Writing to Remember: The Chronotope of Memory and Time in Bảo Ninh’s Nỗi buồn chiến tranh [The Sorrow of War]

In contemporary Vietnamese war literature, no work has suffered a worse fortune than Bảo Ninh’s Nỗi buồn chiến tranh [The Sorrow of War]. Called by Marxist critic Đỗ Văn Khang “confused,” “an evidence of psychopathic disorder,” “falsifying reality,” and “sullying the armed forces’ reputation,” the book was forced to be published in 1990 under a different title: Thân phận của tình yêu [The Fate of Love]. The strongest attack came from Trần Duy Châu, who published a scathing piece in 1994 in Tạp Chí Cổng Sàn [The Communism Review] accusing Bảo Ninh of treason: “By sullying our people’s heroic resistance against the United States, Bảo Ninh not only offends the living but also exterminates once and for all those who sacrificed their lives for ‘the survival of our people.’”

Though the Đổi Mới [Renovation] policy was promulgated as early as 1987 to “cởi trói” [untie] artists and writers, and Party Chief Nguyễn Văn Linh encouraged artists and writers to “safeguard the integrity of your vocation,” what he really meant was “righteous artists and writers should stand firm in the school of socialist realism.” Regardless, critics, scholars, and writers deliberately ignored Linh’s caution and called for a complete departure from old-fashioned models sanctioned by the party. Over
a period of three years following Nguyễn Văn Linh’s 1987 speech, Văn Nghệ [Literature and Art], the official review of the Vietnamese Writers’ Association, published hundreds of articles on various renovation-related issues ranging from problems of the so-called “illustrative literature” to debates on literature and politics to methods of literary criticism, in addition to several roundtable discussions on art and literature. There was also a flowering of fiction that represented a definitive renunciation of socialist realism, with contributions from prominent established and emerging writers such as Nguyễn Minh Châu, Lê Lựu, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương, and Phạm Thị Hoài. For the first time, the writers’ association established a prestigious annual literary award. The most productive and successful year for prose was 1991, with three prizes awarded to Nguyễn Khắc Trọng’s Mảnh đất làm người nhiều ma [The Land that Has Too Many People, Too Many Ghosts], Dương Hưởng’s Bên không chồng [The Jetty of No Husband], and Bào Ninh’s Nỗi buồn chiến tranh.5

A word should be said about Nguyễn Khắc Trọng’s and Dương Hưởng’s novels, which, unlike Bào Ninh’s, received unanimous praise from critics and state-run media. Both writers explored to the fullest what had hitherto been forbidden in a socialist system—the terror of the 1954 Land Reform campaign, the ruthlessness of a new social class that rose after the liberation of the North in 1954, and most importantly the devastating consequences of the war after the unification of the country in 1975. Both Nguyễn Khắc Trọng and Dương Hưởng treated these themes with a realism that rivals that of Émile Zola. In light of the party’s new policy highlighted in Nguyễn Văn Linh’s speech, exposing the dark side of society or the error of the government’s former policy was permissible as long as the writer did not criticize the party or the resistance against the United States. For this reason, while a progressive critic like Nguyễn Phan Hách sang the praises of Nguyễn Khắc Trọng’s novel as “a serious work, not entirely leaning to the negative, the bad, the evil,” he treated Bào Ninh’s novel harshly. “Stepping back, standing higher a little, I can sympathize with this work. But I can’t bring myself to entirely agree with its content.” Nguyễn Phan Hách admired Bào Ninh’s “extremely beautiful style” but deplored his failure to uphold the principles of socialist realism in describing “our great, glorious resistance.”6
Awarding the prize to Bảo Ninh turns out to have been a controversy. For three straight months from August to November 1995, Báo công an Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh [HCMC Police Services Review] interviewed the award-granting committee to find out about the controversy surrounding the award. Most of its members agreed that Bảo Ninh’s novel did not meet the requirements for the prize, because it was “dark, depressing [. . .] and it wrongly reflects our people’s aspirations.” The author was also scolded for expressing “his wrong opinions about the war in his interviews with foreign reporters.” Nevertheless, said Vũ Tú Nam, secretary general of the Vietnamese Writers’ Association, the prize was still given to the author to encourage a young talented writer. Bảo Ninh came under stronger attack from hard-core communist critics outside the writers’ association. General Nguyễn Đình Uóc called the book “a bad, evil work.” Interviewed on the same occasion, Huỳnh Khải Vinh declared that the book was “biased and untruthful” and that “I did not have the guts to finish it.” Another critic, Thanh Lê, said the novel was “an offense, a challenge to common sense.”

