The Courage of Authenticity

Courage is an indispensable quality in Western definitions of masculinity. Whether embodied by the mythical heroes of ancient and medieval epics, or by the self-made pioneers of modernity, whether nostalgically yearned for by the lost generations of the twentieth century or celebrated, tongue-in-cheek, by the anti-heroes of postmodernity, courage remains at the heart of what it means to be a man. The word has long been a synonym of ‘virtue’, whose etymology (from Latin, *vir* = ‘man’) betrays a masculine bias in the definition of excellence – hence, one might argue, of heroism at large. Inevitably, war literature is one of the privileged textual arenas in which the association between bravery and masculinity is articulated and pondered over; the existence of a manly code of honour and the meaning and possibility of male heroism are inextricably linked with our understanding of conflict and armed warfare. Particularly, but not exclusively, within a mythical, sacred ethos, war has been seen as the ultimate rite of passage, an event that separates the men from the boys, an opportunity to test oneself and prove one’s valour, either in victorious survival or in the extreme sacrifice of one’s life. The pervasiveness of this idea, even in the disillusioned context of the post-Vietnam era, is such that we find the celebratory sanctioning of masculinity through combat voiced by the least plausible advocates of its truth: those American men and potential draftees who, for a number of disparate reasons, did not actually fight the war. In ‘Apocalypse Continued’, a 1985 article for the *New York Times Magazine*, the psychotherapist Edward Tick summarises the plight of his fellow Vietnam veterans *manqués*: ‘[w]e suffer because we chose not to perform a primary and expected rite of passage. We were never inducted, not merely into the Army, but into manhood. […]’ I have had some of the usual rites – marriage, educational and professional

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1 I use the terms ‘mythical’ and ‘sacred’ in Mircea Eliade’s sense of the words, as outlined in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949), where they characterize the investment in ritual gestures as purveyors of meaning for their participation in the primordial temporality of the eternal present. According to Eliade, this attitude is typical of, but not exclusive to, pre-modern, traditional, ‘primitive’ cultures; *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).
recognition. But no matter how many passages or accomplishments I garner, I never quite feel complete.²

What is striking in testimonies such as Tick’s is not so much the regret for not having been through the archetypal masculine formative experience, within the scenario that allegedly fosters the most meaningful and authentic male bonding, but rather the resolute conviction that these experiential gaps rule out the possibility of ever feeling whole – a possibility, one surmises, that would have been available to these men had they marched on to war. Tick’s lament for a never-to-be-achieved ideal wholeness is endorsed by Michael Herr’s confession, near the end of Dispatches (1977), of the insoluble dilemma facing those participants and witnesses to the war who finally manage to wean themselves off its influence. The necessity of finding a way out of Vietnam, physically and mentally, lest one should become addicted to it – or, as Herr’s popular wisdom would have it, lest one should become ‘one of those poor bastards who had to have a war on all the time’ – is counterbalanced by the bittersweet fate awaiting the veteran: ‘We got out and became like everyone else who has been through a war: changed, enlarged and (some things are expensive to say) incomplete.’³ In the most severe instances, the feeling of loss, Herr argues, engenders sensations similar to the phantom-limb pains suffered by amputees: the survivor-witness of combat cannot but mourn the disappearance of a part of him that used to be alive. Vietnam is thus remembered as a time tending towards the ideal of a blissful, eternal presence, as conveyed by Herr’s image of an idyllic infancy: ‘A few extreme cases felt that the experience there had been a glorious one, while most of us felt that it had been merely wonderful. I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods’ (195). This final, often quoted, pronouncement is an epigrammatic version of Tick’s analytical stance on the war, an event perceived as a defining adventure and a vehicle for male camaraderie and fulfilment.⁴

Herr’s provocative reference to ‘happy childhoods’ also introduces the idea of war as a locus of experiential immediacy and of authenticity, whose participants are offered the rare chance to be fully and truly themselves.⁵ In

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² Quoted in Bates, The Wars We Took to Vietnam, p. 147.
³ Herr, Dispatches, p. 195.
⁴ Here and in the previous quotations about the ‘poor bastards who had to have a war on all the time’, Herr is referring specifically to correspondents, like himself, who had turned into ‘war junkies’ and relinquished the professional objectivity of the reporter to become deeply embroiled in what they were supposed to observe (as he explains in another memorable line: ‘I went to cover the war and the war covered me’ (24)). Still, as Tick’s pained recognition of the experiential bond provided by the war, and indeed Herr’s blurring of the notion of participants and observers, both testify, these comments can easily be interpreted to apply to the plight of the military veterans of Vietnam.
⁵ I talk of ‘authenticity’ in existentialist terms, as a radical quest for and expression of one’s individuality, and as such caught up in an endless attempt to transcend the established,
this chapter, I will argue that authenticity provides the conceptual context of O’Brien’s analysis of courage and masculinity – although, I should hasten to add, O’Brien rejects in no uncertain terms the notion of war as a male rite of passage and Herr’s deliberately shocking comparison between the conflict in Vietnam and an edenic state of being when one’s true self is naturally encouraged to come through. This theoretical framework also accounts for O’Brien’s departure from the traditional storytelling modalities of war writing. Authenticity is a state of existence: something one is, rather than becomes or performs. It is a private quality, and it does not have an immediate impact on, nor is it directly influenced by, the social sphere. This helps to explain why O’Brien’s narratives typically eschew the Bildungsroman formula or, when they adopt it, as in the case of Going After Cacciato, they do so only to provide very small-scale revelations. O’Brien’s analysis of the meaning and the cost of bravery is thus underpinned by a rigorous philosophical quest, and it is the focus of his first three books, which have therefore been described as forming a ‘tripartite “myth of courage”’.6

As anticipated in the previous chapter, the autobiographical If I Die in A Combat Zone departs from the narrative pattern of other personal accounts of Vietnam, such as Caputo’s and Kovic’s, because O’Brien does not conform to the type of the recruit who is enlightened about the evil of war by his involvement with it. Unlike his fellow veteran-memoirists, O’Brien did not believe in the rightness of the war in the first place and, unlike them, he cannot ascribe to his writing any cathartic or didactic value. O’Brien’s assessment of his integrity does not need the support of experiential elements acquired in the field, because what is really under scrutiny is not the nature of war but the intimate drama of a character who chooses to go to Vietnam against his conscience. The debt of If I Die to the rich modern literary tradition of war writing as protest and demystification of an old-fashioned heroic communal sense of morality. This latter set of values finds its most powerful and suggestive articulation in mythical storytelling, as argued, for example, by the cultural historian Mircea Eliade and – after him – by literary critics such as Northrop Frye and Frank Kermode. The slippery notion of ‘authenticity’ is perhaps best explained in contrast to qualities such as ‘honesty’ and ‘sincerity’, which in turn ‘can be defined as a congruence between one’s inclinations and the prevailing ethos, or as a congruence between one’s behaviour and one’s innermost essence. Authenticity, however, is not in keeping with such a definition. Not only does it deny any rigid a priori essence, but it also rejects any intrinsic value in compliance with a given set of standards. It regards any such compliance as a flight from one’s responsibility for freely forming one’s selfhood. Authenticity defines itself in lacking any definition. It is a pathos of incessant change, as opposed to a passive subordination to one particular ethic’; Jacob Golomb, In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 3.

code is similarly not straightforward, as a further, brief comparison between this text and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) will illustrate. Heberle distinguishes between ‘[t]he two conventional purposes of combat narratives – denouncing war or validating its formative effect on personal identity’ (53), but in modern war writing the former is usually a sub-species of the latter, given how the lesson of technological warfare is more often than not about the immense destructive power that man can exercise over his fellow human beings. Whether they be two separate issues or deeply interconnected, protest and personal maturation are beyond the scope of O’Brien’s memoir, because ‘either scenario would be dishonest to [the writer’s] own experience’ (54).

The inadequacy or hypocrisy of the *Bildungsroman* model is further exemplified by *Northern Lights*, a text which clearly foregrounds questions about gender identity alongside its analysis of bravery. The gender politics in O’Brien’s work are arguably more problematic than his take on courage – or rather, his reflections on courage appear to become problematic when they overlap with gender issues. Still, in the trilogy of courage O’Brien clearly distances himself from the gung-ho mentality and the machismo endorsed by the military, and by the misogynist streak and the male revanchism that Susan Jeffords and James William Gibson have traced in American culture in the post-Vietnam years.7 *Northern Lights* has generally been read as an expansion of the invitation to the feminine ‘wise endurance’ propounded by *If I Die*, as a story revolving around the education of the male protagonist, who must learn to move from the rejection of the paternal misogynist model to the embrace of his wife’s femininity. This interpretation, however, does not do justice to O’Brien’s more complex approach to gender relations and definitions – an approach that goes beyond the mere inversion of the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity. The same is true of *Cacciato*, the one novel whose protagonist undergoes a process of maturation as a result of the war, ostensibly because of the positive example of feminine role models. Even in this case, however, the protagonist’s real growth is only tangentially related to questions of gender; the soldier’s maturation does not consist of the ability to temper one’s essential maleness with feminine touches, but rather resides in the acknowledgement of one’s personal responsibility in the face of societal pressures. Thus does the trilogy come full circle: for O’Brien, courage is a matter of authenticity.

7 James William Gibson is the author of *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), an analysis of the burgeoning of paramilitary culture in the US in the 1990s. Gibson’s study can thus be said to be a development of one of the strands of Susan Jeffords’s *The Remasculinization of America*.
The battle before the battle

Published in 1973, the first of his eight book-length narratives to date, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* remains one of the most interesting and most frequently analysed of O’Brien’s works. The reason for its popularity goes well beyond its significance as an early documentary account of the war. In spite of O’Brien’s protestations that it is a ‘faithful representation of Vietnam’, the book has sparked endless discussions of its unusual structure and approach to its autobiographical material. The history of reception of *If I Die* is marked by uncertainty about whether it belongs to the realm of fiction or of fact. Its early critics have referred to O’Brien’s memoirs in several different ways, picking up on the episodic nature of the narrative (‘snapshots’ and ‘sketches’), or highlighting its opaque cautionary tone (‘parable’), or simply hedging their bets because of the obvious literariness of an account that remains clearly based on its author’s life (‘semi-fictionalized story’). ‘Ironically, even the paperback publisher was confused about the appropriate category by placing the letters “FIC” (fiction) on the spine of the 1979 Laurel Edition and “NF” (nonfiction) on the 1987 edition’. O’Brien was indeed amongst the first writer-witnesses of the war to produce a memoir which artfully employs fictional strategies, and thus provides an alternative, but no less authentic, perspective on the conflict from the accounts of the media. The text’s departure from a strict chronological pattern is the most obvious sign of its formal adherence to a fictional rather than a conventionally autobiographical structure; this straddling of fiction and history is a feature that *If I Die* shares with Norman Mailer’s and Truman Capote’s New Journalism, and with the most popular example of the genre to come out of Vietnam, Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*.

However, while Herr’s idiosyncratic story unfolds as a movie, complete with its own popular music soundtrack and psychedelic montage, *If I Die* is a distinctly literary book, beginning with its learned epigraph from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, quoted in Italian in the text. The reference to free will, God’s greatest gift to man, sets up the tone of philosophical inquiry that underscores the narration and introduces the main concern of the text: the drama of conscience faced by the draftee convinced of the iniquity of the war. The literariness of the memoir, a trait that in the weakest parts of the narra-

8 Travis Elborough, ‘Relying on Memory and Imagination: Travis Elborough Talks to Tim O’Brien’, in *JID*, pp. 2–9, p. 9.
10 The epigraph reads: ‘[L]o maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza / fesse creando … / … fu de la volontà la libertate, The Divine Comedy Par. V, 19 ff.’. The quotation can be translated as ‘the greatest gift that God, in his generosity, / offered in his creation / was freedom of will’.
tive verges on a bookish excess, should therefore not be merely ascribed to the anxiety of influence and lack of self-confidence of a first-time writer still searching for his own voice. In fact, O’Brien deliberately cultivates the image of himself as ‘College Joe’ (*IID*, 33), the atypically mature and educated draftee, definitely ‘not soldier material’ (*IID*, 31), who tries to reason his way out of the moral stand-off caused by his two contrasting allegiances: to his country and to his personal beliefs. That the dilemma is primarily a philosophical one is also made clear by the sustained intertextual references to the Platonic dialogues in which Socrates’s reflections on the nature of courage, together with a radical pursuit of virtue, provide a luminous, and extremely demanding, model of behaviour for the young O’Brien. Like *The Red Badge of Courage*, *If I Die* is a war story whose priority is the investigation of the nature of bravery and of personal integrity (a matter of individual wholeness, which manifests itself in the seamless adherence to one’s own ethical code), rather than the factual account of combat. Famously, Crane had no direct experience of war when he wrote his novel, while O’Brien – who was instead in the position to write a chronicle of his year ‘in country’ – devotes a significant part of his narrative to the agonizing choice between going to Vietnam or deserting and leaving America behind. The deliberation is protracted from Basic Training to Advanced Infantry Training at Fort Lewis, from the receipt of the draft letter to the moment when O’Brien alights at Cam Ranh Bay, and beyond. The real battle, in other words, is what goes on in the soldier’s mind. In a sense, the narrative in *If I Die* begins where the story of Henry Fleming had ended: while Fleming’s self-delusions are shaken by his confrontation with combat, so that his questionable growth finally amounts to a more refined ability to examine himself and his surroundings, O’Brien does not seem to need the encounter with the war, and with military life in general, in order to face his private demons.

