He had contrived, or rather he had happened, to disavow himself from the world—to vanish—to give up his place and privileges with living men, without being admitted among the dead.¹

He had happened to disavow himself from the world—to vanish—to give up his place and privilege with living men, without being admitted among the dead.²

I

In ‘Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances’ (1956), Roman Jakobson speaks of the ‘primacy of the metaphoric process’ in romantic and symbolist writing.³ He argues that the ‘rich literature’ devoted to metaphor is the product of its affinity with metalinguistic operations (p. 258). The idea that the paradigmatic nature of metaphor accords it privileged semantic status, as is well known, has not only been largely endorsed by literary critics but also adopted as virtually a field-defining tenet: the English title of Paul Ricoeur’s La Métaphore Vivante — The Rule of Metaphor — is as suggestive here as that of the French original. Metaphor has become the dominant trope, the literary trope par excellence, and even the main object of literary analysis. From Shelley or Coleridge on the roots of poetry to Derrida’s tracings of ‘metaphor in the text of philosophy’ and beyond, metaphor rules over vast and otherwise disparate critical territories.⁴ For Jakobson, the fact that metonymy is a syntagmatic

I am grateful to Richard Godden, Susan Bruce, Julie Saunders, Jill Kitchen, and Charles Swann.


rather than a paradigmatic phenomenon, a matter of syntax not semantics, adequately explains the ‘neglect’ it has suffered. Being based on the axis of combination rather than selection, metonymy ‘easily defies interpretation’ (Selected Writings, II, 258). This, however, is surely a curious position: reductive, even fatalistic. One almost equally reductive though less fatalistic critical alternative might be not only to enquire into the meaning of what the text says (its content) but also into the meaning of how it says what it says. Better still, it might be helpful to think of holes as holes rather than trying to fill them up with the spoils of metaphor.

It is perhaps fitting in the context of these remarks that Tim O’Brien’s tour of duty in Vietnam (March 1969 to March 1970) coincided precisely with the moment at which, according to Gérard Genette, metaphor finally achieved ‘absolute, undivided rule’ in the field of poetics.5 The publication of Michel Deguy’s Pour une théorie de la figure généralisée (1969) and the Liège group’s Rhétorique générale (1970) finally raised metaphor to the status of top trope and left it, in Genette’s words, ‘frozen in its useless royalty’ (‘Rhetoric Restrained’, p. 115). O’Brien’s memoir of his period in Vietnam, If I Die in a Combat Zone (1973) seemingly affirms metaphor’s high status. Shortly after his arrival, O’Brien’s platoon leader organizes a night ambush. Marching along a trail in single file, O’Brien finds himself recollecting a dream he had first experienced as a fourteen-year-old in Minnesota:

I was in prison. It was somewhere in a very black and evil land. The prison was a hole in a mountain. During the days, swarthy-faced moustached captors worked us like slaves in coal mines. At night they locked us behind rocks, every prisoner utterly alone. They had whips and guns, and they used them on us at pleasure.6

O’Brien escapes but his captors pursue him. Plunging into a forest, he eventually finds himself looking down into a valley where a carnival is taking place:

A beautiful woman, covered with feathers and tan skin, was charming snakes. With her stick she prodded the creatures, making them dance and writhe and perform. I hollered down to her, ‘Which way to freedom? Which way home?’ She was a mile away, but she lifted her stick and pointed the way down a road. I loved the woman, snakes and stick and tanned skin. (p. 93)

O’Brien takes the road home. In the closing scene of the dream, however, there is a second, Medusan, encounter:

The woman was there, beads of water scattered on her arms and brown thighs. Her arm was around a swarthy, moustached captor, and she was laughing and pointing her stick at me. The captor embraced her, and together they took me away. Back to prison. That was the dream. (pp. 93–94)

This is indeed a generous invitation to metalinguistic commentary, and it suggests a strong commitment to the ‘primacy of the metaphoric process’ on

O’Brien’s part. With its concavities and convexities, its thighs and sticks and moustaches, the dream patently locates us in a *paysage moralisé*. Should this be a problem? Probably not, yet I am made uneasy by the way in which the dream so calculatedly excites my critical faculties, almost demanding that I perform. I worry too that the landscape of the dream, even in my own bare summary, scarcely requires interpretation: surely we are all familiar with this uncanny entry into the symbolic? As a professional miner of the text, I also find myself wondering whether the pleasures of metaphoric interpretation, like the pleasures of O’Brien’s dream, may actually work in the interests of others. I am reluctant to follow O’Brien’s ‘pointing’ and suspicious of what may be implied by concepts such as ‘home’, whether conceived in terms of freedom or entrapment. To look for the literal meaning of the hole in the mountain (or the snake woman, or the ‘swarthy’ captor), I would argue, is to grant the primacy of metaphor and to be bound by its terms, two of which are worth noting immediately. First, metaphor must capture the literal as its opposite number within the totality of the figure; secondly, literality must be expelled if narrative is to give rise to reference. The double movement is disabling at both levels. To the extent that O’Brien’s dream is understood as a secondary (though present) effect with a prior (and absent) cause, the dream text produces a critic capable of reconstructing a ‘full’ figure within which the literal and metaphoric terms are simultaneously present. One might recall here the note that Freud added in 1914 to the first volume of *The Interpretation of Dreams*: ‘Aristotle remarked [ . . . ] that the best interpreter of dreams was the man who could best grasp similarities.’ We see here in rapid retrospect the long history of ‘similarity’ as the critic’s road home. In the ‘interpreter of dreams’ model, we move from literality in the context of the figure to literality in the context of reference. In both cases, the framework is exclusively paradigmatic.

