Reconciling with the Father: Tim O'Brien's Unrepresentable Fictions on Vietnam

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"This is true," (*Things* 67) the narrator of *The Things They Carried* declares the plausibility of his story to the reader; but in the end, he almost always reveals the fictionality of the story: "No Mitchell Sanders [. . .] No Lemon, no Rat Kiley [. . .] Beginning to end, you tell her, it's all made up" (85). Why does O'Brien repeatedly deceive the reader? Why does he not write his "autobiographical" fact straightforwardly, or simply write fictitious stories without any provisoes?

Seen in this light, it would be natural that the relationship between fact and fictionality has been critics' central concern in O'Brien's critical studies. And in most of these studies, the unrepresentability of facts, which is often connected with the general idea of postmodernism or chaotic characteristics of the Vietnam War, has been repeatedly emphasized.[1]

However, we should be careful when we consider from where O'Brien's unrepresentability of facts stems; although we can certainly see the surface resemblance between unrepresentability of facts in O'Brien's works and the characteristics of the postmodernism and Vietnam War, O'Brien has repeatedly revealed the aversion toward his contemporary postmodern writers and to be called as a "Vietnam Writer."[2]

It is remarkable here that O'Brien has frequently emphasized that his central theme is not the relationship between fact and fictionality as many critics have pointed out, but love. In most of the interviews O'Brien emphasizes his obsession for love. For instance, in an interview with Lynn Wharton, O'Brien claims that the main theme of *In the Lake of the Woods* and *Tomcat in Love* are not Vietnam but love:

> It's about things people will do for love. [. . .] [The] subject matter itself, that's to do with the human spirit, how we try to win and sustain love—it's an enduring subject for me. The draft to Vietnam, for example—it was

> the love of my family and so on that sent me off to a horrible war. That's not romantic love, but it's still love. [. . .] So love hasn't just been a subject in my books, it's really been the center—probably more than Vietnam itself. Vietnam is really just an aspect or a reflection of the central driving focus of my life, which has been to win love. I'm sure it goes back to things in my childhood—what exactly, I don't know, but I'm sure it does. (230-231)[3]

O'Brien highlights here that his ambivalence toward the Vietnam War stems from the "love," which is not romantic but familial. Thus, I would like to examine in this essay the significance of familial "love" in O'Brien's works, for it seems to be a keyword for his seemingly postmodern features of unrepresentability.

Tim O'Brien was raised in Worthington, Minnesota. And although it is true that O'Brien has repeatedly written about Vietnam, it is also true that he has repeatedly written about the Midwest, especially about the Midwest in the protagonists' childhood.[4] In an interview with Bourne and Shostak, O'Brien discusses the significance of the Midwest for him: "The Midwest for me is not just a sweet background I naively grew up in full of innocence and romanticism. I have a real bitterness towards it that lasts to this day. [. . .] So when I write about the Midwest, I'm writing about it in part out of a sense of real rage and anger, justifiable rage and justifiable anger" (85). In his works, his bitterness toward the Midwest community is frequently changed into the conflict with patriarchy as we will examine later.

Besides, although it seems that no critics have ever pointed out in detail, in his works except *July, July* the protagonists' fathers play a very important role. They are mostly absent, but their absence makes the protagonists aspire for their love. In O'Brien's works, the protagonists frequently imagine the conversation with their father. Therefore, when O'Brien says that his central subject is to win love, this "love" mostly means the father's love; we can see that this is why he's sure that "it goes back to things in [his] childhood."

In this essay, I would like to discuss the relationship between the unrepresentability of facts and the absence of the father in O'Brien's works. O'Brien's unrepresentability mostly stems from the protagonists' relationship with their father.[5] They cannot tell their experience in a right way to the reader; their stories are always fragmented, disruptive and contradictory. But in the imaginary conversation with their father, they can, even though temporarily,

tell their experience without any contradictions. They can reconcile with the father in their imaginary conversation; on the other hand, its imaginariness and temporality imply the limitation of their reconciliation.

