Introduction

In March 2010, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt brought out the twentieth anniversary edition of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award finalist *The Things They Carried*, marking with this decision the book’s status as Tim O’Brien’s most accomplished and significant work – a remarkable compliment indeed, if one thinks that his earlier *Going After Cacciato* had won the National Book Award in 1979. With its publication some six months before President Obama declared the end of the war in Iraq and set July 2011 as the deadline for the beginning of the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, the twentieth anniversary edition of this seminal text about the war in Vietnam has rekindled comparisons between the conflict in the Southeast Asian peninsula, and the more recent American military interventions in the Middle East. Echoing O’Brien’s epistemological insecurity of two decades ago, Joseph Peschel declares that ‘the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity’, regardless of one’s stance on ‘the moral and political validity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan’.1 On his part, having drawn his own explicit comparison between these conflicts and Vietnam, O’Brien focuses on the human and emotional cost of warfare, on the soldiers as well as their families and, by extension, on society as a whole:

Obviously there are differences [between now and then], chief among them the absence of the draft. But there are enough similarities. These are wars in which there are no uniforms, no front, no rear. Who’s the enemy? What do you shoot back at? Whom do you trust? At the bottom, all wars are the same because they involve death and maiming and wounding, and grieving mothers, fathers, sons and daughters.2

Thirty-five years after the fall of Saigon, the shedding of ‘certain blood for uncertain reasons’ (IID, 167) still remains, sadly, a topical subject. In spite of the renewed relevance of his writing to the contemporary global political scene, O’Brien is not very well known outside the United States; moreover, even in his own country, he is generally perceived – for reasons that are all too obvious – as a niche artist, the breadth of whose work, no matter how sharp in its insights and skilful in its execution, is confined within the realm of war literature, rather than being judged against the parameters of great literature *tout court*. This pigeon-holing, understandable in the light of O’Brien’s compulsive return to the literal and figurative landscape of the Vietnamese conflict, and of his awareness of the challenges inherent in writing about unspeakable, traumatic events, fails to do justice to his achievements as a postmodern fabulator, an acute observer of the human condition and a sharp critic of American culture.

As my title indicates, this study is predicated on the conviction that Tim O’Brien has revitalized war literature, taking it beyond the contingencies of the experience of armed conflict to an exploration and an affirmation of the power of storytelling, through formal innovations, metanarrative reflections and a recurrent concern for pressing philosophical questions on matters such as individual agency, ethical responsibility and authenticity. In other words, while it would be close to impossible (and, if possible, then certainly counter-productive) not to acknowledge the centrality of the experience of the war in his writing, 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. O’Brien’s narrative engagement with the war in Southeast Asia has also involved the development of a critical attitude towards those myths that inform America’s perception of itself and, more generally, a number of ideological positions common in Western culture: the association between courage, heroism and masculinity, the celebration of the pioneering spirit in the frontier narrative, the unquestioned sense of superiority in the encounter with foreign civilizations, the fraught relationship between power and truth, or reality and imagination, and the ability and the right to articulate one’s perception of things. These latter themes, in particular, prompt interesting considerations on the role and the responsibility of the storyteller, in what is undoubtedly an important corrective to postmodern writing practices, whose self-reflectiveness and linguistic and technical playfulness have often been perceived as a jettisoning of the ethical dimension. From this perspective, it cannot be emphasized enough how much O’Brien’s rigorous ethical focus sets him apart from the narcissism, and the ostensible lack of political charge,
of a more gratuitously playful postmodern aesthetics – from a ‘high’ postmodernism, that is, characterized by ironic appropriations, experimental excesses, depthlessness and a gusto for pastiche and virtuoso citationality.⁢

