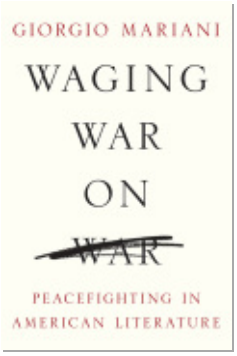
8 War, Fiction, and Truth: Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story"



CHAPTER 8

War, Fiction, and Truth

Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story"

A thing may be incredible and still be true:
sometimes it is incredible because it is true.

—Herman Melville, *Mardi*

A Postmodern War?

Ever since Fredric Jameson referred to the Vietnam War as "this first terrible postmodernist war," the notion of a special connection between the conflict in Indochina and the rise of both postmodern theory and postmodernity itself has become commonplace.[1] Introducing a collection of essays on this topic, Michael Bibby observes that "the blossoming of postmodern studies occurred in the shadow of that moment when the last Huey lifted off from the U.S. embassy in Saigon, bringing to an ignominious close one of the most heinous chapters in twentieth-century history" (ix). If we shift our perspective from the United States to Europe, we could also notice that all the founders of postmodern theory—from Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault to Jean Baudrillard and Francois Lyotard—published their most original works between the arrival in Vietnam of the first American Hueys and the lift-off of the last one on April 29, 1975. This is not to say there is any direct correlation between these two events, as if Parisian intellectuals were storming master narratives and logocentrism in a sympathetic response to Vietcong guerrilla activities in the jungles of the former French colony. As Bibby notes, "the historical and theoretical relationships of postmodernity and the war" are complex and hotly debated. In his own contribution, for example, Bibby takes issue with Jameson's interpretation of the Vietnam War as an expression of postmodernity, arguing instead that, "given that an organized discourse on postmodernism was

not widely available until after the war, it seems more historically accurate to read postmodernity as an expression of a post-Vietnam condition rather than the other way around" (xiv). In its suggestion that we see postmodernity as a specifically "post-Vietnam" condition, this view may be a touch too U.S.-centered. It would be hard to maintain that in Western Europe there was no "organized discourse on postmodernism" until the end of the Vietnam War. What can be conceded is that most cultural readings of the Vietnam War and its aftermath are heavily indebted to postmodern theory. The implication seems to be that the reality of a war in which—to quote from the author discussed in this chapter—"the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity" (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 88) can be properly told only by resorting to a narrative style cultivating uncertainty, skepticism, and what Jameson describes (in reference to Michael Herr's *Dispatches*) as "a whole new reflexivity" (45).

There is certainly a danger in placing too much emphasis on the notion of Vietnam as a "postmodern war." To quote the Italian critic Stefano Rosso, while Jameson (and many others) may be right in suggesting that postmodernist literary techniques are especially appropriate for representing "a conflict lacking a visible center," "for the most part, even in quite recent works, this 'terrible war' is represented precisely 'in the traditional paradigms of the war novel or movie' and, with very few exceptions, it does not open up 'a whole new reflexivity'" (27–28, 29).[2] As Rosso has shown in his study of Vietnam War narratives, the number of texts marked by "linguistic innovations" is very small. Out of a corpus of literally hundreds of novels and films, only a few can be labeled as postmodern works. By concentrating in this chapter on Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story"—a piece from *The Things They Carried* that would at first seem to confirm the existence of a strong correlation between the war in Vietnam and literary postmodernism—I do not wish to discount other representational strategies. However, if we accept Robert Wright's notion that "no other conflict in U.S. history has been burdened so overwhelmingly by the tension between fact and fiction, truth and deception" (303), then "How to Tell a True War Story" may be said to provide us with a wealth of stimulating reflections on that overwhelming tension.[3]

According to Wright, "It is precisely the belief that the *truth* of the Vietnam War is accessible to the powers of rational historical analysis which many literary artists have found to be not only erroneous but contemptible" (215). Yet the title of O'Brien's story suggests that while he too may wonder what kind of "truth" can emerge from the "ineffable, indescribable, finally unrepresentable nature" (Clark 5) of the Vietnam War, he may not find the notion of truth contemptible. His story—which may also be better defined as a mix between a collage of very short stories or vignettes, and an extended metafictional meditation—occupies an uncomfortable position between a postmodernist uneasiness with "truth," on the one hand, and

a rational commitment to rules for distinguishing between truth and falsehood, on the other. No matter how skeptical he may be regarding the possibility of delivering through his stories some kind of "truth," O'Brien is equally resistant to postmodernist ideas regarding the alleged fictive nature of the real itself.

In certain respects, as we shall see, the story here analyzed may be seen as embodying some of the philosophical features of postmodernity criticized by Christopher Norris in his well-known polemic against Baudrillard's provocative statement that the (first) Gulf War would not, and had not, taken place. I do not believe, however, that O'Brien thoroughly embraces the most "radical," and to me irrational, positions of postmodern ideology. It is symptomatic, I think, that even Jim Neilson (192–209), who accuses O'Brien of having irresponsibly turned his back on historical reality in order to accept a depoliticized notion of the imagination, agrees with many of O'Brien's admirers in describing him as a postmodern writer. In Neilson's view, however, O'Brien's postmodern aesthetics does not deserve praise for its capacity to bear witness to the "unrepresentability" of war. Neilson sees O'Brien as a writer who, in opposing a "totalizing" account of war, only ends up privileging his personal experience of Vietnam, thereby discounting the conflict's historical and political substance. As I argue in the following pages, even though there are some ideological blindspots in O'Brien's attempt to come up with a definition of a "true" war narrative, "How to Tell a True War Story" is by no means a demonstration of how, for O'Brien, "imagination is virtually the only reality" (as Neilson suggests). No matter how much the writer may insist on the contingent status of truth, his "postmodern" outlook coexists with a vision that is in many respects "Transcendentalist" and as such typical of an important U.S. literary-philosophical tradition that—at least in O'Brien's case—elicits a firm ethical position. The complex and "plural" nature of truth, in other words, does *not* become an excuse for bypassing the moral dilemmas of the Vietnam War.

