

Vietnam and the Death of Heroism?

Critical Approaches to a Critical Era

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Shortly after his inauguration in 1981 President Reagan, in an address to students at Tulane University, pronounced the Vietnam War to have been "in truth a noble cause" and "a crusade that failed." Reagan was good at coining such pithy phrases. But when he lurched into one of his rambling, off-the-cuff modes, trouble reared its head. At one of his weekly press conferences in April 1982 he interpreted the Vietnam War in astonishingly wrong terms. He maintained that North and South Vietnam had been "two separate countries ... previous to colonization." He maintained that Ho Chi Minh "refused to participate" in the plebiscite about the reunification of Vietnam. Referring to the Geneva Conference where the transition of Vietnam from colony to independent state was negotiated, he insinuated that the US had played a leading role, when in truth the then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had exerted great pressure on the Mendes-France government not to negotiate. He called the provisional demarcation line at the seventeenth parallel a "border" between two states. He argued that after Geneva, hundreds of thousands left the North for the South, forgetting that there had been a smaller migration in the opposite direction too. He maintained that communist terrorism had been the reason why American troops had to be sent to Vietnam, and not the crumbling of the SV puppet regime. He recalled that it was John F.

Kennedy who authorized the sending of a division of marines to Vietnam (it was Lyndon B. Johnson), wrongly calling this "the first move toward combat moves in Vietnam."¹

What we have in these presidential musings is a telling demonstration of the myths and fabrications which arise after a national crisis. Reagan tried to initiate a discourse which would re-construct the notion of American benevolence and moral heroism. But while his presidency successfully stalled all moves to normalize American-Vietnamese relations, it could not prevent the disintegration of anything resembling a consensus on how to interpret the debacle of Vietnam. This absence of consensus would seem to have little to do with the types of re-appraisal which normally take place after a war. The American invasion of Grenada in 1983, the invasion of Panama in 1989 and the Gulf War of 1991 all resulted in a huge popularity surge for Reagan and Bush, respectively. It is only the Vietnam War that stubbornly refuses to be brought into a line of noble and heroic American endeavors. Today, Chuck Norris seems a rather lonely voice as an advocate of the heroic school in Vietnam representation, even though many of the responses to Vietnam have as their basis an essentialist component which places at the center of analysis the "experience" of Vietnam. Since it was always tinged with suffering, inscribing heroism (at least heroic endurance) into that experience was tempting. However, some early commentators, and – more recently – especially female critics have provided radical alternatives.

The Essentialist Paradigm: The Survivor as Anti-Hero

The first coherent critique of the Vietnam War to emerge was James Wilson's *Vietnam in Prose and Film*.² In essence this book is a Marxist critique that combines several strands of Sixties anti-war protest. For Wilson, the war was the inevitable outcome of a rapacious capitalism

1 John Clark Pratt, ed., *Vietnam Voices: Perspectives on the War Years, 1941-1982* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984), p. 3.

2 James C. Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1982).

which had taken "to an extreme the unreality, the discontinuity and the loss of values that may characterize much of our experience in America today" (101). The forces at work (what we might refer to as the "military-industrial complex") have usurped American traditions of the early Republic, rendering them unrecognizable. Wilson does not hide his wider political agenda; in his preface he states that he is not interested in the formal analysis of an artistic corpus, but is looking for "what [this corpus] tells us about ourselves and our culture." Not troubled by post-modern doubts, he is interested in "the truth." The best representations of Vietnam, he declares, are those that "provide an invaluable record of the initial steps we have taken towards facing the unpleasant truth of an unpleasant war." In the rhetorical vein that was popular among Marxists at the time, Wilson posits a major crisis in his own "late-capitalist" culture, which may soon lead to a total collapse of norms, values – indeed, of civilization as we know it. He argues that most writers or film directors of Vietnam War narratives "share an apocalyptic vision of the war's end." *Apocalypse Now* was then widely seen as the definitive movie about Vietnam. In Wilson's view "the world born in Vietnam becomes a monstrosity of senseless violence and random destruction [O]ut of this collective vision comes a literature and a cinema of despair laced with death" (100-101). One of the core texts for his argument is Robert Stone's indeed apocalyptic novel *Dog Soldiers*. This is a novel that thematizes the aggressive 70s slogan of "let's bring the war home." Its central metaphor is the corrosive effect of Vietnam-imported heroin on the human body; likewise on the body politic. It becomes apparent that Wilson is looking for a didactic function in Vietnam representations. By urging America to listen to its veterans rather than its politicians he hints at the epistemological power of Foucault's concept of "subjugated knowledge,"³ while also demanding that the nation help its soldiers come to terms with the crimes committed in its name. The protagonists of the war are thus typical "anti-heroes" of the existentialist kind.

