

論文

To the Bottom of the Lake: Trauma and Narrative in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*

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要 約

本論は、1994年に発表されたティム・オブライエンの *In the Lake of the Woods* において、ヴェトナム戦争のトラウマ的記憶が、父親の自死の記憶と撚り合わせられながら、主人公ジョンの人生の様々な局面で噴出するさまを読解し、トラウマと仮構された因果性、及びそれを言語的に構築するナラティブの関係について考察している。オブライエンはこの作品において湖（や、そのアナロジーとしての鏡）を主人公ジョンのトラウマを照射し、彼の世界像を構成するような暴力的な根源として描いているが、本論ではそのような湖＝鏡の説話的機能に注目し、作品において示唆される主人公や主人公の妻の湖の方への失踪を反復脅迫的なものと捉えた。湖＝鏡は現実を映す表象機能のアレゴリーともなっており、オブライエンは鏡の前で奇術をする行為をフィクションの執筆行為になぞらえている。同様に、ジョンは自分（たち）を狂気から守るために、しばしば得意とする奇術を戦場で披露することで、把握不可能な現実の暴力の巨大さに対し防衛的に額縁を設定し、偽の「理解可能な」暴力の因果性を築きあげようとした。

父の自殺は、ジョンをして自殺した父を殺したいという矛盾した欲望を抱かしめる。父という近しい存在の内なる暴力性はジョンの世界観に深く根を張る見えない脅威となるのだ。彼の奇術への傾倒は、シンボリックに父親を殺す行為の想像的な反復であり、ジョンはそれを通じて偶発的で統御不可能な暴力を彼自身の小さな世界の内に閉じ込める。作品において可能性として提示されているジョンによる妻キャシーの殺害というプロットについては、ジョンによるキャシーと父の同一視という解釈を示した。

様々なナラティブによる言語複合体として構成されたこの作品を通じて、オブライエンはトラウマの異種混交性と、フィクションと「現実」の相互浸透性を表現したと言える。

O brilliant kids, frisk with your dog,
 Fondle your shells and sticks, bleached
 By time and the elements; but there is a line
 You must not cross nor ever trust beyond it
 Spry cordage of your bodies to caresses
 Too lichen-faithful from too wide a breast.
 The bottom of the sea is cruel.
 — Hart Crane, “Voyage I”

The Father emerges from his own death.

— Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, “The Freudian Subject, from Politics to Ethics”

Introduction: Around the Lake

Over the course of his career as a writer, stretching from his debut work *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973) till the most recent *July, July* (2002), Tim O’Brien has unflinchingly invested his ingenious literary imagination on one event and place, that is, the war in Vietnam, in which he participated as a young soldier from 1969 to 1970. Whether fiction or non-fiction, O’Brien’s descriptions of the atrocities that occurred there are so compulsive and recurrent—though not repetitious—that they function as an unchangeable center around which all of his writings slowly revolve. His persistency is particularly outstanding, given that many other soldier-authors who had, as Tobey C. Herzog points out, once devoted themselves to write war novels either moved away from the subject of Vietnam or more likely ceased to write at all.¹⁾ While American Vietnam narratives mostly exhausted their sources when the soldier-authors or journalists wrote down their experiences, O’Brien never ceases to ask the fundamental question: “What was the Vietnam War?” The trajectory of his long struggles as a writer of the Vietnam War shows the difficulty of speaking about Vietnam amid an ever-shifting phase of reality in the present. His exploration of the traumatic past strongly reverberates with the collective memory of both physical and psychological pains, which, as years pass, becomes submerged in daily lives. O’Brien’s ethical engagement with the representation of war urges the reader to (re)imagine and return to the place and moment of terror. Indeed, he often deplores the collective oblivion of Vietnam: “We’ve adjusted too well. In our pursuit of peaceful, ordinary lives, too many of us have lost touch with the horror of war. . . . That’s sad. We should remember. Not in a crippling, debilitating way, but rather a form of affirmation. . . . It would seem that the memories of soldiers should serve at least in a modest way, as a restraint on national bellicosity. . . . We’ve all adjusted. The whole country. And I fear that we are back where we started. I wish we were more troubled.”²⁾

¹⁾ Tobey C. Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7.

²⁾ Tim O’Brien, “We’ve Adjusted Too Well,” in *The Wounded Generation: America after Vietnam*, ed. A. D. Horne (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1981), 205–7.

O'Brien's works cannot be firmly placed within the tradition of war novels. His narrative is not predominantly concerned about the facts of the war, so much so that neither historical reflection nor direct description of battle scenes is given a central role in his novels.³⁾ In O'Brien's works, violence of the war is rarely reflected upon the body in the form of bruises, broken arms, or legs, mutilation and so on; instead, it often permeates into the sufferer's lives, affects one's behavior with a bizarre intensity, and often transforms one's life into a tapestry of schizophrenic actions. In other words, the uniqueness of O'Brien's works lies in his treatment of the war as the intangible extension of our life rather than as an immediate threat to our body. We see a series of metamorphosed violence in the form of personal obsessions in his various works: Paul Berlin's extraordinary search for Cacciato in *Going After Cacciato* (1979); William Cowling's interest in the underworld in *The Nuclear Age* (1985); and Professor Chippering's strange love in *Tomcat in Love* (1998). All of these obsessions show that the war goes on even in the place where no visible fighting takes place and that the traces of violence surface anytime and anywhere as symptoms.

