The requirement of truth as a faithful portrayal of unique experience is the standard most consistently applied to the literature of the Vietnam War. In his discussion of memoirs of the war, J. T. Hansen observes that all the writers he studied shared the objective of "authenticity," an authority based on "knowledge of the war they experienced" (1990, 134-35). Similarly, Donald Ringnalda points out that for the former soldiers, who are the most exacting audience for the Vietnam story, the standard of evaluation is "accuracy, factuality, faithful attention to details" (1990, 65). Nevertheless, as Lorrie Smith argues, verisimilitude has "no inherent value" if the text does not also examine "the cultural assumptions which animate and give meaning to its images" (1990, 90). In The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry theorizes a basis for this discrepancy by explaining that narrative rendition is an integral component of war because the story of war is the exposition of
a special kind of violence: deliberate violence that in turn provokes narrative deliberation. For war is the calculated action of a society rather than the random accident of an individual, and, although war is aggression against singular mortal bodies, its effect, according to Scarry, depends on collective fictive interpretations. War, she contends, is a violent contest in which each side tries to out-injure the other to effect “perceptual reversal” from the premise that “physical damage” is “acceptable and ideological and territorial sacrifices” are “unacceptable” to the opposed proposition that more physical damage is unacceptable and sacrifices of territory and belief are acceptable (1985, 89). Although fighting a war is a matter of personal experience—the effect of weapons on bodies—winning that war, the alteration of a society’s predominant perceptions about its own purposes, is an effect of shared interpretation—the influence of narrative on minds. War, then, inevitably imposes a compromised version on the interpretation of genuine experience, an effect demonstrated by the literary conventions of Tim O’Brien’s If I Die in a Combat Zone (1973). In The Things They Carried (1990), however, O’Brien has addressed the divergence of values—the contradiction between a standard of literary authenticity and the project of moral evaluation—inherent in the “truth” of his first work. Resisting the cultural closure imposed by the traditional war narrative, the postmodern form of The Things They Carried identifies Vietnam as a continuing struggle over representation despite the cessation of military combat.

From his earliest writing, O’Brien, to use the words of one of his more recent titles, has been engaged in the effort to “tell a true war story,” but in so doing he has also struggled to evaluate the attitudes that produced and were produced by the Vietnam experience. Although there is no single defining plot for the American war story, there is in works by such writers as Crane, Hemingway, and Mailer an array of typical motifs: the noble example, the test of courage, the battle as initiation, the collective adventure of the platoon, and the disjunctive return to the civilian world. Too often, however, as Lynne Hanley argues in Writing War, traditional tropes have been turned into formulas through which violence is encoded as a desirable course of action that presents war experience as male, agentless intensification—the chief social activity through which “winners” are determined. The incidents in If I Die in a Combat Zone, O’Brien’s collection of autobiographical essays on his experience in Vietnam, do not vary significantly from the incidents fictionalized in the stories of The Things They Carried, published seventeen years later. But whereas the first book relies on the standard of the representation of truth, the second, by abandoning literary realism, comes closer to presenting a polemic vision that insists on the problematic nature of the Vietnam experience. While the earlier book clearly intends a criticism of war, that
effect is discounted by its reliance on representational codes which annul subversive analysis—especially its characterization of the noble officer, and its preoccupation with the theme of courage—traditional devices which repress the disturbing impact of violence in Vietnam.

The verisimilitude of O’Brien’s memoir is a result of his evident eagerness to communicate with his reader through straightforward description of sensations and emotions, thematic self-revelation, translation of the argot of the soldier, and simple organization based on sequential military events: induction, basic training, arrival in Vietnam, experience of battle, term in the rear, and return to the States. This effort to engage the reader is so powerful that O’Brien frequently presents his own experiences in the second person, as in this description of a helicopter-lift into a war zone:

You begin to sweat. Even the rotor blades whipping cold air around like an air-conditioner, you begin to sweat.

You light a cigarette, trying to think of something to say. A good joke would help, something funny. Laughing makes you believe you are resigned if not brave. (O’Brien 1973, 112)

Through its representation of easily identifiable physical and emotional effects—the chill of apprehension and the desire for laughter to relieve tension—the passage insists that the alien experience of war in Vietnam is directly transferable. In fact, the elision of author and reader, insisted upon by grammatical address in which the perspective of an absent “you” substitutes for direct observation of a participant “I,” is engineered through the presentation of universal and simple correlates of shared experience. This sense of apprehensible truth is reinforced through the soldier’s engaging confession of weakness. Whatever genuine differences may exist between a non-combatant reader and the veteran writer are denied through the narrative production of verisimilitude. And although the insider’s language the author uses to introduce the texture of alternative reality might separate his perspective from that of an outsider-reader, O’Brien cancels this effect through careful translation. “Pinkville,” he explains is “GI slang for Song My, parent village of My Lai—the Batangan Peninsula or the Athletic Field, appropriately named for its flat acreage of grass and rice paddy” (1973, 126). And just as the alien geography of Vietnam can be naturalized for American consumption, so too can the chaotic experiences of the soldier be ordered as events in an identifiable succession of incidents from his introduction to the military to his exit, generally presented as historical movement from month to month.

