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# The Story-Truth after Twenty Years: The Narrative of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), one of the most highly regarded works of the Vietnam War literature so far, is an attempt to put various dichotomies into question. This book blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, novel and essay, memory and imagination, courage and cowardice, good and evil. The elusive narrative discourages all efforts of sense-making. Nothing is believable as an absolute. No moral judgment is made. The ambiguity of this book reflects the reality of the Vietnam War, which overturned established American values and entangled the superpower into a moral confusion where "the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity."

This essay discusses the significance of the textual ambiguity of *The Things They Carried* in both literary and political contexts and also explains how Tim O'Brien's style effectively conveys various feelings to the reader. Furthermore, this discourse explores the social value in which war stories are retold to future generations in the O'Brien style.

## I

The ambiguity of this text is produced by the metafictional narrative of the story-teller who has the identical name with the author, Tim O'Brien. In an interview with Gail Caldwell, O'Brien says that he created this narrator as "just one more literary device, that

goes along with description and dialogue and narration, to build that sense of urgency and immediacy and belief.<sup>2</sup> Although a narrator named Tim O'Brien appears also in his first book *If I Die In a Combat Zone* (1973), those two narrators function differently. As O'Brien defines *If I Die In a Combat Zone* as "straight autobiography . . . a kind of war memoir," declaring that it "was never intended to be fiction," the O'Brien narrator of this memoir can be identified with the author,<sup>3</sup> and the text can be believed to be what exactly happened to him. In *The Things They Carried*, which he calls "a work of fiction" in the opening of the book, the narrator O'Brien is not identical with the author, though the two have several things in common.<sup>4</sup> For example, the author O'Brien does not have a daughter, whereas the narrator has a daughter named Kathleen.<sup>5</sup> The narrator's return trip to Vietnam with Kathleen in "Field Trip" is also fictional. The author returns to Vietnam in 1994 with his girlfriend for the first time after his military tour.<sup>6</sup> At interviews and other public occasions, O'Brien himself blurs or negates the textual authenticity of this "work of fiction." For example, in an interview with Martin Naparsteck, O'Brien, after assuring that Norman Bowker, one of the character in this book, is "a real guy" and retelling the content of "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes," declares, "everything is made up, including the commentary."<sup>7</sup> A similar example is found in his performance in one of Donald Ringnalda's classes at the University of Saint Thomas. After telling the same story "about himself" written in "On the Rainy River," he confused the audience by confessing, "all of it is made up, and all of it is absolutely true."<sup>8</sup>

*The Things They Carried*, not only contradicts the author's biographical facts, but also makes sport of credulous readers even inside the text by presenting a "truth" and later overturning its credibility. There is no knowing what the exact truth is. Milton J. Bates compares the narrator's unreliability to "guerrilla warfare," which makes his "war story" "also a story-at-war."<sup>9</sup> Donald Ringnalda puts it in another apt way, "the real subject of [*The Things They*]

*Carried* is the things the reader carries, particularly his appetite for belief" (112). Instead of satisfying the reader's "appetite for belief," *The Things They Carried* sets up snipers and booby traps to destroy the belief throughout the text.

"[T]he conflict between fact and fiction," indicates Stephen Kaplan, "is made an issue even before the book begins."<sup>10</sup> The "conflict" takes place at the opening two pages located before the text and the first few pages of the first story, "The Things They Carried." In the first opening page, O'Brien reminds the reader about the fictionality of this book by commenting, "Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary." Then the next page of dedication reads, "This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa." And then, the several opening pages of the first story reveal that the six men listed in the dedication are characters of this "work of fiction." This opening confusion challenges the common sense of the reader who knows a book is usually dedicated to actual people. Whether these characters existed in "real" life seems, however, to have little importance to O'Brien. In an interview, he says that the characters to whom the book is dedicated "were more real sometimes than the guys" he "actually served with" (Interview, Caldwell, 69).

The similar blurrings of the boundary between fact and fiction can be seen everywhere in this book. For example, in a story entitled "The Man I Killed," O'Brien presents a dead Viet Cong (VC) corps to the reader. In the story following, "Ambush," and much later in "Good form," O'Brien describes how he killed baffling the reader as to the credibility of his act. The narrative of "Good Form" proceeds in this way: "I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough," and then, "But listen. Even *that* story is made up," and finally, responding to his daughter's question, "Daddy, tell the truth...did you ever kill anybody?", "And I can say,

honestly, 'Of course not.' Or I can say honestly, 'Yes'" (203-204). In the same way, who is responsible for Kiowa's death in the "shit field" remains undecided, after presenting different possibilities: Norman Bowker in "Speaking of Courage," Jimmy Cross and the anonymous young soldier in "In the Field."