O’Brien himself has resisted the label of ‘postmodern writer’, and taken a distance from what he sees as the ‘gimmicky’ and ‘frivolous’ nature of the fiction of this period⁴ – although in this instance he too may be guilty of overlooking the serious, political potential of such literature. This study supports the validity of the claim that O’Brien partakes of a postmodern sensitivity, most clearly encapsulated in his deconstructive spirit, paired with a keen scrutiny of, and ultimately an investment in, the performative power of storytelling; and yet it is true that the question of ‘how we know’ takes centre stage in most of his narratives, thus aligning his work also to modernist, cognitive concerns.⁵

Taken to be an imaginative enterprise without any pretensions to mimetic accuracy, at least in a literal sense, storytelling for O’Brien is indeed in the first instance an epistemological tool with a role in the individual’s quest for truth and signification. Naturally, such a quest becomes particularly urgent, and liable to generate controversy, in the case of war writing, where an objective perception of truth – should we be willing to posit its feasibility, in disagreemnt with postmodern (and modernist) theorizations – would have to come to life in spite of unarguably adverse conditions, given how wars are fought and won through propaganda, as well as on the battlefield. In Vietnam, the site of notoriously heated ideological clashes, both on the home front in the US and in the effort to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the local population, the difficulty in reaching consensus over objective facts was further complicated, in the field, by the arduousness of deciding what was

3 Of course, claiming that postmodernism lacks altogether an ethical and/or political stance is, at the very least, an oversimplification, whose refutation would deserve a longer discussion than can be afforded in the present volume. For a persuasive problematization of the facile association between postmodernism and a fundamentally disengaged stance, see, for example, Linda Hutcheon’s reminder of the wider political dimension of postmodern representation, which ‘does work to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique’; The Politics of Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 3.


⁵ On the basis of Brian McHale’s definition of modernism and postmodernism as having, respectively, an epistemological/cognitive and ontological/post-cognitive dominant, Alex Vernon makes a compelling argument for considering Tim O’Brien as a modernist writer (cf. his Soldiers Once and Still: Ernest Hemingway, James Salter and Tim O’Brien [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004]). My own reading of O’Brien, instead, places greater emphasis on those qualities in his work that are more firmly on the postmodern side of the spectrum – although, in the end, given what I regard as the continuity between the two terms (and the fact that their use is meant to throw light on the work in question, rather than be an end in itself), an exact categorization of O’Brien’s writing is something of a moot point.
real and what was the product of a besieged imagination, or of perception affected by the strains of combat and of an alien and hostile environment. More generally, the traumatic nature of the military experience and the extreme stress induced by a continuous proximity to death often produce a sense of estrangement and a radical reappraisal of the significance and the worth of human life, and of one’s system of values. In this context, and quite apart from the epistemological scepticism characteristic of (post)modernism, the possibility of objectivity in Vietnam war writing recedes further and further into the distance. Against this background, and in line with a long-standing culture of suspicion towards the mimetic claims of formal realism, O’Brien chooses to emphasise the proximity between fact and fiction, and the mutual sphere of influence between imagination and reality; in doing so, he highlights how perceptions and impressions get channelled into stories, how we live life thinking of ourselves as the actors of these narrations, in a two-way process in which emotional veracity is, controversially perhaps, more important than factual accuracy.

O’Brien articulates these convictions most memorably and succinctly in setting up an opposition between two radically different concepts of truth. ‘Happening-truth’ and its antithesis ‘story-truth’ are central to O’Brien’s poetics: the former makes a claim to literalness, factuality and objectivity in representation, while the latter rejects these qualities as unimportant, or even detrimental to the fundamental pursuit of the writer. According to O’Brien,

[l]iterature should be looked at not for its literal truths but for its emotional qualities. What matters in literature, I think, are pretty simple things – whether it moves me or not, whether it feels true. The actual literal truth should be superfluous. For example, here’s a story: four guys go on a trail, a grenade sails out, one guy jumps on it, takes the blast, and saves his buddies. Is it true? Well, yeah, it may have happened, but it doesn’t feel true, because it feels stereotypical, hackneyed; it feels like Hollywood. But here’s another story: four guys go on a trail, a grenade sails out, one guy jumps on it, takes the blast, and dies; before he dies, though, one of the guys says, ‘What the fuck you do that for?’ and the dead guy says, ‘The story of my life, man,’ and starts to smile. He’s dead. That didn’t happen. Clearly, ever, and yet there is something about the absurdity of it and the horror of it – ‘What the fuck you do that for?’ – which seems truer to me than something which might literally have happened. A story’s truth shouldn’t be measured by happening but by an entirely different standard, a standard of emotion, feeling – ‘Does it ring true?’ as opposed to ‘Is it true?’

