

In Dreams, In Imagination: Suspense, Anxiety and the Cold War in Tim O'Brien's

*The Nuclear Age*

I was a witness. I saw it happen. In dreams, in imagination, I watched  
the world end.

Tim O'Brien, *The Nuclear Age*

In Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age* the narrator, William Cowling, gazes out his airplane window at a United States alight with nuclear explosions. In Don DeLillo's *End Zone* a nuclear device explodes in Europe, conflict escalates and cities around the world are destroyed. In Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* a supermarket erupts in panic as sirens wail, jets are scrambled and a nuclear missile explodes. The opening frames of the film *Thirteen Days* are lit by the explosions of rocket propellant as a missile rises gracefully into the blackness of space. The earth's horizon is seen from the top of the missile's arc, and inverts as it heads back downwards. A nuclear explosion follows, more missiles leaping into the air are intercut with further explosions, and the sequence ends with a mushroom cloud boiling up to fill the screen.<sup>1</sup>

These are iconic Cold War images: the end of the world in a cataclysmic release of the energy locked inside matter. What makes these texts significant, though, is that these images of the end are placed under elision. In one form or another, all of the episodes described are mental, not physical, events: in *The Nuclear Age* thermonuclear war is a traumatic hallucination of the novel's troubled protagonist, in *End Zone* it is the climax of a war game played by the apocalypse-obsessed narrator

and in *Generation X* it is a story told amongst a group of friends. *Thirteen Days* simply leaves its opening sequence unexplained, and the audience is left to infer that it was a path history failed to take, for the film goes on to depict the successful attempt to avert the war depicted in the opening scenes, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As readers and viewers we are, therefore, asked to hold these images in suspension, frozen in our minds as deferred possibilities.

*The Nuclear Age* is particularly significant because it makes obsession with this constantly threatened but deferred possibility the overriding focus of the narrative. The novel's concern is not with the explosion of the Cold War into nuclear heat but with the experience of living with this threat, unresolved, over a long period of time, and it explores the psychological consequences of long-term, and seemingly unending, fear. This distinguishes it from most other texts dealing with nuclear issues, where resolution is provided either by the, admittedly horrific, depiction of nuclear disaster or, in the case of the nuclear thriller, aversion of disaster. This paper begins with a discussion of the distinguishing features of O'Brien's 'nuclear anxiety' fiction, which it contextualises in terms of other literary representations of the bomb and research into the psychology of Cold War fear. It then goes on to discuss the problems of language and political engagement posed by the literary depiction of nuclear anxiety.

*Articulating the Nuclear Threat: Fictions of Disaster and Anxiety*

In the early evening of Monday 22 October 1962, President Kennedy went public on the crisis which brought the world closest to nuclear war. Appearing on United States television to announce the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, he stated that 'American citizens have become adjusted to living daily on the bull's eye of Soviet

missiles.’<sup>2</sup> This sense of citizens as targets, of nuclear missiles as a modern sword of Damocles symbolising the insecurity not just of the great but of the many, might be expected to have had profound and far-reaching effects both on the general psychological disposition of the populace and, more specifically, on literature of the Cold War period.<sup>3</sup> After all, for the half century of the Cold War, military nuclear technology represented the possibility of destruction on an unprecedented level. It signified not just war, but a threat to civilisation and even the existence of human life. The Cuban Missile Crisis may have been the most obvious moment of tension but it was also far from the only one. Less than a year before, American and Soviet tanks had rumbled into Berlin to face each other directly in a tense stand off in one of many crises over the city, a decade earlier President Eisenhower had threatened the use of nuclear weapons to end the Korean War, and two decades after the Cuban Crisis the Reagan administration speculated hawkishly that the United States could ‘prevail’ in a nuclear war against the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, despite these moments of heightened tension, and a half century of constant threat, nuclear *anxiety* was in general neglected as a subject in public debate and was, seemingly, strangely absent as an explicit focus in literature of the period. To have become ‘adjusted’, as Kennedy put it, seems to mean, in general, to have suppressed anxieties about nuclear war. This does not, of course, mean that people were unaware of nuclear weapons; nor does it preclude the campaigns against nuclear weapons that took place (though these were more extensive in Europe than in the United States). However, what it does mean is that there were only brief periods when nuclear issues came to the forefront of public consciousness. Charts tracing levels of public engagement with nuclear issues by, for instance, tracking the number of periodical articles on the subject, or the number of opinion polls conducted about it,

all tell the same story: there are brief peaks of interest, following international crises, or significant technological developments, but at other times (notably from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s) overt awareness and discussion rapidly fades away.<sup>5</sup>

While one explanation for this is that people were simply not concerned or, at least, with the exception of those actively campaigning for disarmament, felt unable to shape public policy and so made a rational decision to turn to other issues, another possibility is opened up by the psychologist Robert Lifton. In a landmark book, *Indefensible Weapons*, which establishes the central paradigm for psychological investigations of nuclear fear, he describes a ‘psychic numbing’ of the population during the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> For Lifton, the mind cannot but be overwhelmed when it faces the possibility of nuclear war, and so has to drive nuclear fears beneath the surface. Here they may condition our responses to other aspects of our lives, inducing a numbing of emotions and a feeling of disassociation. Similarly, the lurking awareness that the future can be abruptly truncated by nuclear war renders the meanings we find in our lives absurd and induces a tendency to live a double life: working, socialising, forming relationships and planning for the future, on the one hand, and on the other aware that at any point this could be rendered irrelevant by nuclear catastrophe. The scale of nuclear disaster, threatening not only us, but also everything that would normally survive us (family and friends; society; art) makes this psychological threat distinctively different to that posed by awareness of personal mortality.