The core of the ambiguity is the metafictional story entitled "How to Tell a True War Story." O'Brien, the narrator, tells about his own writing war stories in this story and the other self-reflective stories such as "Sweetheart" and "Good Form." The author O'Brien in an interview admits that "How to Tell a True War Story" "is the genesis for the idea for the whole book" (Interview, Naparsteck, 9). "How to Tell a True War Story" presents two forms of reality, "what happened" and "what seemed to happen," by telling that it is "difficult to separate" the one from the other in a "war story, but especially a true one" (78). "What happened" and "what seemed to happen" are respectively called as "happening-truth" and "story-truth" (203). The "happening-truth" is based on memory and resides in the realm of fact, while the "story-truth" is based on imagination and resides in the realm of fiction. In this story, and throughout the book, those two forms of truth are one, assuming what Donald Ringnald calls "Dali meltdown of fact and fiction, essay and fabulation," which distinguishes *The Things They Carried* from *Going After Cacciato* (1975), where "there is more of an interplay between facts and fiction, there's no meltdown" (110).

In this essay-like story, different versions of "what seemed to happen" at Curt Lemon's death, how he is blown to pieces when he steps on a land mine as he plays catch with Rat Kiley using a smoke grenade, are interspersed among other stories and essay-like passages. It is hard to tell which one is true. As Catherine Calloway says, "the epistemological uncertainty in the stories is mirrored by the fact that O'Brien presents events that take place in a fragmented form rather than in a straightforward, linear fashion."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the narrative of offering the stories "in a fragmented form" is a suitable way to

describe the reality of how Curt Lemon's body is blown into fragments by a booby-trapped artillery round.

"How to Tell a War Story" with its tricky title never offers a single definition of how to tell a war story, just as there is no definite version of how Curt Lemon died. This text of "overwhelming ambiguity" radically challenges the Western rationalism of aspiring after one final absolute truth, which rejects anything incompatible with that single sense of value. It is this rationalism, this refusal to allow what is "ambiguous" or ununderstandable that began and could not easily put an end to the Vietnam conflict.

## II

O'Brien's fundamental attitude toward writing war stories has not changed throughout his career as a writer so far. His intention is neither to retell what happened to him in the war nor to offer any lesson through his experiences. O'Brien does not deny the fictional features of his first nonfictional war memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. Unlike nonfiction, in his words, which "is usually cast in the language of political science or history or sociology or whatever," this memoir is "cast in an entirely different language" (Interview, Schroeder, 137). Thus, the following statement placed at an earlier part of this memoir discourages the reader's expectation to draw any political, historical or sociological lesson on the first-hand basis out of the text written by someone who actually experienced the war as a foot soldier:

Do dreams offer lessons? . . . Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories.<sup>12</sup>

The lack of political or moral lesson in O'Brien's works, however, does not mean that his books are apolitical or amoral. Admitting, in the interview with Schroeder, that all his work so far "has been

somewhat political in that it's been directed at big issues" such as "what's courage and how do you get it? What's justice and how do you achieve it? How does one do right in an evil situation?", he further explains that his purpose of proposing these questions is not to answer them but that it is the proposition itself that is important:

It's not the answer to those questions; it's simply their posing in literature which gives them the importance that I think they deserve.... My aim is just to give those issues a dramatic importance.... By caring about the issues maybe the reader will carry that concern over to his or her own life. I'm not trying to answer questions but to dramatize the impact of moral philosophy on human life. (145)

This statement explains why O'Brien proceeded to write fictions after *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. A fiction contains greater possibilities to "give those issues a dramatic importance," with no restriction of nonfiction on the fidelity to what actually happened.

The narrator O'Brien in "How to Tell a True War Story" and the subsequent story, "Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong," is not given authority, sometimes leaving the narrative to other characters, Mitchell Sanders and Rat Kiley. These two sub-narrators make a good contrast between a nonfiction teller and a fiction teller.

The narrative of Mitchell Sanders, who tells a story of "God's truth" (79) about a spooky episode at a listening-post operation in "How to Tell a War Story," is closer to that of nonfiction. Sanders tries to be faithful to the "happening truth" and concluding the story with "the moral." Responding to Sanders' narrative, the narrator O'Brien points out the difficulty of Sanders' sticking to the "happening truth":

In a way, I suppose, you had to be there, you had to hear it, but I could tell how desperately Sanders wanted me to believe

him, his frustration at not quite getting the details right, not quite pinning down the final and definitive truth. (83)

The next morning Sanders confesses that he "had to make up a few things." This is where nonfiction becomes frustrated. As far as a work of nonfiction remains a self-satisfying monologue, being indifferent whether the reader believes what is written, the author can stick to retell just what happened without making up anything. However, this author, Mitchell Sanders, does not end up his story as a monologue: "But he did care. He wanted me to feel the truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling." In order to make others believe him, Sanders has to "make up" things against his will to tell a story in which "every word is absolutely dead-on true" (81).

By contrast, Rat Kiley, narrating the incredible episode of "The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong," which can be read as a story of a female version of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of the Darkness*, is an example of a fiction writer. He is closer to the general narrator, Tim O'Brien, of *The Things They Carried*. Before introducing Rat's story, the narrator O'Brien emphasizes the untrustworthiness of this sub-narrator:

Among the men in Alpha Company, 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. (101)

Since everybody knows most of his stories are tall tales, Rat is free of Mitchell Sanders' frustration. Rat Kiley does not only "rev up the facts" but also has "a tendency to stop now and then, interrupting the flow, inserting little clarifications or bits of analysis and personal opinion." Mitchell Sanders criticizes this interruption as a "bad habit," because "[T]hat just breaks the spell" of the story (116). It is always Sanders who expresses his discontent whenever Rat inserts

anything other than "happening-truth." Sanders urges Rat to "[S]tick to what happened" (117). This urge, however, does not sound persuasive, now that the reader knows that Sanders himself had to go against the rule of his own story-telling to "[S]tick to what happened" in the previous story, "How to Tell a True War Story."

