

Tim O'Brien's Reimagination of Reality An Exercise in Metafiction

I. Evidence

I'm into a new novel, pushing it uphill as always, so it doesn't look like I'll be doing much travel over the next year or so.

—Letter, Tim O'Brien to John Pratt, 7 July 1990

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"In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, [metafictional] writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside.

—Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. New York Methuen, 1984, 2. Quoted in Calloway, Catherine, "How to Tell a True War Story: Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*," *Critique*, XXXVI,4 (Summer 1995), 250-51.

O'Brien finally got to Harvard in 1970, where his dissertation was "Case Studies in American Military Interventions" ("I never finished"[O'Brien said]).

—Michael Coffey, "Tim O'Brien," *Publisher's Weekly* (16 February 1990), 60.

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II. Hypothesis

I don't know why Mr. O'Brien left. It was before my time. That's why I was so surprised, first to get from him what I did and then, after everything, that comment.

—Letter, Professor Miner Fergusen, Department of American Studies, Duke University, to John Pratt, 6 March 1996.

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1 April 1994

Dear Mr O'Brien:

On behalf of the Graduate School of Harvard University, I am happy to notify you that because of your distinguished publications and awards, we will waive the seven-year rule and reinstate your candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Would you kindly submit the dissertation draft that you mentioned in your letter? I will pass your manuscript to the appropriate Department and we shall form a committee.

—Illegible signature, The Graduate School, Office of the Dean,
Harvard University

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1 September 1994

Dear Mr O'Brien:

Since you have been unavailable for personal consultation because of your travel and reading schedules and have returned only one of my phone calls, I'm following up my 1 May acknowledgment with these unedited comments from your dissertation committee. As you will see, each member has read your draft carefully, and some have gone far beyond the text that you have provisionally entitled, "My Lai in America: Lost in the Lake of the Woods."

Let me acquaint you with some of the problems we faced. First, not only was it difficult to determine in which Department to house your work, but it was nearly impossible to find qualified faculty who were willing to read during the summer holidays. Because the Graduate School finally decided on American Studies, I was selected as chair. The following colleagues agreed to serve: from History, Dr. Jerome Howard Baker (PhD, Yale, 1971) who has received Fulbright and Guggenheim fellowships and is the author of numerous books and articles on American Diplomatic History. From Journalism,

Mr. William Granger (AB, Harvard, 1950), Adjunct Professor, retired AP correspondent, Pulitzer Prizewinner for his reporting in Southeast Asia. From English, Dr. Karil Baker-Hendricks (PhD, Berkeley, 1991), author of numerous essays on the literature of Depression-era class and gender oppression to be collected in a forthcoming book from Oxford University Press. (I might note that no one else in our English Department expressed any expertise or interest in Vietnam War literature.) Myself: PhD, Duke, 1987, appointed in 1990 to establish Harvard's first interdisciplinary American Studies Program, which emphasizes discourse, theoretical ethnicity, and non-specific as well as specific gender studies.

Here are your committee's preliminary comments. I'll offer a summary statement after their remarks.

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From Professor Baker, History:

I don't quite know what to make of this offering. Engaging, to be sure, but it violates every principle of proper historical analysis. Mr. O'Brien claims to have compiled "twelve notebooks worth" with "more to come" (is his research still unfinished?), and he speaks of consulting numerous "musty libraries."¹ In fact, *all* of the sources that I am able to verify exist in either the hardly musty Harvard or Boston Public Libraries, so I suspect that he may be seriously exaggerating his scholarly travails, particularly because he lives in the Boston area.

That nagging problem aside, I have three major areas of concern: first, his treatment of the My Lai incident itself; second, his introduction of apparently fictional characters into what purport to be historical events; and third (this problem can be corrected with careful revision), his hasty and unsatisfactory documentation techniques.

