Escape and Endurance: An Analysis of Philosophical Elements in Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War Trilogy

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U Osijeku, 13. rujna 2021.

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Abstract

The remarkable writing and style of Tim O'Brien have been topics of research and praise since his recognition for his earliest works, including the National Book Award for Fiction for *Going After Cacciato*. Some of academic discourse centered around his style, some on his conception of truth and verisimilitude, parts on the ethical component of his work, but seldom has there been research on the presence of philosophy in his works. Noted, we are not discounting ethics as philosophy, but we are focusing on another field altogether. This thesis will examine O'Brien's Vietnam War trilogy, comprised of selected works of *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), *Going After Cacciato* (1978), and *The Things They Carried* (1990), and attempt to outline philosophical elements present within them. The elements the thesis proposes as present in the trilogy are chiefly the concept of authenticity, the absurd, and alienation, all of which occur in differing degrees and forms in the selected literature. The philosophical basis for drawing parallels of similarity and concurrence is constituted by predominantly existentialist thinkers and their notions of the three concepts, along with some broader, general information on their notions necessary for understanding. Beyond similarity, the thesis proposes original interpretations of the concepts as they appear in the trilogy, along with their inadvertent or intentional formulations in the texts.

Keywords: Tim O'Brien, philosophy, authenticity, absurd, alienation.

Contents

Introduction

Analyses of works of literature have on countless occasions confirmed that authors fall under the influence of the times during which they write, and that their writing is a reflection of their times and of themselves. The works of Tim O'Brien, whose literary opus entails war prose, is surely an example of this. In fact, some of his work relates directly to his political views and is grafted onto his understanding of his geosocial and temporal position. Parts of such work include O'Brien's Vietnam War trilogy, with which this thesis contends, which is made up of selected works including *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), *Going After Cacciato* (1978), and *The Things They Carried* (1990),[1] and they will sometimes be referred to as the "O'Brien trilogy." They have been selected on the basis of sharing similar motifs and elements this thesis will attempt to identify as philosophical, or at the very least as sharing a great similarity to philosophical elements in either conceptual or speculative value. It is worth noting that it is not in the specific words or style that the different authors—philosophers—use that the similarity reveals itself, it is rather in the philosophical *pathos*, if such a thing can be defined, of the different texts. O'Brien's thoughts come from a mind of a soldier fighting in a war, whereas the thoughts of mentioned philosophers come from places where the only war waged is in the trenches of their minds, rooted in their existential quarrel. O'Brien's trilogy, as this thesis will suggest, shares some concepts that existentialist and other philosophers put forth, namely authenticity, the absurd, and alienation.

The position of this thesis does not propose that O'Brien will use these terms or concepts explicitly or in the exact sense, rather that he will present the reader with ideas of such nature, which seem to correlate to a high degree. For example, Nietzsche's theses and postulates, such as the famous ascertainment that "God is dead, and we killed him" are far more outrageous and inflammatory than anything found in O'Brien's trilogy. However, O'Brien does radically, through his character and narratives, question the *status quo*, examine the concepts of good and evil, and subvert the proposed war-reality (*have to do*, obey or be destroyed) using a subtle tone. The title of the thesis is invariably simple and aims to indicate the direction of the analysis: 'Escape' signifies the characters' constant struggle with the absurd and alienation, and 'Endurance' signifies

[1] These three works may be referred to as, respectively, *TTC*, *CZ*, and *GAC* in the body of the paper, with some exceptions where an abbreviation is not suitable.

their acceptance of imposed standards of courage and their mitigation of losing authenticity. As the thesis will try to present, the trilogy of O'Brien is laden with existentialist motifs and concepts, or similar concepts which produce an image of the world and of the subject as alienated among the absurd, in search of his authenticity.

1. The Biography of Tim O'Brien, The Trilogy, and the Philosophical Aspect of the Works

"Tim O'Brien was born in 1946 in Austin, Minnesota, and spent most of his youth in the small town of Worthington, Minnesota. He graduated *summa cum laude* from Macalester College [St. Paul, Minnesota] in 1968" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 329), and went on to serve in the U.S. Army as an infantryman from 1969 to 1970. Having studied political science and then pursuing graduate studies at Harvard following his engagement in the war, it would not be an outrageous assumption that O'Brien read philosophy, aside from Plato's *Republic*, which features prominently in *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien started writing in 1973, but he was against the war all the way up to his drafting. A well-educated man, O'Brien disagreed with the cause of the war, and was a part of a national wave of objection to the conflict:

> Eventually, the national quiescence and contentment of the 1950s gave way to the political awareness and turbulence of the 1960s, and as the all-American baby boom generation reached the end of adolescence, they faced the reality of military engagement in Vietnam and a growing divisiveness over war at home. (Colella, *CliffsNotes on The Things They Carried*)

In any case of literary study, in whatever manner it may be analyzed, the three selected texts of O'Brien remain inextricable from his time and social reality due to his involvement with the war and his intimate connection with it. The culture and O'Brien's position towards the war simply do not allow it, and the culture of the 60s and 70s in the United States practically mandates it be included in the analysis:

> […] the rise of American counterculture in the 1960s and 70s catalyzed a moral reevaluation. In the years following World War II, the popularity of war stories in both film and print skyrocketed. These representations idealized war and reflected wide acceptance of violence in a wartime context. American soldiers began deploying for Vietnam in the latter years of this cultural wave, but rising counterculture openly criticized all violence, regardless of context. Consequently, cultural activists opposed the war and condemned the soldiers' acts as immoral, invalidating the pleasure correlated with duty. For the soldiers, morality is already a fluid concept; whereas they understood killing as wrong, they are now encouraged to kill their enemies because what was once wrong is now encouraged by a new moral code which condones violence. However, because the Vietnam War

> coincides with American counterculture, even a restructured military code of ethics is chastisable. (Bonney 2)

By the 1960s, the literature of the United States had developed a "respect for the apparently non-judgemental, unvarnished truth" (Cunliffe 412), and "all sorts of variations were possible, it became clear, when the distinction was blurred between objective 'truth' and supposition, between authors and characters" (Cunliffe 413). War literature featured prominently in the modernist and post-modernist time of the United States, and with it came trends that O'Brien himself followed or helped institute:

> After the first flurry of sensitive and or tough-guy combat yarns, the Second World War dropped into the background, yielding place to the Cold War and the Korean War, and at length the Vietnam War, not to mention the overwhelmingly civilian preoccupations of stateside America. It took time to digest the martial violence of 1941–5, and to find a means of expressing its inner significance. (Cunliffe 417)

It is important to note that O'Brien did not write this trilogy with the intention of entering into philosophical discussions, thus the ideas and themes which are supposed as correlating in this thesis should not be understood as evidence of O'Brien trying to philosophize through his literature, as no such substantiation has been discovered by the author of the thesis, although Bates refers to O'Brien as "philosophical" (264). There are no unambiguous or explicit pieces of evidence that confirm O'Brien as being inspired by philosophical ideas of any of the authors the thesis mentions, especially Nietzsche's ideas, neither is there corroboration for O'Brien having drawn from Nietzsche directly, as there are no instances of identical ideas presented, only similarities. It is the author's belief that O'Brien did not write with the express intent of presenting an idea close to Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre or any other philosopher as if he borrowed from it or tried to build around it, but that he in his writing philosophized briefly but thoroughly enough to create such a concept in his work. In fact, the thesis will only put forth conceptual likenesses, or elements of philosophy that exist outside of the scope of O'Brien's texts, and which present ideas similar to those occurring in O'Brien's trilogy. Therefore, this thesis will analyze and discuss only elements of philosophy that O'Brien's works put forth, whether intentionally or inadvertently.

Prior to analysis, brief summaries of the works' plots will be supplied, offered in no significant order other than chronology. Written as a memoir, the plot of *CZ* is construed as a mesh of flashbacks and current events which connect months prior to O'Brien's deployment and his time spent in the theater of war. A firm opponent to the war, O'Brien plans to evade joining the

war effort and fleeing into Sweden during his training and experiences an existential qualm under the pressure of his community and the tradition of his family, as he ultimately ends up deploying to the front line. The plot is dotted with significant events and popularly recognized locations from the war (such as Pinkville), yet the significance of assignments, the war effort, and death remain blurred and downplayed, and mostly disregarded as uncertainty. The leadership of the company changes from Captain Johansen, an emblem of courage and "the soldier," to Captain Smith, an incompetent and inexperienced officer. Following Smith's removal, O'Brien's frontline engagement culminates in a miscalculation of artillery during a drill, which results in civilian casualties as Alpha Company looks on, having been stationed nearby. O'Brien falls under the leadership of Major Callicles as he is transferred from the front to fulfill the role of a typist, where he witnesses the Major's downward spiral of drinking and loss of belief in the cause and right nature of the war. O'Brien returns to America, and finds himself completely changed whilst the world had not shifted much since his departure.

GAC is a novel, but follows a similar structure of intertwined events in chronological sense. However, its plot rests almost entirely on imagined events which are a product of Paul Berlin, a soldier in the Vietnam War. Lieutenant Corson, an old and jaded man, along with Oscar Johnson, a young and charged officer, lead the men after Cacciato, an apparently "simple" soldier who had deserted his position, deciding to walk from Vietnam to Paris. Quickly, the soldiers catch up with Cacciato, and upon attempting to capture him as he sleeps, a smoke bomb is set off and the plot begins to line two parallels of imagination and factuality. A fictional line of chasing after Cacciato develops alongside Berlin's development as of Berlin's positions on war, bravery, and what is authentic, and it follows Cacciato from Vietnam, to Laos, Mandalay, Delhi, Kabul, Tehran, Izmir, Athens, Yugoslavia, Luxembourg, and finally Paris. The plot is crowned with ambushing Cacciato in his room, where his door is found open and Berlin collapses to the floor, having fired a couple of rounds into the dark. Factuality, following the imagined line of the plot, implies that Berlin accidentally shot Cacciato that night on that hill, and that Berlin has spent the time of the novel, stationed on an observation post near a coast, ruminating the possibility of Cacciato's courage, and the possibility of the attempted escape—from the war.

TTC is a collection of short stories linked together into a single piece of literature. The stories are connected, but do not present a chronologically ordered sequence of events, rather providing a series of events which amount to an "experience" of the war. The plot begins with a catalogue of the things the men carried, with later descriptions of their underlying importance and impact on the occurrences in the war. The overarching theme of the text is death and its trivial

nature, and this point is put forth by the constant loss of members of Alpha Company and their accompanying paraphernalia. This incurs a double meaning, whereby the person dies, and along with them a meaning tied to their existence. One example is Ted Lavender, who dies coming back from a "bathroom break," and the guilt that falls onto shoulders of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, who blames himself and his obsession with his love interest Martha. An element of personal examination is present in this text as well as in the others in regard to joining the war, and the narrator presents his near crossing the Canadian border in an attempt to evade joining the war. The narrator attributes his failure to buckling under the pressure of his community and a lack of conviction to remain true to himself and his political stands. Death is presented as binary in the stories, as one can die of embarrassment if they do not join the war, and of deadly force if they join the war. All the characters in Alpha Company, of course, had joined the war, and their deaths are simultaneously made trivial and important. The characters perceive the deaths of Curt Lemon and Lee Strunk, dying by stepping on a rigged mortar round and a land mine respectively, as mundane and slightly disturbing, a consequence of their adaptation to the war. The plot, however, uses these events to stitch together a mounting tragedy and conclusion, which bases on deaths of Kiowa and Bowker. Kiowa dies in a field laden with excrement in a hail of rain and mortar fire, and his death is first ascribed to Bowker's failure of courage. As the narrator later divulges, Bowker was not the one who failed to help Kiowa and possibly save him; it was the narrator himself who failed Kiowa and is now resolving the issue by admitting this as he writes the story. A transformative experience on all accounts, Kiowa's death is connected to Bowker, who is recorded as having found himself isolated and alienated when returning from the war, which results in him committing suicide. The narrator relays this information and concludes with his recount of all the little failures and events on his part that got him to the point where he was, writing the stories.

2. Existentialism: The Tools of Our Trade

There are various theories on the exact inception of existentialism as an original school of thought and its basic principles that gave rise to its diverse set of observations, but to provide one would be an arduous and distracting task[2] for the purpose of this paper. Instead, this chapter of the thesis will focus on some main, extracted points from authors that will provide us with an insight into what existentialism succinctly proposes, at least apropos this thesis. Among the most famous positions of the existentialists, is one that existence precedes essence. As Sartre put it, "you are – your life, and nothing else" (43). Among the first to conceive existentialist ideas was Kierkegaard, who proposed the following view, as reported:

> "Existence" was founded in the first place on a fundamental ethical choice, on a decision on the ideal for which one was prepared to live or die, though as personality is a continuing revelation, and authentic persons are continually engaged in making and re-making themselves, the act of choice has continually to be repeated so that to pass through periodical crises of decision, in particular through a capacity to open oneself to grace, is the clearest indication of the authentic. (Coates 230)

Cleary, since its earliest formulations, existentialist thought has put emphasis on the concept of *authenticity*, a reflection of one's true self. With respect to Kierkegaard, existence was a continual ethical choice leading to authenticity. But the full range of understanding the concept was involved in and borrowed from many other sciences, and could not be constructed without ethics, biology, psychology, and other disciplines. This is especially true when it comes to psychology and ethics:

> It is clear that existentialism belongs to that category of philosophies which derive a powerful moral impulse and are based on a distinctive ethical affirmation. The existentialist affirmation is as to the value of the "authentic" in human personality. All the thinkers of the school distinguish between the authentic and the inauthentic in human beliefs and attitudes and give a detailed analysis and description of the modes of personal existence that are involved. (Coates 230)

As opposed to the authentic the *inauthentic* is mentioned, and it represents the false and projected, the pretended and the substituted or imposed onto the subject. The exploration of the self, the

[2] Thomas R. Flynn undertook such a task in: Flynn, Thomas R. "Existentialism. Towards the Concrete." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 2, Special issue with the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, 2012, pp. 247-67.

subject, did not stop at the self in isolation, and it would grow to encompass different concepts, such as anguish, the absurd, freedom, along with authenticity/inauthenticity:

> The conception of "anguish" in the thought of Heidegger and Sartre is similarly associated with their doctrine of authenticity. In their view man finds himself "thrown" into existence, just like that; he does not know why, nor can he ever know why. He is *de trop*[3]. He finds himself in the middle of a fool's journey, travelling without pilot or compass. He will never find any meaning in life except what he himself is able to put into it. Also, he is condemned to be free. He must make some kind of choice[4] as to how he shall live his life. His easiest course, for there is always a powerful pressure on him to follow it, is that of conformity to established usages and opinions, of being assimilated to the general forms of human existence. By this means he becomes "one among many", he becomes buried in the impersonal *Das Man*. Life becomes easy, but at the expense of a flight from personal responsibility, the escape into inauthenticity. (Coates 231-232)

Existentialism sprouted from the notion that science alone could not accurately describe the human being[5], or the phenomenon of existence. From that approach came a host of diverse interpretations of factors both within and without that marked the existing human being:

> The primary subject-matter of the existentialists is personal existence and its ethical interests. Now it is precisely in this field that science, whether proceeding by detached observation or reductive analysis, gives such unsatisfactory results. A person, Heidegger and Sartre tell us, is a No-Thing; it is not a fact that can be placed before us for scientific scrutiny, but a possibility, an entity that makes and re-makes itself by its projects and valuations. Kierkegaard, referring to the growing

[3] Thomas explains this concept, in relation to Sartre, as "simply [being] there, without justification, in excess (*de trop*). Refer to Thomas' article on Sartre from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/sartre/.

[4] Note again the element of choice, which figures prominently in the anthropocentric thinking of existentialism.