Philip Beidler's study *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* appeared in the same year as Wilson's; it has since been supplemented by a much more extensive book titled *Re-Writing America:*

3 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, Colin Gordon, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 82.

Vietnam Authors in Their *Generation*.⁴ In many ways, Beidler is steeped in the modernist tradition of F. R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling; hence his frequent references to classical Anglo-American authors such as Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain and T. S. Eliot. Taking as the best writing about the war works that are ordered, restrained and dense with allusions, he is primarily looking for works that provide the highest degree of literaticity as well as a sense of realism.⁵ But what is it that constitutes the "realism" of Vietnam War novels? In vain do we wait for a set of parameters. Like one of the major characters of John Wayne's film epic *The Green Berets*, Beidler thinks that "having been there" is the main criterion for a good war novel. "Experience" is therefore one of his catch-words, from the title of his study to his concluding chapter.

The limitations of Beidler's perspective become even more obvious after a look at his second and more voluminous study, in which he energetically engages in canon-formation. He lauds his preferred writers for their "literary sense-malung" and for their "truth-telling" potential. Beidler maintains that Vietnam War authors such as Tim O'Brien, Philip Caputo or Larry Heinemann constitute the "best and the brightest" in contemporary American letters, no less. In his preface he offsets them against the postmodern nature of much mainstream American literature, which he calls a "literature of exhaustion"(2). He gushes that certain unidentified "estimations" of the work of these new writers, "have now regularly evoked comparisons with figures ranging from Joseph Conrad and Stephen Crane to Jorge Luis Borges and Bertold Brecht, from Ernest Hemingway and Robert Graves to Graham Greene and Joseph Heller, from Walt Whitman and Wilfred Owen to Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot"(5). As if this was not nutritious enough, he then goes on to praise the astonishing breadth and variety of Vietnam War literature, and mentions that in genre it now ranges "across letter, diary, journal, memoir, autobio-

4 Philip Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), and *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

5 For example, *One Very Hot Day* by David Halberstam, or Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, which Kubrick adapted for *Full Metal Jacket*, or even William Eastlake's surreal *The Bamboo Bed*. Among the poets, Beidler praises Michael O'Casey and John Balaban, because he sees them working in the tradition of Pound and Eliot, totally dismissing the veteran poets who write from the rawness of their experience. In his 1991 study he makes a spectacular turn-around on this verdict.

graphy, short story, novel, poem, play, oral history, documentary, and journalistic report" (5), whose range and diversity is surely a postmodern trait! Beidler considers Vietnam veteran writers the true heroes of the era; in their works they have shouldered the burden of re-charging the tired batteries of American literature. Only at this stage do we become aware that the title of his book (*Re-Writing America*) actually means what it suggests: that Vietnam War literature is in the process of transforming American mythology. His earlier condemnations of postmodernism notwithstanding, Beidler is fascinated by postmodern stylists, often echoing their empty rhetoric. Winston Groom he calls "exemplary of the new and imaginatively inventive sense making, often resulting in new levels of insight and acceptance" (86), while Kubrick's movie *Full Metal Jacket* is characterized as "simply the feeding of a collection of American marine boy-monsters into a Disneyland of mega-death called Vietnam during the Tet offensive" (280). Is it unfair to suspect that Beidler is vainly attempting to join the club of semantically hermetic writers? In any case: he cannot have his cake and eat it too. Vietnam War literature is either about experience and sense-making (the modernist paradigm) or about nothing but language and writing (the postmodern paradigm). It cannot be both.

