

## *The Things They Carried* as Composite Novel

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When Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone* appeared in 1973, critics lauded the memoir and promptly prepared a place for the new author—three years out of Vietnam—in the ranks of the contemporary war writers who were trying to record what was happening in the bloody quagmire in which America, un-

characteristically, found itself mired. Such a characterization seemed borne out in his next two novels; both *Northern Lights* and *Going After Cacciato* were clearly representative of a new literature of the Vietnam experience. But in each of these works there is also ample evidence of his concern with issues broader than a specific war in Southeast Asia: indeed, even early readers recognized that *If I Die in a Combat Zone* was no mere raw emotional record of war experiences but rather “a spare, poetically allusive, and classically toned personal memoir” (Myers 141).

Such an observation suggests the true scope of O’Brien’s interests: in his work there is an abiding concern with the question of battlefield courage, linking him with not only with the best of a tradition of American war writers—Cooper, Crane, Hemingway—but also with the ancients; a more general concern with moral choice and the human capacity for evil which links him to such writers as Conrad (perhaps his most oft-cited influence); and, finally, an explicit interest in storytelling itself, in narrative forms and the power of the imagination, which might connect him to a number of experimental writers, both modern and postmodern. Critics have gradually acknowledged this complexity, and O’Brien has accordingly gained increasing recognition as a writer concerned not only with that war Americans like to think of as so peculiar but also as one whose “fundamental themes . . . grant his work larger, even universal significance” (Myers 141).

O’Brien’s own comments strongly support such readings of his work. In interviews he has cited as influences not only fellow Midwestern soldier-novelist Hemingway, but also Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Joyce. Even more ambitiously, he has acknowledged that “the good writer must write beyond his moment, but he does have to be rooted in a lived-in world—like Conrad, Shake-

speare and Homer" (qtd. in Myers 142). While his own "concerns as a human being and concerns as an artist have at some point intersected in Vietnam" (*Missouri Review* 101), those concerns are perennially human ones—with courage, moral choice, storytelling, "mysteriousness," and the experience of "awakening into a new world, something new and true, where someone is jolted out of a kind of complacency and forced to confront a new set of circumstances or a new self" (*Missouri Review* 99). O'Brien, then, rather traditionally sees the writer as communicating age-old themes that are newly manifested in his particular imaginative world; ultimately he sees his own subject matter as bounded not by the events of one war but rather by the full range of human experience itself.

The veracity of such a claim seems more apparent given O'Brien's broadened scope in his later novels, which are more generally about the American experience. *The Nuclear Age* (1986) is a parody about a nation obsessed with total war and apocalypse; *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994) concerns a husband and wife and the inevitable secrets of married life. But, ironically, it is perhaps in his 1990 publication of *The Things They Carried*—his first full-length return to the terrain of Vietnam in the twelve years since *Going After Cacciato*—that he most fully commits himself to exploring the universal concerns he speaks of so frequently in interviews. In fact, in *The Things They Carried* he is more consciously than ever before coming back to Vietnam with the intention of making it a story about the whole of human experience.

Thomas Myers has claimed with regard to *The Things They Carried* that "in a radically different way from his earlier combat zone narratives, the work depicts Vietnam as both 'this war' and 'any war'" (153). O'Brien would welcome such an observation, for he has maintained that,

despite the general American perception of the war as an anomaly, Vietnam was not really an exception. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, he denies that his war was “especially chaotic and formless.” He claims that the work of earlier writers—he mentions Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Rupert Brooke—has enabled him to acknowledge this fact most fully: “Every war seems formless to the men fighting it . . . We like to think our own war is special: especially horrible, especially insane, especially formless. But we need a more historical and compassionate perspective. We shouldn’t minimize the suffering and sense of bewilderment of other people in other wars” (*Anything Can Happen* 267). Such a statement encapsulates O’Brien’s own commitment to at once capture the unique fury of his own conflict and to communicate it to posterity as something eternally, horribly human.

