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
of *Northern Lights*, whose evocative list of section titles gestures to the cyclical nature of the plot punctuated by the rising and setting of the ‘Black Sun’ and of the ‘Blood Moon’ (the masculine and feminine principles embodied by Harvey’s lust for adventure and Grace’s domesticity, respectively).  

Definitely more complex, but similarly strained (a fact that perhaps accounts for the reviewers’ failure to comment on it, much to O’Brien’s disappointment), is the tripartite division – ‘Fission’, ‘Fusion’ and ‘Critical Mass’, terms connected with the idea of explosive reactions – of *The Nuclear Age*, whose ‘Quantum Jumps’ chapters, which constitute the narrative strand set in the present, about William Cowling’s building of the shelter, replicate with their varying length ‘the progression of a release of nuclear energy’.  

*Tomcat in Love* and *July, July*, O’Brien’s other two novels of ideas, adopt simpler organizing principles, which are for this reason more effective in emphasizing the central theme of their respective narratives. Most chapters in *Tomcat* are titled by a single word amongst the many in Chippering’s personal dictionary of trauma, a collection of (mainly) nouns whose idiosyn cratic connotations are explained by the protagonist’s reminiscences and self-justifications. The Professor’s private re-definition of these terms immediately alerts the readers to the subjective, slippery nature of language: Chippering is indeed proof that there is no such thing as a neutral utterance, that even common words – such as ‘tulip’, ‘cat’ or ‘ledger’ – trigger the most diverse associations of ideas in each individual. Of course, given Chippering’s self-serving attitude, what is exposed is above all the negative side of the protean quality of language: particular words may summon unpleasant memories in the novel’s protagonist, but he is certainly not averse to tweaking these very terms, and their accompanying anecdotes, in order to distort the narrative of his life and to quibble with its critics. The theme of *Tomcat* is that language can be a dangerous weapon in the hands of private prevaricators and public demagogues. *July, July* instead focuses unambiguously on the passage of time, with chapters on the thirtieth anniversary reunion of the Class of ’69 at Darton Hall College alternating with self-contained sketches each dealing with a pivotal moment in the life of one of the book’s main eleven characters. The disillusionment of the Baby Boomers in the years between graduation and the present is thus charted discontinuously, with an emphasis on the defining episodes of eleven different narratives that are otherwise left undeveloped. The result is a deliberately incomplete mosaic, with only a handful of very vivid – perhaps too flamboyant – tesserae.

1 *Northern Lights* is divided in two parts: ‘One’ comprises ‘Heat Storm’, ‘Elements’, ‘Shelter’ and ‘Black Sun’; ‘Two’ begins with the pivotal ‘Blizzard’ (with the two brothers getting lost in the woods) and then repeats the sequence of ‘Heat Storm’, ‘Elements’ and ‘Shelter’ to culminate with ‘Blood Moon’.

O’Brien’s more interesting formal experimentations, however, all draw attention to the generic classification and to the claim to truth of the narratives which they shape. In Chapter 2, we have seen how the episodic structure of *If I Die*, paired with the overt references to the wide literary and philosophical context of O’Brien’s first-person account, prevents the memoirs from reading as a straightforward anti-military story of innocence lost in the madness of war. In subverting the *Bildungsroman* conventions of autobiography, and of anti-war literature, O’Brien also raises interesting questions about the exact status of his tale which, factual in its content, deploys strategies – the jumbled chronology, the montage of self-contained vignettes, the vivid dialogue and characterization in the creation of dramatic scenes – that give it a distinctly fictional feel.  

An opposite impulse instead governs the three narrative levels in *Going After Cacciato*: Paul Berlin’s solitary reflections while on duty on the observation post, the flashback chapters about his tour of duty and finally the company’s fantastic pursuit of Cacciato all the way to Paris. Contrary to what might be expected, Berlin’s indirect interior monologues and the account of the chase after Cacciato, i.e. the two most properly subjective and fictive strands in the novel, develop with much greater adherence to mimetic techniques – as defined by Ian Watts’s seminal analysis of the traits of ‘formal realism’ – than the series of factual chapters about the war. The latter strand, in fact, beginning *in medias res* and proceeding in a random sequence of isolated episodes, provides fewer details of time, place, action or character than Berlin’s meditations or the fantastic picaresque journey from Vietnam to Paris. It would seem that the techniques of formal realism are inadequate for an accurate representation of the soldiers’ perception of the terrifying absurdity of their military experience.

*In the Lake of the Woods* continues to blur the distinction between mimetic and imaginative drives, while also shifting the focus from a private, unremarkable individual like Berlin to a story with a much wider resonance, given its protagonist’s political ambitions and, above all, his involvement in the My Lai massacre. In *In the Lake of the Woods* John Wade’s personal tale is played out against a major, and shameful, historical event, but O’Brien’s intermingling of the factual and the fictional goes beyond the blending of different ontological levels typical of the historical novel. The book is divided in four sets of chapters, whose labels prove to be rather elastic and unreliable, so that they end up highlighting their common textual – and, to an extent, subjective and fanciful – nature. The ‘Evidence’ chapters, for example, do

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3 Schroeder begins his interview with O’Brien precisely with the issue of the interplay of fiction and non-fiction in Vietnam war writing, and O’Brien answers with an interesting and enlightening discussion of the history of *If I Die*.

4 On this issue see, amongst others, Michael Raymond, Robert M. Slabey and Dennis Vannatta.
contain references to the actual material evidence from the inquest on Kathy’s disappearance (photographs, descriptions of places, etc.), and report real and fictional excerpts from the court martial following the exposure of the My Lai massacre. At the same time, though, they also include people’s testimonies and opinions on the main characters, and passages from various real texts: historical documents, psychological studies, the magician’s handbook used by Wade, or even literary classics such as Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (1864). This hotchpotch of sources is underpinned by and, in turn, exposes several different ways of interpreting the word ‘evidence’, from its rigorous legal definition to a much looser sense, hinting perhaps at the idiosyncrasy of the narrator’s *modus operandi* and at his invested interest in throwing light on Wade’s story as a surrogate way of dealing with his own painful past.

The remaining chapters of *Lake* are categorized under three different kinds of heading: besides the self-explanatory ‘Hypothesis’, there is a group of what appear to be more general reflections on ‘The Nature of…’ disparate concepts and, finally, a series of ostensibly more factual chapters which promise to tell us the ‘What…’, ‘How…’ and ‘Where…’ of the Wades’ story. And yet, not only is the distinction between these categories less than airtight (after all, the visible presence of an intradiegetic narrator guarantees that we are aware that the entire novel is the product of a mixture of rigorous research and necessary speculations, the work of one man, who is also not an impartial storyteller), but as in *Cacciato*, the ‘Hypothesis’ strand, that is the more overtly fictional section of the narrative, is possibly the most coherent and linear sequence of chapters in the novel. The Wades’ past, by contrast, is pieced together much more sketchily, the absence of a clear chronology and the frequent recurrence of particularly traumatic events, such as the killing of PFC Weatherby, perhaps mimicking the incoherent, obsessive memories of a post-traumatic stress disorder sufferer. The narrator in *Lake*, an anonymous Vietnam veteran who intervenes in the reconstruction of the Wades’ story with a number of autobiographical and metafictional footnotes, flags up the fragmentation and the generic instability of his account, but he also expresses an unequivocal epistemological scepticism that turns out to be rooted primarily in the belief in the mysteriousness of ‘human motive and human desire’ (*LW*, 30, n. 21) and the impenetrability of the ‘human soul’ (*LW*, 103, n. 36). Against these unknowable subjects, even the most rigorous factual research must in the end give way to a leap into the realm of imagina-

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5 See Heberle, *A Trauma Artist*, p. 220: ‘“The Nature of...” chapters describe significant events in Wade’s past life and his relationship with Kathy before her disappearance; the title of each is a formulaic phrase that gives Wade’s story figural significance.’ The remaining factual chapters cover the period since the Wades’ arrival in Lake of the Woods; their titles ‘parody the headings of an official investigation’.
tion, as the anonymous narrator is only too happy to admit on several occasions.6

The recourse to imaginative resources in order to try to accede to ‘some hidden truth’ (LW, 298, n. 124), and the relative validity of fictional truth vis-à-vis factually accurate mimetic representations is explored in The Things They Carried, O’Brien’s most accomplished work to date and, predictably, the one text from his entire output most frequently under critical scrutiny. Together with Cacciato and, to a lesser extent, with If I Die, the book has acquired canonical status in the field of Vietnam war literature. The chaos and gruesomeness of the conflict are depicted more vividly and continuously here than in the previous narratives, which are both dominated by the inquiry into the ethical quandary of their protagonists. As we have seen, the account of the soldiers’ experience in Vietnam and the horror of the battlefield are accompanied – even, one might say, interrupted – by O’Brien’s philosophical speculations in If I Die and by Berlin’s imaginary journey in Cacciato. In Things O’Brien develops the non-linear, discontinuous structure of his previous works to such an extent that the resulting sequence of interconnected tales about the war – unified by the recurrent presence of the same members of Alpha Company, as well as by an intradiegetic narrator named ‘Tim O’Brien’ – reads both like a novel with a jumbled chronology and like a collection of short stories.7 In fact, ‘[m]ore than a collection of stories, The Things They Carried is a book about the need to tell stories, the ways to tell

6 See for example the following self-reflective notations: ‘Biographer, historian, medium – call me what you want – but even after four years of hard labor I’m left with little more than supposition and possibility. John Wade was a magician; he did not give away many tricks. Moreover there are certain mysteries that weave through life itself, human motive and human desire. Even much of what might appear to be fact in this narrative – action, word, thought – must ultimately be viewed as diligent but still imaginative reconstruction of events. Yet evidence is not truth. It is only evident. In any case, Kathy Wade is forever missing, and if you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book’ (LW, 30, n. 21). Cf. also: ‘Aren’t we all [others]? John Wade – he’s beyond knowing. He’s an other. For all my years of struggle with this depressing record, for all the travel and interviews and musty libraries, the man’s soul remains for me an absolute and impenetrable unknown, a nametag drifting willy-nilly on oceans of hapless fact’ (LW, 103, n. 36). Again: ‘But there is also the craving to know what cannot be known. Our own children, our fathers, our wives and husbands: Do we truly know them? How much is camouflage? How much is guessed at? How many lies get told, and when, and about what? How often do we say, or think, God, I never knew her? How often do we lie awake speculating – seeking some hidden truth? Oh, yes, it gnaws at me. I have my own secrets, my own trapdoors. I know something about deceit. Far too much. How it corrodes and corrupts. […] We find truth inside, or not at all.’ (LW, 298, n. 124).

7 O’Brien himself explains that it ‘is sort of half novel, half group of stories. It’s part non-fiction too: some of the stuff is commentary on the stories, talking about where a particular one came from’, Naparsteck, ‘An Interview with Tim O’Brien’, p. 7. As a matter of fact, several of its chapters were originally published in various journals as self-contained short stories (although the same is true of excerpts from O’Brien’s other works).
stories, and the reasons for telling stories’. Of course, *Things* is also the book in which O’Brien performs his most evident, thought-provoking and accomplished act of intertextual engagement, rewriting in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’ the Conradian journey into the heart of darkness, and revising the poetics and politics of Conrad’s early modernist novella in line with postmodern concerns. This study of Tim O’Brien’s place on the literary scene at the turn from the twentieth to the twenty-first century cannot but end with a focus on his reflections on the writer’s craft, and on his abilities and moral responsibilities.

**Conradian echoes in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’**

*Heart of Darkness* provides an excellent template for the literature of the Vietnam war not only on a thematic level, with its deconstruction of the wilderness/civilization dichotomy and its critique of Western ideology, but also in its technical and self-reflexive aspects. The suggestiveness of the language, the surrealism of the imagery and the endorsement of the poetics of modernism are all part of the stylistic legacy of Conrad’s novella, whose narrative structure directs the reader’s attention onto the nature and the challenges of storytelling. It is indeed the metafictional sphere that is immediately given emphasis by O’Brien’s engagement with *Heart of Darkness* in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’. The allusion to Conrad’s work foregrounds first of all the literariness of the later narrative and opens up the range and depth of available interpretations. Ultimately, the intertextual dialogue with *Heart of Darkness* amplifies the large symbolic scope of ‘Sweetheart’: from a military tall-tale and an indictment of the psychological wreckage caused by the war, the story turns into a universal parable about the reservoir of savagery and desire for transgression lurking in every human being and waiting to be released. On a more superficial level, of course, the modes of such a terrible liberation are recounted in keeping with O’Brien’s personal knowledge and condemnation of the war: it is exactly in this oscillation between an appeal to a universal condition and a contingent comment on Vietnam that O’Brien’s short story most resembles Conrad’s novella, whose sharp critique of European colonialism reaches out to expose the obscure depths of the human predicament.

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9 Conrad also had first-hand experience of travelling in Congo in 1890. ‘The Congo Diary’ provides a record of that trip.
The most striking discrepancy between the two texts is the identity of the character who undergoes the journey into the heart of darkness. In O’Brien’s short story the protagonist is the young Mary Anne Bell on an improbable visit to her boyfriend Mark Fossie, an equally young medic assigned to a military detachment on the mountains to the west of Chu Lai. This time the spell of the wilderness does not capture an uncommon, charismatic man, betrayed by a ‘singleness of intention’ despite his ‘noble’, philanthropic instincts; in ‘Sweetheart’ the ‘fascination of the abomination’ seizes a girl who embodies the very ideals of white American suburban femininity. While archetypically innocent and demure, Mary Anne is the ultimate male fantasy: ‘This cute blonde – just a kid, just barely out of high school – she shows up with a suitcase and one of those plastic cosmetic bags. Comes right out to the boonies. I swear to God, man, she’s got on culottes. White culottes and this sexy pink sweater’ (TTC, 88). Mary Anne hears the call of savagery and gets drawn into it, leaving the boundaries of civilization behind and surrendering to the seductiveness of the jungle and of a life of ambushes. ‘Vietnam had the effect of a powerful drug; that mix of unnamed terror and unnamed pleasure that comes as the needle slips in and you know you’re risking something’ (TTC, 105). The ineffable combination of dread and delight that lures Mary Anne into the uncharted reality of the war is reminiscent of ‘the spell – the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw [Kurtz] to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions’ (HD, 106–107). As the reader already knows at this stage in the narrative, Kurtz has answered the silent incantation of the jungle with his very own ‘unspeakable rites’ at the inner station on the Congo river (83). This image of speechless horror is one of the elements of Kurtz’s degradation that O’Brien reworks towards the end of his short story, as we shall see later; yet the essential equivalence between Mary Anne’s and Kurtz’s psychological journey is immediately conveyed through the recurrence of numerous terms in the semantic areas of ‘wilderness’ and ‘darkness’ in both texts.

