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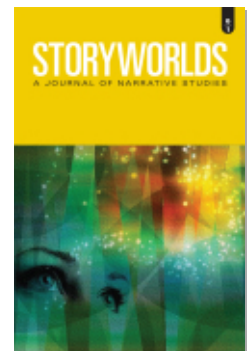
Visitations of the Dead: Trauma and Storytelling in Bao  
Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*

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## Visitations of the Dead

*Trauma and Storytelling in Bao Ninh's  
The Sorrow of War*

Andrew Ng

Although very much a part of the American literary imagination in the late twentieth century, the Vietnam War remains an enterprise still in search of Vietnamese writers. To date, relatively few Vietnamese authors have attempted to recount the harrowing years of and following the war that witnessed the defeat of a Western military superpower by an Asian army dependent on guerrilla tactics and the force of determination. For these writers, however, victory is fundamentally a hollow nationalist discourse that speaks little of the experiences of ordinary Vietnamese who had to endure extreme suffering and loss, the effects of which often continue even decades later. In novels like Duong Thu Huong's *Novel without a Name* (1995) and *Memories of a Pure Spring* (2000), Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1994/2005), and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003) by the Vietnamese American lê thi diem thúy, the war inevitably translates into traumatic memory

that profoundly lodges survivors in a state of existential immobility. Despite being works of fiction, these powerful narratives capture the lingering vexation of unspeakable grief that haunts individuals marked by such a history, and how they manage it. Importantly, novels like those written by Bao Ninh and lê thi diem thúy express the tragedy of the Vietnam War not only in what they tell but through *how* they tell it as well. Arguably, these texts acknowledge that there are properties of war memories that language alone cannot convey and which thus require other narrative means to signify them. To this end, stylistic conventions frequently associated with postmodern literature are especially appropriate: these formal qualities not only intimate the conditions of trauma but vicariously re-create for the reader the mental and physical sensations (i.e., confusion, blackouts, compulsive behaviors) related to a lived circumstance that has been incontrovertibly damaged by trauma. Focusing on *The Sorrow of War*, this essay will demonstrate how certain stylistic practices, such as the fragmented narrative and the deliberate disavowal of temporal organization, are rehearsed in the novel to textually give shape to trauma.

*The Sorrow of War*, whose Vietnamese version remained unavailable until ten years after the publication of its English translation in 1994 (the novel also won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize that same year), has since become one of the twentieth century's most important war narratives. Despite a brief ban in Vietnam, it is today regarded as the country's most beloved novel, "a book celebrated for its relentless, humane depiction of the generation that fought the war" (Thien 2011). The novel, partly autobiographical, is written by Bao Ninh, who during the Vietnam War served with the Glorious Twenty-Seventh Youth Brigade. Of its original five hundred members who went to war in 1969, only ten survived. Set in 1976, the story primarily revolves around Kien, a forty-year-old war veteran serving as a member of the Missing in Action Remains Gathering team. Interspersed between accounts of carrying out this gruesome task are intimate memories about the war, which Kien endeavors to record in writing despite the obvious emotional and psychological struggles it causes him. In the end, Kien disappears from his story altogether, leaving behind his manuscript to be subsequently passed on to an unnamed narrator. It is this narrator who would even-

tually piece together the war veteran's fragmented story and produce the narrative that is set before the reader.

