FIVE

Tim O'Brien's Understood Confusion

> The old epistemology that equated human beliefs with cosmic reality is now a minority report. . . . We haven't yet quite figured out how to live with what we know, and we don't know what a curious piece of knowledge it is—part jewel, part bombshell.
>
> —Walter Truett Anderson

Unlike Stephen Wright and Michael Herr, Tim O'Brien has made a literary career of the Vietnam War. Whereas Wright and Herr each wrote one brilliantly disturbing book about the experience, O'Brien has written five, three of which place Vietnam at center stage. That Vietnam is his permanent "haze" brought out by a "glow" is reflected in the following series of statements stretching over a period of fourteen years. At the 1978 Vietnam Writers Conference at Macalester College, in St. Paul, Minnesota, O'Brien, consistently the most interrogating and epistemological of the war's writers, voiced two fears—that America would forget the Vietnam War too quickly or remember it too simplistically. In 1981, O'Brien did a special piece for A. D. Horne's book, *The Wounded Generation* (1981), in which he says:

> And here at home, weren't the shrinks and scriptwriters and politicians telling us, at least by implication, that we *ought* to be seeking social and psychological readjustment? Heal the wounds, pick up the pieces. Well, we've done it. By and large we've succeeded. And that's the problem. We've adjusted too well. . . . We've all adjusted. The whole country. And I fear that we are back where we started. I wish we were more troubled. (205, 207)

In 1991, in a seminar of mine called "Images of War in American Literature," he sobered my students—most of whom I suspect were secretly high on America's "success" in the Gulf War—by telling them that this latest war proved that we were back where we started. Vietnam never happened. History and memory had been airbrushed out of existence. The "He," not the "I," of Graves' poem was running the show again, and in charge of the public memory.

As Graves' "I," O'Brien has spent a great deal of his prime time in the last quarter of a century troubling over America's infinite capacity to chimerically adjust to, simplistically remember, and quickly forget a war that inconveniently challenged this country's righteous, positivistic paradigm. Likely, this is true for all wars—even "The Good War," which Studs Terkel wisely decorated with quotation marks. Speaking about that war, Paul Fussell says that because America knows so little about its real tragedies and ironies, "as experience . . . the suffering was wasted." "America has not yet understood what the Second World War was like and has thus been unable to use such understanding to re-interpret and redefine the national reality and to arrive at something like public maturity" (268).

It seems to me that part of public maturity would involve processing the messiness of war, which Fussell painfully details. I mean the real messiness of bodies scattered in minute fragments across cratered wastelands—like Curt Lemon in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, reduced to bits of hamburger in the jungle foliage, or Kiowa, mortally wounded, almost inextricably sinking into the sucking ooze of the shit field along the flooding banks of the Song Tra Bong River. Hollywood, the arbiter of American epistemology, has its own self-imposed law prohibiting the showing of this kind of battle scene, which leads Fussell to his claim that "the twentieth-century age of publicity and euphemism" (269) has created a "pap-fed mass public,

[unable] to face unpleasant facts" (270). When the facts do become unpleasant, something less disturbing is "dubbed in"—sometimes literally. To cite but one example, this happens whenever the networks air *Good Morning Vietnam*. On a primary level the film is about how Armed Forces Radio censored unpleasant facts and bad news during the Vietnam War. Exemplary of extreme irony, the network showings dub an already "dubbed" film by rendering "goddamn" as "gow dern" or "gosh darn," "ass" as "rear," and "fucking" as "freaking." This is merely a tiny example of how the guardians of American culture sanitize war and encourage simplistic remembering: "Pick up the pieces"—quickly, before anyone identifies the hamburger with Curt Lemon.

Fussell is wrong about one thing, however: we can't just blame a sentimental society of nonwarriors or venal Hollywood for the lack of understanding. To a great extent the warriors themselves have often been the ones who've passed out the pap—the prechewed baby food. Many of us have eaten it, to be sure, but they are the ones who reassembled hamburger into tough, realist novels of survival and camaraderie. They "G-Ied" their Vietnam experiences by picking up everything that moves and painting everything that doesn't. Stephen Wright's Major Holly would be pleased, for they learned their boot camp lessons very well. Unfortunately, they applied them to their writing about the war, and this results in simplistic remembering.

Several times in *Going After Cacciato*, O'Brien juxtaposes the messiness of Vietnam with the tidy, geometrically sound houses that Paul Berlin's father builds back in Iowa. Berlin (the narrator) and O'Brien have nothing against well-built houses; they simply feel the profound disjunction between those carpentered houses (with floor plans replete with 45- and 90-degree angles, squares, rectangles, isosceles triangles, and reassuring perpendicular relationships) and what was happening to their eroding epistemology in "America's longest war." Somewhat less gently, I suspect, O'Brien juxtaposes the messiness with Berlin's Iowa neighbor, Mrs. Stone. Her obsession with order and control is analogous to the habit of hungering for facts, cleaning up the messes, raging for the destruction of the phantom COSVN,

and, in general, denying the world we really live in. Berlin thinks about her while dialing home from Vietnam.

> She was nuts, that Mrs. Stone. Something to ask his father about: Was the old lady still out there in winter, using her broom to sweep away the snow, even in blizzards, sweeping and sweeping, and in the autumn was she still sweeping leaves from her yard, and in summer was she sweeping away the dandelion fuzz? Sure! He'd get his father to talk about her. Something fun and cheerful. The time old Mrs. Stone was out there in the rain, sweeping the water off her lawn as fast as it fell, all day long, sweeping it out to the gutter and then sweeping it up the street, but how the street was at a slight angle so that the rainwater kept flowing back down on her, and, Lord, how Mrs. Stone was out there until midnight, ankle-deep, trying to beat gravity with her broom. (192)

Principal among the writers who use a "compost" rather than a broom, who make things of the dirt and refuse rather than sweep it away, O'Brien permits the messy interlopers in the backyards of our Protestant, sanitized paradigms to do their jobs: coalesce, infect, and break down. In so doing he deters the irresistible tide that sweeps Americans back and forth from crude forgetting to crude remembering. From his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1969), to his *Going After Cacciato* (1975), to his *The Things They Carried* (1990), O'Brien has sought to make us a more imaginative nation. He has done this by manifesting in his fiction the sentiments of the novelist Carlos Fuentes, Mexico's great interrogator of the paralysis in the human-cultures paradigm: "Art will not reflect *more* reality unless it creates *another* reality" (68). In a letter written to me in 1989, O'Brien echoed Fuentes when he expressed his belief that the novelist must "create new *kinds* of knowledge, new *kinds* of reality," as opposed to rehashing the formulas of realism, which have been around long enough to be perceived as representations of a God-made prototype.