Although Lifton’s approach is somewhat speculative, and is not without its problems (the most pressing of which is the implication that lack of evidence for widespread nuclear fear is itself deployed as evidence for the pervasiveness of that fear, because it demonstrates the extent to which people have become numbed), it has

been influential on work done by psychologists on the issue.<sup>7</sup> Despite its limitations, it draws our attention to the important psychological and cultural need, rapidly to assimilate, after 1945, a world that was fundamentally changed by the presence of nuclear weapons.

For Lifton, this new world takes the form, within our heads, of a constantly present, though frequently suppressed, anxiety. He quotes, for instance, a study into the nuclear fears of American adults who, as children, had experienced ‘duck and cover’ air raid drills. Even though some denied that nuclear fear affected their lives, it became apparent, when they were questioned further, that they had a ‘vague sense of living under a nuclear shadow, a sense that could not be equated with any particular life decision but just hung over one and would never quite go away.’<sup>8</sup> Other researchers back this up. Lowell Rubin, for instance, briefly summarises the work of five studies, concluding that ‘there is considerable worry or anxiety about the nuclear threat in the population at large.’<sup>9</sup>

Suspense, the pervasive, if indistinct and frequently repressed, sense that one is living always on the cusp, just before nuclear war, becomes, in this reading, a signature Cold War mindset. It does not mean that people are obsessively terrified, all of the time, about nuclear war, but it does suggest that there is a lurking dread: nuclear war looms over the Cold War as a possible future scenario. Rare texts, which take this fear as their subject, like *The Nuclear Age*, are therefore valuable.

What distinguishes it from other literary treatments of nuclear war, of which there are many (there are ‘over a thousand depictions of nuclear war and its aftermath’ in English according to Paul Briens),<sup>10</sup> is that it takes fear itself, not nuclear war *per se*, as its subject. In an important way, as I discuss in more detail below, when I turn to the end of the novel, the subject of *The Nuclear Age* cannot be resolved.

Conventional nuclear texts, in contrast, do resolve the narrative about Cold War suspense. If they are of the *nuclear thriller* genre – the race against time to avert catastrophe – the nuclear threat is removed, in a piece of literary wish-fulfilment, by, usually, the heroic actions of the central protagonist. If, on the other hand, they are *nuclear disaster* fictions, representing nuclear war or its aftermath, they provide a different, albeit apocalyptic, sort of closure to the suspense narrative. They might be about the horror of nuclear war (though not all are: in Pat Frank’s *Alas, Babylon*, for instance, nuclear war rather benignly sets up a survivalist situation in which American values are rediscovered); they might be rooted in fear; but they remove the element of suspense. This is not to say that there are not complex and interesting texts within this genre – Aldous Huxley’s *Ape and Essence*, Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* certainly refute such a claim<sup>11</sup> – but by focusing on what might happen they distract attention away from the fundamental Cold War experience of things not happening.

*The Nuclear Age* is distinctive, then, for its focus on the psychological impact of the long, drawn-out nuclear suspense of the Cold War. As such it sits outside the more populous groupings of nuclear texts, and is best described as a *nuclear anxiety* fiction. This anxiety is not simply a conscious fear on the part of the narrator, William Cowling, who is frequently self-deceiving about the source of his terrors, but connects up in important ways to his personal circumstances and to his sense of the fragility of social and family structures. Most strikingly, it incapacitates him politically (overwhelmed by fear, he rejects political action) and physically (his periods of fear are accompanied by constipation). By making the psychological physiological, O’Brien suggests that Cold War fear is manifested most profoundly not

in stand-offs between nation states, but in one's sense of oneself, and one's relation to family, friends and society.

Of course, the psychological trauma represented in *The Nuclear Age* is not simply related to, or explicable in terms of, nuclear suspense. From his first book, *If I Should Die in a Combat Zone*, the semi-fictionalized account of his tour of duty in Vietnam, to *July, July*, his most recent novel, O'Brien's fictional worlds are ones in which suffering experienced in the past erupts in the present. Most frequently, this is read in terms of the legacy of O'Brien's own Vietnam experiences. Mark A. Herbele has gone so far as to label O'Brien a 'trauma artist', and to suggest that his works 'reflect the traumatic circumstances of American postwar [that is, post-Vietnam] life more generally'.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, Herbele discusses *The Nuclear Age* and *Tomcat In Love*, texts in which Vietnam is less obviously a focus than in *Northern Lights*, *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried* and *In the Lake of the Woods*, within this paradigm of posttraumatic, Vietnam-related, fiction, and includes as an appendix the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder.