From the start, O’Brien is already an insightful and uncompromising observer and self-critic, no more inclined to expose the contradictions of the people and institutions involved in the war than he is to denounce his own failings. While Fleming scrutinizes his fellow soldiers in the hope of discerning traces of the self-doubt and fears that plague him in the wake of the battle, O’Brien focuses his gaze inwardly, in a rigorous self-analysis, which is the first mark of his independence and individuality; where Fleming seeks confirmation of the normality of his feelings, O’Brien holds on to his intimate, non-compliant attitude to the homologizing machismo of the army training. His description of Fort Lewis revolves around the opposition between his unique self and the indistinct, unthinking crowd, the ‘horde of boors’, ‘jungle of robots’, pack of ‘savages’ (*IID*, 40, 41) constituted by his fellow recruits, who have become, without realizing it, prisoners of the Army, animals in a ‘cattle pen’ or in a ‘hopeless zoo’ (*IID*, 52). The mixed metaphor...
of the ‘jungle of robots’ is particularly telling in view of the conditions in which the war was fought and of the fact that the attributes traditionally associated with this term are the idea of wilderness and unruliness, in direct contrast to the qualities normally attached to the nature of the military organisation. Another significant reversal of the usual combination of semantic fields and referents is the use of ‘savages’ to denote the American army rather than the enemy.11 O’Brien is very harsh in the judgement of his fellow recruits:

I hated the trainees even more than the captors. I learned to march, but I learned alone. I gaped at the neat package of stupidity and arrogance at Fort Lewis. I was superior. I made no apologies for believing it. Without sympathy or compassion, I instructed my intellect and eyes: ignore the horde. I kept vigil against intrusion into my private life. I maintained a distance suitable to the black and white distinction between me and the unconscious, genuflecting herd. (IID, 41)

This is a deliberately unsympathetic self-construction: the character’s vehement superciliousness is bound to push readers away even as they are alerted to the unthinking nature, and the particular brand of arrogance, of his fellow trainees and of the army machine. Such a high sense of oneself, so early in the narrative, is a natural prelude for a fall: like Henry Fleming, O’Brien seems ripe for a change, but the protagonist’s transformation does not occur as a result of his experience of the battleground. If anything, both the army training and his employment as an infantryman strengthen O’Brien’s, and the readers’, contempt for the brutality and the pointlessness of war. What needs purging is the all too swift association, in the character’s mind, between his intellectual self-awareness and his moral fibre, because the one does not immediately translate into the other, as he naively seems to imply. On the contrary, given that he did not refuse to leave for the war, O’Brien’s ability to see through the strategies used by the army to indoctrinate the soldiers, paired with his misgivings about the appropriateness of the military efforts in Vietnam, mire his credibility as the reliable moral centre of the narrative. What the character must learn, he can learn through a piercing, honest examination of his failure to say no to the draft call, which is tantamount to an admission of moral weakness completely unrelated to the experience of fighting. In other words, O’Brien’s acknowledgement of the hypocrisy that lurks even behind his censorious attitude to the army could have – and indeed should have – accompanied his military career right from the start: the character’s self-doubts and recriminations do not concern his likely behaviour under fire, but the failure of nerve that has landed him in this position in the first place.

11 See also sections in Chapter 1 (‘Old myths, new frontiers’) and Chapter 3 (‘Indian Country’) for a further discussion of these themes.
O’Brien’s musings and self-analysis for the most part, therefore, precede his actual engagement in combat, drawing on literary and philosophical models, and effectively pre-empting the need for experiential evidence in the definition and test of courage. This challenge to the necessity of experience is an even more extreme rejection of the Bildungsroman pattern which had already been given an ironic treatment by Stephen Crane. Needless to say, having renounced the authority of witness, O’Brien also discards any didactic claim for his narrative: ‘Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories’ (IID, 32). Triggered by a missed opportunity for self-assertion and moral growth, If I Die cannot unfold as a progressive narrative of personal development, nor can it be a retrospective warning, to future generations, about the evils of war: O’Brien’s protest is aimed primarily at himself, and at his incapacity to be true to his convictions.

A sober realism and the ability to do the right thing, even when that involves the risk of social censure or the certainty of a solitary destiny, is what distinguishes O’Brien’s heroes: ‘Nick Adams, Alan Ladd of Shane, Captain Vere, Humphrey Bogart as the proprietor of Café d’Américain, Frederic Henry. Especially Frederic Henry’ (IID, 142). This list of role models zeroes in on the type of the American loner, a man ‘removed from other men, able to climb over and gaze down at other men’ (IID, 142). Solitude is the condition that allows him a clearer vision of his world than most, and therefore, paradoxically, a stronger sense of responsibility for his actions. Hemingway’s Frederic Henry is singled out both for his lack of conceit and for the poignant decision at the heart of his ‘separate peace’: far from being a desperate gesture of cowardice, desertion in his case signals the acceptance of his most urgent responsibility as a human being, as a companion to Catherine Berkeley and a father to their unborn child. Of course, within the context of a reflection on courage, the reference to the protagonist of A Farewell to Arms (1929) brings to mind his blunt condemnation of the abstract ideals of heroism and the emotive jargon of military propaganda:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. […] There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.13

12 For a discussion of the wider implications of this statement, see Chapter 5.
Scepticism towards a self-aggrandizing perception of courage, the aware-
ess of one’s limits, is another common trait of these fictional inspirations, whose example finds an unassuming, real counterpart in Captain Johansen, the ‘living hero’ who taught O’Brien that ‘human beings sometimes embody valour and that they do not always dissolve at the end of a book or movie reel’ (IID, 144). O’Brien’s sincere admiration for Johansen is still inscribed within the constant comparison between the fictional and the real. Later on, O’Brien would continue to blend factual and fictive suggestions in the character of Major Callicles, named after Socrates’ antagonist in Plato’s Gorgias, who represents in If I Die the false courage of the reckless and point-
less expedition. In the same vein of deliberate confusion between history and myth, O’Brien’s early, polemic list of real heroes includes ‘Kennedy, Audie Murphy, Sergeant York and T. E. Lawrence’ (IID, 53), people invested with a legendary aura that makes them quasi-fictional creations. In Captain Johansen, instead, for once life appears to approximate the ideal. The excitement for this small revelation is tempered by O’Brien’s knowledge that Johansen would not share such a flattering opinion of his courage. The corol-
lary of the Socratic motto is the hopelessness of ever seeing oneself as a hero: ‘That’s the problem. Knowing yourself, you can’t make it real for yourself’ (IID, 146).

It is finally another Socratic idea that links all of O’Brien’s heroes: courage as ‘wise endurance’, a concept developed in Plato’s Laches, where Socrates contends that ‘men without courage are men without temperance, justice, or wisdom, just as without wisdom men are not truly courageous’ (IID, 140). Courage seems to reside in the awareness of danger and, more importantly, of one’s limitations; it is in the continuous attempt to approximate the ideal

14 Captain Johansen was a member of Amundsen’s expedition to Antarctica in 1910–12. He criticized Amundsen’s disastrous false start in the race with Scott for the South Pole, and openly questioned his poor leadership and selfish quest for personal glory, which had led him to put the lives of his men at risk. Amundsen later dismissed Johansen from his party and refused to acknowledge his crucial contribution – Johansen had saved the life of a less experienced fellow explorer – to the expedition. In 1913 Johansen committed suicide. Like O’Brien’s eponymous captain, Johansen is an unacknowledged hero.

15 In Gorgias, Callicles attacks Socrates and indeed philosophy in general. He is an advocate of natural justice, i.e. supremacy of the strong over the weak.

16 President Kennedy needs no introduction: of his role in the Vietnam War and of the Arthurian spirit of his Camelot Years, we have already spoken in Chapter 1. Audie Murphy was the most decorated American soldier of World War II, and went on to star in the autobiographical To Hell and Back (1955), as well as in a number of westerns and war movies; he played the youth (i.e. Henry Fleming) in the cinematic version of The Red Badge of Courage (1951). Alvin York, an erstwhile conscientious objector, was the most decorated American soldier of World War I; Gary Cooper played him in the biographical 1941 film Sergeant York, which was the highest-grossing production of the year. T. E. Lawrence, an officer of the British Army, rose to fame for his role in the Arab Revolt (1916–18) and was immortalised as Lawrence of Arabia by David Lean’s epic 1962 film.
balance between the four parts of virtue that make up the Platonic vision of true excellence. It is not recklessness, or gamesmanship. It is not what most people immediately conjure up as the image of the hero: the instinctive warrior waging a one-man spectacular attack against the enemy, unconcerned for his life, spurred on by the strength of his passion. The memory of one such assault provides a clear exemplification of O’Brien’s point: ‘Arizona bulled out across a flat piece of land, just like the captain, and I only remember his long limp body in the grass. It’s the charge, the light brigade with only one man, that is the first thing to think about when thinking about courage. People who do it are remembered as brave, win or lose. They are heroes forever. It seems like courage, the charge’ (IID, 135, my italics).

O’Brien juxtaposes to this deceptive example of bravery the low-key, composed model provided by Johansen. What makes the captain’s action heroic, and earns him the recognition of ‘the steady, blood-headed intensity of Sir Lancelot’, while Arizona’s feat is quickly reduced to the image of a lifeless shape in the grass, is not the success of the enterprise, but the frame of mind that preceded it. Johansen is moved by a burning desire to be brave, but also by a constant uncertainty about what this longing implies and what courage really means. Arizona, instead, is obviously part of the unthinking herd, ‘bulling’ through the field, in a blundering private charge which O’Brien associates with the terrible immolation of the five hundred of Tennyson’s ballad. In this vignette, O’Brien dismantles traditional representations of heroism, from Tennyson’s ode to sacrifice, to Henry Fleming’s pathetic (self-)deception – ‘Soldiering is not a red badge of courage’ (IID, 141) – and even, at a first glance, Hemingway’s famous definition of courage as ‘grace under pressure’ (IID, 146).

On closer inspection, however, it is plain that O’Brien is challenging the literal, misinterpretation of Hemingway’s motto, arguing that grace and poise are too easily affected. In fact, the distinction between courage and its affectation is one that Hemingway himself makes very clear in The Sun Also Rises (1926), a text that O’Brien knows very well. One of the climactic moments of The Sun Also Rises revolves around the bull-fighting in Pamplona, a ritual with quasi-religious force for Jake Barnes, the narrator-protagonist of the novel, a man still trying to come to terms with the aftermath of the Great War and with the consequences of the wound that has emasculated him. The war has left Jake unable to establish a mutually fulfilling relationship with the woman he loves, Brett Astley, herself a troubled, directionless character. An emancipated figure, Brett then embarks on a number of doomed, destructive affairs; the idealistic Robert Cohn and the self-possessed Pedro Romero, who both subscribe, albeit in different ways, to a traditional view of gender roles, are amongst her lovers. Unsurprisingly, Brett cannot commit to either of them. Jake, on his part, like Hemingway, is obsessed with finding a model of
masculinity unscathed by the uncertainties and self-consciousness of modernity. In Jake’s eyes, it is Pedro Romero, the young bull-fighter, who embodies this rapidly disappearing ideal of manhood against the showmanship of his older, histrionic predecessors.

Romero never made any contortions, always it was straight and pure and natural in line. The others twisted themselves like corkscrews, their elbows raised, and leaned against the flanks of the bulls after their horns had passed, to give a faked look of danger. Afterward, all that was faked turned bad and gave an unpleasant feeling. Romero’s bullfighting gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time. He did not have to emphasize their closeness. [...] since the death of Joselito all the bullfighters had been developing a technique that simulated this appearance of danger in order to give a fake emotional feeling, while the bullfighter was really safe. Romero had the old thing, the holding of his purity of line through the maximum of exposure, while he dominated the bull by making him realize he was unattainable, while he prepared him for the killing.17

Romero combines the old Achillean model of heroism – collected, self-sufficient, an end unto itself – with the modern attribute of authenticity, of truthfulness to one’s unique self, a human quality that, as already adumbrated, developed with the rise of individualism and began to wane with its twentieth-century crisis, as Hemingway’s protagonists testify. Romero is clearly an exception, part of a rare class of men whose existence is still possible in the mythical dimension of the fiesta, in a country as yet untouched by the malaise of modern life, the latter epitomized in the novel by Paris and the ‘lost generation’ of Jake and his friends. With his lack of self-consciousness and his refusal to pander to the taste of his audience, Romero embodies an authenticity that remains an unattainable ideal in Jake’s, and our, disillusioned world. At the end of the century, (O’Brien’s) heroes can no longer be unselfconscious, but they still strive for integrity, the sense of wholeness attained when one’s essence expresses itself freely, fluidly and seamlessly. Arizona’s gesture clearly runs counter to this quest for authenticity: his is the mechanical action of a kid who has grown up watching too many war movies and who ends up fighting (and dying) in the attempt to be the replica of a replica, hankering for a simulacrum, nurturing his very own ‘John Wayne wetdream’ (24), to borrow Michael Herr’s colourful expression. By definition, the search for authenticity often ends up clashing with the individual’s integration within a community. Lionel Trilling distinguishes between this

deep, and highly personal, quality, and the more superficial dictates of sincerity (or honesty): this latter attribute is achieved through a coincidence between the self’s hidden motives and the established morality of the day. The sincere/honest individual is thus a social construct, defined by his or her adherence to externally sanctioned values and by the correspondence between his or her inner self and its outward manifestations (in demeanour, actions, utterances, etc.). Paradoxically, neither parameter recognizes the sincerity of the self by looking exclusively at the very self under scrutiny: in the first instance, the individual is measured against something over and above himself or herself, while the second perspective implies a split in the self, which is therefore perceived as made of two parts which might or might not be in accordance. Authenticity instead is a rigorous extolling of one’s deepest essence, shed of all societal bindings and influences until the very notion of selfhood becomes untenable. The authentic individual is therefore seamless, whole and self-contained and, at the same time, indefinable and ever-changing: these are the conditions for one’s disenfranchisement from any standard.