I am presently unwilling to commit myself to the view that metaphor is a case of ‘impertinent predication’ rather than ‘deviant denomination’, but Paul Ricoeur’s demonstration of the limits of a nominalist and substitutive understanding of metaphor (the rhetorical understanding, in other words) encourages me to reject my authorially interpellated role as interpreter of dreams and, consequently, to refuse to follow those exit signs O’Brien’s text so clearly illuminates. What positive form might this refusal take? Genette’s essay on metonymy in Proust, with its shift from the discussion of ‘le rôle de la métonymie dans la métaphore’ to the closing description of the origin of the Proustian *recit* ‘par la métaphore, mais dans la métonymie’ is highly

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suggestive. A further cue is provided by Pierre Macherey’s description of the literary work as ‘incomplete in itself’. For Macherey, discontinuity is ‘the true reason’ for the work’s composition. Although the metaphor and the dream are incomplete in their appearance, rhetoric would view this as a strictly temporary attribute. By contrast, Macherey’s ‘determinate absence’ corresponds to ‘a reality that is also incomplete’. Macherey refers to this irrecuperable absence as the text’s ‘caesura’ (p. 79). To think of the delivery of the literary work in terms of punctuation or puncturing rather than deictic acts, however revealing such acts may be, is, I hope, to glimpse a somewhat different figure from the brown-thighed one of O’Brien’s dream....

II

I shall return to the issue of ellipsis once I have established the case for looking at O’Brien’s writings in the light of Jakobson’s work on language and, more particularly, on aphasia. Such a comparison immediately raises a series of questions about the value of extending the insights of structural linguistics. It is, however, worth noting that most of structuralism’s extensions were metalinguistic ones and thus involved the conversion of the syntagmatic set into the paradigmatic system. The usual problems may not attend a syntagmatically-directed investigation such as that attempted here; nevertheless, the analogical status of the linguistic extension is worth emphasizing at the outset.

For Jakobson, signs are arranged according to operations of selection as well as combination. The former constitute a ‘paradigmatic’ axis of language, the latter a ‘syntagmatic’ one. Paradigmatic, selective operations are conducted at the level of the linguistic code rather than the utterance and, since they involve alternative words in the code, imply the possibility of substitution: ‘actually, selection and substitution are two faces of the same operation’ (Selected Writings, 11, 243). On the axis of selection, signs are linked by similarity. Cases of ‘similarity disorder’ present a deficiency in the ‘vertical’ axis of selection and substitution (in ‘contiguity disorder’ the ‘horizontal’ axis of combination is impaired). Since there is ‘relative stability of combination and contexture’, similarity disorder aphasics are able to complete ‘scraps of words’ presented to them. They can function as the addressees of particular utterances and respond to prompts but cannot easily initiate dialogue. Their utterances therefore tend to be ‘elliptical sequels’ to ‘antecedent sentences’ (p. 245). Speech retains ‘the framework, the connecting links’ of language (auxiliaries, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, articles) but ‘the main subordinating agent of the sentence, namely the

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subject, tends to be omitted' (pp. 246, 245). Aphasics with similarity disorder experience a ‘loss of metalanguage’ and have difficulty performing metalinguistic operations (defining a word, producing synonyms or antonyms) because such operations involve selection and substitution (pp. 248, 246). Metaphoric meanings become incomprehensible and ‘operations involving similarity yield to those based on contiguity’ (p. 249). Metonymy is ‘widely employed’ (p. 250).

To say that extreme or ‘traumatic’ events require scrupulously literal retelling, or that such events are ‘beyond words’, is, I would argue, implicitly to invoke that ‘loss of metalanguage’ which for Jakobson characterizes similarity disorder (Selected Writings, II, 248). Such events disable the shared ‘code’ that forms ‘an integral part of our customary linguistic activities’ (p. 248). *If I Die in a Combat Zone* could accordingly be read as an examination and an expression of the damage sustained by the linguistic code in the context of the war in Vietnam. Significantly, O’Brien initially encounters war as a linguistic phenomenon. The stories told by Second World War veterans in the Minnesota prairie town where he grows up disturb him because they appear to have ‘nothing to do with causes or reason’ (*If I Die*, p. 23). This is a paradigmatic as well as an ethical problem. In the empirical specificity of the references to ‘close calls and […] the origins of scars just visible on hairy arms’ and in the insistence on relations of spatial contiguity that reports of ‘the long hike from Normandy to Berlin’ convey, the veterans’ stories seem positioned in respect of the axis of combination rather than selection (p. 23). *If I Die* is filled with instances of the failure of what Jakobson calls ‘equational predication’ (Selected Writings, II, 246). O’Brien seems unable to secure his repeated demands for a metalinguistic explanation of the meaning of war; nor can he clarify meaning to himself by means of substitution along the axis of selection. He makes repeated and apparently solitary attempts to define the meaning of courage. He also opens dialogues about the meaning of war, on one occasion with a North Vietnamese student in Prague and on another with the chaplain and battalion commander on the base in Fort Lewis where he undergoes advanced infantry training. In all these cases his efforts to find the words that might explain are frustrated.

Two scenes early in the book help to establish the linguistic predicament I have been outlining. In the first, O’Brien describes his late-night walks around the town. ‘Is there a God like there’s a tree or an apple?’ he asks himself (p. 24). The Newtonian reference is as pertinent as the allusion to Genesis, for O’Brien is shortly to describe the influence behind his decision not to dodge the draft as one of ‘gravity’ rather than ‘reason’ (p. 28). As O’Brien contemplates his distance from God, conceived as transcendent and immanent ‘being-itself’, theological recognition produces spatial flattening:

The lake, Lake Okabena, reflected the town-itself, bouncing off a black-and-white pattern identical to the whole desolate prairie: flat, tepid, small, strangled by algae,
shut in by middle-class houses, lassoed by a ring of doctors, lawyers, CPAs, dentists, drugstore owners, and proprietors of department stores. (p. 24)

The spatial and social landscape outlined here has an equally compressed and confined linguistic aspect. With its ‘black-and-white pattern’, the lake (to which I will return) arguably traps, flattens, and strangles language. In verbal as in social space, relations of subordination and dependency are already sliding towards contiguity.

