

VIETNAM-WAR NOVELS IN THE CLASSROOM

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In teaching the Vietnam War there are no substitutes for facts. Many of today's students are ignorant of the Viet Minh, the Geneva Accords, the National Liberation Front (NLF), the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Ho Chi Minh, My Lai, the Pentagon Papers, napalm, search and destroy missions, free fire zones, the body count--you name it, they haven't heard of it. In the face of such cultural amnesia, a case can be made for teaching nothing but the historical record.

I would like to suggest in this essay, however, that fiction also has its pedagogical uses. There are over 150 American novels that treat the war.¹ Most of them are combat novels rather than war novels; that is, they focus on the immediate experiences of battle rather than the politics from which battles spring. The main protagonists are usually white soldiers, though there are at least two novels by Black authors, George Davis's Coming Home (New York: Random House, 1972) and John A. Williams's Captain Blackman (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), that have Blacks as central figures. Vietnamese characters are also generally absent, peripheral, or drawn from Western stereotypes: the men are fatalistic, devious, or sadistic, while the women are submissive, exotic, and seductive. A notable exception to this rule is John Briley's The Traitors, referred to by one reviewer as "the war novel . . . gone philosophic,"² in which GI's taken prisoner learn not only to question the fundamental assumptions of United States foreign policy but also to appreciate the humanity of the Vietnamese.

Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of individual works, there are at least two uses to which teachers can put selected novels: (1) Fiction provides an easy and enjoyable way for students to become emotionally involved with research into the war; and (2) properly taught, fiction can help to illuminate the cultural myths that buttressed the war effort and which persist today.³

First of all, fiction is fun, even fiction about things that are devastating in real life. As Johan Huizinga argues in Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture, the creation of "an imaginary world of living beings" is "a playing of the mind, a mental game."⁴ Any story has a ludic aspect, and Vietnam-War novels are strong on story. As a group, they eschew the obscurantism that characterizes much of contemporary fiction; they have recognizable characters and easy-to-follow plots. Though readers may ultimately reject a particular author's world view or value structure, the telling of a tale casts a momentary but inherently enjoyable spell. The fascination is particularly intense when death and dying are the subject matter: Writer and reader together recapture some of the childhood excitement of transcending through make-believe the objects of greatest terror.

Indeed, one of the most enchanting of the novels, Tim O'Brien's National Book Award winning Going after Cacciato treats this connection between fear and fantasy as a major theme. Like O'Brien himself, Cacciato's Paul Berlin is drafted against his will and sent to Vietnam. There Paul Berlin learns to take leave of the shame of killing and the terror of dying by imagining that one day his squad simply follows a deserter away from the combat zone overland to Paris. The novel intersperses scenes from the war with those from the trip to France. O'Brien thus renders in fiction the phenomenon described by psychohistorian Robert Jay Lifton in Home from the War: Entire units of American soldiers devised collective fantasies of peace and love, which "replac[es] grotesque death with marvelously charmed life" and "provided a sustained counter-scenario right in the midst of. . . the atrocity-producing situation."⁵ In a sense, any story about the war "replac[es] grotesque death with marvelously charmed life" and provides a "counter-scenario" of creativity

that contrasts with the reality of the killing and the dying. Through this "playing of the mind," the inclusion on a syllabus of a novel or two can only increase the store of energy and interest which teacher and students together bring to historical investigation.

This excitement is functional as well as pleasant. An important aspect of the recreational dimension of fiction is emotional involvement with characters who, in the novels in question, represent participants in the war. In an age in which students feel increasingly alienated from human society of either the past or the present, novels help them not only think but care about the people whose lives were changed and in some cases ruined by the war.

One particularly sympathetic character whom students come to know through novels of the war is the young man who naively expects combat to offer him a chance at heroism, but who finds that counterinsurgency warfare changes him in unexpected ways. The young man goes to war with a taste for action; he returns with a heightened sense of right and wrong, a conscientiousness earned at the cost of an excruciating feeling of transgression. "Joker," the darkly witty narrator of Gustav Hasford's The Short-Timers, expresses this miserable union of ethical sensibility and self-loathing:

After my first confirmed kill I began to understand that it was not necessary to understand. What you do, you become. The insights of one moment are blotted out by the events of the next. And no amount of insight could ever alter the cold, black fact of what I had done. I was caught up in a constricting web of darkness, and like the ancient farmer [whom I had killed] I was suddenly very calm, just as I had been calm when the mine detonated, because there was nothing I could do. I was defining myself with bullets; blood had blemished my Yankee Doodle dream that everything would have a happy ending, and that I, when the war was over, would return to hometown America in a white silk uniform, a rainbow of campaign ribbons across my chest, brave beyond belief, the military Jesus.⁶