About the My Lai incident: Mr. O'Brien's research is selective and spotty at best. Although he does cite one of Hammer's books, plus Bilton and Sim and some version of the Peers Commission report (see below for severe secondary reference

1. p. 101, fn 2 in my version. See below.

problems), he apparently has ignored Martin Gershen's *Destroy or Die: The True Story of My Lai* (1971), Seymour Hersh's *My Lai 4* (1971)*, Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History* (1983)**, Hammer's earlier, more contemporaneous book *One Morning in the War* (1970), and numerous other studies that would have provided him with enough data to reach a less tenuous conclusion about what really happened at My Lai—and why.

For example, one of O'Brien's scenes provides a microcosm of what's wrong with his approach. According to his text, on February 25th, 1968, Calley's company lost four men killed and twelve wounded in a minefield.² Hersh notes that in the same incident the casualties were six killed and twelve wounded,³ but Gershen reports that there were 32 men killed or wounded, about 20% of the company.⁴ "Three weeks later," O'Brien writes, "a booby-trapped 155 round blew Sergeant George Cox into several large wet pieces. Dyson lost both legs. Hendrixson [sic] lost an arm and a leg."⁵ Actually, Hendrickson (correct spelling) lost the sight in both eyes as well as an arm and *both* legs,⁶ and the explosion was really caused by "a 105mm. round."⁷ About all that is factual in O'Brien's scene is Cox's death. Hardly the work of an "historian," as he calls himself.⁸

What is even more disturbing, however, is the absence of one major character in this and all of O'Brien's subsequent My Lai scenes: Captain Ernest Medina, whom all the other accounts have present at most of the chilling incidents of that tragedy. He appears nowhere in O'Brien's text, and like the minefield scene noted above, in all the events that follow, only the fact of Meadlo's crying⁹ seems to have come from whatever sources O'Brien might actually have used.

* Although this book was written by journalist, there are elements of truth in it. After all, it was good enough to get him the Pulitzer.

** Even though Karnow relegates My Lai to only a sentence or two, it is a widely used text. O'Brien must have known that Karnow even quotes his *Combat Zone* on page 472 in a mangled version. Just because Karnow misquoted him, however, is no excuse for what O'Brien does with his own sources. See later.

2. p. 103

3. p. 33

4. p. 258

5. p. 103

6. Gershen, p. 272 and Hersh, p. 35

7. Gershen, p. 269

8. p. 30, fn 21

9. p. 107

With regard to Thinbill, another problem arises. Mr. O'Brien also calls himself a "biographer."¹⁰ A biographer, however, does not invent his or her subjects, and with Thinbill and Weatherby, I have a real problem. How can these two characters, who appear in no rosters, interviews, or records of My Lai, be seen interacting with actual figures such as Meadlo and Widmer? Thinbill (presented as a Native American no doubt for political correctness) is not only seen in action but is also quoted from his so-called testimony at the Calley court-martial.¹¹ Even more incredibly, he was supposedly interviewed by O'Brien in Fargo, North Dakota on July 19, 1990,¹² only twelve days after O'Brien told Professor John Pratt, "It doesn't look like I'll be doing much travel over the next year."¹³ I suppose that we must also conclude that this Thinbill character supplied O'Brien with most of the My Lai events, since no other source is documented.

I am also very concerned about Thinbill's letter to John Wade.¹⁴ It could have been written either immediately after the scandal broke during the election or right after Durkee's people probably interviewed him. Did Thinbill ever mail it? If not, he must have given it to O'Brien. There's no notice in the text that Wade ever received it, and the letter does not appear as part of any of the police "exhibits."

As for John Wade himself at My Lai, a different kind of problem emerges. Unacknowledged by Mr. O'Brien, there was a John Wood in Calley's company,¹⁵ on whom he may have modeled his invented character, but Private Wood, sadly, was killed three weeks before his DEROS.¹⁶ John Wood—John Wade; an interesting echo indeed.

10. p. 30, fn 21

11. fns 86, 104

12. fn 5

13. Ltr, O'Brien to Pratt, 7 July 1990. Copy given to me by Professor Pratt at the University of Notre Dame Conference on the Vietnam War, November, 1993. Should we talk to O'Brien about his other alleged travels for interviews during this year?

