Trauma, Gender and the Poetics of Uncertainty

Michael Herr’s Dispatches opens with a marvel: an old map of Vietnam. Stretching between the 26th and the 9th parallel, the country unfolds like a long, thin ‘S’, swelling up in the Red River delta in the North and the Mekong River delta in the South, the ‘two rice bowls at the opposite ends of a carrying pole’.

Interestingly, Herr offers a description of the map, but not of what it represents; the poster on the wall – the work of French cartographers – has clearly seen better days. Worn out by the heat and the humidity of the local climate, and made obsolete by the passage of time, it has ceased to provide correct geopolitical coordinates. The anachronism of the old colonial names for the protectorates and territories of French Indochina is part of the incantation of this vision: names such as Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China must have had by the late sixties a mythical, exotic ring, especially when juxtaposed, as on Herr’s map, with fabulous places such as the kingdom of Siam. Yet, with the exclusion of the misguided help of this old-fashioned nomenclature, readers are left to their own devices in order to picture the serpentine drawing that appears to have bewitched the narrator. Like Herr’s outdated map, this ‘blank’ image of Vietnam gains in evocative power in proportion to its lack of referential accuracy: map and country, signifier and signified are so much more fascinating as they are respectively inadequate mimetic tool and mysterious object of contemplation, empty signs holding the promise of a host of interpretative possibilities.

Although part of a self-conscious, cynical and often self-deprecating narrative, Herr’s partial mapping perpetuates orientalist prejudices about the Far East: for Herr in 1967, reading the shifting image of Vietnam, constantly reshaped by the escalating war ‘was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like reading the wind’. Herr’s statement immedi-

2 This brings to mind the enigmatic ‘immense snake uncoiled’ that opens Heart of Darkness where, beckoning from the depths of Africa, the river Congo casts its spell on Marlow and his audience: ‘The snake had charmed me’ (p. 22). On this issue, see also the opening sections of Chapter 1, above, and Chapter 5, below.
3 Herr, Dispatches, p. 11.
ately questions the very possibility of mimetic representation and mutual understanding between different cultures, but it also lends itself to the charge of having stylized and romanticized—or worse, reduced to the status of brute, natural force—the object of one’s observations. If not quite the ‘blank space of delightful mystery’ reminiscent of Marlow’s boyish fantasy of exploration in *Heart of Darkness* (22), Herr’s Vietnam, much like its people, is virtually invisible, not merely concealed by the old colonial boundaries, but effectively erased by the ongoing military conflict: ‘We also knew that for years now there had been no country here but the war’ (11). The opening image of *Dispatches* flags up a number of problematic issues that inform critical reflections on the Vietnam war, as well as textual representations of the Vietnamese landscape: while the realization of the impossibility of total and accurate mapping ties in with the modernist and postmodern reaction to the mimetic illusions of formal realism, and can be seen as part of the twentieth-century disenfranchisement from grand narratives, in tune with a poststructuralist take on language, Herr’s orientalist perception of the Vietnamese and his coalescence of the conflict with the land it ravaged are emblematic of recurrent issues specific to the ways in which the Vietnam war has been narrativized in the United States. We have already seen that O’Brien explores and deconstructs the *a priori* of mythical reductions and/or aggrandizements of his own country: his allusions to the symbolic geography of the United States—the harshness of the northern wilderness, the bloody violence of the Far West—are evidence of his critical attitude towards the foundational national narrative of the frontier, while his descriptions of the American landscape are closely intertwined with the psychological mapping of his characters, in the awareness of the human tendency to project (collective or individual) emotions onto the environment.

In a similar deconstructive spirit, O’Brien’s representation of Vietnam is successful, for the most part, in eschewing and/or exposing the racist and misogynist stereotypes of much literature on the war. Together with the revision of traditional American locations, O’Brien’s attempt to capture the soldiers’ ambivalence towards the Vietnamese territory and its inhabitants is

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4 In fairness, in *Dispatches* Herr does not claim an impartiality and completeness of vision. If anything, he does the opposite, with his focus on the American experience of the war, which explains (without justifying it) the flattening of Vietnam onto Western preconceptions and stereotypes: the ethnic and political diversity within Vietnam and the opacity of the overall picture of this ‘alien’ culture are as much a matter of Western perception and representation as the products of the history and geography of the place. After all, the paradox of the ‘screening’ nature of language itself, let alone cultural differences (cf. the ambivalence of the screen as a canvas on which images can be projected, but also as a partition that obscures things from view) is already present in Herr’s title, the call to an obvious attempt at communication, always already doomed to misfire and do away with (‘dispatch’) final meaning.
subsumed within a vast figurative landscape – made up of holes and ditches, orifices and wounds – that recurs throughout his writing. O’Brien’s penchant for this imagery has often been at the centre of heated critical discussions, because it can be read too easily as yet another gendered, misogynist construction, as in the case of the obscene shit field that claims the life of one of the soldiers in *The Things They Carried*. The charting of O’Brien’s symbolic topography of trauma, as well as of his portrayal of the relationships between male and female characters, offers a fruitful entry point in outlining his non-gendered politics of reception, and in dealing with the question of the (im)possibility of representing the unspeakable and understanding the incomprehensible. I shall argue that it is in the light of this impasse in communication – thematized so obsessively in *Things* – that the holes in O’Brien’s narratives find their most meaningful explanation.

**A matter of holes and ditches**

The feminization of the land is a common trope in Western narratives of exploration and conquest of faraway or even hostile territories, whose possession is often configured as a game of (more or less forceful) seduction. The American intervention in Vietnam is no exception, as several critics (Susan Jeffords perhaps most famously) have pointed out. In the chapter on gender conflicts in *The Wars We Took to Vietnam* (1996), Milton Bates quickly reminds us of the persistent sexualization of combat in various well-known, and all-but naive, narratives about the war: from Philip Caputo’s literary memoir *A Rumor of War* (1977), in which the rush felt in leading a surprise attack is described as akin to ‘the ache of orgasm’, to Michael Herr’s ever-quoted *Dispatches*, in which the mood of dread and exhilaration during a firefight is compared to the experience of undressing a girl for the first time (112). As Bates remarks, this imagery is completely in line with more authoritative and public discourses about the war, such as the American ‘eroticized foreign policy [of the time]. President Johnson notoriously compared escalation of the war to the seduction of a woman: it had to be sufficiently gradual that China would not slap him in the face’. When it comes to the representation of the soldiers’ relationship with the Vietnamese territory, particularly in mass-market productions, such as cinematic franchises like *Rambo* or *Missing in Action* or the pulp combat novels which constitute the vast majority

5 Richard Slotkin and Annette Kolodny have traced this sexual motif in the utilitarian and imaginative literature of the frontier, showing how male settlers tended to regard the landscape as female. On this issue, see Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*, p. 46.
of the narrative production on the war,\textsuperscript{8} the feminization and sexualization of the land, and of the enemy, assume much more sinister and violent undertones.\textsuperscript{9}

As already mentioned, the Southeast Asian peninsula, conceived in the American imaginary prior to the war as a fertile, luxuriant and exotic continuation of the western frontier, disappointed the expectation that the GIs would be welcomed as liberators of a troubled, developing country trying to assert its independence from evil and unwanted foreign influences – a scenario which in itself suggests a stereotypical gender opposition, with Vietnam playing damsel in distress to Uncle Sam’s ‘cavalry’. In fact, anybody envisaging the American intervention in Vietnam in terms of a rescue mission, not to mention an act of seduction, would have to come to terms with the lie of the old colonial cliché that sees the (often virginal) foreign land as being there for the taking, passive and scantily defended, if not positively ready to be plucked. The truth is that, if one were to continue with the sexual metaphor (and the hyper-masculine army mentality would certainly encourage us to do so), the Vietnamese territory could not be taken by conventional military means, i.e. a slow advance across regular battle-lines, a steady conquest of previously forbidden positions. Rape, rather than seduction, appears to provide a better figurative equivalent to the often indiscriminate fire-bombing of the jungle, the systematic deforestation of the land and the destruction of entire villages carried out by the American armed forces in response to the enemy combat strategy. In the context of guerrilla warfare, with the triple-canopied, thick vegetation constantly in the way of the foot soldiers’ advance, while providing a perfect hiding place for the native adversary, the soil itself harbours all sorts of dangers: trails concealing...
underground traps (holes filled with spikes, on which the enemy would become impaled), mines and, of course, the extensive system of VC tunnels. The impenetrability of the land would therefore be construed as hostility, rather than coyness; similarly, the idea of the unfamiliar, mysterious quality of the territory would give way to an impression of treacherousness, creating the image of a monstrous femininity, intent on destroying the soldier. In short, the Vietnamese landscape has often come to be represented, in American narratives of the war, as a *vagina dentata*, a symbol that finds its realistic (!) correspondent in the widespread rumour amongst American GIs that Vietnamese women would hide razor-blades or glass in their vaginas and entice soldiers to have sex with them, so as to emasculate them or bleed them to death.¹⁰

The shocking awareness that danger lurks in unsuspected places thus ensures that GIs have, at best, an ambivalent relationship with their environment, and especially with the ground they tread on; the perception of Vietnam as a conflict whose unprecedented violence will strike out of the blue, even in the absence of the actual enemy, unpredictably triggered by as simple an act as walking, is presented as a source of constant anxiety for the infantrymen:

> We were making history: the first American soldiers to fight an enemy whose principal weapons were the mine and the booby trap. That kind of warfare has its peculiar terrors. It turns an infantryman’s world upside down. The foot soldier has a special feeling for the ground. He walks on it, fights on it, sleeps and eats on it; the ground shelters him under fire; he digs his home in it. But mines and booby traps transform that friendly, familiar earth into a thing of menace, a thing to be feared as much as machine guns or mortar shells. The infantryman knows that any moment the ground he is walking on can erupt and kill him; kill him if he’s lucky. If he’s unlucky, he will be turned into a blind, deaf, *emasculated*, legless shell. It was not warfare. It was murder.¹¹