It is interesting to note that the barrage of attacks against Bảo Ninh was launched after the English translation of his novel in 1993. The book got rave reviews from Time, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Independent, and the Guardian, etc. Kirkus Review declared that Bảo Ninh’s novel is “in the tradition of Remarque and Sassoon.” The Independent unabashedly asserted that it “[v]aults over all the American fiction [that] came out of the Vietnam War to take its place alongside the greatest war novel of the century.” Bảo Ninh’s reputation overseas, notably the reprinting of the novel by a Vietnamese American publisher in 1993 and Robert Templer’s interview with the writer in the Independent in 1994, caused problems for him at home. The very famous writer Nguyễn Đình Thi held “some bad Việt Kiều” responsible for the English translation of the novel that made people in the West misjudge “our system.” For over ten years before its third printing in 2003, the novel had not stimulated any significant discussion on the nation’s literary forums. With the exception of a few scholars and critics who viewed the book favorably—Nguyễn Ngọc, Trần Đình S urzęd, Đỗ Đức Hiệu, and Lê Ngọc Trà—the rest did not feel at ease about Bảo Ninh’s candid representation of the war. Last but not
least, though a finalist, the novel did not get enough votes to win the prestigious Hồ Chí Minh Award in 2016.

My purpose in writing this essay is to argue that Nội buồn chiến tranh is perhaps the most important war novel since Đổi Mới. It best represents the Vietnamese voices in the most complex, most tragic war in modern history. It marks the dramatic shift of Vietnamese literature in the wake of the renovation policy adopted by the Sixth Party Congress from socialist realism to a postmodernist concept of art, that is, “man’s anguish over his existence and destiny, as well as his missed opportunities and the passage of time.”14 In particular, the book has drawn the interest of major scholars. The critic Thiệu Mai writes, “The author thinks and feels in the extreme... writhing in agony on every single page of the manuscript.”15 In his most touching defense of Bảo Ninh, Nguyễn Ngọc compares his writing to a hemorrhage: “The writer’s agony (Bảo Ninh calls it ‘sorrow’) pours out like his blood over some hundred pages.”16 Đỗ Đức Hiếu compares “the burst of memory and the sudden resurrection of the past”17 in Nội buồn chiến tranh to Marcel Proust’s “philosophy of time.” In an overarching and pertinent analysis, Lê Ngọc Trà writes that the novel is about “man’s self-consciousness of his personal destiny and national history, as well as his intellectual pain, desperate aspiration for happiness, and restless anguish over the past.”18

Nội buồn chiến tranh deals with the war and its consequences with a candor, eloquence, and anguish that have no parallel in modern Vietnamese literature. The war leaves the dead unappeased, their survivors broken, and future generations endangered. In the novel, only the past, what existed before the war, lives on, the present and the future already doomed to extinction.

The novel tells the story of a soldier haunted by his guilt for outliving his comrades-at-arms, grieving over the loss of his first love, and angered by the aftermath of war and the realities of peace. Inspired by his idealism and caught in the maelstrom of war, Kiên, in the bloom of youth, goes off to fight the Americans and their ally, the South Vietnamese, in the early 1970s. At the close of the war he returns home, only to find he has lost his lover and his father and cannot get over the trauma and horrors of war, nor his survivor guilt. Kiên, a combat veteran turned writer who composes
fragments of a manuscript about his delirious war experience, is ridiculed and scorned by the public for his eccentric manners. In the last attack of insanity, the writer, like his artist father, puts his manuscript in a furnace, sets fire to it, and vanishes. Luckily his work is saved by his housemate, a deaf woman.

As the preceding discussion suggests, the focus of Nơi buông chiến tranh is not the physical destruction of things or the loss of human lives caused by the war; such ravages, which are not uncommon in a country with a long history of internal conflicts like Vietnam, according to the novel’s hero, “can be repaired, and these wounds will heal.”19 Rather, the novel centers on the unique character of the last great war, its terrible impact on the human soul. In the words of Trần Đình Sưu, one of the discussants at a roundtable on Bảo Ninh’s novel organized by the Văn Nghệ ở Hà Nội in 1991, “the atrocities and the devastations of the war can be seen not only in the casualties on the battlefield but also in the death of the soul, the loss of love, and missed opportunities.”20

To the two idealistic, innocent youths Kiên and Phương, going to war is an act of patriotism, and the worst Kiên imagined the war could do to him, his sweetheart, and his buddies would be death, as seen in the US air raid of a military train in which they get caught. What happens to him in the attack is worse than death. Separated from Phương, whom he later finds bloody and in tatters after her rape by a sailor on the train, Kiên discovers that “in an instant the war becomes something he was not used to thinking about.”21 Having lost his innocence, Kiên comes to realize that the war is not heroic but brutal, tragic, and unexpected: “Kiên’s life started to bleed the moment he was yanked from Phương, and since then he experienced nothing but pain and defeat. Immediately after he knew about the brutality of life in wartime, Kiên felt his soul was already dead, totally dead.”22 The war no longer represents what Kiên and young Vietnamese are fighting for, but it is the loss of what he and his generation have dearly embraced. Not only has he lost his first love; he also begins, when swept into the actual war and engaging more and more in fierce battles, to understand the nature of war, the human condition, the absurdity of life and death, and much more. In war Kiên learns that even the worst thing imaginable in the world cannot be compared with it. “Alas, war is a wasteland, a miserable endless
wandering, a region without men and women, a world of the utmost cruelty, sorrow, and desolation the human race has ever created!” Hyperbolic as the passage may seem, it expresses the protagonist’s and other characters’ truthful viewpoint as participants in the war. Given all the devastations that they witness in which “all the best things in life have been destroyed,” a character wonders how future generations will turn out, since they inherit nothing but evil from their forebears. What frightens these soldiers most is that they feel they are losing their human nature due to their direct involvement in the destruction of their own people. “I’m not afraid of death,” says a character, Can, to justify his plan to desert his unit, “but this senseless killing, if it continues, will destroy all humanity. I’ve always told myself not to resort to knives and bayonets when killing, but I’ve got used to it already. I still don’t understand why when I was young I almost entered the seminary.”