In this paper, first I will discuss the protagonist Tim O'Brien's conflict between the values of the Midwest community and coeval liberalism in one of the stories of *Things* "On the Rainy River," in which his recurring theme of flee-or-fight dilemma appears in the clearest way. In this story, we can see the narrator Tim O'Brien's conflictive relationship with the patriarchy, which appears as the absence of the actual father and creation of the idealized surrogate father. Second, I will discuss the fact that in almost all of O'Brien's works the protagonists frequently make imaginary conversation with their father. In imagination, they can say what they cannot say in other situation: their disruptive language is exceptionally dissolved in the imaginary conversation with their father. They dream their father's acceptance; but their reconciliation with their father is imaginary and temporary. The nature of their aspiration for reconciling with the patriarchy shows us its impossibility and their conflict with the patriarchy. And finally, I will argue that in *Tomcat* and *Lake* the protagonists attempt to approach their father but it ends in failure. By so doing, I will show that both the writer Tim O'Brien and his protagonists use the fictionality to gain their father's love, which inevitably fails in the end.

1. The Surrogate Father and Conflict with the Patriarchy

"Rainy River" is a story which holds an important position in *Things*. As Miura points out, the story is a "fable of the process in which the deconstructive realism is inevitably generated" because this story functions as the starting point for the narrator Tim O'Brien's history when we see *Things* as an interrelated collection of stories (Miura 307). In "Rainy River," the protagonist has confidence that the Vietnam War is wrong because "[c]ertain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons" (*Things* 40). As a result, he exhibits a strong aversion to people who patriotically approve of the Vietnam War: "I was a *liberal*, for Christ sake: If they needed fresh bodies, why not draft some back-to-the-stone-age hawk?" (42). And this aversion is linked to the revolt against conservative but politically indifferent people in his hometown Worthington, Minnesota. The protagonist holds an imaginary discussion with townspeople:

> My hometown was a conservative little spot on the prairie, a place where tradition counted [. . .] At night, when I couldn't sleep, I'd sometimes carry on fierce arguments with those people. I'd be screaming at them, telling them how much I detested their blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all, their simpleminded patriotism [. . .] I held them responsible. (45)

The alienation of the protagonist stands out here, but he cannot be completely isolated from the townspeople: "I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history [. . .] I feared losing the respect of my parents. I feared the law. I feared ridicule and censure" (44-45). The family, law, and community's values are linked together here against the liberalistic values of the protagonist. We can call them paternal community's values. As Vernon points out, "the military represents separation from home and family, and for young men a level of achieved manhood; but military service also demands submission to the larger national home and traditional community values" (205). Therefore, at the bottom the flee-or-fight dilemma is the conflict between the paternal community's values and individual values.

When O'Brien is pressed for the final choice on the Rainy River, he sees a kind of hallucination in which his own history, the history of the United States, fictitious characters, townspeople and family, and his future arise together. The following passage is placed right after the hallucination:

> I tried to will myself overboard [. . .]
>
> I did try. It just wasn't possible.
>
> All those eyes on me—the town, the whole universe—and I couldn't risk the embarrassment. It was as if there were an audience to my life, that swirl of faces along the river, and in my head I could hear people screaming at me. Traitor! They yelled. Turncoat! Pussy! I felt myself blush. I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was.
>
> And right then I submitted.
>
> I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to. (59)

As Miura argues, here "the embarrassment means respectability" (307). Even though the protagonist reaches the conclusion that the exclusive morally right choice is to flee from the war, the internalized community's values prevent him from doing so. Therefore, the failure to flee from the war means the discovery that "the respectability, which differs from the protagonist's volition, has been internalized, naturalized and buried in his body" (Miura 307). But he does not entirely surrender to the paternal community's values; he continues to believe that the morally right choice is to flee from the war. Miura argues in conclusion that O'Brien's sense of unrepresentability does not come from "the nature of the general characteristic of the language but the result of the protagonist's indecision" (308). Basically I agree with this idea; the unrepresentability of *Things* stems from the protagonist's indecision, which means O'Brien's disruption between the paternal community and individual values. But it is exactly at this point that the father figures in O'Brien's works provide us with much more productive material for our argument.