The linguistic aspect of O’Brien’s predicament is further explored in a second scene. On the day preceding his departure for boot camp, O’Brien enters the cellar of his parents’ house and, with ‘devilish flair’, prints obscenities on scraps of paper. For some minutes he seems to himself ‘outside the town […] outside the law’ (p. 29). Once again, however, language seems subject to gravitational force: ‘Later in the evening I tore the signs into pieces and put the shreds in the garbage can outside, clanging the grey cover down and trapping the messages inside’ (p. 30). Although it would be possible to read such a passage metaphorically and as a ‘dream interpreter’, in terms of repression or ambivalence, and although we might easily see O’Brien’s description of his experiences at this point in terms of ‘war neurosis’, I am inclined to read the passage in a less encoded way, in terms of a narrative thematization of similarity disorder.

For O’Brien, life at boot camp appears to intensify the impairment of the axis of selection. As an act of linguistic resistance, he imagines a girl. ‘I spent time comparing her hair to the colour of sand just at dusk’ (p. 41). The scene is subsequently replayed in the title story of *The Things They Carried* (1990), in which First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carries with him letters from a girl named Martha who writes ‘beautifully […] about her respect for Chaucer’. In *If I Die*, by contrast, it is O’Brien who is told (by the girl) that he writes ‘beautifully’ (p. 49). In both texts, however, metaphoric erotics wither on the vine. Jimmy Cross stops fantasizing about ‘romantic camping trips’ and, by way of speculations about whether Martha is a virgin, reaches a ‘hard, hating kind of love’ (*The Things They Carried*, p. 19). Crouching in the bottom of his foxhole, he burns his love letters and becomes ‘realistic’ (p. 20). O’Brien’s metaphoric activities also rapidly collapse. In this case the move to realism seems to be a product of the radically depoeticizing obscenity of the song from which the title of the book is drawn:

If I die in a combat zone,  
Box me up and ship me home.

An’ if I die on the Russian front,  
Bury me with a Russian cunt.

(p. 50)

The marching song can be seen as a manifestation of the institutionalized assault on metaphor that is basic training. It is a linguistic remainder: the

language left over when other verbal possibilities have been broken or banned. Since its organizing intension is to produce subjects who are unable to initiate dialogue and who merely respond to verbal prompts, boot camp looks very much like a factory for the production of similarity disorder aphasics: American soldiers. Jakobson writes of the disappearance of the ‘subject’ considered as the ‘main subordinating agent’ of the sentence in cases of similarity disorder (Selected Writings, II, 245). The analogy with the predicament of human subjects in O’Brien’s memoir is a useful one.

In spite of setbacks, linguistic resistance on O’Brien’s part continues, though now on a more pragmatic and literalist level. He and his friend Eric conduct a ‘two-man war of survival’ through ‘private conversations’ dedicated to ‘talking about basic training in careful, honest words’ (p. 43). In O’Brien’s case, however, verbal precision is insufficient to preserve the paradigmatic dimension:

I thought about a girl. It was hopeless, of course, but I tried to visualize her face. Only words would come in my mind. One word was ‘smile’, and I tacked on the adjective ‘intriguing’ to make it more personal. I thought of the word ‘hair’, and modified it with the words ‘thick’ and ‘sandy’, not sure if they were very accurate anymore, and then a whole string of words popped in — ‘mysterious’, ‘Magdalene’, ‘Eternal’ as a modifier. I tried fitting the words together into a picture [. . .]. For all this, I could not see her. (p. 97)

O’Brien here finds himself trapped at the level of context and combination (the ‘string of words’) with diminishing access to the selective dimension. The sequence ‘“mysterious”, “Magdalene”, “Eternal”’ gestures towards transcendence but the words’ status as ‘modifiers’ brings them rapidly down to earth. Rather than being likened to ‘the colour of sand just at dusk’, hair is now likewise ‘modified’ with some rudimentary adjectives that carry little or no paradigmatic weight (p. 41). And without the paradigm, of course, there can be no dream vision. In contrast to the code-dominated, vertically oriented, hypotactic world of O’Brien’s home town, the experience of the war in Vietnam is increasingly and emphatically registered as context-dominated, horizontally orientated, and paratactic. As the code of ‘culture’ gives way to the obscene speech of war, contexts are deprived of sense and the heightened reactiveness of combat turns life into a series of reflex responses to urgent situational cues. Whilst metaphor connects, introduces similarity and comparison, Vietnam happens metonymically, in terms of fact, detail, and a crushing horizontality:

‘Incoming,’ the lieutenant shouted.

We dived for a foxhole. I was first in, the ground taking care of my belly, then the lieutenant and some others were in, stacked on my back.

