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Mfs

TIM O'BRIEN'S "TRUE LIES" (?)

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"If you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages.
Or read a different book."

—Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*

This epigraph appropriately introduces my article that, like O'Brien's 1994 novel, ends with questions rather than answers. As the plot of *In the Lake of the Woods* unfolds, the anonymous narrator-biographer presents evidence and hypotheses concerning a murder mystery, but he leaves unanswered, for himself, the characters, and readers, a key question: did the central character murder his wife? My article also contains hypotheses and evidence related to a mystery—a literary one—and intentionally ends without the solution.¹ In order to explore why O'Brien frequently introduces narrative deception and contradictions (lies) into his novels, I examine this author's disconcerting habit of mixing personal and historical facts and fictions in his works. Also related to this blurring of fact and fiction is O'Brien's occasional tactic, in both his writing and public forums, to draw attention to his narrators' and his own unreliability.

Admittedly, some critics and readers—no doubt strongly supported by O'Brien—would claim that it is possible to appreciate and understand his work without knowing why O'Brien and some of his narrators deceive or how such deception affects readers. Furthermore, they would

be justified in arguing that a novelist is not obligated to be truthful in his writing or in discussions about his life. For me, however, as a reader, critic, and interviewer of O'Brien, questions about his truthfulness and accuracy remain intriguing and, more to the point, are directly and indirectly invited by the author. While there are no clear answers, my essay explores this mystery through the presentation of background, evidence, and hypotheses concerning this mystery.

Background²

As evidence of some readers' reactions to O'Brien's propensity for creating literary lies and narrative unreliability, particularly in *The Things They Carried* (1990) and *In the Lake of the Woods*, let me describe an incident with one of O'Brien's listening audiences. Almost twenty-five years to the day after Seymour Hersh broke the story about the massacre at My Lai 4, South Vietnam, in *The New York Times* (13 November 1969), Tim O'Brien visited Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. He was in the midst of his book tour for *In the Lake of the Woods*, which also examines events at My Lai. But instead of a public lecture on his latest novel, O'Brien began his evening presentation to an audience of students, faculty, and townspeople, including some Vietnam veterans, with what he labeled a "personal war story." As he told (not read) this story, O'Brien recalled his difficult decision to enter the United States Army despite his strongly held belief that the war in Vietnam was wrong. "Certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons," he explained, using his oft-repeated refrain. He went on to describe his summer of 1968, the time immediately after his graduation from Macalester College and subsequent receipt of a draft notice. The internal conflict surrounding his moral dilemma—avoid induction by fleeing to Canada or serve his country by entering the army—culminated in his trip to the Rainy River, which forms part of the border between Minnesota and Canada, where O'Brien was compelled to choose his future.

O'Brien told his story with such detail and emotion that those unfamiliar with his books were hooked, emotionally drawn into what they believed to be Tim O'Brien's life. However, a few of us in the audience who were familiar with his story "On the Rainy River" from *The Things They Carried* were uneasy. Would O'Brien be honest with his audi-

ence and tell them that most of the events in this so-called personal war story were not factual but were simply part of his detailed summary of this published story, a fictional story with a fictional narrator who happens to be named Tim O'Brien?

At the end of his storytelling, O'Brien paused as the Wabash audience nodded knowingly at the story's conclusion: Tim O'Brien had chosen to enter the army, to fight, and not to flee across the river into Canada. Then, after a dramatic pause, O'Brien confessed: the story was made up; he had lied to the Wabash audience—well, sort of. Real life soldier-author Tim O'Brien had indeed considered fleeing to Canada in the summer of 1968, and the thoughts, questions, and fears of the real man did mirror those of the fictional narrator in the story. Yet the incidents on the Rainy River, so realistically described, simply did not occur in O'Brien's own life. The result: after the reading, some audience members expressed their frustration to me about O'Brien's seemingly unnecessary lie. For example, a few veterans, who perhaps came with unrealistic expectations, felt manipulated by O'Brien's presentation of this "personal war story." Wanting to bond with him, they expected their fellow veteran to share some of his actual war-related experiences. Other audience members, present to hear O'Brien read from his fiction, felt tricked without understanding the purpose for this deception. Their trust of him as a person and as an author was undermined.

This act of fusing lies and facts, memory and imagination, and fiction and reality (in O'Brien's terms "story-truth" and "happening-truth") in his public life is common for O'Brien. He has often told these literary lies, followed by a confession, in college classes, public readings, interviews, and even in his own books.³ Just as often, O'Brien has vigorously defended this narrative deceit as an effective technique for introducing listeners to the complex intermingling of facts, fiction, truth, lies, memory, and imagination underlying all of his writing and inherent in creating fiction. As he and other writers have noted, all fiction writers are literary liars; deceit is fundamental to their art. But O'Brien, unlike many writers, draws an inordinate amount of attention to this authorial deceit in a very self-reflexive manner, and his deception is often personal. His narrative tricks accentuate postmodernist notions that contemporary fiction writers are preoccupied with the fictive nature of their works and the self-exposure of their invention.