The problem with this prototype, as O'Brien has reminded me several times, both publicly and privately, is its addiction to facts. Emulating gravity-defying Mrs. Stone, many fighter-writers use facts to overcome or deny the eroding epistemology. In the face of a crisis of knowledge, they unconsciously try to achieve a veneer of authenticity with clean, hard-edged facts about their Vietnam experiences. But

instead of alleviating the crisis, this approach only exacerbates it; it reinforces the limited "reality" of the shadows cast on the wall of Plato's cave. Instead of discovering that the shadows are shadows and then reinterpreting human reality on the basis of the discovery, it confidently provides quantitative, factual descriptions of the shadows. This takes us back to John Del Vecchio's claim that his book is real because he "had the maps" to guide his writing. A happy citizen of Plato's cave, Del Vecchio doesn't see that by "scrounging" about in the limits of human knowledge, one can discover the possibility of another reality.

In Vietnam, soldiers discovered (or should have discovered) two sets of shadows. First, the myth of the righteous warrior making the world safe for democracy turned out to be a tautological reflection of a national lie. Second, the assumption that America could make sense of and impose its will on Vietnam with a Western Positivist strategy turned out to be a reflection of cultural arrogance. What does one do with these deconstructions of epistemological certitude? They often seem to be forgotten or overruled by "default positions" in the literature of the war. As the psychologist Arthur Egendorf says, there are two ways of not drowning in deep water: "You can refuse to go in, or you can learn how to swim." You can get wet, or you can "brag about staying dry" (70). One can see a lot of the latter in the literature of the Vietnam War.

Tim O'Brien, however, is one of the war's best swimmers. Not that he's unafraid of the water. Discovering all of a sudden that one's feet don't touch the bottom is always frightening. One senses a good deal of O'Brien's fright in chapter 39 of *Cacciato*, where he catalogs an epistemological collapse. Page after page, he writes an anxious litany of everything the soldiers no longer knew:

> Not knowing the language, they did not know the people. They did not know what the people loved or respected or feared or hated. . . . They did not know false smiles from true smiles. . . . Not knowing the people, they did not know friends from enemies. . . . He didn't know who was right, or what was right. . . . [H]e didn't know what speeches to believe. . . . [H]e did not know where truth lay. . . . He just didn't know if the war was right or wrong. And who did? Who really *knew*? . . . They did not know even the simple things. . . . They did not know good from evil. (309–21)

But, as Walter Truett Anderson said earlier, discovering that your feet don't touch bottom can be experienced as a "bombshell" and as a "jewel" that can turn "enormous uncertainties" into "vast possibilities" (xii). The responsible fighter-writer doesn't leave the enormous uncertainties at Saigon's Ton Son Nhut airport; both the bombshell and the jewel need to be taken home. If Remarque's Paul Bäumer begins his postwar memories of "The Great War" with the civilized world in pieces, then Stephen Wright begins his of the Vietnam War with the hallucinatory attrition of geometry, and Michael Herr, with "hundred channel panic" feeding back through his prose years later. In his turn, O'Brien begins with the awareness of Doc Peret's supreme piece of critical analysis of the military's pins and maps: "No fucking tail, no fucking donkey" (131). The problematical status of the donkey and its tail points to a world in which substance is so elusive and unreliable that there may be nothing to cast even a shadow.

In other words, the starting point for O'Brien, as well as Wright and Herr, is the admission that what they knew of reality before war was nothing more than a publicly-agreed-upon fiction—a communally embraced shadow. That communal shadow was quickly blasted by war. Language itself seemed to stop casting shadows. There seemed to be an entropic void between word and object. O'Brien relates this very experience in his memoir. Trying to imagine a girl's face back home, he can't get beyond the point of merely seeing the four letters "F.A.C.E." printed out before him. Hemingway's Frederick Henry (*A Farewell to Arms*) may have scornfully rejected abstract nouns like "honor" and "glory," but O'Brien was losing contact even with concrete nouns.

There are three kinds of reactions to the encounter with the public lies unmasked by war. For most Americans and most Vietnam writers, the reaction is that of Robinson Crusoe: you admit you're shipwrecked, but then you compulsively try to make your new home just like the old one, by putting up comforting calendars, walls, and fences to guard fences guarding fences—so that you can forget that you ever were shipwrecked. Egendorf says that in order to protect your identity from the crisis of knowledge, you ". . . convince yourself that your persona—the concoction of stratagems [Crusoe's fences], life stories, and lessons you've drawn from all that has happened—

is the real thing. You must ignore the fact that you put it all together or else the conviction will drain away. So you play the act, [and] forget who wrote the play . . ." (159). And with that forgetting (a devilish habit, as I have already called it), you're back to the solipsism of Baritz's "enabling ignorance," where Crusoe's fences keep out the vertiginous truth of the public game you're playing, and where Doc Peret's filters are nowhere to be seen. Once again, "A Euclidean narrative produces a Euclidean understanding of a Euclidean world" (Stoicheff, 95).

The second kind of reaction is marked by long-term disillusionment. Instead of being viewed as an onerous impediment to authenticity, illusion is unconsciously treated as a source of meaning and purpose that is now in pieces. Nihilistic apathy is the result; one is shipwrecked because one is shipwrecked; the bombshell is a bombshell—nothing more; enormous uncertainties are enormous uncertainties; "scrounging" is not viewed as an option.