What is surprising is that he does so most powerfully by moving beyond the battlefield. Readers of *The Things They Carried* are immediately struck its variety of settings—which include not only the killing grounds of Vietnam, but also the small towns and cities of America—and the variety of characters to be found in these settings. Speaking specifically about his unusual choice to place a Midwestern American female in Vietnam in his story “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” O’Brien claimed “it would be more fun, it would be more instructive, it would be more artistic, more beautiful, to include as much as possible the whole of humanity in these stories” (*Missouri Review* 98).

This claim is central to understanding the structure of the work as a whole. For more compelling than any discursive statement about the universal nature of war, or any conventionally presented variety of setting and character, is O’Brien’s unconventional choice of form in *The Things They Carried*. Consisting of short stories

published separately over nearly a decade, but reworked, reordered, and bound together with various additions, the work defies traditional generic distinctions. O'Brien himself has described it as something of an anomaly:

Novels have a kind of continuity of plot or of narrative which this book does not have. But it would be unfair for me to say that it's a collection of stories; clearly all of the stories are related and the characters reappear and themes recur, and some of the stories refer back to others, and some refer forwards. I've thought of it as a work of fiction that is neither one nor the other. (*Missouri Review* 96)

Why this particular form, then? O'Brien has always been distinguished from more pedestrian "war writers" by his technical and stylistic skill, his ongoing interest in metafiction and in the surreal. Yet he was annoyed at having *Going After Cacciato* characterized so strongly as a purely experimental work:

I feel I'm experimenting all the time. But the difference is this: I am experimenting not for the joy of experimenting, but rather to explore meaning and themes and dramatic discovery. . . . I don't enjoy tinkering for the joy of tinkering, and I don't like reading books merely for their artifice. I want to see things and explore moral issues when I read, not get hit over the head by the tools of the trade. (*Anything Can Happen* 269)

Given this explicit attitude, one might infer that O'Brien has chosen or "developed" this form—consciously or not—because it best serves his purpose here.

O'Brien's narrator persona notes in "The Ghost Soldiers" that in Vietnam "we were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth-century science" (229); and it seems that in describing those forces, as well as the universal forces of the human psyche, he felt compelled to move from the established linear form of the novel to something more complex and potentially richer. *The Things They Carried* is, accordingly, best characterized as neither novel nor collection of short stories, but as what Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris have recently defined as a composite novel. Their definition in *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* describes this form as the genre of connectedness: "the aesthetic of the composite novel" is such that "its parts are named, identifiable, memorable; their *interrelationship* creates the coherent whole text" (5-6). O'Brien, it seems clear, is using the composite novel form not for artifice's sake but rather to "explore meaning and themes and dramatic discovery"; and he is writing not just a Vietnam story, not even just a war story (adapting Faulkner, he claims that "war stories aren't about war—they are about the human heart at war" [qtd. in Myers 142])—but rather a story and stories about the whole of humanity, and he has chosen the composite novel as the most appropriate form to do so.

He accomplishes this goal by using the strengths of the composite novel in its ability to link seemingly disparate stories by using some common, recurring focus(es). Here he develops to the full various latent possibilities of relationship in the composite novel: by using setting as a referential field that includes not only Vietnam but also middle America, linking the two together as a psychically united region; by using character in a similar sense, focusing on both a collective protagonist and an emerging narrator protagonist; by making storytelling, the process of fiction making itself, a recurring focus; and finally—in a strategy all his own—by using the

composite novel's heightened possibilities for allusion to make his work part of a broader literary and human endeavor (and for all its alleged novelty, even this seemingly "new" composite novel form is ultimately linked with a tradition, a tradition which O'Brien is tapping into and thereby connecting his work with that larger "historical perspective" of which he spoke).

In O'Brien's return to Vietnam in *The Things They Carried*, then, he shifts to a new form in order to accomplish his broad goal most fully: the composite novel allows him to play with multiple settings, characters, the theme of storytelling, and even allusiveness, in a way that most fully incorporates "the whole of humanity" into his story. Here, using Morris and Dunn's concept as a framework and occasional guide, I want to briefly touch on all of these aspects of the work.