Despite the praise of readers and critics alike for O'Brien's skills as a novelist, not everyone is willing to forgive O'Brien his falsehoods and narrative artifices in the name of art. For example, one reviewer of O'Brien's 1990 novel *The Things They Carried* dismisses O'Brien's artistic defense of narrative deceit by disparagingly referring to this tension between fact and fiction, narrator reliability and unreliability as "overly disingenuous game playing" (Bawer A13). If the reactions of some of the Wabash audience are any indication, O'Brien's occasional game playing also disappoints some readers and listeners. They want to hear "real" war stories, want to know the facts about the "real" Tim O'Brien, or want to hear "pure" fictional stories without being distracted by tangential questions of fact or fiction regarding the author's life or the lives of his characters. Their subsequent dissatisfaction may be attributed to this writer-storyteller's failure either to distance himself completely from the story or to place himself firmly in it. These literal-minded readers approach O'Brien's stories conditioned to expect either fact or fiction, but not both, in a story. Consequently, O'Brien, through his literary tricks, creates confusion in these readers' minds about whether details in the story emerge from O'Brien's memory or imagination. Ultimately, not trusting O'Brien's or a narrator's confession that a story is made up, the readers may believe that the fictional story is indeed firmly rooted in O'Brien's personal life and merely another manifestation of his controlling personality and intrusive authorial presence. Such a reading or listening situation destroys the illusionary nature of fiction and prevents the audience from leading "another" imaginary life. And, in Wolfgang Iser's terms, they are unable to be "with and simultaneously outside [themselves]," a desirable "doubling" that responds to a human need and contributes to reader enjoyment of fictional stories (312-13).

Not surprisingly, O'Brien frequently responds to such reader uneasiness by suggesting that this narrative deception is in the readers' best interests. As an author, O'Brien is quick to point out that undermining a reader's comfort level and expectations is one of the goals of his art, a goal consistent with postmodernist notions of elusive truth and angles of reality. He also argues that ultimately questions related to facts about his life and the factual consistency or inconsistency of characters and events in his books—all happening-truths—are insignificant and should not interfere with readers' enjoying and identifying with his works.

According to the author, these desirable responses occur when readers focus on the collective emotional truths (story-truths) contained in his short stories and books ("Tim O'Brien Interview" 98-99). Moreover, as O'Brien privately admits, readers intent upon understanding the who, what, and why of O'Brien's personal life as son, soldier, and author will find themselves embarking on a seemingly impossible journey (94-95). It is a quest that, if his interviews and magazine articles are any indication, O'Brien himself appears to be struggling to complete. This journey is also one on which he claims not to want a lot of company, especially his readers. Instead, he would suggest that just as mystery and ambiguity are integral elements of his successful novels, a similar uncertainty is an inevitable and desired aspect of his public and private life and contributes to his own creativity.⁴

Despite the pitfalls and O'Brien's warnings that sorting through the facts and fictions of his life and works is misdirected, this interest for his reading and listening audience in replacing mystery with certainty and inconsistency with consistency is inevitable. More often than not, such interest is paradoxically invited by the very author who discourages it. O'Brien is, perhaps, one of America's most accessible contemporary writers. He regularly grants interviews and shares glimpses of his life and craft during numerous readings, lectures, classroom discussions, book tours, public radio sessions, and writers' workshops. The obliging O'Brien seems sincerely interested in having people like him and in giving brief glimpses into his personal life that often link with his writing. A typical situation occurred in August 1998 when O'Brien allowed a reviewer from *The New York Times* to accompany him and his girlfriend of two years on a trip to his hometown of Worthington, Minnesota. Part of the visit included an excursion to a nearby gambling casino. For the resulting published interview and review of O'Brien's latest novel, *Tomcat in Love*, reporter Bruce Weber described O'Brien's entrance into the Mystic Lake Casino where he pulled a "wad of \$100 bills from his tennis shorts, strode to the \$200-minimum-bet blackjack table and within minutes, maybe three cigarettes into a long night, was playing with \$2,000 of the casino's money" (B1). Almost four weeks later, in one more example of an intermingling of fact and fiction in O'Brien's life and writing, O'Brien's short story "The Streak" appeared in *The New Yorker*. This story describes a husband and wife's honeymoon trip to a lakeside gambling

casino where a once-in-a-lifetime winning streak at the blackjack table exposes tensions in their marriage. Such a blending of fact and fiction leads to unavoidable questions about O'Brien's life and about the autobiographical nature of all his books and short stories.

But O'Brien can get even more private in his use of personal experiences as raw material for his writing. For example, in a controversial October 1994 magazine article for *The New York Times Magazine* ("The Vietnam in Me"), O'Brien mixes personal narrative about a visit to Vietnam in February 1994 with confessions about his subsequent mental state, his contemplation of suicide, and the traumatic break-up of a relationship with a Harvard graduate student a few months after their return from this trip. For some readers, this excruciatingly frank self-examination is welcomed and admired; others find it contains more personal information than they want to know about O'Brien. Yet, once again, the structure, some of the content, and the confessional tone in this magazine article conspicuously parallel elements in his novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, particularly the central character's and fictional narrator's confessions and psychological trauma. This novel, which O'Brien admits is his most personal, was about to be published when the magazine article appeared ("Tim O'Brien Interview" 107). Further complicating readers' uneasiness with and curiosity about the fact-and-fiction games in this work is O'Brien's intentional commingling of historical events and people associated with the My Lai massacre with fictional characters and details.

These instances of amalgamation—travel narrative with tangentially related personal confession in a magazine article, and personal and historical facts with fiction in a novel—strengthen some readers' resolve to learn the details of O'Brien's life and to probe narrative unreliability in his stories.