The Vietnamese landscape is a disturbing and oppressive presence, covered in vegetation so luxurious that it may well be described as baroque:

To the north and west the country rose up in thick walls of wilderness, triple-canopied jungle, mountains unfolding into higher mountains, ravines and gorges and fast-moving rivers and waterfalls and exotic

10 *Heart of Darkness*, p. 65, henceforward referred to as *HD*.
11 The analogy suggested by this passage works on several levels: it recalls the psychedelic nature of the conflict, marked by the American soldiers’ widespread use of drugs as an escape from reality, but it also signals the paradoxical addictiveness of combat, while hinting at the unspeakable nature of the experience of transgression.
butterflies and steep cliffs and smoky little hamlets and great valleys of bamboo and elephant grass. (*TTC*, 89, my italics)

O’Brien’s stylistic choices emphasize the sense of exuberance of the environment: the initial asyndeton escalates into the reiterative crescendo of the ‘mountains unfolding into higher mountains’ and the quick sequence of ‘and’s’, with the sentence dissolving into a long catalogue of natural excesses.12 This passage provides more than the physical coordinates of the place: the association between wilderness and the west – a subtle leitmotif in the whole narrative – begins to sketch the moral geography of the tale, disrupting the easy equation that would pair off the Western world with the idea of civilization. The same strategy is adopted to similar effect in the opening of *Heart of Darkness*, where Conrad peppers his description of London with allusions to its ‘gloom to the west’ (see, for example, *HD*, 15, 16 and 18), an ‘ominous’ (to use another recurrent term) reminder that the trite colonial self-identification with the ‘bearers of the spark of the sacred fire’ should not be taken for granted.

Mary Anne has no such prejudices; her main psychological trait, we are told, is a great curiosity; open and determined to learn from her peculiar experience, the girl shows a keen interest in the soldiers’ tasks, the natives’ predicament and the routine of war but, most of all, the secrets of the Vietnamese landscape: ‘What was behind those scary green mountains to the west? […] The war intrigued her. The land, too, and the mystery’ (*TTC*, 91–92, my italics). Soon enough the land responds to Mary Anne’s fascination by exacting a radical change from her; in her effortless adjustment to the demands of life on the compound, Mary Anne unlearns her superfluous (feminine) cares, discarding her jewels, her make-up and her girly attire. The ‘white culottes’ and the ‘sexy pink sweater’ are replaced by ‘green fatigues’ and a ‘dark green bandana’ to wrap her hair, which has been cut short as if to suggest the girl’s claim to a military status. Neither her original outfit nor her military gear are mere realistic details, of course: the former hints at a now receding ingenuous coquettishness, while the latter unveils Mary Anne’s latent affinity with the Green Berets and, more crucially, her chameleon-like assimilation into the jungle. It is only a matter of time until Mary Anne loosens her ties from her boyfriend and his comrades to take part in an ambush with the six Greenies who preside over the compound. Mark’s reaction to Mary Anne’s clandestine escapade is a rather weak call to order, through a desperate enforcement of ‘some new rules. Mary Anne’s hair was freshly shampooed. She wore a white blouse, a navy blue skirt, a pair of plain

12 Other terms connected with the wilderness will be ‘green’ and ‘edge’, which are also immediately associated with the exceptional status of the Special Forces.
black flats. Over dinner she kept her eyes down, poking at her food, subdued to the point of silence’ (TTC, 97). This is clearly an appeal to the most superficial attributes of the Western ideal of femininity (prettiness, cleanliness, docility); within this cultural context, Mark’s trump card in his attempt to reverse the progress of Mary Anne’s metamorphosis is a marriage proposal. Needless to say, this gesture proves totally ineffective as a reminder of the patriarchal rules of ‘the world’, for the girl is so far gone into her solitary journey that she is cut off from her old cultural coordinates.\(^{13}\) Thus, Mary Anne’s strained return to normality is as short-lived as the engagement, which succumbs to the girl’s disdain for the only role that Mark can envisage for her: that of sweetheart/fiancée and ultimately, one presumes, wife and mother. The apathy with which Mary Anne embraces her ‘Intended’ destiny is soon replaced by an ever-growing fascination with the unknown territory unfolding under her eyes:

after a day or two she fell into a restless gloom, sitting off by herself at the edge of the perimeter. [...] Mary Anne just stared out at the dark green mountains to the west. The wilderness seemed to draw her in. A haunted look, Rat said, – partly terror, partly rapture. It was as if she had come up on the edge of something, as if she were caught in that no-man’s land between Cleveland Heights and deep jungle. (TTC, 98–99, my italics)

Prey to the Conradian gloom, Mary Anne has moved into a liminal space – the mythical ‘middle landscape’ (to use Leo Marx’s expression) between savagery and civilization, which American military strategists envisioned as the Special Forces’ domain.

The Special Forces are introduced by O’Brien as a different species from the regular soldiers:

The Greenies were not social animals. Animals, Rat said, but far from social. They had their own hootch at the edge of the perimeter [...]. Secretive and suspicious, loners by nature, the six Greenies would sometimes vanish for days at a time, or

\(^{13}\) Mark’s stubborn adherence to a mentality now completely alien to Mary Anne’s logic recalls the short-sighted strategy for petty survival and self-possession of the Chief Accountant in Heart of Darkness. Conrad’s character cherishes the illusion of his superior integrity by behaving in the heart of Africa as if he were in the City; inevitably, he cuts a pathetic figure, hiding behind his ‘high starched collar’ and ‘white cuffs’ in the oppressive heat of the jungle. Oblivious to the suffering and the inhumane material conditions of the natives, he remains nonetheless a minuscule, ridiculous villain, keeping up the appearance of civilization with his impeccable European dress sense and his books in ‘apple pie order’ (36–37). This vignette is underscored by the cruel irony of the Chief Accountant’s dependence on the natives for his own semblance of Western refinement: it is in fact his black mistress who irons his shirts, in spite of her understandable ‘distaste for the work’.
even weeks, then late in the night they would magically reappear, moving like shadows through the moonlight, filing in silently from the dense rain forest off to the west. \((TTC, 89, my \textit{italics})\)

The Special Forces’ ghost-like apparitions and their isolation at the margin of the compound emphasize their dark and beastly side: they literally exist \textit{in extremis}, leading a life out of bounds in every sense. Present-day Charons, the Greenies ferry Mary Anne into their underworld, until she is a shadow amongst shadows, alienated from the medical staff, often alone at the edge of the perimeter, caught up in a limbo, ‘that no-man’s-land between Cleveland Heights and deep jungle’ \((TTC, 99)\). In this metaphorical space, hovering – like Leatherstocking, the western hero – in a precarious balance between the rules of society and an amoral chaos, the hootch of the Green Berets represents the physical correlative to an ongoing struggle with the ‘fascination of the abomination’, much as Kurtz’s stakes decorated with human heads confirm his crossing-over to a realm of transgression. Inevitably, O’Brien’s description of this ‘middle landscape’ is cast in shady hues; Mary Anne’s retreat into the Greenies’ quarters marks the first step in her irreversible drifting away from civilization: the characteristic seclusion and obscurity of the Special Forces’ hut sanctions the girl’s willingness to belong to a nocturnal, subversive dimension. \(^{15}\) In the end, Mary Anne will sever this mediated connection to the world, leaving even the Special Forces behind:

‘Lost’, [Mark] kept whispering. \((TTC, 99)\)

‘Do something’, [Mark] whispered. ‘I can’t just let her go like that.’ Rat listened for a time, then shook his head. ‘Man, you must be deaf. She’s already gone.’ \((TTC, 104)\)

She was lost inside herself. \((TTC, 106)\)

Mary Anne is ‘lost’ even before her final disappearing act into the jungle; the geographical and the inner journey are a reflection of each other, as well as an echo of Kurtz’s own tale of perdition:

\(^{14}\) See also the description of their return from the first mission with Mary Anne: ‘then off to the \textit{west} a column of \textit{silhouettes} appeared as if by magic at the \textit{edge} of the jungle. At first he [Rat] didn’t recognise her [Mary Anne] – a small soft, \textit{shadow} among six other \textit{shadows}’ \((TTC, 99, my \textit{italics})\).

\(^{15}\) See, for example, ‘Off in the gloom a few dim figures lounged in hammocks’, or ‘In the shadow there was a laughter’, and the suggestive ‘she [Mary Anne] turned and moved back into the gloom’ \((TTC, 102, 103\) and \(104)\).
‘You will be lost,’ [Marlow] said – ‘utterly lost.’ [...] I did say the right thing, though indeed he could not have been more irretrievably lost than he was at this very moment, when the foundations of our intimacy were being laid... (HD, 106)

What makes the account of Mary Anne’s inexorable descent different from that of Kurtz’s degradation is mainly a matter of the nature and timing of the revelations concerning their respective character development. In this sense, O’Brien’s narrative can be said to fill in the gaps in Conrad’s story, in which Marlow (and the reader) only ever meet Kurtz when he is already near the end of his journey. The several proleptic passages in Heart of Darkness – a host of rumours surrounding Kurtz (who is primarily referred to as a nameless voice) – create an atmosphere of anticipation and suspense for the reader; these are the same feelings that have obviously fed Marlow’s instinctive fascination with and sympathy for the man, and that underlie Marlow’s determination to save ‘the gifted Mr Kurtz from his fate’ (HD, 81). Conversely, the mythical plot of ‘search and deliverance’ – i.e. the hero’s quest and victorious fight against evil – is impossible in ‘Sweetheart’; Mark Fossie is no knight-in-shining-armour, and no Marlow either, lacking the psychological subtlety and self-awareness of the modernist (anti)hero. For its part, Marlow’s mission retains a mythical flair; it can be envisaged as a catabasis, the descent into the abode of the shades of the dead, which in the best classical tradition (see Odysseus, Aeneas or, even more appropriately, Orpheus) is doomed from the start: Kurtz cannot be brought back to the world, because he always already belongs to the heart of darkness, a voice rather than a body, ‘that Shadow – this wandering and tormented thing’ (HD, 106).16 Still, Marlow’s quest is a success of sorts; like his epic predecessors, what he has really undertaken is a journey of self-discovery (fruitful in so far as he survives to tell, and muse about, the tale) – albeit under the guise of a mission to retrieve a lost soul. Of course, if only in retrospect (see HD, 106 quoted above), Marlow acknowledges the hopelessness of his attempt to reach out to Kurtz. Mark Fossie, by contrast, can never comprehend, let alone come to terms with, his loss of Mary Anne: the shock of this discovery will drive him insane.

16 Odysseus and Aeneas both descend into the underworld (Hades/Dis) in order to question the dead (the soothsayer Tiresias and Anchises, Aeneas’s father, respectively) about their destiny and ask for advice: theirs is a journey of self-discovery, made poignant by the two heroes’ impossible desire to embrace their deceased beloved (see Homer, Odyssey, Book XI and Virgil, Aeneid, Book VI). Orpheus’s mission into the underworld is the rescue of his dead wife Eurydice, who disappears forever into the realm of the dead when Orpheus breaks his promise not to turn around and check that she is following him back to the world (see Ovid, Metamorphoses, Book X). These are easily the three best known secular epic examples of catabasis, and they all make quite clear that the inhabitants of the underworld are insubstantial shadows, who can never get back to the world. The shadow’s doom is also Kurtz’s destiny, although Conrad’s narrative is no epic tale, but rather a modernist epic reversal.
One observation to be made about the web of character associations and narrative functions that I have just outlined concerns the doubling up of Marlow’s position in ‘Sweetheart’. In O’Brien’s tale there are two counterparts to the two roles invested in Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow is both the (anti)hero of his own journey to Africa and of his doomed attempt to rescue Kurtz and the narrator of these complex, intertwined events. The combined functions of would-be saviour and self-conscious narrator are split up by O’Brien and assigned to Mark Fossie and Rat Kiley respectively.

O’Brien’s choice to have two characters share Marlow’s legacy does not extend to his treatment of Kurtz, whose heavy literary inheritance is taken up solely by Mary Anne: the parallelisms between the two figures go well beyond their common solitude and ghostliness. An interesting shared trait, particularly in the light of Conrad’s and O’Brien’s own evocative writing, is the oneiric quality of Mary Anne’s and Kurtz’s speech: the two characters develop their own idiosyncratic language and are susceptible to the influence of vernacular forms of communication. Kurtz’s utterances are cryptic and contradictory, the ravings of a lunatic or perhaps a seer, and resist all attempts at a rational paraphrase. As Marlow admits, ‘They were common everyday words [...] but they had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares’ (*HD*, 107). Mary Anne, on her part, gradually abandons language for music – and non-Western music at that. The tune coming from the Green Berets’ hootch ‘had a chaotic, almost unmusical sound, without rhythm or form or progression, like the noise of nature [...] In the background, just audible, a woman’s voice was half-singing, half-chanting, but the lyrics seemed to be in a foreign tongue’ (*TTC*, 110). O’Brien insists on the savage dimension of the sound: ‘The place seemed to echo with a weird deep-wilderness sound – tribal music’ (*TTC*, 102), and later, ‘In the darkness there was that weird tribal music, which seemed to come from the earth itself, from the deep rain forest, and a woman’s voice rising up in a language beyond translation’ (*TTC*, 104).