By departing from such readings, this article is not suggesting that they are wrong. Indeed, their approaches are essential to an understanding of O'Brien's work. However, an exclusive focus on O'Brien's personal trauma and, more broadly, the United States' national trauma in Vietnam, leaves out a different kind of politics. A focus on the 'events' of Vietnam misses, in a text like *The Nuclear Age*, the importance of the 'non-events' of the threatened nuclear war during the second half of the twentieth century. *The Nuclear Age* is rendered, by such readings, less significant than O'Brien's other texts simply because it engages less obviously with his personal experiences in Vietnam.

This article therefore seeks to add another dimension through which we might approach *The Nuclear Age*. It suggests that the text opens up an understanding of the cultural impact of nuclear anxiety, and that it makes sense to read it in these terms, tying it into fiction about nuclear suspense, alongside the more obvious contexts of O'Brien's other works and a broader canon of Vietnam literature.

### *The Nuclear Family in the Nuclear Age*

The importance of *The Nuclear Age* as a key to the Cold War mindset is that it explores the dynamics that connect politics on the grand, international scale with the intensely personal levels of family units and personal psychological concerns. O'Brien does this predominantly by relating anxieties about nuclear war to anxieties about the break up of the nuclear family. A brief précis of the novel will serve to illustrate this, as well as to introduce one of O'Brien's lesser-known texts to the unfamiliar reader.<sup>13</sup>

The novel is narrated by William Cowling, one of those christened the 'nuclear-haunted' generation by Michael Mandelbaum (born early in the Cold War and whose first conceptual understanding of death would have coincided with the extensive public discussion of the nuclear threat in the 1950s).<sup>14</sup> William writes from the perspective of 1995, a year in which in the novel's terms (published in 1985) the Cold War is ongoing. At the beginning of the novel, seized by a midnight panic, William starts to dig a bomb shelter in his garden. The novel switches between this story of the digging of the shelter, and the story of William's life from the 1950s to this point.

This latter strand traces his fear of nuclear war as a child; his involvement in, and then withdrawal from, radical politics in the 1960s when he dodged the Vietnam

draft and, through his girlfriend Sarah Strouch, got involved in a terrorist organisation; and the early stages of his relationship with his wife Bobbi. Finally, it depicts his embrace of conformity through the selling of the rights to uranium-rich land to a large corporation, as he retires to a comfortable middle-class existence. The other strand, about the shelter-digging in 1995, deals with the resurfacing of his nuclear war fears. It shows the bemused and then frightened reactions of Bobbi and his daughter, Melinda, both of whom William imprisons, drugs and eventually threatens to blow up along with himself and the hole he has dug.

It also becomes apparent, and this is the key to the link between the personal and the political in the text, that the reappearance of William's nuclear fears are not precipitated by an international crisis, or some other event that puts nuclear weapons back on the public agenda. Instead, his fears of nuclear war erupt when he discovers his wife's diaphragm missing from the bathroom and realises that she is having an affair. In other words, it is a threat not of nuclear war, but of the break up of the nuclear family, which prompts William's desperate dig for shelter. The intangible threat to his home life – (dis)embodied in the absence of Bobbi's diaphragm from the bathroom – is displaced by William into the more dramatic threat of nuclear destruction.

The conceit of linking nuclear family and nuclear war is more than a linguistic sleight of hand. From the dawn of the Cold War, the family was invoked as a symbolic buttress against the Soviet nuclear threat. As early as 1953, the acting Civil Defense Administrator called for a 'down-to-earth, home-by-home' plan for civil defence and, rather optimistically, suggested that each American family should 'conduct its own evacuation drills to its own scientifically stocked shelter'.<sup>15</sup> A public information film of the time, *The House in the Middle* (1954), makes domestic

chores within the family home, the heart of preparation for nuclear attack. In the film, three houses are subjected to nuclear blast at the Nevada Proving Grounds, and it is the one which is well maintained and cleaned that survives, while its poorly painted and messy neighbours quickly catch fire.<sup>16</sup> Later in the decade, and into the early 1960s, as it became apparent that public civil defence programmes were both too costly, and too ineffectual, to implement, the fiction of protection from nuclear attack was maintained by shifting the emphasis in civil defence material all the more overtly onto encouraging private citizens, and particularly family groups, to make their own preparations for nuclear war.

The slippage in the novel between William's fears of nuclear war, and personal / sexual anxieties, particularly those to do with being emasculated, therefore reveals more than William's personal trauma. It also cannot help but reveal the way in which the overwhelming power of the bomb is inscribed in public discourse as an ever-present, but also strangely absent (invisible; intangible) threat, located in a ground zero at the heart of the family home.

Throughout the novel, William's fears of nuclear war are never divorced from personal, and particularly sexual, anxieties, sliding from one to the other in revealing ways. When William recalls doubting his own sanity as a child, he refutes his own fears that he might be 'wacko' by asserting that you 'can't use faggy-ass psychology to explain away the bomb' (15). The sense that the problem might lie in his own mind, in psychology, is dismissed by William with a homophobic comment here, but the vehemence with which he asserts this suggests that he may be repressing doubts about his own sexuality. The presence of the bomb, held in perpetual threat above him, is the alternative that William would like to believe is the source of all his

troubles, and his narrative therefore sets it up as virile and potent in contrast to the ‘faggy-ass’ psychology whose implications he would rather not explore.