14. p. 292

15. Gershen, 76, 204, 207

16. Gershen, 76

However, Professor Baker-Hendricks mentioned to me that *her* version of Mr O'Brien's draft is not only bound (mine is not—as you'll remember, my copy came in later) but also has different pagination and contains testimony from one Roy Wood (her fn 63) that does not exist in my copy. Apparently, there are at least two different versions of Mr. O'Brien's work—and we have not yet had time to compare them; nor do I think that such a task should be required of this committee.

Of course, had Mr. O'Brien consulted the other My Lai sources I have noted above, he might well have become even more confused by the contradictory assertions by each writer about who did what, where, when, and to whom—and he might have felt even more license to muddle the issue by inventing more scenes and characters, thus further stripping him of his self-imposed titles of historian and biographer.

Thirdly, his documentation: Mr. O'Brien has carelessly and inexcusably presented what appear to be corroborative footnotes but in fact are assertions that should often be part of the text itself. The numerous out-of-context historical comparisons do serve to put the My Lai incident in historical perspective, but they would be better placed as epigraphs to the chapters. The sources of the "exhibits" are not documented, and even though most of the verifiable quotations are properly attributed, too many are inaccurately noted or transcribed (e.g fns 12, 39, 40, 45, 48, 52, 60, 74, 85, 100, 102). Others, however, seem to be from "sources" invented solely for this work. Therefore, it is quite difficult for a reader to trust what O'Brien presents as "evidence." In particular, the so-called "Peers Commission" report presents a severe documentation problem (fns 38, 90, 91, 93, and only in Prof. B-H's copy, 103). The 1970 dates of the actual hearings are indeed correct, but an abridged transcript was not released until November 13th, 1974 and then was published only in the 1976 Free Press edition. This version contains all of the quotations used by Mr. O'Brien and must be the text referred to in Exhibit #8¹⁷ as the "Book: The Peers Commission Report" that was apparently in the possession of John Wade and the one

17. p. 262

Mr. O'Brien actually used. If Wade had this book, one wonders when he obtained it—and why, if he did indeed read it, the events of *My Lai* remained still so vague in his mind.

Also, as Mr. O'Brien should know, historical documentary footnotes must corroborate, not contradict or alter the text. Many of his "evidence" entries do just this, and by excising some details from one version (mine) and not from Professor B-H's version, he is guilty of doing for this committee (and perhaps for future readers) precisely what he has John Wade trying to do with the facts of his own military record.

Finally, even though Mr. O'Brien does distinguish between certain factual and fictional (the "hypotheses") portions in his text, Chapter 22 presents a particularly egregious juxtaposition of research and speculation. Here, the author conjectures that Kathy Wade, having spent the night on an unknown beach, might have continued her journey on the lake. She remembered however, an incident with Tony Carbo in Las Vegas,¹⁸ where Carbo told her to "unstick herself."¹⁹ This scene could have been told to O'Brien only by the garrulous Mr. Carbo at the July, 1993 interview²⁰ and thus is a factual element that has no place in a scene that is stated to be fiction. It is bad enough, as I have said before, to introduce fictional material into factual events, but to do the reverse is, well, just too much.

I would hope that Mr O'Brien knows Voltaire's famous comment that "History is fiction agreed upon," but here, he seems to imply that history can only be disagreed upon; thus all must be fiction. This abrogation of tradition, based as it is on insufficient and shoddy research, is unacceptable as a dissertation for this university. It will certainly never be awarded any recognition or acclaim by historians.

18. pp. 220-228

19. p. 227

20. p. 296

From Mr. William Granger, Journalism

Prof. F:

I've read all the good stuff written about Vietnam since I was first in-country in 1951-52, and O'Brien's work is weird. It's not reportage. It's not even feature stuff. Sometimes it looks like what some of the younger guys are calling "creative non-fiction," whatever the hell *that* term means.

His My Lai stuff is all screwed up. I know. I was there, a lot sooner and a lot longer than O'Brien says he was. So was Seymour Hersh, who wrote the best piece of objective, interpretive journalism about the incident. O'Brien just ignores him.