17 Kurtz’s own literary ancestry of course places him in the Romantic tradition of the great transgressors or overreachers, the monomaniacal figures consumed by an obsession and betrayed by their *hubris*. ‘The charismatic Kurtz, brilliant yet depraved, corrupt yet fascinating, descends from the “hero-villains” of Gothic fiction, the most notable of these being Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff (who, like Ann Radcliffe’s Montoni, is in turn a literary descendant of Milton’s Satan, regarded by the Romantics as a sublime rebel). Furthermore, the tale’s imagery suggests, Kurtz is a modern Faust, who has sold his soul for power and gratification; so perhaps Charlie Marlow owes a debt to Christopher Marlowe’; Cedric Watts, “Heart of Darkness”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. John H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 45–62, p. 47.

18 Interestingly, Marlow is made to understand that ‘Kurtz had been essentially a great musician’ (*HD*, 115).

19 As already hinted, Kurtz’s and Mary Anne’s language take to an extreme the non-linearity and opacity of the texture of *Heart of Darkness* and ‘Sweetheart’, and of their several narra-
The untranslatable quality of Mary Anne’s chant brings to mind the African natives’ cries to mourn Kurtz’s departure, ‘strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; [...] the deep murmurs of the crowd [...] were like the responses of some satanic litany’ (although O’Brien understandably avoids any suggestion of hell in his description of an other form of speech: as already pointed out, ‘Sweetheart’ plays down the cataclysmic element of the tale, perhaps reflecting a more or less conscious postcolonial political correctness).

Mary Anne’s and Kurtz’s oral relationship with the wilderness eventually takes a grotesque, horrific turn in their cannibalistic desire for the land; Mary Anne is so enthralled by her surroundings that she wants to make them part of herself: ‘Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country – the dirt, the death – I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That’s how I feel. It’s like … this appetite’ (TTC, 103). Mary Anne spells out what is only implicit in Marlow’s first impression of Kurtz as an image of greed: ‘I saw him open his mouth wide – it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him’ (HD, 97) and, in a later passage,

I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived – a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence. (HD, 117)

Devouring the land does signal an extreme yearning for its possession, but it also flags up the need for a selfless sense of belonging, the ultimate merging of subject and object. It is in the fulfilment of this complete assimilation that Mary Anne’s destiny differs from Kurtz’s. After all, Kurtz’s journey comes to an abrupt halt with his death well within the boundaries of the narration,
which means that at the most superficial level of the plot, we do get some answers: “Mistah Kurtz – he dead” (HD, 112). The ambiguity in the story lies not so much in ascertaining the circumstances of Kurtz’s demise (although even these are deliberately obscured by Marlow’s lie to the Intended), but in the difficulty of penetrating the true nature and the deeper meaning of his experience. The challenge of such an interpretative task is neatly exemplified in the ambiguity of Kurtz’s last words, ‘The horror! The horror!’ (HD, 112). We cannot know whether this is an admission of depravity, or a condemnation of the African ‘savagery’ akin to his earlier call to ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’ (HD, 84). Moreover, the interpretative challenge is made even harder for the reader by Marlow’s tentative, ambiguous mediation of the story. In other words, the facts being clear (clearer than in ‘Sweetheart’ at least), the lack of closure in Heart of Darkness lies at a hermeneutical level and, to a large extent, it is a function of the inconclusiveness of Marlow’s storytelling and of Conrad’s modernist poetics. At the end of the tale, when it is once more apparent that the story is as much – if not more – about Marlow as it is about Kurtz, both characters remain equally impenetrable ciphers. This is in tune with Conrad’s appeal in the ‘Preface’ to “Narcissus” that each individual must embark on his or her own quest for signification: as we shall see later, the (partial, evanescent) truth is illuminated on the outside, by the mood of the writing, while the story itself reveals an empty core. The only certainty yielded by Heart of Darkness is a revelation into the thought-provoking nature of Conrad’s – and Marlow’s – narrative (possibly to be adopted by the reader as a model of self-reflection), while the sequence of embedded tales seemingly stages the infinite regress of the final truth away from our firm grasp.

For his part, O’Brien refuses to provide his readers with even a factual ending. The story is inconclusive at the most basic level: there is no way of knowing what has really happened to Mary Anne, other than that she has disappeared into the jungle. In this respect, the girl recalls Kurtz’s native lover, the memorable incarnation of the African charm:

a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman. She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments […] bizarre things, charms, gifts of witchmen, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. […] She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (HD, 99)
This ‘wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman’ enters the scene as a direct emanation of the jungle, which she immediately returns to – her uncharted story a symbol of the mystery of the heart of darkness. Mary Anne resembles the embodiment of the Conradian wilderness in her sinister gaze and her barbarous ornaments and poise, the signs of her own consubstantiality with the earth: it is no surprise that she finally becomes ‘part of the land’. Never a corpse, Mary Anne remains an enigmatic story, always eluding death (and a narrative conclusion) in the sequence of speculations that make up her tale. Moreover, as my analysis of the textual challenges to conventional gender roles will make clear, Mary Anne’s trajectory can be traced as a transformation from a readerly text (in her initial conformity to a predictable feminine plot) to a writerly one (in her ultimate resistance to fixed interpretations: her parable gets written anew with every reading, a fact that O’Brien highlights in the complex structure of his narrative). This journey progressively takes Mary Anne away from a patriarchal terrain, as the girl, once the perfect object of male desire, rejects Mark’s domestic idyll to inhabit the androgynous ‘no-man’s-land between Cleveland Heights and the deep jungle’ (TTC, 99) and eventually metamorphoses into a wilderness that we might want to characterize as féminine: abundant, powerful, alluring and incontainable. This non-phallocentric stance, voiced with great gusto by French feminist theory, defuses the derogatory association of the wilderness with femininity typical of the repressive and self-defensive strategies of patriarchal colonial ideology: viewed as weak, savage and amoral, the feminized and/or emasculated foreign land demands Western mastery and control. Taking their cue from

The woman’s exit is as memorable as her entrance onto the scene, and confirms her identification with the jungle: ‘She looked at us all as if her life had depended on the steadiness of her glance. Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace. […] Once only her eyes gleamed back at us in the dusk of the thickets before she disappeared’ (HD, 99–100).

See her physical assimilation to the wilderness: ‘Her eyes seemed to shine in the dark – not blue, though, but a bright glowing jungle green’ (TTC, 99); her vacuous gaze and barbarous ornaments: ‘Quietly then, she stepped out of the shadows. […] For a long while the girl gazed down at Fossie, almost blankly, and in the candlelight her face had the composure of someone perfectly at peace with herself. […] At the girl’s throat was a necklace of human tongues. Elongated and narrow, like pieces of blackened leather, the tongues were threaded along a length of copper wire, one overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final horrified syllable’ (TTC, 103).

This feminization of the exotic, languid, seductive Orient has long underpinned the imperialist ideology of the West; see, for example, Edward Said, who sees in Flaubert’s relationship with the Egyptian courtesan Kuchuk Hanem a paradigm for ‘the pattern of relative strength between East and West’; Orientalism [1978] (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 6. This patriarchal, Orientalist stance is replicated by Conrad, with ironic distance, in his
– and challenging – the oppressive reduction of femininity to the realms of nature, passivity and obscurity, critics such as Hélène Cixous celebrate the feminine ‘pleasure in being boundless, outside self, outside same, far from a “center,” from any capital of her “dark continent,” very far from the “hearth” to which man brings her so that she will tend his fire, which always threatens to go out’. It is to the energy, freedom, plenitude and fulfilling quality of this vision that Mary Anne responds in her merging with the jungle, an awe-inspiring and empowering image magnified by the rippling away, in several directions, of O’Brien’s decentred narrative. But before moving to the analysis of the conclusion and the general structure of O’Brien’s story, it is worth dwelling on Conrad’s own representation of female characters and on his narrative technique.

The final impossibility of pinning down Mary Anne, who has shown a dangerous degree of adaptability, being equally credible as the American sweetheart and as a creature of the wilderness, differs greatly from what appears to be an unbridgeable dichotomy in the feminine roles in Heart of Darkness. At a first glance, Conrad’s representation of women sways between two antithetic stereotypes, the savagery of the ‘wild and gorgeous apparition’ and the innocence of the Intended, firmly grounded in a patriarchal discourse which, in Peter Hyland’s words,

locate women away from the active but corrupting world of work and commerce to protect the superior morality they were supposed to embody. A woman defined in this way could have no interest in ‘truth’ as it relates to the confrontation with the reality of the outside world, which is represented in its purest form by the wilderness, the savage frontier.

representation of the jungle (see the early episode of the shelling of the continent by the French man-of-war, which reads like an absurd and unsuccessful sexual assault (HD, 30ff.); or also revealing choices of words, as in the description of the silent wilderness taking a native ‘into its bosom again’ (HD, 45) and the isolated stations on the river bank ‘clinging to the skirts of the unknown’ (HD, 61)). In time of war, in particular, the demeaning feminization of the Other/the enemy/the oppressed is the obvious counterpart of the celebration of male bonding and of the masculine virtues of courage, strength and fortitude. Interestingly, the feminization of Vietnam comes through also in the best known image of the war, Pulizer Prize-winner Huyng Cong Nick Ut’s iconic photograph of Kim Phuc, a little girl running away, naked, from a napalm attack on the village of Trang Bang in June 1972. On this issue, see Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 93.


24 Peter Hyland, ‘The Little Woman in the Heart of Darkness’, Conradiana, 20.1 (1988), pp. 3–11, p. 5. On the patriarchal rationale of the lie to the Intended, see also Susan Jones,
Hyland sees a perfect justification for Marlow’s lie to the Intended in the patriarchal desire to preserve the woman’s natural innocence, and retain an image of feminine virtue to counterbalance the disturbing figure of Kurtz’s native mistress: rarefied perfection in opposition to earthly abasement, the Intended must be a Madonna to the barbarous woman’s whore. The reason for Marlow’s disingenuous behaviour is one final mystery to be unravelled by the reader, who should have no difficulty in seeing through the self-deception at work in Marlow’s patronizing manipulation of the truth. In order to reveal the latent misogyny in this ostensibly sympathetic gesture, it is enough to follow the main hermeneutical example within the text, which is paradoxically provided by Marlow’s discerning and cynical attitude towards the ideological flaws of the colonial enterprise.

It is in fact Marlow’s ironic narrative stance that provides a model for a sharp critical response, quick to spot the ‘redeeming ideas’ behind Western culture; of course, the necessity of a disenchanted, inquiring interpretative mood becomes much more pressing when Marlow fails us, having internalized (for once) the patriarchal bias. At this point it falls to the reader to adopt an ironic attitude in his or her interpretation of Heart of Darkness: in this sense, the text can be said to have created its own ideal audience, and I would argue that this training cuts across gender distinctions, in spite of the much debated fact that the intradiegetic addressees of Marlow’s story are all men.25 Marlow’s companions on board the Nellie, including the nameless character who opens and closes the novella, framing Kurtz’s story with the account of its telling, provide not so much a model of a reader’s response as a background to highlight the peculiar qualities of Marlow’s tale and narrative technique. In fact, the only – anonymous – remark directly elicited by Marlow’s storytelling is a request for civility in mock outrage at the suggestion that life is but a series of ‘monkey tricks’ (HD, 60); for the rest, the intradiegetic narrator intervenes only twice to interrupt the story,
commenting on its eerie progress. Even at the very end, following a brief reminder of Marlow’s Buddha-like posture and indistinctness in the dark, the story is met with a prolonged silence, eventually broken by a matter-of-fact remark about the ebbing of the tide. While the narrator expresses our yearning for signification, the audience on the Nellie mirror our bewilderment with the story; it is only Marlow who fully embodies the figure of the active listener/reader within the text, in his reaction to the rumours surrounding Kurtz and indeed in his attempt to decipher, in its telling, his whole experience of this encounter. If anything, the masculine, nautical bond that pervades the narrative frame draws attention to the eccentricity of Marlow’s tale, by measuring it up against the ‘direct simplicity’ of seamen’s yarns,

the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (*HD*, 18)

At odds with the unwritten rules of the bond of the sea, Marlow’s storytelling style has been seen to correspond to Cixous’s definition of *écriture féminine*. The passage quoted above seems to endorse this critical position. Marlow does not tell straightforward stories: rather he *spins* yarns, whose pursuit of signification is characterized by the rejection of a forceful, intrusive prying, so that any apprehended truth remains glowing – evasively, bathed in lunar radiance – on the surface. Besides, the (traditionally feminine) figure of the moon is summoned to officiate over what could be described as the celebration of female, non-penetrative, polymorphous sexuality, which is reflected in the digressive, evocative quality of Marlow’s narrative. Marlow’s complicity with a feminine realm does not end here: in fact, his journey to the Congo is made possible by the intercession of his ‘excellent aunt’; ironically,

26 ‘It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he [i.e. Marlow], sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river’ (*HD*, 50). Here Marlow has become a voice, like Kurtz, while his narrative seems almost non-human: the witness/teller of the story of transgression undergoes his or her own journey into the heart of darkness. The other brief interruption to Marlow’s storytelling occurs on page 80.

27 See footnote in Jones, *Conrad and Women*, pp. 20–21, where the problematic intermittent essentialism of Cixous’s position is also acknowledged.
this character’s unwavering faith in the civilizing mission of the colonial venture causes her nephew to muse on how ‘out of touch with truth’ women are (HD, 28). The African expedition is therefore bracketed within two mirror-like female encounters, during which Marlow is the recipient first and the perpetrator later of an ideological lie: for all his disparagement of his aunt’s misguided piety, Marlow chooses not to tamper with the Intended’s illusions. In this way, men and women are ultimately shown to inhabit the same world and, if women often remain at the ‘door of Darkness’, it is because of the role that patriarchy has reserved for them, rather than the result of an essential difference. While it is true that the portrayal of women in Heart of Darkness is often underdeveloped and caricatural (and yet the same could be said of every character in that story, with the exception of Marlow and – possibly – Kurtz), the Manichaean stereotyping of femininity is only true of those figures who represent a potential or an actual sexual object, that is the Intended and the ‘superb and barbarous woman’, Kurtz’s sweethearts.