Revealing stories like these show this to be one of the most “truthful” novels about Vietnam’s last conflict. Deconstructing the “holy” war in which heroes are hallowed to the point of supernatural, the novel depicts those heroes with all their human weaknesses. First, the horrors of modern warfare subject them to mere shock and terror in the face of death, which is never dealt with in conventional Vietnamese war literature. Even “kill ratios and free-fire zones,” a “strategy” that Thomas Myers finds “unusual among Vietnam novels,” pales in comparison to Nỗi buồn chiến tranh. Despite the graphic and emotional impact of its body-count motif, other Vietnam War literature, because it blends history and fiction, fails to capture this infernal picture of real human massacre depicted in Bảo Ninh’s novel:

That season it was very dry and windy. The forest, soaked with napalm, burst into flame and burned like hell. The companies that had been burst asunder and were trying to regroup were being ripped apart again. Struck out of their tunnels and driven crazy, columns of troops stampeded against an immense barrage of bullets and dropped dead. Above them helicopter gunners strafed fleeing soldiers one after another from behind. Blood gushed forth from their necks, streaming down their bodies. The oval clearing in the woods, where it is said the grass has not grown ever since, was strewn with bodies, smashed and blown up by rockets, continuously expelling hot steam. . . . A few days later,
the air became dark with clouds of hawks and crows, and after the Americans had withdrawn, a huge flood began, turning the battlefield into a murky swamp of blood. Bloated human corpses and charred bodies of animals floated on the surface of water along with twigs and trees of different sizes torn apart by bomb and rocket explosions.26

This mass destruction of human lives and landscapes by unimaginable American firepower and technology not only arouses visceral abhorrence at the carnage of human lives. It also calls into question the purpose of such horrid human sacrifice and, in particular, the validity of the traditional representation of North Vietnamese combat soldiers as Homeric figures, “brass bulwarks” almost always immune from injury. In fact, the hell of this brutal war stripped heroes of their “divine” status celebrated in North Vietnamese propaganda literature, reducing them to the instinctive behavior of ordinary people. The terror of war, once internalized, takes an immeasurable toll on the protagonist’s and his men’s mental life. After suffering heavy casualties, they experience constant hallucinations about the dead:

Since then Battalion 27 is not mentioned anymore, although countless ghosts that came into being after that battle are stalking all over the forest—along streams, shrubs, and bushes—as if they were still alive. And that unknown, dense, misty clearing ever since has been called the Soul Summoning Clearing, a name that when mentioned would give you the goosebumps. Every now and then, perhaps to perform a certain ceremony pertinent only to the nether world, the ghosts of men in the battalion assemble as if for a routine roll call. The murmuring of brooks, the rustling and sobbing heard in the jungle at night, the howling of the wind, all represent the voices of the lost souls that we the living usually hear and comprehend.27

Though the protagonist’s thinking may seem morbid and aberrant, the above passage shows that he and his men are not much different from those lost souls. Like the latter, they are at the abyss of their depression—broken, lost, lonely. These survivors, as days and months go by, begin to join their dead comrades, “lying thick in the Trường Sơn jungle,” but “the road of war still remained endless, gloomy, and directionless.”28 The interminable conflict has not only mowed down most of the hero’s buddies; it has also robbed him of his youth and leaves him and his men devastated physically and
morally. In fact, the horrors of the battlefield are much less demoralizing than the actual condition in which soldiers find themselves. “Ravaged by hunger, by blood-rotting malaria, we were in tatters; our flesh became putrid like lepers.” The war now takes on a new meaning: it is associated with slow death, total moral and mental breakdown. It deprives the hero of the will to live and to die. “Indifferent to everybody and everything around him, Kiên seems to be quietly bidding farewell to himself. He is waiting for death, but death itself seems humdrum and mundane to him.”