O'Brien has said explicitly that "my concerns as a human being and my concerns as an artist have at some point intersected in Vietnam—not just in the physical place, but in the spiritual and moral terrain of Vietnam" (*Missouri Review* 101). His vision of the war clearly seems to fall within Morris and Dunn's conception of the composite novel that employs setting as a referential field, thereby portraying place as not only "a specific geographical space" reflecting "a common ethos or culture," but also as "less concretely dependent upon physical space and more abstractly dependent upon a historical moment or period" (36).

With regard to the first characteristic, O'Brien's Vietnam is fully a locus *and* an ethos. Indeed, it is so much of an ethos that at times it seems almost a ghost-place, a region of the psyche rather than of Southeast Asia. This characteristic is clear not only in explicit statements about the land being "haunted" (in "The Ghost Soldiers," 229) and even "*talking . . . the fog too,*

and the grass and the goddamn mongooses" (in "How to Tell a True War Story," 81), but also in O'Brien's implicit sense of the cultural depth of the country; his sensitivity to the mysterious otherness of Vietnam, and the tragedy of America's failure to recognize it, is revealed in such short vignettes as "Church," in the personal history that makes "The Man I Killed" so poignant, and in the fitting metaphor of the centuries-deep cultural quagmire the US so blithely wades into in "In the Field."

But O'Brien uses the structure of the composite novel to emphasize more clearly the second characteristic, that which portrays place as less a physical phenomenon and as more "abstractly" dependent upon a specific historical period. Implicit in his comment about the "moral terrain" of Vietnam is the fact that this terrain necessarily includes the United States, for his moral experience in that country was profoundly, definitively shaped by the fact that he was there as an American soldier; the word "Vietnam" in his statement encompasses not merely one place but also a time, an enduring moment in *our* national history, one which spanned the seemingly insurmountable geographical boundary of the Pacific and linked two radically different countries in one horrible experience (and O'Brien has insisted that he cannot write about the war as anything but an American, cannot but superficially attempt to portray what it was like for the Vietnamese people—"The Man I Killed" may be as close as he comes to trying to do so). Today many Vietnamese immigrants to this country rightly criticize Americans for still failing to recognize that their country is not a war, but a place; for O'Brien as for many other veterans, however, it was and remains quite inseparably both.

The structure of the composite novel allows O'Brien to connect Vietnam and America more radically than he might have done in a "conventional" novel, to

depict artfully the radical connection of the seemingly disparate countries. The first (and eponymous) story, "The Things They Carried," establishes this connection in its first sentence, which links First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross to "Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey" (3). The foxholes of Vietnam and this collegiate world in the urban American Northeast are bound together inexorably, and the rest of the story—despite its largely "factual" tone—will suggest that all of what these men carry through this foreign place is ultimately attached to America, whether it be supplies from "the great American war chest," "sparklers for the Fourth of July, colored eggs for Easter," (16) or the bonds of emotion. And "Love," which follows immediately after, suggests that the bonds run both ways through space, and through time as well; set in Massachusetts, the story depicts Jimmy Cross and O'Brien's narrator persona perhaps a quarter century later, remembering Vietnam by remembering the girl from New Jersey.

Similar connections are established regularly throughout the work, next—in another explicit act of remembrance—in "On the Rainy River," where the narrator persona leaps back in time from some indeterminate postwar present to the summer before his entry into Vietnam; before he tells any more about that bloody tropical place he must tell about small-town America and the placid, cold northern woodland that is the border of Minnesota and Canada. Having done so, he leaps back into vignettes set again in the war itself (though interspersed with more letters home; e.g., Rat Kiley's in "How To Tell a True War Story") before attempting what is perhaps his most radical connection of the two countries, in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." Almost midway through the book, this story goes further than any other in drawing America into this violent ghost-place, Vietnam. The war's seduction of Mary Anne Bell, a young

girl fresh from Cleveland, bespeaks the fundamental involvement of even the most seemingly innocent Americans in this setting. After a few weeks in the country, she wants "to *eat* this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country. . ."; and by the story's end, she is in fact "part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and her necklace of human tongues" (125).