While acknowledging the foot soldier’s ‘special feeling for the ground’, and the role of weaponry in the metamorphosis of the land from an almost sentient being (‘friendly, familiar’) to a dangerous, impersonal entity (‘a thing of menace, a thing to be feared’), Caputo’s explanatory passage does highlight the terrible power of the Vietnamese earth to annihilate the humanity – and, more significantly, the manhood – of its victims. O’Brien too records the often ambivalent feelings experienced by the American soldiers in the relationship with their foreign surroundings, but he does so without objecti-

¹⁰ See Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*, p. 143.
fying Vietnam or reducing it to a giant, monolithic, symbolic landscape, founded on the misogynist imagery of the gaping vaginal opening, and of a preying and deathly female sexuality. Particularly in his early books, O’Brien, like Caputo, reminds his readers of the particular bond between the grunt and the land, a provider of safety, comfort and strength, as well as a source of anxiety and a place of unexpected dangers.12

*If I Die in a Combat Zone*, for example, ends with the vignette of the protagonist’s flight back home, a sketch in which the manufactured sterility and perfection of the environment on board the aircraft – presided over by ‘blonde, blue-eyed, long-legged, medium-to-huge-breasted’ stewardesses, America’s thank-you for its loyal veterans – conveys an impression of distance and unfamiliarity, poignantly contrasted to the foot soldier’s feelings for the receding ground:

It’s earth you want to say good-bye to. The soldiers never knew you. You never knew the Vietnamese people. But the earth, you could turn a spadeful of it, see its dryness and the tint of red, and dig out enough to lie in the hole at night, and that much of Vietnam you would know. Certain whole pieces of the land you would know, something like a farmer knows his own earth and his neighbour’s. You know where the bad, dangerous parts are, and the sandy and safe places by the sea. You know where the mines are and will be for a century, until the earth swallows and disarms them. Whole patches of land. Around My Khe and My Lai. Like a friend’s face. (*IID*, 201–202)

What begins like a contained declaration of intimacy, defined by immediate proximity with a diminutive, hospitable portion of the soil and set against a profound ignorance of fellow human beings (whether allies or foes), gradually becomes a more expansive commemoration of the Vietnamese earth: imagined as a source of livelihood, recognized, for the present, as a sometimes dangerous place, the land is also seen, within a larger time-frame, as a self-healing and protective entity, to be finally identified with specific locations, called by name and perceived as a friend. (The mention of My Lai seems particularly significant in this context.) One of the final passages of O’Brien’s memoir, this nuanced and unapologetically subjective image of the Vietnamese landscape eschews any symbolic reductions with its repeated focus on the very small and on unheroic comparisons: the soldier’s familiarity with the soil is akin to the farmer’s; the land looks like a friend’s face. This latter detail reveals a deliberate care to personify Vietnam in such a way as to confer on it a genderless humanity. It ought to be noted too how O’Brien here

12 By the mid- to late 1970s, several novels and memoirs about the war had been published to critical acclaim and success with the public: O’Brien’s early writing is thus underpinned by a stronger documentary desire than his later works.
reverses the respective emphasis placed on the two paradoxical elements that inform the GIs’ (experiential and imaginary) perception of the territory: it is the memory of his close physical contact, sublimated into an emotive affinity, with the ground that will remain the veteran’s most abiding memory of his encounter with the Vietnamese.

O’Brien’s meditation on the earth in If I Die is repeated, with striking similarities, in ‘How the Land Was’, a relatively short chapter from Going After Cacciato, where the image of the hunter at home in his favourite forest is briefly – and unsurprisingly, given the theme and the mythical context of the novel – associated with the more appropriate, local figure of the farmer, well acquainted with his acreage. In this expanded description of the land, the farming reference is developed as Berlin muses about the rural economy of Vietnam, whose people are connected to the land in a more essential way than the inhabitants of industrialized countries. The paddies, of course, are the most distinctive feature of the cultivated soil. They give the land a depth that Berlin has never known before; to Berlin’s mind, the contrast with the smoothness and wholesomeness of the corn crops in the American Plains is not unpleasant: ‘there was nothing loathsome about the smell of the paddies. The smell was alive: bacteria, fungus and algae, compounds that made and sustained life. It was not a pretty smell, but it was no more evil or rank than the smell of sweat’ (GAC, 239). The reminder of the Vietnamese reliance on the land in time of peace, voiced by the most average and sympathetic protagonist-soldier in O’Brien’s oeuvre, demystifies the representation of the enemy country as a malignant feminine entity that is common to much literature about the war. This particular description of the paddies, incidentally, is also vaguely reminiscent of Pliny’s Pond in Northern Lights; this latter location, however, differs from the Vietnamese landscape in one crucial aspect: its clear symbolic role in the economy of O’Brien’s first novel finds no counterpart in the geography of the war in the realistic strand of Cacciato. Berlin’s attitude towards various Vietnamese environments is grounded in his experience of combat and not in a misogynist personification of the land which, even in the imaginary journey towards Paris, is never reduced to a hostile feminine place. Thus Xa, referred to as a neuter noun, is described as a maze full of sewage and mud, bringing to mind the anatomy of the organs of elimination, rather than of the female reproductive system.

On the observation post, Berlin is comforted by the presence of the sea: the water protects his back and offers the impression of remoteness from the war and ‘a feeling of connection to distant lands […] to Samoa, maybe, or to some hidden isle in the South Pacific, or to Hawaii, or maybe all the way home’ (GAC, 52–53). Berlin experiences a similar sense of security sitting with his back to the Song Tra Bong, ‘deep in his hole, glad to have water behind him’ (GAC, 109). In the dark, the river, like the sea, is connected in Berlin’s mind
to memories of home, of his father’s ability to distinguish the sounds of the streaming current from those made by the moving grass and the trees out in the countryside. These relations of contiguity – the sea connecting Asia to the American West Coast or the Song Tra Bong standing in for a more familiar river (see Berlin’s fond recollection of the Des Moines River on p. 53) – are by no means the only reason why Berlin feels so safe in proximity to water that he rules it out from the catalogue of places where he can imagine finding his own death: ‘In the thick forest, maybe, or on the slope of a mountain, or in one of the paddies. But not beside a river’ (GAC, 109). Berlin’s conviction is less idiosyncratic and fanciful than it appears at first glance, for his assessment of the dangerousness of the Vietnamese geography is based on facts, and not on the symbolic resonance of any particular location. Piecing together the jumbled account of the casualties of Third Squad, First Platoon, Alpha Company reveals that Berlin is afraid of those places where his comrades have been killed: Billy Boy is the first victim, with his memorable and grotesque death by fear, unable to cope with the shock of having lost a foot in stepping onto a mine (GAC, 208–10); Frenchie Tucker and then Bernie Lynn are killed in a tunnel (GAC, 69–73); Rudy Chassler is also killed by a mine, in an accident which breaks a long lull of uneventful days, shortly after the platoon have waded through a river (GAC, 110); Ready Mix dies on a charge towards the mountains (GAC, 199), in World’s Greatest Lake Country, an area filled by the American bombs with craters; Lieutenant Martin is fragged – a death never actually described in the book, but planned, and presumably executed, in Lake Country; Buff dies by a ditch (GAC, 263) and Pederson in a paddy, gunned down by friendly fire (GAC, 128–30).

The list of fatalities is accompanied by a less immediately obvious catalogue, a taxonomy of holes in the shape of gashes, wounds and hollows. In the realistic strand of the narrative, the holes are signs of explosions, tears in the flesh and in the land, harbingers or traces of death: from the bullet holes in the hull of the Chinook, whose gunners mistakenly shoot Pederson in response to the enemy fire, to the bowl-shaped craters, lifeless lakes full of rainwater, which have taken the place of the luxurious forest on the scorched earth (GAC, 223). These images of indiscriminate, and often disproportionate, violence are perhaps best epitomized by the expression ‘fire in the hole’, which indicates an explosive deliberately detonated in a suspected enemy hideaway (not necessarily before the place has been searched), bringing to mind, of course, the quarrel about Standard Operating Procedures, the killing of Frenchie Tucker and Bernie Lynn in the tunnel, and the subsequent collective execution of Sidney Martin. In the novel, however, O’Brien uses the same expression as a title for the chapter about the aftermath of Pederson’s death, when the surviving soldiers – drenched in paddy slime and caked in soft and greasy muck, like the dead man – call for white
phosphorous in retaliation for the attack that has indirectly caused the demise of their comrade: even as the rounds keep hitting the ground, Third Squad line up and shoot into the burning village until it is reduced to a hole (GAC, 81).

In Cacciato, the recurrent association of holes with death is completely factual, devoid of intimations of monstrous femininity; rather, if anything, it is connected with images of muck and messiness (again, this would seem to allude to the excretive system instead of the female genitalia), as well as, possibly, with indirect references to an unspoken guilt, given the nature of the particular traumas present in the story: Pederson’s manslaughter, the annihilation of the village, the plot against the lieutenant, the soldiers’ reluctance to compose Buff’s disfigured body, and more generally the relief experienced with each casualty, since somebody else’s death is irrationally perceived to make one’s own survival more likely. While there is no denying that holes provide a recurrent central – and inevitably very suggestive – element in many of O’Brien’s novels, the proliferation of such images can often be easily explained by the topography of the battle ground. After all, the same was true of the paradigm modern conflict, as Siegfried Sassoon pointed out: ‘When all is said and done, the war was mainly a matter of holes and ditches’.13 This matter-of-fact summation of the Great War reads like a cautionary statement for the critic too keen to unearth the deep meaning of O’Brien’s own dugouts and ditches: traps and shelters, hence often charged with diametrically opposite connotations, the holes in the Vietnamese landscape are reminiscent of the trenches, which were simultaneously places of safety and of hazardous confusion. The latter feeling, which is perhaps less immediately associated with the idea of trench warfare, where in the first instance it is no-man’s-land – and not the dugout – that is synonymous with mortal danger, is clearly expressed by Fussell in his mapping of World War I: ‘To be in the trenches was to experience an unreal, unforgettable enclosure and constraint, as well as a sense of being unoriented and lost. One saw two things only: the walls of an unlocalized, undifferentiated earth and the sky above. […] It was the sight of the sky, almost alone, that had the power to persuade a man that he was not already lost in a common grave’ (51). The disturbing idea of finding safety in an open grave is also intimated by the image of Berlin asleep in his foxhole, his mind entertaining both reassuring and oppressive visions: ‘At night he slept in the holes, his back against the cold earth, dreaming of basketball and moles and tombs of moist air’ (GAC, 107).