Significantly, this passage segues directly into one where William uses pencils stolen from school to reinforce a crude bomb shelter he has built from a table tennis table, reasoning that the lead in the pencils will protect him from atomic fallout. He therefore reacts against a possible explanation for his actions (faggy-ass psychology) by committing himself all the more fiercely to his fears of nuclear war. What William, the child, does not realise until it is pointed out to him by his parents, is that the graphite in the pencils is not real lead and will not protect him. William, the novel implies, does not have lead in his pencil. Concerned by their son’s nuclear obsessions, William’s parents seek medical advice and, yet again, a sexual trauma is alluded to, this time produced by a bad memory of the doctor: ‘when I was seven or eight, I had this embarrassing bicycle accident, a bad spill, and the damned bike came down on top of me and I ended up with a mangled pecker.... [Doc Crenshaw] started to sew me up, no anesthetic, no nothing and naturally I squealed and squirmed around...’ (18-19).

These events should not lead us to read William’s nuclear fears simply as displaced psychological manifestations of a troubled sexuality. Instead, the novel implies that there is a continuity between these local concerns and the global nuclear threat. In both arenas he is emasculated. In both his personal life, and in his dawning political consciousness, he encounters a frustrating sense of enforced (or what he perceives to be enforced) passivity. Held in a state of suspense, he lacks the wherewithal to take control of his personal life (when in trouble, for instance, he seeks comfort not in actual connection with others, but in pretending to talk on the

telephone to, at various times, Sarah Strouch, his parents and his therapist), and feels unable to do anything about the Cold War standoff that threatens annihilation.

His response, as his hole-digging implies, is simply to dig in and seek shelter. Unlike the radical activists with whom he associates as a student, ‘underground’ does not mean something subversive here, but is instead a place of retreat from political engagement. Indeed, his narrative is peppered with images of comforting, womb-like spaces: ‘Cozy and walled in and secure.... [M]y motives may have been anchored in some ancestral craving for refuge.... The mole in his hole. The turtle in his shell’ (15). This also recalls the nuclear shelter that Perry and Harvey’s dying, fire-and-brimstone preaching father implores them to dig in O’Brien’s *Northern Lights*. Here, too, the shelter implies retreat, denial and a refusal to engage. It is Harvey, the more self-deceiving of the brothers, who digs the shelter and who, in retreat from the trauma of his experiences in Vietnam, resists selling both it and the family home. Here, too, the nuclear threat is articulated as one aimed primarily at male sexuality: the shelter will provide protection from the radiation that will, in a repeated image, rot ‘a man’s testicles’.<sup>17</sup>

The urge to bury oneself, to dig in deep to escape a sense of threat that is configured as coming from above, is apparent in texts by other writers that might be described as having a dimension of nuclear anxiety to them. Michael Mandelbaum, writing about the cultural impact of the nuclear age, singles out Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* as significant texts, in which there is a fear of exposure (209). Although all are set during the Second World War, each in its concern with aerial bombardment, tone of black humour and sense of the absurd is characteristic of the nuclear age. We might add to Mandelbaum’s list, E.L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*, which finds its

nuclear context by retelling the story of the execution of the Rosenbergs, for the alleged passing of atomic secrets to the Russians.

While William seeks protection in the shelter he digs, Doctorow's novel features a narrator, Daniel, who warms to a family friend, Ben Cohen, because of the safety his job, working underground in the subway, affords him: '... a really fine job. You're underground in a stronghold that has barred windows, and a heavy steel door that locks from the inside.... If a bomb drops, you probably won't even feel it. If there's a storm, you don't get wet.'<sup>18</sup> In contrast, Daniel feels exposed in the family home, which should be his refuge: 'It was the way the wind could sweep up the hill over the schoolyard right at his house and, during a storm, actually make the inside wall near the front door wet that alarmed Daniel. The sky here offered no protection, it was too open' (92). Just as O'Brien locates William's nuclear fear at the most personal of levels (his sexuality; his family; his constipated insides), so Doctorow locates the impact of nuclear fears in the image of the threatened domestic space.

This focus on states of mind, on the impact of terror, and on the transference of that terror into personal relationships, is highly significant to the ways in which the nuclear era is coded into these texts. As has been frequently noted, the value of nuclear weapons to nation states during the Cold War was not for their military use (to use them was suicide), but for the impact the *threat* of their use might have. They were, pre-eminently, psychological weapons.

By default, if not by design, the nuclear stand-off was tantamount to the waging of psychological warfare by the governments of the world on their own citizens. In 1948, the US Army defined psychological warfare as that which 'employs *any* weapon to influence the mind of the enemy. The weapons are psychological only in the *effect* they produce and not because of the nature of the weapons themselves....