A True War Story Is Never Moral / All Stories Have a Moral Function

It is not easy to summarize "How to Tell a True War Story," a mosaic of miniature short stories providing O'Brien with points of departure (or arrival) for his theorizing on the art of storytelling.[4] Even though O'Brien conducts his discussion with a certain dose of irony, his overall tone is serious. There can be no question that, his indulging in paradoxes and contradictions notwithstanding, he never forgets the ethical as well as cognitive urgency of the theme he has chosen to investigate. From this viewpoint, it is no sheer coincidence that the story's title carries two different meanings. On the one hand "How to Tell a True War Story" may be paraphrased as "how to narrate a true war story," a title emphasizing the mode in which a responsible and committed storyteller should deliver his or her tale

so as not to contaminate its truth. The title, however, can also be glossed as saying "how to recognize a true, as opposed to a false, war story," and in this case, its warning would be addressed to the reader not as a potential narrator but as a listener of war stories. By oscillating between these two meanings, as Rosemary King has observed, the title invites the reader to take on both roles and therefore to participate directly in the entangling of "the relationship between fact and fiction" (182). At the same time, O'Brien's word play affects the meaning of "true," "a word he uses alternately throughout the story to mean either factually accurate, or something higher and nobler" (R. King 182). In brief, beginning with the very title of his story, O'Brien foregrounds the tension between a "strong" and to some extent transcendental notion of truth and a more conventional, commonsensical view of what makes a story true.

O'Brien begins with private Rat Kiley's story. After losing a friend who stepped on a landmine, Kiley writes a letter to his friend's sister—a "very personal and touching letter" from his heart (75). Rat feels sure he has managed to express his innermost feelings, but, two months later, he admits being deeply irritated because "the dumb cooze never writes back" (76). This episode calls the reader's attention to the communication problems arising between those who experience war firsthand and those who do not, as well as to the more general problem of what may be the right way to write a war story—O'Brien's primary focus. His first reflections are formulated as advice to readers and, implicitly, also to writers and tellers of "true" war stories. According to O'Brien,

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, 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 some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the 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. (76)

This passage raises significant interpretive problems. To begin with, it states that in order to be true, a war story must absolutely restrain from preaching a moral. The implication here is that, by so doing, it would inevitably aim at transcending both the logic and the language of war itself. As O'Brien makes clear later on in his text, while a story has no obligation to realism and verisimilitude, its relation with war should be rigorously mimetic, though the truth mirrored by a true story should not be confused with the facts of battles or military strategies. The fundamental truth that literary fiction should register is war's absolute, unredeemable evil. Any concession on this front would make the reader "the victim of a very old

and terrible lie," as if from war's destruction something good may ultimately arise. This would turn readers into targets of a moralizing ideology, subservient to the logic of those who promote wars.

O'Brien thus sheds light on one of the most insidious and most seductive intellectual lures for readers and writers of war stories alike: that of transforming the text from an attack on war into an implicit justification for it. If, as Ward Just (215) has noted, one writes about war also to exorcize it and to learn to accept that something as terrible as war may indeed exist, war stories in the end would not so much express a hatred of war as something very close to its polar opposite. War stories would be ways to rationalize war's "meaningless" violence. Against such consoling rationalizations, O'Brien invokes a pure, dirty, merciless truth.

My reading of O'Brien's passage stands opposed to his refusal to inscribe a moral within his war stories. My point is that war stories characterized by "an uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" *do intend* to impart a moral lesson to the reader. That lesson may not be self-evident, but, unless a text goes unread, it can never escape interpretation and thus being to a greater or lesser extent domesticated by whatever "moral" the reader will detect in it. However, O'Brien's argument is saturated with moral preoccupations even when considered from the writer's own perspective. It would be hard to imagine a war story with a higher moral and instructive function than one perfectly capable of showing that war can never teach us anything.

It is thus hardly surprising that, in an interview with Brian McNerney, O'Brien develops an argument that turns upside down the one he makes in "How to Tell" regarding the absence of morality in "a true war story." Asked about the effects his war stories are supposed to have on his readers, O'Brien does not deny the moral scope of his storytelling, even though he does specify that the moral dimension or *function* of a war story should never amount to *one* moral. "All stories have at their heart an essential moral function, which isn't only to put yourself into someone's shoes but to go beyond that and put yourself into someone else's moral framework. How would *you* behave in that world? What was the moral thing to do and not to do?" (McNerney 10). To O'Brien the moral scope of any story cannot be traced back to *one* specific message encoded in the text akin to Henry James's legendary "figure in the carpet." The morality of a story lies with its ability to force the reader to meet face to face the moral dilemma(s) of a specific character. In the same interview, O'Brien adds that "fiction in general, and war stories in particular, serve a moral function, but not to give you lessons, not to tell you how to act. Rather, they present you with philosophical problems, then ask you to try to adjudicate in some way or another" (10). A true war story, therefore, though it should not preach a moral, must *be* moral in its substance. Thus while O'Brien emphasizes that his stories are no moral allegories, his desire not to instruct readers is itself a form of

instruction. Here, as elsewhere, O'Brien proposes a radical narrative strategy that is inevitably destined to a logical short-circuit. The need to escape from obeying a moral imperative becomes itself a new moral imperative.[5]

A Plural Truth

So far, I have mentioned the main structural weakness of O'Brien's narrative utopia. There is, however, a further contradictory element in his manifesto. Even assuming that a war story could be as "true" as he would like it to be—and therefore treat us to an altogether obscene, undiluted representation of evil—it would be perceived as such only by someone endowed with some notion of goodness. In other words, the elimination of all goodness inside the narrative cannot (and should not!) be matched by its erasure outside the text because, if that were the case, the reader would have no way to judge war as pure evil. To have a thoroughly evil war, you need a reader capable of discriminating between good and evil, regardless of what a true story actually tells. There is, therefore, a serious danger built into O'Brien's storytelling project. If war stories were simply to insist obsessively on the sheer horror of war, they would open an unbridgeable gap between a "sane" reader and the madness that is war. They would turn war into pure Otherness, something incomprehensible or "sublime" in the postmodern, Lyotardan sense of the term stigmatized by Norris in his *Uncritical Theory* (73–81).