The underground dimension – obscure, clammy and claustrophobic – is a natural memento mori for Berlin and his fellow soldiers, even as it provides

13 Quoted in Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, p. 41.
shelter and an opportunity to muse on one’s condition and to try to perceive reality from a different angle: at an imaginative level, this is what Berlin and the others experience in Li Van Hgoc’s tunnel, where it is made clear that their feelings of confusion and entrapment are also the lot of their ‘unfathomable’ enemy. Besides, the labyrinthine underground, as anticipated in Chapter 2, is associated with decay in the form of sludge and excrement, not an unexpected idea when one thinks of how easily expendable human life is—and how horribly mangled and reduced to nothing bodies can be—in modern mass warfare. Like other Vietnam war writers, O’Brien reminds us that one of the many euphemisms adopted by the soldiers to talk about death exploits this very association of ideas between mortality, expendability and lowliness, while also carrying connotations of injudicious use and dissipation of resources: people are not ‘killed’; they are ‘wasted’. Interestingly, a similar term is quoted by Fussell in his gloss to Sassoon’s bathetic remark about the Great War: Fussell reminds us that, if it is true that the war was mainly a matter of holes and ditches, it is also true that ‘in these holes and ditches extending for ninety miles, continually, even at the quietest times, some 7000 British men and officers were killed and wounded daily, just as a matter of course. “Wastage,” the Staff called it’ (41). Even if it were unconnected with ideas of precarious safety and impending death within the context of war, the underground would naturally summon the image of a miserable and debased existence: in trench and guerrilla warfare, for the most part, the soldier’s lot is at best a grotesque and unheroic assimilation into the land, which for the unlucky ones becomes a tragically final condition.

This impression of abjection is further intensified in the epigraph of The Nuclear Age which aptly sets the scene for the apocalyptic theme of the novel and foreshadows the uncompromising, doom-like tone of the first-person narrative of its protagonist, William Cowling—even as the apocryphal origin of the biblical quotation is perhaps a first intimation to the reader that Cowling is a minor and eccentric sort of prophet. The epigraph indeed opens with a description of destruction on a global scale: ‘And the dead shall be thrown like dung’ (Second Book of Esdras, 16:23), a scriptural passage which makes explicit the scatological connotations of death in its reference to the deceased as the lowest form of excreta, while the few survivors remain ‘hidden in the thick woods or in holes in the rocks’ (16:29). O’Brien’s suggestive symbolic topography is exploited to the full in his first foray into the realm of (black) comedy, a generic subscription immediately announced, as I have just mentioned, in the ironic gap between the portentous prophecy of the epigraph and the switch to an odd first-person narrator, a prophet-with-a-poster denouncing the dangers of the nuclear age. The journey

14 See, for example, GAC, 15 or TTC, 231. See also Caputo, A Rumor of War, p. 220.
underground, culminating in the most precarious of ascents, is thus the central trope of a comedic narrative whose dominant image of the hole—in the guise of a ‘home-made’ nuclear shelter—provides the catalyst for the strand of the plot set in the present time, as well as the obvious location for the nightmarish denouement of the story.

The novel itself begins as William Cowling digs the first spadefuls of earth in his garden, in the middle of the night, in order to build this refuge: his action is the impromptu, compelling actualization of a life-long obsession with safety, triggered in its turn by a pathological fear of a nuclear war. O’Brien’s faithful readers will immediately notice how this motif is an expansion, in much darker tones, of a detail in the plot of Northern Lights, where Pehr Perry nurtured similar apprehensions about the end of the world being near. What these two post-Vietnam novels really share, though, is the rather unsubtle quality of their symbolism, which, while imputable to inexperience in the earlier text, is deliberately cultivated in The Nuclear Age for its caricatural effects. The shelter in Northern Lights epitomised Pehr Perry’s gloomy, merciless religious beliefs as well as his despotic grip on his children. In The Nuclear Age too O’Brien explores the sinister side of a fanatical quest for security, emphasizing the clash in the contradictory notions associated with Cowling’s several underground retreats: his hideaways provide safety and the illusion of safety (as a child, he finds comfort under his ping-pong table, modified to ‘withstand’ nuclear radiations with its coating of lead pencils) or a different kind of threat (a draft dodger, he gets embroiled with a violent terrorist group, undergoing a strenuous paramilitary training conducted by two Vietnam war veterans). The hole represents a desire for survival, but also a withdrawal from life; it is a sign of sanity, as a logical precaution in the face of one’s fears, and the proof of lunacy, given the obsessiveness of Cowling’s plan. Engineered to protect his nearest and dearest, the shelter alienates Cowling from his wife and daughter, becoming by the end of the novel a prison and a potential family grave. The land itself bestows on Cowling immense riches, but also a legacy of guilt when he discovers and decides to exploit a vein of uranium ore, a compromising source of wealth because inextricably linked in his mind with ‘the Bomb’, under whose terrifying shadow he has lived all his life.

Fear of nuclear annihilation is the dominant emotion in Cowling’s existence, but The Nuclear Age is interesting primarily for the way in which it weaves this topic into the figurative geography of the narrative and into the protagonist’s relationship with his women and their attitude to reality and to language. Already as a young boy, William understands his predicament as a no-win situation: one can either be an eccentric loner, a ‘screwball’ devoted to unpopular fixations—‘like that ex-buddy of mine, a chemistry set bozo, testing nails for their iron content’ (NA, 29)—or one can be a ‘regular guy’
(NA, 29), like Cowling’s father, a well-adjusted human being, decent, accepted and sane, but also perhaps lacking in the single-mindedness necessary to identify and forestall danger. For love of his concerned parents, William tries to keep his eccentric tendencies under wraps, going through the motions of a regular adolescence and developing something of a double life, for he feels for the trappings of high school – a microcosm of society at large – the same hostility and the same sense of superiority felt by the Tim O’Brien of If I Die towards the macho military ethos: ‘I was above it all. A little arrogant, a little belligerent. I despised the whole corrupt high-school system: the phys-ed teachers, the jocks, the endless pranks and gossip, the teasing, the tight little self-serving cliques’ (NA, 35). As in the case of the O’Brien of If I Die and Things, the protagonist’s pondering over his options in the face of conscription is later configured as a solitary, paralysing, excruciating process, an impossible dilemma that gets resolved only by default: ‘I did not want to die, and my father understood that. It wasn’t cowardice, exactly, and he understood that, too, and it wasn’t courage. It wasn’t politics. Not even the war itself, not the coffins or justice or a citizen’s obligation to his state. It was gravity. Something physical, that force that keeps pressing toward the end’ (NA, 140). Thus, the novel resorts to the familiar image of the stand-off, the ‘sleepwalking’ (NA, 119), the succumbing to the laws of physics and, while ostensibly framing the protagonist’s dilemma within a different moral context from the one surrounding the definition of courage, in fact it reiterates, if only by negation, the thesis put forth by O’Brien in If I Die and ‘On the Rainy River’: William can dodge the draft call because he is already a social pariah, and because he has nothing to lose and everything to gain by taking a stand that consolidates his relationship with Sarah Strouch, the burgeoning political activist with whom he has fallen in love. The novel skirts over the issue of courage and cowardice, but effectively rephrases that dichotomy in terms of sanity and madness, notions which – besides their socially sanctioned meaning – are seen by William to stand for the individual’s logical adherence to his beliefs: it is in this sense that O’Brien can claim that William is the only hero that he has written.15 (Still, as I argue in Chapter 4, the presence of Sarah Strouch plays a decisive role in strengthening William’s resolve and securing the success of his disappearance underground.) In fact, even William’s brave choice must eventually reckon with the lure of (re)integration within society, and, in the long run, it succumbs to the unbearable burden of embarrassment and the pressure to conform, just as the same pressure brings about the ‘cowardly’ decision to go to war on the part of the protagonist-narrator in If I Die and Things.

Incaperable of seeing himself as anything other than an ‘oddball’, and

retaining his (by now half-hearted) rejection of a regular ‘above-ground’ existence, William nonetheless tries to adapt to the other readily available lifestyle: the quiet, settled family man, rooted in the land. Having initially made the choice that O’Brien could not summon the courage to make, Cowling at last confesses that he has had enough of his self-imposed exile: ‘It sounds trite but I longed for America. Out on the fringe, alone, there wasn’t a day when I didn’t feel a sense of embarrassment nudging up on shame. Unhinged and without franchise, prone to the odd daydreams, I had trouble sleeping’ (NA, 210). A cooling period of solitary home life in a cottage near Fort Derry and discreet visits to his family are followed, five years later in 1976, by the official request for pardon as a draft-dodger and by the enrolment as a graduate student in geology in 1977. As William readily admits, the latter experience provides an apt (and legal) counterpart to his previous ‘subterranean’ work as a courier for the terrorist organization that Sarah had got him involved with: ‘for the next two years I went underground in a completely different way’ (NA, 262). Already as a child and, later on, as a university student, William had found in geology a refuge from the volatility of global circumstances: ‘Terra firma, I’d think. Back to the elements. A hard thing to explain, but for me geology represented a model for how the world could be, and should be. Rock – the word itself was solid. Calm and stable, crystal locked to crystal, there was a hard, enduring dignity in even the most modest piece of granite. Rocks lasted. Rocks could be trusted’ (NA, 68). This time the return to geology is a means of achieving material security and social respectability, besides intellectual comfort: through the exploitation of a vein of uranium ore in the Sweetheart Mountains, William becomes a millionaire and can thus successfully pursue Bobbi, a woman he had rather whimsically fallen for ten years before. The financial and emotional stability promised by this turn of events, however, do not mark the end of the protagonist’s private anxieties; in fact, they are accompanied by a resurgence of William’s obsessive fears of a nuclear holocaust, now further exacerbated by his sense of guilt at having made his position in life through the sale of the basic component of atomic bombs. With the retrospective account of these plot developments, the novel finally catches up with the narrative present, which sees William busy digging a nuclear shelter in the garden of the house he shares with his wife, Bobbi, and their daughter Melinda. In the final chapter of the novel, William’s psychological meltdown threatens to lead to tragedy, when he drugs and transports Bobbi and Melinda into the makeshift shelter, and sets out to blow the entire thing up. This is the culmination of a hallucinatory frenzy, in which the hole/shelter teases William with the lures of annihilation, such as the promise of wholeness, lack of separation, the disappearance of contradictions, absolute correspondence:
Light the fuse! What’s to lose? Like a time capsule, except we dispense with time. It’s absolute! Nothing dies, everything rhymes. Every syllable. The cat’s meow and the dog’s yip-yip – a perfect rhyme. Never rhymes with always, rich rhymes with poor, madness rhymes with gladness and sadness and badness … I could go on forever. I do, in fact. (NA, 299, italics in original)