The heroic ambitions of the young soldier in Ward Just's Stringer are similarly "blemished by blood." Bored by Middle America, Stringer sees in Vietnam an extension of his childhood games of Cowboys-and-Indians, a place to act out the frontier spirit. But after several months of performing "special operations" inside Vietnam, Stringer is left feeling psychically paralyzed, guilty for the death of comrades and enemies alike, and unable to leave a surrealistic prison or mental institution somewhere between the United States and Vietnam. Now "strung out" and "unstrung," Stringer is a victim of the unquestioning deference that had once made him certain that "a man [could not] go entirely wrong working for the United States government."⁷

Readers of Charles Coleman's Sergeant Back Again see that "going wrong" can also be a result of moral sensitivity. Having broken under the strain of witnessing the crippling and maiming of healthy young men, a medic is confined to a mental hospital where he learns that the war has produced in him as well as his fellow patients "a lethal disintegration of person." What appears as mental illness is really, as a sympathetic psychiatrist notes, a "crisis of personal morality. Of right and wrong in the most intimate, private sense. Of clashing values, of contradictory roles, of conflicting beliefs and responsibilities." This turmoil is intensified by the fact that "never in the history of this country has the American fighting man ever felt that he had to justify his presence in a foreign country to himself."⁸ Given the realities of the war, the medic's anguish appears as the normal reaction of a sane and conscientious man.

Another sympathetic figure whom students come to know through these novels is the soldier caught in a conflict created by orders from his superiors on the one hand and the consequences of the orders on the other. In Martin Dibner's The Trouble with Heroes, a career naval officer wrestles with the question, "Where does duty stop and murder begin?" Despite his admiral's argument ("Do the Vietnamese matter? One Vietnamese? A hundred? A thousand? Compared to the lives of our own American boys?"), the officer refuses to fire on civilians and faces a court-martial for his courage.⁹

Victor Kolpacoff's The Prisoners of Quai Dong is not so optimistic about resistance. Lieutenant Kreuger is sent to the stockade for refusing to execute defeated Vietnamese soldiers. But even in prison Kreuger is not free from complicity, as an ambitious officer pressures him to assist in the interrogation and torture of a teen-aged boy. Kreuger's initial spirit is broken as he becomes more frightened of reprisals than of the pangs of conscience. Daniel Ford's Incident at Muc Wa, in contrast, presents a character who grows in moral stature. Originally, Stephen Courcey's only justification for participation in a special counterinsurgency unit is his belief, "This is my job. I want to do my job the best way I know how," and his agreement with his commanding officer, who tells him, "What matters is not why you fight, but how well." But after the needless sacrifice of his own and others' lives, Courcey realizes that "why" matters most of all. Dying, he thinks:

A man should be mighty careful what he chooses to love, what he chooses to fight for. . . . Because life will damned well make the choice stick.¹⁰

Novels involve students emotionally not only through identification with sympathetic characters but also through antipathy to unattractive ones. Josiah Bunting's The Lionheads (New York: George Braziller, 1972) etches in acid the portrait of General Lemming, whose careerist ambitions take precedence over the lives of either Vietnamese or American soldiers. William Crawford Wood's The Killing Zone presents a similarly damning picture of the well-educated young technician who is passionate about weapons systems but indifferent to human beings, a man who "pushes buttons while his men are getting killed."¹¹ And Robin Moore's and Henry Rothblatt's Court-Martial directs anger against the policy-makers in Washington who create an atrocity-producing situation and then make scapegoats of individual soldiers for specific outrages. "Who is to blame in so-called war crimes?" the defense lawyer at the court-martial asks. "The framers of our war policy or those who are forced, frequently against their will, to carry the policy out?"¹²

All of the novels mentioned so far are critical of at least some aspects of the war in Vietnam. There are other novels, however, that reinforce the war mentality, not because they overtly take the United States government side on any of the issues in dispute, but because, as Peter Marin says of Vietnam-War novels in general, they are "encapsulated in American myths." Marin writes:

No novelist seems yet to have been willing to confront, directly, the realities of the war, or to have considered it, at least in part, from the Vietnamese point of view--in terms of their suffering rather than ours. The same cultural bias that has traditionally marked our attitudes toward other races seems still at work.¹³

Carefully teaching novels that are flawed in this way may help students recognize in their operative form the "American myths" that do not so much rationally convince as emotionally manipulate people to go off to war.

