TIMOTHY MELLEY

Postmodern Amnesia: Trauma and Forgetting in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*

In its implications the distortion of a text resembles a murder: the difficulty is not in perpetrating the deed, but in getting rid of its traces.

Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

Like trauma, amnesia is everywhere in contemporary American culture. Mnemonic aids have come back into fashion. A new literary culture has shaped itself around the memoir. Innumerable critics have asserted that we live in "an age of forgetting" (Baxter) and that the United States suffers from "historical amnesia."[1] A major press has recently published an "amnesia anthology" (Lethem). And an increasingly familiar array of traumatic amnesias—the results of everything from brain injury and brainwashing to multiple-personality disorder and satanic ritual abuse—have become cultural obsessions. These astonishing failures of identity and memory have become salient partly because they seem to reveal, often with lurid power, the instability of the liberal subject. They operate on a profound sense of self-division—a sense that one's experience can be secret even to oneself.

These ways of reimagining human subjectivity are direct descendants of the psychoanalytic revolution. A brief history of amnesia narratives would in fact be one way of documenting both the cul-

1. For a convincing argument against this widespread view, see Sturken 2. For a sophisticated description of collective amnesia as a political strategy, see Rogin.

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tural explosion of psychotherapeutic discourse and a related skepticism about liberal individualism—the still dominant Enlightenment theory that views the person as an autonomous, rational agent with a unique core of memories and desires. Stories of traumatic amnesia first erupted onto the twentieth-century landscape in the post-battlefield narratives of World War I "shell shock" and in the psychological case studies of its treatment. Since then, amnesia has become an increasingly attractive narrative device. It has been deployed in narratives that are as crude as the forgetting that follows a sharp blow to the head and as subtle as Kafka's meditations on modern subjectivity.

In recent decades, amnesia has become one of the several important tropes through which "postmodern" theories of history and subjectivity are tested in the cultural arena. If amnesia has registered anxiety about the stability of the liberal self, it has also become a metaphor for historiographical dilemmas—for the sense that it is no longer possible to ground historical narratives securely and that the failure to do so has led to dangerous forms of collective forgetting. Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, and Jean Baudrillard have all suggested that postmodernity is characterized by an ahistorical nostalgia and diminished historical consciousness. For Jameson, postmodernism is a mode in which "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" and condemning us "to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" (18, 25). Baudrillard finds historical referentiality so crippled that he has called the Vietnam War a series of simulations that "sealed the end of history" (278). And one of Harvey's chief examples of postmodernism is the 1988 film *Blade Runner*—an adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, by the amnesia-obsessed sci-fi giant Philip K. Dick—in which a group of humanoid "replicants" are controlled by fabricated memories of their nonexistent childhoods (308–14).

Such representations of the postmodern suggest that the recent surge of stories about trauma and traumatic amnesia are, in part, expressions of a vexed historiography. Cultural debates over failures of memory—such as those over multiple personality disorder and "recovered memory syndrome—reveal the necessity but the

difficulty of relying on individual memory as a record of the past. The inability of individuals to access their own traumatic pasts in turn suggests the inability of historians to "re-member" the past. Narratives about amnesia, in other words, seem to reflect the postmodern condition: the fragmentation of the self into parts not available to consciousness or memory; the inability to distinguish between authentic memories and simulations; and the difficulty of finding sound correspondences between past events and the narratives that purport to describe those events.

But that is only half the story. For many theorists, trauma has seemed a valuable model of history not because it represents postmodern indeterminacy, but because it seems to promise unparalleled contact with the past in all its original immediacy and fullness. According to Cathy Caruth, Freud sometimes understood the neurotic repetition of traumatic events as "nothing but the *unmediated* occurrence of violent events," and "the *literal* return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (59; emphases added). "In trauma," she explains, Freud assumes that "the outside has gone inside without any mediation."[2] In other words, the unfolding of traumatic memory is something like *the unfolding of the event itself*, untainted by the ego of the consciousness it inhabits. Contemporary trauma theorists have repeatedly made such realist claims about trauma. According to psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk and his associates, traumatic events leave a "reality imprint" in the brain (*Traumatic Stress* 52). Traumatic memories, write van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "are fixed in the mind and are not altered by the passage of time, or the intervention of subsequent experience" ("Intrusive Past" 172). Traumatized people, agrees psychologist Judith Lewis Herman, "relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. . . . *It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma*. The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness" (37; emphasis added). It is the "intense focus on

2. It is crucial to note, however, that Freud did not simply adopt the realist stance on trauma suggested by these remarks. On the contrary, his views often alternated between the theoretical stances that Ruth Leys has called "mimetic" and "anti-mimetic" (or realist) (see esp. 1–40). Leys also offers a powerful critique of Caruth's use of Freud.

fragmentary sensation, on image without context," Herman adds, that "gives the traumatic memory a heightened reality" (38).

