come. Linda, on her part, offers to the narrator the momentary chance to revive his childhood self through a vision – the two young sweethearts ‘ice skating late at night, tracing loops and circles under yellow floodlights’ (TTC, 235) – that was already at one remove from reality for Timmy: as we follow Tim dreaming of Timmy dreaming of himself and Linda, who appears ‘as if through ice’, visible yet separate, always on the other side of the mirror, O’Brien’s return to innocence cannot but strike us as a mirage receding further and further away from view. With the significant exception of Mary Anne Bell, the main female figures in Things are all caught up in the male characters’ attempt to come to terms with trauma, but the transparency of this operation, through which women are construed as the prototypical outsiders from the war, is such that the readers cannot be unaware of its tendentiousness – nor can they ignore the ensuing contradictions in the soldiers’ expectations of their female interlocutors.

Bathos, caricatural excesses and the inaccessibility of love

The relationships between men and women analysed so far all illustrate a vulnerable, fraught masculinity, without condoning – rather, if anything, highlighting – the male characters’ failure to envisage femininity in ways other than monstrous embodiments of one’s anxieties or idealized projections of one’s deepest desires. The moral strength and complexity of female figures such as Sarkin Aung Wan and Kathy Wade thus often end up being somewhat compromised by the male perspective that for the most part, in full view and with no pretense to objectivity, underpins O’Brien’s narratives. In other words, we only get to see O’Brien’s glorious, fascinating and at times downright powerful and mystifying heroines, and their less glamorous and positive counterparts, through damaged and/or unreliable male eyes, like Berlin’s, Wade’s or even the narrator’s in Lake. Yet the deliberate partiality of the masculine perspective in O’Brien’s works is not the only reason why some of his creations lack depth in their psychological characterization and development. On a few occasions, O’Brien’s female figures, just like their male companions, appear underdeveloped or unconvincing because of a narrative heavy-handedness that relies on stark oppositions and larger-than-life protagonists. This is the case, for example, of the characters in Northern Lights, a text which, by the author’s own admission, suffers from ‘[o]verwriting’ and ‘too much gamesmanship’,35 understandable flaws in a first creative effort. Having said that, the novel is not so overdetermined as to provide closure across a neat gendered divide: as we have seen, just to give an

obvious example, Grace is spared the role of beatific saviour that her name seems to promise. Like Addie, the other main female character in a novel that puts to the test Hemingway’s model of masculinity, and like Paul and Harvey, the two male protagonists, she is a flawed human being, whose characterization is affected by the painting-by-numbers clumsiness of the narrative. O’Brien’s calculated reliance on overstatement is particularly evident in his comic works, which tend to capitalize – with mixed results, it has to be said – on black humour and caricatural excesses. While O’Brien’s first novel falls victim to its own attempt ‘to parody Hemingway’, the three comic works in O’Brien’s canon could all be described as novels of ideas, in which the narrative development and the psychological characterization of the central figures are subordinated to the illustration of one theme. *The Nuclear Age* is about nothing less than ‘the safety of our own species, our survival’ and the need to take personal responsibility even for such a wide political issue as this one. *Tomcat in Love* is a postmodern reflection on the subjective, slippery nature of language, told by an unreliable narrator, Thomas H. Chippering, Professor of Modern American Lexicology at the University of Minnesota. Chippering is a conceited, self-deluded womanizer, whose spectacular mid-life meltdown provides countless opportunities for O’Brien to emphasize the embarrassing gap between the unfolding events and the narrator’s warped perception and rendition of them. Finally, *July, July* is about the collective fall from grace of the Vietnam war generation, captured thirty years after their turbulent halcyon days, at a time when their erstwhile antagonism in relation to their elders and the establishment – perfectly encapsulated in the provocative motto ‘never trust anybody over thirty’ – has backfired into a mocking self-indictment. These three comedies, and in particular the final two, all chart their characters’ doomed quest for romantic love, outlining in the process the difficulty that traumatized subjects experience in opening up to other people and in establishing healthy, caring and enduring relationships. Inevitably, these books invite a close scrutiny of O’Brien’s representation of gender, and have often attracted criticism at the very least for their lack of subtlety on that front. While it is sometimes difficult to disagree with critics who think that these works are

38 The specific need to shake the American readers from their political torpor is reflected in the cover of the 1987 Flamingo edition of the book: under a heading, almost as big as the title, that reads ‘This Novel Could Save Your Life’, there is the image of Uncle Sam wearing a gas-mask and pointing to the reader with his finger in his usual ‘The Country Needs YOU’ recruitment pose.
39 Another common trait in O’Brien’s three comedies is their treatment of the war, which is much more peripheral – although by no means unimportant both in plot and in character development – than in his other writing.
stunted by infelicitous narrative choices, clearly dictated by the pursuit of humorous effects, O’Brien’s three novels of ideas do not deserve a cursory dismissal. Reading past their occasional mishandling of the comic register reveals perceptive insights on the nature of love, and the long-term effects of trauma, and introduces us to truly memorable figures.

*The Nuclear Age*, for example, offers us the portrait of Sarah Strouch, O’Brien’s most developed and compelling female character, who more than makes up for the less than sympathetic characterization of Bobbi, William Cowling’s later love interest. From the beginning of the narrative, the beautiful, unavailable Sarah Strouch strikes William as a cut above the rest of the high-school crowd. In his distrust of and contempt for the shallow life of his contemporaries – to whose company he opposes his ‘affinity for rocks’ (*NA*, 35), safe, silent, non-judgemental – William makes an exception for this vibrant, spirited cheerleader, with whom he entertains imaginary conversations on the phone, in his ploy to convince his parents that he is a regular teenager. At first glance, this would seem to be familiar territory, with the lead female character being introduced as a projection of the male protagonist. However, as the novel progresses, Sarah enters William’s life for real, developing into a complex, rounded figure, often taking centre stage, and affecting the course of the events in a way that is not matched by anyone else in the story. When they eventually meet at university, Sarah is still a bright, attractive and popular student, while William has recently taken the momentous step of turning his private anxiety about the nuclear war into a public protest, brandishing a poster inscribed with ‘THE BOMBS ARE REAL’ in front of the student cafeteria and recruiting to the cause, amidst general indifference, a couple of misfits. The two outsiders who first join Cowling’s crusade are Ollie Winkler, a short and stocky technological wizard, and Tina Roebuck, a home-economics major and a compulsive eater, who both immediately argue for the protest to become more incisive, perhaps even violent. Certain aspects of Ollie’s description – the comparison to Friar Tuck in cowboy attire, to a gremlin, or the mention of ‘obvious evidence of a misplaced chromosome’ (*NA*, 75ff.) – are reminiscent of similar qualities in Cacciato; and, in a sense, with the fierceness of his commitment to raising the stakes, Ollie is showing William the way to put into action his long-cherished wishes.

However, it is only when Sarah joins this odd trio that William’s small-scale and self-righteous protest acquires effectiveness and visibility. With her liveliness, fervour and temerity, Sarah seems to offer William a third possibility, beyond the impasse created by the dichotomy between ‘screwball’ and ‘regular guy’. Sarah herself is full of contradictions, hiding behind the façade of good-looking exhibitionist, first-class student and popular girl a deep insecurity and an overwhelming need to feel alive and loved. If William’s
fears are crippling, Sarah’s are the prime reason why she courts attention and why she throws herself into the anti-nuclear campaign, which becomes the centre both of her emotional life, through her relationship with William, and of her professional life, once she links up their amateurish college enterprise with an underground terrorist group. In love and war, Sarah quickly becomes William’s guide and instigator, making things happen and taking to her role with natural aptitude:

Cheerleader to rabble-rouser: It was a smooth, almost effortless transition. Surprising, maybe, and yet the impulse was there from the start. In a sense, I realized, cheerleaders are terrorists. All that zeal and commitment. A craving for control. A love of pageantry and slogans and swollen rhetoric. Power too. The hot, energizing rush of absolute authority: Lean to the left, lean to the right. And then finally that shrill imperative: Fight – fight – fight! [...] Her generalship was impeccable. Her demands were unqualified. In public, but also in bed, she was a born leader. (NA, 100)

And, of course, in the matter of another war, it is Sarah who turns into reality William’s decision to dodge the draft call: “‘Run,’ Sarah said. And I did. First by bus, then by plane, and by the second week in September I was deep underground” (NA, 121).

