many different angles. This dissertation, then, posits a kind of a moral casuistry into which O'Brien's protagonists lapse when faced with the flee-or-fight dilemma. The moral dilemma is further complicated by his anxiety over identity. The dissertation has thematized the dilemma in O'Brien's war fictions and examines this work by means of an intensive analysis and exploration of the formation, growth and crisis of the protagonists' identity in *Combat Zone*, *Cacciato* and *Things*. O'Brien's war trilogy describes how males who are naïve and young undergo the stage of psychological development and are challenged to establish their own self-image and identity on the battlefield. The

protagonists Tim O'Brien in *Combat Zone* and Paul Berlin in *Cacciato* are average in age when compared to American soldiers drafted for military service in Viet Nam and represent typical young American soldiers tinged with the innocence of youth. The protagonist O'Brien in *Combat Zone*, for example, says he was drafted at the age of twenty-one. Berlin in *Cacciato* becomes a soldier at age twenty; and, on his imaginary trip, he casts Cacciato as a seventeen-year old boy. The character-author O'Brien in *Things* recalls that the average age of his platoon members (including himself) was around twenty.

The younger characters, such as the protagonist O'Brien in *Combat Zone*, Berlin in *Cacciato* and the character-author O'Brien depicted in the confessional episode entitled "On the Rainy River" in *Things*, are all torn between the pursuit of their autonomy and the fulfillment of their social responsibilities. They anxiously deliberate how they should contribute to society in a satisfactory way, and live up to the idealized American war hero created by the ideology of American triumphalism. Thus, the protagonists' confusion in the face of the flee-or-fight dilemma is pointedly dramatized by the mixed feelings that seem to be particular to youth, such as feelings of love and longing, solitude, inferiority, uncertainty, rage and numbness. These protagonists' unsettling psychic conditions, often coupled with their excessive self-consciousness, introspection and idealism, can lead to the mental distress that any grown-up reader must have gone through in their youth. Because of their identity crisis, the young protagonists can induce a wide range of readers into empathizing with O'Brien's traumatized soldiers.

The protagonists' dilemma is between the fear of damaging their reputation as good American citizens who live up to public expectation and the fear of their, innocent souls becoming tainted by the evil of the war. Embedded in flee-or-fight struggle between self-realization and wish-fulfillment is their secret desire to emulate

an ideal American hero, a euphemism for American manhood. They had been internalizing knowledge of the American war stories rooted in American triumphalism and American victory culture, which strengthened the ideal American self, established and fostered in the classic literature of the American Renaissance period of the late nineteenth century. The romanticized image of the American self was welcomed by the people and popularized by advertisements, magazines, television, movies and American classic and contemporary literature; additionally, the American self, as the expression of national identity, is inseparable from the political sphere. O'Brien's male characters, born as Baby Boomers, are exposed to the collective discourse glorifying the American victory in the Second World War, which was transformed into a mythical American war and the cultural discourses deriving from it. Thus, WWII elevated the nation into a global super-power during the post-1945 period. The U.S. prosperity achieved thanks to the country's triumph in WWII seems to have guaranteed the superiority of American justice until the Vietnam War began. Worldwide recognition even fostered a greater self-respect and a better self-image among Americans with their wealth and liberty. Thus, the American triumph in World War II reaffirmed American war mythology and convinced the nation to view the American identity in a positive light.

In O'Brien's war stories, the reader is induced to sympathize with the protagonists who feel oppressed by public expectations. These protagonists are under pressure to embody the popular image of the courageous American war hero. In *Combat Zone*, as the protagonist Tim O'Brien recalls, the townspeople agree that WWII was a just war and regarded the soldiers who fought the war as their heroes (the generation of O'Brien's father; a veteran of WWII). He is astonished by the strong public belief that fighting the Vietnam War would offer a heroic moment for young American males. The protagonist O'Brien, against his own conscience, finally chooses

to live up to the social expectation and to become the hero, only to conclude that he is nothing but a coward. For him, the Vietnam War has revealed the faulty and empty nature of the idealized American self rooted in American triumphalism. The positive image of the idealized American self had been reinforced by American war stories.

The same question of the idealized American self is taken over and revised in *Cacciato*. In the case of Paul Berlin in *Cacciato*, Berlin's father, who is presented as a heroic male role model, is also depicted as a veteran of WWII. Berlin, once in combat life, relies on the creed of his father, a veteran of WWII, to endure the atrocities of war by focusing on the good things and ignoring the bad. Berlin's father, who seems to be full of confidence, hope and optimism, reflects the American rosy-colored vision of the future of the nation and the blind acceptance of American triumphalism. On his imaginary trip to Paris, Berlin embarks on his quest for the true meaning of fighting the American war in Viet Nam. He imagines the frequent discussions with his imaginary female character Sarkin Aung Wan, not with his father. She is Berlin's alter-ego, or Anima, that is the personification of his hidden desire to pursue his own peace. At the end of the imaginary trip to Paris, however, Berlin eventually reaches his decision to return to the war. When he emphasizes the importance of his public obligation, the reader can see that he eventually favored the desire deep within himself to be seen as a hero.

O'Brien's Vietnam War fictions are dramatized in complex ways by describing the younger characters' emotional instability experienced in the midst of an identity crisis. However, the character-author O'Brien in *Things*, now a middle-aged veteran, he shows readiness to come to terms with the protagonist O'Brien's perplexities about his participation in the wrong war and Berlin's eventual justification in fighting the American war in Viet Nam. In *Things*, the character-author Tim O'Brien devotes himself to producing the Vietnam War stories, which thematize the traumatic memories

of the soldiers of the Alpha Company (including the character-author O'Brien himself) and invite the reader to consider the truth of the war through these fragmentary episodes. Using a postmodern technique of storytelling, the character-author O'Brien provides the reader with his story-truths so vividly that the reader can feel as if he were in the midst of the soldiers' traumatic war experiences. By understanding the authority of the accepted image of the American self, the character-author O'Brien attempts to emancipate the reader from the ideology of American triumphalism. In *Things*, the American war in Viet Nam is still remembered as a major fiasco that questions the American grand narrative. The character-author O'Brien's representation of war reveals that the American grand narrative has passed its best-before date and suggests that the country is approaching a new phase in its evolution. The character-author O'Brien, thus, suggests that the nation may be at a turning point where it begins to create a new story about the American self. O'Brien's story-truths necessitate an imaginary community of the author and the readers where they are given opportunities (through the experience of reading) to consider what the American self should be. O'Brien's readers can free their own imagination to counteract their ignorance and their ignorance of history.

O'Brien's war fictions all revolve around the dilemma of fighting the war, and they represent a purgatorial state. This dissertation claims that the recurrence in O'Brien of the dilemma is nothing less than a purgatorial condition of psychological suffering and torment arising from a profound crisis of the American self.

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