Robert Stone, another war writer, comments on the moral complications of this kind of narrative strategy when he observes that "we cannot make it [the evil of war] stop by saying, 'This is not us. This is them. This is him, this is someone else.' No, this is me, this is me. This is my head that's filled with murderousness" (233). Like O'Brien, Stone wants writers to emphasize the "depravity and craziness and weirdness and murderousness" (233) of war, but he also wants them to remind readers that they too are complicit with its horrors. The implications of this point of view are illustrated by the words of Vietnam veteran Ron Faust in a letter to *The Nation* of several years ago. Faust believes that veterans cannot return home "as long as the rest of this country refuses to *let* us come home; that is, not until it faces up to what *we* did as a nation in Vietnam. We will 'finally come home' on the day we can look other Americans in the eye and see there the confession: 'Yes, we did this terrible thing *together*'" (quoted in Clark 5). In short, the representation of war as Other would seriously clash with the therapeutic function of storytelling so dear to O'Brien, and which asks for the reader's imaginative participation in the suffering and devastations of war.

Whether O'Brien realizes these moral dangers, consistent with his belief that "you can tell a true war story by the way it seems to never end" (83) he goes on to refine, complicate, but also outright contradict his original set of rules. "In any war

story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen," he writes. "What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed" (78). True war stories, then, have no secrets to tell. They offer no path to some hidden truth, and "in many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. . . . In other cases you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling" (79). That no language may be adequate to render the monstrosity of war is of course one of the oldest topoi of war literature and one we have discussed at various points in this book. O'Brien, however, considers the problem from the point of view of both the writer and the reader. By calling attention to the fact that a story is always a *production* of the real, not its neutral mirroring, the narrator undermines the reader's confidence in the factual accuracy of the text. If in war many things are almost beyond telling, then we as readers must be skeptical of whatever writers tell us, especially when what they tell us appears to be believable.

In her brilliant critical reading of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, Evelyn Cobley argues that the novelty of this text lies in Herr's awareness "that facts can never speak for themselves because they are always already somebody's interpretation. . . . Herr cannot trust his eyes. For him meaning does not wait passively to be uncovered; it must be constructed on the same slippery foundations of all fiction-making" (100, 101). O'Brien shares Herr's vision and preoccupations. He insists that war stories, if they wish to be true, must work against our confidence in the notion of objectivity. "For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. . . . In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (88). Moreover, as O'Brien notes a page later, "Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (89).

Puzzled by arguments of this kind, Jim Neilson has accused O'Brien not only of being indifferent to the historical truth of the Vietnamese conflict but also of encouraging a skeptical attitude precluding any possibility of formulating true statements on the nature and causes of the war. If O'Brien is interested in truth, how can he state that the mark of a true war story lies paradoxically in the story's refusal to embrace any absolute truth? To argue that a true war story should reproduce the sense of confusion felt by the "common soldier" in the field, is it not a way to give up preemptively on the possible construction of "an explanatory framework that can choose between competing truth claims" (Neilson 192)? For Neilson, O'Brien's storytelling displays a distrust in the possibility of representing the real analogous to the one Christopher Norris criticizes in Baudrillard's vision of the Gulf War as a hyperreal event. Even though O'Brien does not take as extreme a

position as Baudrillard, in Neilson's view *The Things They Carried* fails to provide its readers with a critical perspective on the Vietnam War. O'Brien does not attempt, Neilson says, "to identify those truths about the war that have been obscured by nationalist myth and capitalist hegemony, focusing instead on the processive and paradoxical nature of all truths" (193).

Some of O'Brien's ruminations do echo—whether intentionally or not—arguments made by contemporary postmodernist and deconstructive philosophies. His insistence on the textual nature of any representation could be seen as inspired by Paul de Man's arguments concerning the impossibility of a nonrhetorical construction of truth or by Hayden White's skepticism toward the existence of clear-cut, "strong" distinctions between historiographic and fictional accounts of reality. O'Brien argues not only that we, as readers of war stories, should be satisfied with an indirect knowledge of war given that all most of us can know about war comes from reading or listening to war stories; he adds also that *first-person witnesses* of war, too, can never have access to an unmediated, direct view of what takes place around them. Notice that the term chosen by O'Brien to describe "the great ghostly fog" separating the soldier from the surrounding world is "spiritual *texture*" (88, emphasis added). There is always a text(ure) between the subject and the object, which is why "something can happen and be a total lie" (89). Truth cannot be reduced to objectivity. On the contrary, objective data may at times be deceptive and prevent us from reaching the truth.

