William J. Searle

Dissident Voices

The NVA Experience in Novels by Vietnamese

To understand the Vietnam War more fully, with greater instruction, we have to understand the Vietnamese.

—John Balaban

It is no secret that frequently there is a contrast, a certain dissonance, between the official version of a war, the sanitized record of noble endeavor sanctioned by the government that sent its sons and daughters to it and the much grittier, often more bitter, portrait revealed in the memoirs and novels of the participants who survived the turmoil. This is especially true, as we all know, of the Vietnam War, in which the confidence and affirmation of General William Westmoreland's memoir, *A Soldier Reports*, is debunked by other American narratives too numerous to name that depict disillusionment, drug use, racism, desertion, loss of moral compass, bloodlust, conflicts within ranks, soldiers cracking under stress, sexual assault, and a breakdown of discipline, just to name a few.

Though fewer in number, dissident voices questioning official versions of the American War in Vietnam have arisen across the Pacific as well. As a result, American readers now have the opportunity to balance the triumphant view provided by Van Tien Dung's *Our Great Spring Victory* (1977) with two 1995 English translations of North Vietnamese novels: Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* written in 1990 and Bao Ninh's 1994

novel *The Sorrow of War*. In each, our former enemy is given a very human face. And though there are significant issues concerning national identity, the focus of this brief study, each work also contains, like their American counterparts, incidents of disillusionment, drug use, racism, desertion, loss of moral compass, bloodlust, conflicts within ranks, soldiers cracking under stress, sexual assault, and a breakdown of discipline.

But before we turn to what the Irish Press referred to as "a tribute to the sheer spirit of the Vietnamese," first we must consider why such dissident writers were allowed voice in the first place. Attached to Duong Thu Huong's satire of Communist rule in Vietnam, a novel appropriately titled *Paradise of the Blind*, is "A Note About the Author" which states:

> In 1987, one year before this novel appeared, the Vietnamese Communist party called on writers and journalists to shake off the stiff, official Marxist style that had been imposed on them and encouraged them to reassert their traditional role as social critics. In this atmosphere of political openness and questioning, many Vietnamese writers and intellectuals responded with literary works, films, novels, and theatrical works that openly or implicitly criticized the excess of the party by satirizing bureaucracy, ideology, and official corruption. (*Paradise* 268)

The note further points out that Duong's earlier novels—*Beyond Illusions* (1987), *Fragments of Lost Life* (1989), and *Paradise of the Blind* (1988) —are works in which "Duong denounced, in simple, direct language, the dehumanization of her country" (*Paradise* 268-69). As an activist in the 1980s, this "fearless and charismatic orator" was ac-

cording to the note, "driven by a deep need to bear witness to Vietnam's political and spiritual chaos" (169). All of this was too much for conservative Communist Party leaders in Vietnam—especially in light of the spread of democracy in Eastern Europe and the rise of democratic movements in China and Burma, far too close to home. Expulsion from the Party was followed on April 13, 1991 by arrest and imprisonment on several inflated charges, like "having smuggled 'secret documents' out of the country" (270), which, one assumes, were manuscripts of her novels. She was released in November 1991, perhaps in part, because human rights organizations, namely PEN and Amnesty International identified her as a political prisoner (270). Some shackles still remain, however, for she is no longer published in Vietnam.

The circumstances behind Duong's struggles—arrest, imprisonment, and withdrawal of her novels from circulation in Vietnam together with the outrage of international organizations—may have made the publication of Bao Ninh's novel easier. But a more plausible reason may lie in the metafictional structure of the novel itself which serves as an aesthetic protective device. Consider the last section of *The Sorrow of War* where a naive redactor claims that he "simply played the role of the Rubik cube player, arranging the order" (*Sorrow* 231). The censor may have anxiously swallowed the redactor's disclaimer on the last several pages. As though the prior two hundred plus pages—in which the only truly joyful times were pre-war—did not exist, the redactor rationalizes: "Our lives may not be very happy, and they might well be sinful. But now we are living the most beautiful life we could ever have hoped for, because it is a life of peace. Surely this was what the real author of this novel intended to say?" (*Sorrow* 232). Calling the true author "the last true Bourgeoise of the district, rebellious, extremist" (229), the fictional redactor further strengthens

the case for the censor to believe the redactor to be a reliable narrative voice of the novel, one with the appropriate politics.