The third kind of reaction is economically labeled in Keats' two words—"negative capability," which he describes as a state of mind ". . . when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." As we will see, no Vietnam War writer has more advantageously worked through the ramifications of negative capability or his shipwrecked status than O'Brien. No one is as adept as he at navigating between the bombshell and the jewel. Not that he is unaware of the Crusoe mentality among fighters and writers. Near the end of his tour, he served under a Crusoe. He writes about him in *If I Die*—a Major Callicles, his battalion executive officer. (Why is it that the worst "Crusoes" always seem to be majors?) Mrs. Stone to the bitter end, Callicles simply refuses to let the experience of Vietnam reveal the shipwrecked nature of the whole enterprise. Surrounded by degradation and wholesale death, he obsessively and maniacally tries to eradicate the four deadly sins: moustaches, prostitution, pot, and sideburns. He reminds me of a *New Yorker* cartoon from years back, in which a sardonic employee working the Complaint Department window tells an irate customer "The whole world's going to hell and you're upset because the light on your waffle iron doesn't go on!?"—or words to that effect.

The placement of this chapter—just before the book's final four pages where O'Brien leaves Vietnam—has the effect of pointing an ironic finger back on his own rather "Calliclesian" central project in the preceding pages: searching throughout history, literature, philosophy, and theology for anything that will validate him as a soldier, anything that will dovetail his Vietnam experience with the past. It's a broad search pattern; he seeks analogues in Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Melville, Frost, Eliot, Pound, Auden, Hemingway, Heller, and Tillich, to name some.

But the search fails to pay off. This failure is summed up in O'Brien's reaction to Horace's famous "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." He calls it "an epitaph for the insane" (174). Like Wilfred Owen, he reveals the "old lie" "in this whole game." But as Thomas Myers says in one of his superb attic-cleaning moments, "O'Brien's historical victory lies in his defeat before the feet of myth" (82). The Callicles chapter, ironically named "Courage Is a Certain Kind of Preserving," is strategically placed to culminate O'Brien's defeat/victory, which would lead to the great negative/capability of *Cacciato* and *Carried*. The character of Callicles—supposedly the quintessence of a World-War-II kind of professional soldier—totally deflates the myth of the noble warrior. Like his namesake in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, Callicles is rendered ludicrous because of his epistemological certainty and his obsession with a paradigmatic, Crusoe myth he would preserve at all costs. It's easier to shave moustaches than to raise wrecked ships. The chapter also deflates the myth of just wars when the news is released about what was perhaps the greatest blow ever to the "Captain America Complex": the massacre at My Lai 4.

Actually, O'Brien doesn't just point an ironic finger back on his memoir; the very first chapter, "Days," points a finger forward. Thus, the book is bracketed by that rare self-directed irony. Stressing the purposelessness, literal aimlessness, and monotony of the grunt's experience, this chapter cuts off all access to the validation of an epic journey. Sampling some of O'Brien's observations, we read "No targets, nothing to aim at and kill. Aimlessly, just shooting to shoot. It had been going on like this for weeks" (16–17). "Things happened, things came to an end. There was no sense of developing drama" (17). "No reason to hurry, no reason to move. The day would be

yesterday. Village would lead to village, and our feet would hurt, and we would do the things we did, and the day would end" (19). Caught between his own bracketing fingers, O'Brien's quest for mythic validation results in the antiepiphany of the memoir's final sentence: "It's impossible to go home barefoot" (205). So much for the war's facts. But this failure to achieve epiphany—as Myers agrees—is a victory. Because from now on, rather than trying to find meaningful placement within the prescriptive, received myths of the past, he will, like Fuentes, aggressively seek to create alternative spaces in the evershifting nexus of memory and imagination.

In *Cacciato* we can learn a great deal about O'Brien the artist if we examine several of his characters, particularly Paul Berlin, Cacciato himself, and the medic, Doc Peret. Much has been written about the Berlin-O'Brien link, so I'll just reiterate that, like Berlin's mental journey to Paris while on guard duty, O'Brien's book is like an observation-post enterprise in which past, present, and future, idea and fact, flight and engagement, movement and stasis are all interwoven in a collage of memory and imagination.

It may seem demeaning to O'Brien to compare him to Cacciato, whom Doc Peret describes as a "guy who missed Mongolian idiocy by the breadth of a genetic hair" (21), and by Harold Murphy as being "dumb as a month-old oyster fart" (14). Obviously neither of these characterizations describes Tim O'Brien. But there's something about Cacciato's moral and epistemological audacity that aligns him with his creator. Just as Cacciato imagines and acts on an alternative to the slaughter and insanity of the war, so O'Brien imagines and acts on a wonderfully contrapuntal, polyphonic alternative to the traditional war novels of people like James Webb and John Del Vecchio, both of whom continue to believe in war as a crucible in which men are validated.

Furthermore, just as Cacciato is described as being "curiously unfinished" (21), so O'Brien is an ever-changing, dynamic writer as he moves from *If I Die* to *Cacciato* to *Carried*. Of course we laugh at Cacciato when he fishes for walleyes in the putrid water of bomb craters; we laugh at his "sophisticated" tackle—an aerosal deodorant can for a bobber and a safety pin for a hook. But this is simply Cacciato's symbolic insistence, shared by O'Brien, that there is life after empiri-

cism and after the factual nomenclatures so obsessively and repeatedly recalled in most Vietnam books. There is the reality of the imagination. There is the truth of fiction—if it is recognized as fiction. This is a difficult idea to swallow, particularly in the West, where we can actually observe the paradigm shift to realism as we watch the meaning of "fiction" change from the purely neutral, medieval sense of kneading dough or clay to a highly charged contemporary sense of anything *feigned*.

In *Cacciato*, O'Brien creates a character caught up in the reality-versus-fiction paradigm. Even as Paul Berlin extends Cacciato's imaginative act of stepping out of the war and "actually" follows him to Paris, he and his pursuing squad are arrested in Tehran, Iran. Eventually they are interrogated by a positivist *Savak* colonel, who has no patience with the phrase "truth of fiction." He is willing to accept reality or fiction, but not Berlin's hybrid: in a pleading, yet demanding tone, one can infer, he says, "Now tell me that this . . . this mission, this so-called *mission* . . . tell me it is fiction. Tell me it is a made-up story" (276).

