‘There was a map of Vietnam on the wall of my apartment in Saigon and some nights, coming back late to the city, I’d lie out on my bed and look at it, too tired to do anything more than just get my boots off. That map was a marvel, especially now that it wasn’t real anymore.’ The opening lines of Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977) – among the most influential narratives of the war in Vietnam – suggest a fascination with the act of mapping, even in the knowledge of its historical contingency and fundamental inadequacy as an epistemological tool. While the mention of these limitations may be a counterintuitive place to start from, for a monograph intent on its own kind of charting, Herr’s reference to the allure of the cartographer’s work brings to mind a more famous recollection of the enthralling power of maps – Charlie Marlow’s memory of the seductive power of the ‘many blank spaces on the earth’ in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), a canonical thematization of the ineffable enchantment that comes from the perception of alien lands as mysterious places waiting to be explored and deciphered, or conquered. Beckoning from the depths of Africa, on whose map – what used to be the biggest blank of all – it stands out as an ‘immense snake uncoiled’, the river Congo casts its spell on Marlow, and his audience: ‘The snake had charmed me’ (22). I am keen to start – as I will end, in much greater detail – with an allusion to Conrad’s novella for a number of reasons. To begin with, given its thought-provoking treatment of the challenges inherent in the encounter – or rather, the clash – between different cultures, as well as in the articulation of such an experience and, more generally, in the investigation of the human potential for savagery, *Heart of Darkness* has played a considerable role in setting the place of the Vietnam war in our collective imagination and has had an enduring impact on American representations of the conflict, most notably, of course, through the mediation of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979). O’Brien himself has revisited the Conradian model


in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’, originally published as a short story in *Esquire* in July 1989 and subsequently incorporated into *The Things They Carried*. While the trope of the journey into the heart of darkness will be outlined later on in this chapter and analysed in depth near the end of this volume, for the time being the reference to Conrad’s long shadow prompts a couple of quick, introductory points about O’Brien’s work and Vietnam war literature in general.

One of the first considerations to strike O’Brien’s readers – even when his intertextual connections are not as easily discernible as those in ‘Sweetheart’ – is that he is very much a writers’ writer and a committed craftsman, conscious of his literary and cultural influences. He is a wordsmith with a clear interest in exploring the mechanisms of language, as well as in testing the technical and formal limits and the sense-making potential of his chosen medium, narrative writing. Those familiar with his working methods will also be aware that O’Brien, true to his belief that making sentences takes a lot of time and effort, drafts and revises several versions of his material before he can be satisfied with the final result. Indeed, he has been known to make changes to his manuscripts at the very last minute: for example, *In the Lake of the Woods* contains significant revisions to the preview copy which had appeared only four months prior to the book’s actual publication. From the beginning of his career – in fact, particularly at the beginning of his career – O’Brien’s intellectual and self-reflective drive has been most noticeable in his dialogue with other authors and other texts, and in his musings on the art of storytelling, from the overt philosophical and cultural references in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* to his all too heavy debt to Ernest Hemingway in *Northern Lights*, and the metanarrative scope of *Going After Cacciato*. Throughout his career, O’Brien has continued to adopt deliberately complex narrative structures, in order to avoid the mimetic fallacy that would have us see writing as a straightforward transcription or reproduction of reality. Indeed, with the exception of his first novel *Northern Lights*, O’Brien has always privileged the diegetic aspect of his texts – that is, the act of storytelling through which the events in the tale get processed and communicated to an audience – over what, as Gérard Genette shrewdly points out, is only ever the ‘illusion of mimesis’ afforded by narrative writing (unless, of course, the narrative subject be language, or the act of writing itself). Flagging up the existence and the


role of his narrators, emphasizing the context of the narrating situation, foregrounding all storytelling acts and exchanges, and generally never letting readers forget that they are accessing an inevitably mediated version of events, O’Brien constantly gives prominence to diegesis over mimesis in his works. The two terms should not be merely construed in the Platonic and Aristotelian opposition of ‘narrative’ vs. ‘imitation’, or ‘reporting’ vs. ‘representation’ (or even Wayne Booth’s ‘telling’ vs. ‘showing’); besides being the mark of a preference for a particular kind of narrative delivery, O’Brien’s embrace of the diegetic also signals the author’s considerable investment in the power of storytelling to extract meaning from – or indeed inject meaning into – our (real or imaginative) perceptions of the world. Unprocessed by narrative filters, these perceptions would remain at the mere level of experience, which – no matter how objectively reliable (were such a thing ever possible) or first-hand or otherwise authoritative – O’Brien always finds relatively worthless and unenlightening. The relationship between storytelling and truth, together with other crucial issues such as the redefinition of courage, or the interplay between memory and imagination, is one of O’Brien’s recurrent concerns. Throughout his career he has repeatedly engaged with the same key questions to be found at the heart of his early work, so that his overall output can be seen to form a coherent corpus, worth considering as a whole, for all the variations in the individual texts’ success with the critics and the public, and in their respective technical accomplishments.

The reference to Conrad is also, much like the title of this study, a reminder that O’Brien writes about Vietnam always with the aim to go beyond literal thematic strictures and the other generic confines associated with the realm of combat narratives. As he has freely admitted in interviews, and has practised in all his work, O’Brien regards the ‘framework of war’ as a ‘short cut’ to apply immediate pressure on his characters and situations, and thus to allow him to deal with fundamental questions to do with ‘the human heart’ – the latter an expression that significantly echoes Nathaniel Hawthorne’s declaration of poetics, as we shall see in Chapter 5. With a slightly infelicitous turn of phrase – for, in his treatment of fighting, he in fact

‘Intradiegetic’ refers to the level of the narrative, rather than the extratextual world: for example, we have an intradiegetic Tim O’Brien, character and narrator in The Things They Carried, not to be confused with the real-life author of the same book. In literature, a ‘mise en abyme’ is a story within a story. More generally, it indicates a mirroring between one element of a story and the narrative in its entirety, such as when a small episode foreshadows the main narrative arc or a wider theme in the text as a whole. It is in this latter sense that ‘mise en abyme’ is typically used in this study.

insists on the materiality of the horror of war, being very careful not to reduce it to a convenient figure of speech – O’Brien has talked about Vietnam as ‘an essential or a life-given metaphor that, for [him], is inescapable’. As he goes on to explain: ‘I’ve used it in the way Conrad writes about the sea […] But Conrad is no more writing about the sea than I am writing about war.’ There is, of course, a danger in treating a specific experience – particularly one, such as the Vietnam war, so morally fraught and traumatic, and so liable to being conflated with a negative perception of an entire country – as a way to explore what it means to be human, itself a claim with more than a hint of problematic essentialism in its universalizing drive. For this reason, and for what would have to be regarded as a tendentious pro-Western/American bias, O’Brien has laid himself open to the same kind of postcolonial critique that has been brought against Conrad’s use of Africa in Heart of Darkness (memorable, and still controversial, in this debate is Chinua Achebe’s accusation that Conrad is ‘a bloody racist’ for his reduction of an entire continent and its inhabitants to ‘the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind’). Other critics, on the other hand, have embraced O’Brien’s attempt to transcend the contingencies of his subject matter, perhaps viewing it as a sign of the classic status that some of his narratives aspire to: given his choice of comparison, this was certainly the perspective adopted by Richard Freeman, whose glowing review for the New York Times, often reprinted on dust-jackets and back covers of later editions of the book, makes the bold claim that ‘[t]o call Going After Cacciato a novel about war is like calling Moby Dick a novel about whales’. 

While the politics of O’Brien’s work will be discussed in the rest of the book, alongside the analysis of his thematic concerns, formal solutions and metanarrative reflections, this first chapter aims to provide a general introduction to the close reading of the primary texts. The following pages sketch the reasons for the common definition of Vietnam as a postmodern war, and the impact of this perception on the literature on the subject. The analysis then expands to consider the inscription of this view of the war within a specifically American cultural context: the myth of the frontier. The third section of this chapter develops my initial comments on the ‘journey into the heart of darkness’ as a paradigm in the perception of the war, and relates this trope to O’Brien’s deconstruction of gender and racial stereotypes and to his mythopoetic sensitivity – both exemplary of a postmodern poetics, in spite of

O’Brien’s firm disavowal of this label. The last section combines the very large and the very small, looking at the challenges inherent in writing about war vis-à-vis changed attitudes towards the notion of heroism, while also giving a brief overview of the specific literary and cultural models that O’Brien engages with, or has pointedly chosen to disregard.

**A postmodern conflict**

What do we talk about when we talk about Vietnam? And how do we – or how should we – talk about Vietnam? Herr’s marvellous map of an unreal country seems to raise these, and similar, questions. While such queries necessarily elude final, comprehensive answers, a brief sketch of the possible meaning and the frame of reference for the use of ‘Vietnam’ as shorthand for the American conflict in the Southeast Asian peninsula, and for the soldiers’ experience of the country of the same name, throws light on the historical and ideological context of the US military engagement and of its literary reinterpretations. As a matter of fact, while this study will follow the convention of writing ‘Vietnam’ as one word (the common Westernized spelling of the indigenous Việt Nam), some critics, following Renny Christopher’s example, have chosen to capitalize on the existence of alternative spellings in order to make a crucial distinction between the country and the conflict. Thus, in what is already a loaded definition of the two terms, we have “‘Vietnam’ – an ideological signifier for the futilely destructive American military, political, and economic intervention in Southeast Asia and its cultural and political ramifications within the United States and elsewhere; and “Viet Nam” – the nation that won the war and has a history and culture that transcends “Vietnam”’. If it is relatively easy to draw a broad outline of the history of the country – the millenary Chinese rule (208 BC to AD 983), a long period of independence and the seventeenth-century division of one kingdom into two (the Trinh kingdom in the north and the Nguyen in the south), the slow progress of French colonization (from the arrival of the first missionaries in the seventeenth century to the gradual establishment of protectorates and colonies in the nineteenth century) until Ho Chi Minh’s 1945 declaration of Vietnamese independence, which ironically opens with a reference to its American counterpart – things get much more complicated when it comes to attempting a chronicle of the Vietnam war, pinning down its exact duration, and indeed even the number of different, interlinked conflicts it entailed.