Evidence

Let's examine a few more significant examples of narrative games that, depending on one's point of view, contribute to or detract from the integrity and quality of O'Brien's books. These games rely less on O'Brien's intermingling of his life with his fiction and more with his manipulation of literary devices. Beginning with O'Brien's first two books, the nonfic-

tional *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973) and his novel *Northern Lights* (1975), readers discover the first rather innocuous examples of O'Brien's persistent narrative tricks. In his widely acclaimed war autobiography, O'Brien shapes a series of twenty-three carefully crafted vignettes that together contain many incidents from his Vietnam War experiences, along with his reflections on this war. He presents them within a form marked by a jumbled chronology and fictional techniques of dialogue, scene setting, dramatic heightening, imagery, and symbolism. The fictional devices so dominate the factual events that early publishers of the book had difficulty deciding whether the content was indeed fiction or nonfiction.⁵

Another early example of O'Brien's gamesmanship—in this case a parody of content and style—appears in O'Brien's first novel. In discussing the book's obvious origins in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, O'Brien comments on his intent and its outcome: "I was trying to parody Hemingway. I wrote the book not knowing it was going to be published. I was just a beginner, and I was sort of having fun with it, so I tried to spoof *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, and I thought I did a pretty neat job of doing the spoofs, but unfortunately good literature should be more than just *gamesmanship*, and I think there is too much *gamesmanship* in that book" ("An Interview" 3; emphasis added).

Fifteen years later, in 1990, O'Brien's readers encounter a more personal and complicated form of gamesmanship and literary lies in his critically acclaimed novel *The Things They Carried*. Some critics and readers, despite their enthusiastic praise of the book, object to the author's manipulative style and the presence of "too many fact or fiction games;" they question how much of the material is straight autobiography from soldier-author Tim O'Brien and how much is invented.⁶ In this novel, written as a war autobiography, author O'Brien invents a soldier-author-narrator also named "Tim O'Brien" to tell stories of his life and Vietnam War experiences, to narrate war stories about others from an omniscient point of view, to transmit stories told to him by other soldiers, and to comment (from this invented author's point of view) on the art of storytelling. The book's resulting form and content have intrigued and puzzled readers. Is the narrator the same person as the real author; in other words, could "Tim O'Brien" be an ironic pseudonym for Tim O'Brien? If not, why is the narrator named Tim O'Brien? Did the real

O'Brien, like the fictional author-narrator in one of his stories, travel to the Rainy River to decide his fate concerning the draft? Does the real O'Brien have a daughter? Are some of the stories in *The Things They Carried* factual, based on the war experiences of soldier O'Brien or on war stories he heard in Vietnam? Are the content and the form of the book more examples of O'Brien's proclivity towards a "disingenuous game playing" that detracts from his writing, or do these narrative strategies contribute to the overall artistic success and emotional impact of this work, thus promoting O'Brien's notions of uncertainty and story-truth?

O'Brien's response to these specific questions is consistent with his previously noted comments about happening-truth and story-truth: the fact or fiction debate should not be an issue. Instead, readers should focus on the emotional truths (story-truths) of the stories themselves. Supporting such a viewpoint, the fictional author-narrator Tim O'Brien describes his reason for mixing facts and fiction: "But it's not a game. It's a form. [...] I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth" (203). Moreover, the real O'Brien notes that despite the similar names and many of the same characteristics he shares with the fictional narrator, "[the narrator] isn't really me" ("An Interview" 9). Such a denial, however, does not end the controversy or satisfy some readers' curiosity: Why, then, did he use the Tim O'Brien name for his narrator? Author O'Brien responds to this question by describing a significant moment—when composing *The Things They Carried*—in his life and in his writing career: "A month into the writing of the book [...] I found my name appearing" ("Staying" 74). Gail Caldwell continues, "After about an hour of writing he began to 'feel' the words and stories in his 'stomach' and in his 'heart' as a result of writing and reading his name in the manuscript." According to O'Brien, this magical moment of his writing life and his real life intersecting became an important influence on this book and resulted in his decision to continue using his name ("Staying" 74).

In describing this creative use of his own name, author O'Brien emphasizes, through the words "feel," "stomach," and "heart," the essence and role of story-truth at the core of his writing. Nevertheless, throughout *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien uses more than just his own name in developing his fictional narrator's background and personality.

Readers familiar with the facts of O'Brien's life will find numerous parallels between his life and that of his fictional author-narrator: Minnesota childhoods, Phi Beta Kappa graduates of Macalester College, graduate students at Harvard, negative attitudes toward war ("certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons" [44]), and literary accomplishments.

Even more intriguing are the inconsistencies in the narrator's details about his postwar life that correspond to similar inconsistencies in O'Brien's comments about his own transition from soldier to civilian. For example, in the chapter titled "Notes," which comments on fellow soldier Norman Bowker's problems with postwar adjustment and eventual suicide, the narrator Tim O'Brien describes his own relatively smooth adjustment to civilian life after the war: "A nice smooth glide—no flashbacks or midnight sweats" (179). Several chapters later in "Field Trip," however, he undercuts this earlier assertion by noting that his years of guilt and loss of direction after the war were alleviated only after a return to the place in Vietnam where friend and fellow soldier Kiowa died: "In a way, maybe, I'd gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I'd finally worked my way out" (212).

Over the years, author-soldier O'Brien has also given contradictory responses to questions about his own postwar adjustment. In a 1990 interview, he uses words similar to those of the fictional Tim O'Brien in describing his postwar emotional adjustment: "I came home happy to be alive. No dreams, no midnight sweats, none of that stuff. For a while I was smug about it—that I didn't suffer" (Lyons 51). Five years later, while discussing from a very different angle this same issue of his postwar adjustment, O'Brien emotionally describes the verbal manifestations of his all-consuming postwar guilt, a guilt he shares with his character John Wade in *In the Lake of the Woods*. O'Brien confesses: "I wake up the way John Wade wakes up, screaming ugly, desperate and obscene things. [...] That 'Kill Jesus' refrain that appears throughout the book—that sense of self-hatred [...] comes from my own soul; it isn't a made-up refrain. It is a real one out of my own life" ("Tim O'Brien Interview" 107).