O'Brien's expression of violence becomes even more radical and complex because of the role of narrative. His narrative often assumes an ambiguous indecisiveness in a way that blurs the distinction between the real and the fictive. In some lectures and essays, O'Brien manifestly states that the language of fiction can be more apt to telling the truth. The postmodernist premise that the truth is relational is thus rarely more intrinsic than in the case of O'Brien, who does not assume reality as being separable from the intricate complexity of cultural, psychological, and linguistic agencies.

Rather than categorize his fictions by some big words such as war and violence, I would be more inclined to call attentions to a particular image that repetitively appears in many of his works. A lake. Regardless of the difference of situations, contexts and plots, the imaginative topos of the lake has great significance in O'Brien's entire oeuvre. Take "Speaking of Courage"—a story collected in *The Things They Carried* (1990)—for example. O'Brien here dramatizes the difficulty of translating war experiences into a coherent narrative through a description of a young soldier, Norman Bowker, who has just returned from Vietnam to his small hometown in Iowa. Norman cannot feel at ease with his family, since he notices as he returns that it is very difficult to put his experiences into words. Without being able to find any "place to go," he spends time for an aimless drive.⁴⁾ He circles the lake in his hometown twelve times in his car. Through the clockwise movement, he exhibits his confused inner geography and temporality. Norman feels unhinged from the universal passage of time as well as from the universal extension of space. His sense of guilt derives from the fact that he could not rescue Kiowa, a Native American soldier who died miserably in Vietnam. The resemblance of the sounds of Kiowa and Iowa seems not coincidental, since

³⁾ In his speech given at Brown University in 1999, O'Brien clearly states that "War stories aren't always about war, per se." Tim O'Brien, "Writing Vietnam: Tim O'Brien, President's Lecture," <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WritingVietnam/obrienpreface.html> (accessed November 29, 2008).

⁴⁾ Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Broadway, 1990), 137.

it represents his struggle with the irretrievability of past and his inevitable return to the scene of the decisive event through his inner geography.

Driving aimlessly, Norman thinks of the ways to recount his experiences to people in the little peaceful town, especially to his father, only to then recognize its astonishing difficulty. The little city in Iowa is in an order that is totally dissonant with the chaos of battlegrounds in Vietnam. The city with “the sanitary conveniences,” for example, does not appear to leave any room to accommodate a story about “a goddamn *shit* field” where shit is literally everywhere.⁵⁾ Norman is afraid that the badges and medals he received for his achievements in the war would speak for his “courage” in Vietnam instead of his account. He feels embarrassed by the foreignness of his own “courage” and recognizes that speaking of “courage” is a completely different experience from being courageous in the field.⁶⁾ Norman is forced to be silent because of the inevitable codification of his narrative.

“Speaking of Courage” was originally published separately in 1976. The fact that O’Brien circled back to the same scene with a revised version more than ten years later implies that the circular movement is not only Norman’s obsession but also O’Brien’s.⁷⁾ Indeed, as the narrator “Tim O’Brien” in *Things* admits, O’Brien heavily draws on his own hometown, Worthington at Minnesota, for the description of the story.⁸⁾ Creating a link between the otherwise irrelevant towns in the Midwest, O’Brien associates his efforts in inventing his war narrative with Norman’s struggles to represent his trauma. The significance of Norman’s obsessive driving, however, is not limited to the plot of the particular story: it is, in fact, O’Brien’s own driving, too. As Timmerman points out, we see a similar circulatory movement around the lake in *Combat Zone*, in which the protagonist “I” just being drafted thinks: “The war and my person seemed like twins as I went around the town’s lake.”⁹⁾ In *Northern Lights* (1975), a novel mostly embellished with watery images, both the Minnesotan lakes and Pilney’s pond are places for intertextuality as well as for sexual symbolism.¹⁰⁾ In *Cacciato*, the lake constitutes a central place of trauma; in the middle of a battleground in

⁵⁾ Ibid., 150, 145.

⁶⁾ See Maria S. Bonn, “Can Stories Save Us? Tim O’Brien and the Efficacy of the Text,” *Critique* 36, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 2–15.

⁷⁾ For other details and other intertextual echoes of “Speaking of Courage,” see Mark A. Heberle, *A Trauma Artist: Tim O’Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 204.

⁸⁾ A vignette simply titled “Notes” in *Things* records “O’Brien’s” reflection on his experiences of writing the two versions of the story about Norman’s circular drive. Quite self-referentially, the narrator comments upon the symbolic effect of the lake in his story by acknowledging that he “uses the lake as a nucleus around which the story would orbit” (158).

⁹⁾ John H. Timmerman, “Tim O’Brien and the Art of the True War Story: ‘Night March’ and ‘Speaking of Courage,’” *Twentieth Century Literature* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 100–14; Tim O’Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (New York: Delacorte, 1973), 20.