It has long been acknowledged that realism as a literary form does more than record the texture of a setting or set forth believable characters. According to Leo Bersani, mimetic fiction also constructs “a secret complic-
ity between the novelist and his society’s illusions about its own order . . . by providing [society] with strategies for containing (and repressing) its disorder within significantly structured stories about itself” (1992, 247). That is, to present war as literary “truth” is to destroy its capacity to challenge the very social expectations that may have produced it.

The formal institution of easy assimilation in If I Die in a Combat Zone is reinforced thematically through archetypal representation of the heroic officer and the young initiate. Although O’Brien includes a variety of leaders—the insensitive Colonel Daud; the dangerous, bumbling ROTC-trained Captain Smith; a racist first sergeant fragged by black infantrymen; the maniacal Major Callicles; and the war-loving lieutenant, “Mad Mark”—his most extensive account of an officer is an encomium to Captain Johansen, especially fulsome on the occasion of Johansen’s rotation out of Vietnam:

Captain Johansen was one of the nation’s pride. He was blond, meticulously fair, brave, tall, blue-eyed, and an officer.

Standing bare-headed upon a little hill, Johansen said that we were a good outfit, he was proud of us, he was sad that some of the men were dead or crippled. There was a brief change-of-command ceremony. We all stood at attention, feeling like orphans up for adoption. (O’Brien 1973, 148)

This portrayal records O’Brien’s evident admiration through the characterological codes of superiority—those of breeding and bearing—that do not so much describe an individual as enlist him within the ranks of what Martin Green designates as the “aristo-military caste.”! Thus Johansen’s example extends from personal achievement to public principle. As the generic “officer” of traditional war narrative, he embodies the US military project as a form of fairominded paternal intervention, and the affiliative connection explicit in this passage makes it difficult for the “orphaned” son to write about his valiant father’s war as an instance of personal and political moral hypocrisy. Nonetheless, that is exactly what O’Brien is trying to do in If I Die in A Combat Zone.

The trope for this subversive project is the representation of violence. O’Brien resists the repression of the disturbing “disorder” of the war in Vietnam by revealing the barbarism and carelessness of American power. The display of the battle trophy of a Viet Cong ear as well as the destruction of a peaceful fishing village because of mistaken coordinates for defensive mortar fire are examples which contradict the restraint and concern for others modeled by Captain Johansen’s military authority. But the subversive representation of a violence out of ideological bounds is weakened by the memoir’s preoccupation with the courage war requires. In formula stories of war, violence provides the primary filter, the test of courage, through which mascu-
line character in a war story may be evaluated. Even though O'Brien redefines that quality as Platonic "wise endurance" (1973, 138), his thematic investment repeats the traditional trope of war as the uniquely desirable setting for the ultimate determination of a young man's mettle.

Although O'Brien writes from the perspective of well-grounded ethical and political objections to the Vietnam war, his challenge is discredited by the effect of the formal realism and the traditional narrative tropes of If I Die in a Combat Zone, which transform his memoir into the conventional account of a young soldier within the military tradition. Written almost two decades later, however, The Things I Carried impels radical ethical critique. Through the revision of the devices of realism and the omission of codes of complicity, this cycle of stories exploits conflicting codes of violence to get at the disparate "truths" about Vietnam which involve the depiction of process rather than action.

**Postmodern Morality in The Things They Carried**

The title story of The Things They Carried invokes and revises two key devices of generic war fiction: the structure of dramatic action and the focal representation of the officer. Buried within this narrative is a conventional plot. A platoon of infantrymen from Alpha Company, led by Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, is on a mission to destroy Viet Cong "villes" and tunnels. The seventeen men—among them, Ted Lavender, Lee Strunk, Rat Kiley, Henry Dobbins, Mitchell Sanders, Dave Jensen, Norman Bowker, Kiowa, and Tim O'Brien, characters who recur throughout the collection—are especially uneasy when they discover a tunnel. Standard operating procedure demands that one of their number, chosen by lot, crawl inside and explore before they blow it up, a maneuver literally dangerous and psychologically unnerving. On the day of the story, Lee Strunk is unlucky enough to have to descend. The others, worried for him and uneasily aware of their own mortality, await his eventual reemergence. Although Strunk returns unscathed, Ted Lavender, the most frightened of the group, is later shot while urinating. A helicopter is summoned to remove his body, and the men respond to his death in a variety of ways: relief, humor, hysterical grief, and the destruction of the nearby village of Than Khe.