[5] On the existential view, to understand what a human being is it is not enough to know all the truths that natural science—including the science of psychology—could tell us. The dualist who holds that human beings are composed of independent substances— "mind" and "body"—is no better off in this regard than is the physicalist, who holds that human existence can be adequately explained in terms of the fundamental physical constituents of the universe. Existentialism does not deny the validity of the basic categories of physics, biology, psychology, and the other sciences (categories such as matter, causality, force, function, organism, development, motivation, and so on). It claims only that human beings cannot be fully understood in terms of them. Nor can such an understanding be gained by supplementing our scientific picture with a *moral* one. Categories of moral theory such as intention, blame, responsibility, character, duty, virtue, and the like *do* capture important aspects of the human condition, but neither moral thinking (governed by the norms of the good and the right) nor scientific thinking (governed by the norm of truth) suffices. (Steven, "Existentialism")

> preoccupation with science that characterized his time, remarked that the person absorbed in the discovery of fact usually forgot what it meant to 'exist'. (Coates 234)

The tradition of philosophical thought has steered clear of the physical and bodily, especially when it came to cognition and metaphysical understanding. This included the omission of understanding coming from within, i.e., from understanding oneself. Only with existentialism does the thinking subject truly begin to construct their disposition towards the world by starting from themselves, going beyond the early anthropocentric views of Ancient Greeks. These reflections inward and projections of thought, complex webs of authentic beings existing in an alien world, appear in the form of Tim O'Brien's literature this thesis targets. Most importantly, it is the understanding and outlook on the world that O'Brien presents us with in his stories that breathes with the sentiment and spirit of existentialism—as the primary result of philosophy is action, not comprehension, as Camus believes. In this regard, we may extrapolate this view to include O'Brien's text and compare the two lines of thinking: O'Brien remarks that there is no "absolute truth" to be told about the war and the world by the soldiers; they can only tell stories, which can be understood as an action, rather than a comprehension that unites the principles of **moral** and **true**, which are, even in tandem, insufficient for the existentialist to describe the essence of being (a human). For this reason, this thesis will discuss elements of authenticity, the absurd, and alienation, all of which the thesis argues are present in O'Brien's trilogy, and which together can amount to an existentialist view of the human state of being. "'Existentialism', therefore, may be defined as the philosophical theory which holds that a further set of categories, governed by the norm of *authenticity*, is necessary to grasp human existence" (Steven, "Existentialism").

2.1. Authenticity

Among the primary philosophical elements present in the selected O'Brien's works, authenticity seems the most pervasive and most important. In a philosophical sense, the concept of authenticity is considered mostly ambiguous and difficult to define, but this thesis will arrange some key aspects which will guide the analysis of the chosen literature. Rousseau is credited as the originator of modern discourse on authenticity, at least in the Western world, pioneering the underlying notions of the concept in his work and discussing basic notions such as the natural state of man and the socialized state which defer to different states; the natural state of humans is one of inherent

good, and the socialized produces societal, moral, and human problems (Laceulle 195). In his life outside himself, the social man lives only in the opinion of others and becomes **inauthentic**, having his opinion and agency steered by others (Laceulle 196). In renditions of the concept of authenticity, issues[6] like the perception of what the true self (truthfulness) is arise, and that issue plagues Rousseau himself in his recount of his authenticity in *Confessions* (Laceulle 196). This truthfulness, usually referred to as *sincerity*, bears implications of both moral and qualitative changes in behavior which impact authenticity, remarks Lowney (34). Sincerity hinges in its earliest interpretations on imposed societal roles and conforming to supposed identities (34), and therefore cannot be equated to authenticity; one can be completely sincere and simultaneously inauthentic. Rousseau's legacy of self-realization achieves its pinnacle through self-revelation (via self-reflection or artistic expression), which encompasses a spiritual value not present in previous iterations as it now included a medium of expression and feeling in an individual's life (Laceulle 196). Following Rousseau and his Romantic heirs, the existentialists of the nineteenth and twentieth century,[7] disenchanted with the Enlightenment and emboldened by Nietzsche's "death of God", challenge the supposed idea of an objective truth present in previous essentialist attempts at defining authenticity. Kiekegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, Laceulle remarks, are the most prominent existentialists of the previous two centuries that deal with the issue of authenticity,[8]. Kierkegaard emphasizes faith, but Nietzsche and certain later thinkers[9] will serve better for the conception of the absurd this thesis will concern. Nietzsche places heavy emphasis on personal responsibility for growth and revelation, while Heidegger[10] centers on shunning the inauthentic of the mass (They) and facing the mortal human condition through facing death (202). Heidegger's interpretation of authenticity pays special attention to the temporal dimension of being, putting forward the future as the chief leader of authentic possibilities towards which being steers itself (202).

> According to Heidegger, authenticity cannot be restricted to the mode of the understanding of a competent performer [one who acts intuitively and immediately

[6] A non-definitive list, albeit a very succinct and pertinent one of issues arising in defining authenticity, especially from an anthropological point of view, is present in: Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, "INTRODUCTION: Laying Claim to Authenticity: Five Anthropological Dilemmas," *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 86, no. 2, 2013, pp. 337-60.
[7] For a thorough examination of these influences, refer to pages 197–202 in Laceulle's cited work.
[8] An important note: Authenticity is regarded as being multifaceted and complex, and not easily defined into a single virtue or agency. For a better view on this, consult: Feldman, Simon D. and Allan Hazlett. "Authenticity and Self-Knowledge." *Dialectica*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2013, pp. 157-81.
[9] Laceulle covers contemporary thinkers' reflections on the topic, such as Charles Taylor, which are excluded from this thesis for the sake of simplicity. For another analysis of Taylor's views on authenticity, consult: Charles Lowney's "Authenticity and the Reconciliation of Modernity" from *The Pluralist,* vol. 4, no. 1., 2009, pp. 33–50.
[10] For a comprehensive interpretation of Heidegger's concept of the authentic, refer to: Henschen, Tobias. "Dreyfus and Haugeland on Heidegger and Authenticity," *Human Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2012, pp. 95-113.

> out of understanding of the public and of the community, sometimes where others would not find appropriate action] or cultural master [one who is described as world-transforming and history-making, an expert of innovation and understanding that holds potential to change generations] dealing with tools. For him, authenticity is the mode of the understanding of a competent performer or cultural master whose responses are *either* immediate and intuitive *or* reflective and conceptual. (Henschen 112)

The views on the concept of authenticity are, as presented, complex and manifold, but they share the focal point of self-realization, self-revelation, and sincerity.

2.2. The Absurd

The absurd is, especially when mentioned in the context of Camus' philosophy, an ambiguous term. This subchapter will offer several factors which will construct a frame of reference for the thesis and later analyses, presenting only crucial understanding of the concept for clarity and distinction. One of the most appropriate renditions[11] of the concept comes from Camus' writing, and is wonderfully presented and illustrated in Sartre's analysis of *The Stranger*:

> "The absurd," he writes, "is a condition as well as the lucid consciousness some people have of this condition." This notion of the absurd or irrational aspect of life from various causes, all of which result from the divorce between man and the universe. For, indeed, nothing is intrinsically absurd: "To be sure, neither man nor the universe, if taken separately, is absurd; but since it is the essential nature of man to exist-in-the-world, the absurd becomes one and the same with the human condition." The stranger, then, is man facing the world, man realizing the gap between the eternal nature of the universe and his own finite nature, and perceiving how much his worries are out of proportion with the futility of all his efforts. Even worse, man is not only a stranger facing the world, but a stranger also in relation to himself. That is what Sartre calls the divorce between the physical and the spiritual nature of man. Sometimes the stranger sees himself in a mirror, but does not

[11] Pritchard offers an interpretation of Nagel's paper "The Absurd," which could be useful for a contemporary view on the absurdity of life. Luper-Foy provides a critique of Nagel as well, in an attempt to deflate some of the strength Nagel's claims boast. Even more pertinent to this thesis, Jeffrey Gordon draws a parallel between Nagel and Camus' conception of the absurd, offering very useful insights on how the notion developed into contemporary times.

> recognize his own features. Such a realization of the absurdity of man's fate inevitably leads to rebellion. (Brombert 120)

Camus' absurd wants reaction to its state, it urges the subject to accept and react. The absurd is rooted in the world, the real—reality. At the center of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, along with the question of suicide, the complex notion of the absurd relates the relationship of man towards the world[12] (Hall 26), whereby the human condition is presented as paradoxical:

> In the strictest sense, the absurd is inherent neither in man's reason nor in the irrationality of what surrounds him. It is rather "the confrontation of this irrational factor and that wild longing for clarity whose call echoes from the very depths of man". Thus it involves, as Sartre remarks, a sense of disillusionment and scandal absent from his own conception of the absurd, which is simply the "given, unjustifiable, primordial quality of existence." For Camus instead the absurd depends as much upon man as upon that quality of the world. More precisely it depends upon the contradiction between man's will and the world. It is the sense of irremediable banishment to alien, sometimes hostile surroundings. It is limitless desire destined to limited satisfaction, hunger for life condemned, without appeal, to die. (Hall 26–27)

For Camus, the absurd is willingly accepted,[13] while in other works of literature which feature the concept, such as Kafka's *The Trial*,[14] the absurd is confounding and repulsive to the subject. The absurd existence for Camus is comprised of two major factors,[15] as Robinson reports, of the spectre

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[12] It is important to note that the absurd position of man is twofold, and has thus created confusion:
"These have in fact come to occupy such an important role in that element of the absurd that Camus has been reproached for an alleged confusion, in The Stranger and elsewhere, between the absurd as man's position in the natural order and the absurdity of his place in society. But these aspects of the absurd are not manifested separately, and it is only logically that the second is subordinate to first. Experience makes no such distinction; and it is clear that mankind has never been for Camus, as it was for Rousseau, composed individuals scattered in the woods. Each man for him is rather, adapt Gide's image, a tree in the wood which does not develop independently, but in a "situation" and in patterns partly imposed neighbors competing for a place in the sun. Only man is unlike tree among trees through awareness of his difference." (Hall 28)

[13] "It is upon the choice of consciousness, or rather upon the choice of its continuation, that the whole notion of the absurd rests. Once chosen, no leap is required to prefer it extended rather than brief, intense rather than dull, varied rather than monotonous. For freedom, power, love, and variety enhance and multiply it, positing their own values." (Hall 32)

[14] Kavanagh wrote an article titled "Kafka's 'The Trial': The Semiotics of the Absurd" about the semiotics of the absurd in *The Trial*, focusing on the absurd being a result of inadequate ability to understand the code through which reality communicates to us. It is an interesting read on how the absurd can be expounded upon through different disciplines. It is included in the Works Cited section for convenience.

[15] ". . . in a universe divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. . . . This divorce between man and his life . . . is properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen . . . that here is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death" (qtd. in Robinson 343).

of death, and of estrangement (343). The marriage of man to his world from which he is estranged, and the divorce of his ability to understand it from the meaning it possesses, is the focal point of what O'Brien's trilogy will bring forth for this analysis. The soldiers are "thrown" into an unintelligible world, where the actions are confusing, the reality is a mismatch of expectations and rationality, and the absurdity is realized as ambiguity becoming normal.

2.3. Alienation

The sense of alienation in the philosophical sense features the self as estranged from both the world and itself (Steven, "Existentialism"). In the wake of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, some authors (Marx, Rousseau, the Romantics, and German Idealists) characterized modern life by the modern man losing an important connection with his inner and outer nature, and other people (Henning 7). The chief qualm of alienation is the outside nature of the world, which gains meaning through our projects but is never brought into being by them, creating then a feeling of not belonging, of a place that does not make us feel "at home" (Steven). Marx proposed an idea, crudely presented, that the society of capitalism exploited the workforce and cycled around ways how to sell more things to us, and thus caused alienation from the world (Henning 8-9):

> According to the Romantics . . . this enlightenment idea of rationality and progress is itself a symptom of alienation. What alienates us from outer nature as well as from our own inner nature is precisely the attempt to conquer the world by rational means, understanding and exploiting it with the means of science. Being truly in touch with the world and with our own inner nature requires a different stance. We must try to open ourselves to that which is strange, magical (and sometimes frightening) about the world instead of trying to make it conform to our scientific conception of it. (Henning 9)

This suspicion continued to garner influence in the twentieth century, and has given reason for the contemporary skepticism surrounding alienation as a notion (Henning 9). Sartre later emphasized the aspect of "being-for-others" having a certain nature and character revealed when observed by others and revealed through their own existence (Steven). In the third-person aspect, our objective nature can be revealed only by others, and that alienates us from ourselves to a degree (Steven). The project, the self-realizing self, is estranged from the world by the tradition and society in which it is found, the self is made anonymous and equalized in being normal and average, by accepting norms and acting not in deviations (Steven). Being alienated is the default state of the self, and the

singularity of existence must be retrieved from the world as we do not start with it (Steven.) Presented this way, the notion of alienation will figure in the thesis as a concept identifying instances of being out-of-place, feeling the strangeness of the world (*unheimlich*), and finding the self as drowned in the supposed and given, the authoritative tables of normality, convention, and duty.

2.4. Nietzsche

When mentioning Nietzsche, it is important to remark Nietzsche's reputation as an "anti-philosopher",[16] one who does not strive to create a systematic unit of thinking. Therefore, to understand Nietzsche's conceptual basis requires an overview of some concepts which the thesis will utilize in its analysis. An exhaustive analysis of Nietzsche's corpus of concepts is beyond the scope of this thesis and unnecessary for a comprehensive understanding of the analysis presented. Instead, we will refer to several sources for a summary of what will serve as an interpretative basis for the selected O'Brien's works in certain regards:

> In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche powerfully refutes the ideas of essence, intention, and knowable truth. In philosophy, physiology, and psychology, he argues, truth is invested with the interests and perspectives—many of them unavailable for conscious scrutiny or easy identification—of the knower. In language, people foolishly attempt to put all concepts—aesthetic, epistemological, ontological, . . . and moral—into binary categories, whereas in reality there are only gradations of meaning and complexity that defy dualism. The value of an action cannot lie in its intention, or in its consequences. (Cloud 532)

Nietzsche holds specific positions on the origins and values of morals, and in *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*, a central claim that "moral values are born out of a peculiar condition he calls '*ressentiment*'"[17] (Reginster 282) is made. Reginster proposes the following as the state of

[16] Coates refers to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as "inspirational thinkers rather than systematic philosophers" (235) in: Coates, J. B. "Existentialism." *Philosophy*, vol. 28, no. 106, 1953, pp. 229-38.

[17] The threefold unit of phenomena, constituted by the ascetic ideal, the distinction of good from evil, and the sense of moral guilt, is the cornerstone of modern morality, and is based on *ressentiment* (Reginster 282). The influence of *ressentiment* on the value of morality is in due in the psychological root of *ressentiment*, as the attitudes expressing the moral judgements are affected by it, corrupting the value judgements through its undermining of the integrity of the self (284). Nietzsche, however, does not outright discard the value judgements, rather critiquing the agent affected by *ressentiment* (284). The notion of *ressentiment* itself rests on "the implicit *endorsement* of the very values embodied by those towards whom it is directed" (296), and not on the constricted meaning of resentment, which proposes a condemnation of the subject and its occurrence.

ressentiment[18] in its general form: It is one of "repressed vengefulness," where one affected by it desires to lead a kind of life he deems valuable and perceives his impotence to attain this goal, while retaining an arrogance which drives him to this power despite his inability to acquire it, ultimately refusing to accept his impotence (Reginster 286-287). The repression of *ressentiment*, different from control and renunciation, causes a revaluation of the values (he covets) in the man of *ressentiment*, which "involves self-deception about the values themselves, and not just about the means to realize them" (Reginster 292). Such a self-deceived agent has not the means or integrity to create values and choose them, as one must acknowledge the desires which come into conflict with the realization of a given value being endorsed (Reginster 300). Therefore, the actual value of morality is to be judged by a noble person of integrity, and the traditional view we have inherited presents them, or values them rather, in a different way, warranting a revaluation upon every mention of the value: "Values should not, therefore, be brought over from the past. The old tables should be broken and each day should make its own tables. To bind the present to the past by cords of convention is to fetter the sovereign itself" (Peters 362). Nietzsche, of course, does not endorse master morality (as opposed to slave morality) as the superior form of valuation, he simply presents it to outline features of moralities (Leiter 263). This thesis will keep these views when mentioning moments related to morality which are closer to Nietzsche's radical position.

[18] Nietzsche primarily builds his position on socio-political "types," from slave to master (noble), and between the nobles from knights to priests. For a comprehensive analysis, refer to: Reginster, Bernard. "Nietzsche on Ressentiment and Valuation," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1997, pp. 286-89. We should keep in mind that Nietzsche sees most value in nobility as a quality of the soul or character, as a noble person has the quality of integrity. Cf. the following: "The noble type of man experiences itself as determining values; it does not need approval; it judges, 'what is harmful to me is harmful in itself'; it knows itself to be that which first accords honor to things; it is *value-creating*." (qtd. in Reginster 299).