¹⁰⁾ While the lake in the work is closely associated with Addie in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Pilney’s pond is a place of masculinity and echoes Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories. See Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 69–83; Patrick A. Smith, *Tim O’Brien: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood, 2005), 48–49.

Vietnam, puddles and muddy ground are filled with a number of dead bodies. Even in *July, July*, which only indirectly touches upon the theme of war, the lake remains a mythical dark topos because of its ability to carry the image of death. A dentist Harmon is drowned in the lake during a tryst with Ellie, who survives and later suffers from the sense of “lake in her lungs.”¹¹⁾ Thus, O’Brien tenaciously uses the lake as a location that evokes the sense of violence and death in his works.

In the Lake of the Woods most exemplarily presents the lake as a psychological sphere into which all the imageries abovementioned flow and interflow. As a work of fiction that comprises psychoanalytic speculation, *Lake* exhaustively explores the problem of both personal and collective trauma.¹²⁾ The obvious intertextuality of the work makes it something not wholly O’Brien’s product. Rather, the work is thrown into political, psychoanalytical, juridical, and communal discourse without losing its core image of the lake around which O’Brien weaves his fictional language. This self-referential structure of the novel allows for an interpretation of it to be easy and difficult at the same time. While the narrative of analysis within the novel provides contexts and background and thus works as guidance to the reader, its immanent plurality constitutes points of resistance against any narrative of critical language. My following exploration of the relation between traumatic events and fictional narrative in the novel does not claim any absolute truth behind the novel’s plot; rather, it aims at examining the mechanics of secrecy and revelation that the novel thematizes as an allegorical structure of writing.

1. The Sphere of Father and the Origin of Violence

At the beginning of the novel, John Wade has just lost the Minnesota Democratic primary for US senator. The revelation of John’s commitment to the massacre in the hamlet of Thuan Yen, an event known in the US as “the My Lai Massacre,” had decisively affected the result of the election. Depressed by his failure to become a politician, John Wade retreats with his beautiful wife, Kathy, to an isolated cabin in the lake country of northern Minnesota. The opening scene is immersed with silence; John, despite his situation, seems to enjoy the private life in the quiet place. One night, however, Kathy mysteriously disappears. The narrator presents several possibilities to the reader to explain her disappearance but does not give any decisive account. John barely remembers anything except some uncertain fragments of memories about the night. It is only the next morning that he is fully aware of her absence. One of the “hypotheses” that the narrator poses argues that John killed Kathy, while another suggests the possibility that Kathy crossed the lake by boat. John searches for Kathy with the help of local police and residents but fails to find any clue for weeks. The focus of the novel

¹¹⁾ Tim O’Brien, *July, July* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 208.

¹²⁾ Frequent allusions to Judith Herman’s representative study *Trauma and Recovery* should be particularly noted. Since her text quotes O’Brien’s *Things* in three places, we can conceive that *Lake* is a response to Herman’s critical analysis of trauma. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

oscillates between the story concerning the event and John's psychological development from his childhood to the present, although even at the end of the novel the relation between Kathy's disappearance and John's past remains obscure. Finally, John leaves the shore of the lake on his motorboat for the other side, which is in part of Canada.

The novel consists of distinctly different four types of narratives that are randomly arrayed throughout the text. These narratives cast lights in four different ways upon the central mystery of the novel, that is, the sudden disappearance of Kathy. While each of the narratives makes an attempt to provide an account of Kathy's disappearance from each different perspective, none of them can make a comprehensive analysis about the mystery. Kathy remains an invisible center where any attempt to explain the whole mystery fails. O'Brien emphasizes the relativity of reality by comparing four different narratives to four different angles of light shone onto the surface of the lake: "It is by the nature of the angle, sun to earth, that the seasons are made, and that the waters of the lake change color by the season, blue going to gray and then to white and then back again to blue. The water receives color. The water returns it. The angle shapes reality."¹³⁾ The change and transience of the colors on the surface of the lake represent the susceptibility of our cognizance to the external conditions that form a ground for truth. While the lake accommodates four different types of narratives on its surface, it retains its hidden sites within itself, never allowing penetrable perspective from the outside. As a result, only the effects of reflection are perceptible on the surface of the novel. Many events in John's life exhibit this symptom; in fact, the reader can surmise John's traumatic experience from the fragments of episodes that are scattered throughout the novel. And yet, it is impossible to describe what his trauma is a posteriori. For, at the center of his experience, John embraces a sense of loss; as Cathy Caruth says, traumatic experiences are always foreign even to the sufferer.¹⁴⁾

While John's trauma has its essential origin in his experiences in Vietnam, the text suggests that we should trace the trajectory of his melancholic grief further back to his relation with his father in his youth. The intensity of his ambivalent feelings of both love and hate for his father is manifestly shown through several testimonial comments made by his mother, Eleanor K. Wade. Whereas she attests that "John loved his father a lot," her comments often reveal the negative side of his father's existence to John: "His father made him feel—oh, made him feel—Oh—maybe overweight."¹⁵⁾ Indeed, his father's overshadowing presence in his life constitutes an inescapable reality of psychological restraint. The most important issue regarding John's relation to his father is his symbolic

¹³⁾ Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 288.