They are effective because they produce dissension, distrust, fear and hopelessness in the minds of the enemy....' <sup>19</sup> Nuclear weapons fit this definition because they are not made to be used; they are made to terrify the enemy into submission. The enemy's only defence against them is to use their own nuclear arsenal in the same way, so that the terror projected at the enemy gets reflected back on one's own citizens. Furthermore, the value of a nuclear arsenal in such a situation lies not in keeping it secret, but in publicising its existence and talking up one's willingness to use it: political discourse of the period is characterised by bellicose statements of intent. <sup>20</sup>

Such a situation produces, to use an apposite metaphor, psychological and cultural fallout and raises an important question. What are the psychological consequences of living in a society which is effectively, in Mandelbaum's words, held 'hostage' to the 'good behaviour' of its political establishment? (110). *The Nuclear Age's* investigation of this issue takes us not only into William's troubled psyche, but also into fundamental questions (posed elsewhere by postmodern literature) about the relations between language and reality.

### *Language, Reality and the Politics of (Dis)Engagement*

At issue within *The Nuclear Age*, as within so many of O'Brien's novels, is the relationship between language and the reality it encodes and shapes. The pressing concern for William is a possible nuclear war, and much of the frustration he experiences stems from the refusal of others to accept that his words convey a fundamental truth about the world in which they live. As a consequence his abiding refrain is that reality is there, that it is tangible and that the words he uses to describe it name, in a straightforward way, facts about the world. In contrast, Bobbi, his wife

(and, significantly, a poet), insists on the metaphorical function of language. Their different perspectives are produced in their very different styles of discourse.

William's perspective is that words reflect reality and his discourse strives to establish a one-to-one relationship between words and things. For example, when he describes his hometown he reduces it to some key statistics:

A mountain town.

Elevation, just under six thousand feet.

Population, just over a thousand.

Ranch country. Scrub grass and pine dust. An old hitching post in front of the Strouch Funeral home. A courthouse, a cemetery, the Ben Franklin store. (11)

The dearth of verbs in this passage indicates a discourse seeking certainty and reality, and it is a discourse that Cowling extends to his attempts to communicate the possibility of nuclear holocaust. What follows is a perspective not only on nuclear war, but on language: 'There are no metaphors,' William says, '[t]here is only science when I say 'Nuclear War' (126). By invoking the authority of science, and scientific discourse, William seeks to undermine the power of metaphor, and other creative uses of language, to engage with reality.

Unsurprisingly Bobbi, as a poet, takes a different view. To William's consternation she repeatedly opens up the ways in which science and politics operate as discourse. Against his proclamations that science is not metaphor, we can place her poems, written to him during his frenzied shelter digging, and which, with titles like 'Fission' and 'The Balance of Power', invoke the terminologies of science and Cold War politics as metaphors for family life. For Bobbi, the language of power and control, and the way of thinking that accompanies it, resonates between every scale of

human interaction, from the global dimension of Cold War politics and the relations between nation states, to the microcosmic level of intra-family dynamics. After all, William's final threat to destroy himself, avenging his wife's infidelity by dynamiting the hole in which he holds his family hostage, is an aggressive and suicidal posture like that adopted in the nuclear strategic policy of Mutual Assured Destruction. William's emasculation in public life (his solution to the nuclear threat is not to campaign for disarmament, but simply to dig in, accepting his own weakness), forces him to act in much the same way as the nuclear strategists he fears.

William's response to the instabilities of language, exposed by Bobbi, is to fall back on his certainties, both about the outcome of the Cold War, and about language. 'Bobbi doesn't understand,' he comments at one point, '[s]he's a poet, she can't help it. I've tried to talk things out. I've presented the facts. I've named names. Poseidon, Trident, Cruise, Stealth, Minuteman, Lance, Pershing – the indisputable realities. Trouble is, Bobbi can't process hard data' (58). Yet, these instabilities are found also within his own discourse, not only that of Bobbi. Throughout his narrative, words and phrases take on multiple meanings, opening up the instabilities he fears. For instance, at one point Sarah says that she loves William because of 'chemistry'. Yet, two pages later, the word takes on other meanings when, hiking in the mountains, they find evidence of uranium. When Sarah asks how William knows it is uranium, he says, simply, 'chemistry' (108-10). Other words and phrases – 'relativity' (297), 'chain reaction' (251), 'escalation' (214), 'inviolable heart' (206) and 'congress' (105), for instance – are similarly inflected in the text, functioning metaphorically to describe not only nuclear science or political bodies, but also personal relations.

William's insistence that language only express 'indisputable realities' is, then, in some ways exposed as naïve. However, in contrast to other critics, I want to argue that his view of language, and of reality, is not entirely written off by the novel. Indeed, a close reading suggests that his point about there being a Cold War reality, which we evade and from which we hide, is maintained in the text.