This imposed dramatic structure of violation and resolution, which makes violent death and chaotic response comprehensible is not adapted by the story, which is, instead, organized as lists of actual and emotional burdens toted by the soldiers. The things they carry include the accoutrements of war, such as steel helmets, which, O'Brien carefully notes, weigh 5 pounds; the particular objects of their military duties, the 23-pound M-60 of the machine gunner or the medic's bag of "morphine and plasma and malaria
tables and surgical tape and comic books . . . for a total weight of almost 20 pounds” (1990, 6-7); and the heavier load of fear and whatever the men rely on to cope with fear, like Ted Lavender’s drugs, Kiowa’s bible, and Jimmy Cross’s love letters.

In Writing War Hanley contends that modern military narratives are suffused with a “‘secret unacknowledged elation’ at the thought of war, with the conviction that war is exciting,”2 and that this style of representation has promoted war as a desirable societal event (1991, 4). But by presenting violence in terms of burden rather than battle through deliberately non-dramatic structure, by stressing the continuous pressure of war rather than the climactic action of combat through the metaphor of weight to be borne, “The Things They Carried” deflates the excitement of traditional portrayal of the violence of the military adventure, and it deflects the ascription of moral purpose to the violent events of war.

Similarly, this story, which foregrounds the reactions of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, obviates his reception as noble example. Jimmy fights the inexpressible fear the men share by obsessing about a girl he wants to love and substituting the banalities of her letters for the reality of Vietnam. After Lavender’s death, Cross digs a foxhole and gives in to uncontrolled weeping. Finally, despite the rain, he burns the letters. Accepting the “blame” for his soldier’s death, he resolves to be a leader, not a lover, “determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence” (O’Brien 1990, 24). He imagines himself, henceforth, an officer in the manner of John Wayne: “if anyone quarreled or complained, he would simply tighten his lips and arrange his shoulders in the correct command posture. . . . He might just shrug and say, Carry on, then they would saddle up and form into a column and move on . . .” (1990, 25). Like the rest of the men, the lieutenant responds to the random violence in largely unproductive ways. He doesn’t set any superior standard because, like the others, he can find no relevant standard to set.

Of course, Lavender’s death cannot be explained or contained by Cross’s pose of heroic responsibility any more than it can be relieved by the unit’s destruction of the “chickens and dogs” and hootches of Than Khe (O’Brien 1990, 16). In “The Things They Carried,” the unplottable violence of the Vietnam experience is structurally contrasted to the assimilable violence of war as popular fiction. In the space between these two opposed representations—experiential disorder, the way the events of war feel to the soldiers in the field, and fictive order, the way popular representations suggest they should respond—emerges the “truth” about Vietnam as a constant process of “humping” or carrying the impossible responsibility of power through a violent landscape.
The proper treatment of this truth, O'Brien suggests, is storytelling. Conditioned as we are to the designations of “fiction” and “non-fiction,” it is easy to imagine that truth and stories are opposite categories. “How to Tell a True War Story,” however, dissolves this relation to allow storytelling to emerge as the pursuit of provisional comprehension. Two scenes of graphic violence organize this effect. The first is the death of a young soldier who steps on a mine during a happy moment; the second is the destruction of a baby water buffalo by his best friend:

1. In the mountains that day, I watched Lemon turn sideways. He laughed and said something to Rat Kiley. Then he took a peculiar half-step, moving from the shade into bright sunlight, and the booby-trapped 105 round blew him into a tree. The parts were just hanging there, so Dave Jensen and I were ordered to shinny up and peel him off. I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must’ve been the intestines. The gore was horrible, and stays with me. (O'Brien 1990, 89)

2. He stepped back and shot it through the front right knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again and Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear. He shot it in the hindquarters and in the little hump at its back. It wasn’t to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much. The whole platoon stood there feeling all sorts of things, but there wasn’t a great deal of pity for the water buffalo. (O'Brien 1990, 86)

The passage continues in this vein. Rat shoots off the tail, then wounds the baby water buffalo in the ribs, the belly, the knee, the nose, and the throat. It is still living when one of the men kicks it, and the group finally dumps it into the village well.