I also covered the Calley and Medina trials, and there's a lot of stuff that Medina could have told him. But O'Brien didn't care to ask. Ditto F. Lee Bailey, Medina's lawyer. If O'Brien really wanted to learn how to make fiction sound like fact, all he had to do was ask Lee. Meadlo, Conti, and many others are willing to talk too.

I just can't say anything positive about his overall effort. I mean, the only My Lai guy he talked to was Thinbill (what kind of a name is *that*?), who didn't even exist. Then again, maybe he did get some coaching from Lee Bailey, after all.

Anyway, I'll leave the factual, style, and format problems to the academics on this committee. About all I feel comfortable commenting on are the so called interviews he did conduct—in terms of technique and content.

First questions: what led O'Brien to this story? Why did he take so damned long to talk to the principals? Why didn't he ever do any followups? Both Wades disappeared in late September, 1986, but O'Brien says he talked with Ruth Rasmussen almost three years later—for just one session. Why *her* first? How did he find her?

To do so, he must have already checked the county records in Beaudette, where Sheriff Lux lived. But he didn't get to Lux until 1991, two years later. Then he waits until 9 and 10 June, 1993 to talk with Vinny Pearson and Myra Shaw, *both* of whom lived in Angle Inlet with Ruth Rasmussen. I mean, Angle Inlet's a tiny place (I've been there, too, and you can only get in by boat and everybody knows everyone else).

So when he does go back to Angle Inlet, he never talks with Rasmussen again. She could have corroborated or disputed the key comments made by Patricia Hood, Lux, and Pearson about the Wades' disappearance. Neither did he follow up with Carbo, Hood, or Wade when he was back in St. Paul to see Laurence Ehlers in March of 94.

Five years to do twelve, maybe thirteen interviews (one of which probably never happened)? Seems to me like the work of a part-time stringer.

Also, there's the Ed Durkee comment on page 292. No date. No attribution. It must have been an early statement, though, because Durkee was still a *nominee* for the November 1986 election. This comment must have been made in an off-the-record interview. No politician would ever say anything like this for publication. Especially just before an election. How did O'Brien get *this* one?

His *use* of his interviews is also weird. A lot of what his subjects told him does end up in the text. The "Carrot Lady" nickname, for instance, on p. 62, or what the young Wade said to Lawrence Ehlers on p. 14.

But so much good stuff never makes it out of the interviews themselves. Who reads footnotes these days, anyway? There's the 1988 death of Claude Rasmussen, for example, noted only in passing by Ruth on p. 294. How did Claude die? Did he leave any notes? What did Lux think about that? There's also Sheriff Lux's destructive search of the premises that Ruth talked about. What did they find? What happened to the crossword puzzle (p.114) that Kathy was working on the morning she disappeared? It should have been still on the kitchen table. What about the call John Wade made to his mother on page 100? Was it right after Durkee's attack hit the headlines? Or might he have just received Thinbill's letter? Eleanor knew, but O'Brien never asked her.

There's so much more. Patricia Hood said that Wade never came home the night the story broke. Where did he go? Whom did he see? Carbo? Why didn't O'Brien ask him? And there's Sheriff Lux, who said, "I don't make guesses," but then stated that Wade was "paying bills" the night after Kathy disappeared.

Yet on p. 78, all O'Brien has Wade doing is going through correspondence and bank statements. So much of this could have been resolved. And why in hell didn't O'Brien track down Kathy's lover, the dentist? Carbo knew who he was. So did Patricia Hood. And if *he'd* disappeared, too, then we'd know a hell of a lot more than we do now.

About what O'Brien *does* use from the interviews, the Thinbill material grates me the most. Let's assume that he did exist. Play O'Brien's game here. Thinbill's letter was probably written right after Thinbill supposedly testified at the 1970 Calley trial. If so, then Wade knew for fifteen years that he'd been identified. So much for his "forgetting." He was just a liar. As for the rest of the Thinbill "interview," all we see are flies, but in the text, most of the My Lai stuff must have come from him. And little of it agrees with anything else I've read. The old man with the hoe, the towels and the T-shirts, Wade's giggling—did Thinbill tell O'Brien about these things, or did O'Brien invent them?