The wider scenario of the contrast between the subject’s authenticity and the mandates of the state is once again illustrated in *If I Die* by Socrates, who was sentenced to death for the alleged anti-democratic nature of his teachings. As O’Brien reminds us, Socrates – who had served Athens as a young soldier – refused both to recant his doctrine and to escape from the city under whose laws he had been happy to live all his life: ‘he reminded himself that he had had seventy years in which he could have left the country, if he were not satisfied or felt the agreements he’d made with it were unfair. He had not chosen Sparta or Crete. And, I reminded myself, I had not thought that much about Canada until that summer’ (*IID*, 28). All wrapped up in the momentousness of his dilemma, the narrator is completely oblivious to the bathetic shift from Socrates and Sparta to himself and Canada, nor does he dwell on the fundamental difference between his predicament and that of the ancient philosopher. In accepting his inevitable death, Socrates does not go back either on his personal beliefs or on the laws of his country; by comparison the draftee would have had a similar, yet infinitely easier option, in the choice to face prison. And yet, somehow, this prospect is never envisaged in any of O’Brien’s narratives. This scenario seems to be literally unthinkable. Why?

We have come here to the heart of the matter, to the real reason why O’Brien cannot find the strength to act in accordance with his individual moral principles: going to prison would mean incurring the kind of social censure that one’s anonymity in Canada or Sweden might not invite (although guilt is inescapable in either case). What O’Brien does not want to lose is ultimately what Captain Vere – significantly the only hero whose wisdom is questioned in *If I Die* – also could not afford to jeopardize: social
order. O’Brien’s parallelism with Melville’s Captain Vere is particularly poignant since both figures are cast as readers, observers and thinkers, as well as, in due course, judges of the stories in which they are involved. O’Brien is the recruit who has ‘read too many books’ (IID, 63), as the battalion chaplain scathingly replies to the soldier’s lucid explanation of his qualms about the war.

The obvious quality of If I Die as ‘an educated and literate man’s response to war’ has led Maria Bonn to remark that O’Brien’s ‘attitude toward the written text initially seems uncomplicated. The good guys read books and the bad guys don’t.’ Captain Vere, on his part, is equally atypical as the learned commander of the Bellipotent, ‘with a marked leaning toward everything intellectual’, as well as being ‘the most undemonstrative of men’, ‘intrepid to the verge of temerity, though never injudiciously so’ (338). Both characters in the end are engaged in a verdict that must deliberate between innocence of intentions and innocence of deeds, and consequently in the choice between alternative linguistic systems to apprehend the world. O’Brien characterizes his final resolution to join the war as a slow abdication of will, the passive surrender to a default setting:

All the personal history, all the midnight conversations and books and beliefs and learning, were crumpled by abstention, extinguished by forfeiture, for lack of oxygen, by a sort of sleepwalking default. It was no decision, no chain of ideas or reasons, that steered me into the war. It was an intellectual and physical stand-off, and I did not have the energy to see it to an end. I did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war. But neither did I want to upset a peculiar balance between the order I knew, the people I knew, and my own private world. It was not that I valued that order. But I feared its opposite, inevitable chaos, censure, embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all. (IID, 31–32)

The certainty of ‘inevitable chaos’ is the counterpart of O’Brien’s reliance on what he sees as a motivated, transparent reality, a world organized according to familiar, decipherable categories, in a language that is clearly intelligible.

Paradoxically, the preservation of this order requires the execution of what to him are unmotivated, arbitrary actions – drawing ‘certain blood for uncertain reasons’ (IID, 167) – as well as the participation in a conflict in which a constative, referential use of language – one, for example, that would provide
a clear definition of the enemy – has been replaced by an arbitrary or disingenuously twisted use of words, as in the infamous, unwritten rule about how to identify the opponent: if it is dead and Vietnamese, then it is a VC. In the first linguistic model, the relationship between words and actions is predetermined and fixed, however conventionally; in the second, instead, actions precede and give a morally perverse meaning to words. The gap between intentions and deeds, inner and outer expression of the individual’s consciousness, crops up again in O’Brien’s final pronouncement on what constitutes a man’s virtue: ‘I believe [...] that a man is most a man when he tries to recognize and understand what is good – when he tries to ask in a reasonable way about things: is it good? And I believe finally that a man cannot be fully a man until, deciding that something is right, his actions make real the suspect bravery of the mind’ (IID, 57).

This is the same crux at the heart of Captain Vere’s dilemma in Billy Budd, where intentions and actions never coincide, with tragic results. Melville’s novella, published posthumously in 1924, tells the story of its eponymous protagonist, an innocent young sailor much loved by his fellow crew on board the Bellipotent, with the exception of the Master-at-Arms John Claggart, who falsely accuses him of mutinous designs. Incapable, because of a speech impediment, of an immediate verbal response to Claggart’s charges, Billy instinctively strikes his opponent and inadvertently causes his death. Thus, Billy’s innocence and status as a ‘motivated sign’,20 i.e. a figure whose purity and transparency of purpose is reflected in a good-looking frame, is contradicted by his involuntary, violent reaction to Claggart’s slanderous accusation. Conversely, prompted by an unmotivated hatred of the ‘Handsome Sailor’, Claggart’s defamatory charge against Billy turns out to be true, insofar as the young man does end up committing a crime: Claggart’s pronouncement of guilt becomes indeed a self-fulfilling prophecy, however incapable of capturing Billy’s essence. Captain Vere, who is aware both of Billy’s de facto crime and of his intrinsic innocence, must fall back – for the sake of order – on social conventions, which at the time of the Mutiny Act and under conditions of warfare demand that Claggart’s killing be followed by the harshest possible punishment.

As in O’Brien’s quandary, Vere’s preservation of order comes at the cost of the disconnection between his inner desire (to save Billy) and his social responsibility (to sentence him to death). Vere’s case, however, differs from O’Brien’s in the real limitations on the Captain’s ability to exercise his individual agency. As members of the King’s Navy, Vere and his crew have abdicated – to a large extent – the right to make independent decisions.

Moreover, Vere’s analysis of their situation outlines the consequences of what O’Brien’s own response to the draft call will imply: ‘in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents. When war is declared are we the commissioned fighters previously consulted? We fight at command. If our judgments approve the war, that is but coincidence.’21 Billy’s sentence, like any other martial duty, is already out of the Captain’s hands before the trial begins; Vere’s position of responsibility within a network of social laws, sanctioned by his title, dictates his verdict, which he must necessarily reach so as to avoid the disturbance that Billy’s crime might create on the Bellipotent. In a way, Vere’s action – the fulfilment of a duty which comports a touching demonstration of self-denial – can be interpreted as the sacrifice of an exemplary individual (the Christ-like Billy) and of an exemplary judge (the father-like Vere, who must suppress his paternal feelings for the Handsome Sailor) for the benefit of the many (the crew). O’Brien’s decision instead is inscribed within a much less pressing social context, under circumstances that allow a greater degree of personal freedom, and lacks the justification of having been made in view of the common good. O’Brien’s inability to follow the dictates of his own conscience, to opt out of the social pact with his fellow-countrymen in response to a greater moral imperative, is an act of self-indulgence rather than self-denial.

The writer stages this crisis in a nautical drama of his own in the chapter in The Things They Carried entitled ‘On the Rainy River’, the account that most vividly describes the draftee’s concrete opportunity to turn his back on a war he had never believed in, and probes into the reasons for the protagonist’s failure of willpower. The early reference to Dante’s Comedy and to ‘de la volontà la libertate’ (‘freedom of will’) in If I Die has a faint echo in the structure and the theme of this story, which charts Tim O’Brien’s (unsuccessful) journey of enlightenment during the summer before his enlistment. Unable to cope with the pressure of his impending conscription, the young character leaves home – and the gory job at a meatpacking plant that would have seen him to graduate school – and finds temporary refuge in a lodge on the mountains, along the river that marks the border between Minnesota and Canada. The impromptu trip towards the borderline between conscription and freedom has an equally suggestive point of departure and destination: from the river of blood of the pigs’ carcasses (reminiscent perhaps of the Phlegethon, to whose boiling, bloody waters the violent are confined in the seventh circle of Hell), O’Brien ascends to the majestic wilderness surrounding the Tip Top Lodge, presided over by Elroy Berdhal, a seemingly omniscient, unobtrusive yet deeply sympathetic landlord.

Under the silent scrutiny of this godlike figure, O’Brien ponders his situation. The final crisis occurs when the old man takes him fishing, pushing the boat into Canadian waters, as if to present Tim with the reality of this option and the urgency of either embracing it or dismissing it for good. The momentous nature of the decision triggers off a kaleidoscopic parade of characters from O’Brien’s private life and from his American cultural and historical inheritance, a phantasmagoria of images from his past and his future, a series of ghosts all waving at him ‘from the far [Minnesota] shoreline’ (TTC, 53). Faced with the opportunity to jump ship and desert, the protagonist-narrator of this tale is held back by a spurious loyalty towards his country: O’Brien’s sense of responsibility and belonging to the American community is brutally exposed as amounting to no more than a fear of embarrassment. (Vere’s) respect for public duty is demeaned to a petty, narcissistic dread of private derision:

All those eyes on me – the town, the whole universe – and I couldn’t risk the embarrassment. [...] I feel myself blush. I couldn’t tolerate it. I couldn’t endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn’t make myself brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that’s all it was. And right then I submitted. I would go to the war – I would kill and maybe die – because I was embarrassed not to. (TTC, 54)

The story closes with a quick, almost cinematic fast-forward, a condensation of the events to come, while O’Brien is driving back home. The narration suddenly speeds up towards its anticlimactic finale: ‘I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived but it’s not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war’ (TTC, 55).

So far, the analysis of O’Brien’s view of courage has led us to consider two
interdependent manifestations of this quality: a spiritual kind, related to the idea of integrity and the ability to stand by one’s own moral principles, and a more physical kind, something akin to military prowess and lack of fear in the face of material dangers. As we have seen, unlike Frederic Henry (and Bogart, Shane, Nick Adams, as well as Vere himself, who believes, after all, that what he is doing is right and is convinced, with good reason, that even Billy appreciates the justice of his verdict), O’Brien portrays a factual and fictional picture of himself as a character who fails to live up to his convictions; he betrays them not for a greater good, but in a hypocritical acquiescence in a social order which he knows to be flawed. O’Brien’s plight can be summed up as the sacrifice of authenticity for what Lionel Trilling calls ‘sincerity’ and what we might more familiarly refer to as honesty; in his respect for cultural conventions and expectations, O’Brien discards truthfulness to his self for the adherence to society’s standards. O’Brien’s struggle for this kind of courage precedes the battle; the breach of integrity that comes with the acceptance of the departure for Vietnam in itself effectively prevents the achievement of real bravery. The knowledge of this original, and crucial, failing, however, does not prevent the soldier O’Brien from reflecting upon the different kind of resources that he is called to draw upon when courage implies most immediately the ability to cope with fear of the enemy and fear of death. This martial aspect of courage, rather than its earlier, contemplative counterpart, is more readily associated with a masculine ideal. It is to O’Brien’s view of masculinity (and femininity) in the context of the definition of courage that this study will now turn.

In Hemingway’s footsteps

If one were to summarize the conclusion reached by *If I Die in a Combat Zone* as a philosophical meditation on the nature of courage, one could do worse than draw on O’Brien’s Platonic formula of ‘wise endurance’. This definition of bravery has certainly catalysed the critics’ attention (see, for example, Bates’s 1987 essay ‘Tim O’Brien’s Myth of Courage’). It has often been described – and indeed even praised, for its open-minded, liberal, non-chauvinistic spirit – as a ‘feminization of virtue’, a powerful subversion of ‘militarized male fortitude’. Of course, the perception of ‘wise endurance’ as an androgynous virtue depends on gender stereotypes – the equation of masculinity with physical strength and a resolute moral fibre, against the gentler qualities of passive contemplation and restraint, traditionally seen as attributes of the ‘fair sex’. It is not surprising that the presence of a qualifier

24 Heberle, *A Trauma Artist*, p. xx.
for the term ‘endurance’ should have prompted a lively critical discussion, given how telegraphic O’Brien’s style can be, especially in certain sections of If I Die, where adjectives and adverbs are often ‘noticeably missing’.25 Besides, it is true that within the context of O’Brien’s memoir, the appeal to the four parts of virtue provides a deliberate, if understated, theoretical contrast to the military practice, from Major Callicles’s irresponsible, showy, inane machismo, to the callous incompetence and desire for glory of the higher ranks of the Army (see, for example, the unnamed colonel in the chapter entitled ‘July’). Such a minimalist style and the reliance on showing, rather than telling, the reality of the war are traits inherited from Ernest Hemingway, the most evident literary influence on O’Brien’s early attempts to come to an understanding of the notions of heroism and masculinity, and of their mutual relationship.