The significance of the story-telling of Rat Kiley, as well as of the narrator Tim O'Brien, lies in the feeling or emotion of "story-truth." Rat revs up the facts, because "he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt" (101). Both Mitchell Sanders and Rat Kiley tell their stories out of the same desire, the desire to involve the people who did not share the same experience. The former tries a nonfictional way, the latter a fictional way. O'Brien takes the latter way in this book: "A story's truth shouldn't be measured by happening but by an entirely different standard, a standard of emotion, feeling—'Does it ring true?' as opposed to 'Is it true?'" (Naparsteck, Interview, 9-10)

It can be said that this desire to make the non-participants listen to the story is a fundamental force to have produced the considerable number of Vietnam veteran writers, who would not have become a writer without the war. Tim O'Brien is one of them, and he carries the desire through twenty years and later. What distinguishes *The Things They Carried* from O'Brien's earlier war stories is the insertions of post-war stories in such parts as "Love," "Speaking of Courage," "Notes," and "Field Trip." As the narrator repeatedly reminds the reader that this book is written "twenty years" after his war experience and that he is "forty-three years old" now, this book presents the war not as a historical fact separated from other situations but as a more universal phenomenon which encompasses the whole field of time and space which lies between the front line of the Vietnam War in 1969-70 and back in the U. S. A in 1990.

"Speaking of Courage" is about an unrealized war story of a veteran named Norman Bowker. The undercurrent of this story is Norman Bowker's desire to tell his war story to the non-participants.

His story-telling is, however, discouraged here:

The town could not talk, and would not listen. "How'd you like to hear about the war?" he might have asked, but the place could only blink and shrug. It had no memory, therefore no guilt. . . . It was a brisk, polite town. It did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know. (163)

Norman thinks that the people he wishes to talk to are indifferent like his father or belong to a totally different world like Sally. The only man who would be interested in his story, Max Arnold, is dead. The symbolism of "Speaking of Courage," with its contrast between the lake in Wisconsin at the Fourth of July as a symbol of the post-war U.S.A. and the "shit-field" along the Song Tra Bong River where Kiowa died as a symbol of the war-time Vietnam, places this veteran as wandering somewhere in between. After depicting how Norman desires to talk and how he cannot, the narrator reveals in the next part, "Note," "'Speaking of Courage' was written in 1975 at the suggestion of Norman Bowker, who three years later hanged himself" (177). Norman Bowker's mental struggle between the desire to talk and the reality of the civilian world which tends to avoid being involved in anything about the "wrong war" is the second war to which numbers of veterans from the Vietnam War were or have been more or less faced.

O'Brien, in an interview, says that he feels greater joy in letters from wives or relatives of veterans of wars, appreciating his writing of books because they could share the feeling of the soldiers or veterans, than those from veterans, saying his book echoed their experiences. He concludes: "The whole creative joy is to touch the hearts of people whose hearts otherwise wouldn't be touched."<sup>13</sup> The middle-aged narrator of *The Things They Carried* is now a father of a daughter, Kathleen, of nine years old. Kathleen is an example of those who are excluded from the war-experience. One of her functions

in this book is to question or even to negate the significance of her father's writing after all those years. Kathleen, in "Spin," prompts the narrator to forget about the war stories:

Forty-three years old and I'm still writing war stories. My daughter Kathleen tells me it's an obsession, that I should write about a little girl who finds a million dollars and spends it all on a Shetland pony. In a way, I guess, she's right: I should forget it. (38)

In "Field Trip," the narrator O'Brien returns to the place where Kiowa died in Vietnam with Kathleen. To Kathleen, what her father says and does here are nothing but "weird." The father offers no answer that makes sense to his daughter's questions such as "why was everybody so mad at everybody else?", "how come you were even here in the first place?", and so on (209). He makes no explanation about his "swimming" in the mush-like water of the river along which Kiowa was killed. Finally, when the daughter wonders whether the old Vietnamese farmer who held his shovel over his head is angry, the father replies, "No . . . All that's finished" (213). Lorrie N. Smith, in her essay, "'The Things Men do': The Gendered Subtext in Tim O'Brien's *Esquire* Stories," comments on the unshortened distance between the father and the daughter, "In the end, the war is closed off to Kathleen and she's merely along for the ride."<sup>14</sup> Smith's comment, however, fails to see that the narrator's withholding of the answers to his daughter's questions corresponds well to the narrator's, and the author's, attitude to pose questions to the reader without answering them. What is important is, as seen above, not the answer but the question itself has the greater importance. Now that Kathleen, being a girl, not likely to become physically involved in a war, begins to ask those questions, she is beginning to become emotionally involved in the war.