Several historians prefer to talk about ‘Vietnam wars’ in the plural, to

highlight how the American military engagement in Vietnam of 1965–73 (from the launch of operation ‘Rolling Thunder’ to the signing of a ceasefire agreement and the subsequent departure of the last American troops) ‘was preceded by a failed French war of colonial reconquest, ran parallel with a southern Vietnamese civil war, and would be followed by a war of national reunification waged by North Vietnam and its southern supporters’.12

Besides, as Marilyn B. Young points out, the ‘Americans sent to Vietnam fought different wars depending on when they arrived and where (and whether) they were in combat’.13 The official US presence in Vietnam had started with the arrival of the first American military advisors to train President Diem’s South Vietnamese Army in 1956 – two such military advisors were to become the first American casualties in 1959 – and ended with the American Ambassador leaving Saigon after the fall of the city on 30 April 1975 in what marked a twenty-year interruption of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Yet the record of incontrovertible facts – arrivals and departures, movements of troops, place names, dates of significant operations, presidents and officers in command on both sides – tells only a small part of the story, and the least controversial one at that. The lack of certainties that surrounds the American perception of the conflict in Vietnam not merely on the matter of its opportunity and design – the issue of whether it was a war of aggression and an undue interference in another country’s right to self-determination, or rather a necessary part of the fight against Communism – is perhaps best summarized by Mark Taylor, who opens his study of the Vietnam war in history, literature and film with the following, loaded question: ‘What would victory have consisted of?’14

The American military involvement in Vietnam has often been described as the first postmodern war in history, for a number of well documented reasons.15 The conflict’s ‘inconclusiveness’, in the perceived lack of a clear
final purpose, is certainly one of them, and was itself the result of a combination of concurrent causes. To begin with, the war seemed to lack clear objectives at a very fundamental level: fought according to the rules of guerrilla warfare, in a foreign country and on unfamiliar terrain, against both the People’s Army of Vietnam (the regular North Vietnamese army) and the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (most commonly referred to as the Viet Cong, who – recruited in the South – were therefore already in that part of the country whose independence from the North the US had pledged to defend), it appeared to the American soldiers as a conflict against an invisible enemy hiding amongst, and indeed often part of, the civilian population. Lacking the battle-lines of traditional military efforts, conducted as a war of attrition and intertwined with a civil war, Vietnam soon turned out to involve the American troops in a campaign to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the very people they thought they had come to help.

In an interview with Tobey C. Herzog, talking about the rationale behind his war memoirs, Tim O’Brien explains that he wanted to write about ‘the infantryman’s experience through the eyes of a soldier who acknowledged the obvious: that we were killing civilians more than we were killing the enemy. The war was aimless in the most basic ways, that is, aimless in the sense of nothing to aim at, no enemy to shoot, no target to kill’. The peculiar rules of engagement of a contained conflict with no definite front-line and an ‘invisible’ enemy also made it difficult to measure success on the battlefield: military progress thus ended up being gauged on the body-count of the respective casualties, a procedure which in turn encouraged the perverse syllogism that a dead Vietnamese must be a VC (not to mention the implicit legitimization of the mutilation of corpses to get a ‘confirmed kill’). The American soldiers’ limited tour of duty (a year for the Army, thirteen months for the Marines) together with the fact that they would join the war effort individually rather than as units dealt a further blow to the idea that the war in Vietnam had a final, collective purpose: although meant to guarantee that there were always experienced soldiers in combat units, this latter practice effectively turned individual soldiers into cogs in the military machine. Add to this the element of chance brought about by the draft lottery system, and

and fragmented did not produce chaotic and fragmented literature, the difference lies in literary history, not military history’ (pp. 12–13). Of course, much like the distinction between ‘Vietnam’ and ‘Viet Nam’, theoretical disquisitions about the postmodernity of this conflict reflect the concerns (and the bias) of Western cultural critics, and not of the Vietnamese.


the increasingly vocal opposition to the war at home, and it is easy to see why the soldiers’ disaffection would mount, even before they set foot on Vietnamese ground.

These practical issues, and their obvious repercussions on the troops’ morale, can be regarded as a marker of the postmodernity of the conflict insofar as they partake of, and promote, a mood of uncertainty, scepticism and relativism, with their privileging of the communication and interpretation of information over other activities, and the prioritization of simulation over substance (see the already mentioned difficulty in ascertaining the difference between friends and enemies, or the notorious practices of the body count, and the kill ratio, to determine military progress). The depthlessness fostered by the fragmentation of knowledge and the proliferation of individual readings of the events is accompanied by other features of postmodernity, such as the negation of a strong teleological narrative implied by the vague strategic objectives of an endless war of attrition, and the flattening of temporality in the ‘presentist’ attitude pervading the conflict, perhaps best exemplified by each draftee’s individual desire to survive his limited tour of duty, in the absence of the shared goal of a final collective victory. Last but not least, Vietnam represents ‘a new and virtually unimaginable quantum leap in technological alienation’ in modern warfare, both in the mechanization of the communication and processing of intelligence, and in its love affair with the potential for immediate, speedy, small-scale targeted operations afforded by the use of helicopters. The latter has become the most instantly recognizable symbol of the American presence in Vietnam, immortalized by Herr’s image of the ‘collective metachopper’ in perpetual motion—‘saver-destroyer, provider-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder’—and by Coppola’s memorable sequence in Apocalypse Now of the fleet of Hueys rising in flight and attacking a beach to the sound of Richard Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries’.

The iconic presence of these images also testifies to another peculiarity of this conflict: never before had a war been so intricately connected with the idea of spectacle, the two notions becoming blurred in their reciprocal interaction with the mass media. American soldiers went to Vietnam with a

19 Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, New Left Review, 146 (1984), pp. 53–92, p. 84.
20 Herr, Dispatches, pp. 15–16.
baggage of unrealistic expectations derived in part from their exposure to popular representations of previous wars. Hollywood accounts of World War II, in particular, gave rise to the widespread and obviously unprecedented phenomenon of the ‘John Wayne Syndrome’, with its reckless, unattainable model of heroism, accompanied by the dangerous feeling of being on a movie set rather than in a real combat zone. On the other hand, the everyday, immediate journalistic coverage of the war, and of the moral and political debate surrounding it, gave the event a mediatic quality with all the consequences of the case, not least a simultaneous closeness to and distance from the conflict and, eventually, a sense of information overload, which has most probably contributed to America’s state of denial in the aftermath of its first military defeat.

How else, then, can the inscription of Vietnam within the logic of late capitalism, so often associated with a privileging of efficiency and performance over truth, be said to have affected the representation and reception of the war? Even if at one point it had become something of a critical commonplace to assume that ‘as a postmodern war, portrayals of the war in Vietnam demand a postmodern style to be meaningful, or indeed to be meaningless in order to reflect the meaninglessness of the war’, the postmodernity of the conflict has not necessarily been reflected in an analogous quality in its literary renditions. In fact, a significant majority of books, as well as films, comics and other expressions of popular culture dealing with Vietnam, have no real artistic pretensions. On the narrative front, most accounts of the war can be categorized as combat novels focused on traditional and realistic descriptions of battle. At best, they read like adventure stories, making no great attempt to perform a deeper analysis of the psychology of war, or of the ethical and ideological assumptions underlying this particular conflict; at worst, they can be dismissed as ‘trash literature’, with a significant proportion of texts whose combat setting is a mere pretext, as they zoom in onto episodes of sexual violence.

Nonetheless, from the reactionary and chauvinistic extreme of near-

pornographic and/or pulp narratives through the documentary value of many fictional and non-fictional accounts of the conflict, Vietnam war literature has reached out to include some of the most innovative and creative works to have come out of the United States since the 1960s. Philip D. Beidler goes as far as to claim that ‘such a body of writing has also suggested a major direction for the national literature towards an access of renewed creative energy [...] , a possible way beyond what became known in the 1960s and early 1970s in the metafictionist argot as “the literature of exhaustion”’. I would agree with Beidler that, generally speaking, Vietnam war literature – in its finest manifestations – has heeded John Barth’s call for self-reflectivity, making a virtue out of the necessity to verbalize its inability to speak, and thus developing new thematic concerns and narrative strategies in order to handle its volatile material. This is certainly true of Tim O’Brien who, having discarded the notion that experiential memory and mimetic writing might respectively provide the foundation and the outlet for an authentic account of the war, also renounced the claims to authority of the first-hand participant in – and witness of – the events, and invested instead in the performative power of storytelling, i.e. in the power of narrative acts to process, mediate and organize our (imaginative, as well as real) experience of the world, and refashion it into a tentative sense-making activity.