This realm of perfect rhymes presided over by the rule of similarity, where everything is like everything else, is a world of pure metaphor; as I shall discuss in more detail in the final section of this chapter, O’Brien is deeply sceptical of the totalizing power of metaphorical language, while recognizing – as in the conclusion of *The Nuclear Age* – its strong allure as the privileged medium for all-encompassing explanations and consolatory grand narratives. William is finally rescued from this deadly appeal by the incursion of the sheer materiality of existence, when twelve-year-old Melinda stands up to him, demanding that he should abandon any thoughts of death and any fears for the future in order to concentrate on the present moment. As elsewhere in O’Brien’s work, the hole in *The Nuclear Age* represents a locus for trauma: it is physically the location where traumatic events occur and it is a symbol for the traumatization of certain characters. In his novels, O’Brien unearts these holes without filling them up. They remain the sites of irreconcilable paradoxes and unspeakable experiences.

Another such hole is the one at the centre of O’Brien’s most famous – and most written about – work: the shit field which engulfs and kills Kiowa, one of the main characters in *The Things They Carried*. More than the death of Curt Lemon or of the one enemy soldier killed by the narrator, two other harrowing events to be told several times in the course of the novel, Kiowa’s drowning in the overflowing village latrine along the banks of the Song Tra Bong is the pivotal trauma in *Things*. The centrality of this episode to the economy of the entire narrative derives from the overwhelming horror of the events: Kiowa’s slow sinking is witnessed at close quarters by one of his fellow soldiers who, overpowered by an insurmountable physical revulsion, abandons his rescue attempt. The image of Kiowa being sucked into the shit field is made even less susceptible to a faithful representation by O’Brien’s deliberate reluctance to provide an unambiguous and trustworthy version of the story. The episode is revisited in three sequential chapters offering different versions of Kiowa’s death: ‘Speaking of Courage’, ‘Notes’ and ‘In the Field’. ‘Speaking of Courage’ follows Norman Bowker in his endless driving around the lake in his home town. A veteran alone with his own thoughts and memories on the Fourth of July, Bowker is obsessively musing over how to talk about his failure to save Kiowa and thus win a Silver Star for bravery. This poignant experience recalls another dramatic event, and its similarly guilt-ridden aftermath, from the pages of *Going After Cacciato*
where, in Chapter 12, one of the ‘Observation Post’ sections, Paul Berlin also
thinks about ‘the time he almost won the Silver Star for Valor’ (GAC, 82),
crawling into a tunnel to retrieve the body of Frenchie Tucker. Instead, on
that occasion, it had been Bernie Lynn who had gone into the tunnel, and
died for his act of valour.16

‘Notes’, a brief metanarrative sketch, reveals how an earlier draft of
‘Speaking of Courage’ had been written for Going After Cacciato, but would
not fit within the temporal flow of that novel because of its clear setting in the
aftermath of the war. In ‘Notes’, O’Brien proceeds to reflect on the other
reason for the initial failure of the previous piece: the original version of
‘Speaking of Courage’ had avoided any reference to the shit field. Retrospec-
tively, this omission appears to O’Brien to have deprived his narrative of the
‘natural counterpoint’ for the lake around which Bowker would drive endless
circuits, trapped in his inability to articulate his grief and lay the past to rest:
‘A metaphoric unity was broken. What the piece needed, and did not have,
was the terrible killing power of that shit field’ (TTC, 158). The lake, on its
part, works as a mirror image of the shit field. ‘Fed by neither springs nor
streams, the lake was often filthy and algaed, relying on fickle prairie rains for
replenishment’ (TTC, 140). It also has a killing power of its own: Max
Arnold, a friend of Bowker’s and a believer in the necessity of the idea of God
as ‘a final cause in the whole structure of causation’ (TTC, 140), had drowned
in it. (This death foreshadows the search for causation later undertaken by
the soldiers in their attempt to allocate the blame for Kiowa’s drowning.)
Together with an explanation of the genesis of ‘Speaking of Courage’, ‘Notes’
also gives the rationale for its own inclusion in Things: Norman Bowker’s
‘simple need to talk’ provides the ‘emotional core’ (TTC, 157) of this short
narrative and therefore – the reader is left to surmise – a crucial topic for a
text so concerned with ‘how to tell a true war story’. The most interesting
piece of information delivered by ‘Notes’, though, comes with its conclusion,
which casts doubts on the identification of Norman Bowker as the soldier
who failed to rescue Kiowa. Having confessed his reluctance to think about
Kiowa’s death and about his own burden of complicity in this tragedy,
O’Brien ends this short piece with an important, and ambiguous, explana-
tion: ‘In the interests of truth, however, I want to make it clear that Norman
Bowker is in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did
not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the

16 A full account of this episode is given in Chapter 14, ‘Upon Almost Winning the Silver
Star’. Quite apart from this self-reflective intertextual connection, ‘Speaking of Courage’
has marked thematic affinity with Ernest Hemingway’s ‘Soldier’s Home’ from In Our
Time (1925). For an excellent comparative reading of these three texts, see Michael
Kaufmann, ‘The Solace of Bad Form: Tim O’Brien’s Postmodernist Revisions of Vietnam
Silver Star for valor. *That part of the story is my own* (TTC, 159, my italics). While Bowker is fully exonerated from Kiowa’s death, O’Brien’s role in the actual unfolding of the tragedy and its eventual retelling remains muddled, suspended as it is between the two possible interpretations: the final sentence can be read as a declaration of creative licence, claimed as a storyteller’s right elsewhere in the novel, and/or an admission of guilt (notice how this state of affairs is clearly reminiscent of the narrator’s predicament in *In the Lake of the Woods*).

The third and final story in the series, ‘In the Field’, continues to cast an aura of uncertainty around the mechanics of Kiowa’s death. It does so by going back to the morning after the event, with the platoon’s search for the corpse, the individual soldiers’ apportioning of blame, and their deliberation over Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s responsibility for their comrade’s grotesque demise. The aftermath of the tragedy unfolds in a double search, for Kiowa’s body and for a recognizable principle of causation; these would seem to provide respectively the beginning and the ending (and a sense of closure) to the story of this particular casualty. The collective quest in its turn is paralleled by two more private efforts, both marked by the need to leave things unsaid: the lieutenant’s tentative phrasing of a letter of condolence to Kiowa’s family and a young soldier’s frantic search in the muck for the photograph of his girlfriend. Out of decency, the lieutenant omits the shit field from his letter, and focuses on the fine qualities of the deceased. The nameless soldier hides a more troubling secret. His reconstruction of the chain of events that has led to Kiowa’s death revolves around the lost photograph of the girl: the soldier is convinced that the mortar attack of the previous evening had been triggered by his reckless decision to switch on a flashlight so as to illuminate the portrait of the girl and have Kiowa admire it. Needless to say, the line of thought behind the interpretation of this horrible sequence follows the twisted logic of guilt, for Kiowa’s nameless best friend and self-confessed culprit is none other than the distraught soldier defeated by the shit field in his rescue attempt. The suggestion, first intimated in ‘Notes’, that O’Brien might be this close friend is supported by the characterization of his relationship with Kiowa throughout the narrative, and particularly in ‘Field Trip’, the account of O’Brien’s post-war return to Vietnam in the company of his ten-year-old daughter Kathleen. The journey is a sort of pilgrimage to the scene of Kiowa’s drowning, where the narrator wades into the murky water and lays his friend’s moccasins in the marshland – a private ritual performed in the uncomprehending presence of the little girl and under the silent gaze of an old Vietnamese farmer.

Set twenty years after the war, and clearly focused on the enduring, painful impact on the narrator of Kiowa’s death, ‘Field Trip’ emphasizes once more the centrality of this tragic episode, and of the shit field, as a sort of *mise en
abyme of the experience of war. In ‘Notes’, O’Brien had already highlighted the need to mention the field as a counterpart to Bowker’s lake: together, the two locations constitute an essential ‘metaphorical unit’ which, if broken, would irredeemably impair the success of the story (i.e. the strength of its grip on the reader and its ability to convey an approximate truth about Bowker’s experience). It is important to notice at this point that it is only in their mutual, contrapuntal relationship as signs in a self-contained system of signification that O’Brien endorses the metaphorical association of ideas that reverberate from the pairing of lake and shit field. Taken individually, and analysed for their respective ability to gesture to an actual referent, the two signs work in strikingly different ways, placed as they are on opposite ends of the continuum between metaphorical and metonymical language. The reason why the lake fails to work by itself is because it relies primarily on its metaphorical connotations (its silent, reflecting, deep, circular nature an apt mirror to Bowker’s state of mind) in order to have an emotional impact on the reader. The shit field, by contrast, marks a powerful, uncompromising, metonymical adherence to utter abjection in the image of ‘death by waste’, the best possible approximation to the otherwise unspeakable nature of the traumatic experience of war. According to David Jarraway’s incisive reading of the use of scatological imagery in the text, in this way, ‘Tim O’Brien eradicates all possibility for responsive uplift in The Things They Carried by reducing even the metaphorical import of waste. As a measure of atrocious acts and imbecile events, waste’s claim on all concerned, accordingly, is seen to be absolutely literal. At this zero-degree level of rectitude, then, war becomes the equivalent of human waste – “a goddamn shit field” [...] – in which an entire platoon must immerse itself in order to register most completely the nauseous vacuity and repulsive futility of their lives at war’.