Consequently, O’Brien legitimizes and practises a certain narrative embellishment of factual reality in place of (the attempt at) a faithful account of things as they happened; in this way, he means to try to salvage, and then communicate, the exact intensity of the original impact of the narrated events on those who experienced them, either first-hand, or even only as powerful stories, i.e. as endeavours to wrench some narrative sense out of the inchoate, chaotic, subjective material that makes up our existence. In his doomed quest for precision, veracity and signification, O’Brien invests in the power of storytelling to invent – both in its etymological meaning ‘to find out’ and with its current connotations as ‘to fabricate’ – and make available to narrators and listeners/readers alike a partial and provisional ‘story-truth’. ‘Story-truth’ is thus closely connected to the performative aspect of the narrative enterprise seen as an endless process of infinite repetitions and modulations of the same tales, in the hope of achieving an ever closer approximation to the elusive target of the ‘true war story’. Not merely a function of storytelling as a perpetual work-in-progress, the performativity of O’Brien’s narratives is also to be understood in terms derived from J. L. Austin’s linguistic theory and his definition of performative speech acts: instead of being truth-evaluable, these utterances can either be felicitous or infelicitous. Similarly, rather than being measured against their veracity or falsity, O’Brien’s stories are conceived and demand to be appreciated for their ability ‘to make the stomach believe’ (TTC, 75), for their narrative and affective success, as speech acts making real – if only momentarily, as an imponderable gut feeling, or a ‘quick truth goose’ (TTC, 34) – that which they are talking about.

O’Brien’s investment in the affective strength of his stories is potentially controversial, particularly in the context of his recurrent military subject matter. The appropriateness, if not the legitimacy, of taking any liberties with factuality in writing about Vietnam has been raised even by readers sympathetic to O’Brien’s practice. In an early interview with O’Brien, for example, Eric James Schroeder asks the inevitable question: ‘Don’t you see Vietnam in particular as a subject which shouldn’t need embellishment?’ Of course, O’Brien disagrees, asserting once more his conviction that the ‘lying’ involved in fictional re-elaborations of certain experiences – such as the horror, or even the boredom, of war – eventually reveals a deeper truth. Besides, in the statement which had triggered Schroeder’s original question, O’Brien had made an explicit connection between the author’s right to exert his or her imaginative freedom and the very nature of fiction: ‘The sense of embellishment, letting one’s imagination heighten detail, is part of what

‘Good Form’; interestingly, the two notions are not defined, but rather illustrated by the examples of two competing versions of the story about the enemy killed by the narrator.

fiction-writing is about. It’s not lying. It’s trying to produce a story detail that will get at a felt experience.”8 With this in mind, we need to recognize and appreciate that O’Brien’s greatest achievement has been the harnessing of the postmodern sensitivity of his time towards the inquiry into matters of personal responsibility, without ever shirking the acknowledgement of the partiality of one’s point of view, and of the cowardice or the iniquity of one’s actions; he has done so relentlessly, even at the cost of alienating readers from his protagonists, as in his characterization of a self-righteous, self-pitying, desensitized ‘Tim O’Brien’ in ‘How to Tell a True War Story’. Underpinned by a profound scepticism towards orthodoxies of any kind, O’Brien’s oeuvre targets time-honoured US, and Western, myths, including the ideal connection between storytelling and self-improvement, particularly strong in the tradition of American autobiographical writing, so often geared towards charting the individual’s spiritual growth and intellectual maturation. O’Brien openly demystifies the long-standing investment, particularly common in the century of psychoanalysis, in the narrative act as a vehicle of catharsis or consolation, or as a process of sense-making and (self-)instruction. Rather, he views storytelling as a means of inquiry which occasionally manages to capture an all too volatile truth, while forcing us to come to terms with our moral quandaries and obligations.