O'Brien's comment about this autobiographical link with character John Wade is but part of his fact-and-fiction gamesmanship and intentional narrative confusion. Readers of *In the Lake of the Woods* may well wonder who is telling the story of John and Kathy Wade, the "I" of

the elaborate 133 footnotes in this novel. Is this unnamed soldier-author-narrator, like the soldier-author-narrator of *The Things They Carried*, a fictional voice who reveals some details about his life and writing that, coincidentally or intentionally, mirror those of the real Tim O'Brien? Or, despite some obvious fictional details and techniques, is this primarily the voice of the real Tim O'Brien commenting on his own life: a composite of the real O'Brien of the nonfictional *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, the soldier-author Tim O'Brien of numerous interviews with critics and reviewers, and the "I" of O'Brien's confessional travel piece published in *The New York Times Magazine*? Is author O'Brien once again engaged in more narrative deception with this unnamed narrator of *In the Lake of the Woods*, or is he, in fact, speaking directly to his readers? As one more complication, why do O'Brien and the book's main character John Wade share some key biographical details, as well as startling confessions about the pervasive role of love, deceit, and guilt in their lives?⁷

As one might expect, definitive answers to these questions are elusive, but certainly a strong possibility exists that the unnamed narrator of this novel is a composite of the real Tim O'Brien and a fictional character who might even be an extension of the quasi-fictional narrator in *The Things They Carried*. Suggesting the presence of his own voice, O'Brien in an interview focusing on *In the Lake of the Woods* admits to using "footnotes from my own life" in this novel ("Things" 69), and several of these passages seem easy to spot as the narrator speaks directly to his audience. For example, in footnote 67 (146) the narrator describes his recent trip to Vietnam with stops at the Son My Memorial and a visit to Thuan Yen. Such a description corresponds with the details of O'Brien's own 1994 return to Vietnam recounted in *The New York Times Magazine*. Also, footnotes 88 (199) and 127 (298), which contain the narrator's account of his Vietnam War experiences and feelings of battlefield terror and evil, echo similar material found in O'Brien's war autobiography, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*; in the *Times* magazine article; and in interviews where O'Brien confesses how his combat experiences led to rage and guilt in his post-war life.⁸ Again, O'Brien muddies the narrative waters. He does not want readers to resolve this tension between the real words of soldier-author O'Brien mixed with the invented words of an unnamed soldier-author. Rather, he would again urge readers simply to accept these coincidences and to focus carefully on the hearts and

minds of this fictional narrator-author and John Wade.

But in following O'Brien's urgings, readers encounter more tantalizing links between the real O'Brien and the fictional author-narrator. This unnamed narrator finds himself embarking on two epistemological quests that he seems incapable of abandoning. One fulfills this author-narrator's stated purpose for his book; the other an unstated purpose. The first is to know his literary subject John Wade: "What drives me on, I realize, is a craving to force entry into another heart, to trick the tumblers of natural law, to perform miracles of knowing" (*Lake* 101). The second, perhaps the more difficult task, is to know his own heart, which requires his moving beyond the surface details of John Wade's life and into his own buried life to unlock the dark secrets of his soul and to confront his own acts of deceit. With an intriguing but also further complicating echo of fictional author-narrator Tim O'Brien's words during the visit to Kiowa's grave in *The Things They Carried*, this author-narrator confesses in a footnote that "in a peculiar way, even at this very instant, the ordeal of John Wade—the long decades of silence and lies and secrecy—all this has a vivid, living clarity that seems far more authentic than my own faraway experience. Maybe that's what this book is for. To remind me. To give me back my vanished life" (298). The narrator ultimately fails in his quest to know definitively "the implacable otherness" (101) of John Wade and to discover the answers to the disappearances of the husband and wife. Yet the narrator succeeds in confronting some of the dark secrets in his own life: "I have my own secrets, my own trapdoors. I know something about deceit. Far too much. How it corrodes and corrupts" (295). For this narrator, the ultimate fascination of John Wade's life is that in Wade's experiences and character the narrator sees so much of himself, including sins of inaction and deceit, the failure of memory, and the overwhelming influence of the need for love in shaping his actions.

Based on the evidence of a consistent pattern of literary and biographical gamesmanship and deception, the obvious question again arises: could author Tim O'Brien be so fascinated with the hearts and minds of both John Wade and the unnamed narrator in this 1994 novel because of their close connection to his own confrontations with emotional trapdoors and secrets about family, love, war, guilt, courage, and deception? Is O'Brien speaking directly to his readers through the narrator's con-

fessional footnotes? Could O'Brien be writing this book to give him back his own vanished life? O'Brien seems to address these questions. In a 1995 interview he confesses that the "dynamic of withholding" in his own life was "at the center of [*In the Lake of the Woods*]." "And I magnified it radically in the book, so that huge things were being withheld. Nonetheless, [the book] was confessional in the way that it was extremely personal" ("Tim O'Brien Interview" 107). These factual, psychological, and emotional links between author O'Brien and his fictional characters in this novel are too obvious to ignore.