Meaning is found, and at the same time created, in the interplay between the actual conflict (or rather, the individual subject’s awareness of it), its collective cultural, symbolic significance and one’s personal reinterpretation of the two combined. Devoid of any didactic or cathartic connotations, each individual, idiosyncratic act of storytelling is viewed as a speculative, and yet the only available, hermeneutical and expressive practice capable of offering an intermittent glimmer of ‘truth’ – a nugget of wisdom suddenly thrown into relief by what we might call, after Michael Herr, an inspired ‘illumination round’. In the decades to follow the last official American departure from Saigon in 1975, this mythopoetic trajectory has come full circle, with the widespread acknowledgement – not only on O’Brien’s part – that the stories we tell about Vietnam have been a catalyst for the representation and the analysis of the contradictions of American culture, and indeed of Western culture, at the end of the American century. More than that: Vietnam has been reimagined – and one cannot emphasize enough the wilful, constructed nature of this vision – as a ‘perfect metaphor for our times’, a symbol that ‘both reflects and illuminates our larger predicament’. O’Brien has exploited both veins in his writing, in which Vietnam figures always as an

urgent theme, deserving of obsessive attention both in its own right, and for its ability to flag up the tension between the individual subject and the often conflicting cultural discourses that make up his or her own sense of identity.

Old myths, new frontiers

The image most readily associated with World War I is the landscape of trenches and foxholes of the Western Front and its eerie, inorganic mockery of nature with barbed wire shrubbery and sandbag mounds. World War II moved the conflict to the skies, with the London Blitz, the bombing of Dresden and, most powerfully memorable of all in this catalogue of tragedies, the atomic mushrooms over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war in Vietnam is connected both with an underground, hellish dimension (the Viet Cong tunnels) and with mass destruction from the air (the American chemical downpour of napalm and Agent Orange across the land). The history of this conflict is that of a war waged against the enemy and his territory alike, the one perceived as the emanation of the other: hostile, impenetrable and undeniably alien. The iconography of the American intervention in Vietnam rests on the image of a triple-canopied jungle, with layers and layers of vegetation: enclosed and trapped in its unfamiliar majesty are camouflaged and scantily dressed GIs, often offering – particularly when transposed onto the big screen – a display of sun-tanned muscles which we are more used to seeing on Californian surfers and bathers than on the battlefield.27 The tropical, luxuriant setting of the Southeast Asian peninsula is definitely one of the features to set this conflict apart from the paradigmatic examples of the two World Wars, which were fought mainly on European, hence familiarly Western, soil.28

The specific nature of the Vietnamese landscape had great material consequences on the military strategies, and indeed on the outcome, of the conflict, which the Viet Cong fought relying on their long experience of guerrilla warfare, forcing their opponent to develop anti-guerrilla techniques. The geography of Vietnam thus constitutes a first, natural barrier between the

27 Francis Ford Coppola foregrounds this conceit through the character of Lance Johnson, the surfing champion turned soldier, and especially through the larger-than-life and suggestively named figure of Bill Kilgore, a madcap Lieutenant Colonel (his is the infamous line ‘I love the smell of napalm in the morning’). Kilgore, a surfing aficionado, insists that Johnson should give him a demonstration of his prowess, even as the bombs are falling on the beach where the soldiers have just landed.

28 The Korean War of 1950–53 is often referred to as the ‘forgotten war’; it never quite captured people’s imagination, and therefore does not figure as a paradigm for Vietnam. The unusual status of this conflict is also perhaps due to the fact that the American intervention in Korea was not preceded by an official declaration of war by the US Congress.
opposing armies, acting like a shield and a screen for VC operations, granting the natives a near total invisibility. Paradoxically, and somehow absurdly in the logic of war, American soldiers at times found it more difficult to reach the appointed destination, to cut their way through a thick, impenetrable vegetation, than to engage the enemy in battle. O’Brien himself testifies to this unnerving state of affairs in his memoir, where he recalls ‘three silhouettes […] tiptoeing out of the hamlet. They were twenty yards away, crouched over, their shoulders hunched forward. It was the first and only time I would ever see the living enemy, the men intent on killing me’ (IJD, 101–102). Added to the sheer physical fatigue of ‘humping the Nam’ were the constant apprehension of stepping onto a mine or being targets for an ambush, and the ensuing necessity to watch both the ground and the flourishing thickets for hidden dangers. This, in turn, led to the arduous and tiring choice to avoid easy trails and let oneself be swallowed by the untried jungle; all these elements caused American troops to perceive the Vietnamese environment as just as hostile as the people who lived in it. And, as if the snares fabricated by the Viet Cong were not enough, the American soldiers had to contend with the fear of the terrible traps harboured by the territory itself, seen as a breeding ground of unknown diseases and of poisonous, exotic insects and parasites. This perception gives an almost literal resonance to the view of Vietnam as the ‘Garden of Evil’, voiced by one of the characters in The Things They Carried as a possible explanation for the extraordinary behaviour of the American ‘Adams’ in a land where ‘every sin’s real fresh and original’ (TTC, 76).

These material and psychological encumbrances ran counter to the American expectations of how the war would unfold; what is more, Vietnam failed to live up to its projected, metonymical representation of the wondrous Far East, an image burdened with well-established orientalist conceits – associations with sensual, captivating and mysterious revelations – perpetuated even by writers, such as Joseph Conrad, who are otherwise well aware of the spuriousness of a stark dichotomy between the Orient and the Occident.29 While it may have been the site of ancient, enchanting and unchanging

29 See, for example, Marlow’s first view of the East in ‘Youth: A Narrative’: ‘And this is how I see the East. I have seen its secret places and have looked into its very soul; but now I see it always from a small boat, a high outline of mountains, blue and afar in the morning; like faint mist at noon; a jagged wall of purple at sunset. I have the feel of the oar in my hand, the vision of a scorching blue sea in my eyes. And I see a bay, a wide bay, smooth as glass and polished like ice, shimmering in the dark. A red light burns far off upon the gloom of the land, and the night is soft and warm. We drag at the oars with aching arms, and suddenly a puff of wind, a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odours of blossoms, of aromatic wood, comes out of the still night – the first sigh of the East on my face. That I can never forget. It was impalpable and enslaving, like a charm, like a whispered promise of mysterious delight’; Joseph Conrad, ‘Youth: A Narrative’ in Selected Short Stories, ed. Keith Carabine (London: Wordsworth, 1997), pp. 69–94, p. 91.
civilizations, with a millenary culture of ascetic wisdom, as well as of fabled feminine submissiveness and hospitality, the Far East in Vietnam lent itself to being perceived (by subscribers to the myth of America as the ‘redeemer nation’) as home to a poor, rural population torn apart by years of civil war and therefore waiting, with arms wide open, for their Western saviour. The general orientalist preconceptions about Far East Asia, which go back centuries in Western culture to the time of Marco Polo’s marvellous encounter with the court of Kublai Khan in the Kingdom of Cathay, were compounded by the distinctly American perception of this region as the natural extension of the US’s own Pacific borders. Last but not least, the American vision, both of the Vietnamese country and people, and of the role that the soldiers would be called to fulfil in their expedition to this foreign land, was also coloured by the symbolic attributes of one of the founding myths of the United States: the great narrative of the frontier.

As is well known, the United States has built an important part of its national identity on its successful effort to conquer and tame the Far West: its self-perception as a progressive, enterprising and young-spirited country rests solidly on the assurance and persistence with which it has met the challenge of a wild and unexplored land. Such venture has required, in equal doses, reliance on the powers of civilization and a strong sense of adaptability and appreciation for the virtues of a more Spartan life, lived according to the rhythms of nature. The myth of the frontier thus rests on a complex tension between the values of civilization and those of the wilderness, as Frederick Jackson Turner and other cultural historians after him have pointed out. In this liminal place, later subsumed within the pioneering spirit of the entire country, the United States strikes the perfect balance of culture and nature, embodying the golden mean between over-civilized, decadent Europe, marred by the shame of its colonial politics and general spiritual decline, and the savagery of the Native Americans. Unsurprisingly, the myth of the frontier glosses over the American ignominies that accompanied the conquest of the Wild West, from the indentured and slave labour behind the construction of the railway system to the genocide of Native Americans. The frontier narrative unfolds as the story of the triumph of civilization: ‘No society of any appreciable magnitude has ever chosen to reject westernization. [...] There is no reason why the Indians should not have shared in this almost universal trend if they so chose’. Insofar as the United States has sought to distance itself from its European ancestors, whose moral corruption and religious intolerance first led the Pilgrim Fathers to cross the ocean, America has been

configured as a symbolic landscape where country, wilderness, nature and the unconscious carry positive connotations, set against the city, civilization, technology and the conscious. However, the negative terms of these binary oppositions are all recuperated and redeemed within the mythical and the tangible geography of the frontier, where ingenuity, practicality, sophistication and material progress are highly valued, since they provide the measure of the pioneers’ successful control over their environment. In this way, the frontier becomes the expression of an incorrupt form of civilization, making a claim for the innocence that Europe has irretrievably lost, while embracing the need for technological advancement in order to meet the challenge of the uncharted territory waiting to be mapped out and settled. This extraordinary reconciliation of opposites reflects the American ‘self-image of limitless possibility, mastery over nature, democratic equality, self-reliant individualism, and special community mission’.

Half a century after the closure of the original western frontier, at a time when the American pioneering spirit infused the new challenge of the space race, Vietnam was seized as an opportunity for the United States to relive one of the most thrilling and significant pages of its young history. On first glance, the American role in Vietnam appears to share several remarkable traits with the conquest of the west. The ingredients for another ‘success’ story are all there, beginning with the setting. As anticipated, East Asia can easily be imagined as the geographical and ideal continuation of the original frontier. Vietnam, in particular, was not only of course a place other than Europe, but a country plunged into its difficult predicament by European influences: there, the Americans had the chance to put to right what the French, with their crumbling colonial power, had not been able to resolve. All the same, though, and despite its very old civilization, Vietnam retained its exotic alterity, which was liable to be viewed as a form of weakness, even of savagery, by Western observers interested in asserting their moral superiority. Indeed, this is exactly the vision of Southeast Asia prevalent in America in the 1950s, due for the most part to the huge popularity of William Lederer and Eugene Burdick’s *The Ugly American* (1958). Advertised as fiction based on fact, the book sold over four million copies – endorsed by J. F. Kennedy, it was given to each member of the Senate at the time of his Presidency – and in 1963 was made into a film starring Marlon Brando. Set in the not-so-fictional country of Sarkhan, the text ‘offered its readers an Indochina representing a frontier where Americans could return to the remembered virtues of their heritage and at the same time free themselves from the burden of their past’.

