



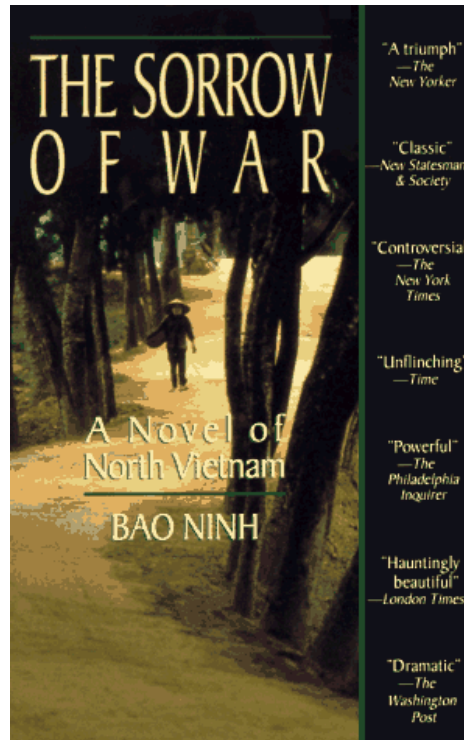
ESSAYS • LITERATURE

Photocopies of Photocopies: On Bao Ninh

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diaCRITICS occasionally features guest blogs and reprints. Originally published in [Finding the Words](#), this essay by Madeleine Thien is about the casualties of war. But more than that, it is about the ghosts who still wander long after the fire has ceased, looking for their place in history. Most of us gaze upon photographs and stories of people trapped in war and fail to realize the most important detail: They were human beings.

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Bao Ninh, now living in Hanoi, became a novelist in the second half of his life. Until the age of forty, he served in the North Vietnamese Army, fighting the Americans for a decade along the Ho Chi Minh trail, then passing another decade as part of the NVA's body-gathering team. Demobilized in 1987, he began to write. Three years later, he published his first and only novel, *The Sorrow of War*. It is a slim book, so small that it would fit easily into a coat pocket.

My own copy, an English translation, came from a bookseller in Phnom Penh. The paper is thin and nearly transparent; dog-eared and worn, the book is in fact a photocopy of a photocopy. The sentences slope crookedly across the page and in some places, the text is smudged and faded from humidity. These counterfeit copies are everywhere in Southeast Asia, available in bookshops, in sidewalk stalls, sold by children roaming the streets. Reading from it in the April heat of Phnom Penh, I feel as if the very air changes. The novel collapses time, collapses worlds.

*

Kien, the novel's central character, joins the North Vietnamese Army in Hanoi when he is eighteen years old. By the time Saigon falls, in 1975, his brigade of five hundred men has been obliterated and more than three million Vietnamese have died in the war. His last duty is to travel the length of the country, trying to find and identify the bodies of those who remain missing in action, a mission that takes eleven years. "If you can't identify them by name," the head of his team tells him, "we'll be burdened by their deaths forever."

As Kien works his way across the postwar battlefield—abandoned now, brazenly lush, idyllic—ghosts free themselves from the mud. They play cards, drink, lose themselves in romantic and lustful abandon; they die, decay, sing, and tell dirty jokes, while Kien drinks cup after cup of brandy, "the way a barbarian would, as if to insult life." The dead step from every corner, every house, every jungle trail, creating a narrative structure that feels like a tide coming in and washing out—relentless—more like labyrinth upon labyrinth than any solid Aristotelian form.

Here, the dead remember other dead, they call up their own ghosts, so that we are always remembering, and living, through an infinite corridor of others.

Unable to comprehend the present, Kien begins writing about the past, "mixing his own fate with that of his heroes," embracing a turbulence of memory anchored to neither time nor space, which adheres only to "that circled arena of his soul." The uprush of so many beings, writes Bao Ninh, "penetrated Kien's mind, ate into his consciousness." Kien takes it upon himself to make a place for as many of the lost, the unnamed, as he can, writing a story in which "any page seemed like the first, any page could have been the last," becoming in the process a kind of composite, invoking the dead in order to keep his life afloat, dissolving himself in first-, second-, and even thirdhand remembrances. The stories, of a time when "all of us were young, very pure, and very sincere," become his only reality in a world

reborn.

Eventually, even Kien himself will disappear, replaced by a different storyteller, perhaps the author himself, perhaps not.