The construction of the female objects of male desire according to the opposite stereotypes of the angel of the hearth and the untamed fiend – the one function usually sought after in legitimate, the other in illegitimate relationships – is part of the patriarchal discourse on women, which O’Brien immediately addresses in making his female protagonist somebody’s sweet-

28 The ‘door of Darkness’, in the headquarters of the Belgian company who commission Marlow to undertake his journey, is presided over by two ladies knitting black wool. Marlow encounters them on the eve of his appointment and will later think about them in Africa. These memorable figures are traditionally identified with the Greek Fates, the mythical weavers responsible for the span of each individual’s life. They are a symbolic, extreme illustration of women’s ability to play an active role in the realm of brute reality, much as Marlow’s aunt is invested with that function on a realistic level. Joanna Smith also points out that Marlow’s aunt’s naive colonial attitude (her belief in ‘weaning those ignorant millions’) is ultimately ‘a variant of the masculine imperialism in Kurtz’s “we can exert a power for good practically unbounded”’; “Too Beautiful Altogether”, p. 190); in other words, the ‘redeeming’ idea is neither an exclusively masculine nor a feminine fabrication. For further comments on female agency in the novel and Marlow’s patriarchal double standards, see also Watts, “Heart of Darkness”, p. 56.

29 A small detail in support of the shared caricatural quality of both male and female minor characters in Heart of Darkness is the ‘starched white affair’ (HD, 26) on the knitting lady’s head, which reminds us of the Chief Accountant’s ‘high starched collar’ (HD, 36). These are all empty, puppet-like figures, anticipating Eliot’s hollow men (see also Marlow’s description of one of the agents at the Central Station as a ‘papier-mâché Mephistopheles’, HD, 48). On the lack of depth of most characters in Heart of Darkness, see also Gabrielle McIntyre, ‘The Women Do Not Travel: Gender, Difference, and Incommensurability in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness’, Modern Fiction Studies, 48.2 (2002), pp. 257–84.

30 Watts points out that Marlow himself is infatuated with the Intended, a detail which contributes to the explanation of the lie as a chivalrous (i.e. patriarchal) gesture; see “Heart of Darkness”, p. 49.
heart. Not a nurse, nor a journalist, let alone a soldier, Mary Anne, a recent high-school graduate, is in Vietnam as Mark’s girlfriend, a status which in itself authenticates her innocence and propriety. Even her flirtatiousness is all for Mark’s benefit, ‘the sort of show that a girl will sometimes put on for her boyfriend’s entertainment and education’ (TTC, 91). In line with the standards of late-twentieth-century Western culture, the figure of Mark’s ‘Intended’ is allowed, indeed required, to be more sexually explicit than in Conrad’s time, and yet the goal of this performance is always the same: the fulfilment of a male fantasy. Mary Anne’s transformation exposes the artificiality of this eternal myth of femininity, which turns out to be as easily disposable as a sexy pink sweater. The essentialist view of the notions of masculinity and femininity is expressly refuted by Rat Kiley, the eye-witness and original narrator of Mary Anne’s story, who makes a passionate oration against our cultural resistance to the idea that America’s sweetheart might accomplish the ultimate transgression. Rat’s argument is further corroborated by the physical and emotional likeness between the early Mary Anne (a ‘cute blonde – just a kid’, ‘a tall, big-boned blonde’, ‘just a child, blond and innocent’, TTC, 88, 90, 99) and Mark (‘just a boy – eighteen years old. Tall and blond. […] A nice kid, too, polite and good-hearted’, TTC, 95). In the end, it is only Mark, still innocent, who persists in the gender fallacy, holding on to such traditional conventions as the engagement and refusing to acknowledge the radical changes in his girlfriend. In a significant reversal of stereotypical gender roles, Mark is exposed as more naive and fragile than Mary Anne: while his drama is played out on a small, bureaucratic scale, with his demotion and medical discharge from the army, Mary Anne’s story

31 After making the point that in Heart of Darkness, with the exceptions of Marlow and Kurtz, ‘characters are known by function rather than by proper name’, Gabrielle McIntire adds that women in particular are defined ‘in terms of their relation to men’: the aunt, the mother, the laundress, the mistress, the Intended, etc. (‘The Women Do Not Travel’, p. 281). With similar polemic intent, Joanna Smith argues that Marlow – and Conrad – ultimately collude with patriarchy in their silencing and symbolic reduction of women, to whom the male rationality and articulacy, and the ability to engage with truth, are not made available. It seems to me that both critics underplay the fact that Marlow’s own storytelling practice contravenes the very masculine rules, standards and goals that he can otherwise be seen occasionally to endorse in his treatment of women.

32 This is a particularly convincing argument, since it is voiced by a speaker who cannot be accused of political correctness: ‘She was a girl, that’s all. I mean, if it was a guy, anybody’d say, Hey, no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. All that crap about how if we had a pussy for president there wouldn’t be no more wars. Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude’ (TTC, 100). See also, earlier in the narration: “She wasn’t dumb,” [Rat]’d snap. “I never said that. Young, that’s all I said. Like you and me. A girl, that’s the only difference, and I’ll tell you something. It didn’t amount to jack. I mean, when we first got here – all of us – we were real young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit, but we learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Anne” (TTC, 93).
unfolds in an awe-inspiring tragedy, with her transfiguration into a legendary figure, a grand personification of the jungle and its unyielding mystery. The powerful image of the woman lurking in the wilderness is a clever, subtle critique both of the myth of masculinity and of the American expectation of a moral renaissance in the conquest of the Vietnamese ‘frontier’: ‘What happened to her, Rat said, was what happened to all of them. You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it’s never the same. A question of degree. Some make it intact, some don’t make it at all’ (TTC, 105). The self-reliance, resilience and entrepreneurial spirit embodied by the pioneers of the American west could not be further away from the simple lesson learnt by the soldiers in Vietnam, as the powerful epigrammatic statement from ‘How to Tell a True War Story’ explains: ‘Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty’ (TTC, 68). If they come home at all.

‘Sweetheart’ shows that there is an irreconcilable difference not between the sexes, but between those who are, or have been, ‘in country’ and those who have remained ‘in the world’ (as we have seen, the latter is a thesis common to most war literature). In this respect, the intradiegetic audience of Rat’s narrative – an all-male group of soldiers united by the ‘bond of war’ much as the people on the Nellie shared ‘the bond of the sea’ (HD, 15) – functions as a reminder of the insurmountable challenges in trying to represent the alterity of the conflict, rather than as the example of an unbridgeable

33 Mary Anne’s tragic – and unspeakable – sublimation makes her akin to the mythical figures (such as Medusa or Penthesileia) reclaimed by Cixous as strong, empowering models of femininity. I do not agree with Lorrie N. Smith, who thinks that O’Brien’s deconstruction of gender difference in this story is only a token gesture (‘as if he’s read plenty of French feminism’) and that ‘Sweetheart’ is only superficially ‘a feminist assertion of semiotic power disrupting patriarchal symbolic order’; “‘The Things Men Do’”, p. 36, p. 35. According to Smith, the complexity and inconclusiveness of the story’s ending would mask the author’s inability to dispose of his monstrous female creation, who ‘remains a sort of macabre, B-movie “joke,” good for a nervous laugh among men’, p. 36. This position strikes me as rather ungenerous towards O’Brien and his text – while perhaps also indicative of the ‘no-win’ situation in which attempts to reconfigure gender relations can often get caught: surely, the silence around Mary Anne’s end can be interpreted as a sign of her successful escape both from a patriarchal world and from a narrative told by and for men. Moreover, while it is true that, in perfect tune with their gung-ho mentality, the Green Berets immortalize the wildest, deadliest aspect of the girl’s mythical transfiguration, Mary Anne is remembered and/or encountered with wonder and admiration, even with love, by tellers and listeners of her story alike. In the end, to her male audience, she is no laughing matter, nor (on the other end of the scale) a frightening, emasculating figure: an awe-inspiring, self-possessed, mysterious creature, ‘she seemed to flow like water through the dark, without sound or center. She went barefoot. She stopped carrying a weapon. […] It was as if she were taunting some wild creature out in the bush, or in her head’ (TTC, 106).

34 It is worth pointing out again that Rat’s anticlimactic moral to Mary Anne’s story, which exposes the corrupting effect on war on all people, regardless of gender, is later somewhat superseded by the much more compelling and lingering impression that Mary Anne makes on the witnesses, listeners and readers of her tale. She is both the contingent proof of the evil of war and a larger-than-life, tantalizing mythical creation.
gender divide. As the story repeatedly makes clear, Mary Anne is not precluded a priori from entering the war enclave: it is only a cultural prejudice that makes it out of bounds for women (hence their typical absence from gatherings such as the one in which Rat’s storytelling takes place). O’Brien exploits the uniformity and exclusiveness of the ‘bond of war’ so as to raise metanarrative rather than gender issues. The listeners’ incredulity towards Rat’s tale reiterates the incommunicability of the experience of Vietnam: if Rat’s fellow soldiers will not believe his story – O’Brien seems to say – then who will? At the same time, Rat’s presence complicates the narrative structure of ‘Sweetheart’, which, like *Heart of Darkness*, contains a frame to introduce and accompany the telling of the core episode. In Conrad’s text, however, the degree of interference between the two narrative levels is minimal: the narrator’s longest intervention is at the very beginning of the novella, when the reader is warned of the complexity and inconclusiveness of Marlow’s yarns. Not so in ‘Sweetheart’, where Rat’s tale about Mary Anne is interwoven with the account of its telling, in a much bolder metafictional gesture, whose narcissism is further highlighted by the fact that the narrator of the frame, and indeed of the entire book, is a character called ‘Tim O’Brien’. At the intradiegetic level, as it is perhaps to be expected, Rat’s storytelling style is very similar to Marlow’s: they both take a tortuous route in unravelling the plot, which is constantly interrupted by assiduous clarifications of the events in question, as well as by a running metanarrative commentary. If the crew on the *Nellie* face Marlow’s meanderings with good-natured resignation, Rat’s self-reflective interludes trigger the vocal remonstrations of one of his listeners, Mitchell Sanders, who clings to the idea that stories should have a ‘direct simplicity’. What matters to Sanders is the ‘raw material’ (*TTC*, 117), and Rat is accordingly urged on several occasions to stick to the facts (yet, ironically, Sanders’ unsuccessful objections impede the flow of Rat’s story, increasing its inconclusiveness). What, if anything, can possibly justify such persistent artfulness in O’Brien’s storytelling?

Complementing the suggestiveness of the image of Mary Anne’s union with the jungle, the intricacy and the eccentricity of ‘Sweetheart’ work as an enactment of a *feminine* mode of storytelling, and constitute a tireless and open narrative attempt to relate (with) the other. Finally ‘Sweetheart’ is a love story, a passionate celebration of Mary Anne, which does ‘take the risk of other, of difference, without feeling threatened by the existence of an otherness, rather, delighting to increase through the unknown that is there to discover, to respect, to favour, to cherish’. As we shall see in the conclusion of the tale, Mary Anne’s charismatic presence is neither excised from the

35 Cixous, ‘Sorties’, p. 78.
story, nor is it reduced to a terrible yet intelligible victim of ‘The Nam’ (in spite of Rat’s epigrammatic pronouncement), nor even to a feared female monster. The convoluted and centrifugal structure of the narrative inevitably also proves to be a challenge to a straightforward claim to truth. In fact, the fictional ‘O’Brien’ jeopardizes the entire credibility of Mary Anne’s story very openly and from the beginning:

I heard it from Rat Kiley, who swore up and down to its truth, although in the end, I’ll admit, that doesn’t amount to much of a warranty. Among the men in Alpha Company, Rat had a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement, a compulsion to rev up the facts […] It wasn’t a question of deceit. Just the opposite: he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt. (TTC, 87)

Adopting a technique endorsed by O’Brien, both in his fictional persona and in his prolific writing career,36 Rat is an odd kind of unreliable narrator, who chooses to exaggerate and embellish the bare facts in order to provoke a reaction in his audience as similar as possible to the emotions experienced by the protagonists of his stories. This unorthodox strategy would have Conrad’s approval, judging from his 1917 ‘Author’s Note’ to Youth: A Narrative; and Two Other Stories (first published in 1902): ‘[Heart of Darkness] is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers’ (HD, 11).