O’Brien’s most fleshed out female character, Sarah Strouch is certainly the real heroine of the novel, the character who provides the moral centre of the narrative and who manages to turn her weakness (her craving for fame, love and recognition) into the fuel for her political battle. Half-way through the novel, as the group prepare for an escalation of their terrorist activities by going to Cuba for a gruelling quasi-military training at the hands of two Vietnam war veterans, Sarah issues one of her most exasperated demands to William, whom she has always jokingly accused of having a ‘jellyfish mentality’ (NA, 103). As the character with drive and backbone in the couple, Sarah urges William to ‘crawl out of [his] goddamn hidey-hole’ (NA, 162) – a metaphorical hidey-hole at this point in the narrative, but also clearly a foreshadowing of the climactic episode of the novel. To Sarah’s reproach, William reacts with a silent admission of the fundamental difference which sets them apart: ‘She was out to change the world, I was out to survive it. I couldn’t summon the same moral resources’ (NA, 163). For all her need for recognition, Sarah’s investment in the outside world – through William and through her political campaigns – is at one with her deepest beliefs, be they the private dream of a passionate escape to Rio and of a large family, or the desire for success in getting America to stop and take notice of the dangers of the nuclear age. In Sarah’s world, words immediately translate into actions, and William is quick to recognize this correspondence, in spite of Sarah’s
façade of bravado, flippancy, and sarcasm which acts ‘as a kind of camouflage, like her cosmetics, the gaudy nail polish and lipstick and mascara. At times, I thought, it was as if she were hiding herself, or from herself’ (*NA*, 103).

To William (and to Ned Rafferty, her other on-off boyfriend, who sticks with the group for love, rather than from deep political convictions), Sarah is a mesmerizing figure, to be held in awe, without full comprehension. She is a ‘mystery’ (*NA*, 107), intense and alluring, but also with a distinct affinity with danger. Her dark side is intimated by her relationship with death: the daughter of a mortician, she tries to shake off this association through her vitality and lust for life. She remains, however, a *femme fatale* in the literal sense of the word because of her ‘fatal flaw’ (*NA*, 103), a recurring fever blister on her lip. This cancerous mole eventually causes her death, thus marking her destiny as a tragic heroine; in a novel in which the larger-than-life nature of people’s personality traits, quirks and obsessions typically has a dark comic (therefore laughable) undertone, Sarah’s ‘fatal flaw’ – one might even say, the physical analogue of the Aristotelian *hamartia* of ancient Greek tragedy – and her ensuing, sombre demise bestow on her a distinct *gravitas* and single her out as the one character in the novel worthy of genuine pity and admiration. In this tragic solemnity – and other, more superficial, traits – Sarah Strouch anticipates Mary Anne Bell in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’ as a charismatic figure who, being true to herself, loses herself in the obscure meanders of her personality. Their similarity is hinted at in their fondness for culottes, which signal an active, athletic nature. They are part of Sarah’s cheerleading outfit and associated with her rebellious spirit, as William’s quip – ‘Culottes to sansculottes – a radical realignment’ (*NA*, 103) – indicates. Beside this small detail of her attire, Sarah shares with Mary Anne Bell an irresistible enthralment with war; true to her characterization, Sarah entertains strong, contradictory feelings about it: ‘This goddamn war. I hate it, I do hate it, but it’s what I’m here for. I hate it, but I love it’ (*NA*, 171 – notice how there is ambiguity in the very reference to the war, which here stands for Sarah’s political fight, but also inevitably alludes to the conflict in Vietnam). Of course, Sarah is a more realistic, more extensively developed version of Mary Anne, whose characterization is necessarily more vague than her predecessor’s due to the obvious constraints of the short story genre. And yet Mary Anne’s tale gains in evocative power, compared to the account of Sarah Strouch’s life, because it is embedded within a legendary, even fantastic, logic, through the utter implausibility of its factual premises and the equally larger-than-life connotations derived from its intertextual dialogue with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

In spite of her undeniable charisma, Sarah’s repeated invitations to William to embrace their cause and join in the frontline of the terroristic network, like the other members of their original group, are ultimately to no
avail. As his (always reluctant) involvement with the underground movement – which of course is tied in with his one-man campaign to avoid Vietnam – threatens to become more consuming and dangerous, William forgoes Sarah’s guidance and, I would argue, full rights to the title of the only hero that O’Brien has ever written, bestowed on him by O’Brien himself in a 1991 interview with Martin Naparsteck. However flawed and eccentric as a role model, it is Sarah who partakes of the defining quality of O’Brien’s heroes, for her allegiance to her beliefs supersedes the desire to acquiesce to the rules of society. Unsurprisingly, William’s reintegration into mainstream America must therefore begin with his departure from Sarah and the pursuit of a completely different companion. William’s desires fix on Bobbi, a seductive air-stewardess-cum-poet met during one of his trips as a courier for the terrorist network, a woman in whose reassuring professional demeanour and lyrical sensitivity he is determined to see the possibility of a romantic happy ending. When Bobbi turns out to be on the verge of relocation to Germany with her new husband, William has no choice but to resort to a longer-term strategy. As already discussed, having put his romantic designs on Bobbi on hold for an indefinite period of time, he has a spectacular chance to resume them thanks to the proceeds of his uranium venture. The millionaire William and the now divorced Bobbi – who, it turns out, had walked out on her first husband only two months after their wedding – thus get married nearly a decade after their initial, casual encounter.

Rather underdeveloped as a character, depicted as something of a flirt and possibly a little too receptive to the lures of money, Bobbi functions in the novel as an antithesis to Sarah, particularly in her attitude to commitment and language. Sarah is loyal, Bobbi is a heart-breaker; Sarah lives intensely, underground, in the nitty-gritty world of Realpolitik; Bobbi inhabits a loftier realm with more rarefied feelings expressed in hermetic poems, such as her earliest offering to William (and, it turns out, to several other men) entitled ‘Martian Travel’, about ‘flight and fantasy and pale green skin, which was hard to follow, but […] seemed meaningful despite the absence of meaning’ (NA, 152). Sarah is a woman for whom actions count more than words, Bobbi privileges words – and indirect communication at that – over any other form of expression; Sarah is riddled with contradictions and looks for the extraordinary, Bobbi settles for a quiet, comfortable, ordinary life. In accounting for his wife’s and daughter’s irritation about the sudden digging of the shelter, William points out his wife’s meticulousness in keeping a tidy house and a tidy life: ‘she’s the poet, the creative type; she believes in clean metaphors and clean language; tidiness of structure, things neatly in place. Holes aren’t clean. Safety can be very messy’ (NA, 6). William’s crisis and regression to

40 See n. 15 above.
his childhood fears of annihilation is partly a radical reaction to the possibility that Bobbi might abandon him, taking their daughter Melinda with her, partly also a rejection of Bobbi’s world of neat metaphors. ‘The world […] is drugged on metaphor, the opiate of our age’ (NA, 124), says William, while digging his hole. By contrast, as he had explained earlier on in the narrative, ‘uranium is no figure of speech; it’s a figure of nature. You can hold it in your hand. It has an atomic weight of 238.03; it melts at 1,132.30 degrees centigrade; it’s hard and heavy and impregnable to metaphor. I should know, I made my fortune on the stuff’ (NA, 65). William’s alienation from his wife is as inevitable as his split from Sarah, whose example remains something for him to aspire to, and yet never to be reached.

Even if her story is subordinate to William’s, Sarah Strouch remains a much more successful creation than he is, because her obsessions and insecurities have convincing, low-key explanations, and are conveyed without the frenzied quality that William otherwise uses in his self-analysis and in his relentless proselytizing. Paradoxically, Sarah’s subsidiary role in the novel is in great part what safeguards her status as a more rounded and sympathetic character than William: as one of the subject matters in his life story, and not a narrator in her own right, Sarah is spared the negative connotations attached to the tone of his first-person narration (incidentally, getting the right narrative tone is a problem which The Nuclear Age definitely shares with O’Brien’s other two comedies). The other major difference between the male narrator and the female heroine of this book is to do with their respective authenticity, to go back to what I have identified as the measure of true courage for O’Brien. William fails to be authentic – and therefore, to an extent, to command our sympathy in the same way that Sarah does – because, like Paul Perry, he mostly reacts to circumstances (hence, for example, his stint as an underground courier, his fortuitous career as an entrepreneur, and even his reinvention as a family man), instead of following his own inner dictates. Besides, like the protagonist of If I Die and Paul Berlin before him, he simply cares too much about what society thinks of him, and finally succumbs to the pressure of embarrassment and the fear of public censure. Even with all her insecurities Sarah, by contrast, is always fully committed to what she believes in. As William himself readily admits: ‘She was in the world. I was out of it. […] She wanted engagement, I did not’ (NA, 258). The element of unthinking self-abandon in what Sarah does, with the potential dangers that such an instinctive reaction to things often comports, is aptly epitomized by her ‘fatal flaw’, the mark both of the character’s tragic status, and of her innate truthfulness to her own nature.