All of this is not to say that Neilson is right in condemning O'Brien's allegedly postmodern aesthetics as intellectually paralyzing because, by endlessly multiplying the potential truths of war, it nihilistically relativizes the notion of truth itself. If it can be conceded that for O'Brien there can be no truth without a story, I don't think he wishes to argue that there is no truth except that of the imagination. To repeat what Fredric Jameson wrote twenty or so years ago, it is one thing to acknowledge "that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form" (*Political Unconscious* 35) and another to argue that, since history can be approached only through its prior contextualization, then history as such does not exist. O'Brien insists that reality is usually so complex and multifaceted that it may be amenable to different textual reconstructions; in addition, he realizes that "sometimes it's just beyond telling" (79)—that, in other words, sometimes the gap between the resources of language and a reality that is rigorously nontextual (otherwise it could not be "beyond telling") is too wide. Take, for example, a miniature story inserted in "How to Tell" that narrates the incredible mission of a six-men platoon sent "into the mountains on a basic listening-post operation. The idea's to spend a week up there, just lie low and listen for enemy movement" (79). As the days go by, the soldiers begin to hear a strange music, "like the mountains are tuned in to Radio fucking Hanoi" (80). The longer the platoon is in the jungle, the more intense and

unbelievable the noise becomes, until "one night they start hearing voices. Like at a cocktail party. . . . It's crazy, I know, but they hear the champagne corks. They hear the actual martini glasses" (81). On the verge of going crazy, the platoon asks the air force to intervene, and the whole area is flooded with bombs and napalm. The morning after there is a total silence, "not a single sound, except they still *hear* it" (82). At this point the platoon gives up and decides to return to base, and when the soldiers are questioned by a colonel anxious to know what happened, what is that they "heard" up there, "they just look at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed, and the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can't ever say" (82). The platoon's experience is incommunicable, and it is to some extent enveloped in mystery even for the soldiers who live through it. The exact nature of whatever they heard is simply impenetrable. The noise (or the noisy silence) at the heart of private Sanders's story is the expression of an "absent cause." It defies credibility that in the jungle there may be a cocktail party in progress, and yet that is what the soldiers believe they have heard. Even though O'Brien considers it ungraspable, he by no means erases the referent. Like a famous haiku story in Herr's *Dispatches*—"Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened" (6)—Sanders's story also is meant to call our attention to the limit of what we may be able to know, without, however, arguing that what we cannot understand is therefore nonexistent.

There is a further, perhaps more significant difference between O'Brien's insistence on the textual nature of all truths and what Cobley describes as the "fact/fiction opposition" (111).[6] As a fiction writer—unlike Herr, whose primary intent is to offer at least in part a journalistic account of the war—O'Brien has no real responsibility to the factual truth of his narration. He may well be skeptical about the existence of some fact and yet continue to believe in a higher truth somewhat independent of factual reality. The story under consideration, after all, is titled "How to Tell a True War Story," and not, say, "True War Stories Can't Be Told" or "No War Stories Can Ever Be True." The story's emphasis would make no sense unless a distinction between truth and falsehood is maintained. In O'Brien's case the impossibility of reaching a final truth does not translate into nihilistic desperation but stimulates a series of endless attempts at storytelling. As he writes on the last page of the story under discussion, "You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it" (91). O'Brien, in short, does not argue that his stories are beyond truth and falsehood; if anything, his opposition to any positivist realism and his subsequent choice of the imagination as a privileged tool for communicating truth has more in common with what Alessandro Portelli has described as "the sense of fluidity, of unfinishedness, of an inexhaustible work in progress, which is inherent to the fascination and frustration of oral history" (vii) than with the contemporary glorification of the ontological indeterminacy of the linguistic sign.

In "How to Tell a True War Story," as in most other stories included in *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien raises metanarrative questions either in the first-person or through characters who tell or listen to stories; or—by way of contrast—by focusing on a veteran like Norman Bowker, who is incapable of turning his experience into narrative form (nobody seems interested in listening to him) and ends up committing suicide. In "Notes" O'Brien writes, "By telling stories, you objectify your experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened [. . .] and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain" (180). This is obviously music to the ears of oral historians, whose task is to attend both to real facts and to how those facts are transformed by "the activity of memory and imagination" (Portelli 15).

O'Brien's narratives, however, are written, not oral, and his desire to continue telling a story forever must remain a utopian wish. While an oral historian must always be faithful to a "double truth"—the truth of facts and the truth of their more or less imaginative description—O'Brien can candidly admit that for him "story-truth is *truer* sometimes than happening-truth" (*Things They Carried* 203, emphasis added). The subjective feel of a given experience *may be* superior to what stands out as the objective truth of the situation. Let's take for example two opposite statements that Neilson considers as exemplary illustrations of O'Brien's embrace of postmodern relativism, found in a dialogue that "Tim" has with his daughter Kathleen years after the war:

> "Daddy, tell the truth," Kathleen can say, "did you ever kill anybody [in Vietnam]"?
> I can say honestly, "Of course not."
> Or I can say, honestly, "Yes." (204)

The narrator's answer may at first appear not only utterly indifferent to factual reality but also a way to evade the moral (as well as political) urgency of the question. And yet if we contextualize the dialogue between the narrator and Kathleen, we should be able to see that O'Brien's words are by no means an attempt to occupy a space beyond truth and falsehood. First, we should note that the passage just quoted brings to an end the short chapter "Good Form," wherein the narrator tells us that although he actually served in the province of Quand Ngai, everything he has written so far is made up, including the chapter "The Man I Killed." "I did not kill him. But I was present, and my presence was guilt enough." But a few lines below he deprives the reader also of this certainty: "But listen. Even *that* story is made up" (203). Here O'Brien finally decides to distinguish between "happening-truth" and "story-truth" by placing the two truths next to each other, showing us that "Tim" has killed the young Vietnamese mentioned in "The Man I Killed" only in his imagination. O'Brien, however, has already stated that "story-truth is *truer* sometimes

than happening-truth" (203)—his presence in Vietnam is enough to make him a killer, or an accomplice of killers, whether he has actually killed someone or not. It is therefore simply not true that for O'Brien the two truths with which "Tim" replies to his daughter Kathleen are the same. In this chapter, O'Brien provides us with all we need to distinguish between different truth claims. From this viewpoint, it is clear that the meaning of the adverb "honestly," found in both answers, must be understood in relation to the two truths to which it refers. The apparent "honesty" of the first answer relies on the opportunistic, somewhat hypocritical use of what seems to be a hard fact. Many U.S. soldiers in Vietnam may never have directly killed an enemy. Moral honesty, however, should take precedence over "the facts," and it is perhaps no accident that this chapter ends with a clear, "Yes." Far from trying to suggest that both answers are true, O'Brien's story demonstrates not only that it is possible to distinguish between different types and degrees of truth, but also that this interpretive operation is intrinsically *political*.[7]