Then, after O'Brien delves as closely as he might into the Vietnamese experience of the war in "The Man I Killed," he again shifts the next lengthy story in space and time, back to America and after the war. In "Speaking of Courage," Norman Bowker is the returned veteran living in the small town Midwest in the silent aftermath of Vietnam. The ennui of his life here seems diametrically opposed to the anxiety of life in the war; yet, once again, the two experiences are part of the same whole. The ennui of the war itself has been evident in other tales, and the drama of the war intrudes here—in Iowa—as he remembers the night of Kiowa's death. And throughout this story, the lake Bowker circles both serves as the centerpiece of his current mundane existence and suggests the horror of the boggy field, which is only gradually revealed to the reader.

Indeed, in this story and in "Notes," "In the Field," "Good Form," and "Field Trip," O'Brien reveals a single event through glimpses of Norman Bowker's life in 1975 Iowa, the murky "present" of the narrator persona in Massachusetts, the wartime past of Alpha Company, the narrator's Massachusetts present again, and then a few months more into that present—but back in Vietnam. These four adjacent stories, perhaps more comprehensively than any others, encapsulate the scope in space and time of the work as a whole. But then O'Brien, after briefly returning to the familiar (in "The Ghost Soldiers" and "Night Life," two more stories set in the conflict itself) performs his most drastic expansion of

place and time at the very end of *The Things They Carried*, in "The Lives of the Dead." Here the narrator persona begins by recording his first exposure to death in Vietnam, but uses this tale as an occasion to frame his very earliest experience of death. In doing so he returns again to his prewar Minnesota, but not to the time of "On the Rainy River" — no doubt just a few months prior to this incident — but rather to an utterly pre-Vietnam era, 1956, and his childhood. His first exposure to death on the battlefield becomes an occasion to reflect on the common human experience of death, whether it come in a napalmed village in wartime Southeast Asia or in the movie theaters and shopping malls of the peacetime United States. O'Brien here uses a radical shift of setting to suggest finally a truth that transcends place, but only after he has masterfully used the composite novel to render the boundaries between America and Vietnam fluid, to merge both together as not just a "physical place" but also "spiritual and moral terrain," to depict aspects of the experience of a whole American generation, and — even more broadly — that of the whole of humanity.

The previous discussion of setting suggests another manner in which the collected stories in *The Things They Carried* unite to form a composite novel: through their development of both, on the one hand, a clear "collective protagonist," and, on the other, an "emerging protagonist" — a narrator persona who is apparently Tim O'Brien but who is in fact, as the reader discovers, largely invented.

Morris and Dunn define the collective protagonist as "either a group that functions as a central character" or "an implied central character who functions as a metaphor (an aggregate figure who . . . may be . . . archetypal . . .)" (59). In this work the applicability of the first definition seems quite clear; the title, after all, is con-

cerned with a “they” that seems quite clearly delineated in the dedication to the “men of Alpha Company.” Yet given O’Brien’s statement regarding the appropriateness of including women in the war in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” and the nature of the work itself, we might extend the concept of the collective protagonist even further. The composite novel structure necessarily works against assigning any character a “minor” status, and, as we have seen in the previous examination of the complexities of setting, these stories are painfully inclusive of civilians as well as soldiers—indeed of as much of the whole of humanity as O’Brien can squeeze in. Therefore, not only Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, and Kiowa are central characters here, but also Martha, Elroy Berdahl, Mary Anne Bell, even Linda (the first and last names in this list—in the first and last stories—suggest that *The Things They Carried* is as much a story about love as it is about war).

Perhaps a similar observation might also be made regarding the development of a “single” archetypal protagonist here—something like the disillusioned veteran of Hemingway’s *In Our Time*—but there is a clearer and more undeniable focus on a shifting persona who is a sort of Tim O’Brien. Morris and Dunn observe in many composite novels “a narrator-protagonist as the focus and significant element of interconnection,” (49) and such is clearly the case in *The Things They Carried*. The author has confirmed in interviews what his narrator persona says at the beginning of “Good Form”: that, other than the fact that he is a writer and a former foot soldier in Quang Nai province, “almost everything else is invented.” Indeed, even as he writes this “I invent myself” (203).