It is the Doc Peret-O'Brien link that best reveals O'Brien's philosophical and artistic concerns, as well as his development as an ever more radical writer. Doc reveals O'Brien's growing preoccupation not with what we saw in Vietnam, but, more radically, how we saw it and through which culturally implanted mediation. (O'Brien once stated in a letter: "The issue of 'how we know' is so central to my work that it would take a whole book to properly address it." In *Carried*, he says, "I want to tell you why this book is written the way it is" [203].) As I have stated, Peret is O'Brien's radical epistemologist. In perhaps the most significant passage in all of Vietnam War writing (and therefore worthy of reiteration), we read of Doc:

> He was right, too, that observation requires inward-looking, a study of the very machinery of observation—the mirrors and filters and wiring and circuits of the observing instrument. Insight, vision. What you remember is determined by what you see, and what you see depends on what you remember. A cycle, Doc had said. A cycle that has to be broken. (247–48)

He adds that we must make a "fierce concentration on the process itself" (248). Without that ferocity of attentiveness we're prone to

mistaking unrecognized "defaults" for common sense. He learns this lesson—quite painfully, one imagines—as a boy. Intrigued by a large air conditioner his father has just purchased, he takes it completely apart, looking for the box that has all the stored cold air in it. Of course, he doesn't find it. Even though he says "And I still tell him . . . if he'd just let me alone I'd have found that damn—" (177), this strikes me as an ongoing family in-joke, the anger and disappointment dulled by the passage of time. Likely he now understands that in defiance of common sense, the air conditioner makes cold air with heat, just as O'Brien will tell us in "How to Tell a True War Story" that fiction makes truth, and just as Anderson insists that a bombshell can be a jewel. If we simply look for the box containing the Vietnam War ("just the facts, ma'm"), we end up with disassembled fragments of the war's surface.

Heeding Doc Peret's advice regarding looking at ourselves, Tim O'Brien is a tragicomic Hamlet cum Don Quixote cum Pirandello. Conscious of the fact that we unconsciously live in a defaulted literary world, he knows that he not only reads, but is *read*. He knows that he not only writes but is written. Arguably, the F.A.C.E. episode of *If I Die* first started leading O'Brien to this moral and aesthetic posture. Also arguably, the "They-did-not-know" chapter of *Cacciato* is the second step. We can infer, precisely because of the multitude of things they did not know, that there is one more thing that O'Brien himself doesn't know, and this is what happily sets him apart as a writer who understands his confusion. I speak of not knowing or accepting the hardened distinction between content and form, between events and the "concoction of stratagems" for perceiving those events, between object and subject, between object and lens, and, finally, between fact and fiction. The task O'Brien seems to have assigned himself in *Cacciato*, and even more so in *Carried*, is to see himself metafictionally seeing himself as writer, like Berlin seeing himself outside a labyrinthine tunnel while looking at himself—future to the past—through a periscope inside the tunnel. Berlin (and O'Brien himself) tries to step outside his boots, unlike Billy Boy Wadkins, who tries to put his foot-occupied boot back on his amputated leg.

I first delivered my thoughts on *The Things They Carried* in a paper at an academic conference. Because the book had not yet been published, and because most people had at best read only the essay-like "The Things They Carried" and "How to Tell a True War Story," both serialized in *Esquire*, my panel was designated "Nonfiction Representations of the Vietnam War." Even though I recognize that session titles often are somewhat arbitrary because of the scores of papers being delivered, this designation, at the very least, suggests that we try to put our foot-occupied boot back on; it implies that we're confident of the difference between nonfiction and fiction, that despite what Vietnam should have taught us, we steadfastly remain a genre-sure country. I maintain that this genre-sureness got us into Vietnam in the first place. Not recognizing the powerful influence of our positivistic paradigm, we simply didn't—and still don't—see our "essays" as fictions. In its righteous, anti-Communist paradigm, it wasn't just that America "forgot who wrote the play"; it forgot that it was acting.

This has resulted in a lot of wasted time and suffering and has prevented us from studying the machinery of observation itself. O'Brien is not at all sure of the strength of the walls erected by clear-cut genre distinctions. A number of the separately published chapters of *Carried* dissolve the wall separating essay and fiction. We often find ourselves in what O'Brien calls the "no-man's land between" the two, "between Cleveland Heights and deep jungle." We "come up on the edge of something" and "swirl back and forth across the border" (115).

In the chapter entitled "On the Rainy River," O'Brien provides a geographical analogue for his genre-straddling. After receiving his draft notice in Worthington, Minnesota, he flees north to the Rainy River, located on the U.S.–Canada border. While staying at the Tip Top Lodge, for six days he vacillates in anguish—cowardice or bravery, Canada or Vietnam? On one occasion he literally vacillates while fishing on the river. He says " . . . at some point we must've passed into Canadian waters, across that dotted line between two different worlds" (58). Because the "dotted line" at times is on the river itself, it's not that O'Brien is on a body of water that neatly separates two land masses; instead, carried by currents and eddies on a snaking river in the middle of a wilderness dominated by "great sweeps of pine and birch and sumac" (50), he can't tell which country he is in.

This geographical ambiguity directly corresponds to his liminal uncertainty. He understands that the old man running the boat has

taken him to a wavering edge. But he says " . . . what embarrasses me . . . and always will, is the paralysis that took my heart. A moral freeze. I couldn't decide, I couldn't act . . ." (59). Even when he does decide on one shore or the other, he inverts what for many people would be a common-sense interpretation of fleeing to or not fleeing to Canada: "I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave" (59). "I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam. . . . I was a coward. I went to the war" (63).