The view that traumatic memory encodes the real in a distinct and quasi-veridical way is not held simply by those with realist sympathies. It can also be detected, paradoxically, in the work of critics who believe that trauma exceeds representation altogether and that depictions of individual traumas such as rape, incest, and child abuse, or of historical traumas like the Holocaust or the Vietnam War, inevitably diminish the true horror and meaning of those events.[3] The paradox of such a view, as T. J. Lustig observes, is that it makes the traumatic event utterly defining and yet "utterly inaccessible: a pure vanishing point of experience always and inevitably betrayed by the fall into language" (82). What is truly surprising is the degree to which this oddly self-defeating commitment to the realism of traumatic memory haunts even the work of a poststructuralist like Caruth, who champions a complex theory of vexed referentiality. For Caruth, psychic trauma is a valuable model of history because the traumatic experience implants itself in the psyche without mediation and yet is never fully available to consciousness. To suffer from trauma is thus to relive an "unclaimed experience," an event one never truly experienced the first time around. This model allows Caruth to suggest an analogy be-

3. Elie Wiesel, for instance, has famously argued that "the Holocaust transcends history" (158). Kalí Tal's 1996 study of trauma and fiction argues likewise that literary critics have erroneously treated traumatic events as metaphoric, thereby ignoring the horrific reality of trauma. Michael Rothberg has called this the antirealist approach to trauma, particularly the trauma of the Holocaust. The alternate view, in his paradigm, is realism, which views the Holocaust as knowable and translatable through familiar mimetic conventions. These stances—realist and antirealist—correspond roughly to the stances Ruth Leys calls mimetic and antimimetic. Leys's paradigm, however, is more complex, as mimesis and antimimesis are theoretical tendencies that both appear, to different degrees, within all clinical and theoretical approaches to trauma. In brief, the mimetic view of trauma—that victims unconsciously identify themselves with the event in a quasi-hypnotic manner—is usually accompanied by what Rothberg calls antirealist assumptions, especially the view that trauma cannot be represented. Antimimeticism, on the contrary, imagines the victim not as a hypnotized imitator but as a coherent and self-present witness to the traumatic event—one capable of offering a realistic representation of that event. Each theory has its disadvantages. While mimeticism suggests that traumatic events are permanently unverifiable, antimimeticism relies on an unrealistically positivist view of memory.

tween the traumatized individual and the historian who can never access the past in all its fullness:

> it is here, in the . . . encounter with trauma—both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it—that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma . . . we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not.
>
> (11)

Such statements, in short, depict psychological trauma as a useful model of referential complexity in which the traumatic event is like the "real" of history, the past that cannot be directly represented.

Despite its poststructuralist lesson, however, this argument requires that traumatic memory encode the past in a uniquely literal way. There is something miraculous about Caruth's assertion that trauma permits history simply to "arise" without understanding or effort. By "history," Caruth seems to mean History—not a narrative about the past but the past itself. There is a residual positivism in this invocation of history (as there is in all invocations of History), a magical sense that the ever-present past can come into the present without human mediation. As Caruth puts it:

> The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all.
>
> (17)

But if there can be "inherent latency within the experience itself," then one's memory of the traumatic event is indistinguishable from the experience of that past event in all its original plenitude. In other words, Caruth's explanation converts *memory* into *experience*. It makes amnesia a precondition to recovering the truth of the past with an immediacy that cannot be obtained through ordinary remembering. In suggesting that the traumatized mind fossilizes the

past, leaving it intact to be reexperienced without the distortions of ordinary memory, Caruth no doubt means to stress the endlessly latent aspect of the traumatic past—the always deferred real. Yet her account paradoxically converts deferral into full presence, human consciousness into reality. This is a strange gesture for a theorist who wishes to move beyond "straightforwardly referential" historiography, for her traumatic historiography is not only "not straightforwardly referential," it is not referential *at all*. The traumatic memory is a reexperiencing of—and not a representation of—the past.

The paradoxes of Caruth's approach to trauma are symptomatic of a contemporary theoretical dilemma. Postmodern (or poststructural) theories of reference have generated intense skepticism about our ability to represent the past. In response to this skepticism, there has been a simultaneous desire to move beyond the problem of vexed reference through various means, one of which is the concept of trauma. Trauma, in other words, seems to permit an end-run around the representational barriers of the postmodern condition. But as Ruth Leys has recently warned, "the history of trauma is a history of forgetting" (119), and that history has often revealed "traumatic memory" to be as open as ordinary memory to influence, suggestion, and contamination. The repression of that discursive history is one cause of the unbearable demands some cultural critics are placing on trauma—that it be an omnipresent cause, a source of selfhood, a place of origins, and the last locus of the real in human memory. Such demands, I will suggest, pressure the concept of trauma to a point where it collapses back on itself.

I now want to turn to a text that exemplifies this problem: Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994). O'Brien's novel depicts a traumatic event that cannot be remembered by anyone—including its narrator, its author, and its protagonist. The latter is John Wade, a career Minnesota politician and Vietnam veteran who was known to his comrades as "Sorcerer" for his skill as a magician. As the novel opens, Wade has just lost the Minnesota Democratic primary for United States senator after revelations that he had participated in the slaughter of several hundred Vietnamese civilians at the hamlet of Thuan Yen, an event usually known in the U.S. as "the

My Lai Massacre." After his crushing political defeat, Wade and his wife, Kathy, retreat to an isolated cabin in the northern Minnesota lake country where, one night, Kathy mysteriously disappears. Wade may—or may not—have murdered her. He cannont remember. What he does remember of that night is boiling a kettle of water and pouring it on all the houseplants while muttering, "Kill Jesus"—the most hateful expression he could conjure. And he recalls, shortly thereafter, boiling another kettle and bringing it to the bedroom, where he watched Kathy sleep. But he cannot recall whether he poured the boiling water on her face and then sunk her deep in the lake along with their motor boat, or whether he simply went to sleep and awoke to find that she had deserted him. In the morning, he is surprised and worried that she is missing. Over the next weeks he searches loyally for her, despite a constant "burn of guilt" that his "faulty memory" has erased a horrible truth (192). The mystery of Kathy's disappearance continues right up to the end of the novel, when John Wade, too, "disappears," taking a boat north to Canada. We never find out what has become of either one of them.