Robin Moore's The Green Berets (New York: Crown, 1965) and Gene D. Moore's The Killing at Ngo Tho (New York: Norton, 1967), for example, present white soldiers as "supermen" protagonists--indomitable fighters who bear a strong resemblance to the traditional frontier hero and whose "savage" antagonists (and allies, too, for that matter) appear as ethnically and culturally inferior. The Green Berets is particularly interesting in its self-conscious use of frontier imagery ("The headquarters of Special Forces Detachment B-520 . . . looks exactly like a fort out of the Old West") and its attempt to link this homegrown tradition with "Kornie," a former member of the Hitler Youth.

An off-shoot of the hero myth is the view that combat is a male rite of passage, that, as the recruiting slogan has it, "The Army Builds Men." The initiation mystique pervades Michael Herr's highly publicized Dispatches (New York: Knopf, 1977) in which the world is divided into those who have been under fire and those who haven't. It is also present in Charles Coe's Young Man in Vietnam (New York: Four Winds Press, 1968), where pre-combat men are called "virgins," and where the hero wins first a Vietnamese girlfriend, then a combat medal, and finally, a Vietnamese ear. A tenet of initiation novels is that war protestors know nothing because, the assumption is, they haven't "been there." In James Webb's Fields of Fire, this theme is fully elaborated. Snake, an inner-city tough, finds meaning and brotherhood in the war. Though he commits atrocities against the Vietnamese, Snake is a hero who gives his life for his squadmates. Senator, in contrast, is a squeamish peacenik who hates war and scorns squad-brotherhood. Only after being wounded and rescued by Snake does Senator see the light. Thoroughly initiated, Senator returns to the United States to denounce peace demonstrators. He tells an anti-war rally:

I didn't see any of you in Vietnam. I saw dudes, man.
Dudes. And truck drivers and coal miners and farmers. I didn't
see you. . . . What do any of you even know about it, for
Christ sake?

After this outburst, Senator feels Snake's benediction on his new identity: "Senator, [Snake] would have said, you finally grew some balls."¹⁴ No longer an effeminate moralist, Senator is now a potent initiate.

Not only does the initiation mystique ignore and thus exculpate the policy-makers--those who send others into combat but who themselves are not "there"--it also exploits apprehensions and insecurity about masculinity. Michael Blumenthal, who avoided conscription during the Vietnam War, wrote in the January 11, 1981, New York Times, "We [draft evaders] may have turned out to be better dancers, choreographers, and painters, but I'm not at all sure that [those who fought] didn't turn out to be better men."¹⁵ It may be particularly important to understand the workings of a vision such as the one embodied in Fields of Fire in a culture that continues to link masculinity to war.

An equally manipulative attitude is the view that the performance of one's duty as defined by authorities is a pre-eminent value, no matter what the impact of that particular job on one's fellow human beings. David Halberstam, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the war, affirms this pseudo-ethic. Describing the Americans in Vietnam, he writes:

Many of the Americans would sink into a kind of cynicism as the Asian reality set in; then, if they were good men--and many of them were extraordinarily good--they would concentrate on their specific jobs and accept the difficult realities of trying to do the best possible day's work under extremely complicated conditions.¹⁶

When worthy goals could not be articulated (when "cynicism" set in), "good" Americans went right on performing "their specific jobs" and doing "the best possible day's work" as if efficiency and morality were one and the same. David Halberstam's novel, One Very Hot Day, presents in the character of Captain Beaupre the fictional incarnation of one of those "good men." Beaupre, cynical, overweight, and alcoholic, is a hero nevertheless, because, as one critic points out, he is "effective" under fire.¹⁷ As advisor to an ARVN unit, Beaupre feels that he must humiliate himself in order to get a hearing from his Vietnamese counterpart, Captain Dang. But when Beaupre sees the ARVN soldiers marching dangerously close together, he readily abases himself, for "they were bunched up and he was being employed by the United States' taxpayers for the specific purpose of keeping them unbunched." As the operation progresses, Beaupre senses danger ahead and his professional instincts quicken and intensify. "I must do this properly," he thinks, as he searches for workable strategems. "If I never do anything again properly, I must do this right." Because of Beaupre's tactical acumen, the ARVN unit avoids an ambush and retaliates with massive fire power. Beaupre radios back to the Command Post:

I want [ordnance] all over the goddamn place. . . . You tell the zoomies that if they see anything moving, any mother's sons . . . to zap their goddamn yello ass. Anything moves, kill it.

Though suffering from heat exhaustion, Beaupre rejects an offer of medical evacuation. He tells his solicitous lieutenant:

I don't want any goddamn choppers. I'll walk in. I've always walked in. The day I don't walk in they can get the wood box and the American flag ready for me and call the man about the farm. . . . Eighteen years, and I've always walked in and I'll do it today.¹⁸

Such a speech makes Beaupre appear to be a man of standards and commitment. If readers look closely, however, they will see that the standards are merely technical ones and the commitment is only to mechanical performance, not to any articulated cause. There is nothing in Beaupre's professionalism that requires him to take into account the consequences of the order he relays back to the Command Post: "Anything moves, kill it." In fact, just the opposite. Beaupre's professionalism, his effectiveness and efficiency, cannot co-exist with concern for the human impact of his acts.