O’Brien’s storytelling differs in degree, not in kind, from Conrad’s, a fact witnessed by the subtle variation in the narrative structure between Heart of Darkness and ‘Sweetheart’. Marlow’s yarn is embedded in the anonymous narration of one of the characters on the Nellie, i.e. a member of the original audience of the intradiegetic tale. This ‘Russian dolls’ structure is supplanted by an alternation of two stories (Mary Anne’s adventure and Rat’s narrative feat) in ‘Sweetheart’, as opposed to the insertion of the one tale within the other. The narration of the act of narration, comparable in significance to a frame, does not envelop the account of Mary Anne’s journey, which, dotted with expressions such as ‘Rat said’, or ‘As Rat described it’, is evidently

36 See, for example, ‘Good Form’ with its proclamation of the supremacy of ‘story-truth’ over ‘happening-truth’, or the already mentioned ‘How to Tell a True War Story’, in which the programmatic inconclusiveness of true stories is also theorized. Sanders’ rage at the inconclusiveness of Rat’s narrative (and conversely, his perceptive guess that Mary Anne must end at some point with the Greenies, otherwise there would have been no reason to mention them in the story) provides a witty comment on narrative conventions and the expectations that they engender (“Jesus Christ, it’s against the rules,” Sanders said. “Against human nature. This elaborate story, you can’t say, Hey, by the way, I don’t know the ending. I mean, you got certain obligations”, TTC, 104).
indirect speech, reported by a character called Tim O'Brien. This fictional ‘O’Brien’ is therefore responsible for both narratives but, while he can personally vouch for Rat’s performance, of which he was a witness, he must rely on Rat as a source for Mary Anne’s tale. Interestingly, even Rat is only a partial eye-witness, having left the medical compound a few days after Mary Anne had moved to the Greenies’ hut: by his own admission (mediated, of course, by ‘O’Brien’’s voice), the conclusion of Mary Anne’s story has reached Rat via a circuitous route, so that his authority on the matter is ‘secondhand. Thirdhand, actually’ (TTC, 104). Always at the risk of losing the thread of the rumours and voices that overlap and follow each other, the reader might be forgiven for thinking that this proliferation of narrative levels is a gratuitous, narcissistic game. Still, O’Brien is merely putting into practice the lesson underlying his whole oeuvre: ‘You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end’ (TTC, 73) or even ‘You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it’ (TTC, 80). O’Brien makes sure that this one keeps on being told, over and over, one more time: by the O’Brien-author of The Things They Carried, by the fictional character of the same name, by Rat Kiley, even by the Special Forces. The multiple performances, evidenced by the presence of parallel and interlinking narrative strands in ‘Sweetheart’, are what puts the truth into the story. This may be regarded as a narrative strategy typical of postmodernity, within which truth is judged for its relative, and contingent, effectiveness rather than in absolute terms of faithfulness to the facts.

A similar conclusion can be reached from the analysis of the implications of Conrad’s embedded sequence of eye-witness accounts: each successive narrator relies on an authority made progressively weaker by the increased distance from the original events, until the whole process becomes a game of Chinese whispers, with the truth receding further and further away from view. The O’Brien-narrator instead has taken it upon himself to mediate simultaneously Mary Anne’s story and the debate on Rat’s narrative performance: this latter subplot prompts metafictional reflections, which are ultimately subsumed within the practice of O’Brien (both the real and the fictional one). Mary Anne’s tale has never been a question of eye-witness account, but survives on the strength of its symbolic, suggestive status: it is a timeless story, handed over from one teller to the next for its sheer narrative charm, prompting continuous tellings and retellings in each speaker’s hope of getting somewhat closer to the truth. Interestingly, ‘Sweetheart’ ends with a short paragraph from the (always mediated) perspective of the Special

37 At the risk of stretching the point, I would argue that this form of narrative, with multiple strands and a collaborative conclusion, has a much more open-ended, plural and dispersive (hence féminine) structure than Conrad’s Russian dolls series of tales which, while lacking a basic linearity, each sequentially contains another.
Forces who, like a Greek chorus, consecrate the appeal of Mary Anne’s story to a collective, mythical imaginary:

But the story did not end there [i.e. in an enquiry and Mark’s dismissal from the army]. If you believed the Greenies, Rat said, Mary Anne was still somewhere out there in the dark. Odd movements, odd shapes. Late at night, when the Greenies were out on ambush, the rain forest seemed to stare in at them – a watched feeling – and a couple of times they almost saw her sliding through the shadows. Not quite, but almost. She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill. (TTC, 106–107)

The final image of Mary Anne with her necklace of human tongues, earlier described with ‘the tips curled upward as if caught in a final horrified syllable’ (TTC, 103), locks her within a silence that is as tantalizing as it is shocking and impenetrable. Like the Conradian Intended, whose (unspoken) name is ironically declared by Marlow to have been the last word uttered by Kurtz, the figure of Mary Anne is collapsed with an unspeakable, elusive truth, and finally with ‘The horror! The horror!’; an ambiguous, haunting cry still echo­ing in our culture.38 Indeed, Mary Anne’s story does not end here, in the final page of ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’, as it did not begin on the mountains to the west of Chu Lai: we have all heard it before (in Heart of Darkness, but also in every other tale of transgression and perdition) and we will hear it again, for as long as we will feel the need to try to cast light on the truth about that part of human nature ‘still somewhere out there in the dark’.

O’Brien’s intertextual dialogue with the Conradian model offers a clear example of the process of invention, that is of the discovery (from the Latin inventio, meaning ‘to find out’) and creation of ‘truth’ in the mirror-like acts of translation and mythopoiesis of something ‘original’. As we have seen, in the first instance the elusive meaning of O’Brien’s ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’ comes out of the incessant tweaking of a story – Mary Anne Bell’s story – that is both private and collective, both personal anecdote and collective myth (once again, ‘original’ in the present and the etymological sense of the word). At the most superficial level, ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’ disputes the (male) myths of progress and heroism – the pillars of the grand

38 An actual example of the intriguing persistence of this cry in our culture is offered by Coppola’s Apocalypse Now, in which the memorable line ‘The horror! The horror!’ is uttered twice by Marlon Brando (Kurtz) in a spine-chilling whisper, the laconic voiceover that accompanies the departure of Captain Willard (the Marlow figure, played by Martin Sheen) from Kurtz’s compound and his return to ‘civilization’. Kurtz’s final words are thus the last line in the film (and their delivery is extremely faithful to Conrad’s text, where they are described as ‘a cry that was no more than a breath’; HD, 112).
American narratives of the frontier and of Manifest Destiny – in an obvious counterpart to Conrad’s critique of the white man’s burden and the imperialist mission. In the eyes of the discerning reader, however, O’Brien’s powerful rewriting of Kurtz’s voyage into ‘The horror!’ adds a further layer of signification and literariness to his project: if nothing else, by drawing inspiration from Conrad’s challenge to the dichotomy between wilderness and civilization, and the subsequent exposure of the lies that underpin the patriarchal, colonial enterprise, O’Brien appears to claim a similar critical scope for his narrative, which thus becomes a parable not merely for the iniquity of the Vietnam war, but for the absurdity of a Manichaean, clear-cut opposition between good and evil, or feminine innocence and masculine experience. Inevitably, both texts end up posing more questions than they solve: yet a reading of ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’ against the grain of Heart of Darkness throws into relief the strength of O’Brien’s commitment to the notion that fictional truth is truer than factual truth, particularly when the truth in question must try to do justice to an event that demands and resists comprehension - let alone an adequate, literal translation into words. O’Brien’s solution to this narrative conundrum is the development of the modernist premises of Conrad’s novella within a postmodern sensitivity: the disclosure of the problematic patriarchal view of women in Heart of Darkness is revisited in O’Brien’s provocative characterization of his protagonists, which challenges the very naturalness of the notions of masculinity and femininity, and gives birth in Mary Anne to a memorable evocation of the ambivalent and undefinable energy that fuels all human existence.

Similarly, the modernist disillusionment with the idea of meaning, portrayed in its elusiveness and frailty in Heart of Darkness, becomes a profession of faith in the performativity of truth in the telling of ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’. A fleeting sense of signification occasionally reveals itself in the act of (compulsive) storytelling; truth is in the self-evident success of the performance, rather than in its content: ‘A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe’ (TTC, 75). And if that does not happen, ‘All you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth’ (TTC, 80). As the entirety of O’Brien’s writing testifies, this quest is an ongoing process.

39 On the other hand, as I have shown with my references to a possible interpretation of the two texts as examples of writing akin to Cixous’s definition of écriture féminine, both Heart of Darkness and ‘Sweetheart’ challenge conventional boundaries between the masculine and the feminine at the level of the narrative structure.
The life of imagination and story-truth

The Third Squad’s fantastic journey in pursuit of Cacciato is the result of Paul Berlin’s book-length reflection on his comrade’s chances of success, as well as an exploration of, or even an indulgence in, his own wish for desertion. In following Berlin’s flight of fancy, Cacciato presents the individual’s reliance on his or her own imaginative powers as an important route towards self-knowledge and as a crucial way of testing one’s relationship with reality. This issue is tied in with the novel’s structural and thematic emphasis on the epistemological confusion that surrounds the experience of modern war and its extraordinary technological power, with the soldiers’ perceptions impaired or twisted by their constant proximity to death and the strain of combat. This uncertainty is heightened by O’Brien’s choice of protagonist, a naive draftee who does not share the self-awareness, the intellectual convictions and the moral high ground ironically ascribed to the narrator of If I Die.

To a certain extent, the novel’s main point about the importance of imagination is made possible precisely through Berlin’s naivety and through his ensuing need to figure out the implications of his presence in Vietnam against Cacciato’s ‘separate peace’: self-analysis is a new exercise for this young recruit, and the exploration of the options available to him is not merely a rhetorical operation, but rather leads to a genuine development.

In the first of the ‘Observation Post’ chapters, Berlin reflects on the reality and plausibility of the events that have followed the explosion of Cacciato’s booby trap, securing the latter’s escape, while triggering his own attack of the biles, as readers later discover:

Time to consider the possibilities. Had it ended there on Cacciato’s grassy hill, flares coloring the morning sky? Had it ended in tragedy with a jerking, shaking feeling – noise and confusion? Or had it ended farther along the trail west? Had it ever ended? What, in fact, had become of Cacciato? More precisely – as Doc Peret would insist it be phrased – more precisely, what part was fact and what part was the extension of fact? And how were facts separated from possibilities? What had really happened and what merely might have happened? How did it end? (GAC, 34)

The entire novel is an elaborate attempt to answer these questions, showing how the difference between facts and their extension is not as clear-cut as their neat division into three separate narrative strands might initially lead us to assume: Berlin’s imaginary journey to Paris is increasingly shaped as a re-elaboration of his recollections of the war, some of which, in turn, are finally brought to the surface of the protagonist’s consciousness in the course of his fantasizing. As Dean McWilliams points out, the most surreal parts of the
flight from Vietnam – the fall into the hole in the ground à la Alice in Wonderland and the escape from Tehran, as in a cartoonish action movie, with the explosion of the prison and the garish getaway car – ‘occur as responses to obstacles posed by Berlin’s two most traumatic memories: the tunnels and Lt. Martin’. Berlin perceives his failure to volunteer to retrieve Frenchie Tucker from a dangerous enemy tunnel as the moment that confirms his inability to live up to the military ideal, even if this rescue operation, significantly carried out by his near-homonymous comrade Bernie Lynn, ends up with a double death. This is a crucial episode not merely for Berlin’s realization that he is not Silver Star material, but also because it triggers the soldiers’ plotting against Lieutenant Martin, whose own attitude towards discipline and military regulations will later be echoed by Captain Rhallon, the Savak officer who arrests the squad in Iran. Berlin might be trying to leave Vietnam behind, but its two most traumatic memories resurface on the road to Paris in the guise of forbidding complications – the surreal tunnel and Lieutenant Martin’s revenant – which force the narrative to take its most bizarre and tortuous turns.

The influence of memory on the imagination becomes gradually more explicit, with direct intrusions of anecdotes from the war or brief references to Berlin’s past, in chapters otherwise devoted to the pursuit of Cacciato. The novel shows how this is a two-way influence: the traces of traumatic events that emerge in the unfolding of the imaginary flight to Paris eventually enable Berlin to face the actual incidents to which they allude. The confrontation with Captain Rhallon in Chapter 33, for example, precedes the two consecutive chapters about ‘Lake Country’, where Berlin manages at last to recall the plot against Lieutenant Martin, the pivotal, shameful event whose memory he had until then tried to avoid – hence the jumbled-up chronology of the early vignettes about the war. Even if the ‘Lake Country’ chapters end before reaching the moment of the lieutenant’s death, Berlin’s ability to get close to this unspeakable incident represents a significant breakthrough: once the block created by the repression of his complicity in an act of murder is removed, ‘the remaining events prior to Cacciato’s departure

41 In Chapter 21, for example, Berlin searches people on a Burmese train, in what is a clear displacement of the frisking of Vietnamese villagers; the mountains of Afghanistan bring to his mind the Vietnamese landscape of Lake Country in Chapter 27; Berlin’s musings about the role of imagination in his journey to Paris lead to a comparison with more mundane uses of the imaginative faculty, exemplified by the memory of his younger self working out the possibility of making it into professional football (GAC, 217). Last but not least, the beheading of a deserter in Tehran is an expression of Berlin’s anxieties about his own imagined desertion to Paris and, more disturbingly, about his role in the fragging of Lieutenant Martin. For a more extensive discussion of these points, see McWilliams, ‘Time in O’Brien’s Going After Cacciato’.
can be narrated in their natural sequence.\textsuperscript{42} The dynamic outlined by McWilliams explains the subconscious drives at play in the interconnections between mimetic and fantastic strands in the narrative but, as we have seen in Chapter 2, Berlin’s quest for Cacciato is more than a spontaneous, oneiric reverie. It is true that the beginning of the squad’s adventure with Cacciato’s disappearance across the border into Laos coincides with Berlin’s fainting fit, which might suggest that the soldiers’ march continues as part of a delirious vision, another effect of an excess of the fear biles. This hypothesis is then complemented, and perhaps even superseded, by a compelling alternative interpretation, initially articulated in the first ‘Observation Post’: ‘Doc was wrong when he called it dreaming. Biles or no biles, it wasn’t dreaming – it wasn’t even pretending, not in the strict sense. It was an idea. It was a working out of the possibilities. […] It was a way of asking questions. What became of Cacciato? Where did he go, and why? What were his motives, or did he have motives, and did motives matter?’ (\textit{GAC}, 35–36).