In "Rainy River," Elroy Berdahl, the owner of a fishing lodge on the Rainy River, functions as an audience of the story: "He was the true audience. 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" (60).[6] Although O'Brien and Elroy barely have a conversation and thus O'Brien soliloquizes his inner suffering to the reader, Elroy witnesses it and comprehends in his reticence that O'Brien suffers from the unsolvable flee-or-fight dilemma. He behaves as if he did not care whether O'Brien flees from the war or not, but he understands O'Brien more than anyone else: "the man saved me. He offered exactly what I needed, without questions, without any words at all. He took me in. He was there at the critical time—a silent, watchful presence" (48). Elroy's reticence is to an extent "typical of that part of Minnesota," but moreover, it is due to his understanding that "words [are] insufficient" (51).

We should notice here that Elroy plays the role of the father figure.[7] He teaches O'Brien, who hates "Boy Scouts [. . .] camping out [. . .] dirt and tents and mosquitoes" (41), how to split and stack firewood, goes out together on long hikes into the woods, and finally takes him out fishing on the Rainy River. On the contrary, O'Brien writes in his letter to the family which would not be posted: "[a]t the end of the letter I talk about the vacations we used to take up in this north country [. . .] and how the scenery here reminds me of those good times" (55). The place where the protagonist suffers alienated from his family evokes the innocent and felicitous memory of his childhood, which highlights

the absence of his family at the Rainy River. Throughout the story, O'Brien cannot communicate with his actual father: "At dinner that night my father asked what my plans were. 'Nothing,' I said. 'Wait'" (42). And the nature of the discommunication with his father is totally different from that of the lack of verbal communication with the reticent Elroy. O'Brien recalls him when the internalized community's values emerge in his illusion: "I saw my parents calling to me from the far shoreline. I saw my brother and sister, all the townsfolk [. . .]" (58). O'Brien's father is, in this story, placed together with the paternal community of Minnesota. The actual father is simply made to be silent and absent by the author, and instead the surrogate father embodies the character O'Brien's longing for the idealized and beautified father-son relationship; Elroy is "the hero of my life" (48).

By imagining the surrogate father's acceptance without any words, the author reveals the protagonist's aspiration for the reconciliation with his father and paternal community; yet, Elroy's surrogacy implies that it can be achieved only in the imagination. The author has to make up a surrogate father figure because he cannot make his protagonist reconcile with their actual father. In O'Brien's works, thus, the protagonists frequently imagine the reconciliation with the father. We will see the examples in the following argument.

2. Imaginary Conversation with the Father

Northern Lights is a work in which the father-son relationship is placed as the central subject, though the protagonist's father is absent when the story is told: "Harvey and Paul live in the shadow of their forefathers' pioneering achievements, [. . .] which cause Paul especially to feel debilitated and impotent" (Millard 104).[9] The protagonist Paul sees his brother Harvey's war mania and outdoorsmanship simply as the manly tendency he cannot acquire: "Perry sometimes wondered if the whole show were a masquerade for Harvey to dress in khaki and display his bigballed outdoorsmanship, proving all over again how well he'd followed the old man into the woods" (21). When the brothers take a cross-country trip into the woods, which also reminds Paul of his forefathers' frontier spirit, Harvey develops a high fever and they both nearly die. Paul struggles to acquire the skill of hunter, which unlike Harvey he did not learn from their father, and to survive by himself.

In the course of learning survival skills, he gradually recalls his father with "some sympathy" (188). He laments, "[i]f they'd only talked. He could think of a

million things to say now" (202). Afterward, when his hunger reaches its highest in the symbolical woods, he has the desire to kill an animal and eat it. He cannot separate these two desires, and feels as if his father were aware of that. Paul desires to "[h]old him [the old man] and warm him and not speak, knowing without language the way the old man knew everything without language and spoke without language" (270). What he imagines here is the reconciliation with his father, whom once he despised on account of his macho tendency; in this work too, the protagonist cannot escape from the paternal inheritance which he despised once. Similar to Elroy's acceptance in "Rainy River," however, the reconciliation with the father is done without language; he cannot reconcile with his father in the actual world, which inevitably involves language. Thus, Paul cannot achieve any epiphany through the trip into the woods: "In the winter, in the blizzard, there had been no sudden revelation, and things were the same, no epiphany or sudden shining of light to awaken and comfort and make happy, and things were the same, the old man was still down there alive in his grave [. . .] everything the same" (317).