It is impossible to read these two passages without placing them in a causal relationship that induces emotional and political interpretation. The juxtaposition of nature and death is especially shocking. In the first scene the sunlit American boy is wastefully decimated by a hidden explosive device. Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon have just been playing catch with a smoke bomb, turning war, for a few moments of pastoral innocence, into a carefree game. But the Vietnamese have, evidently, broken the rules. An invisible enemy, they not only kill Curt, but cruelly dismember him. Although presented as a kind of hero, Curt is reduced to a substance to be peeled off and scraped away. A similar ironic reversal, Curt’s “wet” and “yellow” intestines are converted from organs of life to signifiers of death.

The second scene is, apparently, a direct result of the first. Rat chooses a symbol of Vietnamese innocence, the ubiquitous water buffalo, which is an emblem of the culture, not an agent of war, and a “baby” at that, to mimic Curt, who has been cast as the momentary emblem of youthful American
guilelessness. The horrific attack on the body of the animal mimics his friend's fragmentation and evisceration. The biblical motto of vengeance, "an eye for an eye . . . ," is literally enacted in a narrative sequence meant to inscribe the sense of just retribution. Revenge, as David Whillock notes, is a common plot device in film treatments of the Vietnam war which attempt to impose the closure "that was not possible" in actuality (1990, 310). This text, however, will not let the imputed causal attributions stand. At the end of the account of Curt Lemon's death, O'Brien appends a narrative interpolation: "But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing 'Lemon Tree' as we threw down the parts" (1990, 89). Dave's humor, probably a means of self-protection, nevertheless deflects an automatic assignment of blame. Similarly, previous details about some of Curt's playful "pranks" disrupt his reception as an innocent character. In the condoling letter Rat writes to Curt's sister he describes a terrifying incident he thinks of as funny: "On Halloween night, this hot spooky night, the dude paints up his body all different colors and puts on this weird mask and hikes over to a ville and goes trick-or-treating almost stark naked, just boots and balls and an M-16" (76).

As a conclusion to the description of Rat's actions, O'Brien condenses the general reaction of the men into another gnomic comment by Jensen: "'Amazing,' Dave Jensen kept saying. 'A new wrinkle. I never seen it before'" (1990, 86). The awful humor of Jensen's song and his appreciative acknowledgment of the peculiar novelty of Rat's performance both undercut the causal efficacy of the sequence, which is, in fact, denied sequentiality by its placement within a fiction organized as an essay on writing the war story. And even while reacting with shock and sadness to the extensive catalogue of assaults on the body parts of the baby water buffalo, a reader may respond with irreverence to the exaggeration of the attenuated murder, an unwilling recognition of the kind of overstatement that signals a gag rather than a tragedy. This subversion of narrative causality is further reinforced as O'Brien alternates accounts of action with lectures on the postmodern tests of a "true war story" "How to Tell . . . " exemplifies: it cannot moralize or generalize, it will probably be obscene and most certainly embarrassing, and it will overturn convictions by muddling oppositional categories of truth and fiction, good and evil, and love and war (77, 84, 89, 90). The effect of the true war story will be to replace certainty with confusion.

As parallel scenes of descriptive violence, the deaths of Curt Lemon and the baby water buffalo are meant to suggest opposed explications of guilt and innocence. But the postmodern sabotage of the codes of reception of these scenes confronts the complexity of moral responsibility, which the conventional war story may evade through the narrative attribution of cause and effect. In "The Things They Carried" Mitchell Sanders contends that the
events of that story imply “a definite moral.” When another soldier responds that he cannot extrapolate a meaning—“I don’t see no moral,” he insists—Sanders counters, “There it is, man” (O’Brien 1990, 13-14). The contrasting presentations of thematic and formal violence in “How to Tell a True War Story”—evocative description set against subversive representation—substitute ethical uncertainty for the accessible “moral” of traditional story-telling.

O’Brien also gives Mitchell Sanders the last word on the slaughter of the water buffalo: “‘Well that’s Nam,’ he said. ‘Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin’s fresh and original” (1990, 86). For R. W. B. Lewis the quintessential American story begins with a renovated Adam in the “Garden of Innocence” located in the geographic region he imagines is a “new” world, a mythic assumption O’Brien disputes in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” Lewis’s Adam is the “hero of a new adventure: an individual emancipated from history . . . standing alone, self-reliant, and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited” (1966, 5). However, O’Brien’s protagonists’ participation in the violence of Vietnam serves to undermine such self-serving illusions of originality, confident self-control, as well as innocence.