Grenades burst around the perimeter, a few rifle shots. (p. 33)

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12 See the ‘game of Manichean extrapolation’ which Gérard Genette briefly entertains in Figures of Literary Discourse when he presents metaphor as Mary and metonymy as Martha (p. 119).
The bare idea that Vietnam destroyed the metaphoric and poetic side of language is not in itself surprising, and several literary critics have produced work that takes this general perception as a starting point. Examining representations of the war in terms of dirty realism's 'non-metaphoric style', Joanna Price detects a 'sense of loss' in American consumer culture for which the mere 'metonymy of objects and images' provides only temporary assuagement. Tina Chen has likewise employed metonymy to investigate the 'embodied poetics of displacement' in *The Things They Carried*. Chen argues that the 'metonymic substitutions' in O'Brien's short story collection transform Vietnam into a 'metaphor for home' (pp. 84, 83). The easy slippage between tropes here, not to mention the somewhat casual definition of metonymy in terms of substitution, suggests a distinct disengagement from the syntagmatic on Chen's part. The question of 'deeper meaning' raised in her title is, it would seem, an exclusively paradigmatic one and the invocation of metonymy merely tactical. If poetry is 'similarity superimposed upon contiguity', as Jakobson claims in 'Linguistics and Poetics' (1960), then it would follow that 'any metonymy is slightly metaphorical' (*Selected Writings*, III, 42). In this sense, Chen's poetics are as much based on the primacy of the metaphorical process as Jakobson's. It is worth pausing to consider some of the implications of the decision on the part of both Price and Chen to place 'Vietnam' in the general context of the postmodern. Stylistically and historically, postmodernity here appears as a thoroughgoing generalization of the figurative-as-metaphor and a consequent and radical effacement of the literal-as-reference. From this point of view, Price's and Chen's references to the 'diasporic' or 'exilic' position of the postmodern subject in language and in space remind one of O'Brien's predicament in the dream-vision of *If I Die*: imprisoned by metaphor and a very long way from home (Price, 'Remembering Vietnam', p. 174; Chen, 'Unraveling the Deeper Meaning', p. 85).

To turn from the textualist to the realist approach to the historiography of the extreme event is, however, to encounter the same basic assumption. Citing Terrence Des Pres's arguments against 'our reliance on metaphor', Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt* attacks critical accounts of the literature of the Vietnam war for their 'total reduction of the war to metaphor'. Ironicaly, Tal's acceptance of metaphor's primacy is in the end more absolute than that of either Price or Chen: ironically, and also self-defeatingly, because it renders the 'devastating reality' of the traumatic event, upon which Tal

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somewhat single-mindedly insists, utterly inaccessible: a pure vanishing point of experience always and inevitably betrayed by the fall into language (Worlds of Hurt, p. 76). It is almost equally self-defeating when the narrator of The Nuclear Age insists that the world is ‘drugged on metaphor’ and listens instead to the nihilistic poetry of a hole which is ‘all there is’.16 But, at the very least, the compelling factuality of O’Brien’s foxholes leaves their assorted occupants with inexpungeable memories of earth. In the final chapter of If I Die, as the plane leaves Vietnam, O’Brien imagines taking ‘a last look at the earth’ (p. 201). He never knew the Vietnamese, ‘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’ (p. 201). Similarly, in Going After Cacciato (1978), Paul Berlin is ‘struck with a powerful wonderment about the physical place, the texture of the soil, the colors and shadings’.17 Is this similarity disorder? A compensatory ‘metonymy of objects and images’ (Price, ‘Remembering Vietnam’, p. 180)? An attempt to achieve, in David Jarraway’s words, a representation of the ‘absolutely literal’ by ruling out the ‘responsive uplift’ of metaphor?18 Though I find these claims attractive, it would be reckless to ignore the fact that the nameless punctuations created by extreme events understandably cry out for, and often receive, metaphoric occupation.19 Equally evidently, earth is fertile ground for metaphor. When Andrew Martin gives the title of Tim O’Brien’s first work as If I Should Die in the Combat Zone, for instance, he was surely thinking of the opening line of Rupert Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’ (‘If I should die, think only this of me’).20 That the Horatian overtones of Brooke’s ‘There shall be | In that rich dust a richer dust concealed’ are so grotesquely inappropriate for O’Brien’s foxhole narratives (the dulce et decorum aphorism will be described as ‘an epitaph for the insane’) is testimony to the sheer metaphoric force of ground, earth, and soil as a paradigmatic system (If I Die, p. 173). Noting the ‘astonishing congruence’ between the symbols of liminality and the realities of the war experience’, for instance, Eric J. Leed sees the soldier as a neophyte, ‘buried, forced to lie immobile in a pit or ditch’.21 Before his symbolic rebirth into

postliminal status, the initiate is ‘identified with the earth, with pollution and corruption’ (p. 17). One thinks of *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), where, ‘nine months’ after graduating from college, John Wade finds himself waist-deep in slime at the bottom of an irrigation ditch (p. 36). Or of Paul Perry in *Northern Lights* (1975), floating ‘still as a waiting embryo’ in the ‘curious thick water’ of Pliny’s Pond. My problem with the symbolic approach is not that it does not ‘work’; as I have shown, O’Brien’s writings are always at pains to ensure it does. Yet, whether it is via Freud or Arnold Van Gennep, the recommended move is always from set to system. The ‘symbols’ of liminality, in Leed’s helpfully reductive phrasing, point back to the ‘realities’ of experience. And so, presumably, the ‘obscene smells of salamanders and pine’ associated with Pliny’s Pond in *Northern Lights* (p. 16) refer the interpreter back to the dream in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, where, for the first time, the landscape is said to smell of ‘sedge and salamanders’ (p. 93). We return to sexuality and the body, physical and textual, as to the uncanny home of textual meaning. But in doing so we repeat the oppositions which this essay is attempting to resist.