In *Going after Cacciato*, the father appears with members of community when Paul Berlin imagines explaining the reason he leaves the war behind: "He imagined a courtroom. A judge in a powdered white wig, his own father, all the Fort Dodge townsfolk sitting in solemn-faced rows" (172). As in "Rainy River," the father and the community are linked together in the protagonist's imagination. And the reason Berlin chose to go to the war is more or less the same as O'Brien's in "Rainy River": "He went to the war because it was expected. Because not to go was to risk censure, and to bring embarrassment on his father and his town" (264).

In addition, when Berlin is exposed to the unbearable violence in Vietnam, he repeatedly imagines the conversation with his father. It first appears in "Calling Home," in which the soldiers make a long-distance call from Vietnam to their home. Although other soldiers talk excitedly with the family, Berlin alone cannot talk with his family and makes imaginary conversation with his father.[10] Then it appears again in "Night March," in which Berlin recalls Billy Boy Watkins' death caused by fright, which is one of Berlin's most traumatic experiences in Vietnam. He attempts not to recall that death:

> He was pretending he was not in the war. Pretending he had not watched Billy Boy Watkins die of fright on the field of battle. He was pretending he was a boy again, camping with his father in the midnight summer along

> the Des Moines River. [. . .] He pretended that when he opened his eyes his father would be there by the campfire and, father and son, they would begin to talk softly about whatever came to mind, minor things, trivial things [. . .] (208-209)

Berlin represses the traumatic memory of Billy Boy Watkins' death by imagining a conversation with his father; in the imagination, he can acquire his father's love and get a catharsis.

In *Nuclear Age*, the protagonist William Cowling has contradictory feelings toward his father. When he was twelve years old, he put the pencils around the basement's ping-pong table, believing the lead in the pencils could prevent nuclear contamination. But his father coldly points out that the pencils do not contain lead, and he feels killing rage toward his father: "He was a decent man—an ideal father—but for an instant I felt killing rage [. . .] I loved him, but I also hated him" (28). Cowling loves and hates his father at the same time; this ambiguous relationship with his father is deepened in *Lake*, as we will see later.

And the imaginary conversations with the father here again appear when Cowling watches with binoculars his father's funeral from a distant mountain.

> I'd fire the questions at him. The war, for instance. The whole question of courage and cowardice. Draft-dodging: Was he embarrassed for me? [. . .] I would've told him what a great father he was. Such a good man, I would've said. I would've said all the things I wanted to say but could never say.
>
> You brave son of a bitch, I would've said. I love you.
>
> I tried to say but I couldn't. (249)

Cowling acts against his father; he fled from the war, by which he might lose his father's respect.[11] And what he fled from is not only the war and violence, but also their community and its violent history.[12] But on the other hand, he yearns to reconcile with his father. In *Nuclear Age*, Cowling cannot tell anyone his obsessive illusion of violence. That he has no audience makes his monologue disruptive; in "Quantum Jumps" chapters, in which Cowling keeps on digging a nuclear shelter by himself and imprisons his wife and daughter, the voice of the "hole" and Cowling, which can be considered as the unconscious and conscious voice, appear together. The protagonist's father is, thus, here again the idealized audience who can listen to what he cannot say

even to his wife.[13]

As we can see from the discussion so far, in O'Brien's works, the protagonists' fathers are imagined to be an idealized audience.[14] In their imaginary conversation with their father, they can say "all the things [they] wanted to say but could never say." Thus, O'Brien's unrepresentability is resolved when they make imaginary conversations with their father; even though temporarily, they can get redemption.

We can also say that in the imaginary conversation, the fathers play rather maternal role. They protect their sons from the violence and accept their disruption. But the point is that their idealized "maternal" role is solely an imaginary one. The temporality of the reconciliation with the father makes clear that their "maternal" redemption is not a perpetual one. Therefore, imagining the acceptance of their father is not the means to get redemption but to reveal their conflict with the patriarchy. By imagining the reconciliation with the father, O'Brien allows the character to tell a "true" story and get a temporary redemption. However, by immediately revealing the fictionality of the story, O'Brien exhibits the impossibility of reconciling with the father. For O'Brien, the most important aim of writing stories is not to cause a cathartic effect on the reader, but to reveal his perpetual traumatized conflict with the patriarchy. And O'Brien furthermore attempts to exhibit the nature of the father in *Tomcat* and *Lake*, which we shall examine in the following section. We will see that the mysteriousness of the father connects with the mysteriousness of the story.