In an acute psychoanalytic reading of the topography of trauma in Things, Brian Jarvis digs deeper into the symbolic import of the image of the shit field to reveal how this place conjures up the memory of a greater trauma than the loss of a particular individual, however close to the narrator. Not only is Kiowa the name of an entire Indian tribe, but the mode of the soldier’s slow disappearance into the muck until only one knee is protruding ‘might be read as a “crypt effect” in which the last major armed conflict between the Native Americans and the US Army [the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890] surfaces’. Similarly, the second major traumatic casualty in Alpha Company, the death of Curt Lemon, blown to pieces by a booby trap and left

hanging in a tree, might be read as an allusion to the other main strand of racial violence in US history: the murder of African Americans (Curt’s face appears ‘suddenly brown and shining’ in the ‘fatal whiteness’ of the explosion, *TTC*, 69, 79). Jarvis’s insightful observations uncover the traces of previous national tragedies behind the smaller-scale losses compulsively, but always inadequately, recounted in *Things*. At the same time, the solid psychoanalytic underpinning of Jarvis’s analysis takes us back to the recurring debate about the presence of a monstrous femininity at the core of O’Brien’s perception of Vietnam, a hypothesis that appears particularly compelling in the interpretation of Bowker’s unsuccessful attempt to deliver Kiowa from the shit field. As Jarvis maintains, ‘[t]he psychogeography of this scene suggests antipodal birth traumas in the *anus mundi*: one “newborn” survives to be haunted by meconium aspiration (when a baby swallows its own feces during labor), but the other undergoes a rectal absorption which recalls Freud’s “cloaca theory” (a misconception amongst some children that women have only one pelvic orifice and birth occurs through the anus)’ (136). Beyond its monitory allusion to the Native American genocide (a haunting crime doomed to resurface as a repressed memory in Indian Country), the shit field would therefore reveal O’Brien’s perpetuation of a problematic – if not outright misogynist – image of femininity.

Such a mapping of O’Brien’s topography of trauma, however, strikes me as both a little ungenerous and as too keen to ascribe to this particular text what Jarvis himself recognizes as the ‘generalized gender anxieties apparent within the libidinal economy of war’ (137). After all, quite apart from the context of the hyper-masculine army training, the identification of the land with Mother Earth is such a conventional, widespread idea that it is all too easy to see ‘the maternal imago haunt[ing] a landscape of fecund jungle, intrauterine tunnels and invaginating fox holes, swamps, rivers and a shit field’. O’Brien cannot completely avoid this troublesome connection, which was effectively inescapable in the military culture at the time of the Vietnam war and most likely remains so even now, given the pervasiveness of the Mother Earth figure in our culture, so conveniently available to brand the enemy territory with the mark of a feminine aberration. Having said that, in ‘In the Field’, the final piece to revisit this crucial location, two decades after the end of the war, O’Brien makes it clear that beyond the projections of traumatized soldiers, crushed under an unbearable weight of terror and guilt, there lies an ordinary little field, decidedly not the monstrous place that he has remembered all along, since Kiowa’s death.

There were birds and butterflies, the soft rustlings of rural-anywhere. Below, in

the earth, the relics of our presence were no doubt still there, the canteens and bandoliers and mess kits. This little field, I thought, has swallowed so much. [...] Still, it was hard to find any real emotion. It simply wasn’t there. After that long night in the rain, I’d seemed to grow cold inside, all the illusions gone, all the old ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud. Over the years, that coldness had never entirely disappeared. There were times in my life when I couldn’t feel much, nor sadness or pity or passion, and somehow I blamed this place for what I had become, and I blamed it for taking away the person I had once been. For twenty years this field had embodied all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror. Now, it was just what it was. Flat and dreary and unremarkable. (TTC, 185–86)

Suggestive as the idea of the entrapping womb might be, both in this passage and in the description of Kiowa’s death, it ultimately lurks behind the image of the cloaca (the repository of muck and of the undigested traces of the soldiers’ passage) and of the voracious mouth, sucking and swallowing (this latter image makes a logical counterpart to the cloaca, at the other end of the digestive tract). In spelling out the figurative import of the field, O’Brien insists on its quite literal representation of the indescribable waste and the irredeemable horror of the war; besides, in its association with the image of the anus mundi, O’Brien’s shit field is bound to summon the memory of Auschwitz, the place of utter abjection and unspeakable traumas in relation to which that very expression has been infamously used.

Scatological imagery, itself all too common in the soldier’s crude vernacular, and references to the grotesque body are a frequent presence in O’Brien’s writing, where they mark the protagonists’ deepest responses – their gut reactions, so to speak – to sheer panic and awesome realizations: see, for example, O’Brien’s bouts of vomiting in If I Die, Paul Perry discharging his black bile in the waters of Pliny’s Pond in Northern Lights, or Paul Berlin and William Cowling soiling themselves under the stress of combat in Going After Cacciato and The Nuclear Age respectively. Thus, for a writer who has otherwise already made extensive use of such graphic imagery to try to capture his characters’ encounter with essential feelings of fear, shame, terror and guilt, the shit field, in its lurid materiality, must have seemed like the obvious locus of trauma – an apt correlative and a concrete, metonymical summation for the experience of war, and of the physical annihilation and the moral squalor that come with it. After his hermeneutical tour de force, even Jarvis has his own misgivings about the dangers of abandoning oneself to the metaphorical appeal of O’Brien’s topography of trauma: ‘how sure can one’s
footing be in a shit field? Perhaps my own scatter-bombing, or even muck-spreadling, has ignored the possibility that sometimes a shit field is just a shit field? By dumping so much on this site, do we risk flushing away the phenomenological materiality, the shittiness and fundamental thingness of things?’ (146). Indeed, in my opinion, we do.

As part of the literal and figurative setting of O’Brien’s novels, holes and underground (and underwater) passages are ambivalent places at best: the possibility of rebirth or redemption adumbrated by the characters’ reaction to these locations is always configured as fragile and temporary, and it is often fraught with guilt. Paul Perry’s ‘epiphanic’ immersion into the primordial broth of Pliny’s Pond – a pseudo-baptismal ablution clearly linked to ideas of reinvigoration and spiritual growth – is followed only by the most tentative and precarious drive for change, in tune with the general bathetic tone of the denouements in *Northern Lights*. In *Going After Cacciato*, Berlin’s imaginary flight from Li Van Hgoc’s tunnel marks the beginning of his journey of development and his alliance with Sarkin Aung Wan, but the soldier’s attempt to take his distance from the war is ultimately doomed to failure. In *The Nuclear Age* Cowling’s emergence from the nuclear shelter is a last-minute response to his daughter’s life-wish; given the protagonist’s history, however, the reprieve from his nightmares is bound not to be a lifelong affair. Even more dubious as a willful act of reparation is Wade’s execution of PFC Weatherby from the depth of the corpse-strewn irrigation ditch in *In the Lake of the Woods*, while the shit field in *The Things They Carried* completely rules out the possibility of salvaging any dignity and of drawing any redemptive lessons from the war. It would be impossible to deny the irresistible appeal of a symbolic reading of these environments: such (hard to avoid) figurative readings often open up perfectly legitimate and fruitful hermeneutical avenues. Even so, as this brief overview reminds us, the most persuasive – and evident – interpretation of these recurrent locations in O’Brien’s oeuvre often hinges, rather simply, on the recognition of their presence as places of indeterminacy and confusion, where the gaps in our understanding, and accounts, of things are mercilessly exposed.

**Speaking of (damaged) men and women**

The success or failure in the portrayal of female characters is one of the most contentious issues in the reception of O’Brien’s work, even in the case of those novels which have otherwise found wide acclaim, both with academics and reviewers, and with the general public. The charge most typically made against O’Brien’s representation of women is that his female characters are flat and undernourished creations, instrumental figures devoid of a life of
their own, only necessary to the illustration of an idea, or to the development of the plot and of the male protagonists. There is an element of truth in these accusations but, at the risk of stating the obvious, I would argue that O’Brien’s occasional failure to create convincing and sympathetic female characters, whose existence is not subordinated to the fleshing out of the male protagonists’ predicament, is an inevitable result of the choice to filter his narratives through a perspective that is clearly masculine, and clearly perturbed and uncomfortable with itself: a masculinity that feels permanently ill at ease and under threat. This masculine anxiety is flaunted, inviting an all too easy Freudian response, even by the protagonist of If I Die in a Combat Zone, the narrator-witness who otherwise denounces the misogynist bias of the Army in censorious terms.

In his first book-length narrative, O’Brien makes an immediate, implicit allusion to the institutionalized misogyny of the Army, for the marching song that gives the memoir its title contains numerous offensive references to women: for example, the first verse, cited by O’Brien, goes ‘If I die in a combat zone / Box me up and ship me home. / An’ if I die on the Russian front, / Bury me with a Russian cunt’ (IID, 50). In the testosterone-fuelled context of Fort Lewis, O’Brien and Erik – quiet, reflective, educated young men – are doomed to the role of outsiders: branded as the ‘college pussies’ (IID, 53) by the company drill sergeant Blyton, they become the object of scorn even on the part of the military authority. His passive resistance to the culture of machismo fostered by the Army takes its psychological toll on the young O’Brien. In Vietnam, during a night ambush, he recalls a dream that he had had as a fourteen-year-old, ‘the only dream I ever remembered in detail’ (IID, 93) – a dream which ‘surely cries out for psychoanalytic interpretation’, as T. J. Lustig argues in his lucid analysis of this episode.21

I was in prison. The prison was a hole in the mountain. During the days, swarthy-faced moustached captors worked us like slaves in coal mines. At night they locked us behind rocks, every prisoner utterly alone. They had whips and guns, and they used them on us at pleasure. The mountain dungeon was musty. Suddenly we were free, escaping, scrambling out of the cave. (IID, 93)

Running away from his pursuers, O’Brien plunges into a forest and then makes his way up to the top of a mountain: ‘I looked into the valley below me, and a carnival was there. A beautiful woman, covered with feathers and tan skin, was charming snakes. With her stick she prodded the creatures, making them dance and writhe and perform. I hollered down to her, “Which way to

freedom? Which way home?" (IID, 93). The woman, configured as a dominating erotic figure, points him in the wrong direction; O'Brien meets her at the end of the road where she is laughing and embracing ‘a swarthy, moustached captor’ (IID, 94), whose weathered appearance and visible signs of sexual maturity add insult to the injury that is the young boy’s crushed dreams of seduction and escape. In the gung-ho environment of active military service, and in the dangerous context of a night ambush in particular, O’Brien’s adolescent fears make a predictable (tongue-in-cheek?) return to the surface of his consciousness.22 This image of feminine treachery is the other side of Paul Berlin’s equally naive projection of positive, caring, trust-worthy qualities onto the figure of Sarkin Aung Wan.