Kiên’s indifference to the world to the point of complete estrangement from the present is common among veterans after war. There is no way to heal their psychic wound because war destroys what was part of themselves: youth, love, happiness, hope, and the future. Although they do not “come home talking dirty” like most heroes of Vietnam War novels, they are bitter about the realities of peace. In the Unification Train bound for Hà Nội, Kiên and his fellow veterans feel hurt and betrayed because nobody pays attention to them. They are returning home not as victorious heroes amid applause and salutes but as useless cripples looked upon with pity and scorn. A veteran bursts out, “Hmm, peace! Dammit! Peace is like a tree growing out of our flesh and blood, and we are left with nothing but a few bones. . . . Because of peace, people have dropped the mask they were wearing these years, showing their real face. How disgusting!” But the worst thing that happens to these broken men and women is their inability to fit into a society in peacetime that is busy catching up and has to cast them, the unfit, aside. Says the same man whose only job after the war is to collect the remains of soldiers in the jungle of South Vietnam: “I’m telling you the truth, Mr. Kiên. After this great victory, former combat soldiers like you aren’t normal anymore.” The protagonist puts it more clearly: “Just look and think. That’s the truth. Losses can be repaired, wounds will heal, grief will go away, but the sorrow of war will deepen more and more every day.”

The last remark brings us back to the central theme of the novel implied in its title, Nội buồn chiến tranh. What pervades the novel is the hero’s sorrowful reflection on human destiny during and after the war. Two things leave him constantly dejected: the loss of his first love and the death of his fellow combatants. The war brings him and Phương together, but the
war also breaks them apart. Yet the pain of that love-and-hate relationship is nothing compared to the pain and grief Kiên feels over the loss of so many of his buddies. Though Phương breaks off their relationship, she is alive and they still care for each other. By contrast, the departure of his men, with whom he has fought for more than a decade, is permanent. Kiên’s attachment to the dead, the cause of his obsession with the past and the reason for what he calls the sorrow of war, stems from the guilt he feels for surviving. “I miss them so. I love them so. What grief and sorrow! In their grave humans are no longer humans. I look. I understand. And that’s about it. There’s nothing I can do for them.”35 It is his longing to look at the dead, to understand them, that helps Kiên expiate his sins and alleviate his loneliness. Identifying with the dead becomes Kiên’s only means of living. On excavating their remains, Kiên eerily feels as if the spirit of the dead were invading his soul. “With the passage of time, these living currents of death are condensed in his mind, blend with his unconscious, and become the darkness of his soul. In his memory innumerable ghosts that he dearly loved parade endlessly in his mind, causing his sorrow of war to last forever in his life.”36

Identifying with the dead thus becomes a necessity for Kiên. As a ghost tells him and other survivors, death is life, because in death one can find “peace of mind, transcendence, and true liberty.”37 Seeing a string of youthful American soldiers in their bunkers, their bodies unscratched, their heads against their buddies’ shoulders, lost in their eternal sleep, Kiên understands what death and life mean to the dead and the vanity of the so-called noble ideals for which they were taught to sacrifice their lives. “At the bottom of the giant jungle the dead share the same fate. There are neither the victors, nor the vanquished; there are neither the heroes nor the cowards. Only their names are still there. But they were either wiped out by Time, or become a pinch of bones or tiny slurry.”38 The war is not only brutal, but also irrational and ridiculous, because it invalidates what it advocates for: heroism. Since the dead, the heroes, do not claim this honor, how can the living be entitled to it when they are spared by the war?

What persists throughout the novel is not only the protagonist’s survivor guilt but also his grief over loss and outrage at the price of war. Kiên’s sorrow, guilt, and anger cannot be mitigated, because his debt to the dead
is too great to repay within his lifetime. The only thing he can do to appease the dead (and himself) is to talk about them, to remember them. This is why, as the narrator says, Kiên’s manuscript is full of dead bodies. “In an irresistible manner, the pages of his book raise one dead soldier after another, and the author drifts further and further into the primordial forest of war, silently rekindling that brutal flame of memory.” He cannot forget the dead, nor can he let go of his memories of war and his first love. The entire life he has lived since his return after the war, which Kiên calls “going backward in time,” curiously is for him “a return to the Nirvana of yesteryear before the war.”

As suggested in the preceding analysis and implied by its title, Nội buồn chiến tranh describes the character’s sorrow after he returns from war. What matters to Kiên is his memory of war and profound sadness. Paradoxically, the war has lost its horrors and becomes his raison d’être, because it is his important past, the dwelling place of his beloved dead and his suffering soul. Though it is long over, the war remains a haunting reality still lasting and occupying a place in space, causing everlasting trauma: “The recent war will suffice to make the pain last a millennium. Perhaps for Kiên that only war he has ever known not only permanently haunts him, hangs heavy on him, but also is the cause of his ups and downs in life, including his happiness, joy and sorrow, love and hate.”

The passage just quoted evokes Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope. Literally called “time-space,” the term, borrowed from Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, is coined by Bakhtin to refer to “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” In his seminal essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin talks about the importance of the chronotope not only in literature but also in all “aspects of natural and human life.” Like the dominant idea that Bakhtin says is man’s principle of representation in his other important essay “The Idea in Dostoevsky,” the chronotope is the force that shapes narrative, gives meaning to the literary text. The chronotope also artistically bridges the gap between the actual world and the represented world in literature. Although they are two different worlds, the chronotope makes them coalesce into one, thus enabling us to “perceive the fullness of the work in all its wholeness and
indivisibility, but at the same time we understand the diversity of the elements that constitute it.”