It should also be noted that Kathleen is a representative of future

generations. The author O'Brien, in an essay entitled "We've Adjusted Too Well" in 1981, writes about his fear that a great number of veteran writers of the Vietnam War feel "vaguely proud at having 'been there,' forgetting the terror, straining out the bad stuff, focusing on the afterimage." The questions the Vietnam War raised, such as "What to fight for?", "When, if ever, to use armed force as instruments of foreign policy?" are gradually slipping away from the soldier's memory as well as from "[T]he national memory." "Look around," he continues, "Too many of us call for blood in every foreign crisis, but without any systematic examination of the implication of such action, without much inquiry into the history of American involvement in that part of the world, dumbly, blindly, impatiently." He concludes: "We've all adjusted. The whole country. And I fear that we are back where we started."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, we can enumerate various examples of the realization of O'Brien's fear, "we are back where we started," in the Gulf War and other acts of American military intervention to foreign crises, even within the short history after the Vietnam War. What is dangerous about the adjustment is that the act of being "vaguely proud at having 'been there,' forgetting the terror, straining out the bad stuff, focusing on the afterimage" leads to the younger generation's illusion of the soldiers as heroes, before caring for those questions. In *The Things They Carried*, the soldiers' youth and political naivete are repeatedly pointed out. Events such as Azar's blowing away a puppy with a mine in "Spin," Curt Lemon's trick-or-treating in "The Dentist" and "The Lives of the Dead," and "the young soldier's" searching for his girlfriend's picture in the midst of their search for Kiowa's body exemplify their childishness. Even the platoon leader, Jimmy Cross, is described as entering the army without much consideration in "In the Field" (190). No hero-like character is presented in this book. Instead of showing how to behave in the war, the middle-aged veteran writes about "terror" and the "bad stuff." By taking his daughter to the place where the worst thing happened, and by provoking her to raise the fundamental

questions which the veterans themselves tend to forget, he hands over some parts of the things he carries about the war to be interpreted by the future generation.

### III

As seen in part I, *The Things They Carried* is considered to be a collection of "story-truths." In this book, devices are made to make the reader, especially those who have never been soldiers, "feel" what O'Brien felt. At the end of Part II, we saw that O'Brien here expresses the negative feelings of "terror" and "bad stuff." This part is an analysis of how "story-truths" realize those feelings in the text.

The book opens with First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross' "romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire" (3). The young lieutenant begins to create a fictive world of imaginary love out of the letters from Martha. This romantic part, which appears misplaced in a war story, is succeeded by hard core reality of the war, a paranoiac emumeration of facts about the things the soldies carried through the tropical jungle. The first visitor to the battlefield of *The Things They Carried* inevitably feels the incongruity between these two parts, which signifies the mental confusion of a recruit who has come to a foreign battlefield from the civilized civilian world of "room-mates and midterm exams" (3). Just as the recruits get accustomed to the alien situation, so the two parts, at first incongruous, gradually assimilated into one story.

The lengthy litany of factual enumeration of the things they carried effectively create a monotonous feeling of the march. The rhythmic monotony corresponds well to the actual condition of "the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost," which is the march "for the sake of march" (15). O'Brien says in an interview that he tried to hint at the monotonous days of war in the basketball scenes in *Going After Cacciato* (Interview, Schroeder, 141). These scenes appears in the chapter of "Pickup Games," where the Third Squad keep winning the basketball games while marching on

in uneventful days without seeing an enemy. In addition to the monotonous feeling, the minute descriptions of the quantity and the weight of the things in "The Things They Carried" impresses the weightiness of the burden, which was absent from the basketball games.

This reportage-like impersonal statements, however, are risking the textual boredom itself. Loaded with too many inert facts, the reader would eventually feel bored if there were nothing but those tedious factual statements. O'Brien applies two devices here to keep the text itself from tediousness.

The first obvious device is the juxtaposition of the imaginary part of Jimmy Cross' love. This world of imagination conveys entirely opposite feeling to the war-reality section. The feelings of lightness and purity are emphasized here. The things the young lieutenant carries about of Martha's weigh extremely light; the letters weighing "10 ounces" (3), and the pebble of "a good-luck charm" weighing "an ounce at most" (9). One of Martha's photographs, "an action shot" in a pseudo-battle of "women's volleyball," makes a remarkable contrast with the soldiers in the real battlefield. In contrast to the filthy fatigues of the infantrymen marching in the tropical climate with the full equipment, there is "no visible sweat" and she wears "white gym shorts," clean and light clothing (6). She lives in a safe world where no equipment against enemies is needed. In the midst of the war, Jimmy Cross escapes from the reality to join Martha in this world of imagination:

On occasion he would yell at his men to spread out the column, to keep their eyes open, but then he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending, walking barefoot along the Jersey shore, with Martha, carrying nothing. He would feel himself rising. Sun and waves and gentle winds, all love and lightness.  
(10)

The narrative relaxes the young lieutenant's and the reader's tension caused by being exposed too much to hard-core reality in this way.