Like The Nuclear Age, Tomcat in Love is characterized by the idiosyncratic voice of its unreliable, inauthentic protagonist. This time, however, the first-person narrator is fixated on self-promotion and justification, rather than on
prophesies of doom: an incorrigible narcissist, Professor Chippering cannot but tell his tale through the constant aggrandizement of his achievements and the downplaying of his misdemeanours. Possibly because of the comparative lightness of the issues it deals with, and in spite of its frequent lapses into farcical tones, *Tomcat in Love* manages to let Chippering’s fragility seep through his overwhelmingly boorish characterization. In a way, O’Brien adopts here – on a much larger scale, and for comic effects – the same technique that he had used to outline the protagonist of *If I Die*: the more mistakenly self-righteous the character, the greater the pathos in his demise when the reality behind his self-delusions eventually catches up with him. Chippering’s narrative is prompted by the wish to account for and record his plans for revenge on his ex-wife Lorna Sue and her new husband. This desire for revenge is symptomatic, amongst other things, of his inability to acknowledge his responsibility in the disintegration of his marriage. In fact, Chippering is determined to settle the score with Lorna Sue’s brother Herbie, whose overbearing protectiveness – construed by the narrator as patent evidence of incestuous feelings – has led him to expose Chippering’s ‘harmless’ deceptions to his wife, thus causing an irreparable rift in the relationship. As in a bedroom farce, evidence of Chippering’s final marital indiscretion is compellingly found under his mattress; there Chippering has hidden several cheques to a fake psychiatrist, proof of his deceitful disregard for Lorna Sue’s plea that he should seek medical support for his paranoia and for the other post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms that he has been suffering from for years. This betrayal is compounded by the discovery of another object hidden under the mattress: the ledger in which Chippering has been cataloguing with clinical precision all his sexual conquests, real and imagined. That Chippering should assume the moral high ground and plead for sympathy – the readers’ and the narratee’s, whom Chippering imagines in the guise of a woman abandoned by her husband for a sexier, younger lover – immediately gives us the measure of his effrontery and self-importance. Chippering, however, digs deep into his and his wife’s past in order to explain their present circumstances.

The novel begins with the narrator’s reminiscence of ‘the ridiculous, in June 1952, middle-century Minnesota, on that silvery-hot morning when Herbie Zylstra and I nailed two plywood boards together and called it an airplane’ (TL, 1). Unable to get the aeroplane to fly, Herbie decides to use it as a cross, and to re-enact the crucifixion, enlisting Lorna Sue in the role of Christ. This disturbing childhood tableau, predictably enough, leads to disaster, as the little girl ends up permanently scarred by a wound on her hand. The hole in Lorna Sue’s hand – the tangible mark of the original trauma at the heart of the novel – raises once again, and more urgently perhaps than any analogous images in O’Brien’s other books, the question of
a possible gender bias in the author’s depiction of distressful situations and shocking ordeals. We have already seen that, even when ambivalently caught between the promise of an (illusory) sense of security and wholeness and the reality of trauma, the holes and underground passages in O’Brien’s other works offer an irresistible connection with psychoanalytic characterizations of the female body. After all, in psychoanalytic discourse the maternal body is cast as the site of pre-lapsarian stability and unity, while the female genitalia are the privileged signifier of lack and separation, and therefore, by extension, of post-lapsarian decay. So far I have suggested that we should resist the temptation to read O’Brien’s topography of trauma as a gendered body, for O’Brien’s most recurrent, deliberate anatomical allusions are to the organs of elimination, rather than to the female reproductive system, in a bid to make literal the waste of war. How should we read trauma, however, when its prime site is a penetrative wound inflicted on a female body, as appears to be the case in *Tomcat in Love*? What are the implications of the stigmata-like mark on Lorna Sue’s hand?

With good reason, Chippering himself pinpoints Lorna Sue’s immolation as the trigger of the dysfunctional triangular relationship between the two of them and Herbie, united as they all are in a strange bond of violence, complicity and guilt. Significantly, it is only by accident that the young Chippering does not take part in the crucifixion of Lorna Sue, with whom – it is worth remembering – he had already developed a mutual attraction. The boys’ first attempt at nailing her hand to the makeshift cross is averted at the last minute by Chippering’s mother, and later Herbie proceeds on his own. In a bout of characteristic self-righteousness, Chippering lists the eccentric motives as to why he feels cheated for not having been able to witness, let alone be actively involved in, this momentous event: ‘It was my plywood. […]’ Other reasons too: because at age sixteen I would make first love with Lorna Sue Zylstra on the hood of my father’s Pontiac, and because ten years later we would be married, and because twenty-some years after that Lorna Sue would discover romance with another man, and betray me, and move to Tampa’ (*TL*, 9). Chippering’s regret for his exclusion from the wounding of Lorna Sue is dictated by his sense of entitlement over her and, one suspects, by his jealousy at the thought that he should have let Herbie ‘penetrate’ her first. For Chippering, Lorna Sue’s crucifixion is the beginning of a lifelong obsession with issues of faith, in all the nuances of the word: the intimacy between lovers, the fidelity between spouses, the trust amongst friends, the support of one’s family or even the bond between fellow soldiers, and the relationship with the divine.

His reaction to the pivotal, initial incident in the story is the disappointment of the worshipper who has been excluded from witnessing a mystery crucial to a cult; from this moment on, Chippering becomes convinced that
Lorna Sue’s crucifixion has made her holy in the eyes of the Zylstras: ‘it occurred to me that this entire family was in love with Lorna Sue, or obsessed by her, or caught up in some perverse form of idolatry. [...] The scar on her hand’ (TL, 14). Clearly, Lorna Sue’s alleged divine status amongst her kin reflects Chippering’s own feelings for her: ‘I told her she was sacred to me. I told her she was holy. I told her I had loved her before either of us had been born’ (TL, 21). O’Brien continues to pursue these fanciful religious associations in the unfolding of the narrative, capitalizing on the ironic gap between Chippering’s recourse to the language of spirituality and worship, and the man’s much more mundane and self-serving preoccupations. (This move recalls the bathetic shift in the mention of O’Brien’s musings about Canada and Sweden in the same breath as Socrates’ refusal to leave Athens in If I Die). In punishment for his sister’s martyrdom, Herbie is sent off to a Jesuit school, from which he returns a year later suitably repentant and withdrawn, but also possessed of a fanatic ‘self-flagellating religiosity’ (TL, 42). When in 1957 the local Catholic church is ravaged by fire, and four days later sexual graffiti appear on the ruins and a pair of female breasts are drawn with red lipstick on a statue of Christ, Chippering is convinced of Herbie’s responsibility for these acts of vandalism. As the years go by, while Herbie seems to sink deeper into his strange moods and obsessive concern for his sister, Chippering flourishes – or so he would have us believe – into a devoted husband, an esteemed academic and a highly accomplished man whom ‘women find [...] attractive beyond words’ (TL, 29–30). So popular is he, particularly with his female students, that the jealousy of his colleagues is roused: Chippering is convinced of the existence of an academic plot against him, since he continues to be denied the prize for teaching excellence that is obviously, in his opinion, his due. Even his involvement in the conflict in Vietnam is a resounding triumph: the narrator proudly refers to himself as a ‘war hero’, the deserving ‘recipient of the Silver Star for valor’ (TL, 30).

In the course of the narrative, Chippering’s boastful claims predictably turn out to be greatly exaggerated and to obscure terrible secrets. The professor’s young conquests all see through his vanity and manipulate it to their advantage: when two students threaten to expose his advances, Chippering offers to ghostwrite their theses in exchange for their silence, but is forced into resigning from his job as soon as the entire arrangement becomes known to the academic authorities. More shocking still is the truth behind his service in Vietnam. Being an awards clerk, he manages to confer the Silver Star on himself, for what is really an act of revenge, and not of heroism. Chippering calls in an air-strike to spook the six Green Berets who, in a cruel prank, had abandoned him in the middle of the jungle; desire for retaliation for this terrible ordeal is compounded by further resentment because Chippering holds the Greenies responsible for having tainted his
relationship with a beautiful Vietnamese girl. He had fallen for her, thinking her a model of purity and marvelling at her sexual prowess, only to realize that all along he had been sharing her with his six companions on their secluded military outpost. Years later, at the time when Chippering is telling us his story, the threat of the Green Berets’ own revenge for the air-strike has become a further strain on the professor, the final straw that contributes to the definitive collapse of his plot against Lorna Sue.

Chippering’s present-day progress thus unfolds through a series of humiliating experiences: from a public spanking in front of his students, courtesy of Herbie and Lorna Sue’s new husband, to his dishonourable dismissal from work, to a couple of pathetic attempts to start a new career. In a nursery school, he tries to teach Shakespeare to his charges and is apparently falsely accused of molesting the children; on live television, where he is competing to become the new ‘Captain Nineteen’, the superhero host of a children’s show, he suffers a nervous breakdown. Unsurprisingly, instead of wreaking revenge on his ex-wife, Chippering ends up being institutionalized for post-traumatic stress disorder, before he decides to start a new life with the former Mrs Kooshof, the woman he has amazingly managed to conquer in spite of his pathological obsession with Lorna Sue and his disgraceful spiralling out of control. Of course, the endlessly accommodating and forgiving Mrs Kooshof is herself given a suitably dire background, in what looks like a dress rehearsal for the stories of incredible squalor of July, July: she is married to a fraudster who is serving time in prison and is evidently desperate enough for a fresh start to want to hook up with Thomas Chippering. In spite of this surprising happy ending, Chippering’s redemption is far from assured: he may have taken up temporary residence with his new companion on a tropical island and, in view of his spectacular breakdown, he may be seeking to toe the line of domestic harmony but, as he readily admits, ‘the proud, brawny tomcat still struts within [him]’ (TL, 367), ogling every woman in sight, confident of his irresistible charms.