In exposing the hidden mechanisms of storytelling and in deliberately frustrating the readers’ desire for a reliable source of information, however incomplete and approximate, O’Brien has been accused of indulging in postmodern, narcissistic gimmickry, in books – such as, most famously, The Things They Carried – where the narrator appears to be repeatedly pulling the rug from under his readers’ feet with multiple, discordant accounts of the same event, while bedazzling his audience with the impossibility of separating fact from fiction, and autobiographical material from artistic licence and pure invention. Still, I would reiterate that these narrative strategies, practised with particular success in his most celebrated works, are intertwined with O’Brien’s painful awareness of his inability to find catharsis in the act of storytelling. This poignant conviction, together with the reminder that we cannot delegate our individual responsibilities, is one of the few certainties that O’Brien is unstintingly determined to share with his readers. Thus, from the rubble of Western grand narratives, and American myths in particular, O’Brien propounds a small-scale, immanent notion of ethics, grounded on something akin to the storyteller’s creativity: the human capacity for empathy, which extends from the ability to imagine what it would be like to be somebody else to the knack of envisioning – and subsequently embracing – an alternative future for oneself. Seen from this

8 Schroeder, ‘Two Interviews’, p. 140.
perspective, the failure to adopt an ethical position is often seen to begin with a ‘failure of the imagination’ (GAC, 296). This, too, is an important reminder that the stories we tell about ourselves, to ourselves and to other people, play a crucial role in mediating our relationship with reality and in fostering a more conscious and/or active engagement with it.

O’Brien’s critical approach to distinctive American narratives and ideas is the main reason why the present volume, unlike other book-length studies of his work, is organized thematically, rather than chronologically. Both Steven Kaplan’s pioneering Understanding Tim O’Brien (University of South Carolina Press, 1994) and Mark A. Heberle’s A Trauma Artist: Tim O’Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam (University of Iowa Press, 2001) proceed chronologically, devoting one chapter to each individual book. Only Tobey C. Herzog has adopted, partially, a thematic approach in his Tim O’Brien, published in the Twayne’s United States Authors Series in 1997. Herzog disrupts the sequential analysis of O’Brien’s output by pairing up Going After Cacciato and The Things They Carried in a central chapter on the interplay between memory, reality and imagination. These three monographs chart the development of O’Brien’s career up until the time of their respective publication: for this reason, Kaplan and Herzog conclude their studies with a reading of In the Lake of the Woods (1994), while Heberle is also able to include an analysis of Tomcat in Love (1998). To the best of my knowledge, the only author to have written a comprehensive account of Tim O’Brien’s entire publishing career, from If I Die in a Combat Zone (1973) to July, July (2002), is Patrick A. Smith in Tim O’Brien: A Critical Companion (2005) in the ‘Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers’ series of the Greenwood Press. Structured in the customary chronological sequence, with the analysis of each individual text supplemented by an alternative reading from a specific theoretical perspective, Smith’s companion is aimed more towards a high-school audience than the academic community. Also different in scope from the present volume is the recent Approaches to Teaching the Works of Tim O’Brien, a collection of essays edited by Alex Vernon and Catherine Calloway, published by the Modern Language Association in December 2010. In adding my own voice to the rich scholarly debate on Tim O’Brien, I have been keen to take advantage of the possibilities opened up by my thematic approach.