While this ongoing invention serves to unite the various stories here, it might not necessarily entail any sort of positive progression. The narrator persona is a

shadowy figure at best, one hard to pin down in space and time; he is perhaps more accessible in telling about himself in the past than he is in talking "bluntly" — as he says he will in "Good Form" — in the present. He is a figure who is at once seemingly honest and idealistic (his claim that "this is true" runs like a refrain throughout the work), but also cowardly — as in "On the Rainy River" — and crassly vengeful — as in "The Ghost Soldiers."

He is also a writer who gives credit to his sources, and in doing so reveals how even in developing this single protagonist O'Brien again bears witness to the experience of the whole of humanity. The work begins with "The Things They Carried," one of the few stories here told entirely in third person; there is no "I" or even "we" here. But immediately following, in "Love," Jimmy Cross — whose story has just been told — comes to visit "me" at home after the war and to tell another story about Martha. The narrator-protagonist has entered *The Things They Carried*, and will remain for almost the duration; but almost always he speaks in collaboration with other storytellers, such as Mitchell Sanders (whose tale is essential to "How to Tell a True War Story") and Rat Kiley (who relates the bulk of "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" and others), even Norman Bowker. "Speaking of Courage" is in third person but is immediately followed by "Notes," which gives credit for the preceding story to Bowker; and this almost confessional story is in turn followed by a third and final third person narrative. "In the Field" shows the narrator — almost certainly — as a young, frightened "boy" (186) amidst a group of not much more secure men, including — once again — Lieutenant Jimmy Cross.

Indeed, this recurrently collaborative storytelling function almost implies an emerging *collective* narrator-protagonist, and suggests as much about O'Brien's concept of narrative as it does about his notions of character.

It is noteworthy that in the text itself, in "The Man I Killed," O'Brien writes of his Vietnamese victim: "He knew he would fall dead and wake up in *the stories of his village and people* [emphasis added]" (144). O'Brien sees *The Things They Carried* as to a large extent the story of his own village and people, and so gives his characters their fair share in the telling. As he claims in his essay "The Magic Show," what the writer must do, like the shaman, is to summon "a collective dream" among his people (178).

In some sense, then, the emerging narrator-protagonist of *The Things They Carried* is radically inseparable from the collective protagonist; and yet in "The Lives of the Dead," the focus moves from the men of Alpha Company back to the individual narrator-protagonist Tim, to a quite personal story of his youth in Minnesota. Moreover, this final piece is equally a story about storytelling, about "Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story" (273). As such it, along with the other complexities of narrative touched on above, suggests a third focus that unifies the work: storytelling itself.

Morris and Dunn claim that storytelling, "the process of fiction making" itself, can become a unifying focus in the composite novel (88); as the previous discussion of the narrator-protagonist indicates, in this metafiction such a process is clearly at the center of the narrative. Indeed, "How to Tell a True War Story" may have been an even more appropriate title story for the collection than "The Things They Carried"; not only it but also "Spin," "Ambush," "Notes," "Good Form," and "The Lives of the Dead" explicitly discuss this particular form of truth-telling, and all of the stories here do so implicitly.

O'Brien's explicit concern with talking about storytelling here, in fact, ultimately calls into question the extent to which he is making up stories at all. His meta-

fiction confuses traditional genre distinctions, so that Dan Carpenter can suggest *The Things They Carried* "evokes the hyperintense personal journalism of Michael Herr and the journalism-as-novel of Norman Mailer," but is in fact both fiction and nonfiction, even "an epic prose poem of our time" (qtd. in Kaplan 190). O'Brien would certainly be pleased with any such suggestion that his work is, far from being merely "postmodern," in fact in the tradition of great modern—and even classical—writers. He has cited the influence of not only Faulkner and Joyce but even Homer in conveying to him the sense of "nonlinear time, the experience of one's life as jumps and starts" (Myers 144); and he has indicated his belief that the great stories are those that are continually "retold" and thereby "carry the force of legend" (156). Even Morris and Dunn speak of the composite novel as achieving the very effect of which O'Brien speaks, precisely by returning to the form of "the sacred composite, the epic cycle, and the framed collection." It is in fact this classical conception of storytelling—if his theme is that of the *Iliad*, his form is that of the *Odyssey*—which most fully allows O'Brien to unite his "Vietnam" stories with the whole human experience, not only with humans alive at this time and place in Viet Nam and America, but all those living and dead.