In Chippering O’Brien has created his most boorish character: pretentious, sanctimonious, always on the defensive with embarrassingly transparent excuses. Chippering’s rare glimpses of his true motives, though, are disarmingly honest, as this admission testifies: ‘From childhood on, I had been consumed by an insatiable appetite for affection, hunger without limit, a bottomless hole inside me. I would (and I will) do virtually anything to acquire love, virtually anything to keep it. I would (and will) lie for love, cheat for love, beg for love, steal for love, ghostwrite for love, seek revenge for love, swim oceans for love, perhaps even kill for love’ (TL, 168, my italics). Not content with the scope of this confession, which chimes with a conviction very dear to his author, Chippering draws us all in this desperate craving for love: ‘Am I alone in this? Certainly not. Each of us, I firmly believe, is
propelled through life by a restless, inexhaustible need for affection’ (TL, 168). Chippering’s moments of lucid self-analysis, however, never last long, and never lead to positive action and to attempts to mend his ways. Only his attitude to Lorna Sue changes radically at the end of the novel, and that is because of a dramatic twist in the plot: Chippering finally learns that Lorna Sue had been behind the acts of vandalism ascribed to Herbie. On his part, feeling responsible for his little sister’s traumatization, Herbie had since then always been trying to take care of her and to hide her condition. The climactic showdown between the two ex-spouses occurs as a paradoxical reversal of Chippering’s original plans for revenge, when one night Lorna Sue creeps into the house he shares with Mrs Kooshof, demanding unconditional adoration and threatening to blow up the entire place.

With its extravagant plot, overblown characters and insufferable narrator, Tomcat in Love has generally left critics indifferent or, at best, perplexed.41 Yet the heavy-handed execution of the novel – misguided or otherwise – leaves readers with no doubts about O’Brien’s position vis-à-vis his protagonist’s misogynist arrogance: Chippering is a figure of fun, whether we can get over his unpleasantness or not. Still, unlike other authorial alter egos, whose pretensions to intellectual superiority and to a moral high ground are similarly, more or less explicitly, ridiculed – as in the case of the Tim O’Brien in If I Die – Chippering remains a particularly inauthentic character, undeserving of our sympathy. For the protagonist of If I Die, the act of railing against the ‘jungle of robots’ is, all in all, a rather uncharacteristic moment, since he is too busy scrutinizing his own failings, of which he is painfully aware. Chippering, instead, never appears to be even remotely willing to accept responsibility for his lot, and spends the best part of the novel fabricating one conspiracy theory after another. Always ready to claim agency if the outcome is positive (witness his confidence in his irresistibility to women, his academic brilliance, his valour as a soldier), he otherwise sees himself as an innocent victim of circumstances. Moreover, while readers might be inclined to forgive the young protagonist of If I Die his (occasionally) aggrandized sense of his own worth, they will not be so understanding with the self-delusions of a middle-aged man like Chippering who, having received more than his fair share of knocks from life, really ought to know better.

Worthy of more serious and careful consideration from the readers is Herbie and Lorna Sue’s disturbing childhood prank, and the significance of what at the end of the narrative transpires to have been an act of protest on trauma, gender and the poetics of uncertainty 167

41 See for example the two reviews of Tomcat in Love, published in the New York Times in September 1998: Michiko Kakutani’s ferocious critique of the book was followed, a week later, by Jane Smiley’s more appreciative response to O’Brien’s change in style and direction, in spite of some reservations on his command of the comic register.
Lorna Sue’s part, in her self-immolation. Herbie’s long overdue account recasts their re-enactment of the crucifixion as a challenge to the patriarchal hierarchy of Christianity, prompted by Lorna Sue’s desire for inclusion in a male-dominated world, and by his own curiosity: ‘Wanted to see if she’d go to heaven. If I’d go to hell. If the skies would open. Curious’ (TL, 341). The little girl is indeed eager to participate in her brother’s ‘experiment’ because she wants to play Jesus, replacing a male divinity with a female one, as testified also by her defilement of religious images later on in the narrative. In significant contrast to what would have been Chippering’s attitude in the same circumstance, and what has indeed been his attitude throughout the book, even after his shocking revelation, Herbie refuses to find excuses for his behaviour and to lay the blame on Lorna Sue as a victim colluding with her own torturer. Mark Heberle indeed goes as far as to suggest that Lorna Sue’s characterization – her self-destructiveness, her aggression, her picking at the wound, effectively a form of self-mutilation – actually captures the post-traumatic symptoms of childhood sexual abuse. Unfortunately, the narrow scope allowed by the first-person narration, and Chippering’s own peculiar limitations as a narrator, prevent O’Brien from delving any deeper into the traumas represented – and possibly hidden – by Lorna Sue’s wound. And yet, in spite of the final twist in the plot, Lorna Sue is not typecast as the villain of the piece, another aberrant (female) figure and a convenient scapegoat for the (male) protagonist’s misadventures. On the contrary, her former husband’s insensitivity and his track record of exploitative relationships highlight Lorna Sue’s victimhood, even if the novel fails to provide a detailed explanation of its causes. For the readers, the hole in Lorna Sue’s hand remains the most visible sign of Chippering’s inability to fathom his ex-wife and of O’Brien’s difficulty in finding the words to articulate the experience of a post-traumatic survivor. The scar on Lorna Sue’s body is the physical correlative of the ‘bottomless hole’ inside the narrator, with both characters exemplifying the ‘inexhaustible need for affection’ that Chippering – convincingly for once – identifies as the common plight of mankind.

Unlike the previous two comedies, July, July does not suffer from the overbearing voice of a disturbed narrator; in his latest novel to date, O’Brien’s gusto for the excessive has been channelled into the extravagant quantitative, as well as qualitative, permutations of the lonely, maladjusted anti-hero, a type that in its numerous reincarnations in the cast of July, July exemplifies the disillusionment and cynicism of a generation who, for all the inevitable distance from their youthful idealism, do not seem able to get over the rude awakening that time has in store for us all. In a standard narrative ploy for the exploration of nostalgic reminiscences, longstanding recriminations and

42 Heberle, A Trauma Artist, p. 268.
bittersweet self-reflections, O'Brien's Vietnam war generation is epitomized by the Class of '69 of Darton Hall College, gathered together for a belated thirtieth anniversary reunion in the summer of 2000, in all its textbook topical manifestations: the amputated veteran, the draft dodger who relocated to Canada, the women liberated by the sexual revolution but incapable of finding love or peace of mind, alongside characters who more generally exemplify middle-age frustrations, regrets and disillusionments. The chapters alternate between the account of the mawkish celebration, unfolding in the present time in the 'Class of '69' sequence, and individual vignettes each dealing with one of the main characters and focusing on a pivotal episode in his or her past. For the first time in O'Brien's work, the female protagonists outnumber the male ones, by a ratio of nearly two to one. Asked about the reason for his interest in the numerous female figures in July, July, O'Brien readily admits that this is a deliberate departure from his more usual focus on male experience:

I suppose in part it was a technical challenge, to prove to myself that I could do it, that as a writer I could portray convincing, detailed, intelligent, compelling women. More important, it seemed to me that most of the fiction set in the watershed era of the late 1960s focuses on stories about men — the pressures of war, draft-dodging, and so on. But for every man who went to Vietnam, or for every man who went to Canada, there were countless sisters and girlfriends and wives and mothers, each of whom had her own fascinating story, her own tragedies and suffering, her own healing afterward. I mean, sure, the war was important back then, but Vietnam wasn't everything.43

O'Brien's success in this venture is only partial, compromised by the sheer scope of his self-imposed challenge: a three-hundred-page novel, covering a span of thirty years in the life of a dozen unique individuals, simply does not allow for the psychological depth and the detailed characterization that had prompted this enterprise in the first place. Perhaps as a result of this constraint, and more clearly as a result of the flattening fatalism with which the narrative is imbued, the eleven protagonists whose stories make up this 'ensemble novel'44 all sound remarkably similar, each a slight modulation of a very specific type: the cynical anti-hero whose life has been marred by rejection or disappointment, particularly in matters of the heart. By contrast, The Things They Carried, O'Brien’s only other novel with a substantial cast, is much more subtle in the characterization of the men of Alpha Company,

44 'Ensemble novel' is O'Brien's own definition, from an interview with Josh Karp for The Atlantic.
possibly because of its narrower thematic scope and of the unifying, moder-
ating filter provided by the voice of a sympathetic intradiegetic narrator: with
his relentless self-questioning and incessant tinkering with his stories, the
fictional Tim O’Brien in Things prevents his co-protagonists from turning
into larger-than-life but mono-dimensional figures.