Central to my attempt to go beyond Vietnam is also a focus on gender, stimulated by O’Brien’s revision of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity; unsurprisingly, together with his metafictional experimentations, this is the other element of O’Brien’s work to have generated much interest, and some critical controversy. For example, with its examination of the nature of courage, O’Brien’s early writing has been widely interpreted as
voicing the need for a feminization of this virtue, so as to temper the masculine (or macho) excesses that often imbue its characterization, particularly in a military context. Admirers of his work point this out as evidence of O’Brien’s distance from the misogynist backlash that, according to cultural historians such as Susan Jeffords, swept through the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam war; his detractors, on the other hand, argue that O’Brien’s re-definition of courage, however well-meaning, ultimately does little more than perpetuate gender stereotypes, even as – or precisely as – it advocates the embrace of traditional feminine qualities. The narrative of the frontier – a major influence in American culture, and Vietnam war writing in particular – is another theme whose analysis demands a discussion of American masculinity. O’Brien’s handling of this narrative and his creation of an alternative landscape of mythical (or rather, as we shall see, apocalyptic) resonance has also sparked much critical attention, often focused on exposing the misogyny still prevalent not merely in military culture and, by extension, in war narratives, but specifically in O’Brien’s characterization of women and representation of the experience of trauma. Even the matter of the representation and interpretation of the reality of war, and of the communication dynamics at play in the articulation of potentially ineffable or otherwise problematic topics, has been approached by several scholars with a view to unpicking any gendered nuances in O’Brien’s treatment of the subject. Particularly contentious is the allegation that O’Brien has a tendency to single out unsympathetic female interlocutors as the epitome of an uncomprehending, or even hostile, audience exposed to the plight of the war veteran. Thus, while each of my chapters focuses on a specific topic, they are also linked by a further, common thematic undercurrent, for they all address, with varied intensity and from different perspectives, the questions about gender definitions that are so often raised by – and in relation to – O’Brien’s work, and war writing in general.

Chapter 1 provides an introductory context for the rest of the volume, outlining the postmodernity of the war in Vietnam, the influence of frontier narratives and of the Conradian trope of the journey into the heart of darkness on perceptions of the conflict, and the anti-heroic pattern of twentieth-century war writing. These issues are revisited in the main body of the monograph: beyond its thematic resonance as a study of the ‘fascination of the abomination’, the Conradian legacy illuminates O’Brien’s scrutiny of the epistemological power of storytelling, and his embrace of a postmodern sensitivity. In turn, the relationship between the Vietnam war and the mood of postmodernity ties in with the analysis of the truth and morality of storytelling, while the impact of the frontier myth on expectations and representations of the conflict, and America’s sense of itself in its aftermath, paves the way for the discussion of O’Brien’s take on the American wilder-
ness and of his topography of trauma. The identification of an ironic, anti-
military tradition in war writing and of the fallout from the mythology of
World War II lead directly to the analysis of O’Brien’s re-definition of
courage in Chapter 2, which thus focuses on the notion of authenticity –
rather than the adherence to a masculine code of values – as the real theoret-
ical framework for his critique of traditional views of heroism. This early
chapter also illustrates O’Brien’s awareness of the limitations of the
Bildungsroman model, so common both in war and in anti-war writing, but
rejected by most of his narratives. In this sense, O’Brien takes the lead from
Stephen Crane’s ironic treatment of the quest for military glory in The Red
Badge of Courage (1895), but pushes the anti-heroic lesson one step further,
disputing the need for experiential contact with the war in order to ascertain
one’s courage and moral integrity. Chapter 3 moves from the ‘trilogy of
courage’ (If I Die in a Combat Zone, Northern Lights and Going After Cacciato)
to an analysis of those novels set primarily in the United States: together,
Northern Lights, In the Lake of the Woods and The Nuclear Age constitute a
different pioneer country – identified for the most part with a daunting
northern landscape, and its rigorous ethos – from the western frontier, from
whose mythology O’Brien obviously wants to distance himself. The mapping
of this alternative national landscape is complemented by an overview of
O’Brien’s exposure of the fallacy in the identification of Vietnam as a new
‘Indian Country’. The disingenuousness of the projection of evil qualities on
a (feminized) alien landscape is linked, in the following chapter, to a discus-
sion of the charges of misogyny that have occasionally been levelled at
O’Brien.