To begin the move from system to set would be to shift our attention from dream pictures to the syntagmatic line, from the snake woman’s stick to O’Brien’s march through the Vietnamese darkness. The operative verb here is not ‘to dream’; it is ‘to walk’. In the dream scene of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and its full-scale elaboration in Paul Berlin’s dream-hike from Vietnam to Paris in *Going After Cacciato*, the activities overlap. More often, however, as we have seen, the lyric gives way to the marching song, silencing poetry and reducing prose to narratives of ‘the long hike from Normandy to Berlin’ (*If I Die*, p. 23). This is the agonizing linearity that one finds throughout O’Brien, perhaps nowhere more so than in the wilderness sections of *Northern Lights*. Ultimately, however, a syntagmatic reading must move beyond the analysis of presence-in-sequence. In this context, it is helpful to remember that Jakobson’s remarks on the critical neglect of metonymy in ‘Two Aspects of Language’ and ‘Linguistics and Poetics’ correlate with his discussion of the ‘incomplete utterance’ in ‘Parts and Wholes in Language’ (1963). Just as ‘realistic literature [...] defies interpretation’, being orientated towards the metonymic aspect of language (‘Linguistics and Poetics’, in *Selected Writings*, 111, 47), so in the latter essay, and for partly similar reasons, Jakobson observes that ‘the structural laws of ellipsis have not yet been subjected to a thorough analysis’ (*Selected Writings*, 11, 282). Ellipsis might, therefore, be presented as a lexical instance of the discursive tendencies of the realist text, which, as Jakobson observes in ‘Two Aspects of Language’, characteristically ‘digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the

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23 On metonymy and ‘deletion’, see David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 76. On metonymy and ellipsis, see Lodge, p. 84. On ‘metonymic deviation’ and ellipsis, see Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p. 181.
setting (Selected Writings, II, 255). A junction between linguistics and poetics also comes into view in the case of similarity disorder aphasia, which in Jakobson’s analysis is characterized in terms of evasion. Full of ‘metonymical shifts from the cause to the immediate or further effect [. . .] from the thing contained to the container’, the speech of the similarity disorder aphasic is said to comprise a series of ‘elliptical sequels’ to prior verbal prompts (pp. 236, 245).

The assumption guiding the earlier part of this essay was that metonymy could be studied in terms of ‘horizontal’ contiguity. It now appears that a fuller account of the syntagmatic axis would involve analysis of narrative’s elliptical punctuation and of the ‘determinate absence’ within presence-in-sequence (Macherey, A Theory of Literary Production, p. 79). I have already discussed the way in which Lake Okabena and its reflection of the ‘town-itself’ is contrasted with ‘being-itself’ in If I Die in a Combat Zone (p. 24). I suggested that the ‘black-and-white pattern’ in the lake could be read in terms of the aphasia analogy, as a spatial representation of the syntagmatic aspect of language. Okabena features once again in The Things They Carried, in ways which, I would argue, enable us to move from metonymy to ellipsis. According to ‘Notes’, ‘Speaking of Courage’ was initially written in 1975 and intended for inclusion in Going After Cacciato. O’Brien’s conversations about ‘God and war and love’ on drives ‘around and around’ the lake in If I Die (p. 26) reappear in Norman Bowker’s memories of similar drives ‘around and around’ and similar discussions of ‘God and theories of causation’ in ‘Speaking of Courage’ (The Things They Carried, p. 139). ‘Notes’ confirms that O’Brien ‘lifted up’ Worthington, Minnesota and relocated it in Bowker’s Iowa hometown (The Things They Carried, p. 157). In the initial version of ‘Speaking of Courage’, however, and therefore perhaps also in the lake passages of If I Die, there was, according to the O’Brien of ‘Notes’, something ‘missing’ (p. 158). By omitting the story of Kiowa’s death in the shitfield, O’Brien had ‘left out Vietnam’ (p. 158). In ‘Notes’, O’Brien tells us that the ‘central incident’ of the story has now been ‘restored’ (p. 159). Having finally established the ‘natural counterpoint between the lake and the field’, a ‘metaphoric unity’ has apparently been finally established (p. 158).

Even granting that, with ‘Speaking of Courage’ and ‘Notes’, O’Brien has set forth ‘the full and exact truth’, the filling of this hole is not as complete as might initially appear (p. 158). Something is still ‘missing’, and must always be so. In this case, incompleteness is produced by the complicating presence of a third story, ‘In the Field’, which follows directly from ‘Speaking of Courage’ and ‘Notes’ in The Things They Carried. Rather than retrieving the experience of the extreme event in a unifying artistic act, this third piece uses the events in the shitfield to produce one of O’Brien’s most characteristic ruptures. For here, the experiences attributed to Norman Bowker during the mortar attack in ‘Speaking of Courage’ (‘Everything was black and wet. The field just exploded. Rain and slop and shrapnel, nowhere to run’ (p. 147))
are transferred to Lieutenant Jimmy Cross ('The field just exploded. Rain and slop and shrapnel, it all mixed together, and the field seemed to boil' (p. 168)). Then, in a further transfer, Bowker’s experiences during the crucial moment of the attack ('Two rounds hit close by. Then a third, even closer, and immediately, off to his left, he heard somebody screaming. It was Kiowa' (p. 147)) are merged into those of a character who has earlier been identified simply as a ‘young soldier’ ('He remembered two mortar rounds hitting close by. Then a third, even closer, and off to his left he’d heard somebody scream. The voice [. . .] was Kiowa' (pp. 164, 169)).

‘Truth’, O’Brien observed in a 1984 interview, resides in ‘those moments of punctuation, when things explode’.24 The shitfield scenes in The Things They Carried directly enact such moments. It is true that we are encouraged to read the figure of the young soldier in ‘In the Field’ as an acknowledgment of O’Brien’s ‘complicity’ in Kiowa’s death and on this basis we might conclude that the story represents another step towards the ‘unity’ of restored truth (pp. 159, 158).25 But I would argue that the passages I have been discussing are better understood in terms of the puncturing and fragmentation of narrative lines rather than their unifying or counterpointing. The rhizomatic proliferation of contiguous relationships in the stories of The Things They Carried (and, indeed, across the entire body of O’Brien’s work) does little to assure us of the final triumph of the paradigmatic, when the event can at last be laid to rest in the peace of metaphor. Traces of injury remain, that sequence of three mortar explosions in particular producing a

... after which people scream, and die, and there is an exodus of narratives.