O'Brien's notion of the writer-shaman summoning a "collective dream" suggests his view that storytelling itself is by nature communal. His entire collective-metaphorical technique here is perhaps a way of getting at larger cultural and human truths. In Mitchell Sanders's tale about a "talking" Vietnam in "How to Tell a True War Story," in the tale of the man who "would fall dead and wake up in the stories of his village and people" (144) in "The Man I Killed," and in the generations-deep quagmire of "In the Field," it is clear that O'Brien senses something like an alien collective unconsciousness

in Vietnam, a mysterious cultural psyche that is known—albeit only partially—through talk and stories. What he does with the new yet ancient form of the composite novel is to tap into some of the established myths of his *own* culture. In short, he alludes to older stories, stories which bespeak both his own tradition and the perennially human heart—and particularly those told in this century through the form of the composite novel. O'Brien's commitment to the stories of the past, to the dead as well as the living, is established by the beginning epigraph from a Civil War diary (also by a former sergeant from the Midwest, as Philip Beidler notes [37]). But his commitment to a small pantheon of great moderns can be established by briefly examining his allusions—both thematic and formal—to three writers for whom he has repeatedly expressed admiration: Conrad, Hemingway, and Joyce.

O'Brien has expressed his disappointment with the majority of films purporting to chronicle the war in which he served, but he admits an at least partial admiration for *Apocalypse Now*, which places a mad Colonel Kurtz at the end of a river deep in the jungles of Southeast Asia. The idea of enacting *Heart of Darkness* during the Vietnam conflict was, then, not a new one when O'Brien wrote "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," but it certainly seems to be one he draws from with a power all his own. As noted previously, he has spoken repeatedly of Conrad's influence on his work, which is thematically evident throughout all of *The Things They Carried*. But it is concentrated in "Sweetheart," and with the brilliant adaptation of not only shifting the setting to Viet Nam but also of characterizing the corruption of a Kurtz who is not a merchant or colonel, but rather an archetypally innocent American female. Although *Heart of Darkness* is obviously not drawn from a composite novel itself, the composite novel form allows O'Brien to—in the middle

of a "longer" work—echo one of the greatest works of twentieth-century short fiction.

Carpenter referred to *The Things They Carried* as "an epic prose poem of our time," but doubtlessly O'Brien also had in mind one of the great American composite "war" novels of our era: *In Our Time*. The newer work parallels Hemingway's account of the generation that fought the first great war of this century both in its overall form and in individual stories. "Speaking of Courage," featuring a tired veteran returned to his small Midwestern town, almost certainly echoes Hemingway; as Steven Kaplan notes, "Norman Bowker's dilemma is . . . remarkably similar to that of Hemingway's character Krebs in the story "Soldier's Home." Neither of these men returning from war can tell his story" (189).

Yet while both here and throughout the work O'Brien follows his great predecessor in searching for a definition of courage, he "asserted early in his career that his conclusion could not be a mere restatement of Hemingway" (Myers 144). In his novel *Northern Lights*, for example, there are some forty pages of parody which echo *The Sun Also Rises* (much to the dismay of critics); and while *The Things They Carried* is, fortunately, tainted by nothing so distracting, it is not impossible that O'Brien is reacting to Hemingway even in "On the Rainy River." O'Brien has stated that the story is a dramatization of the "moral schizophrenia" he felt during the summer of 1968, but that its plot and setting are entirely invented. He saw the river as a concrete means of putting his character "on the edge" (*Missouri Review* 95-6); but it is also difficult to read the story, set in the woods of the northern Midwest and climaxing in a fateful fishing trip, without thinking of "Big Two-Hearted River." The loquacity of O'Brien's narrator persona here, however, could not be further removed from the reticence of Nick Adams and his creator; and his open-hearted, anguished

concern about the war is emotionally at opposite poles from the ideal of "grace under pressure."