3. Authenticity: Carrying the Insincerity of Being

Piper, in his article on autonomy, defined autonomy as "a property of self-government or self-determination such that an autonomous person is a person who is in some sense effective in governing herself according to a self-conception that captures her authentic or true self" (768). In such a conception of autonomy, and by extension and more importantly authenticity, we, of course, suppose an account of free will. In addition, as Piper reports, there is "virtual consensus among philosophers that autonomy is a scalar property that can be minimally or robustly possessed" (782). An autonomous person[19] "possesses or exercises a kind of control over her life, a control that is in some way in accordance with, or guided by, her authentic self" (Piper 786). Laceulle identifies **autonomy** as one of three interwoven threads which create philosophical discourse of self-realization, with the two remaining being **authenticity** and **virtue** (189). Laceulle posits her interpretation that authenticity "conceives the best within us that is to be realized in terms of being true to oneself, more particularly to one's most genuine, real or essential self" (Laceulle 190). As it is difficult to describe authenticity in positive terms, it is usually described as "critique against an inauthentic lifestyle that is perceived as untruthful and false" (Laceulle 190), and it is ascribed an "attitude towards life that is personally appropriated, instead of prescribed by one's social position, tradition or convention" (Laceulle 190). We should note this distinction, as the characters presented in the selected O'Brien's works act within the confines of prescribed identities as soldiers, and therefore are liable to succumb to the forces of social institutions and roles which would have us betray our core self (Laceulle 192), which can be ascribed to both the exchange of moral frame and residing to a predetermined role. The interior holds the core of what one is, and the metaphysical essence of being is not to be found without, that is to say, in nature, things, or even other beings, but within our authentic selves.

As Nietzsche believes, authenticity is heroic in exerting effort to become masters of our lives and to surmount ourselves (200), and it is a personal onus to develop ourselves through self-mastery, freeing our spirit in self-realization[20] (200). However, Nietzsche also posits that there are many possible selves, each appropriate to a situation, which we are to form into a coherent

[19] For a view which strictly separates autonomy from authenticity and considers autonomy to be achievable apart from authenticity, see: Oshana, Marina. "Autonomy and the Question of Authenticity," *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2007, pp. 411-29, esp.: "A person can be autonomous even while she does not reflectively endorse key aspects of her identity" (412).

[20] Nietzsche values truth as one of the key values for realizing an "ideal of integrity of self he associates with nobility" (Reginster 298), and identifies self-deception as a "lack of acknowledgment of what, 'deep down', one knows, or believes, to be true" (Reginster 298), thus causing a split in the agent itself, a self-division of the self.

identity[21] (201) and insists on an idea of giving style to our character (201). For the purpose of this thesis' analysis, we will default to authenticity as a concept meaning a complete apprehension of the self in its intention and disposition towards the world, leaning onto different facets of itself to respond and adapt to the world. This understanding will be accompanied by an understanding that authenticity is additionally construed by one's habits and preferences, hobbies and interests, as overt indicators of volition[22] and position in the world, as well as by their intuitive and reflective understanding and action in the world.

3.1. What Truly Was

The Things They Carried and *If I Die in a Combat Zone* differ from *Going After Cacciato* with concern to their display of the element of authenticity. In an effort to make our task simpler, we will refer to *TTC* in this subchapter as "What Truly Was", while *GAC* will be separately addressed in the flowing subchapter titled "What Could Have Been," The reason for this is *GAC*'s approach to the narrative structure and its interlacing of the speculative and the actual, which is not present (at least not expressly or declaratively) in the former works. While *CZ* contains elements and themes regarding authenticity, its best use is reserved for the explication of the absurd and alienation, so for this part of the analysis, we will contend with *TTC*. The main theme of *The Things They Carried*, represented by the work's title, can be interpreted through an existentialist prism; all items, which were deemed a "necessity" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 14),[23] were carried by the men as symbols of authenticity. The items represent physical manifestations of identity and existence in certain meaning, they represent the essence of life for each of the soldiers; the items are beacons of existence. They are a personal signature of the men, not as soldiers,[24] but

[21] As Camus would confirm, dispelling the authenticity and indicating the absurd of divergence of character: "He [the actor] abundantly illustrates every month or every day that so suggestive truth that there is no frontier between what a man wants to be and what he is. Always concerned with better representing, he demonstrates to what a degree appearing creates being. For that is his art – to simulate absolutely, to project himself as deeply as possible into lives that are not his own. At the end of his effort his vocation becomes clear: to apply himself wholeheartedly to being nothing or to being several." (Camus, 77)

[22] Cf. with the following: "The volitional account of self-constitution via wholehearted identification and structuring one's volitions usually presupposes a strong interrelation between authenticity and *autonomy*. Both concepts are based on the idea of a self-reference (*autos*) respective of something being self-generated. Authenticity and autonomy cannot be separated if generating one's own personality means giving it a 'law' (*nomos*), be it the moral law or the formal law of how to structure and order one's volitions. Both attributes . . . underline that is the person herself who generates this law and the structure of her self." (Bauer, Katharina. "To be or Not to be Authentic. In Defence of Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 20, no. 3, Special Issue: New Directions in Character and Virtue, 2017, pp. 567–580.

[23] Further in the thesis labeled as *TTC* for in-text citation.

[24] The items, however, sometimes appear in conjunction to items the men carry related once again personally to them, but are in effect items of military use. Cf. with pages 14–16 of *The Things They Carried* for the most apt

as authentic men (characters). In this way, First Lieutenant Cross' love letters represent his faith in a future, Ted Lavender's tranquilizers represent his faith in a peaceful existence outside the realm of fearing for his life, Mitchell Sanders' condoms portray faith in an impending return to normal, same as Kiley's comic books and Bowker's diary. The items are direct links to what the soldiers are outside of martial reality.[25] Kiowa's New Testament is faith represented in the most overt way, faith as providence which provides meaning. Although all the items have been described as representative of faith, they are nonetheless essential components which have isolated meanings, unrelated to faith outside of the martial reality in which the characters are placed. It is important to note the distinction between the items which reflect authenticity, and *items* that transcend that function in the narrative. This is most clearly presented by O'Brien's style, which will denote an item's transcending meaning. The catalogues (of items predominantly) presented in *TTC* are not exclusively of a single nature; they are either coupled with the overarching theme of the work, or the grounding of the characters in the martial reality: "They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried" (*TTC* 22).

The disappointment in himself for not doing more than touching Martha's knee, for not doing "something brave" (*TTC* 18), is a growing disappointment of Jimmy Cross in martial reality. He is at odds with the war around him, and he is lost for authenticity, as he is at once a man pining for Martha, and a leader to his men. Cross "knew better" (*TTC* 17) than to read Martha's "Love" as more than a signature, yet he did it anyway. Every member of Alpha Company bears a form of responsibility, they share a load that makes them alike, blends them as a unit, but separates them as authentic men who are left to their own devices (courage and a true test of the self) come danger. All the men "humped" some existential load, as O'Brien explains: "In its intransitive form, to hump meant to walk, or to march, but it implied burdens far beyond the intransitive," (*TTC* 16). The load of the characters includes an authentic component relying on their ability to keep calm, to be brave, and to act as soldiers. This is a reflection of authenticity, but placed in an extreme

instance of this. Refer to the following as well: "What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly of field specialty" (*TTC* 18); Jimmy Cross "carried a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men (*TTC* 18).

[25] As this concept will repeat itself through the thesis, the following could serve as the definition of the concept: Martial reality is the reality proprietary to the characters of O'Brien's works, it is separate from the civilian reality and signified by the paradoxical relation of extreme outcomes (physical death or death of character and reputation), the absurd, alienation, and the inauthentic/authentic. Additional elaboration will emerge throughout the thesis, and a specific establishment of this concept can be found in chapter 4 of this thesis.

environment, the only where such facets could surface. As the soldiers were shot at, at all times, they would sometimes let fall their dignified poise[26]:

> Afterward, when the firing ended, they would blink and peek up. . . . As if in slow motion, frame by frame, the world would take on the old logic — absolute silence, then the wind, then sunlight, then voices. It was the burden of being alive. Awkwardly, the men would reassemble themselves . . . becoming soldiers again. They would fix the leaks in their eyes. (*TTC* 37)

In the extreme, hostile environment of war, the characters constantly revert to their items for comfort; they reinvent moments of authenticity by falling back into the symbolism of their items. For example, Cross finds his meaning in Martha completely; he finds it hard to concentrate on the war as he wishes to "sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered" (*TTC* 27). The symbolism of the items (signifiers of authenticity)—the letter, condoms, the Bible, the dope, the extra rations—once again, "implied burdens far beyond the intransitive" (*TTC* 16).

In an exposition similar to catalogues of items Alpha Company carried, O'Brien's narrator describes a hallucination of his past, present, and future, the confluence and summary of all things that made him (*TTC* 87-88), succinctly presenting his existence manifest. It bears noting that this particular moment doubles as an exposition of authenticity, and as the root of alienation. We will, for now, focus on the aspect of authenticity. There were mostly people on the shore before him, and they created an audience of character, an audience of himself. The existential question was: "Can he do what he must do before himself, can he let down some parts of himself to appease the others?" Presented with this choice, staring at a copy of Plato's *Republic*, a slim man he would kill outside My Khe, his wife and daughter, Abraham Lincoln, first lieutenant Jimmy Cross and others, O'Brien failed to stay a part of what he believed was true:

> I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination . . . I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was (*TTC* 89).

The final testament to the narrator's failure of authenticity was his recount of the outcome of the conflict with his authentic self, the compilation of his being: "I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (*TTC* 91). Elroy[27] was there as the "true audience" (*TTC*

[26] Refer to: Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*. Thorndike Press, 2017, p. 36.
[27] Elroy Berdahl is a character which hosts O'Brien's character (the narrator) at the Tip Top Lodge, where the narrator experiences the internal conflict.

89): “He was a witness, like God, or like the gods, who look on in absolute silence as we live our lives, as we make our choices or fail to make them” (*TTC* 89).

In *The Things They Carried*, the authentic lies in the carried, in the entire motif of loading oneself with the self and the expendable material of war, splitting apart what made them men and what made them soldiers. The agency of authenticity of the characters from all three selected works is dispersed throughout this thesis, and consists of analyses of their failures of courage, their inadequate responses to the horrible, their ‘evil’ actions, and their failures of the self.

3.2. What Could Have Been

The entire operation, the chase after Cacciato to Paris presented in *GAC*, was all fiction. It was a conflict of reality and possibility,[28] the mind’s exercise in finding or fabricating an authentic memory[29] that reminds them of past time, the civilized world, the things that they did not *have to*[30] do, but did out of volition. In the novel, possibility becomes the existential dictum for Paul Berlin: to explore the realm of existence’s bounds spurs existence itself onwards, in both the narrative and a philosophical sense, making it both a means and an end in itself. In other words, Berlin lived—existed—throughout the novel to unveil what it meant to exist in both realities, the martial and the civilized. The possible[31] intersects with the actual in the narrative, and the **absurd** intersects with the brief moments of meaning and **authenticity**. The civilized world, the walking instead of marching, the order and the pleasantries were the signifiers of the reclaimed authentic (Tim O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 115),[32] and they are labeled as “average” and “normal” things (*GAC* 122), which points to their status as the authentic, or at the very least the accustomed-to. The concept of contemplating possibility is inextricable from the authenticity in the analysis of *Going After Cacciato* which this thesis presents.[33] Liberated from the martial reality, keeping

[28] For the clearest examples, refer to pages 61 and 257. The imagined is not only Berlin’s craft; it is also reflected in the involved characters of the fiction, which is a notable motif. Cf. with Paul Berlin telling Sarkin Aung Wan that them going to Paris was only a possibility, “one out of a thousand, just a notion” (*GAC* 63).
[29] William Irwin presents an interesting thesis in his article concerning “Fight Club,” featuring an escape into an alternate, substitute position of the possible while examining the notion of authenticity in: Irwin, William. “’Fight Club’, Self-Definition, and the Fragility of Authenticity”, *Revista Portugesa de Filosofia*, vol. 69, no. 3/4, 2013, pp. 673-84.
[30] For an examination of the dichotomy between *having to do* and *wanting to do*, please refer to chapter 6 of this thesis.
[31] The novel provides plenty of moments where the possibility and the hypothetical are presented as such overtly. Refer to pages 68, 123, 257, and 274 for a few notable instances.
[32] Further in the thesis labeled as *GAC* for in-text citation.
[33] Cf. with Camus’ words from *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “That revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life. To a man devoid of blinkers, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it” (53).

watch over the night as the rest of the men sleep at the observation post, the character of Paul Berlin exercises the openness of possibility in his thoughts. As the novel mostly keeps the structures of two parallel narratives developing alongside, the thinking character of Berlin lives in actuality at the observation post. During this period, the character imagines the possibilities, probing for the limit of reality, searching for the authentic while living in the inauthentic.[34] On a few occasions, Berlin entertained thoughts of escape himself; the possibilities were not only Cacciato's domain. Cacciato was a vessel of liberation in his mind, but Berlin himself was still rooted in the actual, sometimes thinking of realizing the possibility of desertion:

> High up were the stars like lighted lanterns, constellations telling where and when. He felt brave. Tonight, anything was possible. . . .
>
> No, it was not an ordinary night. This night . . . he was wide awake . . . Excited by the possibilities, but still in control. (*GAC* 67–68)

Cacciato represents meaning, the truth for which Berlin longs, or rather serves as an emblem of the authentic self of Paul Berlin. Cacciato, even more persuasively and ironically, represents the opposite of the absurd. Whenever Cacciato is cornered, or a trap is sprung for him to fall into, he escapes.[35] Cacciato embodies the elusive *escape*[36] from the war, a return to authenticity and civilization, at least when viewed from the aspect of the narrator. Cacciato escapes with the express reason to drive Berlin further into the authentic, drawing him from the martial reality. Even the novel testifies to this notion: "'And what happens if you find him? If you catch him?' . . . 'Back to reality,' . . . it's back to the realms of reality'" (*GAC* 114). In the novel, for Paul Berlin the imagined is as real as the martial reality; so strong is his existential longing for the authenticity. This is thanks to his "observing instrument," his mind, which enjoys freedom of aspect when employed in rumination: "Things may be viewed from many angles. From down below, or from inside out, you often discover entirely new understandings" (*GAC* 93). The last known *fact* was Paul Berlin ordering the men to close in on the hill where they had cornered Cacciato. But that was "the end of it." "The last known fact. What remained were possibilities. With courage it might have been done" (*GAC* 305).

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[34] Labeling the imagined as inauthentic is done here with the following caveat: Although a projection of the authentic and what he wishes for, Berlin's imagined narrative fails to achieve the status of the authentic in that it is beyond his ability, beyond his courage. After all, it is only imagined, and not the acted out, and is conceived by Berlin himself as something he lacked the courage to do, which qualifies it, at least by standards of Nietzsche, as the self-deceiving, and inauthentic.

[35] The best example of such cases can be found on pages 66 and 74 of *Going After Cacciato*.

[36] Berlin can be attributed with concentrating on the future to escape the reality of now, thinking of what will happen once he is home (*GAC* 54).

On many occasions of finding his tracks throughout the novel, the squadron comes across items which mark Cacciato as a soldier. The items he leaves behind are fragments of his identity, bullets, military fatigues, and the like at first, but then the traces are those of what he is searching for, like M&Ms[37] (*GAC* 66). It is as if Cacciato is shedding his skin and becoming another man, splitting from the layer of martial reality. Thus, Cacciato can be interpreted as a manifestation of wishes and a direct link to the authentic self of Berlin. There are traces of others left in the narrative, as an entire chapter is dedicated to an appreciation of all the presented members of the company, a token of their authenticity (*GAC* 138–143). In certain respects, this token is similar to one of the main motifs of *The Things They Carried*, where carrying the self in the carried items is of paramount significance.

Another telling moment in the novel is the creation and the filling of Lake Country, which was a euphemism for shell-carved ground filled with rainwater. The consequence of artillery strikes and killing the opposition represents space for Paul Berlin to reflect on his fear as he cowers, but also space for the others to veil over the martial reality with pretense of the authentic. The filling of Lake Country was an attempt to reattach identity, the subject, with the severed self. Cacciato fishes not because it is absurd to do so, he fishes (*GAC* 225) to bridge the gap between the absurd and the consoling authentic; the fishing is not a figment of Berlin's imagination, but the outcome of a catch could be. The escape of Berlin into imagination, and of Cacciato to Paris, are results of a lack of purpose: "[P]urpose is what keeps him from running. . . Without purpose men will run. They will act out their dreams, and they will run and run, like animals in a stampede. It is *purpose* that keeps men at their posts to fight" (*GAC* 192). In certain terms, O'Brien presents purpose here as the main motive of fighting men, the detractor from the civil and the chief purpose of action. The significance of purpose extends beyond the martial reality; it is what anchors one to the piece of self that drives to fight, to stay instead of running. A constructed purpose is in one sense, a piece of the authentic if one chooses to adopt it. But even the purpose, or the *intent* of the war to civilize, comes into question in Berlin's mind (*GAC* 262). This is a consequence of innately questioning everything related to the war, as skepticism was one of Berlin's character features. In the amalgam of what they *wanted to do*, the soldier's duty also emerges. That part of war belonged to Berlin and the rest, especially Berlin, lieutenant Corson, and Oscar Johnson (*GAC* 276, 293–

[37] Characters present in the three works are sometimes shown as analogous, similar, or sharing essential characteristics. This is due to O'Brien's choice of writing works that are part fiction, part biography. Cf. the character Rat Kiley from *The Things They Carried*, p. 18.