So if Thinbill is a creation of O'Brien's imagination, so must be everything Thinbill told his interviewer. As well as everything else in this draft, even Eleanor Wade's stuff. O'Brien uses her lengthy interview nine times in the so called "factual" sections about Wade's early years, but we have no idea how many of the facts he really made up. He depends heavily on Carbo, too, who seems to me about as much of a magician and fabricator as John Wade was.

In short, all the interviews are unreliable. All the way. And there's no sign that O'Brien ever did any followups or corroborative cross-checking with anyone.

So all I can conclude is that O'Brien's work, even though it would be an interesting and quick first read for some people, shows thoroughly superficial and irresponsible journalism. No wonder he can't come to the kind of conclusions Hersh and Gershen did, even though they disagree with each other. My recommendation is that he should go back to each of his sources, reinterview each one based upon what he now knows, and rewrite his dissertation from scratch.

From Professor Karil Baker-Hendricks, Literature

[Note: stapled to the first page of Professor Baker-Hendricks' comments was a copy of this handwritten memo to Professor Ferguson: Dear Miner: Thanks for the call. Sure, I'll serve on Tim's committee, even with Baker and Granger. Glad to get the chance to work with texts again. Because I come up for tenure next year I promise not to piss them off too much. I'll keep what they call literary jargon to a minimum. But we sure do come from different worlds, don't we? It's hard to believe: I was born during the Vietnam War and I'm not even sure when it ended. You're not that much older, either. As I mentioned, I don't know Tim's work—but I'll read it all, including the criticism, before looking at his ms. OK? I'll call you. Karil.]

An introductory comment: in his first book *If I Die in A Combat Zone*, Tim notes that "to understand what happens among the minefields of My Lai, you must know something about what happens in America" (40). This theme permeates the rest of his work: *Cacciato*, *Nuclear Age*, and *Things*. In his *Woods* dissertation draft, however, he seems to emphasize the reverse: that to understand what happens in modern America requires an understanding of My Lai. Because he shows such knowledge to be impossible, so then, according to my reading of his text, is understanding itself. His work thus seems to have come full circle, and he now shows that the search for truth is indeed a deconstructive process even when conducted by using neo-historical methods. His conclusion: reality equals illusion . . . No period. Just ellipses.

Were I writing a retrospective scholarly essay, I'd concentrate on how he uses the same basic metafictional techniques in all his major works. (I'd disregard *Nuclear Age* here. All writers have at least one *Across the River and into the Trees* in their canons. Even our own Marilyn French did it in her second novel, too.) In each of Tim's major works, three metafictional modes exist: (1) the Author contemplating his text; (2) the so-called "factual" mode; and (3) the related but distinctly different *imagined* mode. Because this latter element does not

appear overtly (but we may surmise that it probably exists) in *Combat Zone*, we can easily trace Tim's metafictional development from this first attempt at an apparently factual memoir, then through Paul Berlin who, while standing guard duty one night, imagines how he might tell Cacciato's story, then through *Things* where Tim, who disclaims being Tim, tries to tell a "true" war story (a statement that is itself an oxymoron because a traditional "war story" is a lie told by one male to another), finally to *Woods* where Tim (who may or may not be the narrator), claiming to have conducted extensive research, speaks to us as author only from footnotes. Here, he fuses all three modes together, much as a computer can superimpose a text over a text over a text. The result is what I might call a kind of late post-modernistic reimagining (I do not mean "reimagining" here), which does have merit and shows that Tim is in tune with other writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, John Barth, Julio Cortazar, Thomas Pynchon, and Joan Didion, to name just a few.

What I think this manuscript shows is an attempt to deconstruct traditional metafiction in what Tim wants us to believe is a new way—but it's here, despite my fondness for this work and the refreshing sensitivity that its author shows, that I see a real problem in accepting it for the PhD, even under the widely spread web of American Studies. Simply put, there's not much new—the primary requirement for any dissertation—and there are some alarming similarities to, even perhaps echoes of, previous works that have defined what we call metafiction. Some of these predecessors, ironically, have also derived from the Vietnam War. Such literary dependence is hardly new for Tim, because *Cacciato*, for instance, gets not only its language from Hemingway, its basic stagnation image from *Waiting for Godot*, but also its non-linear structure, a much smoother version of which we see in *Woods*, from Cortazar's *Hopscotch*.