Elsewhere the perception of a threat to masculinity and/or the expression of one’s feelings of inadequacy is articulated in quite unsubtle terms as fear of castration. Thus in Northern Lights Harvey argues with Paul for the necessity of the bomb shelter on the grounds that a nuclear fallout would ‘rot [a man’s] testicles off’ (NL, 68; see also page 20, where this belief is first mentioned). In The Nuclear Age, instead, William Cowling ends up with a ‘mangled pecker’, the result of the badly sutured ‘huge gash’ that he had suffered in a bicycle accident as a child (NA, 18, 19). In other cases, the male characters’ unease with their gender identity is conveyed through a sense of inadequacy in relation to traditional masculine models. John Wade, for instance, is taunted for his chubbiness by his father, who also reproaches him for his unmanly hobby: ‘That pansy magic crap. What’s wrong with baseball, some regular exercise?’ (LW, 67). This reminds us that O’Brien’s male protagonists often grow up as lonely outsiders, emotionally stunted even before their involvement with the war or with other major traumatic events (such as Wade Senior’s suicide in Lake, for example). In tune with these fears and insecurities are the characters’ fantasies of return to the womb as to a place of safety and complete seamlessness. As a boy, William Cowling finds comfort in the kindness of a motherly librarian, ‘all hips and breasts and brains’, wishing ‘to crawl into her lap and curl up for a long sleep, just the two of us, cuddling’ (NA, 23, 24). John Wade’s graphic dream of complete assimilation into his

22 On the other hand, the anxiety about masculinity in the sexual undercurrent of the dream effectively obscures O’Brien’s awareness that in Vietnam he has become one of the captors, betraying his younger self who was running for freedom. Cf. Lustig’s reading of O’Brien’s dream in relation to its position in the narrative: ‘in the light of basic training [where O’Brien declares his determination to resist the ‘boors’ that surround him and have effectively captured him in Fort Lewis], the invitation to produce a psychoanalytic reading of the dream becomes more clearly visible as defensive and compensatory. Set between an atrocity and an ambush, the memory of the 14-year-old’s dream offers consolation in troubled times. But it also makes plain that the original identifications have been transformed and that the adult who remembers his childhood dream has become the figure that once he fled’; Lustig, “Which Way Home?”’, p. 410.
wife’s body also blends images of infantilization – the crawling, the swimming, the pressing of his gums against her – with more disturbing material: [he] wanted to open up Kathy’s belly and crawl inside and stay there forever. He wanted to swim through her blood and climb up and down her spine and drink from her ovaries and press his gums against the firm red muscle of her heart. He wanted to suture their lives together” (*LW*, 70). And Wade’s story, of course, is itself mediated by a damaged chronicler, the anonymous war veteran who has pieced together John and Kathy’s mystery as a surrogate investigation for his own unspeakable secrets.

As far as Kathy’s characterization is concerned, the novel quite openly signals its inability to fathom her complex personality and to provide a confident rendition not merely of her mysterious disappearance, but also of her past. While the narrator ‘can at least depend on trying to understand himself in order to re-create Wade’\(^\text{23}\) – and indeed, in the autobiographical references in his footnotes, he deliberately flaunts this connection – the apprehension of Kathy’s story remains tantalizingly out of his reach. The narrator’s speculations on Kathy’s fate and on what might have led to her disappearance are presented in the ‘Hypothesis’ chapters, as if he ‘were reflecting not only the absence of any witnesses to what happened to her but his own presumption in trying to read her mind’\(^\text{24}\) – a presumption that Wade himself found difficult to cope with given his almost pathological desire to have full knowledge of his wife’s actions and to rest secure in her loyalty and affection. In the end, the fact that Kathy’s destiny remains more ambiguous than her husband’s – of Wade we know that he sets off northwards into Lake of the Woods in one of Rasmussen’s boats – gives her a lingering, fascinating quality that none of the other characters in the novel possesses. While the last image of Wade is that of a ‘lost’ man declaiming ‘her name, his love’ to the wind (*LW*, 306), cutting a rather pathetic figure, Kathy’s final appearance is impressive and truly memorable: ‘And here in a corner of John Wade’s imagination, where things neither live nor die, Kathy stares up at him from beneath the surface of the silvered lake. Her eyes are brilliant green, her expression alert. She tries to speak but she can’t. She belongs to the angle. Not quite present, not quite gone, she swims in the blending twilight of in between’ (*LW*, 291). Forever haunting Wade’s imagination, Kathy has become one with the impenetrable, dazzling wilderness, an image that recalls the characterization of Mary Anne Bell in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’, whose own disappearance marks her unavailability to her male admirers and chroniclers, while securing their enduring fascination with her mystery. In her association with the twilight, Kathy also deliberately resembles the ‘wild and gorgeous appari-

\(^{23}\) Heberle, *A Trauma Artist*, p. 247.

\(^{24}\) Heberle, *A Trauma Artist*, p. 248.
portion of a woman in *Heart of Darkness* who, having struck Marlow with her silent, imposing presence, walks back into the forest with her self-possession intact and her story still unwritten but fully under her control.

On the opposite side of the spectrum from the self-aware narrators and wounded male characters is Paul Berlin, represented as a fundamentally innocent young man. As anticipated, Berlin naively subscribes to old-fashioned gender (and racial) stereotypes, but he too turns to an ideal of femininity for comfort, strength and inspiration. Sarkin Aung Wan is therefore quite clearly the product of a male imagination, the female mirror, as feminist critics have been quick to point out, reflecting the soldier’s alienation back to him. Kali Tal, for example, rightly suggests that in his confrontation with Sarkin Aung Wan, Berlin works out the opposition between masculine and feminine qualities within himself. Taking a distance from Tal’s position, I would argue that the transparency of this operation provides a constant reminder of the limitation of Berlin’s perspective – a reminder that it is impossible to ignore. What Tal calls the novel’s ‘reactionary resolution’, i.e. Berlin’s final capitulation to the idea that ‘the division between men and women […] is unbreachable, and it is the male half which must triumph, even though that triumph will bring about the destruction of men and women alike’ (78) is unmistakably the result of the solitary and private struggle of a character who is out of his depth, and it is not endorsed by the novel as a positive, desirable conclusion. The ‘failure of imagination’ is Berlin’s failure, not the novel’s failure and, sympathetic as readers will inevitably be to the plight of this insecure young soldier, whose good faith they have no reason to question, they will also remain aware of his shortcomings and mourn with him his inability to make the right decision.

Bearing in mind this important distinction between the internal logic of individual texts and the gender politics of their author, a similar argument can be made in relation to the characterization of the female figures in *The Things They Carried*. At first glance, the female characters in *Things* do seem to exemplify the unavoidable remoteness of the civilian population from the soldiers’ experience of Vietnam and, indeed, from any manifestation of evil. Reviving the old equation between femininity and innocence, purity and perfection, the four main female characters in the novel – the only female characters, in fact, to be identified by their name – share a virginal quality, for they are either prepubescent, or unsusceptible to male advances. These four

27 It goes without saying that I do not agree with Tal’s argument that Berlin ‘fails to undergo any kind of change’ (78). As I explained in Chapter 2, Berlin might not find the strength to desert, but by the end of the novel he lets go of his self-delusion of innocence.
figures are arranged in two sets of opposite pairings: Martha and Mary Anne, and Kathleen and Linda. Martha, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s love interest, remains clearly separate from the war and ‘[t]he things men do’ (TTC, 26), while Mary Anne, the ‘sweetheart’ who follows her boyfriend ‘in country’, experiences the thrill of combat and embraces her fascination for the wilderness. The two younger characters – uncorrupted and tame by definition – are set apart by their association with the future and the past, respectively: Kathleen, the daughter who questions O’Brien over his involvement with the war, and witnesses his attempts to learn to live with it, represents the promise of filial understanding (and, possibly, forgiveness?), while Linda, O’Brien’s first, long-gone childhood love, becomes the narrator’s muse for a fragile consolatory fantasy at the end of the novel. A closer look at these figures, however, reveals subtle nuances in their representation and in the gender dynamics that follow their appearance on the scene.

‘The Things They Carried’, the story that opens and gives its title to the entire book, introduces with Martha an early – and admittedly a gendered – example of the distance between the soldiers and the civilian population, uninitiated into the horror of war. However, together with its follow-up ‘Love’, this story also describes a poignant, unrequited passion, whose impasse – completely unrelated to the war – can equally account for the unbridgeable gap between the two protagonists. ‘The Things They Carried’ begins with a mention of the correspondence between Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and Martha, ‘whose letters were mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love’ (TTC, 3). This epistolary interaction constitutes an early example in the novel of an exchange at cross-purposes. Martha’s beautifully written letters, in which the girl describes her life as a student of English literature, are cherished by the lieutenant, who holds on to the fleeting, platonic connection they offer and to the promise of something deeper which he wilfully pretends to read between the lines, in spite of Martha’s calculated detachment and of his own better judgement. At the end of each day, Cross retreats to his foxhole and escapes from the war, wondering whether Martha is a virgin and imagining that his love for her is requited. Blended with these fantasies are also the memories of how Martha had rejected his advances, when he had stroked her knee in a dark cinema, while they were watching Bonnie and Clyde (1967). Silent and stern, she had looked at him with her sad eyes and he had pulled his hand back: he would never forget ‘the feel of the tweed skirt and the knee beneath it and the sound of the gunfire that killed Bonnie and Clyde, how embarrassing it was, how slow and oppressive’ (TTC, 5). It is interesting that Jimmy Cross’s anti-climactic, humiliating drama should unfold along-

28 Incidentally, notice how Mary Anne’s extraordinary metamorphosis in Vietnam would appear to demonstrate, precisely because of its aberrant outcome, that a woman’s natural state is rather one of innocuous domesticity.
side the projection of a film that celebrates a passionate relationship built on the strange combination of sex and violence with inexperience, or even with an intimation of innocence, as advertised by the slogan of the film trailer: ‘They’re young. They’re in love. They kill people.’ Bonnie and Clyde’s deaths in an ambush, a bloodbath represented with graphic images in slow motion in the final scene of the film, makes an ironic contrast to Cross’s awkward retreat, but it also establishes an early association between the recollection of his amorous failure and a violent killing.