The moral, utopian appeal of this vision informed the spirit, and the policies, of John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s ‘Camelot Years’, whose faith in the possibility of universal progress was streaked with an awareness of distinctly American shortcomings, past and present crimes, and a consequent desire for national catharsis. For example, while the United States has never been – not officially, at least – a colonial power, a large part of its economy had depended on slavery, as well as on the exploitative system of indentured labour: thousands of Asian immigrants worked, and died, building the very railroads that would forever change the environment of the Great Plains and jeopardize the livelihood of the local Indian populations. Kennedy’s New Frontier would make epic gestures of worldwide resonance, such as the space programme, with the climactic achievement of the ‘giant leap for mankind’ on the moon; simultaneously, however, it would also seek symbolic redemption and material reparation of wrongs deeply entangled with the development of American history. Seen against the bloody legacy of the old, western frontier, Vietnam thus seemed to present a great opportunity for the United States to make amends to the ‘dark man’, albeit vicariously: the same country which had once crushed the Native Americans would now protect the Vietnamese and set them free. Slotkin remarks that Lederer and Burdick treat Asians in much the same way as Hollywood at the time treated Native Americans, while Hellman points out how *The Ugly American* reads like an act of imaginative atonement for the killing of the buffalo, when it is envisaged that the United States should introduce the cow to Sarkhan.

The violent aspect of the frontier myth introduces another series of conflicts to the list of paradigmatic military campaigns in American history: the extermination of Native Americans during the westward expansion of the country and, previous to that, the French-Indian wars fought by the British to secure control of their American colonies. Once again, the broad similarities between these early hostilities, easily coalesced in a seamless battle against savagery, and the much later experience in Southeast Asia, are striking: the difficulty in discriminating between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Indians would be replicated with further complications in Vietnam, where the presence of enemies in the civilian population was a source of particular frustration and distress for the American soldiers, who had expected, especially in the early years of the war, to be hailed as benefactors and liberators of the country. In the original frontier narrative, the pioneers’ encounter with the Native American populations had had very rewarding consequences for the newcomers who, exposed to the wisdom of the local cultures, were able to learn valuable lessons about survival in an unfamiliar

36 It seems no coincidence then that Tim O’Brien should choose to have David Todd, the soldier character from his latest novel *July, July*, get seriously injured in combat while Armstrong lands on the moon.
environment. Knowledge of the land and, perhaps more importantly, respect for the natural world were key traits in the development of the pioneer into what remains the most intriguing heroic figure in the mythology of the west: the ‘White Indian’, a character immortalized by James Fenimore Cooper in his *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823–41). Loosely based on the historical figure of Daniel Boone (1738–1820), Natty Bumppo (also referred to as Leatherstocking, Hawkeye and *La Longue Carabine*, or the scout, the deerslayer and the pioneer) embodies the ideal dweller of the middle landscape of the frontier, for he combines the innate moral and intellectual superiority of the white man with an intimate understanding of the Native American ethos of harmonious coexistence with the wilderness.37 This archetypal western hero strikes a perfect balance between civilization and savagery, most significantly in his fighting skills: he is in command equally of Western technology and military strategies, and of Native American weapons and tactics. Bumppo’s close relationship with his Indian mentors and allies undoubtedly makes him a mediator between the two different races and, to a great extent, a champion of the indigenous cultures; however, in time this kind of character is transformed into ‘civilization’s most effective instrument against savagery – a man who knows how to fight like an Indian, to turn their own methods against them’.38 Incidentally, this early American mastery of non-conventional fighting techniques exposes one of the greatest ironies of the debacle in Vietnam, which is often blamed on the treacherousness and unpredictability of guerrilla warfare, when in fact this has been ‘the most typical form of military operation during most of the army’s history’, from the first skirmishes against the Indians to the war of independence against the British colonial yoke.39

The figure of the ‘White Indian’, duly updated, was summoned to play a major role in the American taming of the Southeast Asian frontier in the guise of the Green Berets. These Special Forces had been instituted in the aftermath of World War II: trained as guerrilla experts, they were to provide assistance to the local armies in the event of a Soviet occupation of western

37 In the 1850 ‘Preface to the Leatherstocking Tales’, Cooper makes explicit his intention to create in Natty Bumppo a composite figure, capturing the best of both worlds: ‘removed from nearly all the temptations of civilized life, placed in the best associations of that which is deemed savage, and favorably disposed by nature to improve such advantages, it appeared to the writer that his hero was a fit subject to represent the better qualities of both conditions, without pushing either to extremes’; James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1990), p. 379. Subsequent references are to this edition.

38 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 16.

39 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 454. The opening sentence of *The Last of the Mohicans* could not make this any clearer: ‘It was a feature peculiar to the colonial wars of North America, that the toils and dangers of the wilderness were to be encountered, before the adverse hosts could meet’ (p. 15).
Europe. Employed in the Korean War, the Green Berets were amongst the first troops to be sent to Vietnam, by John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who in 1961 had sanctioned their right to wear their distinctive headgear (previously unauthorized by the US Army) in a deliberate move to set them up as a distinguished group with a special mission. Their prestigious status and their role of defenders of democracy and freedom, at the service of weaker, foreign lands, cast them as quasi-chivalric types, in tune with the spirit of Kennedy’s presidency; the Special Forces’ association with the President was such that they were soon dubbed ‘Kennedy’s Own’. Their popularity was boosted by Robert Moore’s book *The Green Berets* (1965), later turned into a film by John Wayne, and by the song ‘Ballad of the Green Berets’, released in 1966. In Kennedy’s vision, the Green Berets would excel as counterinsurgents in Vietnam because their skills as military tacticians would be matched by their ability to empathize with the plight of the local populations: like the western frontiersman of lore, the Green Beret would be soldier and diplomat, killer and peacemaker, interpreter between cultures, while ultimately proving the superiority of American civilization. President Johnson’s escalation of the war effort in Vietnam inevitably relegated the Special Forces to a less prominent role, but it did not affect the mythical aura surrounding this outfit: on the contrary, this fall from favour can be seen to add to the mystique of the Green Berets as an elite minority, enmeshed in a complicated relationship with the institutions and, indeed, with any form of authority.

Ultimately, the Green Beret, like the western hero, is only restrained from succumbing to primitive and barbaric impulses by ‘his own higher sense of natural law that is at one with his true civilized duty’. This circular argument passes off as self-evident the righteousness of the Special Forces in their association with natural law rather than with the laws of men; dangerous as it undoubtedly is, the logic behind this statement is merely an extension of the idea that all American soldiers were fighting for a noble cause, being the bearers of the torch of enlightenment and progress. Needless to say, the reality of the war soon disclosed the delusive nature of this belief, and of the air-tight moral alibi proceeding from it: the Green Berets, for example, acquired a reputation for recklessness, often bordering on a crazy lust for violence and atrocity (and this is indeed how Slotkin’s definition of the White Indian, quoted above, continues: ‘In its most extreme development, the frontier hero takes the form of the “Indian-hater,” whose suffering at savage hands has made him correspondingly savage, an avenger determined at all costs to “exterminate the brutes”’). The American dream of redemption and rectitude turned sour as soon as the materiality of the conflict gave the lie

41 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 16.
to the mythical expectations that had been projected onto Vietnam: the Eastern ‘wilderness’ would not lend itself to induce, nor to reflect, the Western display of good will and philanthropy, because these concepts were all clearly flawed cultural constructions and simplistic, spurious oppositions. The encounter with an alien culture turned out to be as confusing for its failure to conform to preconceived ideas about what Vietnamese people, both friends and enemies, would be like and how they would respond to the American arrival, as for the genuine differences and mutual lack of trust between the foreign contingent and the local population. Thus, the experience of Vietnam worked as a magnifying mirror reflecting the epistemological and moral arrogance underlying the self-appointed American neo-colonial mission and, by extension, the shallowness of its concept of civilization. In other words, faced with the defamiliarizing reality of an unmanageable war, compounded by a particularly frustrating relationship with the Vietnamese allies, the American soldiers embarked on a psychological journey of self-discovery which often left them with the painful awareness that the line between sanity and insanity, civilization and barbarity, justness and atrocity is difficult to discern and, therefore, easy to cross.

This psychological journey is a topic that O’Brien – like most other writers of the war – explores on several occasions in his work, most typically by exposing how perceptions of the landscape, be it the American or the Vietnamese wilderness, are coloured by the characters’ prejudices, anxieties and projections, and often provide a building block for the creation of a transparent topography of trauma. Similarly, the ‘fascination of the abomination’ – often irresistible, if difficult to explain, let alone justify – is another frequent theme to crop up in the pages of war narratives. In O’Brien’s writing, the lure of savagery takes a particularly poignant form in the account of episodes of gratuitous violence against the environment, shorthand for the primeval, unspeakable malice lurking behind the characters’ need to release their pent-up feelings of helplessness or their blind desire for revenge. One such recurrent incident – highlighted with special vigour in The Things They Carried, but present also in Going After Cacciato and In the Lake of the Woods – is the killing of water buffalo, the animal most readily connected with the...