Though he may call Hemingway's ideals into question in "On the Rainy River," O'Brien ultimately emulates the great example of *In Our Time* in this story, in "Speaking of Courage," and in his utilization of the very form of the composite novel. Given the parallels between his theme and that of Hemingway, his choice to do so is hardly surprising; the imaginative leap from World War I to the Vietnam conflict was perhaps even less difficult to make than that from the jungles of Africa to those of Southeast Asia. But in his final story O'Brien moves from his concern with moral corruption and war to one even more universally human: death. In doing so he sets in 1956 Minnesota a brief tale that alludes to another tale in the most surprisingly alien setting yet—turn-of-the-century Ireland. At the close of *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien establishes a connection to another of the great composite novels of the twentieth century, Joyce's *Dubliners*.

Like Joyce's "The Dead," O'Brien's "The Lives of the Dead" comes at the end of his work and establishes the ongoing presence of the dead in the lives of the living. An individual death in wartime Viet Nam, which introduces the story, is linked in the narrator persona's mind with the death of a young girl in his childhood, in peacetime Minnesota. O'Brien's story, like Joyce's, is one which is about both death and first love, and suggests that the two are necessarily bound together; just as for Gretta Conroy the love of Michael Furey is bound up with his death, so too the narrator Tim O'Brien cannot think long of death without thinking of his innocent love for lost Linda. Both stories also suggest that what O'Brien called the "whole of humanity" somehow includes "all the living *and the dead* [emphasis added]," as Joyce would say; and the contemporary writer knows

that the ranks of "the dead" now include Joyce himself. O'Brien's allusiveness to *Dubliners*, to "The Dead" and the literary tradition Joyce helped to establish, bears witness to this conviction.

And, fittingly, in this last story O'Brien concludes *The Things They Carried* not only by shifting settings and bringing in the character of Linda (who has perhaps been with the narrator all along), not only by once again alluding to the broad literary tradition he seeks to emulate, but also by presenting his strongest vision of storytelling itself. In his essay "The Magic Show" he has discursively suggested something of this vision:

The process of imaginative knowing does not depend upon the scientific method. Fictional characters are not constructed of flesh and blood, but rather of words, and those words serve as specific incantations that invite us into and guide us through the universe of the imagination. Language is the apparatus—the magic dust—by which a writer performs his miracles. . . . Beyond anything, I think, a writer is someone entranced by the power of language to create a magic show of the imagination, to make the dead sit up and talk, to shine light into the darkness of the great human mysteries . . . (177)

This vision of the writer again suggests his earlier claim that in Vietnam the United States was fighting forces that twentieth century science could not understand, and that he is committed to exploring the nature of those forces as fully as he can. But even more so it suggests again his vision of the shaman who by telling stories summons "a collective dream"; here, too, O'Brien links storytelling to religion, citing not only the shaman

but also Christ as a storyteller and miracle worker in one (177). Writing is, he claims, essentially an act of faith, a way of exploring “that which cannot be known by empirical means” and moving toward “epiphany or understanding or enlightenment” (179).

This vision of the role of the writer is perhaps what most fully elevates O’Brien from mere “war writer” to speaker to and for the whole of humanity. And this language, in both “The Magic Show” and in “The Lives of the Dead,” seems allusive again in that it is almost Joycean. The narrator persona here closes in an act of grand affirmation of the powers of the writer to transform lives, to raise the dead, sounding “like a Vietnam version of Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus” (Myers 154). Certainly throughout the story—when he speaks of the writer for whom “memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head”—he echoes young Stephen’s vision of himself in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a “priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of ever-living life.”

Finally, then, “The Lives of the Dead” ties together all of the focal elements—setting, protagonists both collective and emerging, storytelling, allusiveness—which O’Brien has been working with all along to bind *The Things They Carried* together as composite novel. The richness and complexity of this book—and the composite novel form—make it difficult to determine where one focal element ends and another begins, where one can examine setting without examining character, or examine an “emerging protagonist” without examining storytelling, and so on. But O’Brien is pleased to have it so, it seems; as many of his statements indicate, he rejects the rigorously analytical vision of the real for one that allows more room for mystery and relatedness. In writing *The Things They Carried*, he has posited his own vision of the

real, not just of his experience in Vietnam but of perennial facets of experience that belong to the whole of humanity. □

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