In the course of his tour in Vietnam, Cross finds himself thinking about Martha more and more often, until her image begins to come to his mind even before the day’s activities are over, quite independently from his conscious efforts to consign his fantasies to the safety of the foxhole. Critics have dwelt on one such spontaneous reverie in particular as symptomatic of the text’s recurrent scapegoating of femininity, construed as hostile and alien to the soldiers’ military pursuits. While the platoon are anxiously waiting for Lee Strunk to emerge from the search of an enemy tunnel, the lieutenant is seized by a worrying premonition:

Trouble, he thought – a cave-in maybe. And then suddenly, without willing it, he was thinking about Martha. The stresses and fractures, the quick collapse, the two of them buried alive under all that weight. Dense, crushing love. Kneeling, watching the hole, he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered. (*TTC*, 10)

Cross thinks of his love for Martha as an overwhelming experience: irresistible but also devastating, the communion of their bodies simultaneously desired and imagined as a bloody, suffocating experience – a not unlikely clash of emotions given the history of the lieutenant’s courtship, and a not unlikely fantasy of self-annihilation as the ultimate escape from the war. Cross’s ambivalence extends to the contradictory vision of Martha on which his love relies: ‘He wanted her to be a virgin and not a virgin, all at once. He wanted to know her’ (*TTC*, 10). The lieutenant’s wish for Martha’s impossible duality must be partly a reflection of the duality that he hopes to recognize within himself, as a fundamentally decent guy corrupted by circumstances beyond his control; through this double vision, Cross can hold on to a belief in his own essential innocence, while pragmatically acknowledging his part in the war. But contradiction is also a necessary element in his construction of Martha’s idealized image as an object of desire. Cross needs

29 Notice how Jimmy Cross’s fantasy about Martha is reminiscent of John Wade’s wish about his wife Kathy in *In the Lake of the Woods*.
Martha to be distant and self-sufficient, for these are the qualities that make her a rarefied, unattainable creature to aspire to: ‘Not lonely, just alone […] and it was the aloneness that filled him with love’ (TTC, 10), we are told as Cross’s reverie progresses. At the same time, he also needs her to be approachable, earthly, knowable, for in her other guise she inevitably partakes of an innocence that makes it impossible for him to commune with her.

Martha’s appeal to the lieutenant lies in a paradox, for the very qualities that make her desirable and worthy of his love also cause her to be forever unavailable. O’Brien is careful to present this unavailability as a quality in Martha that Cross is positively dependent on: without her mysterious distance she would not be the blank screen on which he projects his own fantasies, a dynamic articulated by Simone de Beauvoir and by many other feminist critics.30 As the story comes to an end, it becomes clear that Jimmy Cross is caught up in a similar paradox, with the one difference that the inescapable contradictions of his role are inflected according to masculine, rather than feminine, standards. Soon after Lee Strunk has emerged safely from the tunnel, another soldier, Ted Lavender, ‘is shot in the head on his way back from peeing’ (TTC, 11). In what is undoubtedly a traumatized reaction to this unpredictable tragedy, the lieutenant’s grief and sense of responsibility focus on his hopeless fantasies about Martha as a damaging distraction from his duties: Martha belongs ‘elsewhere’, to a world of ‘pretty poems’ and ‘midterm exams’ (TTC, 20), i.e. a place where people are allowed to pursue their own rarefied fancies while everyday life continues undisturbed – a world removed in two different ways from the soldiers’ experience of Vietnam, where daydreams and trivial activities are equally dangerous. In the aftermath of Lavender’s death, Cross burns Martha’s photographs and letters, and decides to impose an absolute respect of standard operating procedures on his platoon: ‘there would be grumbling, of course, and maybe worse, because their days would seem longer and their loads heavier, but Lieutenant Jimmy Cross reminded himself that his obligation was not to be loved but to lead. He would dispense with love […]. And if anyone quarrelled

30 ‘Of all these myths [the binary oppositions – virgin vs. whore, angel of the hearth vs. demon, muse vs. preying mantis, woman Beatrix vs. temptress – that make up the ‘Eternal Feminine’] none is more firmly anchored in masculine hearts than that of the feminine “mystery.”[…] A heart smitten with love thus avoids many disappointments: if the loved one’s behaviour is capricious, her remarks stupid, then the mystery serves to excuse it all. And finally, thanks again to the mystery, the negative relation is perpetuated which seemed to Kierkegaard infinitely preferable to positive possession: in the company of a living enigma man remains alone – alone with his dreams, his hopes, his fears, his love, his vanity’; Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex [1949], trans. Howard Madison Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 270.
or complained, he would simply tighten his lips and arrange his shoulders in the correct command posture’ (TTC, 21).

Cross’s surrender to the rules of his military training – to what makes him an ideal leader, and what makes him a man – in fact drives him away from his men, not so much because of the rigidity of the newly enforced procedures, but because of the suppression of emotions that goes with this masculine role. We have been told earlier in the story that the lieutenant is admired precisely because of his ability to care, for his capacity for grief. Cross’s striving for restraint, just like his fascination with Martha’s unavailability, is shown to be a misguided acquiescence in familiar cultural notions, but in the end both the internalization of a severe masculine posturing and the desire for a model feminine composure turn out to be as sterile as they are equally grounded in old-fashioned gender ideals. All the same, this subtle critique of gender stereotypes does not extend to a condemnation of the young man who subscribes to them. Cross’s characterization remains completely sympathetic: who could blame him for seeking refuge from the horror and the boredom of war in his imaginary romance with a sensitive, ethereal girl? And who could blame him for turning against her, when she seems so far away, both emotionally (in her rejection of his love) and intellectually (her letters never mention the war)? And yet, when, years after the war, the narrator O’Brien asks Jimmy Cross for permission to tell his story, the lieutenant’s response reveals how his actions are still determined by a desire to impress the girl: ‘Make me out to be a good guy, eh? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever’, so that the perfect woman will finally ‘come begging’ (TTC, 27).

While Jimmy Cross is constantly battling with the desire for acceptance and emotional validation, Martha is described as aloof, steely, autonomous, and distinctly uninspired by ‘the things men do’, which seem to be (violent) things done in order to impress or subjugate women, and affirm one’s masculinity – unsurprisingly, the two things seem to go together. Martha, on her part, has called herself out of this game, never getting married, although the deliberateness of this move is definitely under question, giving rise to a host of hypotheses (is she sexually repressed? celibate for religious reasons? a lesbian? or – and why not? – simply not interested in romantic relationships?) and reiterating once again the point that her rejection of Jimmy Cross and of the masculine code of behaviour is not directly related to his participation to the war. It is easy to see why Martha’s distant and censorious demeanour towards Cross – and, by extension, towards masculinity – should be viewed as problematic by feminist critics. They object to Martha’s sketchy and unsympathetic characterization and resent the fact that the mode of Cross’s initiation into his duty as a warrior, configured as a relinquishing of his feminine traits and presented as a sad, but nonetheless inevitable, conse-
quence of the internalization of the army training and of the experience of combat, should not be criticized more openly.

On the other hand, Martha’s naivety in her sweeping, and cryptic, condemnation of ‘the things men do’ finds its opposite number in the lieutenant’s own belief in an ideal model of masculine behaviour that would lead to success in military and romantic conquests: the protagonists of this story are both prisoners of contrasting assumptions about what it is that men should or should not do (or even, what it is that men can or cannot get away with in the expression of their masculinity). And, in all fairness, Martha’s scathing comment on masculine behaviour is a response to Cross’s extraordinary confession that ‘back in college he’d almost done something very brave. It was after seeing Bonnie and Clyde, he said, […] he’d almost picked her up and carried her to his room and tied her to the bed and put his hand on her knee and just held it there all night long’ (TTC, 26). Measured against this fantasy – which, quite apart from its ‘move from chivalry to sado-masochistic erotica’31 directly overrules Martha’s express rejection of her suitor’s hand on her knee – the lieutenant’s understanding of bravery is clearly charged with a predatory and sinister intent. (It makes one wonder how Smith can argue that ‘the violation and coercion’ behind Cross’s notion of gallantry are not considered in the story.) As I shall discuss in the final section of this chapter, the endless circle of male aggression and female passive resistance in which Jimmy Cross and Martha seem to have become locked is replicated, quite deliberately in all its shocking political incorrectness, in the interaction between other men and women in Things (see, for example, Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon’s sister, or even the narrator Tim O’Brien and one of his listeners).

Martha’s unwavering refusal to become implicated in ‘the things men do’ finds its opposite counterpart in the story of Mary Anne Bell in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’, a text geared to dispel the rigidity of gender stereotypes that are otherwise reinforced in time of war. In his gender-bending take on Conrad’s classic tale of the journey into the wilderness, O’Brien openly contests the idea that women are naturally impervious to ‘the fascination of the abomination’,32 without reducing Mary Anne either to a grotesque caricature, more manly than the men, or to a despicable and fearsome manifestation of a monstrous femininity. The success of this story relies in part on the rich web of intertextual references that O’Brien weaves between Mary Anne’s

31 Smith, “The Things Men Do”, p. 25. Lieutenant Cross is not the only character whose view of gallantry has violent undertones. This is how William Cowling describes his first, fleeting casual encounters with Sarah Strouch, before their relationship begins: ‘Now and then, by chance, we brushed up against each other, and I could smell her skin, the skin itself, and there was that moment of hurt and panic, the urge to try something desperate, something gallant, like rape, a blow to the chin and then drag her off’ (NA, 96).