Focused on distilling the essence of each character in turn, July, July
instead provides an elaborate series of variations on the same topic, i.e. the
extremes that people will go to in an effort to be loved, a theme that Heberle
and other critics have identified as one of the recurrent preoccupations, if not
the recurrent preoccupation, behind O’Brien’s work. As in his other
comedies, however, the main concern of the text is presented in its most
overblown manifestations, for July, July concentrates with unremitting
pessimism on the failures in the private lives of its protagonists. The body
count for casualties of disastrous romantic liaisons is particularly disheart-
ening – and I am afraid that the expression ‘body count’ is quite literal in a
couple of cases: ‘Loon Point’, for example, is about an adultery that ends in
tragedy, with the accidental drowning of one of the lovers. Overall, July, July
describes several unsuccessful marriages and abusive relationships, as well as
unrequited loves: ‘Nogales’ provides a particularly tragic study of emotional
manipulation in the story of Karen Burns, the middle-aged, lonely director
of a retirement community in Tucson, Arizona. Karen’s infatuation for
Darrell, one of her employees, a younger man who knows how to lead her on
to his advantage, costs her her life and the lives of four elderly people in her
care: the small party are left to die in the desert after they have ceased to be
of use to Darrell as a cover for a drug deal.

Compared to the plight of other members of the Class of ’69, Karen’s story
– dreadful as it is – is rather low-key, for the novel spans a range of ever
darker and more bizarre amorous predicaments. In ‘Well Married’, we are
told of Spook Spinelli and her two husbands, Lincoln and James: their
bigamous arrangement finds itself under strain when the two men, after years
of peaceful acceptance of the status quo, finally side together against their
wife. In ‘Little People’, we learn about Jan Huebner, the class clown, and her
double life as Veronica, the uninhibited model of salacious private photo-
shoots. Jan embarks on this brief, secret career when she acquiesces in the
request of Andrew Wilton, ‘a diminutive, large-headed young man with an
offer of fifty easy dollars’ (77, 62). The fact that her first, and main, client is
a little person who manages to exploit Jan’s own lack of conventional beauty
is a further illustration of the unceasing, determinate focus on human misery
in July, July. Jan eventually quits her seedy career and rejoins ordinary life;
she even finds love and gets married to Andrew’s brother. Needless to say,
their marriage is not destined to last, and at the class reunion in the summer
of 2000 she is just another bitter divorcée. To end the overview of O’Brien’s
grotesque turn in *July, July*, and lest readers should be under the impression that it is only the women who make spectacular mistakes in this novel, it is worth mentioning ‘Too Skinny’, another tale about how insecurity and self-hatred can cause people to plummet into unlikely double lives. This time the protagonist is a man, Marv Bertel. A mop manufacturer and an overweight, middle-aged widower, he gets caught up in a silly, unsustainable lie that he has impulsively spun to his secretary. In an attempt to impress the young, beautiful Sandra, in a moment of madness, Marv leads her to believe that he is the venerable Thomas Pierce, a famously reclusive and much celebrated postmodern author, clearly modelled by O’Brien on Thomas Pynchon. Sandra is suitably struck by Marv’s revelation, and the two soon embark on a romance which culminates in an unsurprisingly resentful and short-lived marriage.

As this catalogue of wacky characters and extreme situations intimates, *July, July* does not tread softly on its subject matter. It would probably have worked better as a collection of short stories than it does as a novel: the attempt to bring together all these extraordinary characters – through the apt, but careworn, expedient of the class reunion – backfires, because it heightens the morbid, mock-cynical and self-pitying mood that already mars the premises of some of the individual vignettes. Again, as in *Tomcat in Love*, the narcissistic indulgences and commiserations that pervade *July, July* strike a false note both for quantitative and for qualitative reasons. What is forgivable in the characterization and the narrative voice of the young O’Brien in *If I Die* becomes much less understandable in the case of the eleven men and women who share the limelight in the later text. All in all, the protagonist of *If I Die* gives in to self-pity and dejection, and to lamenting the unfairness of his circumstances, with remarkable constraint, considering both his young age and the fact that he is faced with the prospect of death and with the painful awareness that he has betrayed his own ideals. By comparison, the lot of the class of ’69, who are troubled, in most cases, by more mundane dilemmas and problems (lack of popularity, amorous frustrations, fear of solitude and, of course, middle-age disillusionments and disappointments) is vastly easier. O’Brien’s self-imposed challenge thus fails primarily for technical reasons. In other words, my reservations about the overall success of the female characters in *July, July* are connected to O’Brien’s failure to master the comedic mode rather than to his subscription to dubious gender politics: the female protagonists in *July, July* are as accomplished and as autonomous in the general economy of the narrative as their male counterparts. What they all suffer from is O’Brien’s weak control of the satirical register, which here finds expression in monotone bleakness and excessive grotesqueness, products of the same tendency to go overboard that undermines the author’s other comedies. Besides, the poignancy of the novel’s main themes – the
cumbling of illusions, the desperate quest for love and acceptance – is not particularly well-matched to the scathing style of comedy that O’Brien has chosen to write. In fact, the possibility of success in a dark comic novel lies in achieving a difficult balance between the unsparing criticism required of satire, paired with the irreverent, merciless wit of black humour, and the creation of a modicum of sympathy towards the main characters. Such sympathy is absolutely necessary for readers to get involved in the story.

In this and his other comic works, in trying to combine the denigrating spirit of black humour with the didacticism of the novel of ideas, which both require bold narrative strokes, O’Brien has often ended up alienating readers, by losing the measure of his caricatural exaggerations and therefore eliciting little or no compassion for his characters. In her *New York Times* review of *The Nuclear Age*, for example, Michiko Kakutani complains that, since ‘[p]eople do not normally spend every waking hour obsessing about abstractions like nuclear war or worldwide devastation’, Cowling must ‘strike[e] us as little more than an aberration – a kook, and a pretty boring kook at that’; and speaking of the ‘cartoonish’ characters in *Tomcat in Love*, she questions their actual success in making the narrator’s desired point (‘bullying, macho men and catty, calculating women; clownish figures, meant perhaps to underscore the comic similarities between “wartime combat and peacetime romance,” in Tom’s words.’) In a ferocious review of *July, July*, David Gates also complains about the predictable, caricatural quality of the protagonists and situations depicted in the text:

But this is only a novel, not reality. So O’Brien gives us capital-C Characters. A still-traumatized Vietnam veteran. (Here, you play novelist: Do you make him an amputee? A druggie? Have him hear a voice in his head?) An uptight Republican housewife. (Do you give her breast cancer? A husband who’s ‘a senior vice president’? Put her on a 30-years-too-late acid trip?) A draft dodger who split for Canada. (Did the Republican woman jilt him all those years ago?) If you correctly answered yes to each of those questions, you can imagine the other major characters for yourself – as long as you don’t go hog-wild for diversity.


Of course, not all the reviews were so negative, and even the most critical ones tend to give O’Brien credit for setting himself the challenge to deliver comedy through deeply unsympathetic characters. Still, it is easy to see why these novels fail to draw readers in in quite the same way as O’Brien’s most successful works, like Cacciato or Things. It is primarily the dedicated reader, interested in charting the development of O’Brien as a writer and his command of the comic register, who can summon the emotional and intellectual energy to follow to the end either Cowling’s mad, monomaniacal adventure, Chippering’s self-obsessed, justificatory ramblings, or the drunken, cynical reminiscences of the Class of ’69. What these characters also lack, in comparison to O’Brien’s more accomplished creations, is not so much the ability to be true to themselves – authenticity, as we have seen, is not achieved by any of O’Brien’s protagonists – but the willingness to admit, or even the awareness of, their full responsibility for their actions, and their failures to act. In my opinion, the most revealing and compelling aspect of O’Brien’s engagement with the comic mode is that it inevitably unfolds with the development of a series of pathetic men and women, who are incapable of meaningful adult relationships, tainted as they all are by past traumas and secrets. O’Brien’s writing, and his characterization of male and female figures alike, are undoubtedly at their strongest in the adoption of more level tones and the cultivation of a poetics of ambiguity and uncertainty. On their part, with their unapologetic brashness, O’Brien’s three comedies certainly bring the point home: nowhere is the connection between trauma and the inability to establish healthy emotional and sexual relationships articulated more openly than in The Nuclear Age, Tomcat in Love and July, July.