Hypotheses

The evidence, much more than circumstantial, demonstrates that these narrative tricks—elaborately conceived and artfully presented—repeatedly surface in O'Brien's public life as well as in his writing. If, however, as O'Brien notes, "good literature [and I might add good lecturing] should be more than gamesmanship," the important questions remain: why do these fact-and-fiction tensions have such a prominent place in O'Brien's books, his interviews, and even his public readings; and why does O'Brien so openly draw attention to these games? Are they examples of inconsequential tricks that confuse and anger readers, ultimately detracting from rather than enhancing the success of the novels and the readers' experiences? On the other hand, does this narrative ambiguity and tension between truth and lies, memory and imagination contribute substantially to readers' positive engagement with the books and lead ultimately to the books' literary success? The possible answers range from the simple to the complex, from disingenuous to ingenious games, and from playful revenge to personal introspection. Like O'Brien's fictional author-narrator of *In the Lake of the Woods*, who offers eight "Hypothesis" chapters containing speculations on the separate disappearances of John and Kathy Wade, I, too, present eight hypotheses related to O'Brien's self-reflexive use of mystery and deception in his life and in his works.

Hypothesis 1: Humor

"Maybe it was something simple" (*Lake* 53). Possibly these narrative and biographical games are a manifestation of O'Brien's well-known sense of humor carrying over into his writing, or a literary joke, like his earlier Hemingway parody. O'Brien, mixing the facts and fictions of his life with those of his characters, becomes a literary trickster playing a seemingly harmless game of hide and seek with his readers, one that readers should enjoy rather than take too seriously. Just as O'Brien confesses that he uses a lot of "ordinary armchair psychology" in *In the Lake of the Woods* to complicate the motivations for John Wade's actions and lead readers astray ("Tim O'Brien Interview" 100-01), so he introduces several facts from his life into his books to keep readers confused and to enhance the mystery surrounding his life. Perhaps he is having a bit of fun at the expense of literal-minded readers who expect art and life to be separated neatly or at the expense of "tabloid" readers who constantly query him about his life rather than his art.

Hypothesis 2: Revenge

"The purest mystery of course, but" (*Lake* 23) on a darker level, these narrative games might be soldier-author O'Brien's intentional but subtle revenge on "civilian" readers, a possibility raised by Milton Bates in *The Wars We Took To Vietnam*. In commenting on unreliable narrators (a storyteller who gives conflicting versions of events) in Vietnam narratives, Bates observes that, along with other soldier-authors, O'Brien may be consciously or unconsciously attempting "to settle an old score with the reader. We recall [soldier-author] Larry Heinemann's avowed purpose in writing novels about the war: 'It's more polite than a simple fuck you'" (253). This score for these American soldier-authors is simply making the experiential distinctions clear between "us and them," those who served and faced the dangers of war and those who did not. In the process, these writers emphasize that the latter can never possibly know what fighting a war is really like and intentionally draw attention to this division between veterans and civilians. This desire for revenge may occur despite many of the soldier-authors' philosophical opposition to the Vietnam War. Thus, narrative confusion and ambiguity in O'Brien's

war narratives heighten this separation between veterans and civilians and create the aura of an inside war story for those who fought in Vietnam at the expense of the uninitiated readers. Consequently, some of O'Brien's tricks may become part of a reproach. He has used smaller scale reproaches in his fiction; for instance, in "How to Tell a True War Story," the fictional soldier-author Tim O'Brien belittles a female audience member who misinterprets one of his war stories, saying, "You dumb cooze" (*Things* 90). Such a motive at a purely experiential rather than at an ideological level may exist for O'Brien, even though this soldier-author opposed the Vietnam War and still feels guilty for participating in it. If true, these narrative games suggest the depth of his conflictive psychological responses to serving in Vietnam—satisfaction with his skills and competence as a soldier but guilt over the circumstances under which this experience occurred.

Hypothesis 3: Artistry

"What happened maybe was" (*Lake* 111) that at a more serious and sophisticated artistic level, O'Brien may have intentionally created these fact-and-fiction games to enhance his writing and to illustrate his process and goals for creating fiction. Consequently, this narrative deception is an integral part of his art, not of his life. As O'Brien reiterates in lectures and interviews concerning the relationship between his books and his life, the key question for readers should be whether or not the content "rings true" rather than whether it is literally true. Stories should be judged not by their literal truth but by other criteria. As discussed earlier, foremost among these is O'Brien's creative principle of story-truth as opposed to happening-truth, a distinction specifically addressed in *The Things They Carried*, as well as in many of his lectures and interviews. To produce happening-truth, an author simply recalls facts associated with events and people, perhaps from his own life. In contrast, story-truth requires an author's use of imagination to transform facts and reveal emotional truths transcending the limits of his or her memory and these facts. The artistic goal for such creation is described by the fictional author-narrator of *The Things They Carried*: "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (203). Such words echo a passage from Norman

Maclean's autobiographical novella *A River Runs Through It* in which a father talks to his oldest son (the story's narrator and also a writer) about storytelling: "You like to tell true stories, don't you? [...] After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don't you make up a story and the people to go with it? Only then will you understand what happened and why" (104).

In some ways, then, O'Brien's story-truth, a truth aimed at the reader's gut rather than at the mind ("A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" [*Things* 84]), is also a version of T. S. Eliot's objective correlative—an emotion presented through concrete objects or events. For O'Brien, like Eliot, the important aspect of the creative process is for an author to convey a true emotion to the reader through the details, not to emphasize the details used to create that emotion. Accordingly, O'Brien invents and embroiders material based on some of his own experiences to make himself and his readers feel core emotions of hatred, peace, love, loss, horror, confusion, anguish, and wonder—to get a "quick truth goose" from the stories (39). Some critics might view O'Brien's extensive use of his personal history as a creative shorthand or a failure to achieve aesthetic distance. Nevertheless, this technique allows O'Brien to draw upon his own emotional intensity and bring it to his writing about these key experiences in his life with the hope that readers can share in it. As a result, readers should focus on the end of the process, a higher order of emotional truth, rather than on the means, the details.