In denying the oneiric, fanciful quality of his experience, Berlin emphasizes his active role in developing this journey into an adventure of epic proportions and with a definite mission. Three hours, and three Observation Posts, later, in the dead of night, Berlin chooses not to wake Stink Harris, who is scheduled to relieve him of his guard duties, so as to continue the story of the squad’s pursuit at a point in the narrative where the first major obstacle – Li Van Hgoc’s tunnel – has just been overcome thanks to Sarkin’s providential intervention. In other words, Berlin deliberately cultivates and, to an extent, pilots his fantasy so as to try to envisage an alternative future, and measure its viability and appeal. Interestingly, he is aware of the implausibility of his subject matter which, he is nonetheless convinced, ‘would made \textit{sic} a fine war story’ (\textit{GAC}, 123), but he pointedly dismisses as trivial what he imagines to be the sceptics’ objections to the far-fetched development of his fantastic plot. (Compare, for example, the overlooked practical details, such as the soldiers’ lack of money and passports, and the missing psychological considerations, such as their awareness of the illegality of their actions, that would make their adventure realistic, both in terms of feasibility and in terms of its adherence to mimetic narrative conventions.) Berlin’s nonchalant attitude towards these ‘petty details’ leads, by contrast, to the revelation of what is really important to him as a storyteller:

Money could be earned. Or stolen or begged or borrowed. Passports could be forged, lies could be told, cops could be bribed. […] If pressed he could make up the solutions – good, convincing solutions. But his imagination worked faster than that. Speed, momentum. Since means could be found, since answers were

\textsuperscript{42} McWilliams, ‘Time in O’Brien’s \textit{Going After Cacciato}’, p. 249.
possible, his imagination went racing toward more important matters: Cacciato, the feel of the journey, what was seen along the way, what was learned, colors and motion and people and finally Paris. It could be done. Wasn’t that the critical point? It could truly be done. (GAC, 123)

Unconcerned with the observance of the rules of formal realism, Berlin is instead interested in ‘the feel of the journey’, in what will be ‘learned’ from following its trajectory all the way to the final destination. O’Brien develops this point in an interview where he talks of the imagination as ‘a way of goal-setting, or objective-setting, of figuring out purposes’:

The imagined journey after Cacciato isn’t just a way of escaping from the war in his head – it’s that, too, I’m sure – but it’s also a way of asking the questions, ‘should I go after Cacciato, really? should I follow him off into the jungle toward Paris? could I live with myself doing that?’ See what I’m getting at? How the imagination is a heuristic tool that we can use to help ourselves set goals. We use the outcomes of our imaginings. We do this all the time in the real world. You imagine yourself picking up the phone to call this girl. You imagine yourself dialing. What will you say? What will she say? Okay, you’ll say this, and she’ll say that. What if she says no? What shall I do? What if you start sweating? What if she says yes? […] Somehow the outcome of that long mental process will determine whether you’re going to pick the phone up and actually make the call. The central theme of the novel has to do with how we use our imaginations to deal with situations around us, not just to cope with them psychologically but, most importantly, to deal with them philosophically and morally.43

Last but not least, there is a third, elemental reason why Berlin’s flight of imagination deserves to be given such ample space, and such a realistic treatment, in the novel. In the final chapter of the book, as the picaresque narrative comes to an end, we are taken back to the moment when Berlin recovers from his fainting fit and Cacciato vanishes for good. The novel’s conclusion confirms in no uncertain terms what we have known all along: the squad’s journey to Paris only happened in Berlin’s mind. Yet O’Brien insists on the reality of this mental dimension and claims that Cacciato abides to a ‘strict realism’ in its accurate recording of Berlin’s daydreams:

Things actually happen in daydreams. There’s a reality you can’t deny. It’s not happening in the physical world, but it’s certainly happening in the sense data of the brain. There’s a reality to imaginative experience that’s critical to the book. The life of imagination is half of war, half of any kind of experience. We live in our

43 Schroeder, ‘Two Interviews’, p. 139.
heads a lot, but especially during situations of stress and great peril. It’s a means of escape in part, but it’s also a means of dealing with the real world – not just escaping it, but dealing with it. And so I chose to render about half of the book in a naturalistic mode, but I also treated fantasy as fully real.\textsuperscript{44}

O’Brien’s belief in the importance of the life of the mind is reflected in the novel by the closing exchange between Berlin and Lieutenant Corson, who remain hopeful in spite of Cacciato’s ‘miserable odds’ of success: having just brought to an end the fantastic pursuit, O’Brien takes leave of his readers by inviting them to go back to the realm of the imagination and join in his characters’ speculations. Conversely, Cacciato’s actual disappearance and the squad’s short-lived, ineffective pursuit of the deserter suddenly appear to the soldiers as an implausible tale that people at home will find ridiculous and hard to believe; the real events fleetingly present themselves to their protagonists as the stuff of fiction: ‘It would become a war story. People would laugh and shake their heads, nobody would believe a word. Just one more war story’ (\textit{GAC}, 316–17). This self-reflective comment, which narcissistically hints at the composition of \textit{Going After Cacciato}, confirms once more the proximity of fact and fiction, this time drawing our attention to the ways in which even real perceptions and events – no matter how correctly recorded – are ultimately channelled into narratives and are transformed by this process into textual artefacts, whose truthfulness will not – and should not – necessarily be gauged on the basis of their adherence to historical reality. The elaborations on this theme in \textit{The Things They Carried} prove indeed that true (war) stories, according to O’Brien, should claim a different kind of truth from the factual accuracy of historical writing.

The previous chapter mentioned O’Brien’s proposition that a true war story should induce a visceral response in the audience. More specifically, the occurrence of this bodily reaction is one of the requisites of ‘telling’ a true war story – and the double meaning of this expression suggests that gut instinct is required both to recognize a true story and to spin one. In \textit{Things} O’Brien outlines the unorthodox technique of a couple of narrators who are at pains to recreate in the audience the ‘quick truth goose’ (\textit{TTC}, 34) that their stories provoke in them. In ‘How to Tell a True War Story’, for example, Mitchell Sanders concocts a meticulous, sustained – and, ultimately, imaginative – description of the mysterious sounds that had spooked a patrol conducting a listening-post operation in the mountains. The noise of a cocktail party, a glee club, opera music, Buddhist chanting, even the land, the animals and the vegetation talking: these are clearly hyperbolic embellishments that Sanders, as he later confesses to a receptive O’Brien, has to make up in order to convey

\textsuperscript{44} Schroeder, ‘Two Interviews’, p. 138.
the incredible truth of his story, i.e. the fact that the patrol ‘heard sound you just plain won’t believe’ *(TTC, 74)*, which in turn suggests the scary, ineffable otherness of Vietnam as perceived by the American soldiers. At the beginning of ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’, O’Brien reiterates his comprehension and, implicitly, his endorsement of Sanders’ narrative strategy in his comments on Rat Kiley’s ‘reputation for exaggeration and overstatement, a compulsion to rev up the facts’ *(TTC, 87)*. As we have already seen, O’Brien explains that, rather than being motivated by the intent to deceive, Kiley is moved by the opposite desire, a hankering to recreate in the listeners the same sensations that his material engenders in him: ‘he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt’ *(TTC, 87)*.

This choice of words and the imagery of the burning truth recall Nathaniel Hawthorne’s characterization of the power of the scarlet letter in ‘The Custom House’. In this introductory sketch to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne writes of the clash between what we might want to call an empirical interpretative act, which ends in the failure to unveil the truth of the enigmatic piece of red cloth representing Hester Prynne’s story, and the immediacy and efficacy of an empathic approach to the mysterious text, which instead produces an instantaneous physical reaction in its ‘reader’. Hawthorne’s description of his attempt to decode that ‘certain affair of fine red cloth’ found by chance in the archives of the Custom House in Salem illustrates – appropriately through fiction, rather than fact – the evanescent truth conveyed by the text (Hester’s scarlet letter and his *Scarlet Letter*) and the way in which such truth is imparted to those who want to receive it. ‘Careful examination’ and ‘accurate measurement’ of the red cloth do not yield the deep meaning which Hawthorne senses ‘streaming forth’ from the letter, ‘subtly communicating itself to [his] sensibilities, but evading the analysis of [his] mind’.45 Having thus dismissed the empirical dissection of the object as a viable interpretative option, the passage discloses how the letter offers itself as a completely different kind of reading to its now captive audience:

> While thus perplexed, – and cogitating, among other hypotheses, whether the letter might not have been one of those decorations which the white men used to contrive, in order to take the eyes of the Indians, – I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me, – the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word, – it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether similar, yet almost so, as of burning heat; as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor.46

The letter asserts its intense grip on Hawthorne even before he has had a chance to consult the papers that accompany his strange discovery; this purely physical response seizes a reader extraneous to the secret of the text and yet characterized by an unprejudiced openness towards it: both his successful approach to the letter and his reaction to its ‘burning heat’ are described as uncalculated actions.

Hawthorne also places great emphasis on the impossibility of explaining in a rational way, other than through a personal guarantee, the peculiarity of the phenomenon that he has just experienced. He forestalls, tongue-in-cheek, the predictable scepticism in his readers, pleading with them to believe in the truth of what he is saying – and, consequently, of the story that he is about to tell – on the strength of an individual sensation of his. This attitude runs counter to the conventional disclaimers to be found in the novelistic tradition of formal realism where, in the face of the apparent implausibility of the events (to be) described, the author refers to the genuineness and trustworthiness of his or her sources, and in some cases takes on the dependable role of eye-witness to the story, always appealing to the reliability of actual facts rather than to the dubious authority of personal impressions and intuitions. Hawthorne instead asserts the special nature of the truth of the scarlet letter (that it is not susceptible to rational verification, let alone accountable for by objective evidence) and declares his faith in its power to affect the receptive reader (himself in this case) in a physical, instinctive way. Having done so, he proceeds to claim for himself, as the mediator of such a peculiar truth, what he would elsewhere call ‘a certain latitude’ in his storytelling, that is a margin of imaginative freedom with the documentary sources that accompany Hester Prynne’s remarkable embroidery. The letter, in fact, has been preserved together with the old surveyor’s record of Hester’s story and of the origin of her flamboyant artefact.

The ‘small roll of dingy paper’ is indeed mentioned by Hawthorne as the source of the narration that he is about to begin; however, this reference to the traditional realist device of the retrieved manuscript as a guarantee of authenticity is made only to be immediately overturned, since in the same breath Hawthorne admits to having adapted the original text to such an extent that the resulting story is now for the most part the product of his imagination.

The original papers, together with the scarlet letter itself, – a most curious relic, – are still in my possession, and shall be freely exhibited to whomsoever, induced by the great interest of the narrative, may desire a sight of them. I must not be under-

stood as affirming, that, in the dressing up of the tale, and imagining the motives and modes of passion that influenced the characters who figure in it, I have invariably confined myself within the limits of the old Surveyor’s half a dozen of foolscap. On the contrary, I have allowed myself, as to such points, nearly or altogether as much licence as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention. What I contend for is the authenticity of the outline.  

Hawthorne is effectively saying that, so long as the ‘dressed up’ tale abides by an emotional verisimilitude, which has its roots in the authorial knowledge and interpretation of a distant extratextual reality (the ‘motives and modes of passion’ that characterize human beings under certain circumstances), the storyteller need not concern himself with the material and empirically measurable aspect of human experience. Hawthorne’s contention is a redrafting of the pact between the author and his audience: moving away from the realist expectation that the reader should be in a position to verify, or judge, the veracity of the tale in terms of its actual occurrence or plausibility, he gestures us towards the definition of ‘Romance’ – and of the genre’s claim, and responsibility, to capture the ‘truth of the human heart’ – that he will elaborate more fully in his ‘Preface’ to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851).  

Within this framework, the issue of the factuality of the narrative is completely beyond the point, for it is the storyteller’s personal guarantee, through his or her individual sensitivity to the human condition, that provides the only relevant proof of the truthfulness of his or her tale.

O’Brien too makes a claim for ‘a certain latitude’ in his storytelling: calling upon a degree of imaginative freedom is a necessity, rather than a privilege or a whim, linked to the narrator’s task and to his desire to approximate – and communicate to his readership – a particularly elusive truth. In these circumstances, the author’s right to creative licence is tied in to the development of a new mode of writing: much as Hawthorne was concerned with redefining the genre of romance, O’Brien configures his inventiveness as an integral part of his quest for a new way of telling stories – a narrative strategy whose origi-

49 ‘When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience. The former – while as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart – has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation. […]’ The point of view in which this tale comes under the Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us’; Hawthorne, ‘Preface’ to *The House of the Seven Gables*, pp. 1–2.
nality is not a question of style or authorial self-indulgence, but rather something deeply connected with the apprehension and articulation of truths that would otherwise be impossible to come to terms with and elaborate. This issue is the subject-matter of one of the briefest sketches in *Things*, ‘Good Form’, which opens with the blunt declaration that, apart from O’Brien’s age, his profession as a writer and the fact that he served as a foot soldier in the Quang Ngai Province, ‘almost everything else [in the book] is invented’ (*TTC*, 179). Nonetheless, as O’Brien proceeds to explain,

it’s not a game. It’s a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I’m thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. […] But listen. Even *that* story is made up. I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth. (*TTC*, 179)

These self-reflective comments, with their frequent direct addresses to the reader and their reference to the thoughts engendered by the act of storytelling, at the very moment of composition (‘Right here, now, as I invent myself…’), convey the urgency and the commitment behind O’Brien’s unorthodox narrative choices. This attitude is compounded by the obvious sense of personal accountability that transpires from the anecdote mentioned to exemplify the difference between story-truth and happening-truth. The latter, in this sketch as in the rest of the book, is left significantly vague, when not continuously redefined: in the passage just quoted, O’Brien insists that he did not physically kill the man on the trail, but that his own presence in the war has made him complicit in this and other murders. Immediately afterwards, having admitted that the initial story is made up, O’Brien reiterates the happening-truth that provides the inspiration for the creation of (the different versions of) the man on the trail: as a soldier in Vietnam, O’Brien was exposed to death on a large scale, to many ‘real bodies with real faces’, but he was young and did not have the courage to look, so that twenty years on, he is left with ‘faceless responsibility and faceless grief’ (*TTC*, 179). The story-truth relating to the emotional core of this happening-truth (and to the initial confession at the beginning of the sketch) is a portrait in quick, broad strokes of the young Vietnamese soldier already described by O’Brien as his victim in ‘The Man I Killed’: ‘He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him. What stories can do, I guess, is make things present’, O’Brien concludes. ‘I can look at things I never looked at. I can
attach faces to grief and love and pity and God’ (TTC, 179–80).