It is precisely because of his liminal uncertainty that the author could not make *Carried* memoir or fiction, essay or story, autobiography or metafiction, no more than he knew while on the Rainy River if he was in the United States or Canada. The line separating genres is at most a dotted, wavering one. Like "Nuoc Vietnam," it's watery. Moving from *If I Die*, to *Cacciato*, to *Carried*, O'Brien seems to have developed an ever-finer appreciation of how fact and fiction interpenetrate one another, and how the ultimate fiction is the belief that fiction is one thing, reality quite another. In fact, I'm certain O'Brien would agree with me that because America was blinded to the fictionality of its "essay," it was, as I've suggested, self-lured into the Vietnam quagmire. In its genre cockiness, America was epistemologically crude and naive. O'Brien's genius is that in the face of his wonderment he has found a way to take advantage of "a new understanding of [his] confusion." More sophisticated epistemologically than most Vietnam writers, O'Brien is able to pilot the reader through the shifting contours, eddies, and currents of the imagination.

I once had the opportunity to witness O'Brien's piloting skills, and the reaction of people who are suddenly made aware that they're on the Rainy River, not terra firma. It's akin to lifting the mostly empty milk carton that you think is full. Shortly before *Carried* was released, O'Brien visited another one of my classes, this one solely on the Vietnam War. Also in attendance were the book editors from the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. O'Brien started out by saying that he would like to tell us something about himself back in 1968. He admitted that what he was about to tell us embarrassed him, and that he had never told it to anyone before. He told

us he was from Worthington, Minnesota, and that he had graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul. He related that when he was drafted in the summer of 1968, he worked in the Armour meatpacking plant, where his job was to remove blood clots from the necks of dead pigs. He mentioned that it was impossible to get rid of the pig smell and that he therefore had trouble getting dates. He talked at length about his misgivings regarding the morality of the war. During this narration—and with increasing enthusiasm as it went on for some twenty minutes—one of the reviewers was writing down all this fantastically good copy. Eventually, O'Brien told us that because of his opposition to the war, in desperation he headed north—to the Tip Top Lodge on the Rainy River. He ended his "confession" by saying, "I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam. . . . I was a coward. I went to war."

There was an electric silence in the classroom. Everyone was spellbound by the personal details O'Brien had shared with them and by his honesty. Whereupon he said, "There are two things you should know about what I just told you: all of it is made up, and all of it is absolutely true." When the reviewer from one of the papers heard "All of it is made up," he immediately began feverishly erasing everything he had written down. After all, he couldn't print lies. There's got to be more than a mere dotted line between fiction and reality. He simply could not allow "all made up" and "all absolutely true" to coexist. You have to be on one side of the border or the other. I think he left the classroom that day in "a new confusion of his understanding."

Moving chronologically through O'Brien's three Vietnam books, we can notice the metamorphosis of a solid line to a dotted line to one that sometimes disappears altogether. In part we witness these metamorphoses in the changing role of O'Brien himself in his three books. We first find him playing himself, in memoir fashion. Then he creates the artistic-minded O'Brien persona in Paul Berlin. Finally, in an act of aesthetic and epistemological audacity, he creates a character named Tim O'Brien who isn't Tim O'Brien. A "barber" by day, he's a "VC sapper" by night. In an interview with Michael Coffey, O'Brien states: "All along, I knew I wanted to have a book in which

my name, Tim, appeared even though Tim would not be me; that's all I knew" (61). Why would O'Brien want to do this? And what are the implications of such a decision?

To answer the second question first, O'Brien seems to accept as his starting point the fictionality of *all* thought. Furthermore, the more conscious we are of fictionality, the greater the likelihood of grasping some small part of reality. Facts, by themselves, so he tells us in *Cacciato*, simply don't add up to anything much. In the Coffey interview, he says ". . . of the whole time I spent there [Vietnam] I remember maybe a week's worth of stuff" (60).

Regarding the first question, if all thought is fictional, that includes the way we think of ourselves. To think of the real self as a single, fixed, objective, finished entity is as inappropriate as stopping the motion of a mobile, then believing we haven't radically altered its essence. Bluntly, Tim is not Tim because as author he is not God. Not ever able to know his self directly and absolutely, he too must be mediated by a persona. Another plausible explanation for O'Brien's decision to make Tim not Tim is that, fortunately, he couldn't forget Doc Peret's fifteen-year-old advice. As a work of metafiction, *Carried* looks at the components of the "observing instrument" itself. Simply translated, the metaphor means we must study the way all reality is mediated by how, where, and when we look at it. O'Brien knows that reality is accessible *only* through mediation. That being the case, he spurns the Western paradigm of Manichaean dualism, which convinces most of the people most of the time that they can tell the difference between reality and fiction. *Carried*, on the other hand, seems to be written on the assumption that there is only conscious and unconscious fiction, conscious and unconscious paradigms. Thus, O'Brien has fictional status both as character and author. So, instead of pretending to be real, O'Brien really pretends. As such, his metafiction writes a contract between reader and fiction that is similar to the one between audience and the theatre that operates with the being of real pretense, as opposed to the pretense of being real (see drama chapter).

At the very least, O'Brien would agree with the "fictional" Father in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. To the "real" people, the actors on the stage getting ready for a rehearsal of a different Pirandello play, he says that he and the rest of his fictional family, abandoned by their author before the book was finished, are "less real perhaps, but truer" (217). Eventually, the "real" Manager of the acting company sarcastically says to the Father, ". . . you'll be saying next that you, with this comedy of yours that you brought here to act, are truer and more real than I am." To which the Father replies, "But of course; without doubt!" (266). Along similar lines, Linda, a character in "The Lives of the Dead" (*Carried*), describes death as "being inside a book that nobody's reading" (273).

In his discussion of Pirandello's theatre, Robert Brustein distinguishes between "apparent realities and real appearances" (315). In conversations and interviews, O'Brien, in turn, has frequently distinguished between "happening truth" and "story truth." Clearly, both he and Pirandello see a greater power of veracity in the "real appearances," because in these moments the author is at least conscious of the mask he is wearing. As Stanley Fish says in *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, "I would rather have an acknowledged and controlled subjectivity than an objectivity which is finally an illusion" (407). On the other hand, the reason the artifice of realism reveals so little of import is that it is blind to its own mask and to the filters that ensure the continuation of that blindness.