42 This is reminiscent of Kurtz’s movement in his report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs from a rhetoric with ‘no practical hints’ to the chilling ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’, which provides a paradigmatic example for twentieth-century dealings between different cultures: “This was the unbounded power of eloquence – of words – of burning noble words. There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: “Exterminate all the brutes!””; Conrad, Heart of Darkness, pp. 83–84.
rural economy of Vietnam and, symbolically, with the ideal association between the Vietnamese and the Native Americans, and the mythology of the West. At other times, not-so-veiled references to the mindlessly destructive, even genocidal, potential of certain actions, and to the violence of the American fire-power against Vietnam, take a bathetic turn, as in the opening of *In the Lake of the Woods*, whose veteran protagonist burns the house plants with hot water – and, possibly, kills his own wife. A similarly ludicrous effect is achieved by the main character in *Northern Lights* who enters the scene ‘ejaculating sweet chemicals that filled the great forest and his father’s house’ (*NL*, 16), engaged in a battle against mosquitoes conducted with copious amounts of insecticide in what must strike readers as an unsubtle but nevertheless disturbing echo of the napalm-bombing of the jungle.

The use of bathetic images or a bathetic register is one of the recurrent strategies adopted by O’Brien in his critique of the frontier myth, and indeed of other conventional (masculine) narratives. Courage, physical prowess, the demands of patriarchy, patriotism are all variously undercut by O’Brien’s recourse to a form of comedy which, suffused with embarrassing or mock-heroic undertones, invites ridicule and contempt, rather than cheerful, good-humoured and light-hearted laughter. The frontier myth, whether applied to America’s perception of itself or to the projection of this narrative onto the Vietnamese landscape, is further deconstructed by O’Brien’s exposure of the culturally determined nature of these operations. By contrast, as we shall see, O’Brien envisages an alternative symbolic geography in order to try to capture the traumatisation of his protagonists, as well as to sketch a poetics of reception that would transcend gender differences and bridge the gap between those who have remained ‘in the world’ and those who have travelled ‘in country’, where the country in question is not just Vietnam, or the war, or any war, but rather the murky, unmappable territory of the human predicament.

**Retelling the journey into the heart of darkness**

The epigraph to Mark Baker’s *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (1981) reads: ‘You want to hear a gen-u-ine war story? I only understand Vietnam as though it were a story. It’s not like it happened to me.’ It is no surprise that a collection of oral testimonies, otherwise introduced as an earnest attempt to ‘bring us closer to the truth than we have come so far’, should be prefaced by an immediate disclaimer

of the notion of factual truth and an affirmation of the need for literary licence if one is to begin to make some sense out of the experience of war. Meaning can only be accessible to the narrator-witness if he dissociates himself from his immediate knowledge of Vietnam: paradoxically, the genuineness of a personal account can only be attained through a creative, fictional re-elaboration of the storyteller’s first-hand experience of the conflict. The inexplicable nature of Vietnam, in its dual identification with an alien land and with a harrowing military enterprise, goes perhaps some way towards casting light on its unmanageable yet compelling status as a subject for storytelling, or indeed for linguistic definition. ‘In country’, ‘Indian country’, ‘the boonies’, ‘Fantasyland’, ‘Disneyland’, ‘the Nam’: the soldiers’ slang finds inspiration in a crescendo of binary oppositions, in which the contrast between civilization and wilderness is superseded by the dichotomy between the real and the surreal (or even the non-real). Larger than life, given gravity and substance by the presence of the definite article, ‘the Nam’ is variously renamed as a savage, inimical land, a sort of parallel, self-contained universe where the rules of reality do not apply: ‘Vietnam was written off as a place too incomprehensible to exist. People did not go home. They “went back to the world”’. Beyond the reach of language, Vietnam becomes an experience which ultimately transcends its materiality to become ‘a state of mind’, a byword for a psychological condition, as well as for the most private and unfathomable recess of human nature.

The metaphor of the physical journey as an exploration of the meandering of one’s consciousness, probably as old as storytelling itself, is thus an accurate reflection of the soldiers’ metamorphosis in response to their experience of war in an unfamiliar country, whose cultural makeup and natural environment were often perceived as both hostile and impenetrable. The radical alterity of Vietnam compounds the displacement of the romantic expectations – the dreams of heroism and courage – that traditionally underlie the military ethos: as Herzog sums up, ‘the realities and ironies of combat forever destroy [the soldiers’] naïveté and lead them to crucial insights about human nature and war. Some soldiers submit to this spiritual and psychological journey; others resist as they hold on to civilization’s trappings, saving illusions, or surface details’ (4). Soldiers are therefore subject to a double threat of alienation, from their physical surroundings and from the system of values that seemingly validates their actions. The US confrontation with Vietnam can thus be seen to involve a geographical and an existential journey which, in its turn, triggers a critique of Western ideology.

The complexity of a similar scenario is masterfully captured in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, whose account of Marlow’s progress upriver in the Congo and Kurtz’s surrender to the ‘fascination of the abomination’ is an apt, established precursor for the challenges, and the charm, of the experience of guerrilla warfare in Vietnam. In fact, while the opposition between light and darkness, in reference to the realms of epistemology and morality alike, pervades the fictional and critical discourse on war at large, in the case of Vietnam narratives the metaphor of the journey into the heart of darkness has become the most recurrent and resonant literary transcription of the soldiers’ experience of combat and, ultimately, of human nature.\(^4\) This is of course an image rich not only in symbolic implications, but also in intertextual allusions, rooted as it is in Conrad’s eponymous novella, first published in 1899.\(^4\) Besides, the centrality and suggestiveness of this metaphor are widely acknowledged beyond the confines of academia by popular culture, following the cult status of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the text responsible for relocating Marlow’s journey from the Congo to the Vietnamese jungle.

Eleven years after the release of Coppola’s bold cinematic take on *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad’s narrative exploration of the cruelty that inhabits ‘the dark places of the earth’\(^4\) is revisited once more within the gruesome context of the Vietnam war in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’, one of the chapters in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.\(^4\) The fundamental analogy between O’Brien’s story and *Heart of Darkness* has been noted before on several occasions but, to my knowledge, nowhere has it been explored in depth, as I shall do in the final chapter of this study.\(^5\)

\(^{4}\) The first direct allusion to a connection between the experience of Vietnam and ‘some heavy heart-of-darkness trip’ appears in Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (p. 15). Following Herr’s cue, Tobey C. Herzog identifies in the ‘Heavy Heart-of-Darkness Trip’ one of the five thematic contexts in his overview of Vietnam war literature: the other four are the ironic spirit, the John Wayne syndrome, the confrontation with the past and the relationship between the uniqueness [postmodernity] of the Vietnam war and the narratives it has produced.

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\(^{4}\) ‘The Heart of Darkness’ was first published in three monthly instalments between February and April 1899 in *Blackwood’s Magazine*. It was later revised for publication in book form and included, with ‘The End of the Tether’, in *Youth: A Narrative; and Two Other Stories* (Blackwood, 1902). This forms the basis for all subsequent editions of *Heart of Darkness*.

\(^{4}\) Psalms 74:20, quoted in *Heart of Darkness*, p. 18, henceforward referred to in the text as *HD*.

\(^{4}\) For ease of reference, throughout this study I will refer to *The Things They Carried* as to a novel, although the text is probably best described as a collection of interrelated short stories, or as a short-story cycle. On this issue, see Chapter 5.

\(^{5}\) For example, ‘“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is O’Brien’s *Heart of Darkness*, Americanized, Vietnamese, and surrealized (and possibly encouraged by Francis Ford Coppola’s film version of Conrad, *Apocalypse Now…*)’; Heberle, *A Trauma Artist*, p. 184; and ‘In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” […] O’Brien tells a strange and unlikely tale,
investigations of the alienating effect of the Western colonial enterprise and the (neo-colonial) American war in Vietnam, both Conrad and O’Brien find themselves scrutinizing the lure of power and of transgression, as well as their interrelationship. However, in line with O’Brien’s vocal critique of the masculine bias – and machismo – embedded in the military mentality, ‘Sweetheart’ plays a provocative variation, through its female protagonist, on the typical theoretical and literary approach to the phenomenon of American soldiers ‘going native’ during the conflict. The crumbling of moral certainties and cultural (and gender!) differences in O’Brien’s acknowledgement that even ‘civilized’ Americans (and, more shockingly, an American sweetheart) feel the pull of barbarity and of the unknown Vietnamese natural environment – most immediately expressed in an exhilarated response to the violence and the chaos of war – unfolds in neat parallelism with the anti-colonial thesis of the Conradian model.

In *Heart of Darkness* the strain on the individual’s ability to adapt and survive the mysteriousness of Africa is accompanied by a general cultural critique, exposing the weakness of Western rationalizations of the colonial enterprise, what we might call with Conrad the ‘redeeming idea’.51 And yet, the common preoccupation with the evils of imperialism and violence, particularly – it ought to be said – on their very perpetrators rather than their victims, is only the superficial thematic analogy between *Heart of Darkness* and ‘Sweetheart’. Eventually, both texts delve deeper into general considerations about the frailty of human nature, while raising interesting questions about identity and gender relations. What is more, Conrad’s novella and its later creative rewriting share a distinct self-reflective concern, and deliberately foreground the indefiniteness and lack of closure of the narrative act, even as they clearly also invest the process with an urgent necessity and the potential to lead to (fleeting) revelations. *Heart of Darkness* famously opens on the Thames, on a cruising yawl. Waiting for the tide to turn, the men on board the *Nellie* are soon to become the addressees of a story which does not promise to yield easy satisfaction, told as it is by Charlie Marlow, a seaman vaguely reminiscent of both the story and the plot of *Heart of Darkness*; Stefano Rosso, *Musi gialli e Berretti Verdi: Narrazioni USA sulla Guerra del Vietnam* [Yellow Faces and Green Berets: US Narratives about the Vietnam War] (Bergamo: Bergamo University Press, 2003), pp. 198–99, my translation. Herzog also makes a quick reference to the “‘heart-of-darkness’ experience” narrated in ‘Sweetheart’ (Tim O’Brien, p. 110), while Lorrie Smith argues that the short story ‘can be read as a gendered and perhaps parodic version of Heart of Darkness and its derivative retelling Apocalypse Now – those explorations of the imperialist male psyche gone off the deep end’; “The Things Men Do”: The Gendered Subtext in Tim O’Brien’s *Esquire* Stories’, *Critique*, 36.1 (1994), pp. 16–39, p. 32.