Hemingway’s legacy is, as one might expect, never felt more strongly in O’Brien’s oeuvre than in his first novel: Northern Lights. Critics are nearly unanimous in acknowledging that, while showing promise, this book has serious limitations, given the way that it occasionally verges on an unwitting parody of Hemingway.26 O’Brien himself is the harshest judge of his initial full-length foray into fiction; with typical honesty, he provides what has now become the ultimate evaluation of Northern Lights: ‘That’s a terrible book. I’m embarrassed by it; it’s hard to talk about it. It’s the first novel I ever tried to write, and unfortunately it was published.’27 For all its faults, however, Northern Lights remains an interesting read for the critic, and offers a valuable insight into O’Brien’s approach to significant themes of (American) war literature: the paternal role model, the test of manliness in the wilderness, and the polarization of masculine and feminine qualities. The following analysis will show how this text, much like the earlier memoir, does not quite follow the Bildungsroman pattern that scholars have often identified in it; this corrective to the received critical opinion will demonstrate that the perspective on gender in O’Brien’s first novel is more nuanced than has generally been recognized.

Northern Lights tells the story of Paul Perry, a disaffected husband and federal agent for the Department of Agriculture, and his immediate circle of friends and family, in the Arrowhead country in Minnesota. The other protagonists are Harvey, Paul’s younger brother, who has just returned from his tour of duty in Vietnam; Grace, Paul’s caring and docile wife, and Addie,

25 Kaplan, Understanding Tim O’Brien, p. 50.
26 See, for example, ‘the book’s major defect is its unmistakeable origins in Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises’ (Herzog, Tim O’Brien, p. 65). Herzog then goes on to quote Roger Sale’s review of the book: ‘Is it possible to read The Sun Also Rises too often?’ (p. 65). There is a clear implication that, in O’Brien’s case, the answer would appear to be yes.
reminiscent of Brett in *The Sun Also Rises*, a young, independent, sensual woman, who appears to feel a reciprocated attraction for the unavailable Paul, and who later gets involved with Harvey instead. The most memorable character in this novel, in spite of the fact that he has been long dead, is Paul’s father, Pehr Lindstrom Peri, an imposing patriarchal figure, who continues to exert influence on his two sons even in his absence. A severe Lutheran minister and a messenger of apocalyptic visions (like William Cowling in *The Nuclear Age*, he is obsessed with making preparations for what he thinks is an impending nuclear holocaust), he clearly embodies an unwise male endurance: he preaches hardiness and stoicism, and feels an undisguised hostility towards femininity, to the point of excluding women from his life, as his own father (Pehr Peri) had done before him.

Paul and Harvey thus belong to an exclusively male lineage; their mother is barely mentioned, having died in giving birth to Harvey (*NL*, 82). We are never told her name. Similarly, nothing is known of Pehr Lindstrom Peri’s own mother, other than a surname so common amongst the Scandinavian immigrants in that part of the country as to make her identification impossible; nevertheless her son erases even that trace of her existence, dropping his middle name (his maternal legacy) and Americanizing Peri into Perry. An authoritarian and crushing *pater familias*, Pehr Perry thus appears to be an emanation of the intimidating northern territories: configured as a cold, male domain, the latter are a different kind of pioneer country from the mythical frontier of the West. The only trait that these two landscapes seem to have in common is the fact that both have witnessed the Native Americans being driven away and supplanted by European settlers. The Arrowhead region attracted waves of German, Scandinavian and Finnish people, already accustomed to an unwelcoming climate and wild natural environment. Of an austere, Lutheran, northern stock, reserved, hard-working and frugal, these northern pioneers are also characterized by resilience, patience and stamina. These are the virtues that Pehr Perry has tried to instil in his sons: his teachings still shape the two brothers’ lives, even when – as in Paul’s case – they cannot and will not put them into practice.

While Harvey does try, and often manages, to approximate his father’s ideal of manliness, Paul is the black sheep, the son who fails, or refuses, to live up to paternal expectations. Harvey instead appears to be at ease with the woods, and willingly indulges his father’s only fear, building, single-handedly, a nuclear shelter for the family. His return from Vietnam, where he suffers an injury that leaves him blind in one eye, marks the end of only the latest of his adventures – although the dismal reception that he receives from his family and from the wider community dispels any illusion, on the reader’s if not on Harvey’s part, that we are witnessing the homecoming of a war hero. The lukewarm response to Harvey’s return is unrelated to his
military conduct, but is part of a general mood of disillusionment and indifference towards great national events felt by the inhabitants of an isolated, shrinking and neglected region; the ideal of military heroism does not seem relevant to the people of Sawmill Landing who, for all their hardiness and respect for patriotic duty, can do little against the decline, in population and importance, of their community. From this disaffected perspective, courage in battle is devoid of any particular glamour, and is reduced to one of the many possible manifestations of male identity. Paul’s exclusion from his brother’s military experience is therefore not the only reason why his sense of self and feelings of worth are wavering.

Direct engagement with war aside, Paul Perry is like Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*: they are both emasculated characters, hurt and simultaneously redeemed by their psychological and physical scars. Jake’s genital wound is a sign of lost male potency and wholeness; it is also, paradoxically, what keeps him from crossing over into the opposite side of the male spectrum, Robert Cohn’s ‘gentle, sentimental, and implicitly feminine masculinity’.28 Similarly, Paul’s incompetence in male pursuits and lack of interest in abiding by his father’s rules saves him from his brother’s destiny, which, as the book progresses, turns out to be no more than a superficial adherence to antiquated and unrealistic modes of male behaviour. Harvey’s dreams of adventure are hollow, good only in so far as they provide a theoretical affirmation of masculinity, never to be translated into action; besides, as he reveals in a pathetic confession to Paul, his male swagger is dictated by fear rather than by a sincere belief in the paternal values (*NL*, 254ff.). By the end of the narrative, it is clear that Harvey’s nickname, ‘the bull’, must be read ironically: it represents, like Arizona’s doomed charge, an unthinking macho posturing or even, as a slang abbreviation, the gross inaccuracies and vain exaggerations underpinning Harvey’s perception of himself.

With this bathetic reversal, gone are the mythical intertextual connotations of this symbol: Harvey’s bull is not Hemingway’s sacrificial victim, whose death endorses the bull-fighter’s courage and masculinity; and gone, also, is the overt reference to the mythical ‘bull of Karelia’, the epitome of ‘stoic endurance and unflinching acceptance of the end’ of the Finnish epic poem *Kalevala*.29 Incidentally, it is worth emphasizing how these two mythical incarnations of the bull, already *per se* a symbol of masculinity, are charged with completely different connotations: Jake Barnes yearns for participation, however surrogate, in the life-affirming Mediterranean *tauromachia*, a tradition that is culturally alien to him, whereas Paul must shed the much more gloomily fatalistic northern inheritance, an ‘indigenous’ legacy since it has

reached him through his ancestors. The bull of Karelia is therefore an apoca-
lyptic figure, in keeping with the general, intercultural mythical framework
of the novel, whose epigraph is provided by a passage from Revelation:

and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth
of hair, and the moon became as blood. And the stars of heaven fell unto the
earth even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty
wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every
mountain and islands were moved out of their places [...] For the day of his wrath is come.
And who shall be able to stand? (Revelation 6: 12–17)

Posing a rhetorical question about our ability to withstand the wrath of God
at the end of time, this passage offers an immediate clue about the imposing
and unforgiving presence of the father figure in the narrative. *The Sun Also
Rises* instead opens with a quotation from Ecclesiastes about the continuity
of generations, set in contrast to the vanity of individual human existence.30

The diametrically opposite mythical framework of the two novels explains
in part the perceived gap between Hemingway’s nostalgic disillusionment,
with Jake’s betrayal of his *aficion* and the perpetual impasse of his impossible
relationship with Brett, and O’Brien’s seemingly more optimistic conclusion.
This is perhaps one of the reasons why *Northern Lights* has been mistakenly
read as a *Bildungsroman*, describing Paul’s progress from the misogynist
darkness of his father’s and his culture’s apocalyptic credo to a more
balanced, positive view of the world, capable of embracing the feminine
principle, embodied by the suggestively named Grace. This misreading is
further encouraged by the figurative scope of names and imagery in the
narrative, which is at times obvious to the point of clumsiness, and which
consistently draws attention to the characters’ gendered attributes and to
their ability to open up to some kind of enlightenment. Harvey’s inability to
do so, for example, is neatly symbolized by his Vietnam war wound to the
eye; by contrast, Paul’s congenital lack of vision appears to be less
irreversible: he bears its mark in his second name, Milton, the blind poet of
*Paradise Lost*, and in his short-sightedness. Besides, should we have missed
the further implications of his (first) name, the novel provides us with a
further hint at a crucial point in the story: while he is lost in the snow, Paul

30 ‘One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth
forever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he
arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth
about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run
into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they
return again’ (Eccl. 1:4–7).
prays, thinking of Damascus Lutheran, a clear reference to the conversion of Saul (NL, 174).

Following these clues, critics such as Kaplan and Bates have meticulously traced Paul’s gradual and discontinuous progress: the loss of his glasses during the disastrous adventure in the woods with his brother has been read as Paul’s adoption of Harvey’s blind recklessness. By the same token, Paul is also perceived to mature when, having realized that such recklessness is not a true virtue, he almost ritually shaves off his beard and buys a new pair of spectacles. This interpretative line is all too easy to follow, since Paul’s entire predicament can be summed up with imagery pertaining to the field of a pathological vision: he sees too much, or too little, either way with a hint of morbidity (Addie calls him ‘Peeping Paul’, remarking on the voyeuristic, passive trait in his personality). Paul is always scrutinizing his own behaviour and finding it inadequate, with a self-consciousness that is both crippling and wholesome. His faulty vision and the awareness of his limitations, equally experienced as a threat to masculinity, function exactly like Jake’s wound: it is precisely the (real and metaphorical) wound, or the knowledge thereof, that prevents Paul and Jake from falling into the sentimental/mock-heroic/nostalgic trap that Harvey and Cohn fall into. Whether Paul ultimately finds a convincing way forward, an alternative to Harvey’s naive fantasies, is another matter altogether – and this is where my reading of the novel differs from the standard interpretation.

At the beginning of the narrative, Paul is clearly about to face a crisis, the long-term result of traumas rooted deeply in the past and in his relationship with his father. Paul cannot leave this ghost behind, scarred as he is from the memory of his many failures in the paternal eyes. His near-drowning in Pliney’s Pond during a swimming lesson, his dropping out of Divinity School while trying to follow in his father’s professional footsteps, and his refusal to accede to his father’s dying wish and help Harvey build the nuclear shelter all mark Paul as unworthy of the paternal physical, intellectual and spiritual inheritance. For these reasons, Paul feels less of a man than Harvey, whose return from Vietnam catalyses once again the elder brother’s sense of inadequacy. His relationships with women are also very unsatisfactory. Paul’s marriage – to a woman despised by his father for her motherliness – has grown stale; he cannot or will not make love to Grace, who, on her part, seems happy to comfort and fuss over him: her caresses can be occasionally sexual, as it would appear in the monologue that ends the first section, entitled ‘Elements’ (although the passage could be almost read as a parodic, mundane reversal of Molly Bloom’s free-flowing stream of consciousness), but are more usually maternal and not at all erotically charged. Grace’s role seems to be confined to soothing a husband-child, with relaxing rubs and babyish terms of endearment. The other woman in Paul’s life is Addie, the opposite
of Grace in both appearance and attitude: wild, adolescent-like, lively and sensual, vaguely exotic (she claims to be from New Guinea, but is also associated with the Native Americans), she teases Paul and dreams up adventurous fantasies of escape with him. Paul, however, does not know how to respond to her half-playful advances.