O'Brien's novel is largely about failures of memory, the ways in which a traumatic past can infect and distort the memory. In some ways, the narrative resembles postwar noir tales in which an amnesic detective begins to suspect himself. But *In the Lake of the Woods* is much more unconventional in the way it interweaves Wade's struggle to remember Kathy's disappearance with his memories of the massacre at Thuan Yen, and eventually with other historical genocides. O'Brien, in other words, makes it clear that Wade's individual case of amnesia is inseparable from more serious collective memory failures. The result is a tale whose radical ambiguity cannot help but have historical implications. Because it offers no final explanation—only a vast historical apparatus that fails to explain its central trauma—it seems an end-of-the-line instance of postmodern historical skepticism. And yet the narrative depicts a form of individual amnesia that acts as a warning *against* collective or historical amnesia. In a paradox similar to the one in Caruth's argument, O'Brien develops a profoundly amnesic character to critique the collective forgetting that has erased My Lai and other massacres from American historical consciousness. This contradictory strat-

egy, I shall argue, results directly from the notion that the production of history (that is, historical narrative) may be understood through a model of traumatic repression.

This contradiction is most evident in the pronounced oddities of O'Brien's novel. First, *In the Lake of the Woods* has an unusually self-negating plot structure. It contains both the story of John Wade's traumatic life and a frame story about another veteran's attempt to unravel Wade's mystery. This second figure, the novel's narrator, is an obsessive researcher who tries—but ultimately fails—to get to the bottom of Kathy's disappearance. In place of a final explanation, he offers eight different hypotheses about Kathy's disappearance: she was murdered, committed suicide, got lost in the woods, ran away from John, and so on. Each hypothesis is a chapter-long imaginative reconstruction that sometimes enters Kathy's point of view, but only after the narrator has warned us that he is only presenting his own speculations. In addition to these speculations, the narrator provides seven chapters of "evidence," which consist entirely of short quotations from those who knew the Wades and from various historical documents and texts. These statements are arranged so as to offer provocative commentary on the novel's primary story.

O'Brien takes great pains to simulate the facticity of his narrator's research. The narrator provides 136 often elaborate citations, some of which refer to real texts, others of which are spurious (for example, "transcript, Court-Martial of Lieutenant William Calley, U.S. National Archives, box 4, folder 8, p. 1735" [264n107]).[4] Increasingly, the notes become confessional descriptions of the narrator's "four years of hard labor" (30n21) researching the book. As the Wade mystery lingers, the narrator claims to "lose sleep over mute facts and frayed ends" (269n120) and even quotes exasperated relations of the Wades telling him that his obsession with the case is irritating them (194, 266, 269). Like the most scrupulous of biographers, he warns us that "much of what might appear to be fact in

4. The 1995 Penguin paperback edition of the novel contains only 133 notes. O'Brien appears to have removed from the paperback several short excerpts of testimony from *The Court-Martial of Lt. Calley*, by Richard Hammer, which is cited extensively in both versions. The changes do not significantly alter the novel.

this narrative—action, word, thought—must ultimately be viewed as a diligent but still imaginative reconstruction of events" (30n21). By the end of the novel, he has thrown up his hands, saying, "who will ever know? It's all hypothesis, beginning to end" (303). In short, our intrepid narrator's own skepticism has undone him. He is like Nicholas Branch, the endlessly frustrated CIA historian in Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), who, despite years of research, can never bring himself to write the Agency's official history of the Kennedy assassination. Both men dramatize the postmodern historiographical problem: it seems impossible to develop a unified account of the past, impossible to ground historical narrative in the authority of "fact."

But when it comes to historical skepticism, *In the Lake of the Woods* takes a radical bound past texts like *Libra*. DeLillo's novel, after all, contains much of its skepticism within the brief sections about Branch, while its primary narrative offers a clearly dramatized, imaginative solution to the Kennedy assassination. O'Brien's novel, on the other hand, extends historiographic uncertainty into its primary narrative by refusing to solve the mystery of Kathy Wade's disappearance. It does so, moreover, by suggesting that not even the protagonist of the story has access to his memory of the night in question. On that night, we are told,

> a ribbon of time went by, which [John Wade] would not remember, then later he found himself crouched at the side of the bed . . . watching Kathy sleep. . . .
>
> He would remember smoothing back her hair.
>
> He would remember pulling a blanket to her chin and then returning to the living room, where for a long while he lost track of his whereabouts. . . . The unities of time and space had unraveled. There were manifold uncertainties, and in the days and weeks to come, memory would play devilish little tricks on him. . . .
>
> At one point during the night he stood waist-deep in the lake.
>
> At another point he found himself completely submerged, lungs like stone, an underwater rush in his ears.
>
> (50–52)

Historical uncertainty thus haunts not only the historian-narrator but also Wade himself, who suffers profound traumatic amnesia.

But there is yet another oddity to Wade's amnesia. While he can-

not recall his actions on the night of Kathy's disappearance, he does remember the intensely traumatic events at Thuan Yen, where he ran and hid from the butchery of his comrades and then, in two separate moments of panic, shot an elderly Vietnamese man and a member of his own unit, PFC Weatherby. Wade's troubled memories of these acts and of the horrific slaughter directed by his commander, Lieutenant William Calley, return repeatedly, despite his intense efforts to erase them from his mind and from the historical record. Wade also remembers, in vivid detail, the traumas of his childhood—particularly his alcoholic father's suicide. His experience thus reverses the classic psychoanalytic model of traumatic repetition, and the more recent phenomenon of "repressed memory syndrome," in which an *early* event is repressed only to return through later unconscious repetition or neurosis. Here, it is the ultimate event that is forgotten only after the earlier ones have come more fully to mind. This is a case not only of "robust repression"—to use the term of recovered memory movement critics Richard J. Ofshe and Margaret Thaler Singer—but of *instantaneous* robust repression.