294): “Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits” (*GAC* 303).

3.3. Carrying as Literary Motif

In absence of a full-fledged literary analysis, this thesis will allow for interpretative literary analysis of certain relevant literary motifs and themes presented in the selected works of O’Brien’s trilogy. One of them, certainly indispensable in fully grasping the *weight* of O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* in its full capacity of meaning—with which it is loaded—is the motif of carrying. O’Brien’s primary feature of style when presenting this motif are catalogues. To an extent, the catalogues and itemization of what the troops carry serve as an identifier of authenticity, the outlines of the minutia of existence of particular characters. This convention that O’Brien develops in his novel[38] can be interpreted as having a twofold purpose: i) as a literary motif and stylistic characteristic, and ii) as a carrier for the element of existential authenticity. As a literary motif and characteristic of style, the figure is simple to describe and ascribe a purpose to. Every catalogue of items builds the narrative’s characters in a subtle way, without overt exposition or necessary engagement in action, which would normally be featured in a standard plot. In its second purpose, which is built onto the first purpose, the itemizations are usually paired with additional commentary, containing ”items” with metaphysical weight and significance, which directly contribute to establishing authenticity and its importance in this analysis. We will further review the extent of the motif’s importance for the novel.

The men of Alpha Company carry more than the physical; their burdens are beyond the items of use or actual application:

> They carried their own lives. The pressures were enormous. . . . They would often discard things along the route of march. . . . because by nightfall the resupply choppers would arrive with more of the same. . . . and for all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry. (*TTC* 32-33)

In certain terms, the catalogue proves to be specification that details a meaningful structure, which turns out to be absurd—rules and things you use to accomplish nothing meaningful, but it is mostly the case that those items are indicators of an abstract sum of the characters. Some items are

[38] For some examples of this convention in *The Things They Carried*, see pages 29, 30-31, 32-33, and page 40.

replaceable, and their presence signifies the only certainty of the war: ambiguity and the weight that every man must carry. O'Brien will not simply enumerate the items carried; he will ascribe to each of the items a meaning "beyond the transitive," if such applies. Let us take a look at an example:

> The things they carried were determined to some extent by superstition. Lieutenant Jensen carried a rabbit's foot. Norman Bowker, otherwise a very gentle person, carried a thumb that has been presented to him as a gift by Mitchell Sanders. (*TTC* 29)

The burdens transcended the physical as we mentioned, and O'Brien embeds that into the motif early into the work, as apparent in the case when Kiowa wants to partake in the carrying of Ted Lavender's death: "He wanted to share the man's pain, he wanted to care as Jimmy Cross cared" (36 *TTC*). The motif metamorphosizes from weight into a more complex and abstract form of *gravity* later in the novel, but the motif retains the original suppressive quality:

> They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded and the weak. They carried infections. . . . They carried the land itself — Vietnam, the place, the soil —. . . They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it . . . they carried gravity. (*TTC* 31)

The crown of the motif's meaning appears fairly early in the novel, although it continues to persist in different forms throughout the novel. The achievement of the motif rests in the weight of the land itself, the *atmosphere*, which becomes apparent in the hypothetical extraction from the war:

> They were flying. The weights fell off; there was nothing to bear. They laughed and held on tight . . . they were naked, they were light and free . . . as they were taken up over the clouds and the war, beyond duty, beyond gravity and mortification and global entanglements" (*TTC* 41-42)

The weight is alleviated through departure, in resting the weight which went beyond the physical, as the "naked" men were "beyond duty," "light and free."

Of course, as the trilogy can be construed as connected and altogether an assembled collage of martial reality O'Brien's characters experienced, there are similar motifs present in both *CZ* and *GAC*, so let us briefly mention them. *CZ*, similarly to *TTC*, provides a naturalistic and realistic portrayal of the war, and the style of description and catalogues remains similar to *TTC*. Take the following example into consideration:

> Let the war rest there atop the left leg: the rucksack, the radio, the hand grenades, the magazines of golden bullets, the rifle, the steel helmet, the jingling dogtags, the body's own fat and water and meat, the whole contingent of warring artifacts and flesh. Let it all perch there, rocking on top of that left leg, fastened and tied and anchored by latches and zippers and snaps and nylon cord. Packhorse for the soul. The left leg does it all. (O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* 34)

Weight appears as a motif in *CZ*, mostly as a component of routine. It blends with a presented sameness and routine of war, yet it is a natural artifact of the text, tying into the dangerous reality that had become the norm (*CZ* 35). The motif of routine occurs naturally in all of the novels and is featured even in the subtler tone of *Going After Cacciato*. Marching, fatigue, and the extreme weather (*GAC* 40) were Vietnam's nature, and it was always apparent, even when not emphasized.

4. The Absurdity of War

> Atlas was permitted the opinion that he was at liberty, if he wished, to drop the Earth and creep away; but this opinion was all that he was permitted.
>
> —Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father. Stories and Other Writings*

The war described in O'Brien's trilogy offers the deception of choice: the war is on two fronts, as one's being battles the dread of death, while driving back the force of shame[39] that presses from the other side. Whichever way one fights towards, one loses; their being suffers the capital cost. The falsehood of choice seems as such: each presented choice results in death, so there is no true choice to be made. This is evident with all of the featured narrators of the trilogy, who retell their non-choice as existence-defining but also as a terminal approach to another mode of existence, i.e. joining the war effort and joining the martial reality. It would seem that there is no true choice in war; it is a matter of senseless violence and survival. There is no true choice in being violent and acting according to principle. This lack of true choice, nested in a disintegrating façade of reality and sense, represents the core of the absurd in the trilogy. Things and events become irrational, sometimes trivialized, or lose the gravity they would have in a civil setting. Much like *Dasein* with Heidegger, the soldiers seem thrown (*geworfen*) into a given world, a preset location of established protocol, which in the context of the trilogy guarantees only lack of sense. Similar to the idea of "thrown-ness," the characters are robbed of choice and are set somewhere, while having certain conventions, like duty, supposed for them. However, in the concept of *Geworfenheit* exists also room for freedom, as the object being thrown also draws the one who throws it into the throw. There is movement, leverage being created in this alienation from the world (*Geweorfenheit*). For the purpose of this thesis, the hypothetical similarity in conceptual terms to Heidegger, which has run its course by this point, will culminate in relating to the alternate reality the soldiers enter as the **martial reality**. It would be apt to consider it even a separate mode of existence. The strongest evidence for that supposition lies in *TTC*, but is nonetheless present in the rest of the works.

"Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff isn't necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness" (*TTC* 103). O'Brien uses moments to emphasize that this type of grotesque insanity is never far from the soldier, as is portrayed in

[39] Refer to chapter 6 of this thesis for a thorough examination of the element of alienation in the trilogy, of which shame is one of essential driving forces.

dark humor by Stink Harris, who jokingly asks why a young man did not tip the barber who shaved his neck just before his execution (*GAC* 180). The absurdity of martial reality does not live on its own at all times in the works, but is sometimes reproduced by the soldiers, as Harris did. The signifier of martial reality, and by extension its main quality, the absurd, is a lack of sense and purpose, a distinct lack of truth and bearing: "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" (*TTC* 118). One of the most convincing arguments for the absurdity of war is presented by the narrator (O'Brien) in *The Things They Carried*, in a chapter following a "true war story" about a six-man patrol group who hear the rock "talking," told by Mitchell Sanders (*TTC* 104). The returning soldiers are silent and "amazed," and to the inquiry of their superior about the ordnance called in by the forces they "don't say zip" (*TTC* 109): "They just look at him . . . and the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can't ever say. It says . . . you'll never know — wrong frequency — you don' *even* want to hear this . . . certain stories you don't ever tell" (*TTC* 109). The martial reality is simple on the surface, as O'Brien presents it: ". . . I remember sitting at my foxhole . . . thinking about the coming day and how we would cross the river . . . all the ways I might die, all the things I did not understand" (*TTC* 110). Yet, the martial reality is unintelligible, and fails consistency and the general meaningfulness civilian life offers.

If I Die in a Combat Zone opens with the motif of the incomprehensible and the absurd, with Barney and the narrator being shot at constantly (*CZ* 11-13): "'My god, Barney, they were shooting at us all day. How the hell are you going to surprise them?' I was indignant. Searching the ville, the whole hot day, was utterly and certainly futile" (*CZ* 15). Most missions and military action, therefore the martial reality of war, is presented as an exercise in futility and the absurd: "[B]ut it was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost" (*TTC* 31). There was no purpose, no clear goal or defined sense to be derived by the troops, as O'Brien's memoir (*CZ*) will indirectly surmise. This truth proposed by O'Brien changes the perception of danger due to uncertainty.

> The night was not as frightening as other nights. Sometimes there was the awful feeling in the air that people would die at their foxholes or in their sleep, but that night everyone talked softly and bravely. No one doubted that we would be hit, yet in the certainty of a fight to come there was no real terror. We hadn't lost anyone that day, even after eight hours of sniping and harassment, and the presence of the enemy and his failure during the day made the night hours easier. (*CZ* 18)

The absurd of the war relies on alienation and uncertainty, the ambiguous and the unknown that persistently threatens with the extreme outcome of death. The pressure of this reality forces unto the characters a tradition of suppressing hope, and adopting a disposition that makes light of all things the martial reality brings, especially the extreme outcomes:

> Everyone stirred slowly, lay on their backs for long minutes, talked in little groups. At that hour no one really kept guard. A look out into the bush now and then, that was all. A cursory feign. It was like waking up in a cancer ward, no one ambitious to get on with the day, no one with obligations, or dreams for the daylight. (*CZ* 19)

Here O'Brien truly expresses an unmistakable senseless and aimless existence, comparing it to one of a cancer ward, where none have a future or a present purpose. Their days are numbered and void of meaning, so there is no real reason or impetus to act, just as the reality of the Vietnam trilogy is for the soldiers. Similar to the existence of Camus' Sisyphus as analogous to the modern human, the existence of O'Brien's soldier remains homogenous and repetitive, without true vigor and meaning, as authentic existence would be. Instead, it has the atmosphere of a cancer ward, a bleak outlook, a surrender to the absurd. As Sisyphus rolls his stone upwards and the contemporary man toils in his factories and offices, so do the men of third platoon, Alpha Company march and "hump" their equipment, getting shot on their way.

The absurd appears in conjunction with alienation in the Vietnam theatre of war in all of O'Brien's trilogy, as O'Brien's narrator retells in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, with soldiers' treading of fields laden with mines. Mines cause a reaction that dictates the opposite of what is taught in training, a fixation on the ground and detailed scrutiny of nothing other than a few feet before you, all the while inducing anxiety, fear, and a catatonic state (*CZ* 126). The absurdity of this concept follows the narrator's exposition on behavior, describing it through an account of a fellow soldier, which succinctly presents the core of the absurd in martial reality: "'It's an absurd combination of certainty and uncertainty: the certainty that you're walking in the minefields, walking past the things day after day; the uncertainty of your every movement, of which way to shift your weight, of where to sit down" (*CZ* 127). To better explain this case of the absurd, we can examine the "catalogue" (*CZ* 129) of mines, which serves a twofold role in the novel: it is both a catalogue of terrors, the elements of fear as a motif in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, and as a catalogue of "particles" of the absurd. In a particular way, the absurd outlines itself; it can be an apparent military device or masked shrubbery that brings out the senselessness all the same, one seemingly trivial, the other overtly dangerous. Not knowing, the uncertainty, is the composite material of the absurd in *If I*

Die in a Combat Zone. However, even the narrator points out a "patent absurdity" (*CZ* 129), which is presented in a cycle: "The troops are going home, and the war has not been won, even with a quarter of the United States fighting it. We slay one of them, hit a mine, kill another, kill another, hit another mine. It is funny" (*CZ* 129). The reaction of finding it funny is due to adaptation to the martial reality proposed earlier; it is a consequence of accepting the paradoxical nature of not knowing but still moving towards the unknown, the nature of the extreme becoming both the norm and the trivial. A keen example of similar behavior is the instance when soldiers stage an attack by the enemy by synchronously throwing grenades, all due to being bored. This action is met with little commentary, and O'Brien does not invest in a contemplation of the inane and absurd nature of the fact—in fact, the event is merely described with complimentary humorous commentary by the soldiers ridiculing the soldier who got himself hurt in the process, calling the involved "nutty," and no further attention is paid to the act (*CZ* 33-34). Another example of the shifted norm in martial reality appears in *CZ*, when within the frame of but a page and a half O'Brien blatantly, without any commentary again, introduces the absurd. A blind man is struck in his face with a carton of milk for no apparent reason (*CZ* 104), and there is no reaction to it, not from the soldiers, not from the man himself. In the chapter "Enemies" of *The Things They Carried*, the absurdity of Vietnam and its extremity in terms of action otherwise normal is described through an otherwise innocuous spat between Jensen and Strunk. After Jensen hurts Strunk, which sends Strunk to the rear for two days, tension is created that outside of martial reality would not exist, as the narrator points out: "In any other circumstance it might have ended there. But this was Vietnam . . ." (*TTC* 92-93). There were "no vows of revenge" (*TTC* 93), but the threat of a grenade rolling in his foxhole, or having his throat cut existed. This resulted in an absurd shift in paradigm: "The distinction between good guys and bad guys disappeared for him" (*TTC* 93). The factors of two basic principles disappear, they become blurred, the real is no longer immutable but becomes malleable; it becomes **ambiguous**. The innocuous is made extreme, and the extreme becomes the every-day.

The trivializing process is a common theme in all parts of the trilogy. It mostly occurs to death and other extreme outcomes, as a reaction and adaptation to the martial reality. The extremity of outcome is, as was mentioned, one of the factors of the absurd in O'Brien's novels, and this extremity is apparent usually through positions of binary states of living or dying, which are the outcomes of most choices in Vietnam, as presented by the narrator (O'Brien). The testaments to this are the humorous and euphemistic views on dying as the negative outcome, and the ever-present certainty of ambiguity, which ensures the possibility of death, the negative outcome:

> When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. (*TTC* 38-39)

Death is feared; death is accepted. The only way to combat death is to understand it as something else, as a simplified and euphemistic transition: "In Vietnam, too, we had ways of making the dead seem not quite so dead. . . . By slighting death, by acting, we pretended it was not the terrible thing it was. By our language, which was both hard and wistful, we transformed the bodies into piles of waste" (*TTC* 318). *The Things They Carried* succeeds in conveying this notion of the absurd to the fullest degree, and proves similar to Heidegger's notion of accepting death[40] as a means of becoming truly authentic, which for the characters would be necessary. Martial reality is, just like authentic existence in the civil reality, defined by death. In martial reality, however, the certainty of death, the pending final act, does not extend far into the future, but still throws the characters into anxiety and fear. The two defining deaths in *TTC*, the deaths of Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, allow O'Brien to express fully the entirety of the absurdity of war and of death. The characters even draw "morals" from deaths, which are another indication of signifying death as something less than physical death, an attempt to master it and transcend its surface meaning:

> There it is, they'd say. Over and over — there it is, my friend, there it is — as if repetition itself were an act of poise, a balance between crazy and almost crazy, knowing without knowing, there it is, which meant be cool, let it ride, because Oh yeah, man, there it is, there it absolutely and positively and fucking well *is*. (*TTC* 39)

Lavender's death is a clear symbol of the unknown meeting the extreme outcome, and coming together into the extreme outcome, fabricating the absurd reality of war. Curt Lemon's death is a thing of beauty, a spectacle in the higher meaning when the narrator offers the speculative jump over the pure physical meaning. It is an attack on the absurd, but also a surrender to it. A man died, but he died beautifully. It happened in an instant, it was the unknown, but it produced a result, or so the narrator produced to combat the absurd: ". . . and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms" (*TTC* 102-103).

[40] Refer back to chapter 2 and subchapter 2.1. of this thesis for elaboration.

Paradoxically and absurdly, a reversal to your truest existence, the essential being, occurs when the outcome of death seems most likely,[41] i.e., in firefights: "At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life" (*TTC* 116).

The martial reality requires an inwardly projected understanding of life and oneself to face the absurd. The two extremes, life and death, call for a marriage in martial reality. This adds another dimension of paradox to considering the absurdity present in O'Brien's novels, as the situations in which one is closest to death incur a return to the normal existence, a wish for what was previously taken as granted—in other words, the authentic existence. Martial reality produces a disingenuous existence and molds a subject into a senseless drone, who sees no positive outcome and values no "normal" value, instead taking on a perspective of only a detrimental outcome in their inescapable situation, in which they were bound by shame (death of character)[42] and physical death. War carries with itself an innate existential crisis: the means of killing are quick, effective, and almost certain to end one's life if they are applied to someone. The awe the men feel for the things they carry represents this innate crisis, the crisis of men who know that death does not discriminate, and that existing—surviving—in a war is not fair or usually a matter of calculated, planned agency. War is experienced as a terminal disease and the only way of existing within that framework is to accept that definition.