¹⁴⁾ In her *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth explicates the anonymity of traumatic experience: "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on." Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

¹⁵⁾ O'Brien, *Lake*, 10.

patricide through his repetitive acts of cutting his father's necktie. John's simulation of murder through these acts is a manifestation of his hate for and anxiety about obscure violence, which seems to have determined his father's life-and-death problem. John wants to reach the origin of the primal scene of violence by performing the very violence that repetitively causes psychological pains for his father. John's emulative transgression of the law exposes the violent nature in the very act of identifying the origin of violence. Visualizing the invisible violence through repetitive assault on the symbolic object not only tells us about his timeless fetishism but also depicts his resistance against the temporality.

When John reaches the age of fourteen, however, his alcoholic father hangs himself in reality. The event urges him to embrace an impossible desire for killing his dead father:

At the funeral he wanted to kill everybody who was crying and everybody who wasn't. He wanted to take a hammer and crawl into the casket and kill his father for dying. But he was helpless. He didn't know where to start.¹⁶⁾

John's distinction between imagination and reality that he has barely maintained through the symbolic acts is suddenly invalidated by the real death of his father. Instead of feeling sad, John becomes infuriated by his own inability to control the real world. It is only after his father's death that John becomes aware that his father's alcoholism caused his death. Henceforth, secrecy of others, which is to him an uncontrollable reality, becomes his obsession. He tries "to pretend that his father was not truly dead," and begins to construct his "father" in the world of his fantasy.¹⁷⁾ John continues to reproduce his "father" by pretending that his father is not dead. But such a habit of make-believe makes John feel that his father does not "stop dying."¹⁸⁾ In the depths of melancholy, John cannot help but re-experience his father's death because he is unable to comprehend "what it is he has lost."¹⁹⁾ This otherness of the other, in fact, does not come from the absolute sense of foreignness but always arises from one's feelings of intimacy and insufficiency in one's relationship with the other. While, as Julia Kristeva says, the depressed person inevitably possesses "an aggressiveness toward the lost object," which takes the form of the tense ambivalence of love and hate, such emotional reactions are concomitant with one's misrecognition of the psychological distance separating the one from the other.²⁰⁾ Therefore, internalization is inevitable for both the feelings of love and hate, even if it brings aggressiveness, and even if the lost object delimits one's relation to the other because of its inherent narcissism. The autonomous mental

¹⁶⁾ Ibid., 14.

¹⁷⁾ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸⁾ Ibid., 15, 42.

¹⁹⁾ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholy," in *General Psychological Theory*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 166.

²⁰⁾ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 11.

activities that foster both formulations and deformulations in terms of one's relationship with the other disrupt one's senses of reality and temporality. The death of John's father thus does not mean an end to his relationship with his father; rather, it causes him to feel even more obsessive with his ideal figure of the "father."

John's twofold desire of loving and killing is reminiscent of the Freudian theory of psychological dynamics between the pleasure principle and the death drive. In his "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud describes his observation of a child at the age of one and a half. The child is well trained as a "good boy" in the norm of Western society so that he represses his desire, for instance, to touch his mother when she is absent. Freud notes, "He never cried when his mother left him for a few hours."²¹ However, a symptom of the boy's fear and anxiety can be perceived in his play:

The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive "o-o-o-o." He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful "da" ["there"]. This, then, was the complete game—disappearance and return.²²

In this play, the child instantly creates the pleasure of "da" by producing (or rather, pretending to produce) his mother's disappearance by his own hands. Since the child is in the pre-symbolic stage, the tactile sense is very conducive to forming his *Weltanschauung*, or "world view"; in fact, for the child at this age, his mother's disappearance would not be very different from her death, given that both events would simply mean his physical isolation from her. Though it is seemingly strange that the child through his play chooses to make himself uncomfortable, he can find stronger pleasure in seeing the objects moving at the edge of the realm of his sight than looking at things that are stably existent. The "complete game" that he invents makes him confident about his ability to have control over the world. A twinned phenomenon of "disappearance and return" creates a sense of certainty and completeness in his mind because of its structural formulation firmly wedged by a beginning and an end, that is to say, the formulation of story. The completeness of his play thus helps him to dispel the anxiety about his mother's real disappearance.

The child's defensive fiction-making against the reality in the Freudian depiction of the anti-pleasure principle echoes back to John's habit of cutting his father's necktie. By utilizing the metonymic formulation, John constructs his fictional world in which his father would never disappear or die. It is important to note that John's habit of cutting and restoring his father's necktie precedes the traumatic event of his father's death, since the precedence of

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1990), 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

fiction over reality solidifies the false causality between his trick and his father's death, authorizing once and for all a pervasive vision of reality. The question of reality for John thus becomes a question of how he can believe his own fiction. Restoring his father's necktie in a way represents his ability to construct his view of the world through fiction. John does "the tricks in his mind" at his father's death and develops a habit of conversing with his father in his imagination: "they'd talk for a while, quietly, catching up on things, like cutting a tie and restoring it whole."²³⁾ John's addiction to the magic thus becomes a supplement to his irretrievable loss of his father.²⁴⁾