This world of imagination, however, is by no means unreal but another aspect of the reality of war. Soldiers spend much time imagining something, like Jimmy Cross and the main character of *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin, a soldier-dreamer whose imaginary trip to Paris covers a half part of the novel. O'Brien, at a panel discussion entitled "Fact and Fiction in the Literature," admits that he was also a soldier dreamer: "For me, most of my service in Vietnam was spent in my head."<sup>16</sup> Imagination functions as a way to escape temporarily from the situation where one can die at any moment.

The second device to avoid textual boredom is the repeated insertions of similar inconspicuous but ominous clauses predicting Ted Lavender's death in the factual reality part. The brief statements such as "until he was shot" or "before Lavender dies," which appear several times before the actual scene of his death, disturb the tedious marching line of the factual description. These clauses are effectively inserted whenever the textual rhythm seems to get at the height of boredom. These insertions also make "The Things They Carried" truer to reality than the basketball scenes in *Going After Cacciato*. "In reality" of the monotony of the war, O'Brien says, is "not so boring as it sounds in the telling because there's an undercurrent of impending doom always there—the next second could be broken by a mortar shell, a booby-trap could be stepped on" (Interview, Schroeder, 141). O'Brien put the feeling of the "undercurrent of impending doom" into words in "Pickup Games,": "Paul Berlin was the first to feel uneasy. . . . He didn't understand it but he felt it."<sup>17</sup> In "The Things They Carried," he creates the truer feeling of uneasiness without using the words, "feel uneasy." The repeated predictions of Ted's death, in the same inconspicuous out-of-nowhere way of a sniper's, render the reader to experience each soldier's psychology as an "undercurrent of impending doom" which is "always there" in the midst of the

uneventfulness. When nothing happens, the soldiers imagine bad situations where they might die at any moment. Ironically, it is against this very underlying uncertainty or "the unweighed fear" that Ted Lavender is "dead weight" (7). The soldiers "hump" whatever they can against their terror of death. This "humping" for security ironically results in difficulty in marching and causes conspicuousness, as an ideal target of snipers.

"On the Rainy River" and most of the latter half of this book are devoted to writing "bad stuff" which is based on the sense of guilt of the narrator's and other soldiers.' Among those stories, "On the Rainy River," "The Man I Killed," "Ambush," "Good Form," and "The Ghost Soldiers" are about the guilt of the narrator himself. "Speaking of Courage," "Notes," "In the Field," and "Field Trip" deal with Kiowa's death from different soldiers' points of views, all of whom feel guilty.

"On the Rainy River" develops the theme of O'Brien's moral struggle over whether to go to the war, which has been an undercurrent in all his former works. The similar rationale behind his agony, reflecting the reality that he was drafted to the war he believes wrong, is noticeable especially in "Beginning" and "Escape" in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. There does not seem to be a great difference between the political stance of the young "Tim O'Brien" in "On the Rainy River" and that of the narrator of the memoir. "On the Rainy River," however, creates a general feeling more complicated than the former work. In "Beginning," O'Brien's mental suffering of fight-or-flee is in general attributed to external factors such as the nation, the politicians, or the draft board. The blame is hardly cast on himself. Even the passage expressing his "intellectual and physical stand-off" and his fear of "inevitable chaos, censure, embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all" is compromised by the appearance of the subsequent message, "I would wish this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows" (32). In "Escape," O'Brien asserts his

political opinions about the war in a heroic manner when he is confronted by the army chaplain. Therefore, the fight-or-flee problem in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* produces a feeling of youthful heroism which is frustrated by the government.

The middle-aged narrator O'Brien in "On the Rainy River" overtly blames his past self, "Tim O'Brien." He never writes about the character "O'Brien" here as a hero. "O'Brien" in "On the Rainy River" reveals more of his frailty in the "moral emergency." "On the Rainy River" uses "O'Brien's" political belief as unrealistic heroism and how his heroism easily collapses before the reality. This is not a story of a hero but is a confession of how the idealistic heroism, the conviction to behave like a hero, "bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit," is failed, face to face with the reality of the draft notice (43). "O'Brien's" sense of justice and his political belief that this war is wrong is overwhelmed by "the raw fact of terror" (47). His intention to flee to Canada, which he thinks is an act of courage, is discouraged not by an external force but by his own emotion. His illusion of courage is totally broken into pieces before his fear of "embarrassment" to be called, "Traitor!" "Turn coat! Pussy!" by the people in his hometown: "I couldn't endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule" (61). The final act of "Tim O'Brien" is far from being a hero but "crying" (62). He concludes this story by a shameful confession, "I was a coward. I went to the war" (63).

"The Man I Killed" and "Ambush" are stories about "O'Brien's" killing a young VC soldier. The former is persistent descriptions of the dead body of the soldier and the narrator's hypothetical biography of the dead soldier. The latter deals with how "O'Brien" killed him. Later in "Good Form," the narrator presents a different version about this killing: "I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough" (203). As Tobey C. Herzog points out, these stories are "very dramatic and personal sections," into which O'Brien "transforms" the chapters such as "Ambush" and "Mori" in

*If I Die in a Combat Zone* to “explore this guilt” (117).