In his essay Bakhtin distinguishes several major chronotopes, such as the chronotope of adventure in Greek romance, the chronotope of carnivalization in the medieval public square, the chronotope of the road and encounter, the idyllic chronotope. In addition, there are unlimited “minor chronotopes” generated by particular incidents. “[A]ny motif,” Bakhtin says, “has a special chronotope of its own.” We can even say that “[e]ach motif, each aspect of artistic work bears value” and that each contributes to enhancing “the representational significance of the chronotope.” The last characteristic of chronotopes is they gravitate toward dialogic interactions. “Chronotopes,” Bakhtin explains, “are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another, or find themselves in ever more complex relationships.” Chronotopes make the text chronotopic. “We are presented with a text occupying a certain specific place in space; that is, it is localized; our creation of it, our acquaintance with it occurs through time.”

It is hard to highlight Bakhtin’s important ideas about the chronotope in a few paragraphs. In literature, chronotopes are as many as ideas and motifs. Due to the limited scope of my essay, I will select for my discussion three major chronotopes used in Nỗi buôn chiến tranh: the chronotope of memory and time, the chronotope of the road and encounter, and the chronotope of writing. They all fall into the larger chronotope of war, the dominant idea of Bão Ninh’s novel.

Less than two pages into the novel, which describes the hero preparing to go to sleep in the rear of an army truck with plastic bags containing the bones of dead soldiers, he drifts into a dream in which he sees that he is journeying back into the past: “Instantly he feels that the truck suddenly begins to move, its wheels quietly and smoothly rolling automatically, solely engaging in its somnambulism on the solitary jungle trail. The heartbreaking sob of the deep jungle sounds like a long-distant, infinitely vague voice from a certain time and place in the past, like the falling of yellow leaves on a carpet of grass since time immemorial.” This is an example of Bão Ninh’s artistic employment of the chronotope of time; it shows not only the fusion of time and space but also how time and space weave into the hero’s
consciousness and bring his memory of war back to life. In literature, such a fusion reinforces the role of the artistic chronotope. When “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole,” Bakhtin explains, “[t]ime . . . thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” By “materializing time in space,” the chronotope brings forth the representability of narrative events and makes the narrative meaningful. The voice Kiên hears in his night dream is the voice of time indistinct but condensed from a well-defined spatial area in the past, which is the former B3 Front.

The following passage best describes how time functions in the chronotope and how its flow represents the flow of narrative in the novel: “Along the road a running brook rumbles on sadly and interminably, like the sound of time flowing. . . .” This is the real time for Kiên, because he can see, hear, and feel it. According to Bakhtin in his study of the chronotope in Goethe’s work, real time is experienced when the artist has the “ability to see time, to read time in the spatial whole of the world . . . to perceive the filling of space not as an immobile background, but as an emerging whole, an event. . . .” This is the only moment when the hero lives continuously in his real time and in touch with real space (the former B3 Front), drifting off in his dream, yet fully aware of the existence of time in its fullness. But whereas time is experienced by Goethe’s character as a becoming, “in its course,” the hero of Bào Ninh’s novel sees time as moving backward to the past. “The days and months of his life are incessantly retreating.” Time in this chronotope does not advance but is “viscous and sticky,” “moves. . . in narrow circles,” and “drags itself through space.” Time is like Kiên’s sorrow, which is haunting, sad, continually expanding, and never-ending. He constantly feels its presence, because it is inextricably tied to his fate. The novel takes on an important meaning as a result. Encompassing the past that is immobile but so vast and dense, time becomes thick and concrete rather than lengthening, thinning out, and progressing on a straightforward line like historical and biographical time. In Bakhtin’s theory this is the representational significance of the chronotope of time.

The next chronotope concerns the road and encounter. The road is a controversial chronotope for the hero and Phương, his childhood
sweetheart and lover. In the beginning they went to war because it repre-
sented a lofty ideal. But “the road of war,” as it turns out, brings them
misfortune after misfortune. The road is where most events and crises of
life take place. Kiên’s permanent loss of Phương happens after her brutal
rape by a thug on the train that takes them to the front in the middle of a US
bomb attack. According to Bakhtin, the concreteness of the road “permits
everyday life to be realized within it.”

What is realized in it? Only destruction, death, irreparable losses, missed opportunities, all standing out in
starkest realism. In these temporal and spatial relationships, space in the
chronotope of war expands, multiplies into concrete roads and actual loca-
tions of former battles, invisible labyrinths signifying the impasse of the
hero’s writing, and the staggering convolutions of the hero’s memory and
thinking, all seeming to point to the preponderance of space over time. In
fact, temporal–spatial elements in the chronotope still exist, but because this
is the chronotope of threshold characterized by crisis and highly charged
with emotion and value, time drags itself slowly through space. For example,
after the terrible US bomb attack and Phương’s rape, time stays still as if
nothing has happened. “High above, it looks as if it was already noon. The
sky is immaculate and everything is immobile.”

According to Bakhtin, in
the chronotope of crisis time is “essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no
duration and falls out of the course of biographical time.” Time seems to
stand still and nothing happens, although something terrible did happen.
This is human fate in war.