Thomas Myers's *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* is ideologically close to Wilson's book, but conceptually close to Beidler's.⁶ Myers foregrounds actual combat experience in his analysis, but he also wishes to juxtapose narratives of experience with an imagined, symbolic reality. In a passage which has many of the attributes that give post-structuralism a bad name, he writes: "The most perceptive observers knew that the real battle was waged not in the new geographic landscape of men and machines, but within the terrain of collective imagination, an area where the surface images of the war became a mere light show that dissolved in the stronger illumination of persistent cultural realities" (147). Real Vietnam veterans will scoff at such notions. The war was a murderous reality, not a light show, and men in that war were not the least bit interested in the larger issues of a "collective imagination."

Walt Whitman argued that the real war would never get into the history

⁶ Thomas Myers, *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

books, but would be lost amidst a stack of official papers and documents. Myers notes that American soldiers did get to know Vietnamese culture and did acquire insights into the problematics of that war, but for a long time this knowledge went untapped. However, the flood of Vietnam War films and novels of the 1980s the end of that era. No longer is American culture characterized by disinterest in war stories. Those with narrativizing skills now emerge as the new heroes, as "point men" of post-Vietnam mythologizing. Myers ascribes a form of epistemological heroism to the Viet Vet writers of his day: for him, their books are symbolic Canestoga wagons that advance into a new frontier terrain.

Survivors as Subversive Influence

John Balaban's often quoted poem "After Our War" ends with these lines:

After the war, with such Cheshire cats grinning in our trees,
 will the ancient tales still tell us new truths?
 Will the myriad world surrender new metaphor?
 After the war, how will love speak??

In these lines, Balaban acknowledges the duty of American artists to re-read "the ancient tales" and to create "new metaphor" from the common bond of language. A much underestimated study from 1985, Lloyd B. Lewis' *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives*, investigates the basis for such a need.⁸ While Lewis too depends on the "experience" of Vietnam as key to new insights, he focuses less on imaginative re-workings of the war than on oral histories, letters and diaries. He concludes that the soldiers who were sent to Vietnam had been ill prepared for their experience. The four crucial educational agencies of youth and childhood (parents, school, church and popular

⁷ John Balaban, *Blue Mountain* (Greensboro, N.C.: Unicorn Press, 1982), p. 37.

⁸ Lloyd B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985).

culture) had produced in them a "common belief system" in which there was no room at all for an error of judgement by their cultural leaders. Lewis re-works American "exceptionalism" as the source of a mythology of American infallibility. He cites Philip Caputo, who in his much praised memoir *A Rumor of War* writes: "There was nothing we could not do because we were Americans, and for the same reason whatever we did was right" (29-30). Ron Kovic's autobiography *Born on the Fourth of July* is also cited. In addition, Lewis relies heavily on many narrators whose stories were collected by Al Santoli (*Everything We Had*) and Mark Baker (*Nam*). Lewis is surely right in arguing that post-war American culture encouraged young Americans to see themselves and their nation as errant knights, as crusaders, as idealists. The most shocking part of Oliver Stone's movie *Born on the Fourth of July* is the first half hour, when we see how the Cold War years groom eager youngsters for war: through the ever-present John Wayne, the arms race, the annual military parades on the Fourth of July, the mad emphasis on sports and winning, and, not least, John F. Kennedy's hollow patriotism.