4.1. Escape

Going After Cacciato hinges entirely on the absurd, which is evident in the basic premise introduced by the novel: a soldier fleeing the war, travelling on foot from Vietnam to France. The idea seems absurd, but is painted with the humor of O'Brien's style inherited from his military past. The narrative lends itself to irony and mockery of the Vietnam war effort, but it serves a subtler role in O'Brien's intention. The absurd shines through the clear senselessness of the

[41] For the essential and encompassing testament to this occurrence, refer to the following: "All around you things are purely living, and you among them, and the aliveness makes you tremble. You feel an intense, out-of-the-skin awareness of your living self — your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it. In the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted. There is a kind of largeness to it, a kind of godliness. Though it's odd, you're never more alive than when you're almost dead. You recognize what's valuable. Freshly, as if for the first time, you love what's best in yourself and in the world, all that might be lost. At the hour of dusk you sit at your foxhole and look out on a wide river turning pinkish red, and at the mountains beyond, and although in the morning you must cross the river and go into the mountains and do terrible things and maybe die, even so, you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river, you feel wonder and awe at the setting of the sun, and you are filled with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not. (TTC 117) For another explication, see: O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, page 259.

[42] Refer to chapter 6 of the thesis for elaboration.

situation. A soldier regarded as stupid (*GAC* 12-13) flees from the war, enacting the absurd, and his comrades pursue after him, reenacting the absurdity. There is no point to follow Cacciato, as the group remarks (*GAC* 16-17, 22), but the venture continues and construes the entire narrative. The endeavor is its own means and its own end, a ridicule designed solely to point back at itself and prove its absurdity in the context of war. It is both believable and impossible, both absurd and absolutely credible. The pursuit is a venture of patent pointlessness; even when the party catches up to Cacciato for the first time, they do not detain him and instead keep their distance and continue to surround him (*GAC* 30). Instead of immediately capturing Cacciato, "reconnaissance" is performed, and Oscar Johnson returns with a report that serves merely as an affirmation of the surreal situation (*GAC* 28). This instance is finally revealed to be the last actual contact with Cacciato; the rest is conjecture and imagination. "In his tower by the sea Paul Berlin considered the possibilities. A miracle, he thought. An act of high imagination – daring and lurid and impossible. Yes, a cartoon of the mind" (*GAC* 230). Encountering fleeing Cacciato for the first and truly last time prompts Paul Berlin to think of the possibility of the venture, and lament his lack of courage to join the attempt, which is, in terms of a literary analysis, an examination of the motif: could the impossible be proven faulty and the opposite; could the world have some other meaning that it should be ascribed? This is most apparent in Berlin's ruminations of Cacciato's escape and their perceived journey: "Had it ever ended? What, in fact, had become of Cacciato, . . . which part was fact and what part was the extension of fact? And how were facts separated from possibilities?" (*GAC* 34) In full, the absurd in *Going After Cacciato* reveals itself in the examination of reality, and the lie, the false reality, that tells on itself. When the interrogating officer in Tehran makes the characters pronounce the lie and confess to the truth (*GAC* 221), and Sarkin Aung Wan impels Berlin to *do* something instead of pretending in Paris (*GAC* 281), the absurd manifests and questions the reality. In the work's conclusion, however, Paul Berlin does *face facts*: "The war was still a war, and he was still a soldier. He hadn't run. The issue was courage, and courage was will power, and that was his failing" (*GAC* 304).

The imagined in *Going After Cacciato* takes its own course, and wishes for more and more until it finally achieves an equilibrium between the spectacular and the normal, the achievable and the aspired for. Even the imagined events and characters' remarks reflect this, such as the lieutenant's belief that they were being kidnapped, and Berlin confessing how things were taking their own track[43] (*GAC* 132). The occurrences proved hard to sequence to Berlin; separating "what

[43] Paul Berlin falls in and out of consciousness, diving into the deepest on the fantasy, when it truly takes hold of his imagination. Refer to pages 78, 84, and 86 for examples. "'We have fallen into a hole. Now we must fall out'" (*GAC* 99).

happened, and what might have happened" (*GAC* 198), was difficult because they required further observation, and "observation requires inward-looking, a study of the . . . observing instrument" (*GAC* 198). The imaginary journey is crafted through reality, on the observation post, where the instrument is grounded, and to determine the possible it is required to settle the matter in the observing instrument. In a way, this is Berlin's invocation of sanity and a grounding in the martial reality. Simultaneously, the substitute reality takes away the momentum from the search for Cacciato naturally as the soldiers acclimate to the "normal" (*GAC* 167), and even the lieutenant's illness is attributed to a longing for something other than the war—he is nostalgic,[44] he wishes to return home, but in the case of the lieutenant, it is nostalgia for the war and the military life (*GAC* 177). Every character of the novel seeks to balance out, to return to the normal, which for the lieutenant is the war, but for the rest of them civilized society and civilian life. The lieutenant is sick because, in the imagined reality, he is taken away from his normal, the opposite of what is happening to Berlin and the rest.

4.2. The Unending Paradox of War

One of the central elements of the absurdity of war—the martial reality—is its paradoxical nature. We have already mentioned how the paradox relies on ambiguity and uncertainty, but further discussion will offer more insight and clarity in this subchapter. The characteristic of paradoxical nature makes war mostly incomprehensible or ambiguous,[45] the truth indiscernible from the lies: "War is hell, but that's not the half of it . . . the truths are contradictory . . . To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true" (*TTC* 115-

[44] "Under conditions of peace the warlike man attacks himself" (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 92).

[45] The complete description of the paradoxical nature of war, in this thesis interpreted as a mode of existence is necessary for a complete understanding of the writer's thorough exposition of the paradoxical elements. Refer to the following: "War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and discovery and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer round unwinding through the dark like brilliant red ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool impassive moon rises over the nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the harmonies of sound and shape and proportion, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorus, the purply orange glare of napalm, the rocket's red glare. It's not poetry exactly. It's astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference — a powerful, implacable beauty — and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly. To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life. After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass, the soil — everything." (TTC 115–117)

116). In this new type of existence, one must adopt a discriminatory attitude and not generalize, like the narrator notes cannot be done in true war stories, as the truth of this type of existence must always be confounding and related to an event, usually incomprehensible or devoid of absolute truth and the definite (*TTC* 118), but tacitly understood by the stomach, which "believes"—"A true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant" (*TTC* 120). War cannot be defined in absolutes; the only common attributes all parts of war share are uncertainty and ambiguity (*TTC* 118), a fleeting sense of security, dread, and an extreme outcome of action. Things clash in war, meaning intertwines and loses boundaries, and the lines of good and bad blur: "[E]ven rain was to being sucked under a shit field, and because it was all a matter of luck and happenstance" (*TTC* 240). The uncomfortable is graded on a scale that is never regular and can invert, the actions are immediate but the outcomes permanent: "In the field, though, the causes were immediate. A moment of carelessness or bad judgement or plain stupidity carried consequences that lasted forever" (*TTC* 242). The certainty is reserved only for the uncertain; there is no permanence or truth: "There was certainty and regularity to the war, and this alone was something to hold on to" (*GAC* 101). Buff's view of basketball and clear stakes contrasts well against the war, where the reality disappoints: Winning was warm, "warm where the silence hurt. . . . Winning – you knew the score, you knew what it would take to win, to come from behind, you knew exactly" (*GAC* 109).

The paradox of martial reality dazes and confuses, but most importantly it robs the soldiers of purpose:

> By daylight, they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared, but it was not battle, it was just the endless march, village, to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march. They plodded along slowly, leaning forward against the heat, unthinking, all blood and bone, simple grunts, soldiering with their legs, toiling up the hills and down into the paddies and across the rivers and up again and down, just humping, one step and then the next and then another, but no volition, no will, and the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything, a kind of inertia, a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility. Their calculations were biological. They had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched the villages without knowing what to look for, not caring, kicking over jars if rice, frisking children and old men, blowing tunnels, sometimes setting fires and sometimes not, then forming up and moving on to the next village, then other villages, where it would always be the same. (*TTC* 31-32)

Most of martial reality O'Brien's trilogy describes was a vacuity of sense, and the citation above addresses the issue most completely out of any part of the trilogy, so an analysis of its contents is worthwhile to derive certain additional conclusions for this subchapter. The style of O'Brien's writing differs at points where certain sense is being readied, which is the case with this piece of text. It is a remarkably long unit of meaning, constructed of many short parts of limited isolated value, all of which seems to stem from each other, like a stream of consciousness and a well of frustration when put into context. The literary analysis of the citation relies on uncharacteristic exposition and detail that does not drive the plot but serves as commentary and an excurse by the writer/narrator, which marks it as space for reflection and rumination, as well as space suitable for a philosophical analysis due to its reflective nature. The absurd reveals itself in the description of the characters' actions as "biological." We must first discern the concepts of *zoe* from *bios*, and indicate what their difference means for existence. *Zoe* qualifies as life in a broad sense, the living in general, without characteristics. It refers to that state opposite of death, and describes pure life, like an animal would lead. Operating as *zoe*, thus, means a lack of sense and direction, an animalistic reality of following a set path. On the other side, *bios* represents life in detail, the specificity in being alive and in conclusion the life of thinking beings, humans. The clear aim of O'Brien here was to indicate the meaning in the sense of *zoe*, as the men act out on "instinct," which is following standard operating procedure and completing pointless tasks that never produced significant results to contribute to the war effort. The characters have "no volition, no will," they live the "emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect" of war and enact the void of meaning the war represents through its absurdity.

This idea is reflected throughout the trilogy, and it is conjunct with a lack of reason, sense, and purpose for fighting the war. The disappointment is partly rooted in how the absurd disappoints in martial reality: "The tripflares were useless. The ammunition corroded and the foxholes filled with mud and water during the nights, and in the mornings there was always the next village, and the war was always the same" (*GAC* 9). However, the roots reach deeper than the reality the characters meet in Vietnam. As O'Brien's narrator discusses war and life (cf. *CZ* 26–27), it is entirely present throughout the trilogy that he was never a partisan of the war effort, he had never believed in the cause: "I was persuaded then, and I remain persuaded now, that the war was wrong. And since it was wrong and since people were dying as a result of it, it was evil. Doubts, of course, hedged all this: I had neither the expertise nor the wisdom to synthesize answers…" (*CZ* 27).

The same idea appears in *The Things They Carried*: "I saw no unity of purpose, no consensus on matters of philosophy or history or law. The very facts were shrouded in uncertainty:

Was it a civil war? A war of national liberation or simple aggression? Who started it, and when, and why?" (*TTC* 62).

However, this loss of sense in making war and the ubiquity of death, as well as its normality, and as this thesis mentions, the loss of certainty, is not endemic to O'Brien's work or any part of his trilogy this thesis covers, or even war literature in total. Warfare seems to be devoid of sense in the eyes of the soldiers of some cultures, an example for which we can find in different forms of literature and writing. The thesis will now present an example purposely so far apart from what O'Brien's literature is to illustrate this point. The following is a transcription of an English script adapted from the manga series *Berserk*, following an opening over a camp of a mercenary band, featuring dialogue between two main characters, Guts and Casca:

> It seems to me that everybody stakes their lives in a lost cause. Looking over them all from up here, I almost think I can see their hopes and dreams flickering in each little light. Like a bonfire of dreams . . . It's like each one of them has his own little light or small flame . . . and to ensure that those weaker flames don't go out, each man casts his own into the strongest fire of them all, a raging fire . . . (Miura, "Bonfire of Dreams")

The men of Alpha Company stake their lives to ward off shame and to find unity in forced friendship over a "lost cause," a case of defying death by existing in violence, tributing their flame into a greater fire of hope in going home, like the men of that mercenary band add their flame into their leader. Once again, the war effort does not seem to bear the meaning of waging war: "He knew something was wrong with his war. The absence of common purpose" (*GAC* 161). This illustrates how disillusionment roots itself in all of the novels, with the special circumstance of the Vietnam war and its cause, the reason for its fighting, and the political motivation which in summary eludes the narrator, but still leads him to oppose the war. This motif occurs in every part of the trilogy, and in *Going After Cacciato*, O'Brien did not miss the opportunity to outline it even more gravely (*GAC* 254–256),[46] creating an exhaustive document of inaccessibility of meaning,

[46] For convenience, the direct citation is present here: "They fought the war, but no one took sides. They did not know even the simple things: a sense of victory, or satisfaction, or necessary sacrifice. They did not know the feeling of taking place and keeping it, securing a village and then raising the flag and calling it a victory. No sense of order or momentum. No front, no rear, no trenches laid out in neat parallels. No Patton rushing for the Rhine, no beachheads to storm and win and hold for the duration. They did not have targets. They did not have a cause. They did not know if it was a war of ideology or economics or hegemony or spite. On a given day, they did not know where they were in Quang Ngai, or how being there might influence larger outcomes. They did not know the names of most villages. They did not know which villages were critical. They did not know strategies. They did not know the terms of the war, its architecture, the rules of fair play. When they took prisoners, which was rare, they did not know the question to ask, whether to release a suspect or beat on him. They did not know how to feel. Whether,

knowledge and purpose, which covers the entire trilogy. What seems endemic, however, to the trilogy of O'Brien, is the idea of being entirely opposed to the reality presented. The trilogy performs this act of complete opposition by setting the characters against a hostile environment. The reality in the trilogy, especially *TTC* and *CZ* becomes the enemy; the atmosphere is hostile and being alienates the subject within reality.

when seeing a dead Vietnamese, to be happy or sad or relieved; whether, in times of quiet, to be apprehensive or content; whether to engage the enemy or elude him. They did not know how to feel when they saw villages burning. Revenge? Loss? Peace of mind or anguish? They did not know. They knew the old myths of Quang Ngai – tales passed down from old-timer to newcomer – but they did not know which stories to believe. Magic, mystery, ghosts and incense, whispers in the dark, strange tongues and strange smells, uncertainties never articulated in war stories, emotion squandered on ignorance. They did not know good from evil." (*GAC* 255–256)

5. The Nietzschean Abyss of the Well

> If you want to find out what a man is to the bottom, give him power. Any man can stand adversity—only a great man can stand prosperity.
>
> —Horatio Alger Jr., *Abraham Lincoln, the Backwoods Boy: Or How a Young Rail Splitter Became President*

Nietzsche proposes a series of claims and understandings of authenticity, free will, and morality throughout his works. For the purpose of analyzing what is surely the most compelling chapter of O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, we will briefly review some of Nietzsche's positions,[47] which should allow us to draw parallels between elements of philosophy and the literature of O'Brien. The first element related to the aim of this chapter is authenticity:

> To become "what we are" is not to live according to our so-called "innate nature," but to create ourselves freely. To that end we have to know ourselves to distinguish what we can change in ourselves and in the external circumstances that have shaped us; we must realize what we have to accept as inevitable, and must do so in the heroic manner of amor fati (love of fate). (Golomb 47)

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of Nietzsche's espoused attitudes towards authenticity is freedom, freedom and will to become who we are. That freedom is under duress by external effects, including tradition and authority which was inherited, and that duress can lead to inauthenticity, as Laceulle remarks: "Inauthenticity lures us into succumbing to the temptation of following false authorities" (200). Becoming oneself, however, is not a simple transformation with a clearly defined outcome, and with definite frame of achievement:

> To become what one is, we can see, is not to reach a specific new state and to stop becoming . . . It is to identify oneself with all of one's actions, to see that everything one does (what one becomes) is what one is. In the ideal case it is also to fit all this into a coherent whole and *to want to be everything that one is*. (201)

[47] A brief exposition of these positions has been partly laid out in chapter 2 and subchapter 2.4. of this thesis, and this chapter will refer to those ideas and explanations mostly implicitly.

Achieving the authentic state and self-realization ends both with an achieved result, and with the acceptance of the new state in a complete sense. In transforming into what we are, we must recognize what we are, and want to become that which is us:

> No one can build for you the bridge upon which you alone must cross the stream of life, no one but you alone. To be sure, there are countless paths and bridges and demigods that want to carry you through this stream, but only at the price of your self; you would pawn and lose your self. There is one single path in this world on which no one but you can travel. Where does it lead? Do not ask, just take it. (qtd. in Laceulle 200)

The correct response to the call of authenticity is embracing the truth of ourselves as we become what we are. We are conditioned, inherently weak, and driven to courses which do not lead to self-realization; it is our personal responsibility to become ourselves. The idea into which this view on authenticity develops in one of the sovereign individual,[48] and later the Übermensch, a more radical representation of the sovereign individual. It is important to note, as we have mentioned freedom within a context appropriate to Nietzsche, is that Nietzsche does not reject notions of free will,[49] but employs the figure of the *free spirit* as one who seeks freedom from illusions and horizons (Kirkland 576). These notions will serve as an introduction to the idea of the noble,[50] mentioned earlier[51] in the thesis, and the Übermensch.