As already mentioned, the consideration of the extent to which and the
ways in which O’Brien manages to eschew gender stereotypes and misogynist
positions, while acknowledging their existence and their pervasive influence,
particularly in the rhetoric of war, is a thread that runs through this entire
study. It does so for obvious reasons, given the institutionalized sexism in
much military culture, and given that the passionate critical debate on
O’Brien’s treatment of gender demands that the present discussion should
also take a position on the issue. Chapter 4 is where O’Brien’s writing choices
are shown to be inextricably connected to the ineffable experience of trauma,
and to an engagement with cultural perceptions/representations of gender.
This is a crucial issue, deserving of the extensive analysis it receives, because
it underpins the investigation of the core argument of this study: the nature
of O’Brien’s investment in the power of storytelling. While Chapters 2 and 3
deal primarily with thematic questions, in relation to O’Brien as a sharp critic
of received orthodoxies, and an alternative mythographer in his own right,
Chapter 4 instead begins the scrutiny of O’Brien’s poetics and narrative
techniques. For all that his writing theory and practice are tightly interwoven
with the traumatic – and often ‘politically incorrect’, for lack of a better expression – nature of his subject matter, O’Brien consistently strives to soar above the strictures of war literature (in the narrow sense of literature about combat, and its aftermath), demystifying its commonplaces and developing its potential to ‘magnify’ universal quandaries.⁹

The first part of Chapter 4 shows how O’Brien rejects the association, common in the literature of the conflict, between Vietnam and the image of the *vagina dentata*; O’Brien’s symbolic topography instead privileges the non-gendered trope of the *cloaca* – most famously visible in the image of the shit field, the prime locus of trauma in *The Things They Carried* – as a correlative of the horror of war. Having delved more specifically into the gender anxieties experienced by both the male and the female characters in O’Brien’s narratives, the second part of this chapter moves into a preliminary analysis of the difficult communication dynamics at work between those with experience of the war, and those who have remained ‘in the world’ – a challenging rift that is indeed configured as corresponding, often but not inevitably so, to a binary gender divide. In fact, O’Brien always exposes the cultural conditioning behind stereotyped (self-)perceptions of men and women, highlighting in the process how the (masculine) investment in an ideal of (feminine) innocence is one of the results – to be perhaps sympathised with, but not condoned – of his characters’ attempt to come to terms with trauma. The third section of Chapter 4 expands this line of investigation in order to consider O’Brien’s concern with the universal longing for love, and the pain and frustration that accompany the traumatised subjects’ difficulty in forming and maintaining healthy emotional relationships. These themes are the focus of *The Nuclear Age*, *Tomcat in Love* and *July, July*, O’Brien’s three comic novels, which have been frequently ignored by academic readers and literary commentators.

O’Brien’s caricatural excesses and penchant for the ridiculously and contemptuously comic, rather than for a less dark and scathing form of humour, partly explain why these fiercely argumentative texts – which well deserve to be defined as novels of ideas – have typically elicited a different response from the one reserved to O’Brien’s other works: their protagonists’ failure to be true to themselves is unmitigated in these cases by the appeal to sympathy inherent in the restrained narrative tone, and the nuanced characterization, to be found in O’Brien’s more accomplished texts. Interestingly, however, for all its compositional limitations, it is the earliest of these comic novels, *The Nuclear Age*, that offers in Sarah Strouch the most developed