In a study of World War I veterans, Eric J. Leeds argues that these men had been made to transgress certain boundaries of civilization, fixing them in a state of "in-between," which he calls "liminal."⁹ Liminality thus refers to an existence somewhere on a borderline, or to use a military metaphor, in a "No Man's Land," and was the condition of most soldiers in the Flanders trenches. But upon being demobbed, the condition stays. Traumatized authors have a drive to testify, to transmit their experience as a kind of sacred truth, setting themselves impossible standards of literal recreation of "how things were." Even if they give in to a need to glorify their actions and those of their collective, a strong sense of survivor guilt will pre-empt any moves to construct a heroic role for themselves. The private life of the traumatized author will thus rarely be a happy one. While the reader's personal myths may stay largely intact in spite of his or her knowledge of the war, the author's myths have been shattered, and he deeply mistrusts the myths of his country. Among Vietnam veteran writers, a sense of not belonging is frequent. Gustav Hasford's novel *The Short Timers* provides a typical example: "Those of

⁹ Eric J. Leeds, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 14.

us who survive to be short-timers will fly the Freedom bird back to hometown America. But home won't be there anymore and we won't be there either. Upon each of our brains the war has lodged itself, a black crab feeding."¹⁰ This veteran presents himself as suffering from a cancerous growth, a metaphor that frequently turned painful reality. In Larry Heinemann's novel *Paco's Story* we encounter another hollow shell of a veteran. Paco is the sole survivor of the 14 servicemen of firebase Harriet, which has received a direct enemy hit. For two days and nights he lingers between life and death, and this "liminal" state defines his future life. He can no longer maintain any relationships, he cannot even be touched. His badly-scarred slun will horrify unsuspecting viewers; he carries the symbolic landscape of his post-war existence on his person, etched into his skin.¹¹ In his earlier novel *Close Quarters* Heinemann uses similar metaphors to express total estrangement between the protagonist and his country: "I have travelled to a place where the dead lie above the ground in rows and bunches.... My skin is drawn tight around my eyes. My clothes smell of blood. I bleed inside. I **am** water. I am stone.... I have not come home, Ma. I have gone ahead, gone back. There is glass between us, we cannot speak."¹²

As is the case with a good deal of Modernist art, much of early Vietnam War literature reveals a subversive concern with the creation of a hostile counter-culture, strongly opposed to contemporary American society. Poetry in particular is rich with expressions of disaffiliation. "How small is the town where I was born/how little the people have grown ... I am infected with Asia/and can never live with the dwarfs/of my hometown in quiet middle age," writes Stuart Smyth.¹³ Charles Purcell, in a poem observing the patriotic bumper-sticker "This is my country," laconically responds: "I am happy about that/I was afraid/it might be mine."¹⁴ William D. Ehrhart ponders one of the classic American mythologies, that of the heroic rebels facing England's redcoats: "In school, as a child/I learned about Redcoats I studied myself/though I did

10 Gustav Hasford, *The Short Timers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), p. 176.

11 Larry Heinemann, *Paco's Story* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986).

12 Larry Heinemann, *Close Quarters*. (New York: Warner Books, 1983), p. 289.

13 Stuart Smyth, "Back Home," in *Demilitarized Zones*, Jan Barry and William D. Ehrhart, eds. (Perlcasie, PA: East River Anthology, 1976), p. 172.

14 Charles Purcell, "Back Home," in *Demilitarized Zones*, p. 65.

not know it at the time."¹⁵ There are many examples of that kind in veterans' poetry. "Those who have experienced trauma see it as connected across history to other atrocities," Kali Tal argues,¹⁶ and indeed many literary works by Vietnam veterans create links to other unacknowledged American crimes: those against Native Americans, against Latin American countries such as Nicaragua, or against blacks. Such links provide us with entry points into trauma literature, since we encounter tropes that are familiar. But we should not have any illusions about the "mass appeal" of authors such as William D. Ehrhart or like-minded veteran poets. Their audience is painfully small.