The vicarious nature of John's trauma suggests how the violence functions as an agency that simultaneously establishes and disrupts his relationship with his father. Since the sense of intimacy arises only from John's internalization of the "fort-da" system where John fictively impersonalizes himself into the entity of his father, the intense reality of violence for John is importantly related to the sphere of his "father." Violence and intimacy are thus not two polar extremities for John; instead, violence never ceases to assume intimate immediacy for him. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek describes how a person's "fantasy" mediates the desire of the Other: "Fantasy appears ... to the unbearable enigma of the desire of the Other, or the lack in the Other; but it is at the same time fantasy itself which, so to speak, provides the co-ordinates of our desire—which constructs the frame enabling us to desire something."²⁵⁾ The epistemological "frame" makes objects of desire not only visible but also compliable so that one can access the objectified otherness. In John's case, his hobby of magic is an important device for his "frame" in which he creates his tactile sense of "reality." John's mother attests that John "used to practice down in the basement, just stand in front of that old mirror of his and do tricks for hours and hours."²⁶⁾ In order to defy any contingency in the world, he tries to limit his world to within the frame of the "old mirror" where everything can be controlled by his own will. He thus satisfies his desire through this "frame": "The mirror made things better. The mirror made his father smile all the time."²⁷⁾ As Timothy Melley appropriately points out, John "simply internalizes the image of the mirror in which he witnesses his own capacity for deception and control, until eventually he conceives of his memory as a creative, fictional power and not a faithful record of events."²⁸⁾ John's internalized mirror thus functions as a screen where his "fantasy"

²³⁾ O'Brien, *Lake*, 31, 32.

²⁴⁾ Why is the necktie a particular place where John finds his object-cathexis? In *Interpreting Dreams*, Freud comments upon the symbolic meaning of the necktie in dreams: "In men's dreams, the necktie often symbolizes the penis, presumably not only because it is longitudinally extended, hangs down and typifies the male sex but also because a man can choose it at his discretion—a freedom that in respect of the actual object behind the symbol nature withholds." Sigmund Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, trans. J. A. Underwood (New York: Penguin, 2006), 369.

²⁵⁾ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 118.

²⁶⁾ O'Brien, *Lake*, 25.

²⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁸⁾ Timothy Melley, "Postmodern Amnesia: Trauma and Forgetting in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*" *Contemporary Literature* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 119.

is projected: “He felt calm and safe with the big mirror behind his eyes.”²⁹⁾ John believes that even “happiness” can be crafted from the mirror.³⁰⁾

John cannot see the world without this internalized mirror. His desire to become a politician, for one, is in fact a part of his more general desire to control things. When he is still a student at the University of Minnesota, John talks with Kathy, who is at the time his girlfriend, about his future plan:

“Sounds fine,” she said, “but what's it all for?”

“For?”

“I mean, *why*?”

John hesitated. “Because—you know—because it's what I want.”

“Which is what?”

“Just the usual, I guess. Change things. Make things happen.”³¹⁾

His desire of changing things or making things happen exhibits how he conceives of the world, himself, and the relation between them, within the protected framework of his fantasy. One of the characters named Anthony L. Carbo comments on John's political ambition: “I think politics and magic were almost the same thing for him.” Or, “Transformations—that's part of it—trying to change things. When you think about it, magicians and politicians are basically control freaks.”³²⁾ The narrator's explanation makes magic and politics even more closely associated: “Politics *was* manipulation. Like a magic show: invisible wires and secret trapdoors. He imagined placing a city in the palm of his hand, making his hand into a fist, making the city into a happier place. Manipulation, that was the fun of it.”³³⁾ John's political desire is barely supported by his illusion that politics makes it possible to manipulate reality. Such a mechanical understanding of the relation of politics with reality again exposes the intensity of his obsession with the intangible otherness of others.³⁴⁾ Politics is a kind of “game,”

²⁹⁾ O'Brien, *Lake*, 66.

³⁰⁾ Ibid., 65. In his essay “The Magic Show,” O'Brien compares the effect of the story to that of the magic: “. . .the fundamental seemed very much the same. Writing fiction is a solitary endeavor. You shape your own universe. You practice all the time, then practice some more. You pay attention to craft. Your aim for tension and suspense, a sense of drama, displaying in concrete terms the actions and reactions of human beings contesting problems of the heart.” “The Magic Show,” in *Writers on Writing*, ed. Robert Pack and Jay Parini (Hanover: Middlebury College Press, 1991), 176.

³¹⁾ O'Brien, *Lake*, 34–35.

³²⁾ Ibid., 27.

³³⁾ Ibid., 35–36.