O'Brien is part of a long tradition of healthful ontological and epistemological wonderment. This is the key to dovetailing his Vietnam experiences with the past that he hadn't yet discovered in his memoir. His failure ("bombshell") there created the opportunities ("jewel") in his next two works. There's nothing new about the tradition of wonderment. It's as old as Heraclitus, Socrates, Erasmus, Montaigne, and Cervantes. It's as new as Kosinski, Borges, Fuentes, and Morrison. The problem is that throughout Western civilization the new ground that these skeptics uncover keeps getting paved over by the dominant cultural paradigm, which is built on the denial that masks are being worn, except perhaps at masquerades. In fact, nothing is more pervasive in America's Western orientation than the belief that its masks are naked.

To write his ultimate Vietnam War fiction, O'Brien happily donned the mask, and made Tim not Tim. For only in so doing could he underscore the fictional nature of all human perception. But whereas

Pirandello saw this as a galling human limitation, a comic tragedy, O'Brien sees it as an opportunity to turn story viewed as reality (the very reason we got into and waged the Vietnam War) into a reality viewed as story—a tragicomedy. Only in so doing, O'Brien implies in his novel, can we save ourselves from the disjunction between an absurd, inscrutable flux of events, such as those of the war, and America's realist paradigm. Like David Eason's "cultural phenomenologist," and like the "I" of Graves' poem, O'Brien begins with a recognition of "broken images." But because he does so, and because he mistrusts and questions the relevance and factuality of these broken images, he's at an advantage: instead of being limited to naive "quick and dull" faith in public reality, he is skeptically "slow and sharp" as he investigates *alternative* realities.

Robert Scholes would call O'Brien a "fabulator." "Fabulation," he writes, ". . . means not a turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality" (8). As a fabulator, O'Brien persistently undermines belief and the suspension of disbelief in order to reach for more complex truths. In "How to Tell" he writes, "In many cases a true war story cannot be believed" (79). Thus, he inverts the conventional author-reader contract, the whole goal of which is credulity. The problem with belief, says Scholes, is that "it is in a sense the enemy of truth, because it stifles inquiry" (7). There is no danger of O'Brien stifling inquiry. Confronting head-on the story-reading paradigm, which demands credibility, *Carried* blows fuses from beginning to end, where the novel's last word underscores O'Brien's real subject: not war, but "story." Any reader insistent upon the story-telling conventions that create the illusion of reality will stub his toe and bang his head a lot in this novel. Concerned that we believe the reality of story rather than, conventionally, the story of reality, O'Brien places the wiring and circuits front and center, which is reminiscent of the various means used by Brecht to ensure *Verfremdungseffekt* in the theatre. This literally enables O'Brien to incite reader inquiry in response to the way the author revises, edits, even contradicts fiction's conventions. He takes us into a polyvocal world in which we can finally see the limitations of our univocal reading paradigm, where we merely remember what we see and see what we remember.

Carried is an ongoing series of "correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality." Part of O'Brien's polyvocal world consists of what might be called his *Roshomon* gambit. Just as we settle into believing a certain account of an event, O'Brien offers a different version. For example, in "Speaking of Courage," we find out that Norman Bowker is suffering from extreme guilt because he lost his nerve and failed to save his buddy, Kiowa. In "Notes" we learn that he even commits suicide. But in "In the Field" we discover that an unnamed soldier is responsible for Kiowa's death. He turned on his flashlight that night so he could show Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend. This enabled the enemy to bracket the platoon's position with mortars, one of which killed Kiowa. Then in the same story the commanding officer takes full responsibility because he had had the platoon set up camp in an indefensible shit field. Another character, Azar, confesses that if he had kept his mouth shut Kiowa would probably still be alive. In "Field Trip," the O'Brien character returns to Vietnam twenty years later, and in a ritual of expiation for his guilt he walks back into that same shit field where Kiowa was killed. There is not even a hint in any of these other versions that Bowker was in any way responsible.

Another device designed to blow fuses and stub toes is O'Brien's practice of juxtaposing what we perceive as story and essay. Sometimes he does this as he moves from one chapter to the next. This is jarring in itself. There are other times, however, where he does it within a given story. In the title story, for example, O'Brien switches back and forth numerous times from narrative to lists of equipment soldiers carried (and the weight of each piece). He complicates this correspondence, however, by switching within switches several times. Similarly, in "How to Tell a True War Story," he repeatedly switches back and forth between giving advice on how to tell war stories (essay) and actually narrating stories. And again, he complicates by switching within switches.

In two chapters, "Notes" and "Good Form," O'Brien takes us out of any apparent narrative frame and talks about himself as a writer. And in the latter "story" he bluntly tells us that almost everything we've read up to this point (page 201)—including the death-of-Kiowa sequence—is made up, perhaps especially those moments

where he insists "this is true." Then he tells us what really happened, part of which is that he did not kill a thin Vietnamese soldier he earlier admitted—over and over—to having killed. But then he writes "Even *that* story is made up" (203). It turns out he did kill the soldier after all. Finally, he concludes the chapter by answering his daughter's (she too is made up; O'Brien has no children, although he has been asked in interviews how his daughter is doing) question "did you ever kill anybody?" O'Brien's answer is both "Of course not" and "Yes" (204). One of the stories told in "How to Tell a True War Story" concerns the extremely close friendship between Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon. One day they pull the pin on a smoke grenade and play catch. Lemon steps on a booby-trapped 105 round and is obliterated. But at the end of "How to Tell," O'Brien says "No Lemon, no Rat Kiley. . . . It's all made up. Every goddamn detail. . . . 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" (91). Those familiar with the works of O'Brien know that this last occurrence actually takes place in another novel—on the first page of *Going After Cacciato*! So O'Brien confronts us with an exit-less, Borgesian "Library of Babel": we leave one book, only to enter another. But at least we know—O'Brien makes sure of that—that we're in a book. *Carried*, then, is filled with instances of Eastlake's opening *pas vrai* in *The Bamboo Bed*. O'Brien repeatedly turns the reader's "claymore" around and booby-traps the narrative "trails."