The last chronotope in Nỗi buồn chiến tranh is the chronotope of writing.
This is the most complex chronotope in the novel as it is intertwined with
the chronotope of remembrance and sorrow, which is polemical, indetermi-
nate, and unfinalized because of its dialogic nature. The meaning of the
novel, the shape of its narrative, and the representability of narrated events
also depend on this chronotope.

After an introductory chapter in which Kiên talks about his mission of
recovering the dead soldiers’ remains, the novel switches to the hero’s dis-
cussion of writing as his vocation. Nỗi buồn chiến tranh is a juggle not only
of remembrances but also of words; the hero wants to realize his ambition to
recreate through writing the lost time in its entirety, originality, and fresh-
ness. “I must tell and write in order to resuscitate the lost souls and the
fading loves, brighten again the old dreams.” In a moment of ecstasy he views writing as *thiên mệnh* [Heaven’s will]. Kiên tells himself: “I must write! I must do so to achieve a goal and a redemption, to endure and maintain faith, and to show that I still care to live.” By *thiên mệnh* Kiên means both fate and vocation. He was saved from death by fate so he could write to redeem himself and those who died for him. Because for Kiên art is redemption and redemption can be achieved only by self-torture or death, art is atonement, the greatest suffering and the only option he should accept. The narrator affirms Kiên’s commitment: “He must write! For him there is nothing worthier than writing. Although he knows that writing is too difficult for him, like banging his head on a rock, like tearing his heart into pieces with his own hands, he is determined to write till there is nothing left of him, till everything is gone—then he swears he will kill himself.”

While realizing the importance of writing, the hero still has to struggle with certain dilemmas. The straightforward, chronological recording of facts during the hero’s mission of collecting soldiers’ bones in the former B3 Front in the Central Highlands, an ideal mode of writing in traditional war novels, is suddenly interrupted after less than two short pages. The narrative changes to a series of lengthy, fragmented, personal remembrances and nightmarish dreams. As soon as his memory of the past gets activated, Kiên’s writing goes astray, leading him in a different direction. “Even in the first chapter of his novel he already lets go of the requirements of the traditional novel. Space and time are upset, organization goes awry, the characters’ flow of life is at the mercy of accidental inspiration.” Actually, it is not inspiration that leads him astray but the past that he tries to recover through writing is too vast, too complex, and too painful. Furthermore, Kiên is acutely aware of the curse of being a writer, because his writing not only “raises death after death” but also rekindles in him that “brutal flame of memory.” Writing, therefore, is not salvation as he thought, but goes against his principles of living. “The more he writes,” the narrator says, “the more he silently realizes that it seems *it is not him*, but something antagonistic to what he is writing about that does not cease to violate and upset all the beliefs and concepts of literature and life most enduring to him. And *irresistibly everyday* Kiên plunges more and more deeply into that dangerous, irrational spiral of writing.”
Halfway through the novel, after experimenting enough with writing to explore the complexities of warfare, Kiên appears to have given up: “The flow of fiction is like that. It is all by itself and has nothing to do with Kiên. The novel constructs its own time frame and direction, chooses its own current and final destination.” As for Kiên, he tenaciously and silently casts his destiny into that of his characters. Generally, he is very passive, almost unaware of what is unfolding on the very pages of his own work.61

Having tried and failed several times to be the one in charge of the writing of the novel, Kiên burns his manuscript and disappears. The hero fails as a writer, and he might have contemplated committing suicide, as he said earlier. His desperation stems from his failure to understand that traditional techniques are not appropriate for the complex reality he is confronting. But while he fails as a traditional writer, Kiên is able to tell his story faithfully and eloquently. Though Kiên strays off his preconceived purpose because during the course of his writing “the flame of memory takes him further and further into the labyrinth of the past with twists and turns,” this actually is the nature of writing about memory.62

Because narrative gravitates toward dialogic interactions, Bakhtin says “every work faces outward away from itself, toward the listener-reader, and to a certain extent anticipates possible reactions to itself.”63 Writing is not finalized, but even when it is, it will switch to the hero’s inner monologue—his dialogized narrative. Writing, therefore, does not end, because sorrow is never-ending. Kiên failed as the author of the traditional novel because he wanted to control his narrative in his own way—being an autodiegetic narrator who wishes to recover and encompass the entire reality of the past before the war. He did not realize that though memory is a labyrinth with many tortuous paths that lead him astray in his search for lost time, and though he does not have a straightforward, logically constructed text to guide him, he still has in its place a most reliable narrative—his inner voice, his sorrow—as his guidance. Kiên’s success as a storyteller is his ability to transmit his sorrow to the reader and other characters in the novel. As Kiên’s anonymous narrator puts it at the close of Nội buôn chiến tranh, “we all have a similar sorrow.”64 In spite of his disappearance, the hero’s heritage is passed on to a host of readers: the deaf woman who saves his work from fire, the anonymous narrator who reassembles and reorganizes the salvaged
pages, and actual readers like us, who might not share the hero’s experience but are touched by his sorrow and his experience and might, as Bakhtin would say, play a role in “recreating and in so doing renew[ing] the text.”