3. Approaching the Father

In the beginning of *Tomcat*, the protagonist Thomas Chippering, who is a linguistics professor, has a traumatic experience which involves the relationship between his father and language. When he is seven years old, he and his friend Herbie Zylstra nail two plywood boards together to make an airplane. Chippering asks his father to bring an engine for completing the airplane; but what his father brings is not an engine but a turtle. In his disappointment and confusion, he understands that "language [is] involved, its frailties and mutabilities, its potential for betrayal" (4). And this acknowledgement that the word cannot accord with the reality makes his language inevitably disruptive:

> Turtle, I kept thinking, and even now, in my middle age, those twin

> syllables still claw at me. The quick t's on my tongue: *turtle*. Even after four decades I cannot encounter that word without a gate creaking open inside me. Turtle for the world—turtle for you—will never be turtle for me. (3-4)

The "gate creaking open inside" is generated by his father's naming of "turtle" as "engine." As Lustig points out, it reminds us of Lacan's term "the name of the father," yet rather than "identifying with the paternal order, he becomes 'afraid for' his father" (Lustig 397).[15] His father reveals the authoritative arbitrariness of language. In fact, Herbie condemns Chippering's father, "your dad's still a liar, Tommy. They all are. They just lie and lie. They can't even help it. That's what fathers are *for*. Nothing else. They lie" (5).

And it is noticeable that Chippering inevitably approaches his father as he grows older. Chippering is a "born liar" (84). When he drops and kills his future wife Lorna Sue's cat, for example, he reflexively insists that it is because her cat bit him that he dropped it. As his father lies to Chippering to "encourage" and "engage" (4), he always lies to be accepted by the other people: "If necessary, we will lie to win love. We will lie to keep love" (85). In the previous section, I argued that the author O'Brien also makes use of the fictionality of the stories to gain "love," which means to dissolve conflictful relationship with the father in the imagination. Thus, in a sense, O'Brien approaches the authoritative father by imagining fictional devise and deceiving the reader. But by revealing the fictionality of his stories, O'Brien exhibits the process of the failure to approach the father. And in *Lake*, which develops most straightforwardly the conflict with the father, we can see that in the clearest way.

In *Lake*, in a sense, the protagonist John Wade's father is a person who is most similar to Tim O'Brien's actual father in that he cannot escape from alcoholism. O'Brien discusses his actual father's alcoholism in some interviews. In an interview with Herzog, O'Brien reveals that his father was "an alcoholic, bad alcoholic, institutionalized a couple of times; his alcoholism hurt me deeply. That is, it changed his personality so radically that it made him very, very hard to be with" (8-9).[16] In *Lake*, Eleanor K. Wade, Wade's mother, bears witness to his father's alcoholism and their father-son relationship in an "Evidence" chapter:

> His father was never physically abusive. When he wasn't on the bottle, Paul could be very attentive to the boy, extremely caring. [. . .] Except

> then he'd go back to the booze and it was like the sun burned itself out. He was a sad person underneath. I wish I knew what he was so sad about. I keep wondering. (195)

We can see that for Wade's mother her husband's alcoholism is still a mystery. She cannot explain the reason of his alcoholism or the reason he both loved and hated his son. She also says: "Why? It didn't make sense. His father had problems with alcohol, that's true, but there was something else beneath it, like this huge sadness I never understood" (28). The problem for her is that she cannot name what lies under his alcoholism: she can only call it "something," or "this huge sadness."

And the impossibility of expressing his father's alcoholism in exact language is a common problem to John Wade. As his mother says, "[t]hings were hard for John. He was too young to know what alcoholism is" (10). In the same way that Wade is a "mystery" for the narrator, his father remains to be a sheer "mystery" for Wade since his childhood. He cannot understand his father's alcoholism or the reason why his father teased him for being "fat."[17] His mother says again: "Just like me, he wanted explanations—he wanted to know why—but I guess we both finally had to come up with our own pathetic answers" (197). Therefore, in this work too, it is no wonder that we can find the imaginary conversations with the father everywhere in Wade's inner monologue.

The imaginary conversation with the father first appears shortly after Wade's father commits suicide.