Populist Revisions: John Hellmann's Myth-Mongering

1985 also saw the publication of John Hellmann's *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*. This study has become a textbook for many college courses. As the title suggests, Hellmann shifts the focus away from mere essentialism to American myth, the most potent of which is the myth of the frontier. For Hellmann just as for Lewis, the frontier myth was an agent of luring young men into the army: "Each of these protagonists ... goes to Vietnam to enter the landscape of American myth.... In this symbolic frontier America could regenerate its traditional values ... [P]sychologically, all are seeking to leave civilization, the East, the city, the past ... to enter the wilderness, the West, nature, the future – America."¹⁷ Disillusionment was programmed into the experience because Vietnam turned out to be a "nightmarish wilderness" where the soldier felt abandoned and betrayed by his culture. The literature of the Vietnam War, not unlike that of the Lost Generation after World War I, thus becomes a literature of cultural disruption. So far, so conventional. But

15 William D. Ehrhart, "To the Asian Victors," in *Demilitarized Zones*, p. 157.

16 Kali Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma:?" in Philip K. Jason, ed., *Fourteen Landing Zones* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), p. 243.

17 John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 109, 36, 135.

from this point on Hellmann radically departs from previous approaches. Though never explicitly acknowledging the teachings of Freud, he seems to have been inspired by his well-known essay "Über die Trauerarbeit," on the labour of mourning. Freud's three steps of overcoming loss are: Memory, Repetition, and Working Over. Hellmann charges the veteran writer with the task of taking American readers back to Vietnam. The best war literature, he writes, would move back "toward the realm of fantasy – of symbolic imagining – to discover the continuing dimensions of Vietnam as a terrain of the American psyche. Having entered Vietnam as a symbolic landscape, Americans would through highly imaginative narrative art have to find their way back to American myth, enabling them to journey again forward into history." (137) So Hellmann's somewhat bizarre recipe for healing is to fantasize a different kind of war, travelling forward into a refurbished myth with a reconstituted American morality. In the opening sequence of *Rambo First Blood Part II* John Rambo asks his ex-commander: "Do we get to win this time?" "No nation can live without a myth," echoes Hellmann, concluding that "only a second failure, of nerve, would cause us then to draw back from our own better dreams. *Mythmaking is an active, not a passive, process.* Perhaps from the landscape of our Vietnam failure, we can find a new determination to brave the opening expanse." (224; my emphasis) Naturally he looks around for available avenues of "active myth-making;" in fact, he devotes a whole chapter ("Toward New Myth") to what he thinks is going to be a potent source for new American myth-making. His choice is as spectacularly misguided as much of his previous thesis: *Star Wars*.

Feminist Resistance to a Re-Masculinization of America

Now for other departures. In 1989 Susan Jeffords published a groundbreaking study titled *The Re-Masculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Jefford's starting point is her observation that in war men are separated from women – and like it. If women are encountered, they are clearly subordinate, be they nurses, ancillary staff, or the

women of the subjugated enemy whom one is at liberty to possess. Gender tensions inevitably ensue, but are resolved by the masculine appropriation of certain feminine values, qualities and characteristics. Men, who are by tradition rivals, become "buddies," comrades in arms. Bonding – even across racial lines – is permitted and encouraged. The men perform for an audience consisting of themselves. They display their bodies as efficient fighting machines and as masters of an array of technological wizardry. There is pleasure in that display and that mastery; Michael Herr describes the feeling of being in an attack helicopter as "the sexiest thing going."¹⁸ William Broyles maintains that in every war men and women experience sexual pleasure more intensely than in peacetime. But above all, war provides a heightened state of existential awareness. Soldiers are initiated into secret truths in mythical and centuries-old ways. Even a supposedly liberal writer like Broyles, so Jeffords claims,

maintains that war stories across the ages revolve around a kernel of an archetypal story. And it is a story that I would imagine has been told for as long as men went to war. Its purpose is not to enlighten but to exclude. Its message is not its content but to put the listener in his place. I suffered, I was there. You were not. Only those facts matter. Everything else is beyond words to tell. As was said after the worst tragedies in Vietnam: "Don't mean nothin'."¹⁹