War with a Thousand Faces

One of the most glaring paradoxes of "How to Tell a True War Story" concerns the recurrent oscillation between the idea of war as an indescribable phenomenon and a vision of war as the nearly inexhaustible source of endless meanings.

> War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. (86–87)

It should be superfluous to notice how this passage outright contradicts the one on the total obscenity of war, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Now the aim of a true war story is no longer that of displaying its absolute evil; on the contrary, "any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference—a powerful, implacable beauty—and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly" (87). Even though O'Brien continues to refer to war as morally "ugly," by imagining war as a polysemous reality of which nearly everything might be said, he could be accused of fueling the "absolute moral indifference" attached to the "aesthetic purity" of combat actions. O'Brien's Whitmanian catalogue, in which many incompatible "truths" converge, could be constructed as a way to confuse the reader, who is left without the cognitive tools required to operate rational distinctions.

Before analyzing this problem in some detail, I would like to emphasize that O'Brien deserves praise for his honesty. The narrator frankly admits that it should

not be surprising if war, despite its horrible, nasty side, remains a source of excitement and fascination. Though O'Brien himself has privately stated that he does not share "Tim's" appraisal of the "beauty" of war, he has also added that he understands why some people insist on describing war as an attractive experience. The historical record is full of firsthand witnesses—both male and female—waxing lyrical about the strong, intense bonds that wars create among those who take part in them, as well as about the sublime spectacle of destruction offered by many military operations. O'Brien is thus aware that no serious war writer can choose to ignore the disturbing though well-documented aesthetic and emotional appeal of war. As noted by Jean Elshtain, "To turn a blind eye to expressions of love *and* hate for war, wartime, and army life voiced by combatants and noncombatants alike means that, by definition, one will fall short in one's understanding of 'why war?'" (11). There are literally thousands of examples one could give of the emotional intensity that war is capable of inducing.[8] Here I would like to quote the words of a female nurse who served in Vietnam and who emphasized that there is an exciting side of war that has little to do with machismo or bloodthirstiness: "I think about Vietnam often and I find myself wishing I was back there. Life over there was so real and in some ways so much easier. There was no such thing as black or white, male or female. We dealt with each other as human beings, as friends. We worked hard, partied hard, we were a unit. A lot of us, when we left, wished we didn't have to come home" (quoted in Elshtain 10).[9] O'Brien is fully aware that true war stories cannot ignore this utopian side of the war experience. What remains to be understood is whether the narrator's honesty may not turn out to be a way to give war once again an air of, albeit only aesthetical, respectability, which the notion of war as sheer evil endorsed at the outset of the story seemed to have disposed of.

This question may be considered as connected to the notion of war as a supremely contradictory reality. How can a "true" war story communicate to its readers the horror of a war that is at one and the same time sublime? Is it enough to signal that even when "it's astonishing" and "fills the eye" ("How to Tell" 87), war is nevertheless *ugly*? By posing the question in these terms, doesn't O'Brien run the risk of making the "ugliness" of war an empty moral category that is, indeed, at odds with his desire not to preach any moral, but, more than that, also functions as a way to accommodate the chaotic proliferation of an array of apparently irreconcilable meanings? The catalogue quoted above would seem in fact to encourage a morally dangerous skepticism. Take, for example, the two statements "war makes you a man" and "war makes you dead." Set next to each other, the two phrases would both seem to be objectively true. As far as the first is concerned, the experience of war, no matter how devastating, does not exclude in principle the possibility of individual growth. The fact that so many war stories, novels, and memoirs employ, though often in an ironic register, the narrative paradigm of the *Bildungsroman* is an eloquent illustration of this. "A man" is such a generic signifier

that could be applied both to the Rambo-type soldier, whose wars never end, and to the veteran who comes to reject war and turns into a committed pacifist. On the contrary, the second statement has a higher degree of objectivity. To quote the historian Giovanni De Luna, "In death we have the defining essence of war" (xvi). Of course to insist on this aspect of war as opposed to, say, its "higher" scopes is to make a political and ethical choice, and therefore the phrase "war makes you dead" also cannot be considered as ideologically neutral. However, unless we are provided with an unequivocal indication of how to interpret the word "man" in the first sentence, one could suspect that the substantial objectivity of the second sentence has the scope of covering the ideological ambiguity of the preceding one. By moving rapidly from one definition of the signifier "war" to the following one, the passage produces upon the reader an effect that, to borrow a term from Giovanni Bottiroli's *Retorica*, one would be tempted to classify as "confusive." In a "confusive regime" (*regime confusivo*), Bottiroli writes, "no opposing relation, no *negation* is possible" (178). A confusive rhetoric is therefore analogous to the rhetoric of the Freudian unconscious, where "there is no, no," and different registers of articulation are lacking.