To the amazement of Kiên’s narrator, although the new text he creates has a structure different from Kiên’s story, its content does not change. The novel closes with a fascinating twist: the author of the unfinished novel (the chronotope of the living text) is resurrected as one of the characters, his anonymous narrator, and perhaps all future readers, including performers of the text of the novel (whom Bakhtin would expect to exist), all participating in the heteroglossia of retelling the same tale of war, working on the same text, and sharing the same sorrow. No one explains the chronotope of the living text and the role of that living community of tellers and readers in the creation/renewal of the literary text better than Bakhtin: “In the completely real-life time-space where the work resonates, where we find the inscription and the book, we find as well a real person—one who originates spoken speech as well as the inscription and the book—and real people who are hearing and then reading the text.” According to Bakhtin, because the text involves “the listener or reader of multiple and varied periods, recreating and renewing the text,” “the work is not dead,” but it is “speaking, signifying (it involves signs).” In Bakhtin’s words, it is a living text that “occup[ies] a specific place in space... our creation of it, our acquaintance with it occurs through time. The text as such never appears as a dead thing.” In Nơi buồn chiến tranh, this text is the sorrow that the anonymous narrator speaks of for all surviving veterans like him and Kiên: “But we all have a similar sorrow, an enduring sorrow of war, greater than our feeling of happiness as it surpasses our suffering. Thanks to this sorrow, we have escaped war and its endless killing...” Although Kiên is gone, he is not dead but, having fulfilled his role as the author, he vanishes and becomes a member of the community of readers and, like them, has found redemption in sorrow. In sorrow, the anonymous narrator observes: “Kiên permanently lives in the spring of feelings; recovers his love, his friendship and comradeship with the dead; and permanently relives the days and months full of sorrow but radiant with the splendor of love.” Again, this sounds like a revisiting of the Bakhtinian chronotope of memory. The hero lives on in his remembrance and imagination with his uninterrupted narrative of
sorrow as a trope for his everlasting happy past. This is the greatest meaning of the sorrow of war. Through sorrow one can better remember the dead and the past. Through sorrow, also, one can forget the horrors of war and remember the time before when, as Kiên’s narrator puts it, “everybody was very young, idealistic, and sincere.” Sorrow is enduring because it is the text that continues to speak and signify, as Bakhtin would say. Above all, sorrow is redemptive because the presumptive author/hero of the novel and all surviving veterans turn to it for salvation.

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Nỗi buồn chiến tranh stands out as the most important novel during and after Đổi Mới. As if repressed for a very long time and now released for the first time, the creative force in the novel bursts out, ignoring or challenging the party’s rules for artists and writers. The war and its consequences as depicted in the book are far more horrible than in any other war novel in Vietnamese literature. This is why the novel appeals to both Vietnamese and the international reading public. In Vietnam, in addition to continuing to stimulate scholarly interest in the form of reviews and critical essays, the novel has been the research topic of numerous master’s theses over the last several decades. It is regrettable that no book-length study of Bảo Ninh and his novel has been published, probably because critics are still leery of the government’s dubious stance regarding the question of freedom of expression that Party Chief Nguyễn Văn Linh had promised to artists and writers. Abroad, the reviewers’ raves about the novel when it was first translated into English in 1993 have run their course, perhaps because of the lack of serious scholarly study of the book. Recently the question of the novel’s influence emerged when Viet Thanh Nguyen, in his interview with Elizabeth Sulis Kim of the New Orleans Review, said that Bảo Ninh’s novel had “a big formal influence” on him, although it did not inspire him to write The Sympathizer. Though Bảo Ninh’s novel depicts a North Vietnamese veteran’s war memories, it struck a chord with the author of Refugees and Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War. What influences the Vietnamese American Pulitzer Prize winner—and artists and writers of his generation in Vietnam and in the West—is not how the book has inspired them to write, but how it presents “[i]ts formal innovations—which deal with how to talk
about war, how to talk about trauma, how to talk about memory.” The war and its aftermath were so traumatic that it will not be forgotten for many generations. The United States’ disastrous involvement in Vietnam also influences American consciousness. What is best about Bảo Ninh’s novel is that it corrects stereotyped US views of the Vietnamese, presenting them as humans, not the “robot fanatics” that American reporters have portrayed. Finally, as I have endeavored to prove in my essay, the novel is a literary masterpiece that fearlessly addresses difficult themes of war and loss. Although the protagonist declares that his book is a failure—“he writes then destroys everything he has written”—its failure, like William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, is a splendid one because, as Bakhtin would say, the discourse of sorrow and remembering can never end.