From this brief summary, formal narrative features corresponding to postmodern literature are already apparent in Bao's novel. This article explores some of these features, but it will especially consider the manner in which they impart the complexity of Kien's unclaimed experience (i.e., trauma) that invariably culminates in irresolvable grief. A discussion of the unrepresentable immediately follows from this introduction. Both postmodern aesthetics and trauma theory deploy this concept to describe, respectively, the sublime and trauma's resistance to language's signifying agenda, but as I will demonstrate, they do this in fundamentally different ways. What characterizes the unrepresentable (or unspeakable) in trauma may indeed implicate language, but it is precisely by becoming implicated that language is ultimately able to symbolize trauma. Having established the relationship between trauma and the act of writing, I proceed to discuss some of the stylistic (both formal and linguistic) devices used in *Sorrow* to instigate the unrelenting sensations of trauma. Here, interpretations as to what these strategies reveal about traumatic memory or experience will be duly explored. The third movement of my argument focuses on Kien's bequest of his manuscript to a mute girl before exiting from the story. Here, I draw a metonymical association between trauma and silence to interpret the work of reparation and redemption achieved through the shared acts of writing and reading. In my conclusion, I will provide a counter-perspective to Jane Robinett's reading of the novel's unnamed narrator, who only appears toward the end of the story, within the sociopolitical context of Vietnam in the 1980s in order to identify an equally redemptive interpretation that occurs, this time, on a metanarrative level.

### Defining the Unspeakable

A fundamental feature of trauma is the resistance to representation. This is not only because traumatic memory is often denied to the subject through the psychic mechanism of repression so that she may survive the event, but also because language is ultimately incapable of apprehending the magnitude of the experience. Akin to Lyotard's (1988)

notion of the postmodern aesthetic sublime, trauma is the unrepresentable whose defiance against reason's attempt to impose meaning to it correspondingly destroys the subject's sense of being-in-the-world. In this regard, the state of privation produced by trauma, which relegates memory of the experience to the unconscious and deprives the subject of the capacity to make sense of, and to articulate, it, also ensures the subject's subsistence. Paradoxically, however, that this subsistence is premised on denial and an impossibility to speak also traps the subject in an existential loop that perpetually revolves around this "gap" (*trauma*, in Greek, literally means "hole") in memory. The subject, as such, becomes absorbed in a moment in time that she refuses to acknowledge, but nevertheless she manifests symptomatically an attachment to it that suggests her unrecognized disavowal of the future.

In a causal relationship, however, the unrepresentable (or unspeakable) quality of trauma differs from that which informs the postmodern sublime; that is, while the sublime *results in* the unrepresentable, it is the *effect* of trauma. Moreover, the sublime is an aesthetic category that reduces representation to aporia, but this is not exactly the case with the psychological circumstances surrounding trauma. Clarifying this distinction is important because of scholars' tendency to collapse the two and thereby suggest, perhaps unwittingly, the ineffectiveness of trauma studies at understanding the mechanism of this psychic irruption. For example, Jane Robinett criticizes, among others, Cathy Caruth's (1996) formulation of trauma because it allegedly "reinforce[s] the postmodernist position that lived experience, and especially traumatic experience, resists linguistic representation and in doing so, separate[s] the writer from lived experience" (Robinett 2007: 290). This is actually a misreading of Caruth, which possibly results from assuming that similar characteristics define the unspeakable in both postmodernism and trauma studies. Caruth's point is not so much that language cannot represent trauma but that the subject's inability to acknowledge trauma inhibits language from adequately identifying it for her. As the title of Caruth's study suggests, trauma is an unclaimed experience, because the event, despite having happened, remains unassimilated into identity by the subject; because "it was precisely *not known* in the first instance [the event] returns to haunt the survivor later on," and henceforth situates

her in a liminal space that vacillates between “knowing and not knowing” (Caruth 1996: 4, emphasis in the original). In this regard, what constitutes the unspeakable of trauma is the loss of reflexivity in the subject’s self-representation, which results from becoming locked in a perpetual memory because the subject had initially failed to recognize the event as traumatic. Or, in Žižek’s words, what constitutes the “the traumatic event is nowhere given in its positivity; only afterwards can it be *logically constructed* as a point which escapes symbolization” (1994: 171, emphasis in the original). In a paradoxical fashion, what establishes trauma is precisely the point when the experience fails to qualify as such—the “point which escapes symbolization”—and henceforth structures the subject’s “afterward” as perpetually looping back to that point. That self-presentation is acutely “entangled in language” (Caruth 1996: 4) is what renders the latter incapable of enunciating the experience. Ironically, however, and unlike the postmodern sublime, which disavows representation altogether, trauma actually takes shape when language breaks down. The resulting linguistic gaps, fissures, and incoherence become symptomatic intimations of a subject in crisis, revealing vital clues to her disconnection from the world. Hence, while language proves insufficient in articulating trauma, it can nevertheless *embody* the event. That trauma is located in the structure of language but not in meaning is precisely Caruth’s point when she describes the experience as both “knowing and not knowing.”