Critics tend to focus approvingly on a change of heart by William at the end of the book, when he frees his wife and child and suppresses his own fears of nuclear war. The implication of this reading is that the problem is entirely within his mind: the bombs are not real and William's paranoia is all that is at issue. It is worth quoting the novel's final sentence in full because it encapsulates William's new perspective, as he learns to live with his fear, and discussion of it reveals why my reading differs from that of other critics:

I will live my life in the conviction that when it finally happens – when we hear that midnight whine, when Kansas burns, when what is done is undone, when fail-safe fails, when deterrence no longer deters, when the jig is at last up – yes, even then I will hold to a steadfast orthodoxy, confident to the end that *E* will somehow not quite equal  $mc^2$ , that it's a cunning metaphor, that the terminal equation will somehow not quite balance. (312)

Lee Schweninger's reading of this ending is as a moment of anagnorisis for William: 'O'Brien's narrator maintains finally a faith that is hope. In an ecofeminist world, he will discard the modern acceptance of mathematical equations as the only truth.... His is a post-modern, ecofeminist vision, a vision of justice among groups, races, sexes, species.'<sup>21</sup> This is a reading of the novel as *bildungsroman*: William's reflections on life, as he digs the shelter, lead him to a new and mature outlook.

However, this perspective is far too simplistic for two reasons, both to do with William's denial of the truth.

First, it assumes that the complications and threats of violence that accompany William's relations with his family can simply be written off and left behind. Yet, although he achieves some self-knowledge, admitting on the final page that one day 'my wife will leave me', he also persists in his denial of this fact: 'I know this, but I believe otherwise' (312). He still refuses to accept the instability of the nuclear family. Surely, too, it cannot be long before his wife leaves, taking their daughter with her: William has, after all, imprisoned Bobbi and Melinda, drugged them and very nearly blown them up.

Second, and crucially, William's new-found confidence at the end of the novel, that the threat posed by the bombs is insignificant, is surely not a moment of 'vision' as Schweninger would have us believe. If it is, there is nothing in the text to suggest what this vision might be, and no hint that he has found the 'justice among groups, races, sexes, species' that Schweninger rather ambitiously claims. The novel offers no alternative to replace the 'mathematical equations' which William is confident will fail to balance, and it is hard to see the circumstances under which  $E$  will fail to equal  $mc^2$ , and under which the missiles will fail to explode, should they be launched.

Furthermore, the revised political perspective into which William retreats does not offer the radical new perspective Schweninger implies. In the final paragraph he vows to 'firm up my golf game and invest wisely and adhere to the conventions of decency and good grace' (312). This is not a radical 'ecofeminist vision' but a suburban fantasy, acquiescent to the primacy of the political status quo, and as much

of a hole in which to shelter as the one he has dug in the garden. It is an admission that nothing can be done in the face of power.

Jacqueline Foertsch's reading is more sophisticated and contextualises the novel interestingly in terms of other depictions of psychological disturbance in nuclear texts (indeed, my own reading is broadly indebted to her claim that the Cold War 'was not in fact characterized by Soviet- or U.S.- detonated attacks, but by the tension-filled and exhausting constant deferral of these,' and that, therefore, 'depictions of cold war daily life [are] ... pathologized as sickness').<sup>22</sup> She acknowledges that, for all William's eccentricities and the dangers he poses, he is at least 'not carrying out life in a false and self-delusory register which refuses to confront the nuclear threat (real or trumped up) in the enormity of its psychic debilitation' (475). Yet, her reading of the ending, like Schweningen's, also suggests a turnaround in William's perspective that would involve exactly this sort of denial. She claims, although we only have William's word for it, that his family 'begin to forgive and reaccept him' (478) and that the ending allows him 'to rebuild in the direction of secured physical well-being *and* mental health' (479). He may indeed, as she implies, have found a means of living with the bomb, but it involves a denial of the real threat it poses, and exactly the sort of psychic numbing of which Lifton writes.

David Dowling takes a similar position to Foertsch. He acknowledges that there is a knowing retreat to 'the fiction of a happy ending', but implies that this retreat is tacitly approved of in the text: 'there is a sense of communal confession and affirmation as we join William' in his final vision.<sup>23</sup>

Although all of these readings offer some interesting insights into *The Nuclear Age*, they are flawed in assuming that our final perspective should mirror that of

William. He is, after all, a profoundly untrustworthy narrator. In these readings the novel reaches closure because William finds a way to live with the nuclear threat. What goes before the ending, however, surely shows this to be self-deception on William's part. As readers, therefore, we are alienated from William's new vision and we cannot achieve the sense of closure that he finds. The sense of threat and suspense under which he lives, and which has such debilitating effects earlier in the book, is shared by us.

The novel often depicts images of nuclear technology bursting out from below, as if from the subconscious: a missile rises into the air as William lies on a riverbank (70-71), and a submarine surfaces next to him as he floats in a boat off the Florida coast (238-39). (Indeed, it is unclear in these episodes, if they are actually taking place or if they are hallucinations of William's troubled mind). The fact that, at the end of the novel, William represses these images of the weapons he fears, does not mean that the threat no longer exists. Indeed, the point he makes in a mute student protest, earlier in the novel, remains relevant: initiating campus resistance to the Vietnam War, he turns up at the canteen and stands silently with a sign that says, simply, 'THE BOMBS ARE REAL' (74). Nothing in the novel's denouement would lead us to conclude that this statement is untrue. William may be naïve in his assumption that language can simply name reality in a one-to-one correspondence, but it is equally naïve to commit entirely to the opposite view and assume that nothing exists outside of language.