I'll note some less significant similarities, then discuss the probable major source of many of Tim's ostensibly "new" concepts. I begin with symbols. Some of the major images in *Woods* are water (the lake and the storm), angles, surfaces,

memory, and geography. It's pure Robbe-Grillet, who in *The Voyeur* defined the post-existentialist viewpoint by parodying, then demolishing Sartre's view in *Nausea* that the existentially ordained could indeed see reality below the surfaces. For Robbe-Grillet (who got a lot of his ideas from Nathalie Sarraute), in our post-existential world even the author's formerly god-like vision is flawed—if you will, absurd—and Robbe-Grillet's seminal work as well as his subsequent fiction and essays in the 50s and 60s provide all the clues we need to understand what Tim is doing more than thirty years later. And what are the major symbols in *The Voyeur*?: water, angles, surfaces, memory, and geography. In both novels, crimes may or may not have been committed, all fact is suspect, people are unable to see anything but surfaces (except in their imaginations), multiple versions of the same events occur, and the major theme is that because human perception is necessarily flawed, fact is indistinguishable from fiction.

As for Tim's narrative techniques, one has only to consider John Barth (about whom more later) and Joan Didion. "Call me the author," Joan says early in *Democracy* (1984), and she becomes an author who is not an author; a biographer who claims to have known some of her characters, and a seer who can see into people's minds, even though she writes in the first person (cf *Woods*, 30, fn 21: "biographer, historian, medium"). Who are the main characters of *Democracy*? An American politician whose campaign fizzles during the Vietnam War, his alter-ego, a shadowy secret agent about whose actions in Vietnam no one really knows anything, a woman who for undetermined reasons remains attracted to this mysterious warrior, and an outspoken political campaign manager who feels let down by his boss. What is *Democracy's* author-as-character trying to do? Find out, by means of interviews, research, and reflection what really happened in an incident during the Vietnam War, a political fiasco, and a murder mystery. And what is *Democracy* about? The inconclusiveness of history and art, the mutability of fact and evidence, the power (often misdirected of the press, the media that create people who are not what they seem, the vicious amorality of politics, the

indefinable power of love, and the inability of an author to sort everything out. All rather similar, one can see, to what Tim shows in *Woods*.

But it is to Barth's metafictional *Sabbatical* (1982) that Tim may owe his greatest debt. Both works are told by an involved male narrator who is ignorant of the "truth" about which he writes. Both works have the following identical components:

<u>Sabbatical</u>	<u>Woods</u>
explanatory footnotes	explanatory footnotes
documentary footnotes	documentary footnotes
footnotes that refer to other fns	footnotes that refer to other fns
1st person (participant) omniscient PV	1st person (participant) omniscient PV
couple in sailboat	couple in two boats
invented sources	invented sources
real sources	real sources
direct reader address	direct reader address
newspaper articles	newspaper articles
interviews (alleged and real)	interviews (alleged and real)
Allende massacres	My Lai massacre
character missing in boat	character(s) missing in boat(s)
possible/probable murder/suicide	possible/probable murder/suicide
"Our business is fiction, (126) not lies"	"evidence is not truth" (30)
"Realism is a fucking bore" (136)	"Maybe erasure is necessary" (301)
"Fact and fiction...difficult to distinguish" (113)	"imaginative reconstruction of events" (30)
"Magic is your wind" (137)	"Wade...did his magic" (269)
Happy ending	Happy ending?

Thematically, too, the two works are nearly identical, both showing the debilitating nature of politics, the impact of the past on the present, the inability to discern the truth of a

matter, the blending of fact and fiction, the need for love, and the continuing effects of the Vietnam War on contemporary society. Often in each work, the narrator discusses the nature of the creative process, comments on himself, and develops the plot line in extra-textual footnotes.