female character in O’Brien’s work. A strong, intriguing, rounded figure, and
an anticipation of the transgressive Mary Anne Bell in ‘Sweetheart of the
Song Tra Bong’, Sarah has the stature of the protagonist of a Greek tragedy,
doomed as she is by a ‘fatal flaw’. Nonetheless, she remains unwavering on
her path towards authenticity, and has therefore a rightful claim to being the
real heroine in the text, worthier of respect than her male counterpart. The
final section of Chapter 4 turns to The Things They Carried, O’Brien’s most
celebrated work and the text where he most overtly outlines his poetics of
reception. In his practice and in his metafictional theorizations in Things,
O’Brien is critical both of masculine (rational, syntagmatic, metonymical)
and of feminine (emotional, paradigmatic, metaphorical) declensions and
responses to storytelling. By contrast, O’Brien argues for a non-gendered,
visceral approach to his stories, which rely on ambiguities and ellipses in
order to deal with the unspeakable issue of traumatisation.

After considering matters of narrative structure and technique in
O’Brien’s entire output, Chapter 5 opens with a section devoted to ‘Sweet-
heart of the Song Tra Bong’, one of the most arresting stories in The Things
They Carried. In this short narrative, O’Brien acts on the idea that the war can
only be understood ‘as though it were a story’ by engaging in a sustained and
fruitful conversation with Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, one of the most
suggestive tales in the modern Western literary canon. The comparative close
reading of the two texts highlights the evocative and sense-making power of
‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’ as a creative re-elaboration of the experi-
ence of Vietnam. O’Brien’s encounter with Conrad’s novella provides a
critical and imaginative distance from factual constraints; this distance is
crucial to the writer’s attempt to convey and comprehend the true signifi-
cance of the conflict. At the same time, the analysis of the differences between
Heart of Darkness and ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’ reveals a shift from
a subtle modernist critique of patriarchal ideology to a postmodern decon-
struction of the naturalness of gender roles, and from a modernist ‘nihilistic’
epistemological scepticism to the postmodern wilful recuperation of the
notion of a truth (however local and provisional) to be yielded by the
mythopoetic power of storytelling. To this end O’Brien reworks the Conra-
dian sequence of embedded narratives that communicate and obscure – one
might say ‘envelop’ – the truth about Kurtz (and Marlow) into a multivocal
act of mythopoesis that marvels at, celebrates and engages each time anew
with Mary Anne and her story. This case study begins to bring the volume to
a close, for it provides an opportunity to offer some concluding remarks on
the scope and the quality of O’Brien’s output, while revisiting its main
themes and the characteristics of its writing: O’Brien’s literariness; his
development of Conrad’s modernist sensitivity into a postmodern one; his
treatment of the Vietnamese environment, and of American preconceptions
about it; his confrontation with the ideal middle landscape between wilderness and civilization, and the draw of this tension on the American imaginary; his representation of women and his view of gender relations; and, finally, his articulation of trauma, his poetics of reception and his investment in storytelling.

The second and third parts of Chapter 5 return to *The Things They Carried* in its entirety, in order to explore its articulation of the distinction between ‘story-truth’ and ‘happening-truth’, and the author’s endorsement of the former over the latter as the only truth potentially available to the storyteller. In line with illustrious American predecessors, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose theory of romance provides a luminous example, O’Brien’s attitude towards the apprehension and the communication of truth is a celebration of the epistemological power of storytelling, and of fiction writing in particular. This optimistic engagement with an attempt at sense-making is accompanied by a less buoyant view of the potential for catharsis yielded by the whole process. Thus, O’Brien firmly rejects the moral authority typically associated with experience, in favour of a fragile, and always provisional, personal connection with the Other, to be sought after in the endless refashioning of stories and in the imaginative identification with the plight of fellow human beings – an imperfect foundation for our ethical commitments, and yet the only foundation available to us at all. Like the numerous thematic and formal concerns listed above, these lessons too are encapsulated in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’, whose intertextual and metafictional elements provide one of the most felicitous enactments of O’Brien’s belief that stories should develop in more than one telling, and generate more stories, and continue to resonate with narrators and audiences long after their performance. At its best, O’Brien’s writing certainly has the power to do all these things.