> In the weeks that followed, because he was young and full of grief, he tried to pretend that his father was not truly dead. He would talk to him in his imagination, carrying on whole conversations about baseball and school and girls. Late at night, in bed, he'd cradle his pillow and pretend it was his father, feeling the closeness. "Don't be dead," he'd say, and his father would wink and say, "Well, hey, keep talking" [. . .] (14)

Although Wade imagines idealized conversations with his father, the latter never stops dying as well as Cowling's father in *Nuclear Age*. In another imaginary conversation, Wade again asks his father to stop dying, but he would not. And they mutually reveal their love for each other. "'God, I *love* you,' John said. [. . .] 'Hey, I *love* you,' [Wade's father] yelled" (42).

For Wade, the imaginary conversation is a means to recover the love of his

father and resurrect him. Thus, in the imaginary conversation his father's mysteriousness is temporarily dissolved: "In the mirror, where John Wade mostly lived, he could read his father's mind. Simple affection, for instance. 'Love you, cowboy,' his father would think" (65). "The mirror" is a place where Wade repeatedly escapes into when he suffers from inner disruption or when the outside world threatens him. It reflects a typical psychological phenomenon which is usually called repression. The psychological repression makes him act as a "Sorcerer" inside and outside the battlefield.[18]

Thus, also in this work, it is the aspiration for the paternal love that makes Wade goes to the war.

> It was in the nature of love that John Wade went to the war. Not to hurt or be hurt, not to be a good citizen or a hero or a moral man. Only for love. Only to be loved. He imagined his father, who was dead, saying to him, "Well, you did it, you hung in there, and I'm so proud, just so incredibly goddamn proud." [. . .] At times, too, John imagined loving himself. And never risking the loss of love. And winning forever the love of some secret audience—the people he might meet someday, the people he had already met. Sometimes he did bad things just to be loved, and sometimes he hated himself for needing love so badly. (59-60)

Just as Chippering repeatedly lies to gain love in *Tomcat*, Wade does bad things because he aspires for the paternal love, which appears in this case as communal values. The aspiration for the paternal community's love forces Wade to act as a politician; he cannot disappoint them by revealing his dismal experience in My Lai incident.

But in the end, Wade fails to gain paternal community's love. During the election campaign, the falsification of the official record on his participation in the My Lai incident is revealed. After Wade loses his wife and community's love, he disappears into the Lake of the Woods. And here it is significant to our argument that Wade finally approaches his father's inexplicable mystery.

> Curiously, as he worked out the details, Wade found himself experiencing a new sympathy for his father. This was how it was. You go about your business. You carry the burdens, entomb yourself in silence, conceal demon-history from all others and most times from yourself. [. . .] And then one day you discover a length of clothesline. You amaze yourself.

> You pull over a garbage can and hop aboard and hook yourself up to forever. No notes, no diagrams. You don't explain a thing. Which was the art of it—his father's art, Kathy's art—that magnificent giving over to pure and absolute mystery. (241)

Here Wade feels the sense of closeness with his father. But this closeness does not mean that he can comprehend why his father did not love him; he cannot see what the "demon-history" for his father was. The mystery of the father remains as a mystery, but he attempts to re-experience his father's trick of disappearance. In the following passage, he dives into the lake.[19] We should notice here that the purpose of diving is rather to re-experience his father than to seek Kathy.

> To his bemusement there was no chill, or else the chill was lost on him. [. . .] Maybe his father had once done things very much like this in the musty stillness of garage, emboldening himself, examining the rafters with an eye for levitation.
>
> [. . .]
>
> The possibilities were finite. She was there or she wasn't. And if she wasn't, she was elsewhere.
>
> And even that didn't matter.
>
> Guilt had no such solution. It was false-bottomed. It was the trapdoor he'd been performing on all these years, the love he'd withheld, the poisons he'd kept inside. For his entire life, it seemed, there had been the terror of discovery. A fat little kid doing magic in front of a stand-up mirror. "Hey, kiddo, that's a good one," his father could've said, but for reasons unknown, reasons mysterious, the words never got spoken. He had wanted to be loved. And to be loved he had practiced deception. He had hidden the bad things. He had tricked up his own life. Only for love. Only to be loved. (242-243)

Wade's father's mystery, which exists at the bottom of Wade's mystery, can never be solved. And Wade finally disappears into the Lake of the Woods holding his own mystery. *Lake* is, on the surface, the narrator's attempt to cast a light on Wade's mystery. But the narrator cannot solve the mystery; it finally disappears into the darkness. Thus, in *Lake*, Wade and the narrator concentrically approach each mystery; they yearn to get a catharsis or

redemption, but it fails in the end. When the narrator imagines Wade's story with a happy ending, he immediately emphasizes its uncertainty: "My heart tells me to stop right here, to offer some quiet benediction and call it the end. But truth won't allow it. Because there *is* no end, happy or otherwise. Nothing is fixed, nothing is solved. [. . .] The ambiguity may be dissatisfying, even irritating, but this is a love story" (301).