³⁴⁾ In this work, O'Brien alludes several times to Woodrow Wilson's naïve comments on his own life, which are cited from Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Knopf, 1948). These cited comments show O'Brien's ironic distance toward politicians and politics.

in Carbo's words, where one can "accomplish things."³⁵⁾

John's mirror is brought into use in the Vietnam War, too. The absolute contingency in the battlefield leads John into sheer confusion. As he limits the "reality" within the frame of the mirror, John, or the "Sorcerer," as his comrades call him, attempts to transform the unbearable reality of the war into his own fiction through his magic. Because what really happens in Vietnam is too atrocious to be "real," John's magic works *realistically* in the battlefields: "In Vietnam, where superstition governed, there was the fundamental need to believe—believing just to believe—and over time the men came to trust in Sorcerer's powers."³⁶⁾ The fictional causality of things created by John's magic replaces the inhuman arbitrariness of the war. The narrator describes how John transforms the horrible reality of the massacre in Thuan Yen into his magic show:

He displayed an ordinary military radio and whispered a few words and made their village disappear. There was a trick to it, which involved artillery and white phosphorus, but the overall effect was spectacular.

A fine, sunny morning. Everyone sat on the beach and oohed and ahed at the vanishing village.

"Fuckin' Houdini," one of the guys said.³⁷⁾

In this scene, John's spectacular "magic" acquits the soldiers of their sense of guilt about the massacre. John the magician, called "Houdini" here, allows them as well as himself to consume the massacre as a commodity of spectacle. In the classic study of the modern spectacle, Guy Debord writes, "The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, [but] we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity."³⁸⁾ The visual effect of John's magic totalizes the world by eliminating any element of secret and unclarity. No doubt, John's strong will to clarify every phenomenon is deeply rooted in his personal fear of uncontrollable violence, i.e., the outside of his internalized mirror. In this sense, John is an incessant fiction writer; he responds to the call of his traumatic past through his repertoire of magic, which modifies and invents the meaning of the world.

2. Repetition-Impulse and Kathy's Death

John's perpetual effort to replace fiction with reality, however, is not always successful. Kathy discerns the otherness in him when she hears John saying "Kill Jesus" with a distinctly different voice from his usual one.³⁹⁾ John's unconscious compulsion to say these words

³⁵⁾ O'Brien, *Lake*, 150.

³⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁸⁾ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: AK Press, 2006), 21.

³⁹⁾ O'Brien, *Lake*, 53.

expresses his failure to reduce the otherness in him to signification. John suffers from the returned memory of Thuan Yen where he fails to cover the reality with his fantasy. In the village, John sees his senior officer Weatherby shooting “two little girls in the face.”⁴⁰⁾ He also sees Roschevitz shooting people, again, “in the head.”⁴¹⁾ John tries to believe that the whole event is “the most majestic trick of all,” but he cannot deceive himself.⁴²⁾ The scenes of killing imprint themselves on his mind, and John cannot forget them, regardless of his will:

Yet he could not stop returning. All night long he revisited the village of Thuan Yen, always with a fresh eye, witness to the tumblings and spinings of those who had reached their fictitious point of no return. Relatively speaking, he decided, these frazzled-eyed citizens were never quite dead, otherwise they would surely stop dying. Same-same for his father.⁴³⁾

John’s compulsive return to Thuan Yen always makes him face the moment of indescribable violence, since he cannot consume it as part of a spectacle. If trauma speaks for an aspect of atemporality, it is because the primal event is always already unhinged from the mechanism of memorization. John’s imaginative revisiting of the scene of violence causes him to witness the scene of the killings as a new event, where the internalized mirror becomes unsustainable. As the passage shows, the infinitely renewed experience of Thuan Yen forms psychological reference in John’s unconscious to the memory of his father’s death. When John finds the “same” structure of otherness in these two distinct events of uncontrollable violence, it shows that the absence of his “father” in its proper place, irrespective of whether it is before or after his father’s physical death, significantly matters for the way in which John involves himself with the Vietnam War.

The logic of corollary that dominates John’s relationship with others blurs the distinction among people around him. Given the sense of intimacy and isolation that significantly restricts his view of others, his finding of the “same” among different others results in his ultimate failure to relate himself with others. A hypothesis that posits John’s murder of Kathy is based on John’s identification of her with his father; John loves Kathy as a person who unfailingly loves him in the way that his idealized “father” ought to do. Since for John, love is a form of objective relation, he cannot stand any of Kathy’s secrecy; in other words, he burdens a sense of obligation to put all the aspects of Kathy into perspective. When he knows Kathy’s sudden disappearance, John cannot help accusing her in his mind: “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.”⁴⁴⁾ By using the language of

⁴⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴¹⁾ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴²⁾ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴³⁾ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, 241.

magic tricks, John attempts to understand the event of Kathy's disappearance with a frame of his fiction. John tries to place himself in the position of the audience of a drama in order to mitigate the shock he received from the sense of loss. The disappearance of Kathy overlaps with the disappearance of his father in his mind because of his narcissistic identification of others.

John's internalized "fort und da" mechanism postulates the existence of his "father" as a lost object that should, and will, return. After his father's death, John often looks for his father by "opening closets, scanning the carpets and sidewalks and lawns as if search of a lost nickel."⁴⁵ As a game of tag, John's search for his lost object is no more than a guise: a ritual of identification that is founded upon his reliance on the stability of the lost object. Not surprisingly, John's efforts are always rewarded by his discovery of his imaginative "father." But his finding does not in fact bring him to any true discovery of the reality; instead, it covers the reality with his fiction.