To those who still cling to the conventional author-reader contract, who can't let go of the paradigm of realism, these fabulations are irksome. Even some of the reviewers who praised the book found them to be annoying blemishes. The attitude among many readers could be summed up as follows: "I *know* he's making things up, but why does he have to *tell* me?" But O'Brien's sense of self-irony seems to have anticipated this reaction to *The Things They Carried*, and it reminds me of how on more than one occasion in his plays Pirandello denigratingly alludes to the plays of Pirandello. Speaking of Rat Kiley, a fabulator within fabulations, O'Brien writes "Rat had a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement, a compulsion to rev up the facts,

and for most of us it was normal procedure to discount sixty or seventy percent of anything he had to say. . . . For Rat Kiley, I think, facts were formed by sensation, not the other way around, and when you listened to one of his stories, you'd find yourself performing rapid calculations in your head, subtracting superlatives, figuring the square root of an absolute and then multiplying by maybe" (101).

Furthermore, another character, Mitchell Sanders, in effect tells O'Brien to stop this fabulation stuff. He wants O'Brien to respect the U.S.-Canadian border, as it were. In "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," he repeatedly objects to and interrupts the bizarre female heart of darkness story being told by Rat Kiley. Kiley does it all wrong: he keeps breaking the spell, first by interrupting his narrative with editorials, then by admitting that he has no finish and that his information, finally, is thirdhand. Sanders, the prototypical American designated reader, wants the conventions of the "realistic" war narrative to be scrupulously abided by so that he won't see the mere conventions for what they are—filters and circuits. He prefers Peeping-Tom, fourth-wall-removed drama. He demands that the storyteller "get the hell out of the way." Getting in the way ". . . was a bad habit, Mitchell Sanders said, because all that matters is the raw material, [O'Brien's week's worth of facts] the stuff itself, and you can't clutter it up with your own half-baked commentary" (116). [Fully baked by O'Brien himself throughout this "essayed" novel.] Sanders continues by saying that this commentary "just breaks the spell. It destroys the magic" (116). When he discovers that Kiley has no ending, a fully exasperated Sanders says, "You can't do that. . . . Jesus Christ, it's against the *rules*. . . . Against human *nature*. . . . I mean, you got certain obligations" (122). Sanders insists on keeping the seeing mechanism, or medium, transparent so as to avoid seeing theatre as theatre. In the words of E. H. Gombrich, he doesn't want to "watch himself having an illusion" (Iser, 132). He wants the contingencies edited out so that he can experience the seductive pleasures of an unimpeded mimetic pull down "mine-swept" narrative "trails." Unfortunately for all the Mitchell Sanders, O'Brien's stories are *about* those very trails. And he constantly gets in Mitchell's way, thereby frustrating his desire to find the "box" that authentically contains the Vietnam War.

O'Brien has told me that "How to Tell a True War Story" is the pivotal "story" in his evolution from a memoirist to a writer of fabulation. Of the twenty-two chapters in the book, this one is the most explicit and insistent about the necessary Dali meltdown of fact and fiction, essay and fabulation. This is what distinguishes *Cacciato* from *Carried*. In the former work there is more of an interplay between fact and fiction, there's no meltdown. O'Brien's three Vietnam books steadily move toward meltdown. Applying O'Brien's words from another context, I think he felt that he had been "held prisoner by the facts" (Lomperis, 46) in *If I Die*. Furthermore, I think the reason he did this series of fabulations in *Carried* is that, in *Cacciato*, he was still working with a Newtonian, Cartesian epistemology, which posits an objective reality "out there" independent of human observation. Thus, in *Cacciato*, O'Brien didn't "get in the way" as much as he would in *Carried*. In *Cacciato*, he was pushing ethnographic realism to the nth degree, and he did it masterfully. But his newest work doesn't push; instead, it is pulled into a vortex of cultural phenomenology, twilight-zone memoir. As O'Brien says in "How to Tell a True War Story," "The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is absolute ambiguity" (88). Thus, unlike *Cacciato*, *Carried* no longer holds up city limits signs as it moves from past to present, from memory to imagination, from reality to fantasy. Plot, and the continuity and coherence it assumes, is now possible only in "spots in time."

I think O'Brien would be comfortable with the language of Joan Didion in *The White Album*: "I was meant to know the plot but all I know is what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence . . . not a movie but a cutting room experience" (13). One thing O'Brien does have is a consistent cast of characters—people such as Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Kiowa, Ted Lavender, Curt Lemon, and Jimmy Cross—but it's a repertory company that O'Brien places in an unstable Heraclitian world. Like the VC, his characters appear, disappear, and reappear again and again. Their costumes and roles largely remain consistent, but performance times vary wildly, as O'Brien swirls back and forth across the borders of time and space.

In *Cacciato*, on the other hand, characters and genres remain distinct, with rather precise job descriptions. The epistemological inven-

tory is shaken but still intact. Not so in *Carried*, particularly not in the seminal "How to Tell a True War Story." The title itself certainly promises an article, not a work of fiction. Yet, as O'Brien has told me, "it is most definitely fiction, not an essay." "How to Tell" is indeed a story, but one that masquerades as an essay, just as "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" is an essay masquerading as a story. Coincidentally, O'Brien informs me, "The Lives of the Dead" is reminiscent of Hawthorne's "The Wives of the Dead," a shadowy tale about the reality of dreams and the dreams of reality. The chapter "Notes" is a story masquerading as a long endnote, which it originally was when published separately as part of the short story "Speaking of Courage." In *Carried*, the story is "mistakenly" placed two-thirds of the way through the "novel." No Vietnam author more fully subscribes to my sixth guerrilla fighting and writing parallel: O'Brien is the war's great rule-breaker. No one is less attached to the conventional job description of an MOS. Listen to his own description of *Carried*: "It's not quite a collection of stories, not quite a novel, not quite a fictionalized memoir. In fact it's a combination of all these—it's being billed as a 'work of fiction,' which is a little tricky, but still accurate."