This ambiguous relationship between trauma and language will find its clearest expression in trauma narratives. According to Kali Tal, “[trauma] narratives are not primarily after-the-fact imitations of experiences they recount. Rather, the intimate connection between story and experience results from the structure of action itself” (1996: 19). Like Caruth, Tal observes that the stories recounted in trauma narratives are not meant to convey the subject’s experience of the past, but rather her inability to assimilate that experience into her self-definition, which consequently locates her in stasis. For this reason, trauma narratives such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988) and Bao Ninh’s novel reject familiar narrative conventions such as linearity, distinct causal relationships between events, and character development in order to textual-

ly reflect the operations—or what Tal calls the “structure of action”—of trauma, which include sensations of psychical/temporal dislocation (because the past and present have been collapsed into undifferentiated time) and immobilization.

Curiously, despite the tenuous link between language and trauma, language is ultimately a means by which recuperation from trauma becomes possible. As clinical studies have shown, the transcription of traumatic memory into linguistic form can effectively facilitate reparation and recovery for the survivor. Robinett’s essay, which uses Bao Ninh’s narrative as an example, attempts to demonstrate this point, but the premise upon which Robinett’s claim that “writing has played a role in recovery from trauma” (2007: 294) for the narrator and protagonist, Kien, is based is rather unconvincing; that is, Kien is able to reconcile with his traumatic memory because he finally realizes that he has survived in order to subsequently “perform some unnamed heavenly duty. A task that is sacred and noble but secret” (Ninh 2005: 45), which is the act of writing his war experience. For Robinett, that Kien “wrote because he had to write, not to publish. He had to think on paper” (Ninh 2005: 230) is further proof that Kien’s performance is fundamentally therapeutic. But as both theoretical and clinical scholars of trauma studies have consistently shown, healing from trauma cannot be achieved “in secret” by the individual herself. For recovery to take place, a traumatic memory that has otherwise “no social component . . . is not addressed to anybody . . . does not respond to anybody”; ultimately, “a solitary activity” must be transformed into “a social act” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 163) to become narrative memory that can be communicated and thereby reconnect the individual to the world again. In this regard, while I agree with Robinett’s assessment that the novel arrives at some sort of redemption in the end, my interpretation of how this is accomplished, which aligns the trauma of *Sorrow* with a narrative inclination familiar in postmodern literature, will fundamentally differ from hers.

### Narrative and the Embodiment of Trauma

Trauma narratives, according to Laurie Vickroy, “internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within

their underlying sensibilities and structures. They reveal many obstacles to communicating such experience: silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, disassociation, resistance, and repression, among others” (2002: 3). These qualities, moreover, depend on various stylistic strategies to insinuate the operations of unclaimed experiences, strategies that are often also apparent in postmodern literature. One such approach evident in *Sorrow* is the frequent and abrupt shifts between tenses. This device is used in Charlotte Delbo’s (1985) post-Auswich memoir to demonstrate the subject’s uncertain relationship with time; past and present are not neatly differentiated but are instead experienced simultaneously. In *Sorrow*, while much of Kien’s recollections suggest what Delbo terms “*mémoire intellectuelle*,” or memory that reworks raw impressions to allow articulation of a difficult experience, it is the instances of “*mémoire profonde*”—a storage of impressions that is passive rather than active, which functions as “the persistence of the past in its own perpetual present” (Delbo 1985: 170)—that suggest the subsistence of trauma structuring Kien’s memory. The following passage from *Sorrow* profoundly evinces this:

Since returning to Hanoi I’ve had to live with this parade of horrific memories, day after day, long night after long night. For how many years now?