Ambiguity, ellipses and gut reactions

With the notable exception of Mary Anne Bell, the protagonist of a story in her own right, the female figures in The Things They Carried play several variations on the type of the distant and/or idealized addressee of tales of masculine traumas, or the wished-for purveyors of consolation and sympathy to the male traumatized subjects. In what is generally acknowledged as his best work, O’Brien describes several instances of failed communication: attempts to establish emotional connections that seem to fall on deaf ears or are met by inadequate, conventional reactions, tales that remain untold for fear that the intended listener will not want or will not be able to relate to them, even stories whose unfolding deliberately baffles and offends an audience looking for narrative precision and a sense of closure or moral progression. It is through the description of such failures that O’Brien outlines – by contrast – his vision of a model readership and of the ideal
response that he wishes to bring about in his audience. O’Brien’s is a poetics of reception that cuts across traditional gender divides and that explains his reliance on scatological references and images of the grotesque body. By drawing attention to this non-gender-specific physiognomy, once again I hope to redress the criticism that O’Brien has received for the inability – of his work in general but particularly of Things – to challenge ‘a discourse of war in which apparently innocent American men are tragically wounded and women are objectified, excluded, and silenced’. A closer look at the narrative exchanges and at the contextualization of the gender stereotypes that O’Brien uses reveals that the author is continuously at pains to show the constructed nature of the notions of masculinity and femininity, and that he ultimately supersedes them both in order to argue for – and ideally to ensure – a visceral reception to his stories.

As already mentioned, early on in the novel we are made privy to the exchange at cross-purposes between Jimmy Cross and Martha, whose reluctance to be drawn into the lieutenant’s account of the war finds a plausible explanation in her desire to distance herself from his more violent, predatory side – a side of which she has had a brief intimation during their awkward courtship. Much more unsuccessful than this stunted correspondence, and infinitely more shocking in the violence of the male reaction to the lack of female response, is the failure of communication between Rat Kiley and the sister of a fellow soldier killed in Vietnam. Kiley pours his heart out in a letter of condolences to Curt Lemon’s sister, singing the praises of his best friend and recalling his crazy deeds. With the letter remaining unanswered, Kiley feels provoked to brand the woman as a ‘dumb cooze’ (TTC, 68) – a insult whose misogynistic violence appears to be implicitly condoned by the narrative, given the seemingly inexplicable heartlessness of the woman in question and, conversely, the highly emotional state of the bereaved soldier. The key to understanding the woman’s behaviour, however, lies in the exact content of the letter, as well as in the general characterization of her brother which, significantly, is developed here and in the rest of the novel in great part through Kiley’s own perspective. In his exchange with Lemon’s sister, for example, Kiley mentions admiringly Curt Lemon’s unforgettable Halloween celebrations: with his body painted in several colours and a weird mask on his face, Curt ‘hikes over to a ville and goes trick-or-treating almost stark naked, just boots and balls and an M-16’ (TTC, 67–68). This preliminary conflation of sex and violence is later made much more explicit in Rat Kiley’s ‘spiced up’ retelling of this anecdote:

See, what happens is, it’s like four in the morning, and Lemon sneaks into a

47 Smith, “‘The Things Men Do’”, p. 17.
hootch with that weird mask on. Everybody’s asleep, right? So he wakes up this cute little mama-san. ‘Hey, Mama-san,’ he goes, real soft like. ‘Hey, Mama-san – trick or treat!’ Should’ve seen her face. About freaks. I mean, there’s this buck naked ghost standing there, and he’s got this M-16 up against her ear and he whispers, ‘Hey, Mama-san, trick or fuckin’ treat!’ Then he takes off her pj’s. Strips her right down. Sticks the pajamas in his sack and tucks her into bed and heads for the next hootch. (TTC, 232)

Of course, no one knows or can know what really happened during Curt Lemon’s solitary expedition, and the focus, anyway, is on the mythology created around the character’s identity as a maverick. Rat Kiley, the enthusiastic custodian of Lemon’s reckless exploits, relies on this particular anecdote as the linchpin of his tribute to his friend, while remaining completely oblivious to the offensive, humiliating aspects of his story. For the likes of Lemon and Kiley, the indulgence in some gratuitous violence – harmless pranks, such as going fishing ‘with a whole damn crate of hand grenades [...] all that gore, about twenty zillion dead gook fish’ or going trick-or-treating ‘just boots and balls and an M-16’ (TTC, 231) – is the mark of a humorous gutsiness, the confirmation – to be duly acclaimed – that boys will be boys. And, if this is what boys will do, the silence of Curt Lemon’s sister in response to the letter where Rat Kiley mourns his friend’s death and salutes the joie de vivre of his pranks should be read as something quite different from the sign of unconcern that provokes Kiley’s anger against the ‘dumb cooze’ who never wrote back. He may not be aware of the threat of sexual violence underlying gestures that the soldiers regard as examples of fearlessness and heroic panache, but she is – and so are we. Elsewhere, the novel provides an incontrovertible critique of Curt Lemon’s machismo; already dismissed by the narrator as a posturing that would often go too far and that would often be embellished with ‘little flourishes that never happened’, in an endless refashioning of the ‘tough soldier’ mythology (TTC, 83), Lemon’s desire to live up to his ideal self-image is made the object of ridicule in ‘The Dentist’. In this brief chapter Lemon proves his absolute fearlessness by having a perfectly good tooth removed by the army dentist on whose chair he had fainted earlier on the same day.

More generally, throughout the novel, and in spite of the frequent references to the soldiers’ youth, O’Brien tries to instil in his readers a healthy scepticism towards the idea that age should be treated as an excuse for violent behaviour. In ‘The Things They Carried’ the identification of Jimmy Cross with ‘just a kid at war, in love’ (TTC, 11) hovers precariously between the character’s free indirect speech and a comment from the narrator, but our temptation to take this statement at face value, whatever its source, is seriously undermined once it resurfaces as a justification mouthed by Azar, a
particularly disagreeable and sadistic soldier, when he blows up a puppy, having strapped him to an antipersonnel mine: “What’s everybody so upset about? [...] I mean, Christ, I’m just a boy” (TTC, 35). This episode foreshadows another act of cruelty against a harmless animal, Rat Kiley’s slow killing of a baby water buffalo in the aftermath of Curt Lemon’s death. This time the gory execution is witnessed silently by the platoon, who feel no pity for the mauled, dying creature, even though they are dumbstruck in amazement at Kiley’s violent expression of grief. In spite of the obvious, if irrational, significance of Kiley’s gesture as an act of retribution for Lemon’s own dismemberment, the event remains not fully comprehensible, let alone definable: it is ‘something essential, something brand new and profound, a piece of the world so startling there was not yet a name for it’ (TTC, 76). An attempt at an explanation is provided, as is to be expected, by Mitchell Sanders, whose marked need to distil a moral from every story leads him to dispense one of his typical aphorisms in recognition of the iniquity of Kiley’s act: ‘Well, that’s Nam. [...] Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin’s real fresh and original’ (TTC, 76). And yet, as we shall see later on, O’Brien’s fashioning of his ideal reader, through metafictional reflections and negative examples, undermines this interpretative act which conveniently ascribes to the war all the blame for the soldiers’ fall from grace.

Kiley’s grieving, of course, continues in the penning of the unanswered letter to Lemon’s sister, in which he gives full expression to his love for his dead friend and to his admiration for his daredevil personality. The threatening subtext of sexual violence in Kiley’s tale of male camaraderie is an unlikely premise for a positive female response to what can be effectively viewed as an act of narrative seduction, much like the heroic tale of Jimmy Cross – to be written, in the lieutenant’s wishes, by his friend Tim O’Brien – that will get Martha ‘to come begging’.48 The seductive intent of Kiley’s glorification of masculinity is reiterated by his choice of words to qualify his interlocutor’s silence – a choice disturbingly foregrounded by a gloss made in the narrator’s voice: ‘Listen to Rat Kiley. Cooze, he says. He does not say bitch. He certainly does not say woman, or girl. He says cooze. Then he spits and stares. He’s nineteen years old – it’s too much for him – so he looks at you with those big sad gentle killer eyes and says cooze, because his friend is dead, and because it’s so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back’ (TTC, 68).

The narrator’s intervention rationalizes Kiley’s misogynistic rage. At the

48 Cf. Pamela Smiley, ‘The Role of the Ideal (Female) Reader in Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried: Why Should Real Women Play?’, The Massachusetts Review, 43.4 (2002), pp. 602–13. Incidentally, in Going After Cacciato – the only other fictional text in which O’Brien mentions a correspondence between a soldier and his buddy’s sister – makes the narrative seduction explicit, when Stink Harris find out that his little sister has been sending naked photographs of herself to Bernie Lynn (GAC, 140).
same time, however, this unsavoury anecdote is inscribed within the narrator’s attempt to corroborate his belief that a true war story is distinguished by an ‘absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. […] You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don’t care for obscenity, you don’t care for the truth; if you don’t care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty’ (TTC, 68).