The omissions and distortions in Vietnam-War novels are such that the war can never be taught through them alone. When used in conjunction with more traditional sources, however, novels add an important element to historical exploration. They provide the enjoyment inherent in any story, and they familiarize students with the past as it was experienced on the emotional and psychological levels. Through caring about the characters in Vietnam-War novels, students learn to spot some of the assumptions for which people have paid with their lives, limbs, and peace of mind.¹⁹ They come to be more sensitive to the dilemma, by no means confined to war time, of conflicts between the dictates of authority and the demands of conscience. And they heighten their awareness of manipulative myths--the paradigm of the civilized hero versus savage assailants, the mystique of male initiation, and the code of just-doing-my-job--not just when they appear as the easily recognized objects of satire, but also when they are presented in earnest in their most persuasive forms.

NOTES

¹The main repository for the imaginative literature of the Vietnam War is the Special Collection at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. John Newman, Special Collections Librarian, is preparing a bibliography to be published by Scarecrow Press in 1982.

²Richard Rhodes, "The Traitors," New York Times Book Review (September 7, 1969), 50-51.

³Though this essay deals only with novels, I would like to bring to teachers' attention four remarkable anthologies of veterans' short stories, poems, photos, and essays: Free Fire Zone: Short Stories by Vietnam Veterans, ed. by Wayne Karlin, Basil T. Paquet, and Larry Rottmann (Coventry, Connecticut: 1st Casualty Press, 1973); Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans, ed. by Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry, and Basil T. Paquet (Brooklyn, New York: 1st Casualty Press, 1972); Demilitarized Zones: Veterans after Vietnam, ed. by Jan Barry and W.D. Ehrhart (Perkasie, Pennsylvania: East River Anthology, 1976); and Peace is Our Profession: Poems and Passages of War Protest, ed. by Jan Barry (Montclair, New Jersey: East River Anthology, 1981).

Also an important source and as useful in terms of "story" as any novel are veterans' memoirs, such as Ron Kovic, Born on the Fourth of July (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976); Edward G. Briscoe, Diary of a Short-Timer in Vietnam (New York: Vantage Press, 1970); Front Lines: Soldiers Writings from Vietnam (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Indochina Curriculum Group, 1975); Ronald J. Glasser, 365 Days (New York: George Braziller, 1971); Philip Caputo, Rumor of War (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977); Terry Whitmore, Memphis, Nam, Sweden: The Autobiography of a Black American Exile, as told to Richard Weber (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971); and Charles R. Anderson, The Grunts (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1976). For further discussion, see Note 19.

⁴(Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), 136.

⁵Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims nor Executioners (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 174.

⁶(New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 112-113.

⁷(Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1977), 123-124.

⁸(New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 92.

⁹(Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), 88, 113.

¹⁰(New York: Doubleday, 1967), 92, 35, 231.

¹¹(New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1970).

¹²(Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), 390.

¹³Peter Marin, "Coming to Terms with Vietnam: Settling Our Moral Debts," Harpers, (December, 1980), 42-43.

¹⁴James Webb, Fields of Fire (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), 409-410.

¹⁵"Of Arms and Men," New York Times, January 11, 1981, Section EY, 25.

¹⁶David Halberstam, The Making of a Quagmire (London: The Bodley Head, 1965), 108.

17. Peter G. Jones, War and the Novelist: Appraising the American War Novel (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976), 192-193.

18. Halberstam, One Very Hot Day (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 29, 179, 213, 149.

19. Memoirs of the war (see Note 3) indicate that the disabused ingenu exists in fact as well as fiction. Terry Whitmore's Memphis, Nam, Sweden (Graden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971) follows a young Black man from naive patriotism to exile in Sweden. Philip Caputo's Rumor of War (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977) takes the narrator from a boyhood hunger "for danger, challenge and violence" to contrition and a court-martial for atrocities committed in Vietnam. Ron Kovic's Born on the Fourth of July (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976) shows the author's transformation from a gung ho Marine into a paraplegic veteran and then one of the leading figures in the peace movement. And Charles Anderson's The Grunts (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1976) discusses the author's revulsion at the discovery that the military atmosphere was one in which "murder, rape, or any form of harrassment of unarmed civilians somehow constituted an expression of masculinity." Anderson's conclusion as to the heroic possibilities in war: "Fuck you, John Wayne!"