That the language of a "true" war story might, or perhaps *must*, draw its inspiration from the language of dreams, folly, and destruction is hardly surprising. If, however, such language were to occupy a *dominant* position, then Neilson's strictures on O'Brien's narrative style would be justified. The war described by O'Brien would amount to a sort of mythological marshland, the timeless vortex lyrically analyzed by James Hillman's controversial *A Terrible Love of War*. But are we sure that O'Brien's passage is ruled by a "confusive regime" and that such regime is granted a hegemonic status in both the story under scrutiny and the book as a whole?[10]

We may begin by noting that the passage under examination is preceded by one of the miniature stories told in "How to Tell," prefaced in its own turn by a synthetic metanarrative reflection:

> True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis.
>
> For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside.
>
> It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe. (84)

O'Brien's catalogue is meant to oppose the simplifications, the commonplaces, the worn-out definitions of war. But there is more to it, perhaps. The man who made immortal the slogan "War is hell" is no other than William Tecumseh Sherman, the Union general who ordered the burning of Atlanta: a man who knew the extreme cruelty of war but did not do much to mitigate its fury.[11] The rejection of a "cata-

chresized figure" belonging to the "separative regime"—that is, to "the institutional uses of a language, those that are either prescribed or foreseen (or easily foreseeable) by its codes" (Bottiroli 166)—is also an attempt to display the political-moral ambiguity of a clichéd description that is only superficially anti-war.

The seemingly chaotic list of war's definitions offered by the narrator, rather than reaffirming war's undefinability, complicates a narrative and linguistic domain often drenched with trite formulas. As opposed to a concession to the postmodernist "drifting of meaning," the evocation of the different and contradictory faces of war should be read as an attempt to outline that alternative, third "meaning regime" that Bottiroli describes as "distinctive" (*distintivo*) (169, 171, 211). The various definitions of the war experience given by the narrator are neither mutually exclusive nor simply marked by the "figural anarchy" that is a distinguishing trait of the confusive regime. Instead, they intend to affect each other's meaning, and thus ask the reader to imagine a world where horror and beauty, under certain circumstances, may coexist.

Why War?

I will return in a moment to the contrast between "abstraction" and "gut instinct" that stands as a corollary to the refusal of sealing war into some moralizing formula. First, however, I would like to consider what Neilson describes as a (postmodern) "rapid-fire succession" of questions without answers on the causes of the war whose effect, in his view, is to undermine any ability to reach a rational understanding of history. In the story "On the Rainy River," for example, the narrator asks himself:

> Was it a civil war? A war of national liberation or simple aggression? Who started it, and when, and why? What really happened to the USS *Maddox* on that dark night in the Gulf of Tonkin? Was Ho Chi Minh a Communist stooge, or a nationalist savior, or both, or neither? What about the Geneva Accords? What about SEATO and the Cold War? What about dominoes? (O'Brien, *Things They Carried* 44)

I agree with Neilson on one point: compared to the nearly obsessive attention he devotes to the complex and contradictory status of truth in war stories, as well as to the role that memory and the imagination play in reshaping experience, the space O'Brien reserves for a different though certainly no less important question is quite limited. However, it is also fair to say that if the causes of war are, obviously, one of the main concerns of historical inquiry, they cannot be equally central—for understandable reasons—in literary approaches to war. To some, a question like "why war?" falls completely outside the genre of the war narrative. See, for example, what Samuel Hynes has written in this regard in his influential *The Soldier's Tale*:

> [W]ar narratives are not quite autobiographical. They're not quite history either. Historians tell the big stories, of campaigns and battles, of the great victories and the disastrous defeats [. . .]. The men who were there tell a different story, one that is often quite ahistorical, even antihistorical. Their narratives are indifferent to the exact location of events in time [. . .]. Most of all, they are not concerned with *why*. War narratives are experience books; they are about what happened, and how it felt. *Why* is not a soldier's question [. . .]. *Why* is the momentum behind the narratives; but it isn't the story. (11–12)

According to Hynes, there should be a clear-cut division of labor. A direct witness of war need only be faithful to his or her own personal experience: to the sensations and emotions felt at a particular moment. The soldier's tale should not dwell on the reasons for war, which are the historian's field of inquiry. In other words, O'Brien is only doing his job, thereby wisely ignoring questions that fall outside his direct experience of Vietnam.

To an extent, Hynes's observations are sound ones. How can we ask a fiction writer, who is by definition free to fluctuate between fantasy and reality, to face problems that require a different methodological approach and a different use of historical and archival sources? However, Hynes's position strikes me as excessively antihistorical. It may well be the case that traditionally war narratives do not raise questions as to why wars are fought, or that, even though they may ask "Why war?" they quickly reach the conclusion that no definitive answer may be found. Yet since in war a man must disobey the key commandment of civilized life (thou shall not kill), wondering why that may be the case would seem a rather legitimate question to raise for a war writer. Obviously, such a question can be tackled in an infinite variety of ways, and there is no doubt that O'Brien is scarcely interested, as seen in the previously quoted passage, in discerning among the various interpretations of the causes of the Vietnam War. Yet the writer does have something important to say on the problems of *guilt* and *responsibility*, which are two crucial ethical and political articulations of the "Why war?" question.

In order to emphasize O'Brien's substantially *irresponsible* writing technique, Neilson quotes the following passage from "In the Field," another story from *The Things They Carried*:

> When a man died, there had to be blame. [. . .] You could blame the war. You could blame the idiots who made the war. You could blame Kiowa for going to it. You could blame the rain. You could blame the river. You could blame the field, the mud, the climate. You could blame the enemy. You could blame the mortar rounds. You could blame people who were too lazy to read a newspaper, who were bored by the daily body counts, who switched channels at the mention of politics. You could blame whole nations. You could blame God. You could blame the munitions makers or Karl Marx or a trick of fate or an old man in Omaha who forgot to vote.