In telling a good story with story-truth at its core, O'Brien is obviously not unique in conveying material from his own life into his fiction. In fact, American author John Cheever once noted that good fiction is "crypto-autobiography" (qtd. in Lynn 140). For example, readers of Hemingway's war fiction and non-fiction, who also are familiar with his war experiences, encounter occasions when the author takes events from World Wars I and II and transmits or transforms them in his writing and sometimes in his conversations. Facts are mingled with fiction, both in his life and in his writings.⁹ Readers of British literature can find another striking example of narrative fact-and-fiction confusion intentionally created by an author. The tortuous tangle of facts, heightened facts, fictions, and emotions from the life of World War I soldier-author Siegfried Sassoon challenges and mystifies readers of both his fictional

autobiographical trilogy portraying the life of George Sherston—*Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, and *Sherston's Progress*—and of his own three-part autobiography—*The Old Century*, *The Weald of Youth*, and *Siegfried's Journey*. As one critic notes, "The blurring between fiction and memoir occurs famously with Siegfried Sassoon, who writes the 'memoirs' of George Sherston and also his own. Sherston is clearly not Sassoon, but the overlap is considerable and both sets of memoirs can be seen as versions of one body of material" (Parfitt 142). Finally, within this context of authors creating "crypto-autobiography," continuing with the Cheever connection, we might view O'Brien's narrative games and confusion in light of a comment from Cheever's son Benjamin about his father's habit of mixing fact with fiction in his personal letters: "My father's interest in telling a good story was greater than his interest in what we might consider the facts" (qtd in Lynn 139). For O'Brien, this "good story" is one that has story-truth at its core; happening-truth is of minor significance.

Hypothesis 4: Introspection and Catharsis

Drawing upon Parfitt's observation about "versions of one body of material," we might construct another reason for O'Brien's mixing facts from his own life with fiction: personal introspection and catharsis. One writer describes O'Brien as a "confessor, a scab-scratcher, a ceaseless self-examiner" (Weber B4), and as the fictional Tim O'Brien notes in *The Things They Carried*, "Telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat. Partly catharsis, partly communication" (179). As such, this narrative game playing may become for the real O'Brien one of the most important goals of his storytelling, allowing him to explore recurring subjects from different angles, especially subjects from his own life ("The angle shapes reality" [*Lake* 288]). Therefore, readers should not dismiss too quickly the importance of this self-reflective purpose for these narrative games. For example, as noted earlier, when the fictional Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* presents the confessional thread of his autobiography, revealing his heart and mind, readers of O'Brien's other works and his interviews recognize that the real O'Brien and narrator Tim O'Brien are preoccupied with many of the same issues—flight from war, courage, embarrassment, cowardice, fear, death,

revenge, guilt, and healing. While soldiers in all wars have confronted these issues, for O'Brien they have a particular and lasting relevance that continues into his civilian life.

Many of these moral, philosophical, and emotional issues first appear in O'Brien's nonfictional war autobiography *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and reappear in the subsequent novels. In *The Things They Carried* and *In the Lake of the Woods*, however, O'Brien views them from new angles and with much more story depth and emotional impact. For soldier-author O'Brien, the factual events from his life transformed by his imagination become opportunities, in part, for personal heuristic exercises. He is able to explore events years after the fact, imagining alternate possibilities, reaffirming previous decisions, and recovering key emotions. For the novels' narrators and their creator O'Brien, the confessions, fictional or real, exorcise guilt—a way, as the fictional Tim O'Brien notes, to "relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams" (43)—or indulge it. The narrators' moments of introspection are also emotional releases for them and for author O'Brien, opportunities to cut through the emotional numbness that the war has created in them so that all can feel again. These stories made up of facts from O'Brien's life and fictional details heat up the story-truth and allow readers and even the author to feel what the characters and the real O'Brien once felt, the most important quality of a story.

Thus, in *The Things They Carried*, the fictional Tim's analysis of his process of creating a story reveals similarities to author O'Brien's storytelling, as this fictional writer describes how he begins with details from his life and then allows imagination to take over: "The memory-traffic feeds into a rotary up in your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a thousand different streets. As a writer, all you can do is pick a street and go for a ride, putting things down as they come at you" (38). For readers, this extended metaphor suggests a significant artistic process; for the real author O'Brien it describes the workings of his own mind and heart in exploring and re-examining his life through a combination of fictional and real events. Such a creative process and its goals of self-reflection are again set forth by the fictional author-narrator of *The Things They Carried*: "I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't. Yet [...] it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me

through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others" (179).