The question, then, is why O'Brien has marshaled the concept of traumatic amnesia in such an unusual fashion. Why has he allowed historiographic skepticism to haunt *both* segments of his novel, transforming the problem of historical representation into a problem of individual memory? And why has he chosen to account for collective, historical violence in the context of individual, domestic violence?

The answers to these questions lie in the way O'Brien links individual and collective trauma. *In the Lake of the Woods* is in some ways a book about the endlessness of trauma, the tendency of violence to perpetuate itself. O'Brien signals his interest in this subject by including, early in his "Evidence" chapters, excerpts from psychological texts. These include one of the founding texts of the recovered memory movement, Judith Lewis Herman's 1992 *Trauma and Recovery*, which asserts that trauma brings us "face to face . . . with the capacity for evil in human nature" and that "the violation of human connection, and consequently the risk of a post-traumatic stress disorder, is highest of all when the survivor has been not merely a passive witness but also an active participant in violent

death or atrocity" (qtd. in O'Brien 27n13, 144n55). Similar citations from psychological texts, veteran recovery manuals, and Wade's relations, suggest that the mature John Wade is still suffering from the war and particularly from the holocaust at Thuan Yen. Crucially, however, and very much in the spirit of Herman's work, O'Brien traces Wade's post-traumatic stress not simply to Vietnam but to the events of his childhood—and particularly to the pressures of masculinization. "More than anything else," the narrator tells us, "John Wade wanted to be loved, and to make his father proud." But Mr. Wade is an abusive alcoholic who refers to his son as "Jiggling John . . . even though he wasn't fat" (212). His incessant ridicule and scorn turns homophobic when John takes up magic and begins to spend hours practicing alone in the basement: " 'That pansy magic crap,' " says his father. " 'What's wrong with baseball, some regular exercise?' He'd shake his head. 'Blubby little pansy' " (67). When Mr. Wade finally hangs himself in the garage, John is left, at fourteen, with no way to obtain his father's approval.

The psychodrama of masculinization is central to all of O'Brien's war fiction, which obsessively depicts elaborate fantasies of escape from war and centers on characters who go to war not out of courage but out of fear. As the narrator of "On the Rainy River" says, "I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to" (*The Things They Carried* 62). Or as Paul Berlin puts it in *Going After Cacciato* (1978), "I fear being thought of as a coward, I fear that even more than cowardice itself"(286). The primary instrument of this threat to the soldier's masculinity is his father. O'Brien's soldiers fantasize elaborately about the praise their fathers might give them for their service. Berlin envisions that, once home, "He would take his father's hand and look him in the eye. 'I did okay,' he would say. 'I won some medals.' And his father would nod" (44). In 1994, O'Brien himself admitted, "I have written some of this before, but I must write it again. I was a coward. I went to Vietnam" ("The Vietnam in Me").

In what can only be understood as a part of a literary repetition compulsion, *In the Lake of the Woods* enacts this pattern once again.[5]

5. Indeed, for all its apparently endless horror, *In the Lake of the Woods* is the one novel of O'Brien's that actually realizes the central fantasy of all the others: the flight to Canada,

"It was in the nature of love that John Wade went to the war," explains the narrator. "Only to be loved. He imagined his father, who was dead, saying to him, 'Well, you did it, you hung in there, and I'm so proud, just so incredibly goddamn proud'" (59–60). Such fantasies are highly freighted for Wade, who, unlike Berlin, is a survivor of paternal abuse and abandonment. It is, after all, the trauma of his father's suicide, and not his own war experience, that shapes John Wade's potential for violence. "What John felt that night [the night of his father's suicide], and for many nights afterward, was the desire to kill" (14). O'Brien so tightly interweaves this early trauma with the trauma of war that they soon become inseparable. On the night Wade returns from Vietnam, for instance, he lies curled up in the dark, pleading with his dead father:

> [B]ut his father wouldn't listen and wouldn't stop, he just kept dying. "God, I *love* you," John said, and then he . . . found himself at his father's funeral—fourteen years old, a new black necktie pinching tight—except the funeral was being conducted in bright sunlight along an irrigation ditch at Thuan Yen—mourners squatting on their heels and wailing and clawing at their eyes—John's mother and many other mothers—a minister crying "Sin!"—an organist playing organ music—and John wanted to kill everybody who was weeping and everybody who wasn't, everybody, . . . he wanted to grab a hammer and scramble down into the ditch and kill his father for dying.
>
> (42)

Here, as elsewhere, it is not only the ceaseless repetition of the memories but also the inseparability of discrete traumas that stimulates Wade's fury. He feels the same "killing rage" after losing the election: "He wanted to hurt things. Grab a knife and start cutting

the disappearing act, the escape from the social pressures of reputation and manhood. In *The Things They Carried*, this notion is depicted realistically; in *Going After Cacciato*, it becomes an elaborately imagined fantasy that Paul Berlin must finally bring to a close because, while he wishes to run away, he is also "afraid of running away . . . afraid of what might be thought of me by those I love . . . the loss of their respect . . . the loss of my own reputation" (286). At the end of *Going After Cacciato*, Berlin realizes that it is only "social power, the threat of social consequences, that stops [him] from making a full and complete break." But John Wade no longer faces such a threat. He has already been disgraced, and the only person he loves is now missing. There is nothing left for him to do but flee responsibility by disappearing forever.

and slashing and never stop" (5). As he stands by Kathy's bed with the boiling kettle in his hand, he sees images from Thuan Yen: "a wooden hoe and a vanishing village and PFC Weatherby and hot white steam" (51). In what becomes a vital narrative strategy, O'Brien enmeshes the distinct traumas of John Wade's life until each seems both a cause of the next and a result of the former.