Broyles also claims that "war is the enduring condition of Man," a cynical view shared by fascists, and that love in war is the purest form of love. "At its deepest level," Broyles claims, "love without war has no meaning."²⁰

What Jeffords is after is the demystification of the soldier as victim, and with authors like Broyles this is not too difficult. War isn't all hell, it is also the power chance of a life-time. Ample support for her thesis can be found in oral history collections, which, by the way, are curiously ignored by Jeffords. One of the narrators of Mark Baker's *Nam* explains;

18 Michael Hen; *Dispatches* (London: Pan Books, 1978), p. 15.

19 Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 61; my italics. Cf. William Broyles, Jr., *Brothers in Arms: A Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

20 William Broyles, Jr., "Why Men Love War," *Esquire* (November 1984), pp. 56, 65.

"That godlike feeling you had was in the field. It was like I was a God. I could take a life, I could screw a woman. It was a godlike feeling."²¹ Such power can only be enjoyed in the absence of the civilizing presence of women. War is a means of excluding those women, and of displaying the male body as an Ersatz spectacle. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Hollywood movies, from Rambo *First Blood* to all those awful Chuck Norris movies, in which there often is an audience of American POWs witnessing either a superhuman capability to endure pain or an equally superhuman prowess to karate the vile Vietcong into extinction. Even respectable actors such as Gene Hackman (*Uncommon Valor*, 1983) have contributed to that mythology. Jeffords notes that Vietnam soldiers frequently had a sense of being their own audience, that is to say, watching themselves as if they were actors in a movie. There are countless oral accounts in which narrators recall behaving like John Wayne or Audie Murphie. Unlike in World War II, where the streets were often lined with cheering civilians, Vietnam did not usually provide a friendly audience, and so the soldiers found themselves in "a context" that required "a self-justification they had not needed before" (19). This would continue after their return home; hence the flood of memoirs and novels, hence also critical approaches like the ones chosen by Beidler, Hellmann and Myers. Jefford's counter-attack is that soldiers of the Vietnam War are neither heroes nor anti-heroes, but beneficiaries of a culture that is in thrall to war. It is time to recognize that some of the best Vietnam War novels (those by Tim O'Brien for instance) and the many movies have presented a one-sided image of the veteran as heroic victim.

In conclusion, let me point out one final aspect of my argument. When it comes to artistic representations of the American soldier in the Vietnam war, there has been a remarkable similarity between "valuable," "high literature" texts and texts that we customarily call "exploitation literature" or "entertainment." Both have been reluctant to abandon the heroic mode of representation with which American culture has comfortably lived for such a long time. There are several reasons for this: one is simply that very little material written by women, people of color and

21 Mark Baker, ed., *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Soldiers Who Fought There* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1981), p. 172.

Vietnamese (exiles or residents of Vietnam) has reached the market. Another is that taking alternative positions to the war would involve the acceptance of guilt and shame. And shame is terribly unpopular in contemporary American culture. America "wants to feel good" about itself. Robert McNamara's autobiography, which was greeted with such fanfare in 1995, is a case in point: the former Secretary of Defence admitted to several errors of judgement, but nowhere does he apologize for his actions, which caused maybe a million casualties: not to the American soldiers or their families, and most certainly not to the Vietnamese.²² In fact, not a single US politician or general has ever apologized for his actions, which makes it perhaps less remarkable that discourses avoiding guilt and shame are dominant even among liberal male academics. It has only been with the advent of women critics in the 90s that rewriting and revisioning of standard mythologies have become possible.

²² Robert S. McNamara (with Brian VanDeMark), *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995).