In any case, both Duong and Bao have by their experiences earned the right to both create and criticize. The biographical facts printed on the dustjackets are brief, but telling. Duong, serving as a volunteer in a Communist Youth Brigade, spent seven years in the most heavily bombarded section of Vietnam, "living in tunnels and underground shelters alongside North Vietnamese troops." Of the original forty members of her unit, only three survived. Even more appalling casualties were suffered by Bao's unit. He is one of ten survivors of a brigade of 500 who entered combat in 1969. It is good to remember that, for the North Vietnamese, there was no one-year or thirteen-month tour of duty; enlistment was for the duration. To provide epic scope to their work, both authors create protagonists who serve ten-year stints, from 1965 until victory in 1975, from the introduction of American ground forces until the fall of Saigon, from initial enthusiasm to gut-wrenching disillusionment.

Like good epics, both novels provide a glimpse of happier earlier times before the American war as well as depict life outside the combat zone. Duong's *Novel Without a Name*, more traditional in structure than Bao's metafictional work, provides readers with an odyssey of sorts, Captain Quan's special mission to help a boyhood friend driven insane by the war. Flashbacks, nostalgic conversations with old friends, bizarre meetings with eccentric characters, transparently symbolic dreams, and a visit home flesh out the journey. Bao's *The Sorrows of War*, wider in scope, is a combat veteran's attempt to fulfill what he believes to be a sacred duty, to depict the pain of war, and to do that the metafictional author Kien has to

include the cruelties of peace, for him an additional ten-year odyssey.

Despite their differences in structure, there is a common link, aside from the horrors of jungle combat, between both novels—disillusionment with the war and ultimately with the political system that espoused it. This unrelenting theme is echoed by several chords. The suffering of Vietnamese women brought on by the war is acknowledged and depicted, the timeless rhythm of Vietnamese civilian life is of greater worth than military glory, and criticism of Communist bureaucrats reinforces the fact that Vietnamese patriotism is indeed distinct from Communism. In both Duong and Bao, Marxism is an ideology dwarfed by the spirit of the Vietnamese people, perhaps a last vestige of western imperialism ready to crumble. While criticism of the current system is overt in *Novel Without a Name*, it is perhaps all the more telling because implicit in *The Sorrow of War*.

In Duong's *Novel Without a Name*, the suffering of women may, in part, be due to their very subordinate status, even marginalization, within Vietnamese society. Quan's remembrance of his childhood suggests as much: "In a mother's heart, there is no glory worth the life of a child, no ideal higher than the desire to give happiness. But this village was ruled by the authority of the father" (125). According to Quan, his father, a Viet Minh veteran of the anti-French resistance, is "nothing but a brute, a cruel, hateful presence" (113), whose pettiness, anger, and even vindictiveness caused, in Quan's opinion, his mother to die within eighteen months of his return. His father, more of a warrior than a farmer, more of a Viet Minh than a father, nags Quan's younger brother to enlist, it is implied, to curry favor with the local Communist bureaucracy. Instead of studying to become a computer

scientist, the young Quang soon becomes one of the honored dead.

The death of Quan's mother when he was a mere seven-years-old has a lasting impact—for he dreams of her constantly, prays to his mother's soul to guide him when he is astray in the jungle, invokes the names of the mothers of soldiers he must discipline, even makes a special visit to return the belongings of a dead soldier that he finds by chance (in a maze-like valley) to the deceased's grieving mother. Though Quan consistently remarks on the pain of Vietnamese women who lost their sons, he, like his father before him, cruelly mistreats a woman he once loved, his former fiancée, seduced by a local cadre.

War is not easy on women in Bao's novel either, but the suffering he depicts is restricted to the young, where it is often violent, sexual in nature. In those intoxicating, blissful early days of the war, Kien's high school sweetheart Phuong accompanies him on a train only to be raped by Vietnamese laborers, mistakenly abandoned by her boyfriend, and so jaded by these cruelties that she assumes a life of prostitution and promiscuity that can only drive her and Kien apart on his return home. Economic conditions after the war force the youngest sister of one Kien's friends into the same demeaning trade. By far, the unluckiest female in *The Sorrow of War* is Hoa, a troop guide from the North, who during Tet of 1968, saves fifteen wounded North Vietnamese soldiers, first by shooting the dog of American trackers, then by "diverting the patrol from the trail which would have led directly to the sick and wounded troops, almost powerless to defend themselves against such a fit, well-armed force" (*Sorrow* 191). Her reward for such bravery is gang rape and, it is assumed, murder by an American patrol. When Kien questions the meaning of her death he inadvertently implies the role of

many Vietnamese women in war, "Was it that such sacrifices were now an everyday occurrence?" (*Sorrow* 192).