The novel, therefore, explicitly refuses to resolve the tension between the two alternatives – madness (shelter digging) and denial (conformity) – acted out by William in the course of his narrative. What it does do, though, is investigate the problems of political engagement in the face of paralysing fear.

Digging his shelter, late in the Cold War, but at a time when it seems the standoff between NATO and the Eastern Bloc can never end, William rejects radical politics ('no more crusades now') and focuses on personal survival: 'Call it what you want – copping out, dropping out, numbness, the loss of outrage, simple fatigue. I've retired. Time to retrench. Time to dig in. Safety first' (8). The retreat to the shelter is therefore a retreat from politics. However, it is also, paradoxically, a retreat that allows O'Brien to make the nature of the Cold War environment and politics apparent. It focuses attention on the dangerous, threatening world, concealed behind the façade of the happy family life William was meant to live.

This doubleness is conveyed in the novel by a structure of images contrasting dirt with cleanliness. Digging in the garden, William naturally becomes sweaty and dirty and compares this with the cleanliness of the domestic environment he has left behind: 'The house smells of Windex and wax. . . . Holes aren't clean. Safety can be very messy' (6). Later in the novel he imagines a reunion of his radical college contemporaries, in which they have ceased to sing protest songs, like 'Give peace a chance', in preference for advertising jingles about cleaning products: 'Mr. Clean will clean your whole house, and everything that's in it' (131).

William may, therefore, be turning his back on the radical politics of his youth, but he is also rejecting the pretence that accumulation of money (he is rich by this point) and accumulation of consumer products can do anything other than hide the lurking threat of the Cold War. By abandoning the house – the realm of Windex, Mr. Clean and other consumables designed to sterilise and sanitise the domestic environment – he is abandoning a world which pretends that domestic cleanliness, and capitalist aspiration, is enough to guarantee safety, for a world which acknowledges that political realities threaten that very notion of safety. Safety cannot be bought by

participating in a lifestyle of capitalist consumption. As he digs down he unearths for us the suppressed anxiety, frustration and paralysis of the Cold War. At the end of the novel he may return to the house and the pretence that it is proof against the dangers of the Cold War, and particularly of the bomb, but as readers we can see the scale of this self-delusion.

*The Nuclear Age* articulates, then, an anxiety that finds little direct expression in other literature.<sup>24</sup> It reflects on the impact of the virtual, mental constructions through which nuclear conflict was imagined during the Cold War and which, over an extended period, hovered in people's minds as a possible future scenario by which it could have reached its conclusion. While the physical consequences of the Cold War detonating into a nuclear exchange were unimaginably terrible, its real existence 'in dreams, in imagination', produced its own set of casualties. It is precisely in its preoccupation with things not happening that *The Nuclear Age* is a significant text. It suggests that, while the overt events of the Cold War, like the Vietnam conflict which dominates so much of O'Brien's fiction, are important, the politics of threat, of fear, is equally vital. Engaging with such intangible, psychological states is a prerequisite for an understanding of Cold War culture.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Tim O'Brien, *The Nuclear Age* (1986; London: Flamingo-Fontana, 1987), 150. Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (1972; London: Penguin, 1986), 224-25. Douglas Coupland, *Generation X* (1991; London, Abacus, 1996), 70. *Thirteen Days* (US, dir. Roger Donaldson, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the Whitehouse During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1997), 278.

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy himself had used the image of the Sword of Damocles in an address to the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Isaacs and Taylor Downing, *Cold War* (London: Bantam, 1998), 334. An extended investigation of the Reagan administration's attitude to nuclear war is F.H. Knelman's *Reagan, God and the Bomb* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985). Knelman's alarming claims about Reagan's hawkishness should be balanced against the progress made toward détente in various summits between Reagan and Gorbachev.

<sup>5</sup> Kramer, Kalick and Milburn chart the number of opinion polls on the topic; Weart, and Polyson, Hillmar and Kriek, quantify the number of periodical articles published. Bernard M. Kramer, S. Michael Kalick and Michael A. Milburn, 'Attitudes Toward Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear War: 1945-1972', *Journal of Social Studies*, 39.1 (1983), 10. James Polyson, Jodi Hillmar and Douglas Kriek, 'Levels of Public Interest in Nuclear War', *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 1.3 (1986), 399. Spencer R. Weart, *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988), 387.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Jay Lifton and Richard Falk, *Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case Against Nuclearism* (New York: Basic Books, 1982). I call 'psychic numbing' Lifton's thesis because he writes the first part of the book, about the psychology of the nuclear age, while Falk writes the second part, advancing the political case against nuclearism. Particularly valuable on psychic numbing are chapters 5 ('The Bomb in Our Schools and in Us') and 10 ('On Numbing and Feeling').