For how many more years?

Often in the middle of a busy street, in broad daylight, I’ve suddenly become lost in a daydream. On smelling the stinking rotten meat I’ve suddenly imagined I was back crossing Hamburger Hill in 1972, walking over strewn corpses. The stench of death is so overpowering I have to stop in the middle of the pavement, holding my nose, while startled, suspicious people step around me, avoiding my mad stare.

In my bedroom, on many nights the helicopters attack overhead. The dreaded whump-whump-whump of their rotor blades bringing horror for us in the field. I curl up in defence against the expected vapour-streak and the howling of their rockets.

But the whump-whump-whump continues without the attack, and the helicopter images dissolve, and I see in its place a ceiling fan. Whump-whump-whump. (Ninh 2005: 41–42)



Unlike Delbo's memoir, however, in which both types of memories are deliberately assumed by the narrator to help her consciously manage the way she relates to past experiences, in *Sorrow* it is very often that the *mémoire profonde* overcoming Kien is sudden and unwanted. Unable to assimilate the harrowing experiences of war, Kien now lives in constant anxiety as he is made to encounter them over and over in the present. Mundane, routine activities (crossing a street) and familiar, everyday things (the ceiling fan) become invested with metonymic implications that could unexpectedly transport Kien back to the nightmare of war where he is compelled to relive horrendous moments such as being surrounded by dead bodies or attempting to evade bombardment by enemy helicopters. For Kien the war is clearly not over, as the use of the present tense throughout the passage implies. So arresting are his memories that the force they exert can drain the present of its reality.

Plot-wise, *Sorrow* does not follow a linear narrative whereby episodes interlink in cause-and-effect relationships to culminate in a conclusion. Instead, the novel comprises a series of vignettes that revolve around either Kien's present situation or the war memories that underscore his trauma. This, however, does not suggest that the narrative has no aim or direction; as Kien tells us, he writes in order to "expose the realities of war and to tear aside conventional images" (45) of this experience, images that are often highly romanticized. Additionally, Kien hopes "to touch readers' hearts, to move them with words of love and sorrow, to bring to life the electric moments" (51). But despite Kien's effort to impose some kind of order to his narrative—such as outlining a narrative sequence, deciding on the hero, and planning the words and actions of his characters—he finds that "the act of writing [always] blurs his neat designs, finally washing them away altogether, or blurs them so the lines become intermixed and sequences lose their order" (44). Most significant is how the act of writing denies Kien his desire to forget: when Kien first started his novel, his intention was "a post-war plot [focusing on] about-to-be-demobilized soldiers on the verge of returning to ordinary civilian life" (51). To his dismay, however, he soon discovered that "relentlessly, his pen disobeyed him. Each page revived one story of death after another and gradually the stories swirled back deep into the primitive jungles of war, quietly re-stoking his horrible furnace of war memories" (51).

Arguably, Kien is unable to write the story he wants because the identity corresponding to it—one that is located in the present and bears the promise of the future—remains unrealizable due to its refusal to claim an experience that has resulted in its becoming entrapped in the past. Instead, the act of writing is now both a symptom of Kien's trauma and a conduit through which it can resurface. The first instance is implied by the writing's refusal to "submit" to Kien's manipulations: disorganized, confused, and somewhat incoherent, the narrative not only reveals the troubled mind that has engendered it but serves as a textual mirror to Kien's life. At the same time, writing forces Kien to confront his refused memories. Events and especially people he once knew that he struggled to forget and repress now return to haunt him through his narrative. It is as if his decision to write has unwittingly unleashed the floodgate of traumatic memories, which now have a means to revisit Kien and compel recognition from him. The obsessive compulsion with which he puts pen to paper reveals the extent of the trauma that relentlessly pursues him and which he is no longer able to deny. For someone who has all his life "avoid[ed] reading anything about any war, the Vietnam war or any other great wars," Kien now finds himself unable to stop writing anything else except war stories" (52).