For Tobey C. Herzog, in Vietnam Stories: Innocence Lost, the traditional theme of the initiation of a military protagonist into the depravity of war dominates central texts of literature on Vietnam, a premise O’Brien’s fiction significantly complicates. The narrative of war, according to Paul Fussell’s study The Great War and Modern Memory, proceeds in three mythic stages: 1) “preparation” for war, usually based on inappropriate romanticized models; 2) participation in battle, which is “characterized by disenchantment and loss of innocence”; and 3) the resultant “consideration” of the experience of war (1975, 130). O’Brien’s representation of the Vietnam War differs from this pattern, first, in that there is never innocence to be lost. In all three of his accounts—the memoir, his novel Going After Cacciato (1978), and in The Things They Carried—the main character cooperates with the government despite his ethical objections to the Vietnamese conflict because of an inability to face social opprobrium if he does not do so. “It’s not a happy ending,” the narrator of “On the Rainy River” confides, “I was a coward, I went to the war” (1990, 63). Secondly, O’Brien departs from Fussell’s schema in that the dehumanizing preparation for the war in the boot camp in If I Die is coextensive with, not different from, the war itself; for O’Brien the war in Vietnam is the exaggeration of his nation’s basic principles.

Certainly The Things They Carried, like the World War I literature Fussell examined, evaluates the experience of war, but O’Brien’s evaluation is less decisive and more inclusive. According to Wayne Miller in stories of the Great War the conclusion emerges that it is the social system, not the soldier, that is blameworthy: in “a world in which traditional political and social values have
lost meaning . . . one seeks one’s separate peace” (1970, 102). Although outraged by war, the literary doughboy emerges morally intact. The contemplation of violence in the “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” however, does not allow the soldier the illusions of separation from a morally deficient culture or abdication of personal responsibility. Postmodern in execution, this story is a compendium of references to other stories, especially those reflecting contemporary ideological assumptions about war. The setting, an encampment containing a small field hospital alongside a tentful of Special Forces soldiers, recalls two popular narratives of the Vietnam period, *M*A*S*H* and *The Green Berets*, which reflect opposite strategies of assimilation of the violence. The first, a movie and a popular television series still re-running, addressed the need to contain the disturbing reality of death and gore, available to stateside civilians in hitherto unknown quantities via television news. The medics of the *M*A*S*H* unit, whose charge is to repair the bodies of wounded men from the distant front-lines of the Korean Conflict, spend most of their time in eccentric and playful disengagement from the expectations and red-tape of the military establishment. Not only does the medical narrative repeatedly suggest that the physical damage inflicted by war can be repaired by well-intentioned Americans, it asserts through the zany antics of *M*A*S*H* characters that even participants in war, like Hemingway heroes, can maintain separate positions of moral integrity.

The second reference is to *The Green Berets*, the 1967 motion picture concocted by Hollywood and Washington in support of the ongoing war in Vietnam. In this update of John Wayne’s previous roles, violence was not evaded but embraced. The American soldiers under Wayne, a Special Forces colonel, fight decisively and heroically for democracy, confident that the South Vietnamese support their intervention and that the North Vietnamese deserve technologically sophisticated extermination, certainties not universal among actual soldiers. “Missing from this view,” according to Herzog, “are the difficult moral issues involved with war: the moments of self-revelation on the battlefield; the confessions of fear, brutal instincts, and frustrations; and the questions of personal responsibility for violent actions” (1992, 24).

In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” O’Brien inserts an innocent American girl between these twin idylls of denial and endorsement. Scripting an apocryphal military daydream, O’Brien has one of the young medics transport his seventeen-year-old girlfriend from the States to the war. The point of the story is not just that Mary Anne Bell—“this cute blonde just out of high school” (1990, 102)—loses her innocence, but that her loss speaks to the general ethical confusion of the war in Vietnam.

According to Rat Kiley, who narrates her story, Mary Anne’s transformation typifies that of any participant in the war. She begins her visit filled
with dreams and goals dictated by American values: “someday they would be married and live in a fine gingerbread house near Lake Erie, and have three healthy yellow-haired children, and grow old together, and no doubt die in each other’s arms and be buried in the same walnut casket. That was the plan” (O’Brien 1990, 106). Soon, however, the young woman begins to change. Her immitigable curiosity leads her into contact with the Vietnamese countryside and the practices and procedures of both the camp’s medics and its resident green berets. By the end of the second week she has begun to help treat the wounded and later begins to learn the tricks of the military trade. As a result of her new experience, Mary Anne begins to change: “she fell into the habits of the bush. No cosmetics, no fingernail filing. She stopped wearing jewelry, cut her hair short and wore it in a green bandanna” (109). More important than the physical modification is the girl’s characterological transformation. She doesn’t laugh as often, her voice seems to deepen as she talks less but more forcefully, and even her face takes on a “new composure, almost serene, the fuzzy blue eyes narrowing into a tight, intelligent focus” (O’Brien 1990, 109). Mary Anne no longer expresses the same expectations for the future with her lover, whom she leaves in order to participate in the Apocalypse Now-type military exploits of the “Greenies.” Finally, she leaves them, too, crossing “to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill” (125).7