32 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, p. 20.
adventure, and its convoluted history of transmission and reception, and
Marlow’s account of Kurtz’s, and his own, remarkable voyage of self-
discovery. An extensive comparative reading of the two texts will have to wait
until Chapter 5, where we shall see how O’Brien’s celebration of a character
who transcends traditional gender roles is accomplished through a narrative
strategy that embraces the challenges of écriture féminine to the phallogocen-
tric discourse of patriarchy. For the purposes of the current discussion of the
women in Things, suffice it to say that so keen is O’Brien to tell the story of a
character who would disprove an essentialist view of gender that he abandons
all the rules of plausibility to have the young Mary Anne join her soldier
boyfriend in a small medical detachment near the village of Tra Bong. There
Mary Anne becomes increasingly involved in military life, proving that the
real divide between the soldiers and the people back home is not a matter of
unbridgeable gender differences, but a question of exposure to the stress, as
well as the thrill, of combat. In Vietnam, Mary Anne – who, unlike Martha,
is introduced as gregarious and sexy in the wholesome manner that becomes
an American sweetheart – finds an irresistible opportunity to follow her
deepest and darkest instincts, losing her culturally determined sense of
identity and entering into a space beyond the reach of language. Liberated
from the patriarchal order, she is represented as a powerful figure who
continues to haunt those who have witnessed her metamorphosis: her story
remains a source of fascination, awe and curiosity to her ‘fellow soldiers’.
Crucially, in her journey from all-American girl to creature of the wilderness,
Mary Anne not only disappoints all expectations of her, but ultimately breaks
away from any attempt to rationalize or provide closure to her story. Her
retreat into silence – the fact that, unlike other characters in Things (such as
Mitchell Sanders, the platoon’s self-appointed hermeneutist, and Tim
O’Brien himself), she never gets to condense her experience into neat
aphorisms, sardonic morals or paradoxical lessons – is a sign of her strength,
as suggestive and awe-inspiring as Kurtz’s final words.

Leaving intertextual considerations aside, for the time being, it is clear that
Martha and Mary Anne are set on divergent narrative paths in order to repre-
sent, respectively, the self-perpetuating antagonism between gender roles
posed in binary oppositions and the dissolution of these mutually defining
bonds. The contrast between these two figures is further emphasized by the
echo, in their names, of the biblical story of the two sisters in Luke 10:38–42,
where Mary is shown listening to Jesus, while Martha preoccupies herself
with the household arrangements – itself perhaps an allusion to Mary Anne’s
instinctive fascination with the soldiers’ plight (Jimmy Cross shares the
initials of Christ and is linked to the symbol of his passion) and to Martha’s
subservience to cultural conventions. Kathleen and Linda, on the other hand,
fulfil a much more similar role in their representation of quintessential
innocence, a quality which is reflected in their age and in the etymology of their names. Significantly, the two girls are the only female characters to engage in direct interaction with O’Brien, for Martha and Mary Anne are known to him exclusively through the medium of somebody else’s storytelling. (In fact, the other female character to interact with Tim O’Brien in Things is an older woman who is part of the audience at one of his readings, but their relationship is clearly confined within the bounds of a narrative exchange, much as it had been in the case of Martha and of Mary Anne.) With the presence of two prepubescent girls, one an uncomprehending witness, the other the necessary mediator in his quest for catharsis, O’Brien draws attention to a theme that he will later revisit and expand both in In the Lake of the Woods and in Tomcat in Love: the difficulty in establishing meaningful adult relationships as a result of traumatization. In Things, this difficulty is exemplified by the narrator’s reliance on childhood innocence as an idealized backdrop against which it becomes possible – or even necessary – to play out a tentative search for signification and redemption.

Kathleen’s blunt curiosity about whether her father has ever killed anybody takes us back to familiar territory, with O’Brien musing on the burden of guilt that comes with one’s participation in the war, regardless of one’s personal body count. O’Brien is in no doubt about his responsibility, but he chooses to postpone the complex and painful explanation that such a question warrants until a time when his daughter is old enough to hear his full story. With a function not unlike Martha’s in relation to Jimmy Cross, Kathleen represents the promise of future fulfilment, while – crucially – retaining her present innocence. In his daughter O’Brien finds the solace of an ingenuousness to be preserved for as long as possible while cultivating the potential for understanding which their close relationship undeniably possesses. The young child who is first introduced chiding her father for his obsession with the war and suggesting that he ‘should write about a little girl who finds a million dollars and spends it all on a Shetland pony’ (TTC, 33) makes her final appearance in the novel accompanying O’Brien on a ‘field trip’ to Vietnam, which includes a visit to the site of Kiowa’s death and an elusive search for ‘signs of forgiveness or personal grace or whatever else the land might offer’ (TTC, 183). There, while Kathleen remains curious about the war and open with the locals, O’Brien is taken aback by how much things seem to have changed and how little trace of his past sorrow he can find, or indeed feel, in his exposure to once tragically familiar places. O’Brien’s

33 Kathleen is a variation of Catherine, from the Greek for ‘pure’. Linda stands for ‘clean’ in Italian, and ‘pretty’ in Spanish, while its Germanic root means ‘yielding’.
34 Even so, it is in reply to Kathleen’s demand for an honest answer that he articulates, for the reader, his distinction between ‘story-truth’ and ‘happening-truth’ (on this issue, see Chapter 5).
emotional numbness continues in his solitary performance of a brief remembrance ceremony for Kiowa, when he wades into the marshlands to return his friend’s moccasins to the place of his drowning twenty years before. This private ritual, from which Kathleen remains markedly excluded (like the old Vietnamese farmer also present at the scene), is executed in silence, for the narrator struggles ‘to think of something decent to say’ (TTC, 187). The deluded investment in the possibility that this deed would provide some sense of closure, ratified by O’Brien’s pithy ‘There it is’ (the refrain associated with the fatalistic, and ultimately meaningless, morals that Mitchell Sanders distils from the war), is further thrown into relief by Kathleen’s defamiliarizing gaze, as she looks uncomprehendingly on at her father taking a swim in such an inopportune place. Kathleen’s mundane protests at O’Brien’s unexplained action add to the bathetic quality of his attempt to lay his ghosts to rest through anything other than the interweaving of memory and imagination and the endless refashioning of stories.

It is with Linda, through whom he first learnt the consolatory power of storytelling, that O’Brien gets closest to experiencing some kind of catharsis, although – as the paradoxical fragility of the title of her story, ‘The Lives of the Dead’, already seems to suggest – not even the endless possibilities opened up by a narrative act can yield lasting comfort and signification. This chapter, the last in the novel, envisages the possibility of superseding the irreversibility of death and grief through the most powerful secular grand narrative in the Western world, the notion of romantic love, which is found here in its most perfect manifestation: absolute, uncorrupted and eternal, it is the bond between the nine-year-old Timmy O’Brien and his school-mate Linda, a girl who dies soon afterwards of a brain tumour. O’Brien pointedly insists that his feelings for the girl, and vice versa, should not be dismissed as a childhood crush or a lesser form of love. On the contrary, this connection ‘had all the shadings and complexities of mature adult love, and maybe more, because there were not yet words for it, and because it was not yet fixed to comparisons or chronologies or the ways by which adults measure things’ (TTC, 223). Already grounded in an immediate and complete mutual understanding – itself made possible by the authenticity that is the prerogative of childhood – and crystallized in its perfection by its tragic curtailment, the love between Timmy and Linda is further elevated to the status of ennobling, pure passion by the reference to their precise age, which is the same as Dante’s and Beatrice’s at the time of their first, life-changing encounter, as described in the Vita Nuova.

Linda is thus set up to become the narrator’s muse, a consolatory vision that Timmy first summons to his aid when trying to come to terms with her death. The nine-year-old’s day-dreaming is the beginning of a lifelong faith in the ability of imaginative storytelling to offer a respite from sorrow and
grief, a feeling of wholeness, even perhaps a glimpse of redemption:

And then it becomes 1990. I’m forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. She’s not the embodied Linda; she’s mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was. Her real name doesn’t matter. She was nine years old. I loved her and then she died. And yet right here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I’m gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all. I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can even see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. I’m young and I’m happy. I’ll never die. I’m skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt between the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the air and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy’s life with a story. (TTC, 236)

Following Linda, who by now has become fully transubstantiated into an incorporeal ideal, O’Brien accedes to a heavenly dimension where there is no death, no separation and no pain, where old friends are reunited and sorrows forgotten. The narrator’s permanence in this ‘other world’, however, is described as fragile, particularly when it comes to his encounter with his younger, innocent self. In other words, O’Brien’s imaginative leap is quite knowingly envisaged as a temporary fantasy, a willing suspension of disbelief aided by the mediation of an iconic figure who, for all her consolatory power, falls short (and how could she not!) of the beatific example on which she is modelled. In fact, the Dantesque allusion offers an ironic counterpoint to the scope of the narrator’s journey, which is a quick, virtuoso ‘skimming across the surface’ of his personal history, an endless going around in circles, ultimately only amounting to an attempt to retrieve, fleetingly, a romanticized fragment of one’s past.

With the creation of the two prepubescent characters, O’Brien avoids the undercurrent of male resentment against more mature female figures who, in the soldiers’ eyes, are held responsible for their failure to understand the war, even when – as the careful reader is bound to acknowledge – the stories that they are asked to relate to and the attitudes that they are asked to condone contain a definite threat to femininity. Kathleen can suggest that her father should try to leave the war behind without incurring his wrath or sarcasm, unlike the elderly woman in the audience later in the narrative; on the other hand, her innocence precludes her father from truly opening up to her here and now. The possibility of understanding and forgiveness is thus available, but only through a story that has not yet been told, in a future conversation which, as O’Brien’s evasiveness in ‘Field Trip’ seems to suggest, might never