Over and over again, Kien would return to certain memories in his story, most prominently those involving people he had known: fellow soldiers, including his sweetheart, and their families, many of whom have perished in the war. As Kien acknowledges, "the spirits of all those killed in the war will remain with [him] beyond all consequences of the war" (57), beckoning him to continuously relate their tales because he had originally chosen to disavow their memory. Their stories, the novel informs the reader, "came from beyond the grave and told of their lives beyond death" (82). At one point in the novel, the leader of the Missing in Action team tells Kien, "If you can't identify them by name we'll be burdened by their deaths for the rest of our lives" (83); for Kien, however, such closure is unavailable to him. Despite vividly recalling the names of his dead comrades, Kien is unable to exorcise them from his memory. Indeed, Renny Christopher's observation that "Kien's stories are themselves ghostlike" (2001: 79) aptly captures the symbiotic con-

nection between ghosts, traumatic memory, and narrative in *Sorrow*, for Kien's tale is not merely about ghosts, but is itself a ghostly entity:

These flimsy pages represented Kien's past; the lines told stories that were sometimes clear, but most were at best obscure and as vague and pale as twilight. They told stories from the precariously fine border dividing life from death, blurring the line itself and finally erasing it. Ages and times were mixed in confusion, as were peace and war. (Ninh 2005: 100)

Like ghosts, Kien's stories are the reanimation of those who died, but in a way that never amounts to a clear picture, and thus become indistinct in terms of whether these stories are recounting the past or present (as reinforced by the constant shifts in tenses). Here, Bliss Cua Lim's notion of "noncontemporaneity," which describes the temporal significance of specters in ghost stories, serves equally well for characterizing trauma. In fact, for Lim, narratives about ghosts are often invariably about trauma as well, for like ghosts, "traumatic events precisely trouble the boundaries of past, present and future, and cannot be written back to the complacency of a homogenous empty time" until they are acknowledged or (re)claimed (2001: 288). It is therefore unsurprising that many trauma texts are also ghost stories.

The various formal conventions discussed in the preceding paragraphs culminate in the novel's absolute disregard for clear chapter divisions. Although this is not an unusual practice in literature, its deployment in Bao's work particularly helps in reinforcing the textual embodiment of trauma. It suggests a stream of consciousness that has no sequence or organization and thus blurs and even erases the lines separating memories to form instead a shapeless, monstrous entity. Clearly, this formal choice is meant to both suggest and mirror a consciousness that has been imperiled by trauma. We are also told that the novel in its final form replicates exactly the condition of Kien's manuscript, whose pages are also unnumbered (Ninh 2005: 106). As such, rather than following a chronology, *Sorrow* encompasses Kien's "forty years" *all at once* (Ninh 2005: 212). Past and present collapse into a single, perpetual constituent that is Kien's postwar life, and as such, confirms the postulation that "traumatic experience/memory is, in a sense,

timeless. It is not transformed into a story, placed in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end. If it can be told at all, it is still a (re)experience” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 177). Interestingly, that Kien views his act of writing as part of his duty, albeit a final one, as a soldier (Ninh 2005: 45) corresponds in some ways with this “(re)experience” from which trauma victims suffer.

### After the End

Quite early in the novel, we are told that Kien is obligated to write because he perceives it as a “sacred duty” (Ninh 2005: 51) of indeterminate nature and objective, since it is also ultimately “secret” (45). For Robinett (2007), Kien’s acceptance of his writing as a responsibility he must fulfill implies a reconciliation with his horrific past, and possibly his healing from trauma. Writing, in other words, may function as a catalyst for Kien’s repressed memories, but it also helps to exorcise his ghosts—a view that gains further resonance when Kien realizes that “Now that he had written it he had no use for it. Whatever devils he had needed to rid himself of had gone. The novel was the ash from his exorcism of devils. Kien had written for the sake of writing, not to publish” (Ninh 2005: 105). Robinett frames her reading of Kien’s realization against Judith Herman’s clinical study of trauma recovery and interprets his claim as reflective of the third stage in the process, which is finding out what the “survivor’s mission” is (Herman 1997: 207). Robinett notes with interest Herman’s use of “military-religious language” (Robinett 2007: 295) as corresponding with Kien’s own declaration of how writing is “his last adventure [and] duty as a soldier” (Ninh 2005: 45) and that his narrative contains some “mystical logic” (81) that resists his imposition of order on it.