Paul’s passivity is further emphasized by his infantilization, as Grace mollycoddles and pities him as her ‘poor boy’ several times in the narrative. Even his job, in which he feels trapped, is described by Harvey as ‘sucking the Federal Titty’ (NL, 30). Harvey’s return from the war aggravates the crisis, forcing Paul to face up to his perceived inadequacy from yet another perspective. Harvey seems to be able to do everything that Paul cannot do: besides being a fighter, an adventurer, and his father’s legitimate moral heir, he is also capable of conquering Addie (who calls him ‘the pirate’), while treating Grace with the respect she deserves. Yet Harvey also unwittingly precipitates his own and Paul’s reversal of fortune, when he suggests a holiday to Grand Marais, so that the two men can take part in a skiing competition and the women enjoy the festivities. The highlight of the trip is to be the brothers’ skiing expedition back home, a real adventure and the archetypal test of manhood in the exploration of the wilderness. Before Paul and Harvey set off on their homeward journey, however, the holiday has already degenerated into a series of disappointments, with Paul’s continuing inability to relate to Grace, Addie’s defection from Harvey to a young, promising skier (O’Brien’s counterpart to Hemingway’s Romero) and Harvey’s pitiful and hung-over athletic performance (he falls during the race, while Paul does not even take part in it). The final adventure therefore does not begin under the most promising circumstances and soon turns into a complete disaster, when Harvey fails to navigate accurately and a furious storm gets the two brothers even more hopelessly lost. It is at this point that Paul must take over, tending to his sick brother, foraging for food, and looking for help. Paul undoubtedly does all of these things, but his success as a real man is always underscored by the unheroic nature of his accomplishments: his skills as a hunter are confined to battering a torpid woodchuck to death (NL, 278ff.), and his success in finding assistance is foolhardy and fortuitous, as a couple of decidedly unimpressed local men point out in no uncertain terms (NL, 312ff.).31

During the storm, Harvey confesses his admiration for Paul’s ability to stand up to their father, but not even this startling admission alerts Paul to the vacuity of his reclaimed masculinity; on the contrary, for a while, he cultivates the ruggedness he thinks he has gained in the forest.

Critics have interpreted Paul’s eventual rejection of the superficial

31 For a further analysis of the woodchuck episode, see the section ‘Indian Country’ in Chapter 3.
trappings of a manly mask, and his renewed efforts to become closer to Grace, as evidence of his maturation into a human being who can finally recognize the need for a balanced blend of masculine and feminine elements in his personality and in his life. Much has been made of Paul’s changed attitude towards Grace, who, by the end of the novel, seems to take on the role of muse and mentor to her husband. Following her gentle lead, Paul makes plans to sell his father’s house and relocate to her native state, Iowa, which is significantly related to the idea of a tame and fertile agricultural landscape, as opposed to the hostile territory of northern Minnesota. In another noteworthy episode, during a walk in the woods, Grace teaches Paul how to see and appreciate the feminine, gentle side of the wilderness and, by implication, how to love her for the first time. In a scene with clear baptismal undertones, Paul wades into the waters of Pliney’s Pond, teeming with life and associated with Grace throughout the narrative; he comes out of this amniotic fluid a new man, with a restored vision (after his immersion, Paul manages to see the northern lights that he had failed to notice before) and a regenerated vigour. Again, the imagery could not be clearer: the narrative had started with Paul ‘ejaculating’ poison to kill mosquitoes (a self-evident bathetic counterpart to the American war effort in Vietnam) and ends with him finally making love to and presumably impregnating Grace.

It is difficult not to be taken in by the neat symmetry of this structure, and by the blatancy of the other textual clues that suggest the emotional progress of the main character. However, Paul’s transformation from self-loathing child into wise man is not entirely convincing, nor does it offer a strong model of identity, grounded in the solid reconciliation of positive male and female qualities. Like Anthony Beavis, the protagonist of Aldous Huxley’s Eyeless in Gaza (1936), another text revolving around the imagery of impaired vision and the necessity, for the main character, to learn how to love, Paul Perry comes under the sphere of influence of several different people and each time, one may argue, he is easily swayed by their presence. In virtually all his major choices, Paul reacts to the prompts of his friends and family, be they deliberate or inadvertent, constructive or provoking. His marriage to Grace is a case in point, a decision which seems to make itself, partly as a rejection of (posthumous) paternal authority, partly as a calm acquiescence in an act that seems to require no conscious volition: ‘After all the years with his father, after pursuing the old man’s winter tracks, ice fishing and hunting and fiery sermons, after all that Grace had come with her whispers and understanding, and marrying her after graduation had been as easy and natural as falling asleep in a warm bath. By then the old man was dead’ (NL, 24). After the collapse of Harvey’s plans of adventure and of Addie’s dreams of escape (she leaves Sawmill Landing, not for the exotic Badlands but for life in metropolitan Minneapolis), Grace’s wish for domesticity becomes the next
available fantasy and as good an aspiration as any.

In fact, the illusoriness of Paul’s progress is underscored by the cyclical structure of the novel, which is inscribed within the mythical passage from ‘Black Sun’ to ‘Blood Moon’, in two symmetrical sequences made up of ‘Heat Storm’, ‘Elements’ and ‘Shelter’ and separated by the climactic ‘Blizzard’. Particularly if compared to The Sun Also Rises, the novel’s ending appears unconvincing and inconclusive; by the same token, Paul’s tempering of his northern roots sounds at best half-hearted, at worst disingenuous vis-à-vis Jake’s renewed nostalgic disavowal of the pre-modern ideal of masculinity. The final scenes of the two novels share remarkable similarities and equally striking differences. In The Sun Also Rises, Jake and Brett mutually acknowledge the impossibility of their dream in a memorable exchange: “Oh Jake,” Brett said, “we could have had such a damned good time together.” [...] “Yes,” I said. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” (216). These modernist characters are the broken, cynical heirs of Romanticism, with its yearning for an unreachable wholeness: Jake’s final line states his subscription to this impossible desire even in the knowledge that – should fulfilment be available – it would not yield its promise. Jake continues to wish for old-fashioned, pre-modern idols (the myths of heroism, masculinity, romantic love, authenticity) even as he knows that they are illusions. Northern Lights instead ends with a near-caricature of this passage, with Harvey’s preposterous dreams of adventurous camaraderie and Paul’s characteristic refusal to commit: “What do you think?” Harvey said. “We’ll have us a fine time, won’t we?” [...] Perry shut his eyes. “Doesn’t it sound great?” Harvey kept saying. “Doesn’t it?” (NL, 363).

Paul’s silence is ambivalent: it provides a neat contrast to the ridiculousness of Harvey’s excitement, but it also fails to rein him in. O’Brien pointedly excludes Grace from this final sketch, except in a passing and revealing mention. Harvey asks: “…You really going to Iowa?” “Grace seems to like the idea. We’ll see what happens”, says Paul (NL, 361). While The Sun Also Rises ends with a kind of negative epiphany, Northern Lights ends with no epiphany at all. Paul’s final utterance in the novel is ‘maybe’ (NL, 362), and his whole attitude betrays the proposed settling down with Grace in Iowa as a very low-key happy ending. One must also wonder how much the relocation is prompted by the fact that Paul loses his job half-way through the novel: again, Paul seems to go along with whatever life throws at him, rather than make responsible and independent decisions. The truth is that Grace’s alternative to Pehr Perry’s uncompromising credo, and to Harvey’s delusional dreams, is itself flawed and fragile: at no point in the novel does Grace convincingly live up to the redeeming connotations of her name. She is certainly not damaged like Brett, whose psychological scars make her a kindred spirit to Jake, in her unavailability; she embodies a diminutive
standard of cosy domesticity, rather than a powerful, instinctive, healing, mother-earth figure. Interestingly, her femininity, just like the waters of the pond with which she is associated, is characterized in ambivalent terms: her ‘womanly, wifely, motherly sympathy’, which ‘ooze[s] like ripe mud’ both attracts and repels Paul, comforting him but also threatening to smother or sully him (NL, 24). Likewise, the pond’s waters are not merely swarming with life. They are also stagnant and vaguely putrescent. They smell simultaneously of burgeoning life and slow decay; they are both amniotic fluid and a cloaca, where Paul can discharge his black bile like diarrhoea (NL, 351).

In this first novel, the characters who seem to conform most closely to monolithic stereotypes, the austere, law-giving patriarch (Pehr Perry) and the sympathetic, nurturing mother (Grace), are revealed to be monstrous or deeply flawed in their nature. Harvey and Addie, who represent slightly more nuanced specimens of masculinity and femininity, also expose the limitations of their gendered identity, but in a more pathetic way, once it is clear that their aspirations are nothing more than shallow posturing. Given the lack of viable options and positive role models, it is not surprising to see Paul hovering unconvinced on the brink of a spurious change in the parodic and nihilistic ending of the novel. As a meditation on courage and integrity, *Northern Lights* strikes me as a much darker narrative than *If I Die*, which at least posited, at the end of the chapter on ‘Wise Endurance’, a modicum of value in the conscious attempt to change, to try harder, to improve. ‘Wise courage’ is not a quality that one possesses once and for all, but rather something one must strive for, incessantly and deliberately. It is a work in progress. And, finally, the attempt is all: ‘You promise, almost moving your lips, to do better next time; that by itself is a kind of courage’ (IID, 147).

**Dreams and responsibility**

The discussion of bravery and of its relation to ideas of masculinity and femininity in O’Brien’s writing would not be complete without an analysis of his third book-length publication, *Going After Cacciato*. The novel can be seen as the final part of the trilogy of courage, although the themes broached here will continue to crop up in O’Brien’s later works. *Going After Cacciato* begins with an immediate reference to ‘the ultimate war story’, an episode that – like the memory of all the other casualties of the Third Squad, First Platoon, Alpha Company – haunts the entire narrative: Billy Boy Watkins’s...
death. The primacy of this death over the other fatalities mentioned in the novel is perhaps due to the singular cause of this soldier’s demise: Watkins is a casualty of fright, an inexperienced soldier literally scared to death, killed by fear rather than by physical wounds. In spite of the fact that this story seems to endorse an ‘either/or’ reading of O’Brien’s pithy decree about the effects of war, denying the full force of its paradoxical meaning – war will make a man out of you, if it does not kill you first, Billy Boy Watkins’s parable appears to say – the novel in its entirety clearly takes its distance from a macho view of courage.

To an extent, O’Brien’s first Vietnam war novel is a more clearly fictional re-elaboration of the same fundamental predicament outlined by the protagonist of If I Die, a character whose involvement in Vietnam is the result of vague and questionable reasons (fear of embarrassment and social censure), or even no reason at all (a paralysis of the will or inertia). The reluctant soldier’s feeling of disorientation and confusion, of complete and utter estrangement from the world of the war, is unmitigated, in Cacciato, by the account of the protagonist’s military training and soul-searching prior to his arrival in country. Paul Berlin, the main character in the novel, is an average American kid with no intellectual pretensions, devoid of the sense of superiority and the (ultimately naive) self-awareness of the College Joe figure carefully portrayed by O’Brien in his memoir. This difference provokes a slight shift in the immediate scope and tone of the analysis of the notion of bravery. In If I Die, O’Brien is represented as a character who belongs to an intellectual elite: the fact that he is better educated than most American draftees, that he is articulate and thoughtful and clearly destined for further ‘superior’ pursuits, makes his deployment as a foot soldier – what in earlier wars might have been called ‘cannon fodder’ – a scandalous option, according, of course, to the first person narrator’s partisan line of reasoning. It is on the strength of this conviction that O’Brien takes a chance, turning down the opportunity offered during basic training to enlist in the Army for three years, the only guaranteed way of escaping infantry duty. As he recalls, with more than a hint of self-contempt gained in hindsight: ‘I had gambled, thinking they would use me for more than a pair of legs, certain that someone would see the value of my ass behind a typewriter or a Xerox machine’ (IID, 56).33 O’Brien’s self-portrait is deliberately painted in such a way as to

33 This idea is reiterated more vehemently in ‘On the Rainy River’ in The Things They Carried: ‘I was too good for this war. Too smart, too compassionate, too everything. It couldn’t happen. I was above it. I had the world dicked – Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude and president of the student body and a full-ride scholarship for grad studies at Harvard. A mistake, maybe – a foul-up in the paperwork. I was no soldier’ (TTC, 40–41). In Cacciato, instead, Berlin is shown to be aware of the encouraging odds of landing a relatively safe assignment in Vietnam; the laws of probability are the only reason why he entertains the hope of being spared combat duty: ‘The ratio of support to combat personnel...
highlight the intellectual pride and moral smugness of the narrator-character, to the point of making his representation less than sympathetic at times, and unquestionably risible in the unspoken claim to immunity to the draft call. At the same time, however, from a dramatic perspective, O’Brien’s lofty opinion of himself heightens the poignancy of his collapse: the higher you stand, the greater the fall. For a character of strong principles, sound mind and keen sense of justice, the inability to act on one’s convictions is an unforgivable ignominy, configured as a defeat, a surrender and a slow suffocation of one’s true self (cf. the extinguishment ‘by forfeiture, for lack of oxygen, by a sort of sleepwalking default’, quoted above).

Paul Berlin, on the other hand, lacks the initial self-righteousness and the developed aptitude for self-analysis displayed by O’Brien in *If I Die*; without the framework of an individual conscience struggling to come to terms with an act of self-betrayal, the scrutiny of one’s acquiescence in the Vietnam war becomes more open-ended. What might have been lost in immediacy, with the move from first- to third-person narration, is gained in the more ‘everyman’ quality of Berlin, whose own inertia and confusion are perhaps ultimately easier to relate to than O’Brien’s philosophical reflections and unflinching moral judgements. While it is clear from the start that there is no hope for redemption for the protagonist of *If I Die*, *Going After Cacciato* unfolds instead as a journey whereby the possibility of development and change can be still entertained for the duration of the narrative, even if it is finally denied in the end. Berlin’s is a strange, phantasmagorical flight: a journey of the mind and of the conscience, perhaps, but a real journey nonetheless. The presence of a protagonist like Berlin – inexperienced, but not simple, politically and philosophically green, but not oblivious to the larger implications of his participation in the war – allows O’Brien to move the focus from the failures of nerve and judgement of the individual to the objective moral and epistemological difficulties involved in making the right decision about Vietnam.