The ellipses I have been describing are not cases of hidden meaning and therefore remain insusceptible to the dream-interpreter approach. When, in The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud recognized that the ‘concealed meaning’ of parts of his dream of Irma’s injection still eluded him, he consoled himself with the observation that ‘there is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable — a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown’ (Standard Edition, iv, 111, n. 1). The organicist assumption of a coherent (though absent) epistemological body (the dream, the subject) is abolished in O’Brien: the ‘moment of punctuation’ gives birth to a phenomenon more of the order of Macherey’s caesura, and may well correspond to ‘a reality that is also incomplete’ (A Theory of Literary Production, p. 79). This hole really is a hole. It will not talk.

25 The soldier believes he was responsible for disclosing his unit’s position and thus for bringing down the mortar attack in which Kiowa died.
'Moments of Punctuation'

IV

‘Focus on the order of things’, Paul Berlin wisely reminds himself in Going After Cacciato, ‘sort out the flow of events so as to understand how one thing led to another, search for that point at which what happened had been extended into a vision of what might have happened. Where was the fulcrum?’ (p. 199). The ‘fulcrum’ (another way of referring to the ‘moment of punctuation’) is the dominant structure of feeling in O’Brien. His writings turn on disparities between narrated and narrating, presenting the reader with those ‘moments of choice or bifurcation’ which for Jonathan Culler form one of the principal narrative inputs into the hermeneutic code.26 O’Brien’s distinctive method is to articulate his ‘moments of choice’ in relation to a single, organizing gap. It is from this point that the series of alternative narratives migrate. In Going After Cacciato, for example, as Dennis Vannatta has shown,27 the ‘flow of events’ resolves itself into three distinct narrative strands. The ‘Observation Post’ chapters comprise Berlin’s retrospective reflections. A further sequence of ‘road to Paris’ chapters, presumably imagined by Berlin whilst in the observation post, develop a fantasy narrative that would seem to be employed as a way not to continue a third narrative strand beyond the point of Cacciato’s disappearance. Berlin’s command ‘Go!’ represents ‘the last known fact’ and is, therefore, the fulcrum on which the weight of the novel rests, the moment when ‘what happened’ gives way to ‘what might have happened’ (pp. 32, 305). O’Brien even establishes his ‘moment of punctuation’ in terms suggestive of ellipsis since Berlin’s command forms the third in a series of three utterances: ‘Go [. . .] go [. . .] go’ (p. 32). In the Lake of the Woods offers a similar interweaving of narratives. Although there is no retrospective narrative level along the lines of the ‘observation post’ chapters in Going After Cacciato, a quasi-autobiographical editor figure supplies the reader with documents, quotations, and speculative footnotes in a series of ‘Evidence’ chapters. The ‘Hypothesis’ chapters equate to the ‘road to Paris’ chapters in Going After Cacciato and provide various fantasies concerning what might have happened to Kathy Wade after her disappearance, the fulcrum on which the novel balances. The narration of the events leading up to this event is apportioned between a series of evidential chapters with adverbial titles (‘how [. . .]’, ‘what [. . .]’, ‘where [. . .]’) and, finally, a more speculative and chronologically wide-ranging series of chapters detailing ‘The Nature of [. . .]’. The real issue, however, is what happens after Kathy Wade switches off her light and enters ‘dream time’ (p. 22): tea kettles, geraniums, spider plants, puffs of steam . . .

But the real issue is not in the end the issue: I would argue that the hermeneutic gap developed in O’Brien’s works can easily be filled since the interpreter always knows ‘what happens’ (although he or she may well choose to resist that knowledge). In the case of Going After Cacciato, the ‘road to Paris’ chapters offer Berlin an acceptable and therefore representable alternative to an unacceptable and therefore unrepresentable event. Since the first fact to be known after the command to ‘go’ is that Berlin’s weapon has been firing on automatic it is difficult not to conclude that Cacciato has been killed, ‘accidentally’, perhaps, but, given his apparent refusal actively to endorse the conspiracy to ‘frag’ Lieutenant Sidney Martin, conveniently. Billy Boy was first. And then . . . then who? Then a long blank time along the banks of the Song Tra Bong, yes, and then Rudy Chassler, who broke the quiet. And then later Frenchie Tucker, followed in minutes by Bernie Lynn. Then lake country. World’s Greatest Lake Country, where Ready Mix died in a charge toward the mountains. And then Sidney Martin. Then Buff. Then Pederson.

And, the sequence tellingly concludes, ‘then Cacciato’ (p. 199). When what happened similarly gives way to what might have happened in In the Lake of the Woods, the truth of the moment of punctuation, once again, is death. Yet the hermeneutic question merely adumbrates a more fundamental ontological deficit, pointing back to an inaugural but now absent event like the trail of debris left by an explosion, lines of perspective converging on a vanishing point.

I have already discussed O’Brien’s meditation on the relation between the town, the reflection in the lake, and God in If I Die in a Combat Zone. I shall quote another passage from the same scene:

At night I sometimes walked about the town. ‘God is both transcendent and imminent. That’s Tillich’s position.’ [. . .] ‘But is there a God? I mean, is there a God like there’s a tree or an apple? Is God a being?’ I usually ended up walking towards the lake. ‘God is Being-Itself.’ (p. 24)

The existential theologian Paul Tillich does indeed argue, in Systematic Theology and elsewhere, that ‘the being of God is being-itself’. A central issue for Tillich is the relation between transcendence and immanence, and in particular the question of whether ‘God is in or above the world or both’ (p. 292). For Tillich the third position is the only tolerable one: ‘God is immanent in the world as its permanent creative ground and is transcendent to the world through freedom’ (p. 292). Were it not for the fact that Tillich’s The Courage to Be informs O’Brien’s discussion of courage throughout If I Die and later gives him the title ‘Speaking of Courage’, these somewhat recherché references would hardly cry out for critical commentary. Discussing ‘The Meaning of Non-Being’ in that text, Tillich sees ‘speaking of courage as a key to the interpretation of being-itself’ because courage must be defined as a particular relation taken by human beings towards ‘the negation
of being’.