"How to Tell a True War Story" begins with the words "This is true." ("The Lives of the Dead" begins with "But this, too, is true.") In fact, forms of the word "true" recur approximately four dozen times in this relatively short story. O'Brien and characters such as Rat Kiley and Mitchell Sanders desperately want their audiences to believe in the truth of their stories. O'Brien is obsessed, as are all vets, with telling the truth. Rather than invest his energy in tracing the surface phenomenology of war (the conventional MOS), he invests it in the phenomenology of fiction—particularly in the difference between America's unacknowledged fiction and his own don't-ever-forget-that-this-is-fiction variety. I say this despite the fact that the title and lead-off story, "The Things They Carried," reads like a *Soldier of Fortune* catalog of military surplus, enticingly detailed, both for the gun nut and for the Vietnam authenticity nut. It's a feast of factual ballast. In devilish fashion, O'Brien even gives us precise weights of the things they carried: this item weighs 6.3 pounds, this one 3.5, this one 8.4, and so on. But all of this spurious "precision" is O'Brien's fabrication. His book's metafictional honesty makes a

mockery of the reader's easy beliefs when confronted by the veneer of authenticity. One could justifiably accuse O'Brien of playing games here and elsewhere. He is. But they are games with a serious purpose: he has to show the reader how easily he can be set up so that he can then deconstruct his own "confusion of . . . understanding." In a sense, the real subject of *Carried* is the things the reader carries, particularly his appetite for belief.

Thus, as we near the end of "How to Tell," O'Brien startles the "ethnographic realist" in all of us by saying, "in a true war story nothing much is ever absolutely true" (88). O'Brien feels dishonest about telling the truth, at least as Crusoe perceives truth, and that's because the old epistemological inventory no longer is intact, or as he says in the chapter "Spin," "the whole world gets rearranged" (39). "The memory-traffic feeds into a rotary up in your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a thousand different streets. As a writer, all you can do is pick a street and go for the ride . . ." (38).

I think that the most important new item in O'Brien's epistemological inventory is that "truths are contradictory" (87): "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (89) "Story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (203). Sniping at America's "Cuckoo's Nest" sensibility, O'Brien echoes "Chief" Bromden's words of "cultural phenomenology" in Ken Kesey's novel, which attacks the country's bias against invention: "it's the truth even if it didn't happen" (13).

O'Brien again echoes the superior value of fiction truth in "The Lives of the Dead," where the narrator, as a nine-year-old, sees the World War II movie *The Man Who Never Was*. The Allies put an officer's uniform on a corpse, plant fake documents in his pockets, and dump his body into the sea. The currents carry him to the Nazis, and the course of the war is at least somewhat changed. Conceivably an analogue for O'Brien's book, the movie shows how a non-existent person with fictionalized papers alters reality. Lies create a new truth.

There are more contradictory truths: to be courageous requires cowardice. One experiences "falling higher and higher." Hate is love. The linguistic synapse now requires intransitive verbs to carry direct

objects. As we've seen, the narrator is at once O'Brien and not O'Brien. "A true war story is never about war" (91). A moral war story has an "absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (76). "Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery" (88). In order to present the cool truth you need to heat it up. Silence is deafening and cacophonous. Characters become third persons in their own narratives. A Vietcong glee club and the Haiphong Boys Choir exist in the jungle because they're not there. Sanders has to lie in order to tell the truth. Feelings create facts, not the other way around. O'Brien himself tells a tall tale by writing an article—echoes of Borges. Like Heller's chaplain in *Catch-22*, O'Brien squarely faces the possibility that "he never really *had* thought he had seen what he now thought he once did think he had seen, that his impression now that he once had thought so was merely the *illusion* of an illusion" (276). Again, the language of cultural phenomenology, beckoning us to adapt our critical thinking to it. *Carried* is as different from conventional Vietnam War writing as Brontë's "eccentric" *Wuthering Heights* is different from Austen's "central" *Pride and Prejudice*, to use a distinction made by Carlos Fuentes. The distinction is as old as Western civilization. Thus, O'Brien is to James Webb and John Del Vecchio what Brontë is to Austen, Blake to John Locke, the gothic to the Enlightenment, Hieronymous Bosch to his contemporaries, Heraclitus to Parmenides (again to borrow from Fuentes). O'Brien is inside the tree line, sniping at the onerous assumptions of America's central culture in the clearing.

O'Brien is a good sniper, because, like the VC, he travels light. This probably will strike some readers as a peculiar, even preposterous, claim. Many view O'Brien as the war's most polished (too polished, some would say), intellectual, and even academic fighter-writer. That view has some merit; after all, he does seem to have a lot of stuff up in his "attic." Yes and no. Yes, he does have a goodly number of literary conventions up there; but more often than not, they serve an ironic purpose. Every time he pulls a "*Pas vrai*" on the reader, he's displaying those conventions the way one would pick up a lava lamp, and, chuckling, wonder what it was still doing there, or why it was ever saved at all. In other words, O'Brien uses the attic stuff as a tool

for encouraging the reader to travel lighter by deconstructing his own epistemological keepsakes.

Other times, as when Linda compares death to being in a book no one is reading, O'Brien empties the attic. This melts away the illusion of ontological security; but it also frees the writer and reader from a lot of clutter. It opens up a lot of territory for exploration. Crusoe's fences keep danger out, but at the same time they stifle him within. They restrict him to minute, factual descriptions of shadows. Crusoe takes comfort in knowing a great deal about very little—his compound. O'Brien takes a kind of dreadful delight in knowing very little about a great deal.

I began this chapter with the last lines of Graves' poem "In Broken Images." Let me conclude by quoting from a poem so consistent with O'Brien's way of thinking that he has it prominently affixed to a wall in his study where he writes. Another poem by Graves, it is called "The Devil's Advice to Storytellers." In it, Graves writes:

> Lest men suspect your tale to be untrue,
> . . . . .
> Do conscientiously what liars do—
> Born liars, not the lesser sort that raid
> The mouths of others for their stock-in-trade:
> . . . . .
> Nice contradiction between fact and fact
> Will make the whole read human and exact.

Graves' paradoxes run absolutely counter to what Paul Fussell calls the "positivistic pretensions of non-Celts and . . . [the] preposterous scientism of the twentieth century" (*The Great War and Modern Memory*, 206). Those same paradoxes get at the very heart of Tim O'Brien's negative capability.