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[48] Refer to the following for a hyperbolized description: "who has his own protracted will and the right to make promises and in him a proud consciousness, quivering in every muscle, of what has at length been achieved and become flesh in him, a consciousness of his own power and freedom . . . [and who] is bound to reserve a kick for the feeble windbags who promise without the right to do." (qtd. in Gemes, Ken and Christopher Janaway. "Nietzsche on Free Will, Autonomy and the Sovereign Individual." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, vol. 80, 2006, pp. 321-57, p. 326.)

[49] "Nietzsche, then, should not be seen simply as one who rejects received metaphysical notions of free will, autonomy, agency, personhood and soul, but as one who replaces them with immanent naturalist accounts. Moreover, these accounts serve distinctly normative ends: they aim to replace a passive stance and engender a genuinely active creative engagement with the world. Nietzsche aims to change his preferred readers from being mere conduit points of a vast array of conflicting inherited drives into genuinely unified beings." (Gemes, Janaway 335)

[50] "The genuinely noble will have a high sense of duty for commanding, ordering, and directing the paths of human lives. In light of this responsibility the most distinguished individuals are marked by their capacity for self-command. The duties of the noble soul are governed by what permits power over itself and conditions itself for command not the universal imperatives of a transcendent subject. Beyond the freedom sought by a free spirit, the noble soul will understand that his privileges come with duties, come as duties. Beyond moralities of good and evil, the noble soul will not understand these duties as universal. Beyond good and evil and beyond mere freedom lies the nobility of the most comprehensive responsibility." (Kirkland 603)

[51] Once again, refer to chapter 2 and subchapter 2.4. of this thesis.

The authenticity of the men when acting out the atrocity of "How to Tell a True War Story" retains an ethical[52] component and concerns far greater speculative scopes than the size of this work allows for. For the sake of simplicity, and to meet the requirements of length, this thesis will not discuss the details of concepts such as Übermensch or its ethical implications, but will use them as cursors for drawing parallels between thoughts that are intentionally philosophical (Nietzsche) and those who are only interpreted as such by this thesis. First, it is in order to address the first parallel, which will lie in Nietzsche's text *Beyond Good and Evil*, since this text allows for an interpretation of good and evil beyond a simple dichotomy, and makes mention of monsters and the abyss, in one of its most famous sections. Before we deconstruct the meaning of the abyss, the thesis will allow space to first elaborate on the title of Nietzsche's work. Indeed, the work goes *beyond* the concepts of good and evil, and transcends that dichotomous relationship by positing new paradigms, questioning roots of morality and the tradition that we have inherited, which in turn loaned us the language and criteria for grading matters as good or evil:

> Nietzsche's critique of morality rests crucially on psychological analyses that purport to expose the self-destructive effects of moral attitudes like guilt and ascetic self-denial, as well as the corrosive mismatch between the official claims of altruistic morality and its underlying motivation in *ressentiment*. (Anderson, "Friedrich Nietzsche")

For Nietzsche, morality is a complex subject and does not hinge on principles set by outside authority. In his understanding, especially later when the idea of the beyond-man emerges, power[53] becomes one of the pillars of understanding his relation to morality, virtue, and authenticity. The story of the baby water buffalo, found in the chapter "How to Tell a true War Story," represents the most captivating and abstract philosophical piece of writing within the novel. The opening pages of the chapter set a precedent for the upcoming themes: "A true war story is never moral. It

[52] For further reading, refer to Grene, Marjorie. "Authenticity: An Existential Virtue", *Ethics*, vol. 62, no. 4., 1952, pp. 266-74., esp. the following: "For example, the existentialist denies the practical supremacy of reason, he denies the universality of moral values, he asserts the all-importance, ethically, of the historic individual in his unique situation" (266). Anderson (Anderson, R. Lanier. "On Marjorie Grene's 'Authenticity: An Existential Virtue'", *Ethics*, vol. 125, no. 3, 2015, pp. 815-19) wrote a review/critique of Grene's piece, so that may be useful to create a more complete understanding of her positions.

[53] "The closest Nietzsche comes to organizing his value claims systematically is his insistence on the importance of power, especially if this is taken together with related ideas about strength, health, and 'life'. A well-known passage appears near the opening of the late work, *The Antichrist*" (Anderson, "Friedrich Nietzsche"):
"What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself.
What is bad? Everything that is born of weakness.
What is happiness? The feeling that power is *growing*, that resistance is overcome.
Not contentedness but more power; not peace but war; not virtue but fitness (Renaissance virtue, *virtù*, virtue that is moraline-free)." (Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* 571).

does not instruct, nor encourage virtue . . . nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done" (*TTC* 100). Next, the thesis will draw the parallel and see how the similarities manifest.

As Alpha Company set up to march westward into the mountains across the river north of Quang Ngai City, as detailed in "How to Tell a True War Story," following their loss of Curt Lemon, they find a water buffalo. Rat Kiley, having lost his friend, takes the buffalo along with the company until they settled at an abandoned village. Rat Kiley then proceeds to torture the water buffalo. Shooting it in various body parts, including limbs and its mouth, Rat Kiley exercised his power over a powerless subject: "It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt" (*TTC* 113). The platoon looked on without reaction, and the narrator explains the reason for the atrocity: "The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there wasn't a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo. Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world" (*TTC* 113). This scene is in stark contrast to the rest of the novel in one way: it is an exercise of torture, of excess force with the single objective of inflicting pain. A sufficient analysis of the chapter's synopsis would prove to be the following: the members of the company, especially Rat Kiley, are outraged by the death of Curt Lemon, and Kiley acts as a conduit for the frustration caused by the absurd nature of the war, and its unforgiving reality (extremity of outcome). However, this thesis will argue that there is a deeper layer of meaning that can be interpreted from the text. The factors of such an analysis lie in the words O'Brien uses, and the reactions of the characters to the act of violence.

This thesis will propose that this chapter, or at the very least the part of it concerning the incident with the buffalo (*TTC* 112-115), can be read as a moment of *apokalipsis* (revelation) for the men of Alpha Company. This ethical revelation is reminiscent of Nietzsche's notions of will to power, the Übermensch,[54] and the famous section on gazing into the abyss. "[In war], [t]he old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true"[55] (*TTC* 118). The torturer, Rat Kiley,

[54] "For the evolution of the man of power . . . is not bound by the conventions of society. He is beyond good and evil. He is a law unto himself. He is the creator of values. He is not bound by the ties of the past. History centers about *him*. If he wishes to be ruthless then ruthlessness is his right. Indeed it is to be the special pride of the beyond-man that he has hewn his way up. . . . For the beyond-man there must be an entire transvaluation of all values. The virtues of the good are merely compromises within the herd by which they have agreed not to destroy each other. They are the conventions of cowards, not of strong men." (Peters 364)

[55] This idea of revelation, but more practically speaking, the wiping of the slate clean and introducing a new arrangement, can be drawn as a parallel to Nietzsche's view presented in *Ecce Homo*: „"To become what one is, one must not have the slightest notion of what one is . . . The whole surface of consciousness-consciousness is a surface-must be kept clear of all great imperatives . . . Meanwhile the organizing 'idea' that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down-it begins to command; slowly it leads us back from side roads and wrong roads; it prepares single qualities and fitnesses that will one day prove to be indispensable as a means towards the whole--one by one, it trains all subservient capacities before giving any hint of the dominant task, 'goal', 'aim', 'meaning'." (qtd. in Gemes, Janaway 332)

and the rest of the spectators, unveil a new reality, a new truth: "We had witnessed something essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling there was not yet a name for it" (*TTC* 114). Killing the buffalo had given rise to new power, brandishing it fully. That who is overrich in will is the most devious, the most solitary in his will and designs, he has mastered his virtues and produces more virtues, like isolation and deviance, in hedonism where the experience of pleasure and pain holds as the only truth; here no common good is tended to as the individual holds a violent and barbaric will (Cloud 535). As Kiley tortured, the old paint of imposed weakness, morality, and impotence peeled off, and he was now aware of the full scope of his power, and his aptitude for evil. The discovery is one of latent depravity, potency to eliminate and craft a new standard, as Nietzsche proposes in *Antichrist* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. The furious Kiley experiences *krisis*, (existential crisis, the turning point of when one realizes/discovers). He had taken the first step towards uncovering a new frontier, becoming a new version of himself. The beyond-man, as Peters[56] refers to the Übermensch, needs evil to become better, he must be free from pity and ready to kill (364–365). "'Amazing,' Dave Jensen kept saying . . . 'Well, that's Nam,' he said. 'Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin's real fresh and original" (*TTC* 115). The spectacle Dave Jensen notices and the incredulity he expresses are due in part to the paradoxical, absurd nature of war,[57] and the novelty of the discovery they had made. They possessed power, an innate power[58] of character and a power of arms, which made them capable of retaliation and extermination, subduing and submission at their whim. Morality had developed a new dimension,[59] evil had become a broader space, or it had been altered in a moral polarity or spectrum. As Bonney remarked in chapter 1 of the thesis, there was a perversion of satisfaction which joined with fulfilling duty in war. The *apokalipsis* of the characters is, succinctly, a revelation of power foremost of a being who must overcome his limitations in his growth, and is unmistakably reminiscent of the will to power. Will to power is not one, not one unified world will

[56] For Peters' exhaustive exposition of the Nietzsche's doctrine of will to power and its intersecting with the concept of the *Übermensch*, refer to: Peters, Charles C. „Friedrich Nietzsche and His Doctrine of Will to Power." *The Monist*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1911, pp 357-75.

[57] Refer to chapter 4 of this thesis for a thorough explication of this phenomenon.

[58] Nietzsche's views mentioned and used in this thesis concern a broad idea of a sovereign individual, extrapolated from several of his works, whose chief quality is the ability of genuine agency, and a discovery of free will as an innate potential.

[59] Cf. Nietzsche's perspective on historically situated and rhetorically produced morality: "Morality in the sense in which it has been understood hitherto, that is to say the morality of intentions, has been a prejudice, a precipitancy, perhaps something provisional and precursory, perhaps something of the order of astronomy and alchemy, but in any event something that must be overcome. The overcoming of morality, in a certain sense even the self-overcoming of morality: let this be the name for that protracted secret labour which has been reserved for the subtlest, most honest and also most malicious consciences as living touchstones of the soul." (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 51)

"but many unrelated wills, each equally legitimate" (Peters 362). The principal governing will is that of creation and force, and no objective truth stays valid in a world that is not consistent:

> It is the business of each thing then to force its way in the universe. Things are only what they are made. They are not found; they are created. "the doer," he says, "alone learneth." Apart from doing there is nothing to learn for facts do not hang together in such a way as to constitute truth. There is in the universe as such no unity, no coherence. It is foolish to speak about truth for there is no truth that belongs to the objective world. Only a fool would attempt to be consistent. The self is primal, the self is sovereign. There is no truth except what it creates. (Peters 362)

Having killed the water buffalo and discovered a new truth, they have identified themselves with one who transcends his confinement of morality by stepping into the dimension of monstrosity and embraces it as a form which he can harness to hone his existence to its utmost quality.

It is precisely in this moment that something profound and radically new is revealed to them: they have the capacity to be monsters (mutilate with weapons as it is understood from the metaphorical nature of the short story), both in terms of mental and physical ability. They understand through this ethical *apokalipsis* (revelation) that there was within them the silence that all of them shared as the poor animal was harmed, and that they willingly let it happen, perhaps even derived some sense of retribution from it, as it was destroyed like Curt Lemon was. Finally, we reach the famous section: "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you" (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 107). Wading into the waters of warfare is treacherous and makes distinctions between its participants. The shallow water of war, the bare implication in it and participating in the acts, be it a bystander or a link in the chain is the default state. Beyond the shallow lies the abyssal depth, and when men tread the water, they should take care not to step into the abyss; for in that act the distinction happens. Stepping into the abyss may let a man float, metaphorically speaking, and resist the depth and the resident evil, but it can also drown men, claiming them into its own, assimilating them into a part of the abyss, flooding them with its evil. This metaphor, this thesis proposes, functions as a machine of philosophical and psychological inquiry, and lends credence to the presence of significant philosophical elements in the chapter "How to Tell a True War Story."

5.1. Nothing Is True, Everything Is Permitted

The aphorism quoted verbatim in the title of this subchapter is one of Nietzsche's most famous ones, and in great part seems to translate to O'Brien's conception of a "true war story." O'Brien considers in *The Things They Carried* that a true war story must be so senseless, so bizarre, and offset from the normal that it would only reveal its verity in precisely such qualities; otherwise, it is not *true*. This quality of being true bears a couple of meanings in the context of O'Brien's work; the first one being the more trivial and common meaning, as in sincere. The soldiers in *The Things They Carried* are instruments of war, walking bodies fulfilling orders and acting only according to their training and their orders. For them, the matter of truth is radically different from, for example, ours, but as well as that of an average United States citizen during the Vietnam War. This confuses the soldiers as the second quality of being *true* is revealed, which is the perverted normal of war. In all instances in which O'Brien's characters invoke a story as true, the reality seems absurd and meaningless, or at least suffers its paradigm of right and wrong dramatically shifted. This part of meaning ties once again into Nietzsche's idea of the Übermensch, and O'Brien's short passages of the soldiers experiencing an *apokalipsis* in the light of realizing their new norm and new potential over war's horizons. "Everything is permitted" can be interpreted as the will to power construed through the chapter "How to Tell a True War Story." Truth is dissolved in the area of martial reality, and as the thesis mentioned from *TTC*, the old truths no longer hold. This allows for a dichotomy of evil, where the men do not act, instead they observe. As the men looked on, they partook in the evil, had the paradigm stayed the same. The paradigm shift of letting the atrocity with the baby water buffalo take place, and the discovery of new power with weapons of war—one can become more than they are—in light of newfound power, allows them to lord over others or submit them to their will. Inspecting the citation in full now: "War has the feel — the spiritual texture — of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true"[60] (*TTC* 118). "A true war story" must be, held to a normal standard of the reader, absurd and unbelievable, which is due to the character of war. Warfare rediscovers the latent properties of the human, and propagates a complete rediscovery of power and potency. But with all things comes a cost, as all men from the stories suffer in some form. The cleansing madness is the "overman" himself, he who sets right the strayed: "Where is the lightning to lick you with its tongue? Where is the frenzy with which you should be inoculated?" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 126). The insanity of reality, the damnation called upon by the normal to cleanse the soldiers of their corruption and perversion, is

[60] For a discussion on Nietzsche's conception of free will, consult: Gemes, Ken and Janaway Christopher. "Nietzsche on Free Will, Autonomy and the Sovereign Individual", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, vol. 80, 2006, pp. 321-57.

what the soldiers can expect once they return to the normal, as their revealed norm has no place in the old, civilized system.

6. Alienation: Lost in the World of Having to Do

"The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do."

—Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

Alienation, as it appears in O'Brien's trilogy, can be separated into two layers. The first layer concerns the alienation experienced by the characters as they endure the war. Hopelessness and alienation occurred in all scenarios of the martial reality, even among peers. In a way, the characters sensed alienation in humanity, by feeling human and afraid: "Some carried themselves with a sort of wistful resignation, others with pride or stiff soldierly discipline or good humor or macho zeal. They were afraid of dying but they were even more afraid to show it" (*TTC* 38). Within fear they find solace, and community, but it is that exact fear that guarantees alienation if projected.