51 Cf. ‘The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only’ (*HD*, 20).
known for his evocative tales, and significantly introduced to the readers in ‘the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower’ (HD, 20). When Marlow finally breaks a long silence, with the casual recollection of his one stint as a fresh-water sailor, the narrator of the frame immediately comments: ‘we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences’ (HD, 21).

With a similar intent to draw attention both to the compelling nature, and to the impenetrability, of some tales, ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’ begins: ‘Vietnam was full of strange stories, some improbable, some well beyond that, but the stories that will last forever are those that swirl back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane. This one keeps returning to me’ (TTC, 87). The obvious protracted, tantalizing resonance of this story for ‘Tim O’Brien’, the (partly autobiographical) narrator of The Things They Carried (and, of course, of the tale about to begin), replicates the attitude of Rat Kiley, the intradiegetic narrator of Mary Anne’s story in ‘Sweetheart’, whose grip on his material is much less firm than Marlow’s, at least in terms of the authoritativeness of his status as an eye-witness and a participant to the events that make up his account. This and further, subtle adjustments to the narrative structure, and to the way in which the scope of the storytelling act is configured, provide a clear illustration of the shift in emphasis from cognitive to post-cognitive questions that characterizes the passage from a modernist to a postmodern sensibility. In fact, set against Conrad’s inspiring example, O’Brien’s departure from the (derivative) modernism of an early work like Northern Lights becomes particularly evident. Like Brian McHale, I see modernism and postmodernism in a relation of mutual definition and continuity, as evidenced by the essential agreement between Conrad’s and O’Brien’s practice on a number of crucial points such as, for example, the correspondence between narrative form and content and the problematization of the notion of truth. On the other hand, as we shall see, it is the question of the nature and final accessibility of signification that tantalizes the most, and sets apart from each other, the two authors: while Heart of Darkness diffuses any hope in the success of the epistemological quest, ‘Sweetheart’ – and indeed O’Brien’s entire oeuvre – enacts the belief that truth can be painstakingly summoned and momentarily glimpsed through the performativity of the narrative act.

52 Brian McHale’s theory of the change in dominant underpins my periodization of the two primary texts under scrutiny: if we choose to read Heart of Darkness as a modernist text on the strength of its fundamental epistemological uncertainty and lack of closure, we must acknowledge the postmodernity of ‘Sweetheart’ as it bypasses the cognitive impasse of its predecessor with an act of faith in the performative power of storytelling (foregrounding ontological questions in the process).
War writing and the death of heroism

Tim O’Brien’s assessment of his participation in the conflict in Vietnam can be summed up in the epigrammatic pronouncement that closes ‘On the Rainy River’ in The Things They Carried: ‘I was a coward. I went to the war’ (TTC, 55). Punchy, paradoxical and memorable, O’Brien’s reversal of the customary connection between bravery and military life feeds into the sceptical attitude towards the notion of heroism that pervades most twentieth-century war literature. Cynical rather than tragic in tone, critical rather than celebratory in mood, this counter-tradition to the epic ethos is a direct consequence of the advances in modern military technology and the ensuing disappearance of face-to-face combat. When killing the enemy becomes as easy as pulling a trigger or as impersonal as dropping a bomb on an indistinct swarm of people, the possibility for classical heroism, rooted in the prowess of the single warrior measuring himself against an equally valiant adversary, is effectively vanished. It was during the Great War that the reality of modern combat first became evident on a scale so large as to initiate an epochal change in the perception of individual valour and personal sacrifice. It is hard to disagree with Paul Fussell’s thesis that World War I is essentially responsible for the ironic and anti-heroic stance which characterises the twentieth-century sensibility and which inevitably marks the great war literature of the past one hundred years. While it is customary to cite the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, or the narratives of Ernest Hemingway, or Erich Maria Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front (1929) as the earliest, exemplary literary critiques of the perverse mechanism of twentieth-century warfare, the frenzied organization of the military forces and the effective scope for heroic behaviour in battle had already been explored, from a disenchanted perspective, in Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage (1895) at the end of the nineteenth century. Set during the American Civil War, Crane’s short novel displays an impressionistic attention to detail and offers a distinctly unorthodox rendition of the plot development, from innocence to self-awareness, to be expected of a narrative charting the initiation of the young soldier into combat.

By definition, the inexperienced recruit comes out of the battle – whether victorious or defeated, whether alive or dead – having faced his fears and responsibilities; in other words, having become a man. First-hand knowledge of war makes soldiers grow up and turns them into veterans, i.e. into old men

53 In pointing to Crane as an interesting term of comparison for O’Brien’s work, even if his influence remains unacknowledged by O’Brien himself, I am indebted to Tobey C. Herzog, who uses The Red Badge of Courage as the literary context for the analysis of If I Die in a Combat Zone and Going After Cacciato in Chapter 4 (‘Consideration’) of his Vietnam War Stories.
(‘veteran’ deriving from Latin, *vetus* = ‘old’). Crane’s narrative, by contrast, provides at best an ambivalent picture, if not an outright ironic dismissal, of this *Bildungsroman* model: the development of its protagonist, Henry Fleming, proceeds in fits and starts, and it ultimately leads nowhere, since the young soldier’s final demonstration of courage is little more than an involuntary reflex. Crane thus anticipates and sets the standard for twentieth-century representations of war in a number of ways that will later be revisited by O’Brien, particularly in his first book, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. He describes the battleground in short and vivid vignettes, while dwelling on the disturbing anticipation and the actual chaos of combat through his protagonist’s skewed and muddled perspective. He also emphasises the role of the soldier as an anonymous cog in the machine (Fleming is most often referred to simply as ‘the youth’ and it is not until near the end of the narrative that we are told his full name) and focuses relentlessly on the motivations behind his decision to join the fighting. Such rigorous psychological scrutiny is in itself evidence of the demise of the epic notion of heroism: in demystifying the grandeur of battle and probing into the hidden facets of valorous behaviour, Crane unmasks the absence of the gratuitous hankering for excellence that is the mark of the true hero.

Heroic excellence works according to tautological rules, in tune with the self-evident logic of mythical thinking; it is an ideal for which the hero himself is the final measure: ‘Achilles, the prototypical hero, does not serve a cause (or, if he does, then he serves it badly) and fights for no purpose that could be situated in time and space. He is a hero because he pursues a model of heroic perfection which he has interiorized’. The hero is already the embodiment of an ideal perfection; the cause of his contingent acts of courage is immaterial, the proof of his excellence is always redundant. By contrast, Fleming’s desire to prove his manhood in the pursuit of military glory is a puerile obsession that both fuels and is fuelled by the unconfessable fear of the (male) fate worse than death: cowardice. Crane’s protagonist *does* have something to prove but, in an ironic analogy with the status of the classical hero, he ends up concentrating on his personal trial even to the detriment of the success of the communal military enterprise. In enlisting into battle because of a *private* worry over his adequacy to the *culturally* sanctioned ideal of male daring, Fleming clearly departs from the self-sufficiency of the epic hero: the glorious autonomy of the ancient model becomes instead a small,
personal matter about living up to conventional expectations and gaining – or retaining – a certain status within society. Fleming’s doomed quest for gallantry is neither gratuitous, nor redundant, and – in its solipsism – it anticipates the divergence between individual and national goals that informs the various ‘separate peaces’ embraced by the anti-heroes of twentieth-century war literature (most notably, Frederic Henry’s in A Farewell to Arms and Yossarian’s in Catch-22). O’Brien does not fit into this tradition: a separate peace is impossible for him to achieve, or rather, it would bring no solace to the soldier who knows that he has betrayed himself by acquiescing in the draft call. He should never have left for the war in the first place.

Of course, from a different perspective, characters like Henry Fleming are the upshot of the rise of modern individualism, when the cult of the epic hero as the perceived ideal embodiment of communal values, and the hero’s disinterested display of glory, is replaced by the private pursuit of happiness as the main goal in life. That the United States subscribes to this value is clear, as witnessed by its prominent mention in the Constitution, as well as by the entire mythology of the American Dream which ratifies the self-conscious American championing of the right to personal success and self-improvement. Crane’s description of Fleming’s naive disappointment at the demise of the old warrior spirit reveals, through a clever transition from focalization to third-person narrative, that the current stakes are much more partisan than ever before and a natural extension, in war-time, of the practical ideal of the pursuit of happiness: ‘Greeklike struggles would be no more. Men were better, or more timid. Secular and religious education had effaced the throat-grappling instinct, or else firm finance held in check the passions. He had grown to regard himself merely as a part of a vast blue demonstration. His province was to look out, as far as he could, for his personal comfort.’