O'Brien's stories are unrepresentable because they are love stories; it is the mystery of the absence of his father's love that makes his style disruptive. And this mystery had started before he went to the war. In an essay called "The Magic Show," O'Brien discusses the resemblance between magic and fiction:

> The object of storytelling, like the object of magic, is not to explain or to resolve, but rather to create and perform miracles of the imagination. To extend the boundaries of the mysterious. To push into the unknown in pursuit of still other unknowns. To reach into one's own heart, down into that place where the stories are, bringing up the mystery of oneself. (183)

At the bottom of O'Brien's mystery lies the absence of his father's love. O'Brien performed magic because he needed his father's love; and O'Brien writes fictions because he needs his father's love. We can see that the Vietnam War was no more than an occasion that made him aware of his traumatized conflict with the patriarchy.

In conclusion, in O'Brien's works, the protagonists yearn to reconcile with the father and recover from their disruptive language; but O'Brien does not allow them to do so successfully. O'Brien's stories are full of contradictions because although he yearns to gain the love of the father, he is also aware of its impossibility. Thus, when we think of the father as the paternal community, we can say that O'Brien's contradictory writing contains postmodern features which resist nationalism: as Miura argues, O'Brien's style is that of the postmodernists' because he "renounces the community of the reader (i.e., American citizen), which defines the 'correct answer'" (308). By showing the impossibility of identifying with the paternal community, O'Brien's style becomes postmodern.

However, as we have already seen, O'Brien has a conflictive relationship both with the paternal community and his actual alcoholic father. Thus, on a deeper psychological level, O'Brien's unrepresentability should also be considered to be a private and visceral way of recording his personal

ambivalence toward the patriarchy; in short, it also stems from the unrepresentability of the father. By focusing on the Vietnam War, O'Brien has invented his critiques against the paternal community through his style of the contradictory writing. What we can see in *Tomcat* and *Lake* is the process in which O'Brien crystallizes them into his personal conflict with his father and deepens them once again as a universal issue of the father and son. O'Brien's uniqueness lies in that his social and personal concerns merge on the point of the conflict with the patriarchy.

Notes

[1] For example, Herzog argues that in O'Brien's works, "[a]s observers and their angles of perspective change and events transform, reality and truth also alter while postmodernist uncertainty increases" (27). As for the relationship between postmodernism and O'Brien's works, see also Carpenter, Kaufmann and Vernon 53-62 for instance. Herzog also argues that in O'Brien's works, the "confusion and ambiguity of the form and content [. . .] mirror the disorder of the Vietnam War" (107).

[2] See McCaffery 263 and 269 for instance.

[3] As for O'Brien's insistence that his central subject has been love see also Smith 131, Sawyer and Bold Type Interview for example.

[4] Although critics do not pay as much attention as O'Brien's obsessional rewriting about Vietnam, the protagonists of O'Brien's works up to *July, July* were all raised in Minnesota, except Paul Berlin in *Going after Cacciato*, who was raised in Wisconsin and William Cowling in *Nuclear Age*, who was raised in Montana.

[5] Unlike other critics, Heberle discusses how O'Brien makes use of his traumatized experience in Vietnam as a material for his fiction: "O'Brien does not simply reproduce or re(-)collect his own experiences; rather, trauma becomes a resource for further writing that both replaces and elaborates with imaginative refabrication whatever might have happened to the author. Furthermore, O'Brien uses Vietnam itself as a resource to refigure trauma as a domestic and private wounding that leaves the war behind" (Heberle 23). But the relationship between his traumatized experience and the absence of the father's love is not within his scope of interest.