This strategy permits O'Brien to undertake the novel's central theoretical task: the extension of Wade's story into an exploration of American history. First, as I shall explain in detail later, O'Brien weaves Wade's traumas not only with each other but with an increasingly wide circle of collective, historical traumas. Second, through the uncanny and incessant repetition of traumatic memories, O'Brien recontextualizes historical events to suggest the power of narrative context to produce historical meaning. The first time we see Wade shoot his smiling comrade Weatherby, for instance, the act seems cold-blooded and thoughtless (64). During a later, more detailed memory, we learn that Wade has been surprised by Weatherby while cowering in a ditch full of dead bodies so that he does not have to watch Weatherby gleefully slaughter dozens of innocent villagers (111, 220). Such retellings not only imitate the repetitive nature of traumatic memory but illustrate the power of context in shaping historical interpretation.

Third and most important, O'Brien uses the inseparability of Wade's traumatic memories to develop a thesis about the widespread relation between trauma and forgetting. Like all of the historiographic commentary of this novel, O'Brien's notions about historical amnesia are represented primarily through John Wade. And like his capacity for violence, Wade's immense capacity to forget is born in the wake of his father's suicide, for it is to cope with the suicide that John develops his most defining mental habit:

> [H]e tried to pretend that his father was not truly dead. He would talk to him in his imagination, carrying on whole conversations about baseball and school and girls. . . . John would sometimes invent elaborate stories about how he could've saved his father. . . . [H]e imagined yelling in his father's ear, begging him to please stop dying. Once or twice it almost worked. "Okay," his father would say, "I'll stop, I'll stop," but he never did. (14–15)

Here, confronted with the ceaseless repetition of traumatic memory—"the fucker kept hanging himself. Over and over" (286)—Wade learns to manage trauma through the techniques of fiction.

O'Brien's central figure for this creative mental habit is the mirror in front of which John practices magic.

> In the mirror, where miracles happened, John was no longer a lonely little kid. He had sovereignty over the world. . . .
>
> In the mirror, where John Wade mostly lived, he could read his father's mind. Simple affection, for instance. "Love you, cowboy," his father would think.
>
> Or his father would think, "Hey, report cards aren't everything."
>
> (65)

Magic not only gives Wade a sense of control and accomplishment but begins to assimilate functions of storytelling—the narrative practice of simulating reality through illusion. Significantly, O'Brien associates these techniques with the functioning of the traumatized mind. Young John Wade 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. His head becomes a "hall of mirrors" that hides emotional pain behind more comforting fictions:

> The mirror made this possible, and so John would sometimes carry it to school with him, or to baseball games, or to bed at night. Which was another trick: how he secretly kept the old stand-up mirror in his head. Pretending, of course—he understood that—but . . .
>
> The mirror made things better.
>
> The mirror made his father smile all the time.
>
> (66)

Once he transforms his memory into a fictive tool, it allows him to replace painful events with more pleasant ones. His head becomes "a box of mirrors," "a place to hide" from emotional pain (212–13).

It is through this figure that Wade develops the central fantasy of his adult identity—that as "Sorcerer," a practitioner of deception, espionage, and manipulation, he can control the chaos around him

and receive the love and approval his father never gave him. Amid the holocaust at Thuan Yen—his comrades slaughtering anything that breathes—Wade is mute with horror until finally he declares, "Go away." Suddenly, with this "most majestic trick of all," "the little village began to vanish inside its own rosy glow" (110–11). "Over time," the narrator explains, Wade's "most profound memory" of the massacre becomes its "impossibility": "This could not have happened. Therefore it did not. Already he felt better" (111). As he flees the butchery, shooting an old man whose hoe he mistakes for a rifle, he feels "only the faintest sense of culpability. The forgetting trick mostly worked." This sleight-of-mind allows Wade not only to survive Vietnam but to become a successful politician, by managing his past so that no one—especially Kathy—can find out the truth. At the same time, the tricks begin to create confusions of identity. After pressuring Kathy to have an abortion, he finds that his mental "box of mirrors" creates disturbing "[f]un-house reflections: deformations and odd angles," turning him "inside out and upside down" (159). When Kathy disappears, he realizes that "his whole life had been managed with mirrors and that he was now totally baffled and totally turned around and had no idea how to work his way out" (242).

Wade's ritual self-deception and mnemonic erasure become so elaborate that he emerges as a latter-day Jay Gatsby, someone who believes it is possible to "repeat the past" (Fitzgerald 99), "to remake himself, to vanish what was past and replace it with things good and new" (*In the Lake* 238). Not only does Wade modify the rosters linking him to My Lai but, like Gatsby, he generates a Franklinian menu for self-improvement and even awards himself a medal. Because his comrades know him only as "Sorcerer," he trusts that "over time . . . memory itself would be erased" (272). These forms of deception are linked to an odd concept of secrecy—Wade's sense that Vietnam "was a secret," that "History was a secret," that "Secrecy *was* the war," and that deep inside every man, including himself, were "incredible secrets"—things "so secret that he sometimes kept [them] secret from himself" (73–74).