Civilization may have smoothed over the primeval brutality of mankind but, significantly, the humanizing triad is not complete until the influence of rationalism and piety are joined by a solid economic pragmatism. It seems that already before the battle, and in direct contradiction to his investment in the ennobling experience of combat, Fleming begins to have an inkling of the hard-nosed reality of war and reviews his priorities accordingly, in what looks like an uncanny anticipation of the logic of personal survival, which developed in Vietnam as a response to the experience of the war as a timed event with the introduction of the policy of the year-long tour of duty. Fleming’s fledgling susceptibility to change as a result of the introspection prompted by the mere idea of his future engagement in combat suggests a potential for development (or self-expression) that precedes the young soldier’s participa-

tion to the war. This is an idea that O'Brien will exploit fully in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, whose protagonist’s greatest struggle, and most humiliating defeat, takes place before he has even set foot on Vietnamese soil. Nevertheless, for all these subtle correspondences, given his suspect allegiance to the belief that war is, after all, the way to a ‘quiet manhood’ (211), Henry Fleming does not figure in O’Brien’s list of examples of heroic behaviour in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, which turns Crane’s literary model on its head at the same time as it follows in its footsteps as a sustained meditation on the nature of courage. Fleming thinks of himself as a potential hero, and must learn that he is a coward. The O’Brien protagonist of *If I Die*, who does not believe in Fleming’s notion of heroism, thinks of himself as intellectually superior to his fellow soldiers, but he too must learn that he is really no different from the mass. If anything, his intellectual superiority makes him a hypocrite, and more of a brute than the other soldiers, who lack his self-awareness.

The ancient Greek model of heroism, still looming large, for all its cracks, over the American recruits to Vietnam – ‘We come to Fort Lewis afraid to admit we are not Achilles, that we are not brave, that we are not heroes’ (*IID*, 45) – is not the only martial ideal that O’Brien needs to renegotiate. For the soldiers fighting in Vietnam, the most recent and authoritative incarnation of the perfect warrior was John Wayne, who had built since the late 1920s a larger-than-life cinematic persona in the cognate genres of the western and the World War II epic drama. For the young people of O’Brien’s generation, John Wayne represented the quintessential American hero, endowed with extraordinary courage and, above all, with an innate righteousness: ‘In the movies in which John Wayne portrays the war hero, the aggression unleashed as overt violence is legitimated by the end it is designed to serve. Wayne performs in the heroic mode to defeat Fascism – Evil Incarnate – in those WWII epics. The absolute wickedness of the enemy sanctifies massive blood-letting. (In the marginally cited genres – cops/robbers and cowboys/Indians – equally definitive forces of evil are annihilated: lawlessness and savagery).’

The figure of John Wayne, however, is noticeable for its near-absence in O’Brien’s writing. This omission is easily explained, especially in *If I Die*, by the fact that O’Brien was a very reluctant fighter, definitely ‘not soldier material’ and deeply troubled by a war that would draw ‘certain blood for uncertain reasons’ (*IID*, 31, 167). Unlike Ron Kovic and Philip Caputo, whose *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) and *A Rumor of War* (1977) form with *If I Die* an early, canonical corpus of memoirs from the Vietnam war, O’Brien was one of the unlucky winners of the draft lottery. The dilemma at the core of O’Brien’s inquiry on courage – should I take part in a war that I believe to

57 Lewis, *The Tainted War*, p. 29. For a seminal analysis of the John Wayne myth, see also Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation*. 
be morally wrong? – completely bypasses Kovic and Caputo, who both joined the military in order to fight in Vietnam and thus prove their courage; needless to say, both writers mention the myth of John Wayne as one of the inspirations behind their enlistment.

Having said that, it is certainly true that World War II was the ‘paradigm war’ for the Vietnam generation of soldiers: as the conflict of their fathers, it was an almost tangible point of reference, an event whose legacy had played a manifest role in their young lives. O’Brien is quick to acknowledge the long shadow cast by the aftermath of this momentous victory on the American psyche:

I grew out of one war and into another. My father came from leaden ships of sea, from the Pacific theatre; my mother wore the uniform of the WAVES. I was the wrinkled, swollen, bloody offspring of the great campaign against the tyrants of the 1940s, one explosion in the Baby Boom, one of the millions of new human beings come to replace those who had just died. My bawling came with the first throaty note of a new army in spawning. I was bred with the haste and dispatch and careless muscle-flexing of a rejuvenated, splendidly triumphant nation giving bridle to its own good fortune and success. I was fed by the spoils of 1945 victory. I learned to read and write on the prairies of southern Minnesota, in towns peering like corpses’ eyeballs from out the corn. ( *IHD*, 21)59

This passage opens the second chapter, with the significant heading ‘Pro Patria’, of O’Brien’s war memoir. It provides an immediate contextual counterpoint to the beginning of the narrative, a sketch entitled ‘Days’. A description *in medias res* of a typical episode of life on the battlefield, ‘Days’ captures the mundane, distressing monotony of the war, which for the most part unfolds in an unbroken blend of tedium and fear. The flattened temporality of guerrilla warfare – “Snipers yesterday, snipers today. What’s the difference?” (11) – is followed in ‘Pro Patria’ by the wide historical perspective on the soldiers’ cultural background, which is given a distinct mythical dimension: the parental figures are transfigured into fabulous images (witness the epic ring of the ‘leaden ships of sea’ or the identification of the mother with the corps of the WAVES). At the same time, O’Brien casts himself as the archetypal ‘Baby Boomer’, an expression whose explosive connotations are deliberately detonated here. While father and mother shed their individuality to be endowed with an iconic and heroic quality, the movement from a unique to a collective identity enveloping the sons unfolds in a completely opposite direction, towards anonymity and undifferentiation.

59 The mythical resonance of this passage is noticed also by (amongst others) John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, p. 105.
Entering the scene in a clearly traumatic fashion ('wrinkled, swollen, bloody'), the Baby Boomers are described as spare parts, clones, the expendable results of intensive rearing or reproduction by spawning. In this dystopian vision, even the prairie, the fertile landscape of the frontier narrative, is distorted into a surreal and macabre apparition. If the previous generation ascend, as a group, to a heroic status, the sons' loss of individuality is unmatched by any gain or positive connotation, and speaks of the young soldiers' anxiety about what seems to be configured – again, in mythical terms, but this time with a clear ironic intent, for the myth turns out to be a nightmare – as the inexorable, cyclical progress of history in whose context Vietnam will be the fall which must succeed one of the country's greatest military triumphs.

O'Brien's rejection of the popular mythology of World War II, glamorized by Hollywood and invested with a further, more private allure by its emotional connections with parental figures, explains at least in part why, especially in his early writing, he looks at literary models who deal with the horrors of the Great War.60 As its suggestive epithet constantly reminds us, this conflict has the dubious privilege of being the first modern confrontation on a global scale. Another major difference between the two world wars, in so far as their cultural representations are concerned, is to do with the media which codified and fixed them in the popular imagination. The events of World War II proved to be perfect raw material for the big screen, as evidenced by John Wayne's charismatic grip on his audience; conversely, the literature of the same conflict, which includes American classics such as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), appeared much later, often decades after the end of the conflict, and took longer to acquire canonical status. In the end, before and during the American engagement in Vietnam, the influence of these now celebrated war narratives was in no way comparable to the popular reach of blockbusters like John Wayne's *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949; directed by Allan Dwan) or even the less gung-ho but mythically titled *From Here to Eternity* (1953; starring Montgomery Clift, Burt Lancaster and Frank Sinatra, directed by Fred Zinnemann, from a script based on the eponymous 1952 novel by James Jones) and *To Hell and Back* (1955; starring Audie Murphy and directed by Jesse Hibbs).

World War I by comparison generated a more considerable impact on the

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60 The Horatian motto 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori', scathingly revisited by Wilfred Owen as an 'old lie', is embedded, in a jumbled-up order, in the title of three chapters of *If I Die*. *Northern Lights* is virtually a rewriting of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, while *Going After Cacciato* opens with an epigraph from Siegfried Sassoon, 'Soldiers are dreamers'.
international literary scene; it may even be said to have given rise to a new
genre, with the brutal, surreal indictment of the reality of combat in the
poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, whose impassioned critique
of the rhetoric of war is acknowledged by O'Brien's early writing. In fact,
British war poetry – the category hardly needs the 'first world' qualifier, since
it is so readily associated with the image of the trenches on the Western front
– represents a seminal example of 'literature of protest', with the soldier-artist
exposing time-honoured conventions and common (mis)representations of
the truth for the cultural, ideological constructions that they really are.61 The
revolutionary impact of the Great War and its literature on (for lack of a
better term) the Western world is rightly identified as one of the key reasons
for its persistence in the twentieth-century imaginary. More specifically,
cultural historians see an obvious analogy between the effect of the First
World War on Europe (particularly on the British Empire) and the terrible
blow that Vietnam dealt to the US's perception of itself. The image is that of
a rude awakening, a fall from grace, the end of a golden era, as Freeman
Dyson already argued in 1979: 'The Vietnam War produced in American life
the same fundamental change of mood that the First World War produced in
Europe. The young Americans of today are closer in spirit to the Europeans
than to the Americans of thirty years ago. The age of innocence is now over
for all of us'.62 Besides prompting the moral controversy about the role of the
US on the global scene and challenging its identity as the redeemer nation,
the war in Vietnam, pace Richard Nixon and General Westmoreland, still
remains the only substantial blot on the American military record.63 Again,
even leaving aside any ethical issue, this defeat is so much more humiliating
when one considers the disproportion in wealth and technological resources
between the two countries.

Last but not least, World War II turned out to be an inadequate precursor
to the experience of Vietnam because the latter proved to be a more awkward

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61 Of course, the literature of protest substitutes its own constructions for the old ones: for
example, it is virtually predicated on the (self-)perception of the soldier as a victim or even
a martyr. O'Brien seems aware of this danger, which is why he is so concerned with
exploring the notions of authenticity and personal responsibility.