Tim may, however, go one metafictional step farther than Barth by casting doubt on the reliability not only of so-called fact, but also of fiction itself. Tim's last "Hypothesis" chapter 27 is a rewriting of chapter 8, itself a fiction based upon the author's speculation (albeit partly from interviews with fictional characters). Here, he makes even his own fiction suspect and unreliable, forcing the reader to make the final hypothesis about what might have happened, even though he or she has such conflicting information that a real determination is impossible. Of course, Tim might also be trying to show an author who has forgotten what he wrote earlier, or perhaps because this is a rough draft, Tim may even have failed to revise what he himself had first written. I rather doubt the latter, but you never can tell with these guys.

So, I'm in a quandary. We don't of course have an MFA program here, but I suspect that one of those (after all, they're springing up all over like weeds) might be a better place for Tim to seek certification of this work. If I read his intent correctly, there's no way he could revise it to be acceptable here.

[Note: handwritten attachment stapled to the last page: Miner: sorry about this, but it's all I could do. Is Tim planning to come here for a conference? Let me know. I'd really like to meet him. Karil]

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From Miner Ferguson, Committee Chair

Dear Mr. O'Brien:

I'm sorry that the comments of your committee aren't more positive. As a result, there's little that I think I should add at this time. With only Mr. Granger suggesting that revisions might overcome some of his objections, I can't hold out much hope for

an eventually successful, publishable dissertation. You might, I suspect, be able to interest a small press fiction editor in your work but if you do so, I'd suggest a strong disclaimer as an epigraph, perhaps using the concept that Professor Baker-Hendricks mentioned, "reimaging," or as I now think better, the term "reimagining." Because that's precisely what you've done and what has so incensed my colleagues, who understandably speak from their own experience and points of view. Academe being what it is, there's not much else that I can say, but sometime, perhaps, I might share with you some of my own frustrations in introducing new concepts and programs into a traditional university structure. Incidentally, I'll be going back to teach at Duke next year. They're more on the cutting edge.

It does strike me, however, that your subject matter and mode of presentation might lend itself well to the screen. Have you considered contacting Oliver Stone? To get some background on the war for your project, I watched *Platoon* on video, and from reviews that I've seen of that and his other works, Stone seems to be interested in using history the same way that you do. Just a thought.

Regardless, I thoroughly enjoyed reading your manuscript and sincerely regret that your interesting work is just not suitable for the PhD.

With best wishes,
(signed) Miner Ferguson

III. Evidence

Life has unsolved mysteries, I'm sure. They're sometimes necessary in non-fiction. In fiction, however, they aren't needed. Writers have the freedom to go out and solve them. That's what perplexes me about "In the Lake of the Woods," at 7 p.m [March 5th, 1996] on Fox. In adapting Tim O'Brien's best-seller, the producers have inexplicably decided to have it end as a mystery.

—Advance TV movie review by Mike Hughes, Gannett News Service, in *The Fort Collins Coloradoan*, 5 March 1996, C2.

And after what Fox TV did to *Lake of The Woods*, I really feel sorry for him. They certainly tried. Some of the cuts were good, as were the characters, but Wade's attraction for Patricia and the police beating scene and the axe were just too much. Then they had Wade remember everything and they made Thinbill into a standard hippie. My friend was really confused and kept telling me to be quiet when I'd try to tell him what was wrong. I suppose Mr O'Brien asked for it, but somehow, I feel responsible. Anyway, here's the dissertation "stuff" (to quote Granger) that you asked for. It's all water over—no, in the lake. Consider it from now on, public domain.

—Letter Professor Miner Ferguson to John Pratt,
6 March 1996

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To Miner Ferguson:

Platoon sucks—and so does the PhD. Peace.
Love, Tim

—Xerox copy of author's inscription on an advance reading copy of *In The Lake of The Woods*, dated 15 February, 1995.

John Clark Pratt served on the USAFA English Department faculty from 1960-1974 and is currently Professor of English at Colorado State University. Among his books are the novel *The Laotian Fragments*, the collage *Vietnam Voices*, The Viking Critical Edition of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, and (with Tim Lomperis) *Reading the Wind: The Literature of the Vietnam War*. He has also written numerous Vietnam-related essays, reviews and introductions.