John's defense mechanism in which such hide-and-seek operates conditions his relationship to his silent partner, Kathy. Indeed, from the beginning of his acquaintance with her, John spies on Kathy in fear of losing her. For John, Kathy is a visualization of his lost object. John supposes that the act of spying makes it possible to feel a sense of love to her, since constant surveillance gives him a chance to regain his "father" in his relationship with his real father.

When he engages in the Vietnam War, John attempts to maintain his connection with Kathy by exchanging mails. Most of the letters from Kathy bring him a sense of comfort. However, one of the letters that Kathy sends to John makes him tremble. In it she writes: "A piece of advice. Be careful with the tricks. One of these days you'll make *me* disappear."⁴⁶ Since John's anxiety is obviously inscribed in the letter, and since her voice in the letter sounds quite different from that in other scenes, the tone of the letter makes the reader suspicious about whether it is really written by Kathy or invented by John's imagination. Reading the letter makes John feel "the old terrors rise up again."⁴⁷ The "old terrors," of course, are the terrors that he felt when he lost his father. His fear of losing Kathy thus uncannily resonates with his experience of losing his father.

Thus, one can consider John's possible murder of Kathy in terms of the mechanism of John's identification. Kathy is metonymically associated with John's father through the place of John's pillow, which he self-deceivingly identifies with his "father." Such identification provides a rationale for the "hypothesis" that John pours hot water onto Kathy's face lying on the pillow. Kathy's body substitutes the place of his "father" at the very moment of the murder through the violent force of identification. To be further noted, "father" but also his experience in Vietnam that influences him to murder her. As I pointed out, John witnesses his

⁴⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 38.

comrades shooting Vietnamese people in the head in Thuan Yen. The act of shooting in the head thus constitutes a central image of his trauma, which John emulates in the act of pouring water on Kathy's head. Although this "event" is presented as no more than a "hypothesis" in this novel, the posited scenario illuminates the predominance of symbolic structure in John's world view. John's trauma thus urges him to create a fictional world where the symbolism is dominant over any material event.

3. To the Bottom of the Lake

Consideration of John's relation with the problem of violence directs us to examine the meaning of his engagement in Vietnam with a fresh perspective. When the narrator attests that "it was in the nature of love that John Wade went to the war," it touches upon John's inner necessity to place his body in the midst of violence.⁴⁸⁾ Indeed, going to Vietnam, for John, in a way signifies a return to the origin of his father, which is simultaneously a return to his own origin. Intimacy with violence, or his avid curiosity of what conditions violence, primarily motivates him to go to Vietnam. One of John's secrets, the narrator says, is "how much he loved the place—Vietnam—how it felt like home."⁴⁹⁾ John identifies Vietnam, or the notion of violence, as his "home" and by so doing negotiates with his own melancholy. John incessantly trifles with violence in battlefields through his performance as "Sorcerer," and attains a freakish and transitory sense of intimacy:

Sorcerer was in his element. It was a place with secret trapdoors and tunnels and underground chambers populated by various spooks and goblins, a place where magic was everyone's hobby and where elaborate props were always on hand—exploding boxes and secret chemicals and numerous devices of levitation—you could *fly* here, you could make *other* people fly—a place where the air itself was both reality and illusion, where anything might instantly become anything else.⁵⁰⁾

The passage is far from a realistic description of the landscape in Vietnam. Instead, it shows John's keen intimacy with a place where he can transform anything into anything he wants. John's attachment to a place that would enable him to hide himself from the gazes of the others finds its exquisite expression in Vietnam. The reason for his feeling Vietnam as "home" is that the formulation of John's desire is metonymic. The sense of being at ease that he attains by hiding his body leads him to a fortification of psychic space as well as a dismissal of geographical space.

Within the same trajectory of the question of John's topography, one can explore the psychological topos of the lake. In order to examine the placeness (and the placelessness) of

⁴⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, 72.

the lake in the fiction, let us refer back to the beginning of the novel, where John and his wife come to the isolated cottage on the lake in order to evade the harsh reality of the world:

Beyond the dock the big lake opened northward into Canada, where the water was everything, vast and very cold, and where there were secret channels and portages and bays and tangled forests and islands without names. Everywhere, for many thousand square miles, the wilderness was all one thing, like a great curving mirror, infinitely blue and beautiful, always the same.⁵¹⁾

The description of the scenery is not objective but reflective of John's inner landscapes, represented by the "mirror" and the "secret" places. In other words, John's sense of place quite reducibly serves to turn the geography into issues of intimacy. John's unconscious call for the return to the primal scene definitively affects his relationship with the circumstances. A sense of no way out brings him to the border of his nation, namely, the Northern Minnesotan border with the land of Canada where the lake in question exists. Here, as well as in other works by O'Brien, Canada is a place of liberation or evasion from the military service, and the lake symbolizes moments of hesitation and decision.⁵²⁾