62 Quoted in Herzog, Vietnam War Stories, p. 69.

years after the French had lost the first Vietnam War, we had won the second Vietnam
War. We signed the peace agreement that ended the war in a way that won the peace. We
had redeemed our pledge to keep South Vietnam free'; quoted in Susan Jeffords, The
Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War (Bloomington and Indianapolis:
Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 2. General Westmoreland also famously stated his belief
in the American victory, even if with a telling proviso: 'Militarily, you must remember that
we succeeded in Vietnam. We won every engagement we were involved in out there';
quoted in Kermit D. Johnson, Realism and Hope in a Nuclear Age (Louisville, KY: John
moral quagmire than anybody could have ever imagined. Vietnam lacked the self-evident moral certainties of ‘the great campaign against the tyrants of the 1940s’ and stirred an unprecedented and occasionally violent opposition on the home front: only John Wayne could produce and star in a film clearly in support of the war while the conflict was about to escalate amid growing perplexity. The Great War did not possess that unshakeable kernel of righteousness, and the necessity of the continuing massacre was audibly called into question, most famously by Sassoon, who in July 1917 expressed his strong objections to the war in ‘A Soldier’s Declaration’: ‘I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. [...] I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be unjust and evil.’ Interestingly, Sassoon’s own sense of duty and loyalty towards his soldiers is what convinced him to suspend his protest and rejoin the war: the bond, in this case between an officer and his troops, and more generally between fellow-soldiers, becomes the supreme commitment, particularly when allegiance to one’s state and to the cause of the conflict begins to wane. This consideration brings me to two more points to be made about the wide cultural context of O’Brien’s position as a war writer – both revolving around the ideological battles being fought on the home front, and both fuelled by the feeling of ingratitude and hostility perceived by the veterans back in the US: the sense that the soldiers had been betrayed by their fathers, and their experience of a direct, American threat to their masculinity. In both cases, O’Brien’s writing departs from these widespread responses to the war and their literary articulations.

Acquiring particular resonance in the comparison between World War I and Vietnam, the first of the above-mentioned issues flags up the hiatus between the pull of the individual’s sense of obligation towards his or her ancestors and the inevitable tension and discrepancies in the conduct and values of different age groups: in other words, what Milton Bates calls the ‘generation war’. Of course, the generation gap is a constant of human

64 The film in question is The Green Berets, released in July 1968. It performed well with the public, who probably got what they expected, i.e. a movie in the John Wayne tradition. Even so, it was generally perceived to be little more than propaganda and, to this day, it continues to be derided not only for its simplistic, clear-cut politics and ridiculous patriotism, but also for its blatant factual inaccuracies. Notorious amongst these mistakes is the film’s ending on an improbable sunset on the east-facing South China Sea. For a discussion of The Green Berets, see Taylor, The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film, pp. 48ff.


existence, but both the Great War and the Vietnam war contributed very significantly to the intensification of the cultural clash and the shift in the prevailing mood that often accompany the passage from one generation to another. Memories of the class of 1914 are inevitably slipping away, while the tag ‘Vietnam generation’ retains common currency; both denote an epochal change in sensitivity, the irrevocable onset of a new age and the dismissal of old beliefs. There is, however, a fundamental difference between those whom the young soldiers of the two conflicts held to be responsible for the perpetuation of the wrong ideals: in Vietnam things got very personal. The rude awakening to the unprecedented scale of destruction caused by modern armed conflict during the First World War was of truly historic significance, because at the beginning of the twentieth century war itself was an event barely within human memory in Europe and the US: ‘No man in the prime of life knew what war was like. All imagined that it would be an affair of great marches and great battles, quickly decided’. Both in World War I and in Vietnam those who had not yet reached their prime would bear the brunt of the inaccuracy of these expectations. War is always fought by the young; unsurprisingly, their disillusionment with military life is often mingled with resentment towards what looks like the undeserved and/or misused authority of the older generations, of their institutions, of their values.

In Vietnam, this ideological clash took place in a private dimension, as well as in the public arena. Memories of a relatively recent war, and a just and noble war at that, prevented the recurrence of the peculiar military amnesia that had preceded the First World War, but were the cause of even more terrible misconceptions. To the Baby Boomers deployed in Vietnam, the memories had come charged with emotional connections, since it was the soldiers’ own fathers who could guarantee, first-hand, their authenticity and, by implication, the validity of the principles they stood for: ‘Fathers taught sons the nature of war using their own experiences in WWII as a model. By levying on the notions of manhood and duty […], the fathers presented war as a blessed event. Had the Vietnam War proved itself amenable to the world view of the fathers, those notions would have survived intact to be re-transmitted by the sons to future initiates’. Besides raising critical questions of the nation’s system of beliefs, the rupture of this seamless continuity damaged the most basic form of social cohesion, breaking the relationship of trust within the family: ‘Vietnam made a whole generation of fathers look like liars and betrayers, and a whole generation of sons victims of their own initiation’. If the reality of trench warfare shattered myths of gallantry and brilliant military action that were truly time-honoured, the Vietnam war

68 Lewis, The Tainted War, pp. 49–50.
pitched the young soldiers against their own fathers, the veterans of a conflict in which glorious purposefulness and the possibility of heroism seemed indeed to have resurfaced.

I would argue, however, that the much more personal nature of the American soldiers’ feeling of betrayal in Vietnam is the product not merely of the contingent circumstances of the war, but also of the mythical and actual legacy of the peculiar history of the United States. The bond of duty between one generation and the next is loaded by the Puritan vision of America as the ‘City upon a Hill’ or, in its secular manifestation, the land of freedom and possibilities. Whether in a sacred or a lay version, a tradition of individualistic utopianism underpins the foundation of America and becomes the unwritten covenant that binds all its citizens, as private human beings, to the fulfilment and the defence of its principles. The autonomy and the rebellious spirit of the pioneer bear witness to the strength of American individualism even within the context of a collective, ‘civilizing’ mission. By contrast, the British Empire’s call for allegiance to God, King and Country rests on a much longer shared history and remains devoid, in spite of any religious reference, of the messianic sense of purpose that informs the foundation of the United States. Finally, the very status of America as a country of immigrants, to be built on individual volition, heightens the sense of mutual responsibility, as well as the attrition, between fathers and sons, particularly when the parental figure is perceived to be a link with the corrupt European past. The deposition of the (European) Father is, after all, a constant of the early American novelistic tradition.

The disparaging exposure of the dubious motives behind the conflict and the perception of the soldiers as victims rather than as agents of destruction have another interesting aftermath in the American troops’ perception of their ordeal: the idea that they had been callously forced to engage in what was at best a senseless enterprise underpins the portrayal and (self-)percep-

69 The Puritan legacy for Vietnam is mentioned in almost every literary study of the literature of the war (see, for example, Herzog’s Innocence Lost), but Philip Melling makes it the main object of study in his Vietnam in American Literature (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990).

tion of the Vietnam veterans as ‘emblems of an unjustly discriminated masculinity’, a near-ubiquitous notion in the re-evaluation of the war and the re-apportioning of blame that took place in the 1980s. In her seminal book *The Remasculinization of America*, Susan Jeffords argues that the US’s involvement in Vietnam, and its unprecedented military defeat, triggered a distinctly conservative and misogynist backlash, which found expression in an extreme re-evaluation of male bonding as the prime form of human relationship. Ironically, to all intent and purposes, this line of reasoning ends up running counter to the American patriotic spirit, since it claims that soldierly camaraderie is to be privileged not only over familial and romantic ties, but also over the social pact between each individual and the larger national community. In other words, allegiance to one’s brotherhood finally supersedes allegiance to the flag. Jeffords focuses on the cultural revisionism spawned by the proliferation of personal, fictional and historico-political accounts of the war from the late 1970s onwards; her research shows how these representations and appraisals of the conflict turn Vietnam into a spectacle of masculine prowess and mutual loyalty, while inviting the fetishization of the male body. They are also instrumental to the redemption of the image of the soldier, who is cast in the role of victim of an ineffective and feminised government and of an unsympathetic mother-country. The American troops are thus seen to be threatened with emasculation by their own superiors, by the political apparatus and by the people at home, perceived respectively as incautious strategists, useless negotiators and passive, if not hostile, observers. Given these premises, it would follow that, had hot-blooded male Americans been allowed to unleash their righteous and muscular power without constraints, the war would have been won and the natural order of things would have been restored. In this imaginary scenario, the (feminine) doves are no match for the (masculine) hawks.

The general scapegoating and denigration of femininity is completed by the projection of feminine qualities onto the invisible, unfathomable enemy and onto the Vietnamese landscape, often effectively configured as a *vagina dentata* or as another castrating, feminine monstrosity. While O’Brien’s gender politics are occasionally problematic, and at times even deliberately shocking, they never fail to draw the readers’ attention to pressing questions and unresolved contradictions, as well as to the inadequacy of the traditional military identification between courage and masculinity. This latter point is analysed obsessively throughout O’Brien’s work, from the expansive philosophical meditations of his early autobiographical narrative, to the concise and peremptory tone of the epigrammatic sequence of paradoxical pronouncements about the nature of war contained in ‘How to Tell a True

War Story. After the chiasmic reiteration, in slightly different terms, of the simultaneous feelings of exhilaration and revulsion prompted by the experience of combat – ‘War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery’ – O’Brien’s final quip shakes up the old equation between military enterprises and male rites of passage, with a deadpan reminder of what is ultimately at stake for the soldier: ‘War makes you a man; war makes you dead’ (TTC, 77). Such a cynical, disenchanted take on the impact of war on the individual’s growth is clearly intertwined with a radical re-evaluation of traditional notions of courage and gallantry. The following chapter will explore O’Brien’s re-definition of these terms, particularly in the early phases of his writing career.