Hypothesis 5: Uncertainty

"Maybe this" (*Lake* 217): the confusion and mystery surrounding these games of fact and fiction and unreliable narrators can also be explained in terms of closure—or in this instance, absence of closure or certainty. As Milton Bates suggests, O'Brien, like other authors, "distrusts narrative closure because it violates our experience of life" and because it ignores the realities of the Vietnam War (252-53). What Bates describes, in part, is a postmodernist denial of absolute truth and finality, as contemporary writers embrace uncertainty within moral, aesthetic, psychological and experiential contexts. These authors, such as O'Brien, continually explore the elusive nature of truth and reality. As O'Brien observes, "What's really true is not a philosophical thing; it's a plaguing thing. What does somebody really think? Does she really love you? And if she does to what degree? [. . .] If you say you're committed and later you're not committed, well, was the first thing commitment? [. . .] This kind of thing has always interested me" (Weber B4). Bates's quote also contains a standard of realism for the self-described "realist" O'Brien. For author O'Brien and the self-examiner O'Brien, uncertainty and ambiguity are inherent in his characters' lives and his own; absolute truth and closure are impossible; reality is determined by the angle from which events, the self, and others are viewed: "Everything that I am doing flows out of the life I have led. And the life I have led is a life of finding it hard to distinguish within myself and without what's true and what's not. [. . .] These are epistemological questions, in part, but they are also life questions" ("Tim O'Brien Interview" 97). For author O'Brien, the narrative lies and confusion in his writing become mirrors of these life questions and the elusiveness of truth.

For soldier-author O'Brien, these questions about personal truth and domestic reality are present in domestic lives, as well as inherent in another subject of so many of his books—the experience of war: "In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself,

and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (*Things* 88). Within the war environment, this absence of certainty in establishing boundaries—between facts and fictions, memory and imagination, truth and lies in O'Brien's own life and in the lives of several of his characters—becomes an important formal and thematic device. The resulting narrative confusion and contradiction heighten readers' sense of the chaotic nature of war in general and of America's experience in the Vietnam War in particular. As numerous historians and cultural critics have observed, many Americans characterize the Vietnam experience as a formless, murky, contradictory, fact-and-fiction filled war. Lies, deception, linguistic obfuscation, conflicting angles of reality, unclear military goals, shifting boundaries, an elusive enemy, often demoralized and confused American soldiers, and America's eventual retreat from Vietnam have contributed to a widely embraced perception of this war as a postmodernist paradigm resisting attempts at sense-making and closure.¹⁰ Therefore, in a strange McLuhanesque way, O'Brien's medium does become the message of his war narratives. Their form and content are intricately intertwined, as confusion and unreliability are inherent in writers' and readers' responses to this war.

Hypothesis 6: Reader Involvement

Maybe, then, these formal and thematic mysteries and ambiguities also become a rhetorical strategy as author O'Brien consciously turns them back on the reader. Readers are forced to become part of the storytelling as they grapple with questions of fact and fiction, discover their own changing perspectives on events, and perhaps become involved in their own creative process to achieve closure. They also begin to understand the underlying purpose of O'Brien's war stories: to make readers feel rather than know; to involve them in the book's story-truth rather than to distance them from it. O'Brien's novels become what reader-response theorist Stanley Fish might label "dialectical texts" (37-40). Rather than presenting absolute truths and a static reality, these books lead readers to create their own story truths, to view events and meaning from changing angles, and to accept multiple possibilities for outcomes.

Hence, the argument can again be made that O'Brien's narrative tricks are artistically purposeful rather than purposeless, ingenious rather

than disingenuous. They are integral elements of his books' form and content as this author forces readers to explore the elusiveness of truth; the integrity of literary lies; the nature of storytelling; and the relationship between memory and imagination, fact and fiction. From a literary perspective, O'Brien succeeds brilliantly as a novelist because his writing is rooted in experiences and ambiguities that lead to important questions for readers about the human heart and mind, as well as essential questions about reality and fantasy. In pondering these questions, O'Brien and his readers arrive at some story-truths about O'Brien's characters and even about the author, but not the answers. "Absolute knowledge is absolute closure" (*Lake* 266), a closure that for author O'Brien undercuts the purpose and attraction of storytelling for both the teller and the audience. It is also a closure that soldier-civilian-author Tim O'Brien resists because it would end his own introspective journey, along with the reader's self-examination.

Hypothesis 7: Ego

The various hypotheses presented so far for O'Brien's narrative deceptions and contradictions seem plausible and, in many cases, are supported by O'Brien's own arguments. For the most part, these literary lies are true lies without a question mark. Cynical readers know, however, that one more possibility exists for these lies—one more self-centered, one directed toward the demands of the market place, one involving O'Brien's ego. Without O'Brien's words to guide me with this hypothesis, I journey deeper into speculation. Could these games partially result from O'Brien's efforts to draw attention to himself, to keep reminding readers that behind the magical worlds of the novels is the artful and powerful magician-creator? Without the trickster there are no tricks; without the author's life, emotions, and confessions there are no stories. Is it conceivable that a writer would consciously deflect attention away from his work onto himself in order to massage the ego, attract reviewers' attention, or sell books? Does O'Brien again provide some evidence to answer such a question? Why else would O'Brien, in telling the true story of his return to Vietnam in 1994 in an October 1994 edition of *The New York Times Magazine*, turn a travel narrative into such a personal confession that it opens up portions of his life that many

readers simply don't want to know about? Perhaps on O'Brien's journey of self-discovery, for which he claims not to want a lot of company, he does want his reading public to join him. Author Tim O'Brien is fascinated with and haunted by the mysteries of his own heart and mind, and on a literary level he wants his readers to be fascinated also. Consequently, the narrative games, in addition to having their serious literary and cathartic purposes, could ensure that many readers would follow along. Possibly this form of disingenuous game playing is the ultimate manifestation of this author's art and vanity inextricably linked. These deceptions may be true lies with a question mark.