“Who else but you can experience your life?” A simple question, voiced by Kien’s stepfather, but one that Bao Ninh turns inside out. Rather, the reader experiences just how many lives Bao Ninh can bequeath to us through the single, solitary mind of Kien, through a character who never quite solidifies, who floats from night to night; from the jungle to the city; from existence to disappearance.

Bao Ninh

Near the end of the novel, Bao Ninh asks, “As for the author, although he wrote ‘I,’ who *was* he in that scout platoon? Was he any of those ghosts, or of those remains dug up in the jungle?”

Was he any of them, all of them, or none at all? Bao Ninh’s literary creation is an empty man, a sieve, who is brought alive by other voices. Kien survives the war but his identity, his self, is ruptured. He becomes both a full and an empty vessel, a character who knows that only a greater humanity, a flood of conflicting voices, will hold

his self together. “Let our stories become ashes now,” a young woman tells Kien at the war’s end, wanting him to forget the past. In the moment, neither recognizes that ash remains, that the residue survives the conflagration. “I know, of course,” wrote Bertolt Brecht, “only through luck did I survive so many friends. But tonight in a dream I heard these friends say of me, ‘Those who are stronger survive.’ And I hated myself.”

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On its initial publication in 1990, *The Sorrow of War* was briefly banned in Bao Ninh’s homeland. Since then, however, it has become Vietnam’s most beloved war novel, a book celebrated for its relentless, humane depiction of the generation that fought the war. Here in North America, Bao Ninh’s novel has been criticized for being rambling, incoherent, untidy, and uncontrolled, for lacking the poignancy and clarity of Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. Perhaps the critics are right. Or perhaps fiction, like the human mind itself, is more elastic than we give it credit for. *The Sorrow of War* defies, takes apart, its own structure, makes a mockery of linearity, in order to voice its truth.

In Cambodia, the artists who might have told the story of their war—the writers, poets, dancers, filmmakers, painters, artisans, and musicians—were killed. Among the two million Cambodians who lost their lives during the Khmer Rouge revolution, an estimated 90 percent of the country’s artists died of starvation and disease, or were murdered in the fields or in the prisons of the Khmer Rouge. Others were silenced by exile and poverty: Libraries were emptied and Cambodian writers became like Brecht’s banished poets: “Not only their bodies but even their works were destroyed.”

Images, not words, have come to represent the Cambodian genocide. The most famous of these are the thousands of photographs from Tuol Sleng, a high school in Phnom Penh that was converted into a prison and used primarily to murder “enemies” within the

Khmer Rouge itself. The majority of Tuol Sleng's victims were peasants, cadres, cooperative leaders, soldiers, and commandants who fought for Pol Pot and his ministers, as well as students and teachers who returned home from abroad, hoping to serve their country; the remaining victims came from all walks of life, all age groups, and all professions. Of the sixteen thousand prisoners who were brought there, there are eleven known survivors.

Nhem Ein, the Khmer Rouge cadre who photographed each prisoner, was asked how he wanted people to react when they viewed his pictures. "Firstly," he said, "they should thank me ... When they see that the pictures are nice and clear, they [should] admire the photographer's skill. None have any technical errors. Secondly, they should feel pity and compassion toward the prisoners." I have been to Tuol Sleng many times. In the hot, stale rooms, air disappears. The tiled floors are dirty and stained. After grief and pity, what I feel is rage and a determination to understand. Movements and ideologies do not spring from the air; we are building them all the time, persuading ourselves of their value, following their bright promises to utopia. Such tidy narratives, in myth or in literature, succeed only in evoking an illusory land, more false than the ghosts of Bao Ninh's landscapes.

In the photocopies of photocopies, translations upon translations, Bao Ninh's ghosts have been granted a second, enduring life. *The Sorrow of War* can be found in the placid northern guesthouses of Laos, and in the endless shelves of the Kinokuniya Bookstore in San Francisco. In June 2010, I took a bus from Bucharest to the Black Sea, where some two thousand years ago, Ovid passed his final decade in lonely exile. I spoke about *The Sorrow of War* to a colloquium of Romanian and international writers, carrying in my pocket the same dog-eared photocopied book I acquired in Phnom Penh. As I read from the novel's pages on the edge of the Black Sea, the salty air slowly diminished, and Kien's jungle, once again, grew lush. Such is the strange

world of fiction, where words allow us to live again an unlived experience, where memory can be preserved on paper. Between ourselves and the most enduring works of art—whether a poem, a painting, a piece of music, a film—every return widens our vision. We hope, each time, to carry ourselves deeper into the encounter. We hope to carry more of the world, and our own experiences, with us.