While I agree with Robinett that the narrative does attain some form of transcendence over trauma, I am unconvinced by her argument that this circumstance relies on an alleged heavenly mission underscoring Kien’s motivation to write. Although it is understandable why Kien needs to convince himself of such a reason to write, it should not be taken at face value, because it is ultimately a conviction born out of desperation. For me, the reparation achieved via the act of writing by Kien

has to do with making trauma “thinkable.” According to Dori Laub, a profound and complex aspect of a traumatic experience is how it locates the subject within a paradoxical position of being both witness and insider. Such a position obviously compromises the entire project of witnessing due to the fact that the subject is situated in the “very circumstance of being inside the event” (Laub 1995: 66) and yet must be able to “step outside” that frame as if unaffected to bear witness to that event. As Laub understands it, the “loss of capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well” (67). But through the act of writing, a survivor begins to recover her position as self-witnessing, as well as her identity and place in history. In contrast to Derrida’s notion of a witness who is always already blind because she “substitutes narrative for perception” (Derrida 1988: 104), trauma survivors must enact such a performance precisely to acknowledge traumatic memory and thereby reclaim their ability to properly see once again. In this regard, Kien’s manuscript undoes not only the denial of his dead comrades’ memory but also his own annihilation by the progress of history. To put it differently, Kien writes to insert his identity back into history. His manuscript serves as a testimony to the facticity of his aliveness and the role he played in a momentous episode of the nation that postwar Vietnam is gradually erasing from collective memory. Toward the end of the narrative, Kien may disappear from the story, and hence from history, but his manuscript will remain as witness to his having fought and survived a terrible war.

Furthermore, that Kien writes “not to publish” does not mean, as Robinett seems to think, that he does not want his narrative to be read. Kien is not merely performing writing, but is also telling a story, and thus invariably requires *an audience*, without which his identity and history would remain unverified and unrealized. Moreover, as noted earlier in my discussion, recovery from trauma can be stimulated by transforming memory that is otherwise “inflexible . . . invariable . . . and has no social component” into “a social act” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 165) and by reversing its effect on the self’s “loss of confidence in the surrounding tissue of family and community” (Erikson

1995: 198), so that the survivor may (re)establish connection with her world once again. It is arguable that such an end underscores Kien's writing, for why else would he leave his manuscript with someone, instead of destroying it?

It begs the question, however, as to the individual to whom Kien entrusts his work: a mute female neighbor who is known, and utterly devoted, to him. In fact, the unnamed narrator is puzzled that Kien would choose to leave his sole possession with her: "That was the one last enigma bequeathed to us by the author" (Ninh 2005: 100). In my view, this enigma can be illuminated by comparing Bao's mute with those often featured in the works of another Southeast Asian writer, Lee Kok Liang. According to John Kwan-Terry, the mutes in Lee's stories represent, on one level, the "acute awareness of individual powerlessness. . . . Through its invocation of states of helpless silence, loneliness, deformity and alienation, it becomes an ontological definition of man's relationship with his inner self and his relationship with the outer organized world" (1984: 153). When applied to *Sorrow*, this interpretation suggests that a profound, metonymic connection exists between the mute girl and Kien: in different but related ways, both individuals experience powerlessness and suffer from a deformity (physical in the case of the girl, and psychical in the case of Kien) that renders them socially othered (recall Kien's experience of people suspiciously "step[ping] around me, avoiding my mad stare" [Ninh 2005: 42]). Kien's traumatized position in this regard is akin to that of being mute, because he has been rendered silent by a postwar Vietnam whose focus on peace and nation building inadvertently ends up discriminating against individuals like him—a constant reminder of the nation's still recent notorious past. Such a situation invariably reinforces Kien's inability to adjust to a new life (Ninh 2005:67), leading him to constant brooding and alcoholism, and causing him frequent lapses into hysteria—all of which would evidently augment his sense of alienation further. In psychoanalytic parlance, it seems that Kien's "known environment" no longer knows, *or has chosen not to recognize*, him (Mitchell 1988: 123), thus effectively deepening his anxiety over becoming erased by history. Hence, Kien considers the mute a worthy recipient of his story because of the affinity they share in being voiceless. She would not only understand the loneliness and re-