Unlike “Mori,” which vividly depicts how the North Vietnamese Army nurse shot by an American soldier is dying, “The Man I Killed” shows only the final result, the body of the soldier. The latter produces less of the direct feeling of guilt or remorse than the former. However, this story, paired with the next story, “Ambush,” gradually forms the sense of guilt of the narrator. In “The Man I Killed,” the repeated descriptions of the body signifies that this killing is absolute and cannot be undone. With all the solacing words of Kiowa’s, all “O’Brien” does is watch the body. The narrator here inserts a biographical hypothesis of the man he killed. In his imagination, he creates somewhat of a Vietnamese version of “Tim O’Brien” except that this VC avoids being involved in any political issue. In a sense, the narrator is responding by this hypothesis to Kiowa’s question, “You want to trade places with him?” (141) A story entitled “Ambush” appears both in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*. In either story, the narrator kills a VC soldier and confesses the feeling of the killing. The narrator of the memoir confesses that he killed the VC out of fear: “I neither hated the man nor wanted him dead, but I feared him” (102). However, the detailed description of the military strategy of ambush undermines the feeling of fear. “Ambush” of *The Things They Carried*, on the other hand, holds the factual explanation about the ambush to a minimum and concentrates the narrative to the actions of the VC and “O’Brien,” and to how the latter feels, or more precisely, how he does not feel any sentiment, when he throws the grenade. The act of throwing the grenade to the young man is described as done in an “entirely automatic” manner, without feeling any hate, without seeing the man as an enemy, without pondering “issues of morality or politics or military duty,” with “no thoughts about killing.” (148). Later in “Good Form,” the narrator intentionally blurs whether he killed this man or not. What he intends to do is not to make clear about the “happening-truth” but to communicate the feeling of the killing in the

war to the reader as expressed in "Ambush".

"Speaking of Courage," "Notes," "In the Field," and "Field Trip" are related to Kiowa's death in the muck along the river of Song Tra Bong. Among the deaths mentioned in *The Things They Carried*, the death of this Native American soldier in the "shit field" produces a significant impact to any reader accustomed to sanitized war stories. O'Brien comments about writing this event as follows:

I wanted to have an integrated novel in which an episode in one chapter—the shit field business with Kiowa—echoed in later chapters so that the incident of Kiowa's death would carry throughout the book. (McNerney, Interview, 8)

"Notes" suggests why the narrator devotes such a considerable amount of pages to "the shit field business with Kiowa." In this chapter, the narrator reflects upon his past writing, reminded by Norman Bowker's letter of how easily he "made the shift from war to peace" (179). Inspired by Norman's letter, the narrator wrote the first version of "Speaking of Courage," where he omitted "the shit field and the rain and the death of Kiowa," and sent a copy to Norman. The response was, however, "short and somewhat bitter": "It's not terrible...but you left out Vietnam. Where's Kiowa? Where's the shit?" (180-81) The narrator later suggests why he omitted Kiowa's death from the first version: "Kiowa, after all, had been a close friend, and for years I've avoided thinking about his death and my own complicity in it" (182). In the new version of "Speaking of Courage" and "In the Field," the narrative intermingles the scenes of Kiowa's death and the streams of consciousness of Norman Bowker, Jimmy Cross, and the anonymous "young soldier." This interminglement, together with the narrator's suggestion of his own feeling of guilt in "Notes" and "Field Trip," effectively creates a feeling of responsibility or guilt from multiple levels of consciousness around the event of Kiowa's death.

The death of Kiowa, whom the narrator describes as a "close

friend," has special significance in *The Things They Carried*. The deaths of other soldiers such as Ted Lavender, Curt Lemon, and the young VC soldier whom the narrator killed or did not kill, appear more than once in the book. Curt Lemon's death by the mine, especially, has as much impact as Kiowa's. Little or no information is given, however, about those other characters before their deaths are presented, whereas Kiowa is already well characterized before the story of his death in the "shit field" in "Speaking of Courage." Furthermore, the narrator remains impersonal or even becomes antipathetic when he writes about Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon while alive later in "Spin," "The Dentist," and "The Lives of the Dead." For example, in "The Dentist," Curt Lemon is described as someone of negative personality to the narrator with his "tendency to play the tough soldier role, always posturing, always puffing himself up," and therefore, the narrator "found it hard to mourn" when Curt was killed. Instead of expressing his mourning, he tells Curt's story of cowardice "to guard against" the general tendency "to get sentimental about the dead" (95).

By contrast, throughout the book, Kiowa is constantly characterized as a "good man" by American moral standards (186). The narrative has already established an image of Kiowa, before the story of "Speaking of Courage," as a devout Baptist, who carries a New Testament offered by his father, and as a soldier who keeps his sense of moral value undepraved by the war. For example, in "Church," Kiowa protests modestly that their setting up at the almost abandoned pagoda is "wrong," because "it's still a church" no matter what religion it is (136). In this story, he also seriously listens to and responds to Henry Dobbins' story about his vague hope to join in some religious issue, at which other soldiers would laugh away. And most impressively, Kiowa's sympathetic attitude with consoling words in "The Man I Killed" to "O'Brien," who is disturbed mentally by his killing of the VC soldier, is fresh in the reader's memory when he/she knows about Kiowa's death in "Speaking of Courage." Consequently,

the narrative of "Speaking of Courage" and "In the Field" involves the reader into the absurdity of the war, which swallows such a good man as Kiowa up into the darkness of the "shit field."