The concept of a secret inner life has always been essential to liberal, and especially masculine, subjectivity. The notion that one keeps secrets from oneself, on the other hand, became culturally

viable only with the rise of psychoanalysis. But *In the Lake of the Woods* extends repression well beyond familiar Freudian ground and into the postmodern territory of robust repression and multiple personality, where one can forget one's own recent actions wholesale. It is this notion that permits the concomitant view that History itself is a "secret," that the past is altogether inaccessible. For if we cannot trust even our own testimony, then what hope is there for a valid history of traumatic events? This question, in fact, is precisely what Wade's amnesia is designed to provoke. His forgetting is not simply an interesting individual anomaly but a way of representing the status of collective memory in contemporary American culture. O'Brien has projected the postmodern historiographic crisis onto the protagonist himself, whose psyche becomes an emblem of history's groundlessness. Wade is a postmodern hall of mirrors because he is a *model of history*, a model in which the truth of events is always out of reach, obscured by failures of memory, falsified documents, and misleading testimony.

We can further specify this model as a *traumatic* model of history—a model in which physical or emotional wounds distort or destroy memories. As Herman puts it, in a line cited by O'Brien's narrator, "The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness" (qtd. in O'Brien 138). When Senator Robert Kerrey admitted, some thirty years after the fact, his participation in the slaughter of thirteen unarmed Vietnamese women and children, he was unable to avoid speaking in oxymorons: "Part of living with the memory, some of those memories, is to forget them. . . . I carry memories of what I did, and I survive and live based upon lots of different mechanisms. . . . It's entirely possible that I'm blacking a lot of it out" (Vistica). What O'Brien seeks to show, I am suggesting, is that this logic operates on a cultural, as well as an individual, level. The narrator presents a litany of actual testimony suggesting as much. "Look, I don't remember," says one My Lai participant. "I can't specifically recall," claims another (139). "I am struck," says a senior Army investigator, "by how little of these events I can or even wish to remember." By combining such remarks, O'Brien depicts an entire society committed to the forms of forgetting and "deniability" that have defined American political leadership since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who in the

words of Charles Baxter established "the proving ground of historical amnesia" (148). As O'Brien himself complained on the eve of his novel's publication:

> Now, more than 25 years later, the villainy of that Saturday morning in 1968 has been pushed off to the margins of memory. In the colleges and high schools I sometimes visit, the mention of My Lai brings on null stares, a sort of puzzlement, disbelief mixed with utter ignorance. Evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology. We erase it. We use ellipses. We salute ourselves and take pride in America the White Knight, America the Lone Ranger, America's sleek laser-guided weaponry beating up on Saddam and his legion of devils.
>
> ("The Vietnam in Me")

John Wade's amnesia, in short, is less a representation of individual forgetting than an expression of profound dismay about the ahistoricity of the present generation—an expression that has been central to the visions of postmodernity offered by Jameson, Harvey, Baudrillard, and others.

This critique of contemporary culture explains why O'Brien eventually places Wade's experience on a much broader historical canvas. As "evidence" in the case of Kathy Wade's disappearance, his narrator begins to include material drawn from the biographies of U.S. presidents (Wilson, Johnson, and Nixon), unhappy children who, like Wade, satisfied their longing for love and approval through politics. He cites other politicians on the traumatic shock of losing an election and the tendency to conceal things from their families. He includes accounts of magic that locate its appeal in the longing for supernatural power and control. Soon, he begins to build in actual testimony about the My Lai incident, in which dumbstruck veterans try to excuse their appalling savagery or claim to forget it altogether. He cites novels and psychiatric manuals, newspapers and military records—all of this alongside fictional testimony from his own characters. Eventually, he confronts us with much older historical events: General Sherman's call for the extermination of Sioux "men, women and children" (260); the U.S. slaughter of three hundred Cheyenne; the last words of General Custer ("John!, Oh John!" [145, 260], a common term for Indians but one which also seems eerily to address John Wade); and both

American and British soldiers describing the "savage" slaughter of innocents in the American War of Independence (262–63).

In many respects, then, *In the Lake of the Woods* charts a cycle of violation and murder in the United States that stems from both the experience of war and the much more ordinary experience of becoming a man. O'Brien does not articulate this notion as such but instead presents a suggestive collage of historical and fictional echoes that are, like the experience of trauma itself, fragmented and repetitive. Yet what is so strange about these fragments is that they are presented as evidence in the case of Kathy Wade—as if the history of war time atrocities were somehow causally connected to her disappearance. If they tell a story at all, it is one that must be pieced together out of the scraps left by the narrator. It is certainly not a tale about Kathy, about whose fate the narrator finally admits "nothing is solved" (304n136). It is, rather, about the collective atrocities that have punctuated all the armed conflicts of the United States—how they can be forgotten by their perpetrators and inaccessible to their historians. And yet O'Brien locates this account of historical dynamics in a story of individual grief and amnesia, a story that is unresolved from both of its widely divergent points of view. What is the meaning of a story which our sorcerer-author has made to look like a true crime mystery but rigged to be fundamentally insoluble and ambiguous? What is the meaning of a *fictional* plot that is a mystery to its own (amnesic?) author? "My feeling," O'Brien has admitted, "is that John Wade didn't kill her. But that's just what I think" (Edelman). And why is this story ultimately a Vietnam story? How did we get from individual violence to collective, historical trauma here?

To answer these questions we must turn to a final puzzling feature of *In the Lake of the Woods*. It turns out that, in composing this novel, O'Brien borrowed key sections of two earlier autobiographical essays. The first of these, "The Magic Show" (1991), describes how O'Brien came to believe that "fiction writing involves a desire to enter the mystery of things" (379). It begins this way:

> As a kid, through grade school and into high school, my hobby was magic. I enjoyed the power; I liked making miracles happen. In the basement, where I practiced in front of a stand-up mirror, I caused my mother's silk scarves to change color. I used a scissors to cut my father's best

> tie in half, displaying the pieces, and then restored it whole. I placed a penny in the palm of my hand, made my hand into a fist, made the penny into a white mouse. This was not true magic. It was trickery. But I sometimes pretended otherwise, because I was a kid then, and because pretending was the thrill of magic, and because for a time what seemed to happen became a happening itself. I was a dreamer. I liked watching my hands in the mirror, imagining how someday I might perform much grander magic, tigers becoming giraffes, beautiful girls levitating like angels in the high yellow spotlights, naked maybe, no wires and strings, just floating.
>
> (379)

The bulk of this passage also appears in *In the Lake of the Woods* (31), where, converted into the third person, it is used to describe young John Wade.