jection about which he writes but would also be able to empathize well with the protagonist and thus grow to cherish the narrative even more.

What also bewilders the unnamed narrator with regard to Kien's choice of the mute is the fact that she "cannot read" properly (Ninh 2005: 100). Ironically, however, it is arguably this limitation that also makes the mute the ideal reader of, and therefore witness to, Kien's story. The disavowal of familiar and standard narrative conventions in Kien's manuscript would suggest that typical reading practices—identifying a linear and progressive storyline to pursue, establishing causes and effects to form a complete picture, adopting a point of view, and so forth—cannot be suitably applied to it. Instead, to appreciate Kien's story, one must forgo reading "properly" and assume the position of an empathetic, devoted reader. In this regard, the mute perfectly fits the role. Committing his manuscript to the mute girl also suggests Kien's effort at transforming his trauma into a social act. In seeking a reader, Kien conceivably hopes to recalibrate his narrative burden into something sharable so that his memory will no longer traumatize him, but instead help reconnect him back to his community again. Considered in this light, Kien's disappearance can be interpreted as symbolizing his potential liberation from trauma to live a life of fulfillment, for having written his manuscript, he can now bid farewell to the experience that he has finally claimed.

## Conclusion

*Sorrow* intimates that Kien does achieve a degree of redemption from writing his trauma. Toward the end of the novel, he will disappear and his manuscript will be taken over for consolidation by an unnamed narrator. This strategy of unexpectedly replacing a narrator with another, usually unnamed one is usually associated with postmodern literature (whose most famous example would be Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* [1990]) as part of its ludic effect, but in *Sorrow* its deployment promotes an altogether distinct significance: to encourage another interpretative layer of narrative redemption. Before proffering this perspective, I want to briefly consider Robinett's criticism against this sudden intrusion of an editorial presence. Characterizing this device as

narrative bad faith, she argues that this unnamed “I” attempts to usurp Kien’s story and align it instead with Vietnam’s postwar political ideology. She asserts:

“I” misreads (perhaps deliberately) Kien’s account, in an attempt to bring it in line with the established governmental view of “the painful but glorious days” of the war when “all of us were young, very pure, and very sincere.” As readers, we are not deceived by “I”’s move to co-opt Kien’s account of his experience; rather, it serves to authenticate both Kien’s experiences and to strengthen the connection we have made between traumatic experience and the narrative. (2007: 308; inset quotes from *Sorrow* 217).

Robinett stakes her claim on the fact that “I,” after failing to “rearrange the manuscript pages into chronological order, to make the manuscript read like the kind of book I was familiar with” (Ninh 2005: 214), adopts “a more casual approach” (215) in his editorial work that will subsequently result in identifying the reader not so much with Kien and his story but with “I”’s mediated version of them (Robinett 2007: 307). Underlying such a strategy, as Robinett’s interpretation further suggests, is the editor’s attempt to shift narrative attention from Kien to himself, but one that allegedly unravels because “as readers, we are not deceived.” Robinett’s position is unconvincing on at least two counts. First, she seems to ignore, probably unintentionally, the kinds of sociopolitical pressure Bao Ninh was under when working on his novel. *Sorrow* was written during a rather ambiguous period in Vietnam’s postwar history: in the early 1980s, the Communist government considerably relaxed its stance on the arts to promote the “Renovation Literature” movement. Writers were encouraged to be honest about and critical of what they perceived as ideological flaws and to thereby shift their work’s emphasis from “collective life to those centered around the life of the individual” (Healy 2000: 46) and to take “a fresh look at important issues in the past” (47). But by 1987 the government seemed to have reneged on its commitment: writers who had heeded its invitation to be critical suddenly became targeted for discipline. Considering the sociopolitical situation during which Bao Ninh was writing his novel, his use of the postmodern literary technique of switching narrators in order to end the novel on a more positive note