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Abstract
This essay addresses the controversial reception of Bảo Ninh’s novel Noi buôn chien tranh [The Sorrow of War] in Vietnam and argues that the novel was perhaps the most important fictional work since Đổi Mới [Renovation]. By overlooking the tenets of socialist realism, the book deals with the war and its aftermath with a candor, eloquence, and anguish that have no parallel in modern Vietnamese literature. The novel’s important questions—memory, time, and writing—can be explained in light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Đổi Mới, war consequences, war literature, writing
Notes
1. All translations are my own. My translations from the novel were prompted by my desire to recover what is missed in Phan Thanh Hào’s translation. Perhaps because Bảo Ninh’s style is unusually long-winded, rugged, and fluid, many places in the book were skipped or mistranslated. An American reviewer’s comment that the language of Bảo Ninh’s novel is “overwrought” applies to Frank Palmos’ English version of Phan Thanh Hào’s translation rather than to Bảo Ninh’s writing style.
5. Writers’ and artists’ responses to Nguyễn Văn Linh’s speech were overwhelming. In just two years, from 1997 to 1999, Văn Nghệ published hundreds of articles on a vast array of topics including the importance of literary reform, the need to isolate politics from literature, literary freedom, methods of literary creation and appreciation, and teaching literature in high schools. There were also, for the first time, roundtable discussions of contemporary poetry and fiction. To this end a special session was held on Bảo Ninh’s novel Nội binh chiến tranh featuring major critics and writers such as Thiếu Mai, Nguyễn Ngọc, Đỗ Đức Hiếu, and Trần Đình Sứ. Promulgated by the Sixth Party Congress of 1987, the Đổi Mới policy had a far-reaching impact on Vietnamese literature. From 1987 to 1992, many writers rejected socialist realism, which had ruled since the suppression of the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm [Humanities and Master Work] in 1956. For an in-depth analysis of the so-called 1987 glasnost and the suppression of this policy in 1989, see Phung Hien Khanh, “Glasnot in Vietnam: Limits to Openness,” Indochina Report (October–December 1990): 1–27. A massive collection of documents about Đổi Mới, including controversial reactions to Bảo Ninh’s novel, was compiled by Lại Nguyên Án, Nguyễn Thị Bình, and their research assistants and was periodically posted on www.viet-studies.net/NhaVanDoiMoi.htm.
20. Trần Đình Sỹ, “Thảo luận về tiểu thuyết Thần phận của tình yêu.”
22. Ibid.
23. Bao Ninh, NBCT, 47.
24. Ibid., 35.
26. Bảo Ninh, *NBCT*, 18–19. Battles graphically described in the quote are believable. In an interview in 1999 by Marc Levy, Bảo Ninh states that of five hundred men and women in his 714 Youth Brigade sent to the South to fight, only ten returned. The most tragic dimensions of the war often escaped Vietnam War novelists. First, as Thomas Myers has complained, American soldiers’ “faith in the quick fix and failure to read Vietnamese cultural history” (*Walking Point*, 28) prevented them from understanding the Vietnamese and, I would also argue, their suffering. Second, whereas US combat veterans’ war experience may have been very intense, it lacked the kind of trauma suffered by their Vietnamese counterparts described in Bảo Ninh’s novel. Bound by the communal oath “Born in the North and die in the South” sworn before going to war, North Vietnamese recruits saw little hope that they would return home. Still, if alive but crippled like Hiền in the novel, veterans were expected to act normal for the sake of avoiding humiliation. In a culture that puts a high premium on humility and forbearance, the poet Xuân Diệu would advise when action is impossible and useless, “Có quên di néh cảm mà nín” [Just forget and keep mum].

27. Ibid., 20.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 61.
34. Ibid., 266.
35. Ibid., 60.
36. Ibid., 41.
37. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 78.
40. Ibid., 323.
41. Ibid., 98.
44. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time,” 255.
45. Ibid., 250.
46. Ibid., 252, emphasis added.
47. Bảơ Ninh, NBCT, 18.
49. Bảơ Ninh, NBCT, 28, emphasis added.
51. Bảơ Ninh, NBCT, 326.
53. Ibid., 120, emphasis in original.
54. Bảơ Ninh, NBCT, 300.
55. Bakhtin, Forms of Time, 248.
57. Ibid., 195.
58. Ibid., 194.
59. Ibid., 70.
60. Ibid., emphasis added.
62. Ibid.
64. Bảơ Ninh, NBCT, 325.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., 252.
68. Ibid.
70. Ibid, 326.
71. Ibid.
73. See Timothy Lomperis, “Reading the Wind”: The Literature of the Vietnam War (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987). GIs who served in Vietnam and American reporters held a similar stereotyped view of South Vietnamese during the war. In a two-day conference on the literature of the Vietnam War at Duke University on May 7–9, 1985, several Vietnam veteran writers recalled “the numb stare” on the face of peasants and some captured Việt Cộng suspects, which they had interpreted as these people’s insensitivity to pain and suffering or their inability to value human lives. These writers called for a study of Vietnam’s
literature “to reach beyond ourselves” and “to come to terms with the Vietnamese.” The acclaim given in the West to Bảo Ninh’s novel was due to its most truthful representation of the war from a North Vietnamese perspective. It was unfortunate that the South Vietnamese had no opportunity to present their perspective, because their regime fell so soon.