Through Berlin, O’Brien declares the impossibility of pinning down the exact causes and consequences of the war, or to fathom the benefits (however dubious) of the American intervention when they are measured up against the global political scenario. He then proceeds to pose more and more radical epistemological and ethical quandaries: can the truth be disentangled from the lies of propaganda and the deceptions of bad faith? Is it possible to identify – let alone adopt – a single, universally valid, moral stance? In a novel which propounds the cognitive value of imagination, these reflections are aptly framed within Berlin’s hypothetical conversation with a little Vietnamese girl, years from the end of the war:

> was twelve to one. Paul Berlin counted it as bad luck, a statistically improbable outcome, to be assigned to the 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry, 198th Infantry Brigade’ (*GAC*, 46).
he would explain to her why he had let himself go to war. Not because of strong convictions, but because he didn’t know. He didn’t know who was right, or what was right; he didn’t know if it was a war of self-determination or self-destruction, outright aggression or national liberation; he didn’t know which speeches to believe, which books, which politicians; he didn’t know if nations would topple like dominoes or stand separate like trees; he didn’t know who really started the war, or why, or when, or with what motives; he didn’t know if it mattered; he saw sense in both sides of the debate, but he did not know where truth lay; he didn’t know if communist tyranny would prove worse in the long run than the tyrannies of Ky or Thieu or Khanh – he simply didn’t know. And who did? Who really did? Oh, he had read the newspapers and magazines. He wasn’t stupid. He wasn’t uninformed. He just didn’t know if the war was right or wrong or somewhere in the murky middle. And who did? Who really knew? So he went to war for reasons beyond knowledge. \(\text{(GAC, 249–50)}\)\(^34\)

What is articulated here is a more essential stalemate of the reason than the one experienced by the protagonist of \textit{If I Die}, who declared himself in possession of a firm opinion about the iniquity of the Vietnam war.

In a chapter with a significant title and strategically placed near the conclusion, \textit{Cacciato} instead takes us through the intricate debate about the necessity of the war: ‘The Things They Didn’t Know’ is the penultimate section in the strand of the narrative made up of sketches and recollections from Berlin’s first six months in country, as well as some general musings about the war.\(^35\) It is only at this point, having established the contingent difficulty in ascertaining the truth about the war – and having cast legitimate doubt, by implication and through the cumulative structure of his main argument, on the possibility of knowing anything at all – that O’Brien reverts to a familiar theme and prevents us (and indeed his protagonist himself) from looking at the epistemological and moral confusion about Vietnam as a justification for Berlin’s behaviour. Berlin’s ‘reasons beyond knowledge’, when further articulated, echo the confession at the core of \textit{If I Die}, and O’Brien’s

\(34\) The Vietnamese girl is the male protagonist’s projected idealization of innocence, as well as a character that epitomizes – again, in Berlin’s mind – a complete separateness from the war. Such male investment in young female figures is recurrent in O’Brien’s work, as I shall discuss further in Chapter 4.

\(35\) The novel also comprises a series of chapters recording Berlin’s thoughts during a six-hour night-shift on the observation post, and, of course, the account of the squad’s fantastic pursuit of Cacciato on the way to Paris. As critics have often remarked, the trajectory of the pursuit sub-plot is surprisingly straightforward, both spatially (in a manner of speaking, of course) and chronologically (see Slabey or Vannatta, for example). The more thematically realistic sketches about the war, instead, are presented in a jumbled order, while the ten ‘Observation Post’ chapters, which can be said to partake of the setting of both other strands (reality and Berlin’s mind), follow each other in the right temporal sequence. For a further discussion of the three narrative strands in \textit{Cacciato}, see also Chapter 5.
own feelings about his participation to the war; the above-mentioned passage continues with an implicit allusion to the noble ideas upon which the American nation, and democracy in general, is founded, with a reminder of the social pact that underpins its political system. This sequence of observations ends with a refrain familiar to O’Brien’s readers from his memoir – the somewhat humiliating disclosure of the real reason behind Berlin’s answer to the draft call, his desire not to bring shame upon himself:

[So he went to war for reasons beyond knowledge.] Because he believed in law, and law told him to go. Because it was a democracy, after all, and LBJ and the others had rightful claim to their offices. He went to the war because it was expected. Because not to go was to risk censure, and to bring embarrassment on his father and his town. Because, not knowing, he saw no reason to distrust those with more experience. Because he loved his country and, more than that, he trusted it. Yes, he did. Oh, he would rather have fought with his father in France, knowing certain things certainly, but he couldn’t choose his war. Nobody could. (GAC, 250)

Insofar as this revelation is concerned, Cacciato can be said to end where If I Die had begun, that is from the acknowledgement that the fear of social censure is stronger than the fear of violence and death. Even after the completion of his Advanced Infantry Training, for the protagonist of If I Die the option of desertion remains an all too feasible, tantalizing possibility. The reader is made party to the agonizing confrontation with this dilemma, as O’Brien starts making serious plans to flee to Sweden, a safer destination for the American deserter than Canada, where most draft-dodgers escaped to. Having worked out the logistical arrangements – bus from Seattle to Vancouver, flight to Dublin, followed by a boat ride to the Swedish shores – O’Brien must admit to himself that ‘it was truly possible. […] There was no doubt that it could be done’ (IID, 60). The plans come to nothing, however, and O’Brien never makes it past Seattle, where he goes through a delirious, sleepless night in which physical illness and moral paralysis of the will are conflated: ‘I was a coward. I was sick’ (IID, 73). The main drama charted by If I Die is about this malaise, and the issue of O’Brien’s courage, and defiance of social expectations, is resolved once and for all before he gets to Vietnam. Paul Berlin’s own exploration of the possibility of desertion, and the related deliberation about the real meaning of courage, takes the shape of a book-length, fantastic journey in pursuit of Cacciato, a fellow-soldier from Alpha Company who one day decides to leave the war and sets off on his way to Paris. Interestingly, if O’Brien’s fear in the face of his two unpalatable options – leaving his old life behind to seek asylum in Sweden, losing his
reputation into the bargain, or joining the war and losing his self-respect, and possibly his life, instead – finds a physical manifestation in recurrent bouts of vomiting during his fateful weekend in Seattle. Berlin’s dread of the war is immediately configured in terms of corporeal symptoms which, in their turn, substantially affect the character’s manner of envisaging, and presumably responding to, his moral quandary. Berlin has an excess of fear ‘biles’, which provokes, amongst other disorders, ‘paralysis of the mental processes that separate what is truly happening from what only might have happened; floatingness; removal; a releasing feeling in the belly; a sense of drifting; a lightness of head’ (GAC, 35). Chapter 2, the first ‘Observation Post’ section, contains an unequivocal hint about what might have triggered Berlin’s whole imaginary journey to Paris, which does otherwise take its cue from Cacciato’s actual flight from the war: ‘This Cacciato business – it’s the work of the biles. They’re flooding your whole system, going to the head and fucking up reality, frying in all the goofy, weird stuff’ (GAC, 35), Doc Peret, the squad’s medic, says to Berlin. As readers are told at the very beginning of the novel, and of the squad’s pursuit of their comrade, when the narrative is still in the realm of actual facts, Berlin suffers an attack of the biles after the explosion of a booby-trap set up by Cacciato. In the grip of panic, Berlin loses control of his bowels and, as it turns out much later, in a not altogether unpredictable denouement at the end of the novel, he loses consciousness too.

The flight to Paris, however, is not simply the product of an unconscious vision from which Berlin wakes up in the final chapter of the novel (appropriately entitled ‘Going After Cacciato’, just like the opening chapter, when the fainting fit takes place); throughout the parallel narratives of the guard-duty at the observation post and of the adventures on the road to Paris, Berlin often tries to imagine, or is encouraged to imagine, a happy ending for this crazy venture. Thus, the pursuit of Cacciato is simultaneously represented as a creation of Berlin’s subconscious and a reverie for Berlin to indulge in at night-time, an activity so enjoyable that he is willing to prolong his shift at the observation post for the sake of working out the odds of Cacciato’s success and/or dreaming up a positive conclusion for the latter’s adventures – and, at an imaginary level, his own and the squad’s. Whether a subconscious vision or a wilful fantasy, the journey to Paris is a way for Berlin to explore the real nature of courage and measure his own aptitude for bravery. The option of desertion, which O’Brien had already identified in If I Die as the only true courageous alternative for any draftee opposed to the war, is deliberated through the (more or less conscious) power of the individual’s imagination – and this is where the novel explores in more depth an issue only intimated in the memoir and later revisited in The Things They Carried: the connection between the inability to do the right thing and a ‘failure of the imagination’ (GAC, 296).
Whether in a bile-induced hallucination or in a controlled reverie, the squad’s flight to Paris is never fully entertained by Berlin as a straightforward act of desertion; rather, in spite of Harold Murphy’s early refusal to follow the search party beyond the Vietnamese border, and of further subsequent reminders of the soldiers’ precarious status outside the war zone (see, for example, the execution of a young Iranian boy accused of having gone AWOL in the chapter entitled ‘Atrocities on the Road to Paris’), the journey to Paris is constantly justified by the need to apprehend Cacciato, even when the appeal of ulterior motives is so strong as to overshadow, more and more frequently, the original goal of the soldiers’ expedition. After all, the flight to the French capital can be seen as the fulfilment of fantasies of escape from the horror and the chaos of combat in the pursuit of romantic love, or in the accomplishment of a collective mission with a definite aim, or in the pleasure of a challenging, exotic trip towards a fascinating destination. In this sense, the possibility of desertion is always investigated in a doubly mediated form, not merely through the buffer of imagination, but also as an experiment prompted by Cacciato’s own fanciful decision to set off on the 8,600-mile-long march to La Ville-Lumière. Interestingly, both the squad’s expedition and Cacciato’s journey are primarily configured as movements towards an objective, rather than flights away from the status quo – although, of course, in the end the two options really amount to the same thing.

On its part, the final destination of the soldiers’ journey summons up a host of suggestive images: in the first instance, within the immediate context of the Vietnam war, Paris is where the inconclusive peace talks between the US and North Vietnam had been taking place since 1968 in an attempt to find a diplomatic alternative to the military conflict. Of course, Paris is also the city where the independence of the United States from Great Britain was first internationally recognized in 1783. The memory of the American shedding of the colonial yoke in Paris makes an ironic historical counterpart to the fate of Vietnam which, divided in the colony of Cochinchina, and the two protectorates of Amman and Tonkin, would fall prey to France’s own imperialistic drives and become part of French Indochina in 1887. Paris also embodies a number of more general contradictions, as the city of the Enlightenment and of Terror; a symbol of sophistication and a den of debauchery; the most romantic place in the world, but also an aggressively sensual and sexual place, particularly in the Puritan American imaginary (see Lieutenant Corson’s immediate response to the disclosure of Cacciato’s destination: ‘So Cacciato’s gone off to gay Paree – bare ass and Frogs everywhere, the Follies Brassiere’, G.A.C, 12). Last but not least, in this series of connotations, is the fact that Paris is located at the end of a long march westward, thus bringing to mind the mythology of the frontier.

Guiding his squad to this loaded destination is the pre-eminently uncom-
plicated Cacciato who, by virtue of his innocence, acts as perfect foil for Berlin’s exploration of his own desire for escape, while also providing, with his eccentricity, a very convincing starting point for the whole mad enterprise. Introduced, on the second page of the novel, in the matching words of two of his comrades (‘Dumb as a bullet, Stink said. Dumb as a month-old oyster fart, said Harold Murphy’, 10), Cacciato is repeatedly described as almost pathologically simple and with strangely unmemorable features:

‘It’s the Mongol influence,’ Doc Peret had once said. ‘I mean, hey, just take a close look at him. See how the eyes slant? Pigeon toes, domed head? My theory is the guy missed Mongolian idiocy by the breath of a genetic hair. Could’ve gone either way.’ And maybe Doc was right. There was something curiously unfinished about Cacciato. Open faced and naïve and plump, Cacciato lacked the fine detail, the refinements and final touches, that maturity ordinarily marks on a boy of seventeen years. The result was blurred and uncolored and bland. You could look at him then look away and not remember what you’d seen. All this, Stink said, added up to a case of gross stupidity. The way he whistled on guard, the funny little trick he had of saving mouthwash by spitting it back into the bottle, fishing for walleyes up in lake country. It was all part of a strange, boyish simplicity that the men tolerated the way they might tolerate a frisky pup. (GAC, 15)

On closer look, however, the negative associations of Cacciato’s simplicity can be replaced by much more even-handed and flattering explanations; the fuzziness of his features, for example, makes Cacciato into something of a blank slate – an ideal character on which to pin one’s deepest desires – and creates a sense of mystery about him, while constantly reminding the reader that this soldier, like most of his comrades, is still little more than a boy. Cacciato displays the physical traits of a baby (the soft flesh, the big eyes, the pale skin tone) and the mannerisms of a child without a care in the world (the constant smiling, whistling and chewing gum), so that his dumbness is better described as playful, nutty and even immature ‘tomfoolery’ than as incapacitating idiocy (after all, the squad are completely outsmarted by Cacciato’s smoke-grenade, the ‘booby’s booby trap’, GAC, 27). What is more, Cacciato is recognized by general consensus to have distinguished himself not merely for his ability to cope with the toughest aspects of life as a grunt, but also for some memorable acts of bravery, so that the hypothesis that fear is the reason behind his decision to quit the war is decidedly ruled out of the question (GAC, 22). Seen in this light, then, his crazy enterprise looks like an impulsive, audacious escapade of the kind that would appeal to a boy who lives in the moment and who would therefore take no notice of such trifles as practical considerations and military rules.