is arguably a careful, tactful way of evading censorship and punishment while still getting across his revelation of the excruciating horrors and loss engendered by the Vietnam War.

Related to the preceding argument, and to establish what I take to be Bao's purpose in writing the novel, is my second criticism against Robinett's reading: that she fails to understand the significance of the "meta-fictionally shifting set of narrative frames" operating in *Sorrow* (Liparulo 2003: 72, emphasis mine). The manuscript contained in the novel may be Kien's, but *Sorrow* is ultimately Bao Ninh's story. As much as the text embodies Kien's trauma, it is also a profound reflection of Bao's struggle with war memories. While I will not go so far as to argue that the unnamed narrator is incontrovertibly the empirical author himself, I cannot dismiss the possibility of such an affiliation, especially because it resonates with Bao's declared purpose in writing the novel. As Bao Ninh states in a conversation with the Korean writer Hwang Suk-young, the intended message of *Sorrow* is that peace must characterize the twenty-first century to offset the horror and tragedy that characterized the previous one (Hwang and Ninh 2001: 434). The narrative, to put it differently, must be appreciated for its redemptive, optimistic propensities despite its exposition on war and trauma. It is in this regard that the function of the novel's unnamed narrator becomes imperative. According to Vickroy, an important indicator of the degree to which resolution has been reached in a trauma narrative is the level of optimism offered at the end of the story (2002: 7). This, she argues, is an integral quality of the genre toward which many writers strive, because "their greatest reward is a sense that their work has helped heal or inform their readers" (20). For me, the metafictional shift in Bao's work is meant to achieve precisely such an effect. The introduction of an unnamed narrator not only adds another witness to Kien's story, but the fact that that the unnamed narrator will eventually consolidate and publish the manuscript will further strengthen Kien's reconnection with the world and reentry into history. His "casual approach," which Robinett misunderstands but which the narrator actually explains, has to do with limiting considerably his editorial intervention in order to let Kien's story flow "in harmony with the reality it described" (Ninh 2005: 216).

That the unnamed narrator is identified primarily by the first-person subjective pronoun to possibly indicate a correspondence with Bao Ninh himself is implied in the generally optimistic and conciliatory tone with which the narrative concludes. This tone, however, is carefully balanced with an empathetic regard the narrator shows toward Kien. As he ruminates, “Our lives may not be very happy, and they might well be sinful. But now we are living the most beautiful lives we could ever have hoped for, because it is a life in peace. Surely this was what the *real author* of this novel intended to say” (217, my emphasis). Indeed, just as Kien is both a character modeled after the author *and* a cipher symbolizing those who survived the war but not necessarily its corresponding trauma, the unnamed narrator is simultaneously a witness who will testify to one soldier’s memory *and* Bao Ninh himself. Indeed, the phrase “real author” is playfully telling, and could equally mean Kien or Bao Ninh himself. If we consider the latter, the quoted passage would then also signify Bao’s capacity, following Van der Kolk and Van der Hart’s view, to finally “step outside” his traumatic memory and transform it into a social act. In the end, despite the “pessimism” (217) that otherwise permeates the story, the unnamed narrator decides instead to, borrowing a phrase from Duong Thu Huong, “sing louder than the bombs” (quoted in Blodgett 2001: 32) by punctuating the narrative on a celebratory note. Rather than “sublime sorrow,” the narrator chooses to focus instead on what is pure, sincere, and good in the novel, such as “love . . . friendship . . . comradeship, those human bonds which had all helped us overcome the thousand sufferings of the war” (217).

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