> They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing — these were the intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture. (*TTC* 39-40)

Death is also an agent of alienation of the characters, as we can interpret from Kiowa's pondering of Ted Lavender's death, as the story describes it: "He wished he could find some great sadness, or even anger, but the emotion wasn't there and he couldn't make it happen. Mostly he felt pleased to be alive" (*TTC* 35-36). The characters in *TTC* find themselves alienated from the common emotion they would experience in civilian life; life is paramount and death meant simply that you were no longer a member of the military. Ted Lavender carried "unweighed fear," and became "dead weight" (*TTC* 20) once he was shot and killed. As chapter 4 of the thesis covers, death became trivial: "Other medics slowly came over. They were tired of putting their fingers into blood" (*CZ* 154). Alienation and isolation of every one of the men in the company is in a way similar to the motif found in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*—you are transformed by war, and this new you still tries to return to your old **self**, your old daily life, your old **feelings**. But there in so such home anymore, a new truth has taken its place. Even at his departure from Vietnam, O'Brien remarks the essence of the alienation he, along with every other soldier, felt:

> The earth, with its little villages and bad, criss-crossed fields of rice paddy and red clay, deserts you. It's the earth you want to say good-bye to. The soldiers never knew you. You never knew the Vietnamese people. But the earth, you could turn a spadeful of it, see its dryness and the tint of red, and dig out enough of it so as to lie in the hole at night, and that much of Vietnam you would know. Certain whole pieces of the land you would know, something like a farmer knows his own earth and his neighbour's. . . . Whole patches of land. . . . Like a friend's face. (*CZ* 201–203)

As it was a matter of social ostracism and undying shame for a lifetime in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, not participating in the war means the same for the narrator in *The Things They Carried*, where it is "weighed" with specific mass, composite with other existential burdens:

> They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment. (*TTC* 40)

In other words, they were "too frightened to be cowards" (*TTC* 41). Identically, the men of *CZ*'s Alpha Company fought just to stay alive—in terms of honor and biological survival—without purpose. They endured: "Each morning, despite the unknowns, they made their legs move. They endured. They kept humping. They did not submit to the obvious alternative, which was simply to close the eyes and fall" (*TTC* 40). As the text presents it, to die is to be released of the weight of fear, a constant burden of existence in war, which transfers over analogously to existence as it is. All of the "weight" separates the self from its authentic core in war, it alienates from the world it ought to belong, and O'Brien points out how the experience can be used:

> I would wish this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows . . . Or it would be fine to confirm the odd beliefs about war: it's horrible, but it's a crucible of men and events and, in the end, it makes more of a man out of you. But, still, none of these notions seems right. Men are killed, dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry, things smell different in Vietnam, soldiers are afraid and often brave, drill sergeants are boors, some men think the war is proper and just and others don't and most don't care. Is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even for a theme? . . . I think not. (*CZ* 32)

To revise, there are stratums of alienation in O'Brien's works, and there are two that, roughly speaking, bear most importance to understanding the concept of alienation in O'Brien's soldier's sense: first, the alienation of a soldier waging war on a battlefield and living the warfare's reality, along with suffering its consequences, and second, the alienation of any man protesting the war when met with its elements and inductions. The former is discussed above, and is frequently presented across the texts in the trilogy, far more notably in *CZ* and *TTC*,[61] with no explicit marking that denotes it as different from the former stratum. The alienation the narrator experiences usually experiences an ascension in stratums. For example, the alienation in *CZ* begins to metamorphosize into the primary, first stratum as the narrator lands in Vietnam, as explained by equating his arrival in Vietnam to arriving at bootcamp: "Things are new, and you ascribe evil to the simplest physical objects around you. . . . You are not sure how to conduct yourself – whether to show fear, to live secretly with it, to show resignation or disgust" (*CZ* 76). In a certain sense, the characters O'Brien created are lost in the world of *having to do*. This is evident through duty and imposed meaning and its opposition in authentic existential meaning:

> It was painful to tread deliberately over all the axioms and assumptions and corollaries when the people on the town's draft board were calling me to duty, smiling so nicely. . . . Piled on top of this was the town, my family, my teachers, a whole history of the prairie. Like magnets, these things pulled in one direction or the other, almost physical forces weighting the problem, so that in the end, it was less reason and more gravity that was the final influence. (*CZ* 26–27)

The greatest influence that contributed to going to war was shame, the death of one's character, a betrayal of the self the world manufactured for them:

> I held my own, not a whisper more. I hated my fellows, my bunk mates and cell mates. I hated the trainees even more than the captors. I learned to march, but I learned alone. I gaped at the neat package of stupidity and arrogance at Fort Lewis. I was superior. I made no apologies for believing it. Without sympathy or compassion, I instructed my intellect and eyes: ignore the horde. I kept vigil against intrusion into my private life. I maintained a distance suitable to the black and white distinction between me and the unconscious, genuflecting herd. I mouthed the words, shaping my lips and tongue just so, perfect deception. But no noise came

[61] Just like O'Brien's narrator in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, Paul Berlin in *Going After Cacciato* pretends to conform, trying not to take the ironies and the truth seriously (*GAC* 203–204).

> out. The failure to bellow 'Yes, Drill Sergeant!' was a fist in the bastard's face. A point for the soul. (*CZ* 41)

In *CZ*, O'Brien celebrates his rejection of soldiering, he keeps his values to himself but in turn becomes alienated from his new reality. However, he succumbs. "With *The Mint* I became a soldier, knew I was a soldier. I succumbed. Without a backward glance at privacy, I gave in to soldiering. I took on a friend, betraying in a sense my wonderful suffering" (*CZ* 42). In his acceptance of the new norm along with Erik, his companion during training, the narrator of *CZ* takes the following stance: "All this not because of conviction, not for ideology; rather it's from fear of society's censure . . . Rather from fear of weakness, afraid that to avoid war is to avoid manhood" (*CZ* 45). But the unnatural and truly alienating, the inauthentic facet of the soldier's existence extended across all men (that is to say, all types of existence) in the barracks at Fort Lewis: "It is a cattle pen. Seething and stirring in their sleep or on their way to sleep, the men are animals, restless and caged" (*CZ* 52).

Ultimately succumbing to the pressure of the community and accepting war affects the existence of the narrator, morphing his first dissolution from war was from war as an unacceptable evil: "The war and my person seemed like twins as I went around the town's lake. Twins grafted together and forever together, as if a separation would kill them both. The thought made me angry" (*CZ* 29). It is this identification of the soldier and person with war and its radically different paradigm of morality and action that shows itself as a common motif in literature concerning veterans returning from war. Being a soldier changes one's existence in a meaningful way, and in that sense grafts itself to what that person has become: a soldier, "forever and forever together." The narrator's imagined protest against adopting his new twin is his declaration of the war and his community for accepting it as evil (*CZ* 29), and his weighing of whether war is worth losing your life over, or whether war is worth losing your country over (*CZ* 30). Despite his silent, personal protests, the narrator admits that he "submitted" (*CZ* 31). Becoming a soldier was a matter of routine and submission, by which all doubts "were crumpled by abstention, extinguished by forfeiture, for lack of oxygen, by a sort of sleepwalking default. It was no decision, no chain of ideas or reasons, that steered me into the war. It was an intellectual and physical stand-off, and I did not have the energy to see it to an end" (*CZ* 31).

By his own admission, the narrator "did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war" (*CZ* 32), but he strove to keep the order of the things he knew, as he knew "its opposite, inevitable chaos, censure, embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the

end of it all" (*CZ* 32). This same sentiment is echoed in the narrator's recount of Erik's "episode" with the company drill sergeant during training, which Erik remarks on in his memory: "It's impossible to separate in my mind the gut fear from pure reason. I'm really afraid that all the hard, sober arguments I have against this war are nothing but an intellectual adjustment to my horror at the thought of bleeding to death in some rice paddy" (*CZ* 44). In uncertain terms, the narrator equalizes the outcome of both rejecting to become a soldier and becoming one. In either case, the potential end of life presents itself as the new likelihood.

The argued extremity of outcome this thesis mentions rests on the binary outcome of death; one of character, other of physical being. Most things that concern your existence in the war, in Vietnam, are terminal, extreme. One of the most elucidating examples for the first case of this fact's impact on the characters is Cross's love for Martha, which cost Ted Lavender his life. As Cross burns Martha's letters, the love for whom he blamed for Ted Lavender's death, he realized that his action was merely a gesture: "Lavender was dead. You couldn't burn the blame" (*TTC* 42). Blame is another piece of the intangibles the soldiers carry, and Cross's burden of Lavender's death was, as outcomes were in Vietnam, extreme. Because of him, Lavender was dead. In the same way lieutenant Jimmy Cross bore the new item of guilt, the Company was also heavier for his death, but lighter for some of the responsibility for another man. The dichotomy of death is best represented on two occasions, the first of which is the narrator of *TTC* describing his life leading up to the period of joining the war: "[T]hinking about the war and the pig factory and how my life seemed to be collapsing toward slaughter. I felt paralyzed. All around me the options seemed to be narrowing, as if I were hurtling down a huge black funnel, the whole world squeezing in tight. There was no happy way out" (*TTC* 67).

The likeness of the outcomes is clear enough when *CZ* and *TTC* are compared. They present a duality of the war, a specific motif: you wage war both as a civilian who fights back shame, and as a soldier who fights to survive. Your reality as a soldier becomes that of duty, a duty imposed; lost in the world of having to do. The second most prominent instance of the extreme nature of choice is illustrated with O'Brien's stay at Elroy Berdahl's Tip Top Lodge and his planning to cross the Canadian border. The experience is so illusory that O'Brien himself finds it hard to believe: "I sometimes wonder if the events of that summer didn't happen in some other dimension, a place where your life exists before you've lived it, and where it goes afterward. None of it ever seemed real. During my stay at Tip Top Lodge I had the feeling that I'd slipped out of my own skin . . ." (*TTC* 81-82).

When he had the opportunity to jump off the boat and swim onto Canadian soil, O'Brien (the narrator) described how the choice was an existential split so severe that it paralyzed him, rendering him unable to decide:

> What would you do? Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your family and your childhood and your dreams and all you're leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry, as I did? . . . A moral freeze: I couldn't decide, I couldn't act, I couldn't comport myself with even a pretense of modest human dignity. (*TTC* 85)

For O'Brien, the right choice was not in question. It was his choice of outcome that struck him with fear and paralysis. Being a coward would be definite and inescapable if he fled, but the war weighed in heavier. "Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do" (*TTC* 86). He was faced with the extreme choice; both meant death in the respective senses mentioned: "My whole life seemed to spill out into the river, swirling away from me, everything I had ever been or ever wanted to be" (*TTC* 86). The alienation in these instances is dissolution from authenticity and character, an inescapable destiny of alienation.

6.1. Lost to The Consuming

The Vietnam war as O'Brien experienced it and as he called it, a "crucible of men and events" (*CZ* 32), was a specific world to be alienated in, an alternate mode of existence, the martial reality as opposed to the normality of civilian life, from which the characters, especially Norman Bowker, also became alienated. The most interesting view on this phenomenon can be found in the mortar fire of the chapter titled "In The Field" from *TTC*. The field, in an interpretation we can suggest, is a metaphor for the war and its effect on soldiers, and such is the representation O'Brien offers:

> This little field, I thought, had swallowed so much. My best friend. My pride. My belief in myself as a man of some small dignity and courage. Still, it was hard to find any real emotion. It simply wasn't there. After that long night in the rain, I seemed to grow cold inside, all the illusions gone, all the old ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud. (*TTC* 250-251).

The mud took the men from each other, it was the manifestation of war, an alienating force. Kiowa's death in the field is a way of expressing just how alienation intertwined with martial reality. On one hand, Bowker (supposedly) fails to save Kiowa and is "lost" just like Kiowa:

"[Bowker] released Kiowa's boot and watched it slide away. Slowly, working his way up, he hoisted himself out of the deep mud . . . He was alone" (*TTC* 206). Bowker surfaces alone, alien among comrades, alien in the world, lost. The reality that meets him is equated with that Kiowa faces. "Kiowa was gone. He was under the mud and water, folded in with the war" (*TTC* 222). This is further testified to by the following words of O'Brien, who considers returning from war a process of reemerging from the mud that took them all: "In a way, maybe, I'd gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I'd mostly worked my way out" (*TTC* 253). Kiowa was lost to the consumption of war, just as all the men could have been in any other turn of events. War was a matter of happenstance, the absurd, the indiscriminate eliminating force of outcome. The strength of this realization stretched across time, etching itself into the existence of the soldiers beyond the war: "The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over" (*TTC* 54). Life after the war was sometimes suffering; it was sometimes permanent alienation.

6.2. Bowker Finds *No Exit*

In his play *No Exit*, Sartre wrote the following: "Hell is – other people!" This relates to the concept of the Other Sartre proposes, and his notion that alienation comes from the fact that the Other (other people) observes us. Through others we are condemned, and through others we are realized in an objective manner; we are revealed as who we are. We become the object to others, "each of us will act as the torturers of . . . others" (Sartre 17). At the same time, there is a petulant attitude of the characters in the play: "A man is what he wills himself to be" (43). We are the products of our own agency, but that does not circumvent the suffering that is our existence as marked by others. "You are – your life, and nothing else"[62] (43); existence is our life, and without it, there is no meaning to construe. The character of Norman Bowker in *TTC* plays a significant role in the novel. He is a victim of suicide, a subject misaligned with the world as it was before the war, an alienated man: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide" wrote Camus (1). "'Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that'. One might object that suicide is neither a 'problem' nor a 'question,' but an act." (Aronson, "Albert Camus"). Bowker's suicide is not a question or a problem that this thesis will discuss, it is an act meant to revise his situation, counter

[62] "One always dies too soon – or too late. And yet one's whole life is complete at that moment, with a line drawn neatly under it., ready for the summing up. You are – your life, and nothing else." (43)

the imbalance of rejection and alienation. Let us read more into Camus' intention: "For him, it seems clear that the primary result of philosophy is action, not comprehension. His concern about "the most urgent of questions" is less a theoretical one than it is the life-and-death problem of whether and how to live" (Aronson).

The chief existentialist issue, an act in its own right, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is suicide. Further into this subchapter, we will analyze how Bowker's philosophical journey of reintegration adopts similar concepts as Camus proposes, aligned with O'Brien's text. We could argue that O'Brien's stories are acts, and not comprehension, as he admits to implicitly in his words of denouncing the soldier's truth, as one can read in *TTC*. The truth is what makes your "stomach believe:"

> Camus sees this question of suicide as a natural response to an underlying premise, namely that life is absurd in a variety of ways. As we have seen, both the presence and absence of life (i.e., death) give rise to the condition: it is absurd to continually seek meaning in life when there is none, and it is absurd to hope for some form of continued existence after death given that the latter results in our extinction. But Camus also thinks it absurd to try to know, understand, or explain the world, for he sees the attempt to gain rational knowledge as futile. (Aronson)

For Camus, the world we live in is absurd, impossible to make sense of. Similar to how we would fail to find meaning in his world, Bowker would do the same in a world that he used to be a part of. This view is reflected in O'Brien's work with his continued insistence that the truth of war, that is their existence as soldiers, is never absolute and never final. They can only tell stories, that is **act**, and they cannot construct a moral 'of the story' so to speak, therefore they cannot **ask** the right questions. A story tells and does not ask. The truths of O'Brien's short stories are those of absurdity and alienation; the men are a unit, a company of individuals, all abandoned into themselves, seeking shelter in their misunderstanding of the so-called truths they must accept. Some, like Bowker, fail to grasp some form of truth when returning home: "'The thing is', he wrote, 'there's no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean. It's almost like I got killed over in Nam . . . That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him . . . Feels like I'm still in deep shit'" (*TTC* 214).

Kiowa was lost, literally and figuratively, and his loss is tantamount to the loss of others, like Bowker. To be lost is to question; Norman's letter was as much a question as it was a statement. "Kiowa had been combined with the waste and the war" (*TTC* 231), and the failure of courage

made Bowker lose sense completely, despite the fact that the failure of courage was the narrator's, not Bowker's (*TTC* 221).

"The town could not talk, and would not listen" (*TTC* 198). As O'Brien remarks, a true war story is about the people "who do not listen." In the incomprehensible martial reality, where the truth is malleable, evil, and obscene, i.e., its existential mode, the subject is alienated and cannot find a way to communicate the alienated aspects because of their nature. What is more alienating than a home rejecting us, the normal we attempt to reoccupy, which drives us away? Like an insect understanding that we must "by all means disappear" (Kafka 110) to appease our surroundings, Bowker realized that he was letting out his final breaths when he tried to reacquire his civilian life. Even when Bowker is back home in Iowa (the actual geographical markings were those of Worthington, Minnesota, as O'Brien details), he does not find an audience for the cause of his alienation, as he feels "invisible in the soft twilight" (*TTC* 208). In his striving for reintegration, he could not reconnect with the authentic existence he once knew. This is clearly presented in Norman Bowker's inability to speak with others about his actions in Vietnam—the people wanted to hear tales of valor, and not his failure to save Kiowa or his missing Silver Star (*TTC* 198-211). This was the way of the war, alienating those who took part, leaving them alien to the ordinary. The center of this piece in the novel are the twelve loops around the lake Bowker does with his Chevy, which in a literary analysis could represent revolutions of the character's mind.