The obscene truths of a true war story – the blood, the filth, the explosions of physical and verbal violence – must cause embarrassment, a word that, with its social rather than private implications, draws attention to the relationship between the storyteller and his or her audience. With his own personal allegiance to obscenity and evil in the metanarrative notations to Kiley’s abusive reaction, O’Brien makes sure that the collapse of the norms of human decency caused by the war is replicated in the impropriety of the act of storytelling itself, which becomes a ‘talking dirty’ both in its content and in its delivery. Such a duality is already present in the ambivalence of the expression ‘how to tell’ which, alongside its most immediate meaning, in this context, as a guide to assess the veracity of a specific tale on the grounds of its realistic portrayal of the immorality of war, also works as a reminder of the qualities that the storyteller must put into his or her narrative in order to infuse it with some kind of truth. Thus, the novel’s programmatic subscription to obscenity and evil continues in a shocking revelation of how the main storyteller in the book is also susceptible to its draw. In an unsettling metatextual coda to ‘How to Tell a True War Story’, the forty-three-year-old narrator Tim O’Brien – the same character who has set himself up as a self-aware intellectual, the draftee who was too good for the war, ‘too smart, too compassionate, too everything. […] A liberal, for Christ’s sake’ (TTC, 40-41), the protagonist and writer of If I Die in a Combat Zone and the acclaimed author of Going After Cacciato – sheds his carefully constructed politically correct persona to echo Rat Kiley’s angry misogyny. O’Brien explains how occasionally, after he has told the story of Kiley’s grief, a member of the audience – ‘always a woman. Usually it’s an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics’ (TTC, 80) – will approach him to share her appreciation of the tale and her concern for its teller’s inability to move on to new, less painful material. This figure, who embodies a stereotypically feminine response to O’Brien’s stories, becomes the object of the narrator’s ridiculing scorn – ‘The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad. Sometimes, even, there are little tears’ (TTC, 80): the woman’s emotional reaction is clearly inadequate – and is eventually dismissed as another, uncomprehending ‘dumb cooze’ (TTC, 80). This deliberately crude slip seals the narrator’s

49 One cannot overemphasize here the crucial difference between embarrassment and shame: the former involves the humiliating exposure in the public sphere, while the latter can be experienced in relation to qualities or actions known only to oneself.
absolute allegiance to obscenity and evil, capitalizing on the gender divide, but also highlights, through shock tactics, the effect of the war on his own self-regarding humane politics. Much as the woman’s response to the story might be belittled for its simplistic sentimentality, O’Brien’s transformation into a foul-mouthed chauvinist is a long step away from the image of the pedigreed liberal – ‘Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude and president of the student body and full-ride scholarship for grad studies at Harvard’ (TTC, 41) – and sensitive writer on which his authority as a narrator has been built. Moreover, the confusion between the fictional character and the real-life author increases the shock experienced by readers in the verbal lashing-out against the older woman, who is effectively one of their number, an addressee of O’Brien’s stories.

This coda is an expansion of the communicational dynamics that we have already seen at work between Jimmy Cross and Martha, and Kiley and Lemon’s sister: men seeking for validation from an ideal female reader who is excluded a priori from the very narrative that she is asked to relate to. It is no wonder that the woman in O’Brien’s audience is shown to comment only on the killing of the baby buffalo – the death of an innocent creature which, as Smith points out, echoes the death of the soldiers’ innocence50 – and not on those parts of the story that contain a more or less explicit sexual threat. While it is true that in Things women are often configured as distant, uninitiated and unsympathetic readers, O’Brien does problematize this equation, which, it ought to be noted, typically arises when male narrators are telling particularly emotional and traumatic tales – a circumstance that possibly explains, but cannot excuse, their sexist implications. In the three above-mentioned encounters between men and women, O’Brien offers an unpalatable, but honest, representation of the gender divide in our culture – a divide that has traditionally been heightened by war (it is a fact that Martha and Lemon’s sister would not have had to fear the draft call) and that is shown to have been further exasperated in the male veterans’ processing of trauma and perception of their alienation from the uninitiated civilian population.51 The ‘woman of kindly temperament and humane politics’, who explains that ‘as a rule she hates war stories, she can’t understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore’ (TTC, 80), is singled out by the narrator O’Brien as a predictable epitome of that part of society which, by

51 ‘The veteran is isolated not only by the images of the horror that he has witnessed and perpetrated but also by his special status as an initiate in the cult of war. He imagines that no civilian, certainly no woman or child, can comprehend his confrontation with evil and death. He views the civilian with a mixture of idealization and contempt: she is at once innocent and ignorant. He views himself, by contrast, as at once superior and defiled’; Judith Lewis Herman, Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror (London: Pandora, 1992), p. 66.
definition, has no connection to war. To his credit, though, O’Brien (the
author) does not conceal the strand of sexual aggressiveness – in male behav-
ior and in male stories – that causes the various women in the narrative to
maintain their distance from the men’s appeals for sympathy.

Besides, the sketches about Mitchell Sanders’ tale of the six-man patrol on
an unlikely listening-post operation in ‘How to Tell a True War Story’ –
whose episodic organization reproduces in small the structure of the entire
book – focus on the failure of communication between the soldiers and their
superiors. In this particular incident, the six men on patrol, who are
themselves engaged in a frustrating attempt to listen, allegedly hear all sorts
of strange sounds in the mountains: ‘The place talks’, explains Sanders
(TTC, 72). Finally, unable to cope, they call in the artillery and ‘make jungle
juice’ (TTC, 72–73). Upon their return from this unsettling mission, the
soldiers lock horns with a colonel over his request to be told the reason for the
employment of firepower on the listening post. The story emphasizes the
unbridgeable gap between the soldiers, whose spooky experiences are impos-
sible to articulate, and the officer, who must demand objective reports and
rational accounts for the strategic decisions made by his men in the field.
Sanders’ sympathy is all with his fellow soldiers, of course, and his outrage at
this (all-male) breakdown in communication finds expression through
gendered terms of abuse that are on a par with Kiley’s and O’Brien’s
outbursts against their own (female) obtuse listeners. In Sanders’ words,

‘this fatass colonel wants answers […] But the guys don’t say zip. They just look
at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed, and the whole war is right
there in that stare. It says everything you can’t ever say. It says, man, you got wax
in your ears. It says, poor bastard, you’ll never know – wrong frequency – you
don’t even want to hear this. Then they salute the sucker and walk away, because
certain stories you don’t ever tell.’ (TTC, 73)

Lack of understanding, therefore, is not to be found exclusively on one side
of the gender divide, and is met once more with unspoken invectives and with
a categorical refusal to engage in explanations. Admittedly, in drawing the
moral of the story, Sanders once more identifies virginal young women as the
epitome of the character who will not listen,52 but by now it is clear that the
real divide is between those who have experienced the same things together
(and a colonel’s experience of the war will be significantly different from a
grunt’s), and those who have not. In fact, O’Brien takes things one step
further when in ‘Notes’ he talks about the genesis of ‘Speaking of Courage’,

hears nothin’. Like that fatass colonel. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your
girlfriend. My girlfriend. Everybody’s sweet little virgin girlfriend” (TTC, 74).
and his failure to get it right the first time. The idea to write about the terrible events that had taken place in the thick muck caused by the overflowing of the Song Tra Bong had been originally prompted by Norman Bowker’s poignant request to his writer friend: ‘What you should do, Tim, is write a story about a guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole’ (TTC, 156). Bowker, however, is disappointed by the award-winning first draft of the story, and complains to O’Brien that he has ‘left out Vietnam. Where’s Kiowa? Where’s the shit?’ (TTC, 158). And, one might add, where is Bowker, given that O’Brien initially chose to fictionalize his experience in the story of Paul Berlin, the (patently invented) protagonist of Going After Cacciato? O’Brien’s failure to tell fully the story of the shit field first time round is a failure to follow Bowker’s instructions, and ‘[t]hat is the tragedy of the first version of “Courage”: no one listens – not even the author/narrator “O’Brien,” who is ostensibly telling Bowker’s story.’

Where does this leave us, though, with the gender oppositions that are perpetuated in the narrative? In particular, how should we respond to the misogyny that surfaces in the text, especially when it is voiced by the narrator, who otherwise provides the intellectual and moral compass of the story? Is his aggressive streak against the ‘dumb cooze’ the ultimate legitimation – disguised under the pretence of a necessary ‘allegiance to obscenity and evil’ – of a pervasive disparagement of women for which the traumatized soldiers cannot be held fully accountable? I think that it would be unfair – and, frankly, mistaken – to draw such a conclusion from the representation of gender relations in Things. After all, O’Brien’s aggressive outburst against the older woman, as we have seen, is part of a larger sequence of irrational, incommensurate acts of violence against female and/or innocent targets, like Cross’s burning of Martha’s mementos or Kiley’s killing of the water buffalo. These events – memorable because of the narrative space which they are given as well as for their attribution to individualized characters – displace the full horror of the military retaliations that would often follow the deaths of American soldiers, as O’Brien reminds us at the very beginning of his book: ‘After the chopper took Lavender away, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross led his men into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything. They shot chickens and dogs, they trashed the village well, they called in artillery and watched the wreckage, then they marched for several hours through the hot afternoon, and then at dusk, while Kiowa explained how Lavender died, Lieutenant Cross found himself trembling’ (TTC, 14). (Of course, the trembling is a first, physical symptom of the shame and sense of

53 Kaufmann, ‘The Solace of Bad Form’, p. 336. Kaufmann glosses this observation with a fine footnote: ‘O’Brien shows through his [eponymous] narrator that even having the same experience does not guarantee one will listen and be able to understand’ (p. 342).
responsibility which Cross will later transfer to his love for Martha.) While *Things* may encourage us to pity the perpetrators of these acts, the gratuitousness of their violent reactions remains painfully clear.