The power of storytelling to ‘make things present’ clearly does not rely on
the evocation of actual events, but on the imaginative re-elaboration of a
particularly haunting experience or of something elemental in the human
condition, like grief, love, pity and the quest for signification. (Interestingly,
in this specific example, with his emphasis on the face-to-face encounter with
the other, O’Brien draws our attention to his attempt to recuperate, through
his narrative act, the fundamental ethical relationship obliterated by the
perverse logic of war.) O’Brien’s story-truth, like Hawthorne’s ‘truth of the
human heart’, thus corresponds to what Tzvetan Todorov calls ‘truth-disclo-
sure’ (la verité de dévoilement) in opposition to ‘truth-adequation’ (la verité
d’adéquation). While truth-adequation can be measured ‘only against all or
nothing’, since it rests on a verifiable adherence to empirical evidence, truth-
disclosure should be measured ‘against more or less’ because it endeavours
‘to reveal the essence of a phenomenon, not to establish facts. Novelists aim
only for this latter type of truth; nor do they have to teach historians anything
about the former’.50 In other words, Todorov’s verité de dévoilement is the
truth of fiction, and it is for this reason that O’Brien can legitimately get away
from the either/or logic of la verité d’adéquation and make instead the
‘both…and’ claim of the paradox that concludes ‘Good Form’: ‘“Daddy, tell
the truth,” Kathleen can say, “did you ever kill anybody?” and I can say,
honestly, “Of course not.” Or I can say, honestly, “Yes”’ (TTC, 180).

In the course of defining story-truth in opposition to the rigorous philo-
sophical standard of logic, where the truth of speech is configured as
adequatio intellectus ad rem (adequation of the intellect to the thing or, in
Gadamer’s words, ‘adequation of the presentation through speech to the
presented thing’51), O’Brien makes a further important distinction between
different kinds of tales whose meaningfulness and reliability do not hinge on
adherence to actual facts. In ‘How to Tell a True War Story’, he recounts an
anecdote that ‘we’ve all heard’, the heartbreaking tale of a self-sacrificing
soldier who deliberately takes the blast of an explosion in order to save the life
of his comrades. As O’Brien maintains, it is natural to wonder about the
veracity of such a story: ‘Is it true? The answer matters. You’d feel cheated if
it never happened. Without the grounding reality, it’s just a trite bit of
puffery, pure Hollywood, untrue in the way all such stories are untrue’ (TTC,
79). The factuality of this episode is not beside the point: without it, the story
becomes nothing but a variation on an old cliché, a feel-good narrative based
on the archetypal figure of the selfless hero. In the continuation of the same

50 Tzvetan Todorov, The Morals of History [1991], trans. Alyson Waters (Minneapolis:
passage, O’Brien provocatively disputes that the factuality of this event would turn its account into a ‘true war story’:

Yet even if it did happen – and maybe it did, anything’s possible – even then you know it can’t be true, because a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie, another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth. For example: Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast, but it’s a killer grenade and everybody dies anyway. Before they die, though, one of the dead guys says, ‘The fuck you do that for?’ and the jumper says, ‘Story of my life, man,’ and the other guy starts to smile but he’s dead. That’s a true story that never happened. (TTC, 79)

The anecdote of the selfless hero who succeeds in saving his friends’ lives is not a ‘true war story’ in either case, whether the event it describes is factual or not. If it is, then the account should clearly be viewed as a piece of documentary evidence, an act of testimony – in other words, a statement whose validity relies on the propositional truth of logic, rather than on the story-truth claimed by O’Brien for his narrative. If the same anecdote had no basis in reality, then its profession of truth ought to be seen as pertaining to the self-evident, indisputable authoritativeness of myth, firmly grounded in the circular logic of the a priori social consensus that distinguishes sacred from secular writing. As Northrop Frye discusses in The Secular Scripture (1976), the appeal of the mythical text to its audience, in terms of the truth it purports to convey, is a question of cultural relevance rather than of factual accuracy.52 The claim to truth of myth follows as a consequence of the social bearing of the text and not the other way round, as it would happen within a secular framework in which credence must be earned and is not accorded unconditionally. The hold of myth on its audience is inscribed within a tautological, circular temporality, for in this case the interpretative act is caught within the time-warp of sacred culture: the addressees of mythical stories are, by definition, insiders to the civilization whose very Weltanschauung these narratives have contributed to shape. In other words, the community’s

52 ‘Myths are usually assumed to be true, stories about what really happened. But truth is not the central basis for distinguishing the mythical from the fabulous: it is a certain quality of importance or authority for the community that marks the myth, not truth as such. The anxiety of society, when it urges the authority of a myth and the necessity of believing it, seems to be less to proclaim its truth than to prevent anyone from questioning it. It aims at consent, including the consent of silence, rather than conviction. Thus the Christian myth of providence, after a battle, is often invoked by the winning side in a way which makes its truth of secondary importance’; Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of the Romance (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 16, my italics.
perception of itself is simultaneously reflected in and created by its own mythical tradition. It is not for its propositional truth that we are asked to engage with and trust the anecdote of the selfless, heroic soldier; on the contrary, as a myth, this story demands our unquestioning subscription because it is always already validated by the deep-rooted investment of our culture in the belief that *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.

O’Brien’s ‘true story that never happened’ by contrast, while flying in the face of plausibility (‘Before they die, though, one of the dead guys says…’) and therefore renouncing any claim to factuality, demystifies the ideal of heroism propounded by its mythical counterpart, rejecting in the process the consolatory function implicit in the reiteration of a valued communal message. Thus O’Brien does not define the scope of his narratives through their ability to communicate a definite truth, either grounded in reality or in shared principles; rather, he configures the storytelling act as an ongoing, endless process of exploration and quest for (provisional) meaning. His juxtaposition between the ‘Hollywood’ version of the anecdote and the ‘true story that never happened’ encapsulates the different attitudes towards sense-making of mythical and fictional narratives respectively:

Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanation of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time, *illud tempus* as Eliade calls it; fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now, *hoc tempus*.54

It is clear that O’Brien claims for his writing the drive of fiction towards ‘finding things out’ and making sense of the contingent, without ever uttering the last word on any particular subject – especially a thorny one such as the war in Vietnam, and the epistemological and ethical questions triggered by it. Talking about his approach to the definition of courage in a 1991 interview with Martin Naparsteck, O’Brien openly asserts his belief that ‘[t]he best literature is always explorative. It’s searching for answers and never finding them. It’s almost like Platonic dialogue. If you knew what courage is, if you had a really wonderful, philosophical explanation of courage, you would do it as philosophy, as explication: you wouldn’t write fiction. Fiction is a way of

53 See Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, for an extensive analysis of this tautological temporality.
testing possibilities and testing hypotheses, and not defining...’. In positing the exploratory function of fiction and circumscribing its claim to truth to la vérité de dévoilement, O’Brien outlines a view of storytelling as an ongoing project with limited epistemological aims: the emphasis is on the process, which is open-ended, and not on its results, which are at best tentative and provisional, as we shall see in the final section of this chapter.

The ethics of fiction

At the beginning of If I Die in a Combat Zone, the most overtly autobiographical of his narratives, O’Brien expresses in no uncertain terms his scepticism towards the testimonial and moral authority of experience: ‘Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories’ (IID, 32). And, as we have seen, the truthfulness of these stories does not depend on their factuality – guaranteed by the eye-witness status of the soldier-narrator – but on something much less tangible and yet self-evident, because its effects are written on the body, in the ‘quick truth goose’ that comes when a tale, however implausible or even patently fictional, still manages to offer us a brief, partial and provisional glimpse of what we instinctively recognize as belonging to a fundamentally human sphere. In denying the authority associated with a first-person involvement in an event, O’Brien reiterates the point made in ‘The Storyteller’ (1935) by Walter Benjamin, who argues that ‘the art of storytelling is coming to an end’ because of the devaluation of experience – the raw material of the tales exchanged between the storyteller, their occasional sources and their audience – in the modern world. Interestingly, Benjamin maintains that this phenomenon, clearly related to the ever-increasing reliance on technology started by the industrial revolution, has become particularly apparent in the aftermath of the Great War, when ‘men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience’.

The alienating, fragmented reality of modern existence – and what, indeed, is more alienating and traumatic than technological warfare? – is such that it is no longer possible for the individual to translate his or her own Erlebnis (‘experience’ in the sense of something that has been lived through, in a passing moment, and remains unprocessed) into Erfahrung (‘experience’

57 Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 84.
as something that accrues, and can be reflected upon and communicated to others). *Erfahrung* is also difficult to attain because the rise of the novel and, more generally, the modern decline of oral forms of storytelling in favour of written narratives, have brought about, in the face of the devaluation of the direct communication of experience, the privileging of the more pragmatic category of information, that is a description of things always already ‘shot through with explanation’ but disconnected from the subjective understanding and the personal guarantee of the storyteller. According to Benjamin, in the modern world we no longer exchange stories, but rather trade in information, whose value does not outlive the moment when the piece of news is first communicated. By contrast, ‘[a] story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time’. Today we know about things, but this knowledge is no longer rooted in either our own, or the storyteller’s, experience of them. For this reason, the figure of the storyteller as a dispenser of wisdom or counsel for his audience has become an anachronism – an idea that O’Brien endorses in his refusal to endow his tales with any didactic or testimonial scope.

On the other hand, however, it seems to me that O’Brien still claims for the storyteller an important role as providing a (limited) guarantee of signification, not because of his or her direct engagement with the events at the root of his or her tales (i.e. not because of his or her ‘experience’ of things), but on the basis of his or her commitment (however idiosyncratic) to the relevance, and to the performative potential, of his or her storytelling activity, regardless of the verifiability of its sources. Following on from Benjamin’s diagnosis of the “poverty of experience” of the modern age’, and having remarked on how it was the everyday, and not the unusual, that made up the stuff of experience in pre-modern times, Giorgio Agamben articulates the self-fulfilling connection between authorial trustworthiness and a belief in the power of storytelling:

> for experience has its necessary correlation not in knowledge but in authority – that is the power of words and narration; and no one now seems to wield sufficient authority to guarantee the truth of an experience, and if they do, it does not in the least occur to them that their own authority has its roots in an experience. On the contrary, it is the character of the present time that all authority is founded on what cannot be experienced, and nobody would be inclined to accept the validity of an authority whose sole claim to legitimation was experience.

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In O'Brien, too, the notion of authority is detached from the verifiable, and related instead to the storyteller’s personal investment in the tales that he or she chooses to tell (in the case of Things, and indeed most of O’Brien’s other works, these tales are grounded in the unexperienceable reality of war) and to a pressing desire to communicate what resists communication. Obviously, this is an urge that can never be fully satisfied, and is often met at the cost of abandoning factuality and sacrificing the plausibility of the story. Even Mitchell Sanders, the one character who is constantly associated with the need for a moral and who, as a listener to the story of Mary Anne’s disappearance into the jungle, demands narrative linearity and plausibility, complaining about Rat Kiley’s distant, third-hand connection with the events, feels entitled to embroider his own second-hand account of the listening patrol’s mission to the ‘talking jungle’ ("Last night, man, I had to make up a few things"), he explains to O’Brien, TTC, 74) while insisting on the truthfulness of his tale precisely because of the incredible nature of the incident that it chronicles: “Yeah, but listen, it’s still true. Those six guys, they heard wicked sound out there. They heard sound you just plain won’t believe”, TTC, 74). The same is true for the O’Brien-narrator of ‘How to Tell a True War Story’ and, by implication, of the general scope of Things, where the fictional and the factual, the imaginary and the autobiographical, are deliberately confused in a never-ending attempt to capture something that approximates the incommunicable Erlebnis of war. Faced with his failure to get through to ‘the older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics’ with his story about Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon’s sister, O’Brien acknowledges that his only option is to tell his tale

one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth. No Mitchell Sanders, you tell her. No Lemon, no Rat Kiley. No trail junction. No baby buffalo. No vines or moss or white blossoms. Beginning to end, you tell her, it’s all made up. Every goddamn detail – the mountains and the river and especially the poor dumb baby buffalo. None of it happened. None of it. And even if it did happen, it didn’t happen in the mountains, it happened in this little village on the Batangan Peninsula, and it was raining like crazy, and one night a guy named Stink Harris woke up screaming with a leech on his tongue. You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it. (TTC, 80)

The connection between the truthfulness of a story and its susceptibility to being constantly reshaped and honed, in an endless sequence of retellings, is a question that we will return to later on in this chapter. Before we do that, I would like to reprise O’Brien’s general take on the ethics of war narratives; the contention that not even those who have been to Vietnam can draw lessons from the experience of war is in fact a corollary of O’Brien’s wider
scepticism about any account of the conflict to claim a didactic and/or cathartic function:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest proper models of human behaviour, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that a small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. (TTC, 68)

This categorical denial of the moral scope of war narratives is predicated on an ethical need to avoid any reference to decency and any investment in the possibility of rescuing some kind of signification out of an event whose meaninglessness seems to be the only certainty that modern and contemporary war writers hold on to. Ironically, for somebody so keen to emphasise the amorality of true war stories, O’Brien thus adopts a position that is inherently moral in positing the unredeemable horror of war as an undisputable a priori.

In arguing against any attempt to rationalize, and therefore to an extent justify, the conflict, O’Brien is also caught up in another paradox, given how the impulse towards sense-making underscores – more or less explicitly – any narrative act. In selecting, ordering and verbalizing their material, storytellers shape, however loosely, and create connections in what was previously inchoate and unstructured; in Jean-François Lyotard’s words, ‘narratives are like temporal filters whose function is to transform the emotive charge linked to the event into sequences of units of information capable of giving rise to something like meaning’. In this sense, even the true war stories distinguished by their ‘absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil’ will inevitably be endowed with some kind of signification by the reader’s engagement with them. As Giorgio Mariani points out, O’Brien’s refusal to endorse an explicitly didactic stance in storytelling eventually must come up against the fact that ‘lessons are not simply encoded in a text by the author. They are the result of textual interpretation and, unless a text goes unread, it cannot escape interpretation; it cannot escape being turned into a “moral”’. O’Brien’s response to this objection comes with a remark that openly contradicts (or does it?) his previous point about the amorality of true

war stories: ‘In a true war story, if there’s a moral at all, it’s like the thread that makes the cloth. You can’t tease it out. You can’t extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there’s nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe “Oh”’ (TTC, 75).