<sup>7</sup> For example, Lowell Rubin claims that psychic numbing 'captures various dimensions of the denial people use to deal with the overwhelming anxiety caused by ... nuclear weapons' and Vamik D. Volkan acknowledges the work done by Lifton. Lowell Rubin, 'Melancholia, Mourning, and the Nuclear Threat' in *Psychoanalysis and the Nuclear Threat: Clinical and Theoretical Studies*. Ed. Howard B. Levine, Daniel Jacobs and Rubin (Hillsdale: Analytic Press, 1988), 246. Vamik D. Volkan, 'Nuclear Weapons and the Need to Have Enemies: A Psychoanalytic Perspective' in Levine, Jacobs

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and Rubin, p. 122. Even those who dispute some or all of Lifton's findings, like Barbara Tizard, implicitly acknowledge his influence on psychological approaches to the issue. Barbara Tizard, 'Old and New Paradigms: Research on Young People's Response to the Nuclear Threat', *Journal of Adolescence*, 12.1 (1989), 4. For a good summary of some of the problems of Lifton's approach see Ofer Zur, 'On Nuclear Attitudes and Psychic Numbing: Overview and Critique', *Contemporary Social Psychology*, 14.2 (1990), 96-118.

<sup>8</sup> Lifton and Falk, 50. The quoted study is Michael Carey, 'Psychological Fallout', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 38 (January 1982), 20-24.

<sup>9</sup> Rubin, 246.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Brians, 'Nuclear Family / Nuclear War', *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, 26.1 (1990), 151. Brians' book, *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction 1895-1984* (Ohio: Kent State UP, 1987) is a comprehensive guide to this fiction.

<sup>11</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Ape and Essence* (1949; London: Chatto and Windus, 1971); Walter M. Miller Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959; London: Corgi, 1963); Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> Mark A. Herbele, *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam* (Iowa: U of Iowa P, 2001), 297.

<sup>13</sup> There may be a number of reasons why critics comment infrequently on *The Nuclear Age*. It certainly fits less well into established genres than O'Brien's other novels (which are usually set in Vietnam and thus connect up with a ready made canon of literature). Also, in some editions it is mis-marketed as a trashy supermarket novel, even though the most cursory read reveals it to have 'high' literary ambitions (the edition referred to in this paper carries on its cover a picture of Uncle Sam in a gas mask, pointing at the reader in a pose familiar from recruitment posters; above this picture a headline promises that 'THIS NOVEL COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE'). A final reason may be that it is precisely because it takes nuclear anxiety as its subject that it is neglected. By raising the uncomfortable, generally suppressed issues that Robert Lifton has argued lead to 'psychic numbing', it makes itself less appealing.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution: International Politics Before and After Hiroshima* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 212. (All further parenthesised page references to Mandelbaum in the text refer to this book, not his 1979 book, which is quoted in note 16). Mandelbaum discusses this

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generation, and the difficulties of pinning down the psychological and sociological effects on them of the existence of nuclear weapons, throughout chapter 8 of his book, 'The Bomb, Dread, and Eternity' (207-29). Mandelbaum's point, much like Lifton's, is that nuclear fear is necessarily repressed, and therefore must be looked for through indirect manifestations.

<sup>15</sup> 'Family Plan Urged for Civil Defense', *New York Times* (30 Aug, 1953), 36.

<sup>16</sup> *The House in the Middle* can be viewed online at the Prelinger Archives:  
<http://www.archive.org/details/Houseint1954> (21.9.05).

<sup>17</sup> Tim O'Brien, *Northern Lights* (1975; London: Flamingo-HarperCollins, 1998), 20. Further references to this are on pages 68 and 356 of the novel.

<sup>18</sup> E.L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel* (1972; London: Picador-Pan, 1982), 45. When Cohen reappears in the novel, the protection his job affords him is again mentioned: 'He had come directly from work from the subway where it was his job to make change and which protects him from the atom bomb' (126). On the page before, Daniel has mentioned that the papers at the time, the early 1950s, were full of speculation about the damage an atom bomb could do to New York.

<sup>19</sup> Secret definition of psychological warfare used by US army in war planning, recently released under the Freedom of Information Act, and quoted by Christopher Simpson, *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare 1945-1960* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 12. Simpson's book investigates the use of psychological warfare, at home and abroad, by the United States and the complicity, and sometimes collaboration, of the academic social science establishment in this.

<sup>20</sup> Consider, for instance, this statement by Robert McNamara, to the Committee on Armed Services in the House of Representatives: '[The United States can] absorb fully a Soviet strike and survive with sufficient power to destroy utterly the Soviet Union. We have made that statement. We wish them to believe it. They should believe it. It is true'. Quoted in Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Question: The United States and Nuclear Weapons 1946-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979), 76.

<sup>21</sup> Lee Schweninger, 'Ecofeminism, Nuclearism, and O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age*' in *The Nightmare Considered: Critical Essays on Nuclear War Literature*. Ed. Nancy Anisfield (Ohio: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1991), 184.

<sup>22</sup> Jacqueline Foertsch, 'Not Bombshells but Basketcases: Gendered Illness in Nuclear Texts', *Studies in the Novel* 31.4 (1999), 471.

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<sup>23</sup> David Dowling, *Fictions of Nuclear Disaster* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 191.

<sup>24</sup> In a forthcoming article, 'Beyond the Apocalypse of Closure: Nuclear Anxiety in Postmodern Literature of the United States', I argue that it is in postmodern literature that nuclear anxiety is most effectively coded through motifs like paranoia, disconnection between language and reality, and refusal of closure. Ed. Andrew Hammond, *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2005).