Turning the archetypal tale of a young man’s initiation into the male mystery of violence into the story of a young girl on a whimsical visit opens it to fresh interpretation. The first explanation supplied by the narrator, follows Fussell’s model of the conversion of innocence to experience: “What happened to her . . . was what happened to all of them. You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it’s never the same” (O’Brien 1990, 123). Thus, in a single stroke, O’Brien demolishes the masculine mystique of the violence of war as the litmus test for manhood. But there are deeper implications. Mary Anne’s transformation is the consequence of an appeal that varies among Americans in Vietnam in intensity, but not in kind. She is presumably particularly vulnerable because her circumscribed feminine role as the archetypal American girl-next-door has not allowed her any previous access to “the adrenaline buzz” (109) of the operating theater nor the narcotic “high” of the battlefield: “you become intimate with danger; you’re in touch with the far side of yourself,” like “the effect of a powerful drug: that mix of unnamed terror and unnamed pleasure that comes as the needle slips in” (123). In place of the ideological containment of violence suggested by the M*A*S*H allusion or its sentimental celebration in the John Wayne movie, O’Brien offers an analytic depiction of its appeal that functions, as
well, as a powerful critique of normative American values. Besides the rejection of war as masculine ritual, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” posits a kind of falseness of national experience, especially true of feminine socialization, that accounts for the addictive appeal of the existential authenticity encountered in the danger and physical extremes imposed by war. Mary Anne’s induction into genuine experience is clearly destructive as well as empowering. That she, or any other American, can only encounter personal potential and visionary “truth” in the national practice of institutionalized death is the story’s most disturbing implication. When she accuses her boyfriend of insularity, she expresses a key ethical argument of The Things They Carried: “You hide in this little fortress, behind wire and sandbags, and you don’t know what it’s all about” (121). The concept of innocence—presented as the absence of the experience of moral complexity—is rejected as a legitimate basis for morality.

In the war stories of The Things They Carried Tim O’Brien represents violence in terms of opposing narrative possibilities: the unplottable experience contrasting the implicit order of “The Things They Carried,” the narrative sequence and the postmodern dislocation of “How to Tell a True War Story,” the containing and exploiting myths invoked in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” What emerges is not another ameliorating instance of the “loss of innocence”—war imagined as something imposed on soldiers rather than enacted by them (and us)—nor even a clarification of what is right and wrong. The first story introduces the moral burden of war; the second insists on the provisional nature of the process of ethical inquiry; and the third deconstructs the categories through which such judgments are conventionally assigned: guilt and innocence, self and other, male and female. O’Brien’s contradictory depictions of violence produce the thematic assertion of the moral confusion imposed by the war, and his manipulations of textual conventions violate the comfortable reception of war modeled by its traditional depiction as a test of courage, a mode of heroism, or an assertion of superiority or virtue. Instead, O’Brien’s representational divergence demands the possibly impossible ethical interrogation of the violence of Vietnam.

Like Dave Jensen, the soldier amazed by the originality of experience in Vietnam, critics have been astounded by O’Brien’s apparent newness. His narratives of war have been variously labeled as postmodern; magic realism; “faction,” a combination of fact and fiction; even “fictive irrealism.”8 But these metafictive labels stress his stunning epistemological effects at the expense of his troubling ethical achievement. In “The Vietnam in Me,” an essay published in 1994 on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his tour of duty, he emphasizes the disturbing moral legacy of the American war in Vietnam. In addition to revealing the painful symptoms of his own continuing confu-
sion—isolation, nightmares, depression, suicidal impulses—O’Brien expresses his outrage at the massacre at My Lai by soldiers of Charlie Company on March 16, 1968, two years before he served in the same region. But he reserves his severest condemnation for the moral abdication of the US in reaction to such incidents:

I despised everything—the soil, the tunnels, the paddies, the poverty and myself. Each step was an act of the purest self-hatred and self-betrayal, yet, in truth, because truth matters, my sympathies were rarely with the Vietnamese. I was mostly terrified. I was lamenting in advance my own pitiful demise. After firefights, after friends died, there was a great deal of anger—black, fierce, hurting anger—the kind you want to take out on whatever presents itself. This is not to justify what occurred. . . . Justifications are empty and outrageous. Rather, it’s to say that I more or less understand what happened on that day in March 1968, how it happened, the wickedness that soaks into your blood and heats up and starts to sizzle. I know the boil that precedes butchery. At the same time, however, the men in Alpha company [the unit in which O’Brien served] did not commit murder. We did not turn our machine guns on civilians; we did not cross that conspicuous line between rage and homicide. I know what occurred here, yes, but I also feel betrayed by a nation that so widely shrugs off barbarity, by a military justice system that treats murderers and common soldiers as one and the same. Apparently we’re all innocent—those who exercise moral restraint and those who do not, officers who control their troops and officers who do not. In a way America has declared itself innocent. (O’Brien 1994, 53)