I draw attention to this borrowing not simply to show that O'Brien is autobiographically related to young John Wade, but because "The Magic Show" is a theoretical blueprint for *In the Lake of the Woods*. The central claim of the essay is that storytellers are "sorcerers." Both magic and fiction, O'Brien claims, are "solitary endeavors" in which one aims "for tension and suspense, a sense of drama," and satisfies a basic human "desire to enter the mystery of things," "to know what cannot be known" (379). This "interpretation of magic and stories" (380) obviously shapes the character of John Wade, whose confabulations are inseparable from his interest in magic. But there is more. Being a writer, O'Brien explains, is like being a healer or miracle worker—one who controls the world: "The shaman or witch doctor was believed to have access to an unseen world, a world of demons and gods," not only through magic but through "stories *about* those spirits" (380). Even the "personage of Jesus," O'Brien points out, was both "a doer of . . . miracles" and "a teller of miraculous stories" (380). The possession of these godlike powers was a compelling childhood fantasy for O'Brien. "I liked the aloneness" of magic, he writes, "as God and other miracle makers must also like it. . . . I liked shaping the universe around me. I liked the power" (379). This fantasy is visible in the displaced Oedipal struggles of O'Brien's novel, where a nascent storyteller, deprived of a father with whom to compete, suddenly wishes to kill the Father above: both the furious John Wade and

Alexandre Dumas (whose case is cited by our narrator) respond to the deaths of their fathers by wishing to "Kill Jesus" or "kill God" (200).

"The Magic Show" expresses a more constructive vision of divine activity than the novel. But if the essay begins with the profound hope that "as writers we might discover that which cannot be known through empirical means" (381), it eventually converts this hope into a radical anti-empiricism. We may want magic to plumb the secrets of the world, O'Brien argues, but we also crave uncertainty and mystery; thus "there is something both false and trivial about a story that arrives at absolute closure" (383). O'Brien ultimately rejects the idea that we can unravel "the mysteries of the human spirit" (384). "We 'know' human character—maybe even our own—," he writes, "in the same way we know black holes; by their effects on the external world." This view of human ineffability is echoed by the novel's narrator, whose remarks are repeatedly lifted from "The Magic Show": "Our lovers, our husbands, our wives, our fathers, our gods—," he says in one such passage, "they are all beyond us" (*In the Lake* 103n36, 269n120, 298n127). Later he quotes Freud making a similar point: "Whoever undertakes to write a biography binds himself to lying, to concealment, to flummery . . . Truth is not accessible" (qtd. in *In the Lake* 294).

The second vital source for (and commentary on) *In the Lake of the Woods* is the 1994 autobiographical essay "The Vietnam in Me," a confessional piece published on the eve of the novel, in which O'Brien admits being a "chubby and friendless" child whose cowardice and "desperate love craving" led him to fight a war he believed was "mistaken, probably evil."[6] This essay depicts a response to trauma radically different from the one articulated in "The Magic Show." It describes O'Brien's journey to Thuan Yen in February 1994 during a period in which he is barely in control of his life. He is profoundly depressed, anxious, suicidal—suffering not only the aftereffects of his combat experience, but its painful

6. This is not to suggest that Wade is a mere stand-in for O'Brien. O'Brien clearly states that his own unit did not engage in the slaughter of civilians, and unlike the forgetful Wade, he finds that there is "much to remember" about Vietnam ("The Vietnam in Me").

repetition in his own writing. Unlike the fantasy of controlling the world through the magic of fiction, this essay reveals the nightmare of post-traumatic stress in which writing about Vietnam is a haunting compulsion that wreaks havoc in O'Brien's life. As he puts it, "You don't have to be in Nam to be in Nam." If "The Magic Show" is a literary manifesto for the imaginative power to transcend a painful reality, "The Vietnam in Me" is a classic expression of trauma's power to create endless human suffering.

Just as important, while "The Magic Show" is an expression of radical historiographic skepticism, "The Vietnam in Me" laments historical forgetting and moral unaccountability. In the latter essay, O'Brien regrets that "the villainy of that Saturday morning in 1968 has been pushed off to the margins of memory" and clearly states that while he can understand the butchery of Thuan Yen, his own unit never crossed the "conspicuous line between rage and homicide."

These two source essays thus correspond to the strangely divided structure of O'Brien's novel. While the narrative of John Wade's trauma and the narrative of historical recovery *appear* to conflict, they in fact describe two forms of authorial subjectivity linked through the experiences of O'Brien himself. They also articulate two distinct, but connected, responses to trauma, one geared toward repression and erasure, the other toward acknowledgement and documentation. If Wade's narrative depicts post-traumatic *repression*, the battle to convert shame, guilt, and uncontrollable repetition into something more tolerable, then the narrator's story of recovery represents the equally frustrating attempt to *recover* the traumatic experience, to convert it from trauma to history. Insofar as fiction can be distinguished from history, the two narrative strands of the novel represent the fictional and the historical, respectively. On the one hand, we have the sorcerer's desire to fictionalize, to perform the priestly rite of transforming the painful past into a wondrous illusion; on the other hand, we have the historian's desire to unearth, to confess the truth, to document the past, to solve the mystery. On one hand, the expression of historiographic skepticism; on the other, the realist impulse.