The acknowledgement of the possibility that a true war story might have a lesson to yield is made simultaneously with a disclaimer of the actual availability of such meaning to those who are looking for it; having declared his aversion to facile didacticisms, O’Brien is careful not to let the investment in moral lessons in through the back door.

The elusive significance of a true war story is reiterated once more in a later section of ‘How to Tell’ which extends O’Brien’s nihilistic hermeneutical attitude from the realm of conscious interpretative acts to that of sudden, unsought epiphanies – delayed revelations that hit us when we least expect them, only to leave us again as soon as we think that we have finally grasped them:

Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn’t hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you’ve forgotten the point again. And then for a long time you lie there watching the story happen in your head. You listen to your wife’s breathing. The war’s over. You close your eyes. You smile and think, Christ, what’s the point? (TTC, 78)

Apart from the tantalizing futility of the quest for meaning outlined here, this vignette is fundamentally in line with the idea that stories do not expend themselves immediately, but rather resonate with us for a long time and are capable of releasing their strength after years, as Benjamin argued. This point, in turn, leads us back to the consideration of the only way out of the postmodern impasse that O’Brien’s utopian rejection of signification brings about.

If the possibility of signification is inherent in any interpretative attempt, then a true war story will defer the production of meaning – and its own reduction to a moral lesson – for as long as it can escape becoming the object of a conclusive hermeneutical act, that is for as long as it remains fluid, ever-changing, liable to infinite performances. ‘The endless retelling of a war story will ensure its eternal openness: at any new telling, as oral historians have taught us, a more or less different story will be produced so that the story will never deliver any final truth, but only provisional, precarious, local truths’.63 Interestingly, ‘How to Tell’ follows the observation that ‘[y]ou can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it’ with a closing remark which expands

the narrow definition of the genre, refusing a rigid, mimetic subscription to its military subject in order to claim much greater emotional latitude instead:

And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It’s about sunlight. It’s about the special way the dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It’s about love and memory. It’s about sorrow. It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen. (TTC, 80)

A true war story is about life and death, about fear, grief and love, about trauma and our inability to process and talk about certain things. This is a point that O’Brien makes implicitly as soon as he lists the first example of what war stories are really about, for the sunlight is a reference to the narrator’s recollection – mentioned in the previous page – of the death of Curt Lemon. Blown up by a ‘rigged 105 round’, Lemon is lifted into the air in the glaring light, thus appearing to have been killed by the sun, an image that O’Brien shares with his readers while confessing that he can never really get it right. If only he could do so, ‘then you would believe the last thing Curt Lemon believed, which for him must’ve been the final truth’ (TTC, 79). Yet the narrator’s effort is doomed. In the end, then, a true war story is about the difficulty of writing true war stories, and about the storyteller’s stubborn determination to work in the face of this challenge and in spite of the futility of trying to establish a complete connection with one’s audience.

Viewed from this perspective, O’Brien’s literary manifesto in ‘How to Tell’ is reminiscent of John Barth’s argument in ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’ (1967), in which the contemporary artist is configured as someone who may, or rather has no option but to, ‘paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work – paradoxically because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation, in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to be enabled to live, spiritually and physically, in the finite world’. In O’Brien’s case, of course, the felt ultimacies of postmodernity and the epistemological limitations of a ‘literature of exhausted possibilities’ are further exacerbated by having war – and the Vietnam war, at that – as subject matter.

Does this mean then that O’Brien sees his writing as ultimately caught up in an endless, narcissistic loop? Do the ontological self-reflections and the epistemological scepticism of postmodern literature, paired with a declared – if provocatively utopian – anti-didactic stance leave no room for an ethical

65 Barth, ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’, p. 70.
commitment? O’Brien addresses this issue with a poignant narrative gesture, exploring the possibility of representing the point of view of the dead enemy in ‘The Man I Killed’. This is clearly a radical proposition, for, as argued by Roland Barthes, the perspective of the dead is truly unrepresentable, and marks the limit of our capacity for empathy.\(^6\) The latter, in this particular case, is already being tested by the extreme alterity of the subject in question, whose Otherness, predicated in the first instance on ontological or existential grounds and accentuated by his cultural difference from the narrator, is further intensified by his status as a military opponent and purveyor of death. Nevertheless, the confrontation with the dead enemy becomes one of the key moments of Things, signalled as it is by the centrality of ‘The Man I Killed’ in the text, as well as by the insistent focus on this episode throughout the entire narrative, much as in the case of the traumatic deaths of Kiowa and Curt Lemon. The portrait of this nameless casualty of war begins in a factual manner, with a very meticulous, graphic description of the man’s body, his disfigured face and his empty gaze; while it is clearly pervaded by the desire to give an accurate, individual identity to its subject, this account cannot but mention, as the character’s distinctive traits, details which highlight his sudden, violent departure from the realm of the living, his gruesome transformation from a human being into a catalogue of monstrous images – or even of shocking absences – of body parts: ‘His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole’ (TTC, 121). After this opening onto a gritty reality, the narrative then soars into an imaginative dimension, as the fictional Tim O’Brien traces the dead man’s story from his birth in 1946 in a village of the Quang Ngai Province to his somewhat tentative enlistment with the 48th Vietcong Battalion and his demise at the hands of a young American soldier whose own participation in the war had been dictated by the desire not to let his community down. The dead man’s identity is thus configured with obvious echoes of (the fictional and the real) O’Brien’s past, with particular emphasis on their common studious, intellectual nature, their aversion to conflict, and their fear of the military enterprise in the face of a legacy of heroism, both in their family’s and in their country’s history.

The similarities in the two men’s backgrounds – all related to biographical elements that have marked O’Brien’s reluctant engagement with the war, so as to place emphasis on the fact that both killer and dead man are victims, albeit in dramatically different ways – are overt enough to make clear that the identity of the Vietnamese soldier is an invention of O’Brien’s and indeed a

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projection of his own life. Because it is so transparent and urgent, this strikes me as an honest and necessary gesture of empathy, an attempt to achieve an ideal reconciliation in the understandable effort to assuage one’s guilt, no matter how ultimately powerless O’Brien is in undoing the terrible deed that he once committed, and no matter how fraught with neo-colonizing impulses his narrative act will inevitably be: the points of contact between the dead Vietnamese’s (imagined) life and O’Brien’s own background highlight the two characters’ fundamental common humanity, as well as their accidental similarities, but, without spelling it out, they also draw attention to the American soldier’s inability to conceive of the enemy in any way other than in his own image. At the same time, however, the story of the dead man contains minute details – his passion for maths rather than literature and philosophy, or the presence of a young wife, for example – that prevent what would be a complete, and therefore patently inappropriate, flattening of the one character onto the other. And, significantly, O’Brien’s reconstruction of his victim’s identity does not stretch to the invention of a name, or a ventriloquizing of his voice.

The outline of the dead soldier’s past and the imaginative adoption of the dead man’s perspective, all in all, cultivate and indeed flag up the precarious balance between the factual and the fictional, the desire to find or establish sympathetic connections and the obvious one-sidedness of this process, which must necessarily teeter on the brink of hijacking the story of the man who has been condemned to silence, even as it tries to redress, in the only way it can, the taking of his life. Interestingly, while the story of the dead soldier is, of necessity, an imaginative creation, it unfolds in the indicative mode, with only the occasional ‘maybe’ to signal its speculative nature. O’Brien continues to demand that the reader should pause to take stock of the narrative strategies (and the implications thereof) in place in this unlikely story by multiplying its strands and layers. As we have come to expect from the wider structure of Things and from O’Brien’s general writing practice, ‘The Man I Killed’ contains two interweaving tales: the (re)construction of the dead man’s past and an account of the immediate aftermath of his death. More than showing us the perspective of the killer side by side with that of his victim, the description of O’Brien’s reaction to his first casualty offers an opportunity to portray this character too as someone who is simultaneously silent and being spoken for, as he is both the speechless recipient and the exemplary subject of a well-meaning and pious narrative (while of course also being the fictional narrator of Things and of ‘The Man I Killed’, and an overt reference to the extratextual author and war veteran).

On one hand, the story of the intradiegetic O’Brien’s wordless traumatization following the death of the Vietnamese soldier is a perfect complement, and corrective, to the story of the O’Brien–narrator who, years after the
incident, can talk to us about what happened and try to bring the past back to life, while laying old ghosts to rest. On the other hand, the intradiegetic O’Brien, silent addressee of the consolatory, if perfectly reasonable, platitudes uttered by Kiowa (‘Tim, it’s a war. The guy wasn’t Heidi – he had a weapon, right?’, TTC, 123) provides something of a mirror to our position as recipients of ‘The Man I Killed’, which is itself partly moved by and therefore mired in an inescapable, and inevitably flawed, cathartic drive. Through this reverberation of points of view and narrative positions, the readers are effectively being asked to identify with the killer in the story who, in turn, tries to identify with his victim, while also having been shown to have failed to find any redemptive power in the early sense-making narrative attempts addressed to him by his fellow soldier Kiowa. In reading ‘The Man I Killed’, we therefore both witness and become implicated in a desperate effort to face up to and process feelings of guilt and responsibility, in a doomed experiment to achieve some kind of redemption and signification through a view of the events which aspires to open up to opposite perspectives, even when these perspectives are obviously unavailable and unrepresentable. This story is O’Brien’s attempt to articulate – and enact, for as much (or as little) as it is possible – the only truly ethical position available to the war writer. As Stefano Rosso argues,

‘The Man I Killed’ puts forth the idea that writing should try and avoid the monologism and the ‘panopticism’ typical of so much literature still centred on a simplified idea of meaning and narrator, while at the same time acknowledging that this is an impossible task. It is perhaps for this reason that the story closes with Kiowa’s desperate plea [‘Talk to me, Kiowa said’, TTC, 125] left unanswered by Tim […]. The O’Brien–narrator, who continues to multiply the points of view, is determined to contradict the O’Brien-character, who remains absolutely silent. And this seems to me a potentially productive contradiction – maybe the only available chance – for a kind of writing that is trying to break out of the silence in which those who have experienced the war are inevitably driven to seek shelter.67

This is a move that, quite apart from trying to recuperate an ethical dimension to the saturated representational power of postmodernity, perhaps also enables O’Brien to bypass the paradox created by his call for an uncompromising allegiance to evil in war stories. Such an allegiance, spurred by what Mariani calls the ‘anti-war impulse’ of modern war literature, is completely

impracticable for narrative, if not moral, reasons, since it 'conflicts power-
fully and unpredictably with the writer’s need for a plot that will draw the
reader’s interest and attention’. First of all, allegiance to evil implies a writer
and a reader capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, and there-
fore the possibility of inscribing the story in question within an ethical
interpretative horizon. Concomitantly, an uncompromising allegiance to evil
would alienate the reader from the story, causing him/her to withhold
sympathy and recoil in horror in the face of what would presumably be an
unbearable and unacceptable burden. If a true war story really ought to be
nothing more than a representation of pure evil, then how can the writer hope
to capture readers’ interest and appeal to their understanding and compas-
ion? If one were to go for this approach to storytelling – if it were indeed
feasible to avoid the very possibility of generating comprehension and
sympathy – war would be turned into pure Otherness, whereas O’Brien
wants his audience to feel implicated and to participate in his, and his charac-
ters’, inconclusive attempts to come to terms with difficult moral choices,
traumatic memories and unspeakable experiences. O’Brien himself has
explained the limitations of a merely mimetic conception of the task of story-
telling with his reflections on how to convey the boredom of war:

…fiction – good writing of any kind – can’t employ this imitative fallacy. You
don’t try to get at boredom by being boring in your writing. [...] So you compress
the monotony down. In a way, of course, it’s a kind of lie, a kind of embellishing,
but you’re trying to get at a deeper truth. Truth does not reside on the surface of
events. Truth resides in those deeper moments of punctuation, when things
explode. So you compress the boredom down, hinting at it but always going for
drama – because the essence of the experience was dramatic. You tell lies to get at
the truth.

O’Brien’s writing is all about these ‘moments of punctuation, when things
explode’: unresolved tensions and dilemmas, inconclusive stories, compul-
sive tellings and retellings that erase one another, fail to gather narrative
threads and instead let meaning disperse in opposite directions, because it is
the sense-making process itself – the author’s as well as the reader’s – and not
the end result, which is always inadequate and untrustworthy, that really
matters. Whether the overt artistry, moral ambiguity and self-contradictori-
ness of texts such as ‘The Man I Killed’ and *The Things They Carried* are
more than postmodern gimmickry and manage, with their moments of

69 Remember his endorsement of Rat Kiley’s narrative strategy, his ‘heat[ing] up the truth, to
make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt’ (*TTC*, 87).
70 Schroeder, ‘Two Interviews’, p. 141.
punctuation, to achieve that fleeting ‘quick truth goose’ (TTC, 34), touch the audience and resonate with them through time, it is for the individual reader to judge. At the time of writing, on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Things, aged sixty-three, O’Brien continues to proclaim his suspicion of absolutism and certainty, his scepticism towards ‘what’s declared to be true’. In the same interview, asked about his opinion on the current American military engagement in the Middle East, while not shrinking from a clear attack on George W. Bush’s foreign politics and its legacy, O’Brien identifies the main source of his frustration in the lack of a general critical perspective, in the absence of a desire to ask difficult questions even when these are likely to remain unanswered. Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there then? No. But he can tell war stories, and hope that they will prompt some uncomfortable questions.