It is the absolute necessity of moral evaluation that is the central issue of The Things They Carried. The moral certainty that assigns absolute righteousness to “us” and complete culpability to “them”—the object of the war narrative—Scarry describes—is precisely what O’Brien’s strategic sabotage of textual certainty in The Things They Carried is meant to forestall. For it is only through the unflinching willingness to evade the consoling simplicity built in to the formulaic war narrative process that genuine responsibility can be attempted. And for O’Brien, author of the war stories in If I Die in a Combat Zone and Going After Cacciato, as well as those of The Things They Carried, it is the telling, the retelling of war stories that leads to the possibility of the scrupulous analysis to which he is committed: “All you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth,” (1990, 91) which is a truth not just of texture but of accountability.

“. . . because truth matters”

Because it supports the narrative project of war, the generic story of war is defined by its uncritical manipulation of events of military violence, and
the pressure towards simplification and closure imposed by the narrative structure of war is also reflected in influential literary criticism of the Vietnam story. Sandra M. Wittman’s *Writing About Vietnam: A Bibliography of the Vietnam Conflict* (1989) has over 1,700 entries, and they are still coming. Yet despite the unprecedented number of texts, which indicate that the question of Vietnam remains vitally open, some important criticism about Vietnam literature promotes the desirability of the military/narrative project of closure. Although Philip Beidler in his 1982 *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* observes the “manic contradiction” and “bizarre juxtaposition” of key works (1982, 4), he evidently distrusts the validity of the resulting characteristic openness these devices introduce. Lamenting the inconclusiveness of American responses to the experience of Vietnam, he demands: “How, then, might one come up with some form of sensemaking for this thing—this experience already cast in the image of some insane metafiction recreating itself in actual life—and in the process find some reason to believe that the effort might be of some literary or cultural significance?” (10). Like Philip H. Melling, and Owen W. Gilman, Jr., he settles the problem by grounding the literature of the American war in Vietnam in similarities to the Puritan and classic literature of early American imperialism in order to locate a “visionary myth” that fixes “memory” of a “Vietnam more real than reality” (85). In fact, Ringnalda describes his *Fighting and Writing in Vietnam* as “atypical” and “dissenting” largely because of his insistence “that the last thing that America needs to do with the experience in Vietnam is to make sense of it” (1994, ix).10

In the literature of past wars, the simplified “sense” of the war narrative has been resisted through literary deployments of the very sense-making apparatus used for wartime propaganda. Hemingway’s concrete prose style deflates the literary pretension of political rhetoric of World War I. World War II, the first war subject to official narration by the publicity industry, is countered through the exploitation of public forms—the extended treatment of a joke, the “Catch 22” of Joseph Heller’s title, and the alternative fantasy of science fiction in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*.11 These operations are ironic in that one code of meaning contradicts another. Because the second code in each case is the alternative source of a truth denied by the dominant code, the use of irony re-introduces the possibility of the complex expression it is the purpose of war to rescind. But because the second code also functions as a site of authorizing definition, irony has not been adequate to the essential confusion of the Vietnam experience. *The Things They Carried* resists both the pressure of sensemaking and the implicit source of sense irony promises.
Vietnam, mediated by the visual narrative of TV news, as Beidler notes despairingly, was received by its combatants in the narrative formulas of television melodrama: “cartoons, commercials, cowboys, comedians and caped crusaders . . . child-world dreams of aggression and escape mixed up with moralistic fantasies . . .” (1982, 11). This mode of reception conforms to postmodernism, the representational practice, which, according to Peter Brooker’s provisional definition, “splices high with low culture,” “raids and parodies past art,” “questions absolutes” and “swamps reality in a culture of recycled images” (1992, 3). The spirit of popularized representation Beidler deplores is actually the basis for the productive postmodern treatments of the Vietnam War by O’Brien.

In “Postmodernism and the Consumer Society” Fredric Jameson designates Vietnam as the “first terrible postmodernist war [that] cannot be told in any of the traditional paradigms of the war novel or the war movie,” witnessing “the breakdown of any shared language through which the veteran might convey such experience” (1992, 176). Vietnam is for Jameson a signal instance of the outer limit of contemporary economic deficiency and social incapacity that it is the painful burden of postmodern art to convey.