In "Field Trip," on his return trip to the place where Kiowa died, the narrator describes his feeling about the field.

This little field, I thought, had swallowed so much. My best friend. My pride. My belief in myself as a man of some small dignity and courage. . . . There were times in my life when I couldn't feel much, not sadness or pity or passion, and somehow I blamed this place for what I had become, and I blamed it for taking away the person I had once been. For twenty years this field had embodied all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror. (210)

The book could have ended in this story which appears to be a catharsis for the narrator, by leaving "all the waste that was Vietnam" behind in the "shit field" and concluding, "All that's finished" (213). However, the narrator does not end the book as a mere catharsis. He carries "the waste" back to the book, confessing how his belief in himself "as a man of some small dignity and courage" was transformed into "the waste" in "The Ghost Soldiers."

If the death of Kiowa signify the phenomenal absurdity in which a noble character is sucked into the "shit field," "The Ghost Soldiers" reveals the inner "shit field," inner darkness of human consciousness. This story is about the revenge of the narrator/character "Tim O'Brien" on Bobby Jorgenson, a new medic whose inexperience could not treat his wound properly. This revenge is irrational, in the sense that Jorgenson did not hurt "O'Brien" on purpose and that the medic apologizes to "O'Brien" for his greenness, though not publicly. "O'Brien" here has a grudge not so much against Jorgenson's unskillful treatment as against the subsequent fact that he was sent to the rear. He feels "a new sense of separation" when his former war

buddies in Alpha Company come in for stand-down (221). This childish and irrational feeling triggers his act of "revenge." Looking back his behavior at that time, the narrator confesses the transformation of his personality caused by the war experience:

Something had gone wrong. I'd come to this war a quiet, thoughtful sort of person, a college grad, Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude, all the credentials, but after seven months in the bush I realized that those high, civilized trappings had somehow been crushed under the weight of the simple daily realities. I'd turned mean inside. Even a little cruel at times. For all my education, all my fine liberal values, I now felt a deep coldness inside me, something dark and beyond reason. (227)

"O'Brien" first asks Mitchell Sanders to help him about the act of revenge, but Sanders refuses to give a hand, saying, "Man, you're sick." (228) Azar accepts to help him. Azar is a character opposite to Kiowa. The reader is well informed of his meanness of behavior and bitterness of speech in previous stories such as "Spin," "The Man I Killed," and "Style." Unlike Kiowa, who is "a fine human being" (186) and whose death causes other soldiers to feel guilt, Azar is described as an evil character, as the narrator comments, "Nobody cared for him, including myself" (228). "O'Brien" intends the revenge not to be anything serious which would cause a physical pain but to be a psychological game with a trick which produces eerie sound and light in the absolute darkness. His purpose is to disturb Jorgenson's mind with the terror that he felt while he was helplessly and impatiently waiting for his wound to be properly treated. Hence "O'Brien" does not feel easy to see Azar become more and more enthusiastic about the revenge. While preparing for the revenge, "O'Brien" feels as if he "were gearing up to fight somebody else's war" (229). Although "O'Brien" thinks of giving up the revenge

several times, he cannot control himself: "In a way I wanted to stop myself. It was cruel, I knew that, but right and wrong were somewhere else. This was the spirit world. I heard myself laugh" (234). In this story, the narrator presents the separated self in two ways: The separation between his conscience and his behavior based on an evil part of himself which takes place in the revenge, and the separation of the "genie" figure from his body in the memory of "O'Brien's" near-death experience. He cannot control himself in the revenge, just as he cannot move his body of his own will with his serious wound. All through the act of revenge, "O'Brien's" conscience is aware that he is doing something "evil." Against the conscience, however, "O'Brien's" evil self autonomously controls his behavior as an embodiment of "Nam—the horror, the war" (235). This evil self or a "genie" separates itself from "O'Brien" and goes close to Jorgenson to "read his mind" in terror (236).

The revenge is over for "O'Brien," when he knows that he and Jorgenson shared the same feeling of terror. However, it is not enough for Azar. The leadership of the revenge is now shifted from "O'Brien" to Azar, who does not seem to have any pang of conscience. All "O'Brien" can do is plead with Azar to quit. Azar showers all manners of abuse on "O'Brien's" timidity. Finally, Jorgenson discovers the trick. The narrator discloses the shameful result of this revenge: Azar kicks "O'Brien" in the head, where all his past "education" and "fine liberal values" abides. "O'Brien" has his wound treated by Jorgenson, his mental foe.

The story of "The Ghost Soldiers" not only is an example of how the war changed a soldier's personality but symbolizes the Vietnam War itself. "O'Brien" here is a metaphor of the Americans who conducted the war. They began the war with no definite or realistic motive and could not easily end the war in spite of the consciousness that they were fighting a wrong war. Just as "O'Brien's" leadership is taken over to Azar in "The Ghost Soldiers," the war could not be ended by American conscience but became worse and worse with the

increasing craziness and atrocities conducted by depraved soldiers like Azar. The national heroism of "fine liberal values" to save the world from Communism revealed its fragility.