Like its two sources, then, the novel offers competing models of trauma and its relation to history. The primary narrative of John

Wade is driven by historiographic skepticism, vanishing tricks, the healing of pain through misdirection and illusion. The novel's historical narrative expresses a realist desire to terminate the experience of trauma by putting it into perspective—perhaps on the basis of Herman's view that one escapes trauma by offering public testimony (122). But in the end, this proves impossible. No matter how much the narrator wants to critique the culture that has forgotten these events, he must admit that he, too, has no purchase on them. His footnotes (lifted from "The Magic Show") become more frequent, intimate, and confessional. By the end of the novel, he admits that his platoon, too, committed "atrocities—the dirty secrets that live forever inside all of us. I have my own PFC Weatherby. My own old man with a hoe." He, too, has learned to forget. "I can understand," he admits, "how [Wade] kept things buried, how he could never face or even recall the butchery at Thuan Yen. For me, after a quarter century, nothing much remains of that ugly war. A handful of splotchy images" (301n130).

Here, in a sort of traumatic infectiousness, the narrator's experience has begun to blend uneasily with Wade's—and with O'Brien's. As Mark Heberle has observed, "Wade spends the last several months of his service as a clerk, which gives him the opportunity to change his identity by altering military records, rewriting himself out of Charlie Company and into Alpha Company—O'Brien's own company. Thus, not only does O'Brien rewrite himself as Wade, but Wade tries to rewrite himself as O'Brien" (250). By the end of the novel, Wade, the narrator, and O'Brien have all begun to morph into one another as the narrator's memories of combat come to seem untrustworthy, *less real* than his dramatic renderings of John Wade's life. "In a peculiar way," the narrator notes, "the ordeal of John Wade . . . has a vivid, living clarity that seems far more authentic than my own faraway experience. Maybe that's what this book is for. To remind me. To give me back my vanished life" (301n130). This is more than a simple salute to the imaginative power of fiction, for in the end the narrator admits that there is something oddly amnesic about his own memory. "On occasion," he confesses, "I find myself wondering if these old tattered memories weren't lifted from someone else's life, or from a piece of fiction I once read or once heard about" (301n130). This

unsettling suspicion is actually experienced by a surprising number of Vietnam veterans, who report "they have forgotten where some of their memories came from—their own experience, documentary photographs, or Hollywood movies" (Sturken 20). So powerful is narrative fiction, in fact, that even nonveterans have written themselves into the war—as for instance when the distinguished historian Joseph Ellis admitted fabricating Vietnam War stories for his students (Scott). With such phenomena we begin to verge on the contentious territory of recovered memory syndrome and its evil twin, false memory syndrome.

We also arrive at the moment in which the trauma of O'Brien's protagonist has merged with the trauma of the narrator-historian. The narrator's sense that his own memories may be false is only another version of John Wade's inability to recall what he has done (or not done) to his wife. This is one way of understanding why the narrator believes that writing the "history" of John Wade might "give him his life back," provide the clarity to help him recover his own "vanished" past. Yet the narrator cannot shake the suspicion that his memories are products of his narrative rather than of his life. This sensation is akin to the traumatic effect that Caruth calls "unclaimed experience." In both cases, the traumatized soldier has, to use her terms, "missed" the traumatic experience and must now reapproach it *as a historian*. The paradox, however, is that, conceived this way, traumatic events can only be historicized via an "amnesic" experience, which destabilizes the authority of the memory to provide testimony.

This, finally, is the internal contradiction that haunts trauma, that splinters it under the weight of incompatible cultural demands. Trauma, we are told, points to the real: its manifestations are the eruptions of the past, of truth itself; it explains the causes of things, the formation of the self, the motive force of history. And yet, paradoxically, the traumatic event cannot offer these things unless it remains in hiding. In the end, then, we are not much further than when we started: the real and the fictional—history and fantasy—are hopelessly intertwined. *In the Lake of the Woods* is symptomatic of this dilemma. The novel is motivated by conflicting impulses: on the one hand, to unmask the repressed nightmares of U.S. history; on the other, to display an extraordinary capacity for decep-

tion, confabulation, trickery, storytelling. At every turn, our narrator seems to maintain a scrupulous skepticism about his difficulty in depicting the past—and yet the novel's uneasy blending of Wade, narrator, and O'Brien, its linking of trauma and fantasy, leaves open the possibility that our sorcerer-author has staged everything, even his own skepticism. O'Brien himself has done everything in his power to heighten this suspicion. He is now well known for telling audiences a purportedly autobiographical tale before impishly revealing that "none of it is true. Or very little of it. It's—invented" ("Writing Vietnam"). He has explained this stunt in paradoxical terms that sound almost like a defense of John Wade's duplicity. Fiction, even in the guise of autobiography, O'Brien tells his audiences, is "for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth" ("Writing Vietnam").

This problem—the need to document the truth of events *and* the sense that only narrative confabulations can simulate the intensity of those events—is what brings O'Brien's book to a halt before we find out what has happened to its central characters. Just as the original trauma of the soldier can only be reapproached as history, so the narrative of John Wade gives way to the narrative of historical reconstruction. But the latter narrative cannot satisfactorily conclude. It can only document the difficulty of approaching the past before articulating a sense of profound doubt and skepticism about our ability to tell its story. And if telling the story is what allows the sufferer to transcend trauma, as Judith Herman claims, then O'Brien's narrative seems to document the need to repeat that trauma compulsively, not only as memory, but as historical fiction, too.

Miami University

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