On the other hand, Cornell West maintains that for black writers who have had to “come to terms with state-sponsored terrorism” postmodernism may serve, not as the emblem of exhaustion of moral resources Jameson describes, but as a source of social redefinition: “acknowledgement of the reality one cannot not know” (1992, 218). For West as for Scarry, violence provides access to power. Within the narrative structure of war that power is deflected to the service of ideological limitation, but its deployment as a literature of violence treated through the oblique filter of postmodern practice may generate ethical redefinition. In the Vietnam literature of O’Brien the referential sphere of culture is juxtaposed to the experiential sphere of the suffering and death imposed by war. What emerges from the gap between them is indeed “truth,” not the reflection of reality but an invitation to engage in the effort of revision.

Notes

1 In Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire (1979) Green posits that the representation of the feudal British warrior class was modernized in the imperial eras of expansion dominated by merchant classes as the expression of gentlemanly bearing, an ideological middle ground which combined the noble status of inherited privilege with the aspirations of the bourgeoisie at the same time as it obscured military force as the basis of economic colonization.

2 The quotation Hanley cites comes from Doris Lessing’s Prisons We Choose to Live Inside (1987), in which Lessing argues for the open acknowledgement of the pleasurable excitement with which many people respond to the activities of war.
3 Fussell notes the constant trope of the game in World War I. Not only did writers compare battles to football, regiments were encouraged into battle by leaders who supplied balls to kick into enemy territory. “Modern mass wars,” he explains, “require in their early stages a definitive work of popular literature demonstrating how much wholesome fun is to be had at the training camp” (1975, 18). O’Brien’s invocation of this war-as-the-play-of-boys metaphor reverses the assumptions that war, like games, is bound by rules, that winning is what is important, and that the uncomplicated companionship of young males is an important result of military experience.

4 Both of these popular films were adapted from fiction: Robin Moore’s best-selling The Green Berets (1966) and Richard Hooker’s MASH (1968).


6 Herzog argues that the moral ambiguity of the American experience of Vietnam resulted from the special circumstances of the war (1992, 51-59). The isolation of individual soldiers created by the practice of separate assignments to military units, limited tours of duty, and rapid transitions from military to civilian life caused many problems. The every-man–for-himself arrivals and departures to and from field units made difficult adjustments the problem of separate individuals rather than obstacles shared with a supportive group, and the limited tours may have encouraged an emphasis on individual survival at the expense of other goals. Widespread American opposition to the war also contributed to a sense of ethical uncertainty, and the dispersion of the enemy throughout the whole country made observable geographical progress impossible. Similarly, since it was frequently difficult to distinguish between friend and foe in field maneuvers, it was often hard to define what was procedurally correct in many circumstances. The measurement of success in body counts, fired by media coverage and political pressures on commanders, was particularly pernicious. An emphasis on score-board numbers, Herzog argues, “led to inflated claims and, at times, American soldiers’ callous disregard for civilian lives” (53). The media image of the crazed and bloodthirsty American soldier may have contributed to its occasional reality, as did the general availability of drugs and alcohol.

7 Jacqueline Rose’s argument in the title essay of Why War? is that war, the paradoxical attempt to arrive at epistemological certainty, is inevitably uncertain. “Death” she explains, “forces us to acknowledge that what belongs to us most intimately is also a stranger or enemy, a type of foreign body in the mind” (1993, 19). Mary Anne’s conversion seems to literally enact this confrontation of radical unfamiliarity.


9 In Vietnam in American Literature, Melling argues that the “key” to understanding Vietnam is pursuing historical continuity in order to “avoid the dead end of absurdity and the postmodern faith of a surrender to fragments” (1990, xiii, 16).
Gilman in “Vietnam and John Winthrop’s Vision of Community” urges Americans to discover in the experience of Vietnam something like the affirming “ideal” which “vitalized” the Puritans (1991, 139).

Similarly, Kai Tal rebukes four traditional critics for their attempted “total reduction of the war to a metaphor” (1991, 223), comforting in its conformity to previous mythic and historical ideology.

Citing Catch-22, Fussell comments that irony is the “one dominating form of modern understanding” (1975, 34-35). In Wartime: Understanding Behavior in the Second World War, Fussell describes these two texts as primary examples of a literature dependent on a thematics of “blunders” (1989, 31), the ironic exploitation of the distance between right and wrong.

Works Cited


Myriam Miedzian's *Boys Will Be Boys: The Link Between Masculinity and Violence* New York: Douleday.