It is in an existential rather than hermeneutic context that the caesura and the ellipsis can now be seen. In *If I Die*, however, it is not quite a case of the relation between transcendence and immanence. Rather than writing of the ‘immanent’ (alternatively spaced as ‘I’m man’, the opening letters of the word offer solid if sublunar orientation), O’Brien writes of the ‘imminent’ (spaced ‘I’m mine’, the adjusted set of letters both recall the prison in the mountain and anticipate O’Brien’s experiences in Vietnam) (p. 24). Is this typo or parapraxis? Can the single letter (i not a) mark the space left by what O’Brien would later feel to be ‘missing’ in his first attempt at ‘Speaking of Courage’ and, indeed, at taking a relation towards ‘the negation of being’? Semantically, the difference between the immanent and the imminent is the difference between what is everywhere in space and what is approaching in time. I would argue that, as early as *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O’Brien’s ‘error’ produces something ‘incoming’, anticipates explosion.

The imminence of earth conditions O’Brien’s discussion of mines in ‘Step Lightly’, Chapter 14 of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. Here, he moves beyond spatial and linguistic flattening; attention shifts from the walk to what might for ever break one’s step, the apprehension that in one particular ‘spot’ there might be ‘more to the earth [...] than silicates and nitrogen’ (p. 126). For O’Brien, the effect of this ‘moment-to-moment, step-by-step decision-making’ is one of ‘paralysis’ (p. 126). As he goes on to list the variety of mines used by the Viet Cong, however, a further moment of punctuation occurs:

In the three days that I spent writing this, mines and men came together three more times. Seven more legs were out on the red clay; also another arm. The immediacy of the last explosion - three legs, ten minutes ago - made me ready to burn the midsection of this report, the flippant itemization of these killer devices. (pp. 128–29)

O’Brien’s usual stance of posterior narration shifts to one of implied simultaneous narration, the shift conveyed by the phrase ‘ten minutes ago’ and the telegraphic dashes. *If I Die in a Combat Zone* here gathers itself to a point at which narrative, narrated, and narrating almost coincide. Almost, but not quite: in this case, ‘ten minutes’ separates narrator from narratee. The gap is unusually chronologically specific but the punctuation is inevitable and insuperable: this is a period of non-being which will never be recovered. The result, I would suggest, is a curious sense of posthumousness, a sense developed more thoroughly in the Okabena sections of ‘Speaking of Courage’. It is ostensibly Norman Bowker who ‘feels like he got zapped over in that shithole’ (‘Notes’, in *The Things They Carried*, p. 156). But, as we have already seen, Bowker’s predicament is made to ripple out through a series of other narratives.
In the context of the above remarks, the very title *If I Die in a Combat Zone* can be read as a version of the posthumous predicament. The first couplet of the foot soldiers’ marching song from which the title is drawn offers a conditional sentence, complete but for the elision of the conjunction that introduces the consequent clause (‘*If I die in a combat zone, [then] box me up and ship me home*’). By contrast, O’Brien’s title suppresses the consequent clause leaving only the protasis (‘*If I die in a combat zone*’). As the conditional ‘*if*’ of the song’s syntax slips into the suppositional ‘*if*’ of the title’s, sequential movement is arrested. The title’s suspended clause presupposes O’Brien’s survival at least to the point of the utterance but does not rule out the possibility that his narrative is a posthumous despatch. Significantly, the moment of explosion ‘ten minutes ago’ represents the single moment in *If I Die* when the narrative mode appropriate to the memoir (O’Brien talks of a ‘report’) shifts into one more typical of the diary. It is here, arguably, that we reach a point of no return. Whilst memoirs and reports are produced after the event, the diary intercalates a sequence of narrating acts within the narrative and is therefore perfectly capable of being overtaken or cut short by events. It is in the sudden shift from memoir to diary that O’Brien establishes his point of no return. Then, there, Tillich’s ‘negation of being’ occurs (*The Courage to Be*, p. 30). The effort to find the meaning of non-being, and the consequent need to speak of courage, goes on, but from this point onwards the terms of O’Brien’s survival are seriously compromised. The title captures this: enveloped by the collective voice of the army, entirely given over to the words of the marching song, O’Brien speaks to us from the far side of the ‘combat zone’.

At the end of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, an aeroplane descends over Minnesota and, when the no-smoking lights come on:

You go into the back of the plane. You take off your uniform. You roll it into a ball and stuff it into your suitcase and put on a sweater and blue jeans. You smile at yourself in the mirror. You grin, beginning to know you’re happy. Much as you hate it, you don’t have civilian shoes, but no one will notice. It’s impossible to go home barefoot. (p. 203)

But this does not secure the junction between what has been narrated and the act of narrating, for there is no simple retrospection here and O’Brien’s ‘*if*’ has no ‘*then*’; he has lost more than a day on his journey home. Does the narrator of the title convert himself into the song’s narratee? Is he now shipping the boxed ‘*me*’ home? Far from rescuing the ‘*I*’, what is clear is that the shift to the second person singular serves only to exile it the more permanently. It is as if the ‘*you*’ of the final chapter is unable to leave Vietnam because the ‘*I*’ of the title has been left behind.