[6] In *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, the narrator Tim O'Brien also bluntly proclaims the sense of distrust toward the Vietnam War and people of the Minnesota prairie. And also in this work, he chooses to go to war, which means to give in to the paternal community's values. In *If I Die*, however, he suffers thoroughly alone without audiences; the character O'Brien records, reads and tears up his inner confession without any audiences. When we see *If I Die* as an

autobiographical work, thus, we can assume that O'Brien has deepened his fictional world by creating the (impossibility of) father figure as an idealized audience. See *If I Die* 18-20.

[7] See Herzog 116-117.

[8] These outdoor activities remind us of the author Tim O'Brien's one of the greatest literary influences: Ernest Hemingway. There have already been many critical studies which focus on Hemingway's influence on O'Brien's works. For instance, see Vernon and Kaufmann.

[9] Heberle points out that in *Northern Lights* although Harvey is called by his given name, Paul is called by his last name "Perry," which suggests stronger patriarchal influence. In this discussion, we call him Paul for the sake of convenience. See Heberle 74.

[10] In the forty-third chapter Berlin again imagines calling home but does not act it out. See 302.

[11] We can find another imaginary conversation with his father when Cowling suffers from the nervous breakdown during the terrorists' military exercise. Without imaginary love of his father, Cowling cannot survive the nuclear age. See 191-192.

[12] Cowling's ambivalence toward his father originally stems from the latter's annual death in Custer's Days. Every summer his father plays the role of George Armstrong Custer, who massacred Indians and was finally killed by them. Custer is revered in the community of his "ordinary" Midwest town; when the university students hold an all-night party, the theme for the year is "Custer's Last Stand": "At the center of the dance floor was a [. . .] dummy of Custer himself [. . .] The idea, no doubt, was to make everyone feel a swell of state pride, or a sense of history, but for me it was the creeps" (84-85). We can see here again the protagonist's conflict with the paternal community. The relationship between the immigrants and Indians is hinted at in other works as well. See *If I Die* 12-13, *Northern Lights* 65-67 for instance. And the narrator comments on Custer's sobbing in *Lake*. See 143 and 199.

[13] In O'Brien's works, almost no women can become an audience of the protagonists' stories. For instance, see the narrator Tim O'Brien's misogynic attitude in "How to Tell a True Story": "Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. [. . .] I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, You dumb cooze. Because she wasn't listening. It wasn't a war story. It was a love story" (Things 84-85).

[14] In *Things*, in addition to "Rainy River," the father plays the similar role in "Speaking of Courage," in which the townspeople are totally indifferent to Norman Bowker's war story. For Bowker, his father is the only potential audience. He imagines telling him his experience of "shit field" using dirty words, which are essential for conveying the sensations he felt: "Clearly, he thought, this was not a story for Sally Kramer. [. . .] If his father was here, [. . .] the old man might have glanced over for a second, understanding perfectly well that it was not a question of

offensive language but of fact" (146). But we cannot ignore the fact that Bowker's father is only "watching baseball on national TV" (139) at home. Despite Bowker's imagination, in the end, the narrator implies that his father is as indifferent as the townspeople.

[15] See *Tomcat* 3. Heberle also argues that "the Law of the Father [. . .] plays little role in Tommy Chippering's crises. His father's turtle/engine *diminishes* his authority and provokes a fascination with the symbolic that calls language into question rather than validating it" (279). But on the contrary, by naming turtle/engine, his father's authority seems to be augmented by the very arbitrary nature of his father's act of naming.

[16] As for O'Brien's father's alcoholism, see also Shostak and Bourne 86 and Wharton 235.

[17] O'Brien's actual father also teased him about weight. See Herzog 9. See also *Lake* 75.

[18] Besides, like Elroy in "Rainy River," in this work Claude Rasmussen plays the role of a surrogate father. He is Wade's only "genuine friend in the world" (244) and alienated from the community, he alone believes Wade's innocence. He gives Wade the love which his father could not give. Rasmussen leaves a note for Wade: "I can honestly say that I don't blame you for nothing. Understand me? Not for *nothing.* The choices funnel down and you go where the funnel goes" (279).

[19] O'Brien's protagonists repeatedly float on the lake. For example, see *Northern Lights* 347-348 and *Things* 154 and 186-188. We can see it as the attempt to reconcile with the father. As for O'Brien's personal memories of the lakes, see Wharton 236-237.

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