In 1997, twenty-two of Nhem Ein's Tuol Sleng photos were enlarged and exhibited at New York's Museum of Modern Art. In MoMA's brief exhibition text, there was little context and almost no history. The viewer, gazing into the faces of children about to be executed, would not know, for instance, how Khmer Rouge leaders had educated themselves in the Marxist study groups of Paris, how some Western leftist intellectuals had shrugged off criticism of the Khmer Rouge revolution—dismissing the stories of Cambodian refugees as American propaganda—or how our governments supported Pol Pot after 1979, how we allowed his foreign ministers to hold Cambodia's seat at the United Nations until 1993. The photographer was credited as “unknown”—a falsehood—and the individuals in the photos as “unidentifiable.”

In a country where so many lost their voices, it seems absurd that pictures taken by executioners were believed capable of telling the entire story. Perhaps MoMA's curators, like Nhem Ein himself, believed the pictures to be so complete that they could exist independently as artistic objects: images of suffering, relics of tragedy so powerful that they required no words, no prior knowledge when a stranger approached them. Nhem Ein's photographs are distressingly beautiful. Thousands and thousands of times, men, women, and children stared directly into the camera's lens, unsure if they were seeing their brother or their murderer. Unable to hope, unwilling to despair, their faces remain fixed in a grievous calm.

But here, in the present, the ghosts should be allowed

words and a history, a time and a place of living, a specificity. It seems so little to give or to receive. Instead, they became mute images from a foreign war, distorted by our projections: of suffering, innocence, brutality, madness, and incomprehensible ethnic conflict. As the journalist Nic Dunlop wrote, “The victims are presented as the Khmer Rouge saw them: without a name, without family, without an identity or country.”

“The philosophy,” wrote Hannah Arendt, “of art for art’s sake ends, if it has the courage to pursue its tenets to their logical conclusions, in the idolization of beauty. Should we happen to conceive of the beautiful in terms of burning torches we will be prepared, like Nero, to set living human bodies aflame.” Pol Pot was, as Arendt described Hitler, true until the end to his own ideology: enacting a revolution he believed would strengthen Cambodia and purify its people. Both men were “prepared to sacrifice everything to this consonance, this ‘beautiful’ consistency.”

A few years ago, attending a writers’ conference in Boston, Bao Ninh was interviewed by an American who had served in Vietnam. The American, Marc Levy, was met with reticence when he asked Bao Ninh to describe the NVA’s tactics, jungle strategies, and ideological training. Finally, Levy asked Bao Ninh if there was something more he wished to say, something their interview had overlooked. “We were human beings,” Bao Ninh said simply. “That is what you must tell people. We were human beings.”

In 2006, rumored to have finished a second novel, Bao Ninh admitted that since the publication of *The Sorrow of War*, he had written continuously but he did not know if he would ever publish again. “I keep stopping myself,” he said. “I keep holding myself back.” Now, at the age of fifty-eight, he edits a weekly literary supplement in Hanoi, and he lives the life of a reclusive author made famous by a book that, in its selflessness, in its lost individuality, managed to speak for a generation. Like Denis Johnson’s *Tree of Smoke*, the

novel spans not only the unfolding of many lives, but a profound psychological plummet. “There’s been a lie told,” says a former Viet Cong, now double agent, in Johnson’s novel. “I’ve told it. I’m going to let the truth reclaim me.”

Soon, I’ll return to Cambodia, a country that I love, and one that continues in an uneasy peace. There, another generation, born after the last UN peacekeepers withdrew from the country in 1993, is slowly finding its voice. I have met dancers, journalists, painters, and musicians alive in their art. They do not idolize beauty. They create art not for art’s sake, but from necessity, to hold together what is beautiful and what was broken, to seduce, to escape, and to conjure from themselves some small thing that will last, to be encountered again and again, retold, experienced anew, like photocopies scattered across a region, like persistent efforts, as all of us grow older.

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Madeleine Thien is the author of three books of fiction, including *Simple Recipes*, a collection of stories, and *Certainty*, a novel. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Granta*, *Five Dials*, *Brick*, *PEN America*, *Warscapes*, and the *Asia Literary Review*, and her work has been translated into seventeen languages. In 2010, she received the Ovid Festival Prize, awarded each year to an international writer of promise. Her most recent book, *Dogs at the Perimeter*, will be published by *Granta Books* in 2012. Born in Vancouver, she divides her time between Montreal and Berlin.

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