This utter disregard for the realm of rationality and common sense ties in
very well with Cacciato’s association with the moon (its shape is recalled in
the roundness of his face), hence with the (traditionally feminine) faculties of
intuition and imagination. To this dyad, I would add the quality of purity or
innocence, which is also one of the constitutive traits of Artemis/Diana, the
virginal goddess of the moon, and of the hunt, in ancient Greek and Roman
mythology. Cacciato’s lunar connotations are further emphasized by the
reference to the ‘caccia’ (‘hunt’ in Italian) contained in his name, which trans-
lates into ‘the hunted’ or even possibly ‘the shunned’. The latter, looser
interpretation is perhaps a hint to Cacciato’s separateness from the group – a
distance which acquires particular significance when we remember that
Cacciato is the only squad member who refuses to be actively implicated in
the fragging of Sidney Martin, the young lieutenant executed by his men for
putting their lives at risk (and for causing the deaths of Frenchie Tucker and
Bernie Lynn) with his rigorous insistence on Standard Operating Procedures
when dealing with VC tunnels. All in all, with his quirks and ingenuousness,
Cacciato makes an unlikely hero, and certainly a very unlikely male role
model, devoid as he is of any conspicuously manly traits. In fact, in the course
of their search, his comrades dismiss the suggestion that the fugitive might be
found looking for ‘booze an’ bimbos’ like any ‘red-blooded Joe’, while one of
the squad members goes as far as to doubt that ‘the guy knows women from
french fries’ (GAC, 116–17).

O’Brien’s use of the metaphor of the hunt – an image already present in
other Vietnam war narratives, such as Norman Mailer’s Why Are We in
Vietnam? (1967) and Michael Cimino’s The Deer Hunter (1978) – also strikes
me as an ironic quotation of ‘the prototypical American figure, the isolated
hunter in the wilderness’.36 It is true that, in relation to Berlin, Cacciato
gradually changes from his original role as quarry to the active function of
guide and source of inspiration, but he remains a very unorthodox scout
figure. Elusive, unpredictable, bizarre, even comic, Cacciato is an odd kind of
pathfinder: his skills, the nature of his adventures and the tone of their repre-
sentation could not be more different from the solemn earnestness of the
frontier myth. On the other hand, Cacciato does partake of some of the tradi-
tional qualities of the pioneer: his singleness of purpose is perhaps fuelled
more by a simple-minded doggedness than by manly hardness but, on the
plus side, Cacciato is definitely endowed with the sense of ease with himself

Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film on the Vietnam War, eds. Owen W.
205–24, p. 208. In his article, Slabey reminds us of the widespread critical proposition that
‘warfare, as treated in American fiction, is an avatar of the frontier spirit, with the soldier
replacing his progenitors, the cowboy and the frontiersman […]. With the widespread use
of imagery from the hunt and Indian warfare Vietnam becomes an extension of the
American Westward movement’ (p. 208).
and the infinite adaptability to his surroundings typical of the scout (from this perspective, his ostensible lack of interest in women can be assimilated to the celibacy and self-sufficiency of the White Indian). More than that, Cacciato is always and seamlessly himself; his simplicity and indeterminacy are finally marks of an authentic individual, whole and self-contained, and therefore always potentially at loggerheads with the rules of common sense and common morality. If authenticity is the key to true courage, then Berlin could not have found a better trailblazer for his journey of self-discovery and for his inquiry into the right course of action necessary in order to maintain one’s integrity and prove one’s valour in Vietnam.

Alongside Cacciato, Berlin finds another spiritual guide and role model in Sarkin Aung Wan, a young refugee from Cholon who joins the squad on the Vietnamese border with Laos, to which she had been travelling with her two elderly aunts – their final destination, in the girl’s own words, ‘The Far West’ (GAC, 60). Seemingly fragile and in need of protection, but in fact full of energy, physically tough and strong-willed, Sarkin is also – or perhaps I should say unsurprisingly: she is, after all, a figment of Berlin’s imagination – fetching and exotic. She soon becomes an active member of the expedition to Paris, in spite of some initial reservations on the part of old Lieutenant Corson (Sidney Martin’s replacement). In line with his nostalgia for the certainties of conventional combat with proper rules of engagement and clear demarcations between friends and enemies, Corson maintains that war is no place for civilians – least of all, the implication seems to be, when they are women.37 Undaunted by the Lieutenant’s scepticism, Sarkin is immediately charmed by the prospect of reaching Paris, where she would love to visit the famous monuments, stroll along the Seine, admire the shops and perhaps even put down roots, establishing a beauty parlour and setting up home. As she tells Berlin, there is a possibility that they might fall in love in Paris. In her vision, Sarkin combines the thrill of a holiday and the magic of romance with the peaceful appeal of domesticity, thus painting an idyllic picture that – the reader surmises – would naturally come to mind, enticingly, to Berlin

37 Lieutenant Corson wistfully reminisces about his engagement in an earlier Southeast Asian conflict: ‘In Korea, by God, the people liked us. Know what I mean? They liked us. Respect, that’s what it was. And it was a decent war. Regular battle lines, no backstabbing crap. You won some, you lost some, but what the heck, it was a war’ (147). The implication is that Vietnam is not even a war, let alone a decent war. While O’Brien gives voice through the old-fashioned lifer to the familiar argument about the particular challenges of the American intervention in Vietnam, he later on maintains, through Doc Peret (another sympathetic character), that all military conflicts are the same: ‘The point is that war is war no matter how it’s perceived. War has its own reality. War kills and maims and rips up the land and makes orphans and widows. Any war. So when I say that there is nothing new to tell about Nam, I’m saying it was just a war like every war’ (GAC, 190). In voicing this latter view, O’Brien takes an atypical stance in the literary and cinematic canon that has developed around the war in Vietnam.
as the best possible development of the daydream triggered by Cacciato’s flight to Paris. Throughout the course of the narrative, Sarkin continues to spur Berlin on his imaginary journey, acting both as an essential part of his wildest fantasies and as the key character to prompt and/or resolve crucial incidents in the plot, such as the squad’s escape from the VC tunnels or Berlin’s honest reflection on the reasons for his inability to follow completely in Cacciato’s footsteps, both in reality and in the realm of fiction.

O’Brien’s early descriptions of Sarkin Aung Wan manage to strike a perfect balance between exotic, seductive, even primitive connotations and more familiar, innocent and unthreatening traits: ‘A girl, not a woman: maybe twelve, maybe twenty-one. Her hair and eyes were black. She wore an ao dai and sandals and gold hoops through her ears. Hanging from a chain about her neck was a chrome cross’ (GAC, 60); ‘smooth skin, dignity, eyes that were shy and bold, coarse black hair. She was young, though. Much too young. She smelled of soap and joss sticks’ (GAC, 62). Dark and beautiful, demure and confident, Sarkin wears her contradictions on her body: the fresh scent of soap and the more pungent fragrance of incense, the cross on her chest complementing her local attire and sparkling earrings. If she is a cliché — which to an extent, of course, she is, particularly in her first intimate moment with Berlin, as she ‘purr[s] from somewhere below his knees’ while clipping his toenails (GAC, 113) — we should not mistake the conventional imagery as a failure on O’Brien’s part to create a complex, three-dimensional female character. Rather, this is the logical consequence of the fact that Sarkin is a product of the mind of an inexperienced, timid young soldier, who is quite the opposite of a ladies’ man; a consummate day-dreamer and procrastinator, always wavering about his options, something of a drifter, plagued by an ‘inability to decide’ (GAC, 217), Berlin is no material for a lead romantic role, in a war narrative or otherwise.

Readers are given the measure of his personality in a couple of vignettes about his life as a young man back home: the school counsellor’s disbelief (‘Don’t you know there’s a war on?’ , GAC, 217) when Berlin quits college only four credits short of graduation and in the full knowledge that this act might speed up his draft call, or the clumsy courtship of a high-school sweetheart (‘In high school, Louise Wiertsma had almost been his girl friend. He’d taken her to the movies, and afterwards they had talked meaningfully about this and that, and afterward he had pretended to kiss her’, GAC, 175). The late, sensitive disclosure of these details prevents them from being used to dismiss Berlin with a few easy labels (the college drop-out, the loser); rather, they put the finishing touches to a poignant, rather than pathetic, picture. Bearing all this in mind, it comes as no surprise that Berlin should latch on to common orientalist imagery (e.g. the submissive Asian girl) and create out of this raw material — which, admittedly, is problematic for some of the gender
and ethnic stereotypes that it perpetuates – a perfectly idealized figure within the strict boundaries of what her architect dares to imagine. The relationship between Sarkin and Berlin quickly develops into a romantic liaison, framed by the Parisian promise of fulfilment, but it remains plausibly chaste – plausibly, that is, when we think that this is the dream of the same boy who could not bring himself to kiss his date back in the States.

Tailor-made to fit her creator’s emotional needs and desires, Sarkin is also a positive, vibrant and engaging figure tout court. When she first enters the scene – two bawling aunts in tow, mourning the loss of one of their water buffalo at the hands of Berlin’s squad – she appears to be offering, as a vulnerable refugee, an orphan and a victim of American violence, a feminine, domestic, civilian counterpoint to the soldiers’ plight. Soon enough, however, through the passion of her vision, evidence of her resourcefulness, and the discreet, early disappearance of her elderly relatives, she turns her escape from the conflict into a life-affirming mission towards a brighter future. At the beginning of the marvellous journey towards Paris, it is Sarkin who encourages Berlin not to give up his dream, which at this stage has developed beyond the initial aspiration to follow Cacciato – i.e. a thinly disguised wish to leave a controversial war – into a more complex desire that includes the fulfilment of a romantic fantasy with a beautiful, caring and spirited young woman. Sarkin’s vision of playing house in Paris is Berlin’s own fantasy in both senses of the word: Berlin is merely projecting onto Sarkin, a figment of his imagination, a desire which he strongly cherishes himself and which he cannot freely express without her mediation, because it is incompatible with his duty as a soldier – and with traditional gender roles. Like Cacciato before her, Sarkin functions as a foil for Berlin’s own inadmissible desires: the hunt for the deserter masks Berlin’s longing to take a moral, if not physical, distance from the war. Similarly, imagining the wish for domesticity as Sarkin’s own daydream is Berlin’s way of letting himself entertain the same fantasy vicariously, and therefore not as a full-blown betrayal of manly virtues and of the military ideal of male bonding.

Significantly, Berlin will not be able – even in the realm of fantasy – to overcome his reservations about the legitimacy of this romantic dream: when getting a flat in Paris with Sarkin becomes a real option – in the fantastic subplot, of course – he feels guilty about walking out on his comrades. Having overcome these misgivings, Berlin cannot make the final leap of imagination into the much longed-for scene of domestic bliss: the police catch up with the squad, who therefore must relocate all together into the flat recently rented by the couple; what was meant to be a love-nest becomes a military headquarters from which to resume the collective search for Cacciato with renewed earnestness. In the initial stages of the adventure, by contrast, Sarkin’s confidence in the power of Berlin’s imagination had not been disappointed; one of
the most surreal episodes of the journey occurs at the moment when the soldiers and the three Vietnamese refugees appear doomed to go their separate ways, in accordance with Lieutenant Corson’s orders. This particular plot development is prevented at the last minute by a truly extraordinary invention, as the earth opens under the travellers’ feet and the entire party falls, Alice-in-Wonderland-like, down a hole on the road to Paris. The squad find themselves in a tunnel complex presided over by Li Van Hgoc, a prematurely aged Viet Cong major, whose promising future has been thwarted by the draft call. After Li Van Hgoc’s bizarre attempt to seize control of his enemies – which amounts to nothing more than a feeble declaration of intent since, as Corson sums up, the major is ‘[o]utmanned, outgunned, and outtechnologized’ (GAC, 95) – the American soldiers are made to realize a new meaning of the expressions ‘prisoner of war’: Li Van Hgoc has spent ten years in his underground maze, with ‘tunnels leading to more tunnels, passages emptying in passages, deadends and byways and twists and turns, darkness everywhere’ (GAC, 98). There is no exit. They are all trapped. Xa, the land, is their common enemy. As if the metaphor were not clear enough already, Sarkin and Li Van Hgoc go on to explain that the ancient ideogram does represent the land, but also ‘community, and soil, and home. […] Xa, it has many implications. But at heart it means that a man’s spirit is in the land, where his ancestors rest and where the rice grows’ (GAC, 87).