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30 Owing to the existence of the international date-line, the soldier’s tour of duty was completed 364 not 365 days after leaving the continental United States.
Nowhere in the field of contemporary theory are the problematic relations between the extreme event and language addressed with such intensity as in work on the ‘literature of trauma’. The insights associated with ‘trauma theory’ have informed my own work. My efforts to depict the way in which O’Brien represents the experience of extreme events in terms of the loss of the paradigmatic dimension of language, for example, run alongside Saul Friedlander’s remarks on the use of ‘minute incidents’ in accounts of the Holocaust to convey ‘the excess that cannot yet be put into phrases’. O’Brien’s metonymies and ellipses must in part be seen as evidence of the argument that only a language ‘purged of all metaphor, trope, and figuration’ is appropriate for the recounting of traumatic events. I have mainly avoided the term ‘trauma’ because the concept has tended to carry with it the very assumptions about the relation between the literal and the figurative that I have been attempting to question. From Freud’s analysis of the Wolf Man through to Dominick LaCapra on ‘working through’ or Eric Santner on mourning in the light of Beyond the Pleasure Principle, discussion of this problem has been substantial and sophisticated. My complaint is not that trauma theory falls apart into a polarized set of positions with ‘event’ people lining up against ‘language’ people, for at its best the debate has been conducted in modulated terms. I am questioning, rather, the way in which ‘event’ is constructed given the primacy of the metaphoric process and the resultant equation of metaphor and the figure. Saul Friedlander notes postmodern thought’s failure to do justice to trauma because of its ‘equivocation [. . .] concerning “reality” and “truth” ’ (Probing the Limits, p. 20). Friedlander is no naïve literalist. Nevertheless, the dismissal of the postmodern rule of metaphor tends to pre-empt extensive rethinking of the literal-as-reference and therefore to do violence to narrative at large, which, in so far as it differs from ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ must inevitably equivocate. Friedlander’s point about historical revisionism is politically valuable, but I am not sure how he would distinguish between equivocation and figuration or even between equivocation and narration. When the literal is required within the figure as metaphor’s other and without as narrative’s other, paradigmatic issues of textual meaning give onto questions of authenticity. The traumatized subject begins to look like the theorist’s antithesis to the inauthentic postmodern subject. Here, the opposition of history and rhetoric is itself conditioned by rhetoric and the literal is already

conditioned by metaphor. The idea of a traumatized subject similarly risks being swept up in the double movement I have been attempting to describe.

If authenticity is one issue, intentionality is another. Although I have tried to show the risks involved in following the direction signs placed by the author, I am not defending an anti-intentionalist position; quite the reverse. Must the subject remain ‘innocent’ of narrative intention in relation to the traumatic events which have befallen it? Must authentic testimony be an unintended disclosure in which the event dictates its terms? I am not suggesting that testimony will necessarily be free of traumatic damage; my earlier use of the aphasia analogy entertained precisely that possibility. Yet O’Brien’s moments of punctuation cannot simply be read as symptoms, for this is to return to dream interpretation, to read the symptom as metaphor rather than the ‘determinate absence’ of the caesura. It is at this point, however, that I must part company from Macherey, for while I can accept the idea that the work is ‘produced under determinate conditions’, and even see O’Brien’s lacunae as an instance of those conditions, I cannot see that the emphasis on production validates Macherey’s insistence that ‘the work is not created by an intention (objective or subjective)’ (A Theory of Literary Production, p. 78). It seems to me that intentionality remains an absolutely necessary (if always insufficient) hypothesis. The real error comes not with intentionality but with organicism and the ‘interpretive fallacy’, for which meaning is recuperable because it forms part of a unified body. The syntagmatic effects I have been exploring in the work of O’Brien do not admit such interpretive moves but they are not for that reason inadvertent expressions of trauma as a determining condition.

The intentionalist position I am trying to outline is not one for which writing is a cathartic act, enabling the subject to retrieve the agency removed by the traumatic event. Although the epigraph to If I Die in a Combat Zone does significantly refer to ‘della volontà la libertà’, free will is a paradox rather than a therapeutic cure. The traumatic experience is one of complete abjection:

You whimper, low or screeching, and it doesn’t start anywhere. Blasting in perfect key with the sound of the bullets, the throat does the pleading for you, taking the heart’s place, the soul gone, a figment of some metaphysician’s brain. (If I Die in a Combat Zone, p. 136)

Yet after all, Macherey notwithstanding, holes are dug, in language as in the ground. Writing is not simply the record of happening, or of dissevering, or of giving up one’s place and privilege with living men, without being admitted among the dead. It is also a contriving in which syntagmatic fracture is as much to be achieved as paradigmatic unity. John Wade knows that there are some calculations in which ‘one plus one equals zero’, and acts

accordingly (In the Lake of the Woods, pp. 61, 72, 76–77, 245, 276, 303). The fact that he has achieved an intentional relation to non-being does not, of course, guarantee his innocence, either at the level of language or that of the event: especially at that of the event. O’Brien himself points out that ‘if a man can squirm in a meadow, he can shoot children’ (If I Die, p. 136). The relation to non-being is compatible with atrocity and need not be a courageous one. Emerging from his own spell of ‘lost time’ a few months in advance of his author (In the Lake of the Woods, pp. 41, 273), John Wade manages a quick change on the flight home:

In the skies over North Dakota he went back into the lavatory, where he took off his uniform and put on a sweater and slacks, quietly appraising himself in the mirror. After a moment he winked. ‘Hey, Sorcerer,’ he said. ‘How’s tricks?’ (p. 273)

I am grateful to Charles Swann for drawing my attention to this reworking.