Hypothesis 8: A Warning

"If all is supposition, if ending is air, then why not [. . .]" (*Lake* 299). What is the definitive answer to the question, why does Tim O'Brien lie and confuse? Alas, I may be like the unnamed author-narrator of *In the Lake of the Woods* who is left with only his hypotheses and evidence for his characters' mysterious disappearances, but no firm answer: "Nothing is fixed, nothing is solved. The facts, such as they are, finally spin off into the void of things missing, the inconclusiveness. Mystery finally claims us" (301). I have presented hypotheses and supporting evidence for the purposes behind O'Brien's deceptions and lies. Perhaps, the best answer to the original question might be very simple: O'Brien plays these games with the facts and fictions of his life and the lives of his characters for all of the reasons stated above—with some obviously being more significant than others. You are left to your own speculations if you need closure to this question of Tim O'Brien's True Lies (?); keep in mind, however, this final cryptic advice from O'Brien: "[. . .] there's an almost super sophistication built into our response to printed literature that seeks the unfindable, the ulterior motive. The world is sometimes simpler than that. In my case it sure is" ("Tim O'Brien Interview" 109).

Notes

1. In addition to using lines from *In the Lake of the Woods* for an epigraph to this article, I have also borrowed elements of the book's structure, spe-

cifically O'Brien's use of chapters labeled "Evidence" and "Hypothesis." The reasons for this borrowing will become evident as my article unfolds.

2. Portions of my "Background" and "Evidence" sections are taken from my book *Tim O'Brien*.
3. Another example of this intentional deception appears in a 1989 interview, where at one point O'Brien claims that a character in *The Things They Carried*, Norman Bowker, and certain events involving Bowker are real, but soon after he confesses that "everything is made up" ("An Interview" 7-8). Don Ringnalda describes another fact-and-fiction deception, similar to the one at Wabash, involving O'Brien's reading "On the Rainy River" in one of Ringnalda's college classes studying the Vietnam War (102-03). Finally, Bruce Weber writes that "when [O'Brien] gives readings, he often begins by recounting one of his stories as though it really happened, then confessing he made it up" (B4).
4. In his review article, Bruce Weber describes O'Brien as a "man who isn't quite satisfied without ambivalence" in his life and writings and a "man who lives with tension and the habits tension release. By nature he is a confessor, a scab-scratcher, a ceaseless self-examiner" (B4).
5. Dell, the publisher of the paperback edition of *If I Die In A Combat Zone*, placed the letters "FIC" (fiction) on the spine of the 1979 Laurel Edition and "NF" (nonfiction) on the 1987 edition.
6. See Bruce Bawer's earlier comment about O'Brien's "overly disingenuous gameplaying" and Bawer's uneasiness with O'Brien's playing "too many such fact-or-fiction games" (A13). Also, Gail Caldwell comments about the "disconcerting" presence of the first-person narrator in *The Things They Carried*, "made more so by the self-referential qualifiers" ("Following" B49).
7. Some of the intriguing similarities between O'Brien and John Wade involve their Minnesota upbringing, the problems and loneliness of growing up with alcoholic fathers, their turning to magic and politics to gain acceptance from people outside their family, their choices in life driven by a need for love, and similar psychological fallout from their Vietnam War experiences. For some startling parallels between the personal confessions of O'Brien and his fictional character, see my discussion of the relationship between O'Brien's magazine article "The Vietnam in Me" and portions of *In the Lake of the Woods*, as well as O'Brien's and Wade's sharing of a strong "sense of self-hatred: (*Tim O'Brien* 149-50; 158).
8. As examples of such confessions about his postwar life, O'Brien notes that "I wake up the way John Wade wakes up, screaming ugly, desperate,

obscene things" (qtd. in *Tim O'Brien* 158). Also, in a 1994 interview with Joseph P. Kahn, O'Brien comments that "I still feel that sizzle [intensity of war] inside me sometimes"; and "You still feel culpable [. . .]. You still are culpable [serving in Vietnam]. Once you've committed what feels to be a sin, a true sin, you live your life questioning if you'll ever do it again" (69).

9. In a *Forbes* article by Michael Taylor, about one of Hemingway's escapades as a World War II magazine correspondent, the author notes that "trying to judge the accuracy of Hemingway stories is a little like trying to figure out if Martin Bormann lived on after escaping the Fuhrerbunker. You know there's a germ of truth in there somewhere" (162). Also quoted is one of Hemingway's friends commenting about the truthfulness of Hemingway's personal war stories: "Never believe that everything he said is true. He made his life out of writing fiction. He had a very hard time deciding where it ended and where the truth began" (161).
10. For a discussion of these characterizations of the Vietnam War, see Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* 46-59.

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Mfs

**RESSENTMENT AND THE SOCIAL
POETICS OF THE GREAT GATSBY:
FITZGERALD READS CATHER**

Robert Seguin

Following his bout of emotional exhaustion in the mid-1930s, F. Scott Fitzgerald came to describe what he called his "crack-up" in more than strictly personal terms. In his meditation on his depression, the crack-up expands outward in waves from Fitzgerald as individual, encompassing disparate social and cultural materials and achieving a certain allegorical intensity. At one point, the shape of Fitzgerald's psyche becomes expressive of the very curve of national history, from the bull-market twenties to the depressed thirties:

My own happiness in the past often approached such an ecstasy that I could not share it even with the person dearest to me but I had to walk it away in quiet streets and lanes with only fragments of it to distil into little lines in books—and I think that my happiness, or talent for self-delusion or what you will, was an exception. It was not the natural thing but the unnatural—unnatural as the Boom; and my recent experience parallels the wave of despair that swept the nation when the Boom was over. (*Crack-Up* 84)