> In the field, though, the causes were immediate. A moment of carelessness or bad judgment or plain stupidity carried consequences that lasted forever. (198–99)

Here, O'Brien would be guilty of refusing to place in some hierarchical order the various forms of blame he mentions. Thus, a man who forgets to vote would stand as guilty as the generals who directly orchestrate wars, or as the military industries manufacturing deadly weapons, or, worse yet, as those natural forces (mud, rain, climate) that have nothing to do with war. This rhetorical choice would lead O'Brien to privileging the more direct and brutal cause-and-effect mechanism dominating the battlefield. Neilson is right, I think, to consider the opening sentence of the passage as ideologically suspect, but he seems to forget an important detail. Even though we may be right in assuming a loose continuity between the textual "Tim" and the autobiographical voice of O'Brien's, we must note that the considerations quoted *cannot* be attributed to the narrator. "Tim" is recording the thoughts of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, and he does that from a clearly ironic perspective. Cross multiplies in a disorderly fashion the people or agencies to blame in an attempt to alleviate *his own* guilty feelings for having chosen to make camp with his soldiers in an "indefensible" spot and thus for having laid in a major way the ground for Kiowa's death. At the end of his effort to extend the number of those who may be blamed for the incident, however, Cross seems to realize that "in the field" there is an "immediacy" that does not grant him any relief. The lieutenant has a direct responsibility for what took place and, therefore, referring to the "immediate" causes of what happens during a military confrontation does not so much erase the more general and greater causes that have led to the war as it shows that Cross is somehow beginning to realize how much *he* is to blame.[12] Unlike Christ, ironically evoked by both the JC initials and his last name, lieutenant Jimmy Cross is incapable of granting his disciples any salvation. Whether his decision is defined as "a moment of carelessness," "bad judgment," or "plain stupidity" (198–99), the fact remains that Cross is in several ways responsible for dragging his unit into a hellish situation.

One may accept my reading of this passage and still legitimately object that O'Brien seems to show little interest in a serious discussion of the political and historical causes of the Vietnam conflict. However, the reason behind his reluctance to play the historian's role has little to do with an alleged desire to evade the (un) ethical dimension of war in order to seek refuge in the precinct of the imagination. As shown by the episode in which private Kiowa loses his life, O'Brien prefers to focus on the direct responsibilities of his characters rather than the larger ones of more distant forces. After all, it would be a lot easier to blame some more or less abstract entity (the government, imperialism, the Cold War) than to highlight the guilt of single, seemingly insignificant individuals. "Jimmy Cross did not want the responsibility of leading these men. He had never wanted it. In his sophomore

year at Mount Sebastian college he had signed up for the Reserve Officer Training Corps without much thought. An automatic thing: because his friends had joined, and because it was worth a few credits, and because it was preferable to letting the draft take him" (190). *That* is Jimmy's original sin: his conformism—the "automatic" response that would lead him to roam the Indochinese jungles with an "automatic thing" in his hands. And, as we shall see in a moment, this is also "Tim's" original sin, highlighted by O'Brien in one of the narrative's most intense and memorable moments.

The story "On the Rainy River" is devoted to the summer when the narrator must decide whether to go to Vietnam or else opt for an alternative that if, on the one hand, would allow him to follow his conscience and refuse the draft, on the other would certainly expose him to his community's disapproval.

> My conscience told me to run, but some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me toward the war. What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame. Hot, stupid shame. I did not want people to think badly of me. Not my parents, not my brother and sister, not even the folks down at the Gobbler Café. [. . .] I was ashamed of my conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing. [. . .]
>
> The day was cloudy. I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war. (54–55, 63).

As I anticipated in the ending of this book's second chapter, I take this to be a particularly strong "Emersonian" moment in O'Brien's writing. Here, with an argument that closely parallels that of Emerson's essay "War," the conventional definition of what makes a given behavior "cowardly" or "heroic" is completely undermined. O'Brien's use of irony in this passage is much stronger than, say, that of Stephen Crane in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Also in Crane's novel the notion of "heroism" is in various ways called into question. The protagonist, Henry Fleming, is seen by his comrades as a "hero," but no careful reader can afford to ignore that just as Henry was earlier on a victim of his own "real or imagined" fears, his "heroic" exploits are also by and large instinctive responses. His "brave" charge against the enemy is as casual as his panicky flight from the battlefield. Yet Crane's attack on heroism still relies on a rather traditional definition of what in war counts as an act of cowardice, and Henry's flawed conduct evokes by contrast the very notion of "heroism" that the narrative criticizes.[13] O'Brien goes much further because he redefines cowardice as the attitude displayed by those *who go to war*. Just as Emerson had insisted that "the cause of peace is not the cause of cowardice" and explained that a noble cause like that of non-violence could be defended only by someone *greater* than a "hero"—by someone ready "to be hanged at his own gate

rather than consent to any compromise of his freedom"—"Tim" realizes there is nothing admirable and heroic in going to war, a decision precipitated by the *fear* of being criticized and ostracized. This is what leads "Tim" to compromise his own freedom of judgment, thus choosing what for Emerson is the worst kind of cowardice—the cowardice of those who fear to trust their own inner convictions.

Though O'Brien may devote scant attention to the causes of American involvement in Vietnam, the narrator is crystal clear concerning who is to "blame" for his participation in the war. "Tim" is to blame—his anti-Emersonian inability to listen carefully to the voice of his conscience leads him to follow cowardly the majority opinion. "Tim's" conformism seems almost literally to embody the Emersonian maxim that "imitation is suicide" ("Self-Reliance" 259), except for the fact that in the case of war a conformist attitude should be seen not just as a form of potential "suicide": its meaning should be expanded to take on homicide as well. O'Brien's formula—"I was a coward. I went to the war"—sounds like a confirmation, 150 years later, of Emerson's insight that one needs more courage and sangfroid to reject war than to take part in it.