To the reader already acquainted with the character ‘Tim O’Brien’ from the pages of *If I Die*, the narrator’s misogynist cry against the ‘dumb cooze’ and, by extension, against all the women who will not listen, sounds even more like an about turn, the veteran’s delayed giving-in to the indoctrination that he had resisted during his army training. The marching songs reported in the memoirs configure the soldiers’ relationship with women only in debased sexual terms, with references to sex as a commodity that is sold and bought and with the metonymical identification of women with their genitalia (*IID*, 50–51). The army lesson on gender relations is summarized by O’Brien in a few lines: ‘There is no thing named love in the world. Women are dinks. Women are villains. They are creatures akin to Communists and yellow-skinned people and hippies’ (*IID*, 51). The word ‘love’, clearly meant here in the sense of a romantic relationship between a man and a woman, has no referent in reality. In order to counteract this lesson, as ‘a way to remain a stranger, only a visitor at Fort Lewis’ (*IID*, 41), O’Brien would turn to the image of a girl. Like Jimmy Cross, he would rely on a mix of memory and imagination in order to create a secret refuge from military life: ‘I spent hours comparing her hair to the colour of sand just at dusk. That sort of thing’ (*IID*, 41). In time, however, this strategy becomes less and less successful, until one day in Vietnam O’Brien finds out that the girl has receded away from his thoughts to become virtually unavailable: ‘It was hopeless, of course, but I tried to visualize her face. Only words would come in my mind. One word was “smile”, and I tacked on the adjective “intriguing” to make it more personal. I thought of the word “hair”, and modified it with the words “thick” and “sandy”, not sure if they were accurate anymore, and then a whole string of words popped in – “mysterious”, “Magdalene”, “Eternal” as a modifier’ (*IID*, 96–97). O’Brien cannot imagine the girl other than in pieces, through details that remain vague in spite of his efforts to qualify them; even when ‘a whole string of words’ finally comes to mind to define her, the description unfolds paratactically, along the axis of combination, for the three final attributes, which appear to gesture towards transcendence, are brought down to earth by their status as ‘modifiers’. According to T. J. Lustig, whose argument I am borrowing here, O’Brien’s failure to recall the image of the girl is the result of a type of linguistic impairment – what Roman Jakobson would call ‘similarity disorder’ – brought about by the experience of conflict in Vietnam: ‘[a]s the code of “culture” gives way to the obscene speech of war, contexts are deprived of sense and the heightened reactivity of combat turns life into a series of reflex responses to urgent situational clues. Whilst metaphor connects, introduces similarity and comparison,
Vietnam happens metonymically, in terms of fact, detail, and a crushing horizontality. The soldiers’ relationship with women in Things can also be read as an instance of this linguistic reduction, whereby, on some telling occasions, the metonym standing in for the loved one continues to be valued even when the emotional connection that was its ultimate frame of reference is definitely over (see, for example, the unnamed soldier’s desperate search for Billie’s photograph in the aftermath of Kiowa’s death or Henry Dobbins’ trust in his girlfriend’s stockings as a lucky charm: both objects retain their importance even after the girls they represent have rejected their respective boyfriends.)

O’Brien’s move away from the totalizing drive of metaphor does not stop at the ‘crushing horizontality’ of metonymy, but continues with the narrator’s tantalizing insistence on the presence of unbridgeable gaps in his narratives, ellipses which cannot be filled in by any one interpretative act. One such gap that resists closure is the account of Kiowa’s death: as we have seen, the tripartite sequence of stories about this event – ‘Speaking of Courage’, ‘Notes’ and ‘In the Field’ – produces a proliferation of hypotheses, instead of delivering the clarifications that it purports to offer through metanarrative explanations and the revisiting of material already covered. Thus, besides its metonymical representation of utter abjection through ‘death by waste’ and its factual depiction of war as filth, the shit field lends itself to a further literal reading as a hole in the narrative, a segment of the story that can never be fully articulated and understood. It is this literal image of the hole as an obscene void in the narrative, as something definitely left unsaid and located in the centre of a tale, that O’Brien ultimately exploits in his poetics of reception, whereby he posits an equally physical and inarticulate response to the elusive core of meaning conveyed by truthful storytelling. This physical reaction, I would argue, is defined in contrast to the behaviour of the two main intradiegetic listeners in Things: the ‘older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics’ in ‘How to Tell a True War Story’, who, as we have seen, stands in for a more generally feminine way of reading war stories, and Mitchell Sanders in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’, who occupies a diametrically opposite position, for his direct involvement in the conflict and for his markedly unemotional, rationalizing attitude towards the war.

The older woman responds emotionally and sympathetically to the tale of Kiley’s grief. In addition, she clearly invests in the uplifting power of story-

telling: ‘What I should do, she’ll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell’ (TTC, 80). But O’Brien, of course, does not believe that he is on a path towards redemption, nor indeed that war stories should suggest the possibility of catharsis or closure: the stereotypically feminine response is at fault for sublimating the horror of war into a meaningful, affecting experience (and for sidestepping the obscenity of the conflict, as the narrator provocatively reminds us with his invective against the ‘dumb cooze’). Sanders, on his part, is characterized throughout the novel as a relentless hermeneutist, quick to isolate catchy anecdotes and sententious lessons from the war, always in search for some kind of moral, even if the moral amounts to nothing more than the empty deictic affirmation ‘there it is’, which masks the tautological logic behind his truisms. Sanders’ demands for linearity and consistency, not to mention his desire for a clear meaning to be deduced from the tale, perhaps typify a stereotypical masculine stance towards storytelling, which is expected to be punchy and trustworthy, and to yield memorable lessons. However, as the narrator reminds us in ‘How to Tell a True War Story’, ‘True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes I can’t believe it in my stomach. Nothing turns inside. It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe’ (TTC, 75).

What O’Brien is positing here, as the proper response to a true war story, is something radically different from either the woman’s display of compassion or Sanders’ analytical drive. These two stances are themselves comparable to metaphorical and metonymical operations respectively: the sympathetic identification with another relies on recognizing a relationship of similarity between people belonging to different worlds, whereas the rationalizing processes wished for by Sanders rest very much on a relationship of contiguity, with the soldiers-witnesses-storytellers drawing general lessons from their first-hand experience of the war. The problem with the above-
mentioned attitudes is that they both manage to retrieve meaning from the storytelling act, thus endowing war with the status of a significant experience. A true war story, instead, should hit us in the stomach and leave us speechless, much as its truth resists a final verbal articulation, dwelling as it does in the gaps and the aporias of the endless modulations of the same stories, slightly different with each obsessive retelling. Unsurprisingly, this bodily response is not located in the heart, nor in the brain, but rather in the guts: once again, with the image of an immediate, visceral reaction, we are drawn back to that scatological dimension so stubbornly present in O'Brien's topography of trauma and most clearly epitomized by the shit hole lying at the centre of The Things They Carried.
The Power of Storytelling

Tim O'Brien’s writing is characterized by structural complexity and literary and linguistic self-awareness. Yet formal reflections and experimentations may also be regarded as one of the recurrent thematic concerns of his work, particularly when we consider that his attention to questions of style and structure is connected with the investigation into the power of storytelling as a viable epistemological tool, an effective means of communication and, even, as a source and a conduit for compassion and catharsis. The most obvious structural feature common to O'Brien’s books is the rejection of a linear narrative development, often accompanied by an explicit foregrounding – through chapter and section titles, or through metafictional notations – of the alternative organizing principles of the text in question. Whether only a few pages long or spanning an entire book, his stories frequently unfold through multiple, interweaving narrative strands, each covering a different temporal dimension or exploring the relationship between facts, memory and imagination, or even providing various perspectives on the same theme and separate accounts of the same events. At other times, O'Brien relies on the juxtaposition of self-contained, and occasionally overlapping, vignettes, whose deep connection readers are invited to work out by themselves. Whatever the narrative strategy, at the heart of O'Brien’s emphasis on the artistry of storytelling lie questions about the nature of truth and the possibility of its apprehension and representation. This issue is clearly behind the generic hybridity of texts such as *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*, which deliberately blur the boundary between autobiography and fiction, and *In the Lake of the Woods*, an example of historiographic metafiction, the postmodern take on that already cross-breed genre, the historical novel. The investigation into the availability and communication of truth also underpins the intertextual connections in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’.

Since the beginning of his career, O'Brien has carefully arranged his material in such a way as to highlight or mirror the plight of his protagonists, and the central themes of his novels. In his less accomplished works, while clearly meant to guide the reader through the development of the story, the narrative organization can feel a little laboured and obscure: such is the case