Americans and Vietnamese alike are prisoners of a conflict whose resolution is not clearly in sight, for all the military superiority of the American armed forces; furthermore, while the indigenous connection with the land is self-evident, for the American soldiers Xa cannot but signify the bond of duty to one’s country, what it stands for and what it requires of its loyal citizens. Faithful to her role as a migrant, dispossessed and in search of a new home, and as the voice of possibility and imagination, Sarkin embraces a paradoxical logic perfectly suited to the squad’s present circumstances (“The way in,” she repeated, “is the way out. To flee Xa one must join it. To go home one must become a refugee”, GAC, 99) and guides them out of the hole, through a subterranean environment marked by the stench of death, by sewage and by sludge. This part of the soldiers’ expedition to Paris is thus configured as a re-birth, the journey that follows (for those lucky enough to make it) the catabasis, i.e. the (often cathartic) descent into the underworld, itself a place of decay, waste and dirt. The reference to the labyrinth also suggests a perilous, difficult passage, where one is likely to get lost or to encounter monsters, where both one’s sanity and one’s life are seriously under threat. Sarkin – a novel Ariadne or, as intimated by Slabey, a novel Beatrice – leads the soldiers out of their labyrinthine selva oscura to the conclusion of this part of the journey, in Mandalay, a location no doubt much more mundane than Dante’s Paradise, but still possessed of a legendary ring
in the Western world, with its promise of the love of a languid ‘Burma girl’ and memories of the golden days of the British Empire.38

The soldiers’ progress continues in a series of curious adventures and encounters from Mandalay through India, Iran, Turkey and then across Europe to Paris where, in the last chapter completely devoted to the fantastic sub-plot (‘The End of the Road to Paris’), Sarkin and Berlin hold their own personal peace talks in a climactic showdown during which imagination must be finally translated into reality or abandoned for good. Confronted with Sarkin’s peremptory plea for him to start living his marvellous dream, Berlin is forced to admit that, even at an imaginary level, he cannot overcome the moral and emotional obligations that keep him tied to the war. Berlin’s address concludes with a much quoted sequence of three sentences which sum up the ‘failure of the imagination’ at the heart of this book. The final paragraph of Berlin’s confession deserves to be reported in full, for its eloquent exposition of the pressure that society exerts on the individual (a point subtly emphasised in the shift from the first person singular to the first person plural in this passage) or, in the terms of my analysis of bravery, of the conflict between sincerity/honesty and authenticity:

Perhaps now you can see why I stress the importance of viewing obligations as a relationship between people, not between one person and some impersonal idea or principle. An idea, when violated, cannot make reprisals. A principle cannot refuse to shake my hand. Only people can do that. And it is this social power, the threat of social consequences, that stops me from making a full and complete break. Peace of mind is not a simple matter of pursuing one’s own pleasure; rather, it is inextricably linked to the attitudes of other human beings, to what they want, to what they expect. The real issue is to find felicity within limits. Within the context of our obligations to other people. We all want peace. We all want dignity and domestic tranquillity. But we want these to be honorable and lasting. We want a peace that endures. We want a peace we can live with. We want a peace we can be proud of. Even in imagination we must obey the logic of what we started. Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits. (GAC, 302–303)

The announcement of the limits of imagination, almost like a performative

38 The image of the Burma girl (or ‘broad’, in the American vernacular) wishing her British soldier back to Mandalay, ‘where the old flotilla lay’ and ‘where there ain’t no Ten Commandments’ (but rather, the sound of ‘crazy [temple] bells calling’ to lazy days in a luxuriant landscape, the wind blowing amidst the palm trees, while the flying fish play in the sea) originally comes from Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘Mandalay’. The first and last stanzas of this poem were edited and put to music by Oley Speaks in 1907 as ‘On the Road to Mandalay’, a song popularized in America by Frank Sinatra in the late 1950s.
speech act, brings the negotiations to a halt: Berlin and Sarkin leave the room from separate exits, and the girl effectively disappears from the novel. We later find out that she is heading all the way back to Vietnam with Lieutenant Corson, the character who, in the aftermath of Berlin’s attack of the biles and Cacciato’s successful flight across the Vietnamese border with Laos, concludes the novel with a declaration of hope against all the odds, a tentative suggestion (‘Maybe so’, GAC, 317) that Cacciato might make it. The lieutenant’s cautious optimism explains why Berlin has imagined him as Sarkin’s companion on her return journey to Vietnam; in the realm of reality, Corson is the one character who, with Berlin, seems to believe in and wish for the possibility of Cacciato’s enterprise succeeding. Corson is the good, caring lieutenant, as opposed to Sidney Martin, a bad leader for his insistence on military discipline and regulations. On this subject, it is worth pointing out that O’Brien never depicts Martin as an outright villain, fully deserving his violent death: while Corson is undoubtedly a much more sympathetic character, loved by his men (and by Sarkin, who treats him like an ailing father), Martin is also portrayed as a perfectly decent, intelligent and perceptive man. His murder remains perhaps the most traumatic and heinous incident in the novel, so terrible that it is the only truly unspeakable death in the narrative. The circumstances of the other American casualties are all accounted for, even if not in the right chronological order, but rather delivered in a mixture of prolepsis and analepsis; by contrast, we never see Oscar Johnson throwing the grenade that, having been touched by all the other squad members, kills the lieutenant. Rather than playing down the magnitude of the event being glossed over, this remarkable ellipsis draws the readers’ attention to issues of collective, and individual, responsibility.

Berlin’s confession of his inability to stand up to social pressure is only a fraction of what the young soldier discovers in the exploration of his own soul under Sarkin’s tutelage. During the war, the encounter with ‘a little girl with gold hoops in her ears and ugly scabs on her brow’ (GAC, 248), in need of medical attention, had prompted Berlin to wonder whether she, and her fellow villagers, could sense his compassion for them, his desire for mutual kindness and collective happiness, his horror of violence, and his fear. Dabbing iodine on the girl’s sores, Berlin had embarked on a silent, heartfelt explanation, aimed at the entire village, of the extent and the nature of his personal involvement in the conflict, a desperate attempt to absolve himself from any sense of guilt:

His intentions were benign. He was no tyrant, no pig, no Yankee killer. He was innocent. Yes, he was. He was innocent. […] [He would have told them h]ow it made him angry and sad when … a million things, when women were frisked with free hands, when old men were made to drop their pants to be searched, when, in
a village called Thin Mau, Oscar and Rudy Chassler shot down ten dogs for the sport of it. Sad and stupid. Crazy. Mean-spirited and self-defeating and wrong. Wrong! He would have told them this, the kids especially. But not me, he would have told them. The others, maybe, but not me. Guilty perhaps of hanging on, of letting myself be dragged along, of falling victim to gravity and obligation and events, but not – not! – guilty of wrong intentions. (GAC, 249)

In a similar bid to establish his distance from the war, during his first day of combat, Berlin – like a toned-down version of the Tim O’Brien from If I Die – had worked out his own strategy of resistance against assimilation into the military pack: going through the moves of the comradely trooper, he would look, smell, learn how to clean and how to use his weapon like the other soldiers, and perhaps even laugh at their macabre jokes, pretending to find them funny, without letting on. Acting his role in the most superficial manner, he would thus preserve his integrity and individuality. ‘The trick was not to take it personally. Stay aloof. Follow the herd but don’t join it’ (GAC, 204; notice the recurrence of the word ‘herd’ from If I Die). At the end of the novel, however, and particularly after his confrontation with Sarkin – who, as the reader will have noticed by now, is really a composite figure, modelled partly on Louise Wiertsma, partly on the ‘little girl with gold hoops in her ears’ – Berlin realises that his earlier excuses and rationalizations do not exonerate him from his individual share of culpability as a soldier, albeit a reluctant one. Before launching into the final part of the harangue in which he declares his failure of imagination, Berlin in fact acknowledges in no uncertain terms that the fear of social censure, even as it explains his inability to oppose the war, does not provide him with a moral justification for his behaviour (GAC, 301ff.). By the same token, the distinction between tagging along and being guilty of the wrong intentions is a specious one: this realization, which provided the premise of If I Die, is the greatest lesson that Berlin learns from his journey.

In conclusion to the analysis of Cacciato and of the more general argument on the nature of courage, a few observations about the gender politics of this novel are perhaps in order, particularly in view of the fact that academic discussion of O’Brien’s take on the notion of bravery has tended to focus on his marked rejection of a masculine, heroic conception of this ideal in preference of the androgynous virtue identified in If I Die as ‘wise endurance’. My own insistence on authenticity as the key to understanding O’Brien’s definition of courage aims to complement previous studies of this subject, but also to moderate the emphasis placed on the endless debate about the opposition between masculinity and femininity which – quite justifiably, of course – pervades the study of war literature, and has inevitably become the privileged perspective from which to approach an author like O’Brien, especially in his
attempt to define a quality so traditionally intertwined with manliness. As shown by this reading of *Cacciato*, the creation of a feminine figure like Sarkin is due more to the need for psychological faithfulness to the character of Paul Berlin than to O’Brien’s desire to attach a gender to courage, imagination or hope. (Needless to say, these notions are all gendered enough in our culture.) It is true that Berlin’s other guides – Cacciato, and even Corson – are somewhat feminized, and not always in the most flattering terms. The former is branded as an idiot, the latter is a sick man: the language of pathology is used in reference to both figures. It is also true that when Sarkin encourages Berlin to embrace his dream in spite of (what she sees as) a misguided loyalty towards his comrades (a camaraderie that he must have succumbed to in the face of his early resistance to the lure of the ‘herd’), she might be construed as a female threat to the male bond – a bond that Cacciato did not have to break because it was never there for him in the first place.

On the whole, however, it seems to me that any dubious connotations ascribed to feminine or feminized characters are more than counterbalanced by the novel’s attempt to provide an honest representation of the complexity of the bond between the soldiers, not to mention its unmistakable critique of the ridiculous machismo that pervades the entire hierarchical structure of the army. For example, the sketch about Berlin’s interview with the battalion promotion board, in the realistic strand of the novel, exposes the obscenity and inanity of the ‘tough-guy’ military posturing in the committee’s grotesque, bullying repartee with the soldier (*GAC*, 251ff.). On the other side of the spectrum of gender stereotypes, the parade of wacky characters in *Cacciato* does include a girl from California, a ‘revolutionary’, or rather the parody of a hippie, from whom the squad hitch a ride near Zagreb. Without having given the soldiers time to explain the purpose of their flight to Paris, the girl over-zealously proclaims her affinity with their rebelliousness, emphasizing their common rejection of rules, their contempt for institutions, and their desire to separate themselves from evil. Exasperated by the girl’s off-hand, if well-meaning, comments about the similarity of their plight, Oscar puts the rifle against her ear and gets her to pull over. Knowing Oscar’s quick temper and having witnessed his mounting irritation, the reader is not too surprised by what follows: the van is hijacked, the girl is dumped on the road. Not so the girl, who mistakes Oscar’s brutal recourse to his weapon as the preliminary to another kind of violence, and quickly interjects, smiling: ‘Look, rape isn’t necessary. I mean, hey, I really dig sex. Really. We can rig up a curtain or something’ (*GAC*, 261). With these words, this vapid figure confirms the tritest misogynistic ideas that the military – who, it ought to be pointed out, in the promotion board vignette, were self-proclaimed ‘swinging’ dicks’ (*GAC*, 253) – entertain about women: they are stupid, they cannot understand the war, they are sluts. Besides being the character who, more
than anybody else in the novel, seems to represent the unbridgeable divide between those who have fought the war and those who have not (and women, by definition, traditionally epitomize the latter category), the girl from California embodies another misogynistic cliché with her sexual behaviour.

The girl from California certainly is a mono-dimensional character who could be (mis?)construed as a misogynistic caricature. However, one wonders, should this be read as an expression of misogyny on O’Brien’s part, rather than a representation of the prejudices held by his characters or even, by extension, of the misogyny present in our culture? The answer, I think, is no, although I appreciate that the Californian girl’s unwillingness to listen and inability to understand seem to prefigure similar failings ascribed to other women in O’Brien’s best known book, *The Things They Carried*, whose war stories fall on the deaf ears of sisters who do not write back and elderly ladies of humane convictions who do not get the point. We shall return to this issue in Chapter 4, but for the time being, one thing is for sure: particularly through his early work and his recurrent meditations on the nature of courage, O’Brien clearly takes his distance from what Susan Jeffords has called the ‘remasculinization of America’ in the aftermath of Vietnam. At the most basic level, the guiding presence of Sarkin Aung Wan makes sure that the journey to Paris, i.e. the real test of courage in the novel, is not ‘that men without women trip’ that perpetuates the myth of male bonding as the one good thing to come out of extreme situations like combat.

More to the point, *Cacciato* tries to supersede the scrutiny of gendered role models that had informed *If I Die* and *Northern Lights* and continues O’Brien’s relentless probing into the issue of personal responsibility not merely for one’s actions, but also for one’s failures to act. The novel acknowledges the pressures of social conditioning and military training – Berlin, after all, is a more malleable recruit than the protagonist of *If I Die* – but at no point does it suggest that he, or any other soldier for that matter, is a guileless victim of the system or that society is to blame for the ferocity (or even the indifference or cowardice) of its people. On the contrary, in *Cacciato* Berlin shows that keeping away from a gung-ho mentality must be accompanied by a frank acknowledgement of one’s individual responsibility and failings. This is perhaps why, after his trilogy of courage, O’Brien has been able to move on to the exploration of a character like William Cowling – the anti-hero of *The Nuclear Age* – who, however flawed (and O’Brien’s protagonists are always troubled and flawed), appears to have the guts to stick to his beliefs at the cost of unpopularity and social censure.