A True War Story Is Never about War

I would like to conclude by returning to the juxtaposition between stories that make use of generalizations and abstractions, and "true" stories that follow the "gut instinct." This opposition between two narrative modalities serves as an introduction to another miniature story in "How to Tell," where we are informed of a bizarrely cruel episode that takes place after private Kurt Lemon's death. Emotionally devastated by the loss of his friend, Rat Kiley vents his rage in a series of machine-gun outbursts against a baby water buffalo. Rat's destructive fury is chilling, but with a move that at first leaves the reader confused, the narrator goes on to clarify that this story, which certainly has much to do with "guts," should not be read as a further demonstration of the horror and folly of war. On the contrary, Rat's story is—like many great war stories—a story of *love*. O'Brien intends of course to draw our attention to the fact that Rat's love, deprived of its natural object—his friend Lemon—turns into blind fury, a barbarous desire for annihilation. The body of the baby buffalo functions as a surrogate of the obvious target on which Rat would have discharged his rage: the body of the enemy. The very short story of Rat and the buffalo is thus a rewriting of another, archetypal story of furious love: that in which Achilles drags in the dust the slain body of Hector, in a futile attempt to fill the void left by the death of his friend Patroclus with the relentless devastation of the enemy's body.[14] It is in this contradictory, visceral nexus of love and hatred, destruction and will-to-redemption, that the narrator locates the deepest mark of a "true" war story. "Tim" thus reaches the paradoxical, provocative conclusion that

> a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that 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. (91)

It is virtually impossible to miss how this last definition of a true war story is quite distant from the notion that a war story should distinguish itself by its "absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil." There is plenty of obscenity and evil, of course, in Rat Kiley's desperate attempt to come to terms with his loss. Yet at this final juncture of his story, O'Brien provides the reader with an exit strategy from the concept of war as pure, unmitigated evil. His point is not to rehabilitate the experience of war as such but to show the reader how a "true" war story must be capable of showing also *the obverse side* of war. As he bitterly considers the fact that whenever he tells Rat Kiley's story in public, he has to face an audience that does not seem to grasp its deeper meaning, "Tim" snaps, "It *wasn't* a war story. It was a *love* story" (90). A "true" war story, the narrator implies, is the one in which we are allowed to catch a glimpse of the distortion or aberration of love—a tale which, as Kenneth Burke would have put it, encourages us to think of war as a "a special case of peace" where feelings of love are often visible only through their perversion.[15] A "true" war story is a story that manages at the same time to narrate war and to trope it into something else so that in the end, paradoxically, there is a sense in which "a true war story is never about war."

In an insightful comparison between Hemingway's and O'Brian's war narratives, Alex Vernon has written that "*The Things They Carried* very much renders love and war inseparable, each constituting and constitutive of the other." Indeed, for Vernon, "The essential subject of all of O'Brien's work is the exploration of the relationship between war and love" (198). In the instance under consideration, however, the love story is very different from the one that, in *A Farewell to Arms*, "masks" the violence and guilt inherent in the war story, thus setting up a pattern repeated by O'Brien's John Wade, who, in the novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, uses "his love story to foster his denial of his own war violence and lies" (Vernon 194). The kind of love story hidden in Rat Kiley's furious response to Lemon's death belongs to the "immense love" that soldiers have repeatedly declared feeling for their fellow combatants, and that Joanna Bourke has eloquently written about in her *Intimate History of Killing*. "Whether called 'mateship,' 'the buddy system,' or 'homo-erotic relationships,' the power of love and friendship in enticing men to kill has been widely commented upon. Although frequently exaggerated [. . .] combatants reported that they were able to kill because of the love they felt for their comrades" (129–30). Keeping this in mind, one may wish to argue that, in our case, rather

than a war story masquerading as a love story (in order to cover up the horrors of war), what we have is a love story disguising itself as a war story, so as to please an audience more interested in the thrills of war than in the complexities of love. Yet O'Brien's war story does not cover up a straightforward love story: the "love" we detect at the bottom of this, as of many other war stories, is a love that can never be completely separated from hate and rage. It is a love that kills. "Tim's" remark may sound rather sentimental in its evocation of "love," but once we situate his statement within the context of the story he has just told, we immediately realize that this is not the kind of love-making that will bring war to an end.

"How to Tell a True War Story" is a compelling, insightful meditation on the moral perils and conceptual paradoxes any serious war writer must come to terms with. By encouraging the reader's distrust in any representation of war, O'Brien provides us with a powerful critique of any war story's attempt to salvage some goodness from the wreckage of war. Yet what O'Brien also shows—against his initial intentions—is that even the most self-deconstructive of war narratives can never completely do away with a kernel of positivity and "goodness." As he writes in a revealing passage, "Proximity to death brings with it proximity to life. After a firefight there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. . . . You feel an intense, out-of-the-skin awareness of your living self—your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it. In the midst of evil you want to be a good man" (88). Goodness may blossom even in the "garden of Evil" (86); love sometimes is intertwined with horror; *peace* is distorted by war into monstrous forms without, however, being altogether erased from its texture. A "true" war story must remain faithful to these paradoxes. Even though, when read superficially, they may appear to cultivate a postmodern distrust in "truth," O'Brien's narratives do not abolish reality in order to chase the ghosts of a solipsistic, incorporeal imagination. On the contrary, O'Brien's imagination is a *cognitive* resource and, therefore, ultimately a *political* tool capable of unveiling the cowardice hidden behind what many call heroism, as well as the way even love can feed the monster of war.