One of the "hypotheses" suggests that Kathy crosses by boat to the other side of the lake. This supposition is seemingly contradictory with the another scenario where John kills his wife. But if the lake is a reflection of John's mind, these two different scenarios do not necessarily contradict each other. The lake is not a solid object but a collective reflection. When Kathy disappears into the lake, she is also engulfed into the hollow lack of John's mind. If, as Cathy Caruth says, the agony of the trauma comes from the "perplexing experience of survival" rather than "the life-threatening events," the traumatized person is forced to live one's life only in the possibility of death.⁵³⁾ As he goes to the lake in search of Kathy on a boat with his helpers, Claude and Pat, John gradually feels that he is surrounded by familiar echoes of violence. At a small village on the lakeshore named Angle Inlet, John hears the somber voices of the men who surround the bonfire. The scene reminds John of his days in Vietnam: "Even from a distance, Wade decided, there was something distinctly mournful in their voices.... It reminded him of the way men talked in the hours after a firefight. After Weber died, or Reinhart, or PFC Weatherby. That same melancholy. The same musical rise and fall."⁵⁴⁾ The intensity of his identification of objects through the repetitive acknowledgment of the sameness turns his search for Kathy into the exploration of his own "heart of darkness." All of John's traumatic memories merge into one in the hollow room of

⁵¹⁾ Ibid., 1.

⁵²⁾ In *Combat Zone*, for example, the protagonist plans to escape to Canada before deciding to go to Vietnam.

⁵³⁾ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 60.

⁵⁴⁾ O'Brien, *Lake*, 235.

his mind as the echoes of his past reverberate in the air. Surrounded in the echoes of the returned voices, John goes farther and farther into the lake. While the narrator suggests the possibility of John's disappearance to the north, the text shows another scenario where he drowns himself to the bottom of the lake. This possibility figures in his affection for Kathy, who "stares up to him from beneath the surface of the silvered lake."⁵⁵⁾

Through the self-questioning structure of narrative in *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien engages with the relation between trauma and narrative. As John considers the uncertainty of memory in his coinage of the word "sub-memories," O'Brien suggests that human memory is always vulnerably exposed to the influence of various agencies.⁵⁶⁾ If the four angles of the light shone onto the surface of the lake are the metaphor of the four different kinds of narratives, the ungraspable bottom of the lake presents violence as an origin of creativity. The reason for the association of Kathy with the invisible bottom of the lake is that John desires to see her at the solid bottom of its reality: "The way he'd looked at her, no tricks at all. Just young and in love. Sentimental, maybe, but it was one of those times when all the mysteries of the world seemed to condense into something solid."⁵⁷⁾ Perceiving "no trick" in the gaze of the other, John establishes "something solid" through his relationship with Kathy. The disappearance of Kathy is, then, a negative form of response to John's belief.

The relation between John and the narrator repeats the relation between John and Kathy as the footnote records the author's voice: "John Wade—he's beyond knowing. He's an other."⁵⁸⁾ While Kathy is an invisible center to the characters within the novel, John remains "an other" to the narrator. Through such distancing, O'Brien seems to suggest that narrative can be possible only in the recognition of its impossibility.

At the time the novel was published, about a quarter of a century had passed since the events in Thuan Yen. O'Brien attempts to resist the politics of forgetting by depicting John's self-defensive response to the violence. John's difficulty of relating himself with the traumatic past poses a question about the easiness of oblivion that the American public seems to share. In an interview with David Louis Edelman, O'Brien made critical comments on the massacre in Thuan Yen.

[Interviewer]: What did you think about [the massacre] at the time?

[O'Brien]: I thought it was murder, the same thing I think today. It makes me angry that so many people got off, the charges were dropped, people got off on technicalities, only one person was convicted. That was Lieutenant Calley. People who testified that they killed 20 people, they were never prosecuted. What really bugs me is that of all the people who were there, about 150 or so, the American public only remembers Calley's

⁵⁵⁾ Ibid., 288.

⁵⁶⁾ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁷⁾ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁸⁾ Ibid., 101.

name. But what about the rest of them? Those people are still among us, all over, maybe even some in Baltimore. What are they telling their wives and children? Are they guarding their secrets, too?⁵⁹⁾

In his response to the interviewer, O'Brien clearly accuses not only "the people who were there" but also "the American public" who wants to guard the secrets of American soldiers' guilt in Vietnam. Through *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien indicates Americans' collective amnesia of the traumatic event, which is allegorically represented in the function of John's internalized mirror.

By exploring the relation between trauma and narrative through his intricate formation of metafiction, O'Brien poses the question of the narrative of historical memory. Against collective oblivion, O'Brien continues speaking about the Vietnam War. As Maria Bonn insists, it is his belief in the potentiality of stories that sustains O'Brien's narratives.⁶⁰⁾ It is true that knowing the reality of the war in absolute terms is impossible. But O'Brien finds a way to resist the reducibility of history by exhibiting multiple fictional narratives for a single event. He creates the Vietnam *wars*, which are always imagined, looked back on, referred to, and narrated again and again both by the author and the reader. The events are always renewed through the work of narrative and the collective memory of the past, since any event is inseparable from the narrative. O'Brien describes the war as a living phenomenon, provoking our imagination for the unspeakable, silent, yet lingering past.

⁵⁹⁾ "Interview with Tim O'Brien," *Baltimore City Paper*, October 19, 1994.

⁶⁰⁾ Bonn, "Stories," 3.