The twelve revolutions around the lake are an acclimation of the character to a world he wanted to reinhabit and readopt. Philosophically, it is a desire to reclaim the old norms and conditions, but in literary terms, this motif indicates an immutable state, a permanence established through repeated action which climaxes with rejection. Despite the revolutions he experiences around the lake, Bowker finds no admittance; the boys playing pay him no mind; the workmen preparing the fireworks and the waiter were not interested in his story, and his former love interest Sally now bears a different last name, Gustafson (*TTC* 202). Bowker's revolutions around the lake he liked to swim in can be interpreted as cycles of time, the eternal revolving arms of a clock which turned without care for Bowker or any of the men in Vietnam. Norman Bowker failed to find "a meaningful use for his life after the war" (*TTC* 213), which is a result of his participation in the war[63]—none would listen to his failure of courage, none would pay him any attention because of

[63] Bowker is described as having lost himself in the war, implying a meaning Nietzsche would convey, despite Bowker clearly not finding himself a monster for his actions, but we as readers could infer from Bowker's thoughts on how no one would like to associate with him as an ex-soldier: "Terrible experiences make one wonder whether one who experiences them is not something terrible" (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 95).

his experience. Existence and the reality change drastically out of war, as Bowker found attending college, at which "the course work . . . seemed to abstract, too distant, with nothing real or tangible at stake, certainly not the stakes of a war" (*TTC* 213-214). The martial reality consumed him as much as it did Kiowa, taking his meaning away from him, as the stakes were too trite and irrelevant. During the tenth revolution around the lake, Bowker finds himself alone (*TTC* 210), the activities of the town winding down without including him, at no fault of his lack of engagement. The penultimate, eleventh revolution (*TTC* 210-211), represents Bowker's resolution and understanding that he is left alone in this "new" reality, a stranger back home: "There was nothing to say. He could not talk about it and never would" (*TTC* 211).

In the final revolution, Bowker accepts his status as an "alien," as someone apart the old ways and uninteresting to the average civilian, remarking then that his home was interesting, as if he were just a stranger, *the stranger*: "For a small town, he decided, it was a pretty good show" (*TTC* 212).

7. Ethics: Speaking of Courage

Every man is guilty for all the good he did not do.

—Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*

This thesis would be amiss not to at least mention the ethical component of O'Brien's trilogy. The ethical implications and conduct of warfare have been thoroughly described and argued in literature, which is also, unsurprisingly, true for O'Brien's works. For this short analysis, the thesis will defer to a brief examination of ethical elements in the selected works and will center on topics which seem to enjoy concurrence in the academic community. Sarah Bonney posits that "[t]hroughout the novel, the soldiers are forced to construct a new morality as a result of the violence required of them; however, the soldiers' wartime moral system conflicts with the civilian moral system" (1). The code of conduct civilians use becomes inapplicable in war, and the duty of the characters as soldiers remains inherently unethical (1). However, an ethical code exists, as evident in their care for their comrades and in Jimmy Cross' weight of being a leader (1). The enacted revenge for Ted Lavender is sufficient proof that human sentiment exists within the soldiers, and the ethics of action did not disappear, rather they had shifted to accommodate for the normalization of violence:

> After the chopper took Lavender away, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross led his men into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything. They shot chickens and dogs, they trashed the village well, they called in artillery and watched the wreckage, then they marched for several hours through the hot afternoon, and then at dusk, while Kiowa explained how Lavender died, Lieutenant Cross found himself trembling . . . he began digging a hole in the earth. . . . All he could do was dig. He used his entrenching tool like an ax, slashing, feeling both love and hate, and then later, when it was full dark, he sat at the bottom of his foxhole and wept. (*TTC* 34)

Bonney also argues that the newly contrived system of morals conditions the soldiers to derive pleasure from killing and not being killed themselves, simply out of its nature as their duty (2). As it coincided with the American counterculture which criticized violence, the ethical precepts which appear in O'Brien's works detailing the Vietnam war seem even more worthy of critique, as the wartime morality manifests through pleasure (Bonney 2–3). The issue presented by Bonney is as such:

> If military service is not ethical, violence and killing performed to fulfill the soldiers' duty is immoral and condemnable. This cultural philosophy would condemn Cross's renewed commitment to his soldiers and his role as a military leader because this becomes synonymous with a renewed commitment to kill the enemy. In order to reconcile their military duty and the anti-military sentiments growing back home, the soldiers of the Vietnam War are pushed to construct a new moral code independent of military ethics established in previous wars. In previous conflicts, wartime violence was condoned by the civilian public, and soldiers were able to depend wholly on the "ethical pardon" granted in times of conflict. (3)

A "new definition of war morality requires a new definition of violence" (4), suggests Bonney, and "[t]he soldiers' correlation of pleasure and violence presents violence as an effective and ethical method of resolving conflict rather than a definite immorality" (4). "Besides serving as punishment 'for the sins of the aggressor' and 'defense of innocent others,' killing the enemy eliminates the evil contained in the opposition, which is the higher moral purpose of war" (4). Violence in war is converted practically into virtue, into a tool of resolving conflict, and it is placed within a moral system which does not view it as immoral, viewing it rather as a means to an end if used in the least necessary measure (5): "Wartime morality does involve stipulations of right and wrong" (5), and a "violent act's justification is measured by the act's positive repercussions" (6).

Next to these alignments, these paradigms of morality, lies another issue a soldier need consider. Throughout all three works, the concept of courage arises and perplexes the characters. It was due to their "work" as soldiers, the martial reality; it was "[t]he things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do" (*TTC* 45). We will focus on the presentations of courage from the narrators of the works, but for context, we will provide a measure of courage in men.[64] "Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down" (*TTC* 62). There is no lack of

[64] One such measure is present in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, as described by Bates: "Walking a fine line between irony and genuine admiration, O'Brien calls the lieutenant's [Mad Mark's] form of madness 'the perfect guardian for the Platonic Republic. Mad Mark might even be said to practice an Aristotelian ethic: some men are meant to rule others, and if the others refuse to be ruled then war against them is natural and just. . . . Captain Johansen . . . is by most a criteria a brave man. . . . Though modest about his own accomplishments, he *cares* about the question of courage, differing in this respect from the soldier whose bravery is merely a sort of galvanic response. If he stands apart from his men, unlike the gregarious Mad Mark, he is nonetheless their Hector, affording them one reason to fight a war otherwise lacking in purpose." (Bates 271)

moments, as we can imagine in works concerning the Vietnam war, where courage needed to be called upon, where the quality needed to be expended to act right, to act courageously. Simple moments, like the decision the narrator faces with the choice of fleeing to Canada in *TTC*: "Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do . . . I would not be brave. That old image of myself as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage, all that was just a threadbare pipe dream" (*TTC* 86). Courage fails us, not because it is defunct, but because we lack the capacity for it or the ability to employ it: "Courage was not always a matter of yes or no. Sometimes it came in degrees, like the cold; sometimes you were brave up to a point and then beyond that point you were not so brave" (*TTC* 203). The fleeting quality was usually reserved for extreme conditions, for the threat of death, and for the charge, the dare into the unknown threat of death: "The issue was how to act wisely in spite of fear. . . . Yes, the issue was courage. It always had been" (*GAC* 82–83). For Paul Berlin, the Silver Star represents proof of courage, it is a symbol of what it was to be courageous:

> The real issue was the power of will to defeat fear. . . . Somehow working his way into that secret chamber of the human heart, where in tangles, lay the circuitry for all that was possible, the full range of what man might be. He believed . . . that somewhere inside each man is a biological center for the exercise of courage, a piece of tissue that might be touched and made to respond. . . . There was a Silver star twinkling somewhere inside him. (*GAC* 83)

But there was always the fear of the unknown, the lack of making the courageous spine stand straight and choose to be so, in the face of fear: "He was scared, yes, and confused and lost, and he had no sense of what was expected of him or of what to expect from himself" (*GAC* 45). The narrator of *CZ* draws an analogy between the supposed lesson in morality from war and dreams:

> Is that [conflicting attitudes towards war and its values] the stuff for a morality lesson, or even for a theme? Do dreams offer lessons? Do nightmares have themes, do we awaken and analyse them and live our lives and advise others as a result? Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories. (*CZ* 32)

With this analogy, O'Brien creates a compelling case for why war as a human activity, especially in an intellectual and ethical regard, offers no benefit or supposed character building. There is no philosophical benefit or moral superiority to be derived from the act of war. On the contrary, the only ability that a soldier acquires in war, as O'Brien echoes in *The Things They Carried*, is the

ability to tell war stories, which are, on average, senseless, maniacal, and usually absurd to the reader who has not experienced them, but simultaneously familiar and ”normal” for a veteran. This reflects succinctly the element of absurdity in O’Brien’s trilogy. The absurd is the cornerstone of the substitute, false authenticity soldiers adopted when entering the martial reality.

Completely inadvertently, the title of this thesis includes “endurance,” a part of a significant chapter in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, titled “Wise Endurance” In a notable departure from the tone set by a string of previous chapters, “Wise Endurance” features the narrator’s attempt to ruminate on courage, along with endurance and conviction as its factors. In a philosophical attempt, O’Brien strives to examine courage:

> [C]ourage, according to Plato, is one of the four parts of virtue. It is there with temperance, justice, and wisdom, and all parts are necessary to make the sublime human being. . . . men without courage, are men without temperance, justice, or wisdom, just as without wisdom men are not truly courageous. Men must know what they do is courageous, they must know it is right, and that kind of knowledge is wisdom. . . . Courage is more than the charge. More than the dying or suffering the loss of a love in silence or being gallant. It is temperament and, more, wisdom. (*CZ* 140–141)

The narrator wonders if his endurance, whether naïve and foolish, or true perseverance to fight for a cause lacking conviction, is the true reflection of his own courage (*CZ* 134-139). The final conclusion the narrator presents is as follows: “It is more likely that men act cowardly and, at other times, act with courage, each in different measure, each with varying consistency. The men who do well on the average, perhaps with one moment of glory, those men are brave” (*CZ* 146). Courage is presented as an ethical virtue of the soldier, common to all those endure the fear and press on to fight again in trying to do better. It is endurance, the choice of perseverance that marks the weaker traces of courage:

> And those who are neither cowards nor heroes, those men sweating beads of pearly fear . . . the mass of men in Alpha company – even they may be redeemable. The aphorisms hold no hope for the middle man, the man who wants to try but has already died more than once, squirming under the bullets, going through the act of death and coming through embarrassingly alive. . . . You promise, almost moving your lips, to do better next time; that by itself is a kind of courage. (*CZ* 146-147)[65]

[65] The several omitted sentences are included here, simply to provide additional context and preserve the style of writing O’Brien employed when describing such a quality: “The bullets stop. As in slow motion, physical things

Courage, however, was not the only ethical quality them soldiers appreciated. There was value deposited in living and an appreciation for trying to live, instead of performing the acts of a war none of the soldiers believed in. Life becomes the good, and preserving it while doing what is evil puts it into a context only wartime ethical systems can provide:

> You feel an intense, out-of-the-skin awareness of your living self — your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it. In the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted. (*TTC* 117)

In *GAC*, Corson, an average platoon leader, was loved by the Company, simply because he had an aversion towards taking risks and sacrificing lives (*GAC* 49). There was no courage in killing, there was courage in sacrifice for your comrades. This reversion to the old precepts, the old, long-hailed qualities mentioned in contemporary and ancient texts alike, was partly a reaction to the truth of martial reality.

7.1. How to Tell a True War Story

> As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.
>
> —Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

An exceedingly important theme in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is the concept of a "true war story." This is perhaps one of, if not the most researched topics about *TTC*, and its importance in research spans from ethical to epistemological interpretations. For this thesis, we will focus on the ethical aspect of a "true war story" O'Brien details in *TTC*. Some foundational precepts to consider about the notion of a "true war story": the truth is necessarily tied into the absurd, and the absurd is necessarily a genuine reflection of the perceived truth (reality); the truth of a war story does not espouse a moral or teach, nor does it favor the "good". This subchapter will first address the rudimentary complexities of O'Brien's conception of truth in a war story, followed by its relation to morals. It is important to note that the truthful component of a war story is, to the normal audience, hard to believe, and is fluent in its correlation to reality:

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gleam. Noise dissolves. You tentatively peek up, wondering if it is the end. Then you look at the other men, reading your own caved-in belly in their eyes. The fright dies the same way novocaine wears off in the dentist's chair." (147)

> ”In battle, in a war, a soldier sees only a tiny fragment of what is available to be seen. The soldier is not a photographic machine. He is not a camera. He registers, so to speak, only those few items that he is predisposed to register and not a single thing more. . . . after a battle each soldier will have different stories to tell, vastly different stories, and that when a war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers.” (*GAC* 189)

This excerpt from *GAC* tells a similar story O’Brien tries to convey in *TTC*. What construes truth for a war story is the perception of its teller, the participant of martial reality, the capturing instrument:

> In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed . . . you close your eyes . . . and float outside yourself. [. . .] You tend to miss a lot . . . there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (*TTC* 103)

What makes truth for a soldier is its ambiguity and its doubtable testimony to verity. The truth is not a unitary concept proprietary to everyone, it is a shared and morphing mass of atoms of truth that form the molecular whole of martial reality, to which a “true war story” is designed to testify. A true war story is not about war,[66] it is about the exact difference of martial reality from the authentic, normal existence. “In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It’s a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn’t, because the normal stuff isn’t necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness” (*TTC* 103).

O’Brien firmly states throughout the series that a soldier will not supply a moral truth or some universally acclaimed principle for application in life just for having gone through war. Therefore, the stories of a soldier are similar to the speculations of an existentialist, who dwells on what he may even truly be, precisely in his supposed position and role:

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing what they

[66] Refer to the following: “And in the end, of course, a true war story s never about war. It’s about sunlight. It’s about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It’s about love and memory. It’s about sorrow. It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen.” (*TTC* 122)

> have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue . . . you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. *TTC* (100)

It is clear that for O'Brien's narrator, evil and distinct lack of good deeds are clear indicators of a "true" war story. "If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth" (*TTC* 100), wrote O'Brien, relating another component of the true in a war story, the obscenity. This obscenity, or the explicit nature of war, is not a surprising element that makes a war story believable or true, and it grows back into the martial reality, which is, aside from being violent, obscene because of its absurdity (ambiguity): "Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity." (*TTC* 118).

In summary, the truth of a war story depends on its allegiance to evil, obscenity, ambiguity, and complexity, along with a moral that cannot be "teased out":

> In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unravelling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story except maybe 'Oh.' True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis . . . War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet . . . I can't believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside . . . A true war story . . . makes the stomach believe. (*TTC* 112)

One consequence of a true war story, O'Brien's narrator notes, is that "[a] true war story . . . never seems to end. Not then, not ever" (*TTC* 109). The truth of martial reality transforms so much of a soldier's view on life that it embeds itself permanently in their memory and their capacity for life. It stretches across the remainder of life, and it stays true across time, saved by the "true war stories" of the men who tell them.

Conclusion

Great and good are seldom the same man.

—Winston Churchill

In conclusion, the aim of this thesis was to analyze philosophical elements in three selected works of Tim O'Brien, and in that endeavor to present three key concepts emerging as significant and philosophical in the works. Through parallels drawn between O'Brien's texts and concepts springing from Camus, Nietzsche, Sartre, Kierkegaard, and others, the thesis has derived a conclusion that the selected trilogy of O'Brien's works can be construed as containing elements of predominantly existentialist philosophy. In light of the analyses, several factors were discovered.

The fictional/biographical characters of O'Brien's trilogy seem to be universally at odds with an effort to attain or preserve authenticity, as beings extricated from their normal. The concept covers themes of soldiers losing the authentic self in martial reality (as opposed to civilian reality) and struggling to construe a meaningful existence due to that occurrence, and soldiers performing a speculative leap, an imaginative exercise in an attempt to subjugate the inauthentic reality and revitalizing the authentic through imagination and envisioned fabricated memories. In this position of inauthenticity, or their struggle to attain authenticity once again, characters are found in a world aptly considered absurd. Due to a dramatic shift in paradigm, in losing clear lines between concepts of good and bad (an opposed moral system), and in a world where agency of war provides no purpose and serves as an exercise in futility and senselessness, the characters are without meaning. They are found to be struggling, and found to be so far removed from purpose and meaning that they cannot understand the world that they inhabit. This culminates in alienation, the final concept the thesis proposes as a philosophical element found in the trilogy. An acute absurdity in all facets of existence and a lack of authenticity disintegrates appropriateness of the characters, it pulls them from their place and makes them feel that they are alien. The action of placing an individual in a foreign country is an act of alienation itself, but it is also the violence, the routine, and the imposed standards of courage and extremity of outcome that detract from their sense of belonging. The characters are alienated by others, alienated by themselves, and the world itself (both the war and the community as they return home).

Lastly, the thesis covers the concept of truth O'Brien proposes in relation to a war story, which is interpreted as an extension of the ethical component of war, which is analyzed at the very end. As an ending note, the concept of a true war story is revealed as allegiance to obscenity and

evil, to the verisimillitude of martial reality, and its utmost dedication to alienation, the absurd, and the detraction from the authentic. Considered in total, the Vietnam War of the trilogy is the manifestation of all examined philosophical elements, and the characters themselves are stage actors that play on the boards it constructs.

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