By creating various forms of "story-truth" or "what seemed to happen," *The Things They Carried* reconstructs what the narrator/author did not actually see or refused to see at the war. He communicates to the reader various feelings, including "bad stuff," which he dared not tell in his previous works. The narrator says in the final story, "The Lives of the Dead," "Stories can save us" (255). As Maria S. Bonn, in her essay on the efficacy of O'Brien's text, concludes, "stories can save us, but through preservation rather than through salvation."<sup>18</sup>

As we have seen in Part II, *The Things They Carried* covers the range of time and space between Vietnam in 1969-70 and U. S. A. in 1990. "The Lives of the Dead" carries the reader farther back to the past in 1956, when the narrator was nine years old and was called Timmy. In this story, the narrator writes about Linda, who was "in love" with Timmy and died of brain tumor at nine years old (258). The narrator writes here about Linda as a girl who is alive in the story, rather than as a dead person: "In a story, miracles can happen. Linda can smile and sit up. She can reach out, touch my wrist, and say, 'Timmy, stop crying'" (265). Telling the stories about dead people, O'Brien appears to be enjoying his life as a writer, who can work a miracle in the reviving of the dead by words. In Timmy's dream, Linda answers his question of what it is like to be dead, "I guess it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading... All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody'll pick it up and start reading" (273). This answer of Linda's also reflects the essence of literature. In this book, *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien connects the past, the present, and the future together. Just as the narrator's withholding of the answers to his daughter's questions about his past in "Field Trip" signifies, this book proposes various questions open to the future

possibilities. Someday Kathleen, who is now the same age as Linda at her death, will meet Linda in his father's book. And further into future, when Tim O'Brien is dead, another young girl will read *The Things They Carried* and will feel the "story-truth" that her history books of "happening truth" cannot tell.

## Notes

1. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (1990; New York: Penguin, 1991) 88; hereafter cited in text.

2. Tim O'Brien, interview, in Gail Caldwell, "Staying True to Vietnam," *Boston Globe* (29 March 1990): 69; hereafter cited in text.

3. Tim O'Brien, interview, in Eric James Schroeder, "Two Interviews: Talks with Tim O'Brien and Robert Stone," *Modern Fiction Studies* 30 (Spring 1984): 136; hereafter cited in text.

4. In his interview with Stephen Kaplan, O'Brien admits that *The Things They Carried* is not defined as a novel in the sense that it lacks "a kind of continuity of plot or of narrative." Nor it cannot be called "a collection of stories," he says, because "all of the stories are related and the characters reappear and themes recur, and some of the stories refer back to others, and others refer forwards." He calls it instead "a work of fiction" or "interrelated fictions."

Tim O'Brien, interview, in Stephen Kaplan, "An Interview with Tim O'Brien," *Missouri Review* 14.3 (1991): 96-97.

5. Tobey C. Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997) 114; hereafter cited in text.

6. O'Brien's essay about this return trip with his girlfriend, Kate, appears as "The Vietnam in Me" in the 2 October 1994 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. He combines two wars in this essay. The one is the Vietnam War, which he fought as a foot soldier in 1969-70. Revisiting the place which was familiar to him as a soldier, he reflects on the war and his experiences both personally and politically. The other war is his spiritual agony over the breakup of the relationship with Kate which took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a few months after the trip. His mental war in the civilian life back in the U.S.A. is ironically contrasted with the peaceful atmosphere of "a Vietnam that exists outside the old perimeter of war" twenty-five years after the war (50-51).

7. Tim O'Brien, interview, in Martin Naparstek, "An Interview with Tim O'Brien," *Contemporary Literature* 32 (Spring 1991): 7-8; hereafter cited in text.

8. Donald Ringnalda, *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 103; hereafter cited in text.

9. Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 254.

10. Stephen Kaplan, *Understanding Tim O'Brien* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995) 175.

11. Catherine Calloway, "'How to Tell a True War Story': Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*," *Critique* 36.4 (Summer 1995): 253.

12. Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973; London: Paladin Books, 1990) 32; hereafter cited in text.

13. Tim O'Brien, interview, in Brian C. McNerney, "Responsibly Inventing History: An Interview with Tim O'Brien," *War, Literature, and the Arts* 6 (Fall/Winter 1994): 24-25;

hereafter cited in text.

14. Lorrie N. Smith, "'The Things Men Do': Gendered Subtext in Tim O'Brien's *Esquire* Stories," *Critique* 36.1 (Fall 1994): 22.

15. Tim O'Brien, "We've Adjusted Too Well," *The Wounded Generation: America After Vietnam*, ed. A. D. Horne (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1981) 206-7.

16. Tim O'Brien, cited in Timothy J. Lomperis, "*Reading the Wind*": *The Literature of the Vietnam War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987) 48.

17. Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, (1975; New York: Delta/Seymour Lawrence, 1989) 92.

18. Maria S. Bonn, "Can Story Save Us? Tim O'Brien and the Efficacy of the Text," *Critique* 36.1 (Fall 1994) 14.

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- Tim O'Brien and Robert Stone." *Modern Fiction Studies* 30 (Spring 1984): 135-64.
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