While there is no shortage of combat in *Novel Without a Name*, the rendering of the immemorial rhythms of Vietnamese life provides a more fully human face to the Vietnamese. Quan's earliest childhood memory, reiterated several times in the novel, deals with the birth of his brother. The agony of childbirth quickly gives way to a more affirmative interchange between mother and sons: "A final ray of sun lights her face; her eyes shine with tenderness. Her face is clear again. I grab the tiny red feet and rub them against my cheeks. 'Little brother. Little brother' " (14). The sentimental portrait above is followed intermittently in the novel by a plethora of nostalgic vignettes, recounting harvest festivals, childhood pranks, schoolboy lessons, teenage insensitivities, adolescent love, tea rituals in base camps, the chance meeting between male soldiers and female volunteers, and the memory of the sound of a flute all recall earlier pastoral times. Return to pre-war peaceful existence is always a consummation devoutly to be wished: "Homecoming: the return to the native village. Showers of tenderness. The same dream haunted our days as soldiers. *Native Soil.* These two words expressed everything we had lived for, cherished, adored" (110). After costly combat operations, Quan poignantly daydreams of happier times and wishes for the possibility of future renewal in images of cyclical rebirth:

> Happy to have survived, I let my mind wander back to my village, let it follow the length of the dikes, through the fields. Wild ducks honked their way across the sky. I had gathered my lost fragments of life, had drank [sic] a bit of blue sky from the bottom of a cup. . . .

> Perhaps I could grow again like a strand of paddy spared the harvest, bent by hatred and storms but still able to flower, to bear fruit. (247)

Even the glorious victory in Saigon on April 30, 1975 pales in contrast to a more perennial appeal—love of the Vietnamese countryside:

> I see myself break away from the crowd. I grab onto red and gold lacquered posts, grope my way out a door, through ruined fields. Bits of fodder still lie about. In the distance the marshes glisten. A flock of storks paddles about in the silt, chasing tiny shrimp. I track them, silent as a shadow, my bare feet plunging into the grass, into the mud. (282)

While the novel reminds us that the blood of Vietnamese soldiers nourishes the land, it is clear that the reverse is also true.

The broader canvas of *The Sorrow of War* reminds us of other aspects of Vietnamese life, other immemorial rhythms. In fact, as a novel about writing a novel, much of the book immerses us in Vietnamese culture. We read of Vietnamese poets, artists, musicians as well as of Vietnamese folklore, folk sayings, and religious practices. References to family altars, ghosts of the deceased, gift-giving at lunar festivals, the beauty of Hanoi in the springtime, and the naive innocence of adolescent romance reinforce Kien's assertion that "he knew it wasn't true that young Vietnamese loved war" (75). Pre-war experience is always idealized in the novel, for we hear that the past was "a never-ending story of loyalty, friendship, brotherhood, comradeship and honesty" (227).

However, even in a novel whose setting is primarily urban, one in which Kien reminisces and writes of those memories, we learn of the appeal of more traditional Vietnamese life—being in harmony with the land. After the war, many North Vietnamese veterans returned to the Central Highlands to enjoy "healthy, outdoor, free living" (196). Kien remembers a particularly idyllic moment years earlier when his unit came upon a South Vietnamese coffee planation untouched as yet by the conflict. Kien and several of his soldiers shared coffee with the owners in an atmostphere described as one of "intimacy and warmth" (198). Calling the incident a "special memory," Kien cites the owner's words at length:

> We just live a simple life, growing coffee, sugarcane, and flowers, he began. Thanks to Heaven, thanks to the land and the trees and nature, and thanks to our own hands and energy and the money from our labor, we are self-sufficient. We don't need help from any government. If the president loses the fight, then let him be, even though you are Communists on the other side. You're human too. You want peace and a calm life, families of your own, isn't that right, gentlemen? (198)

Knowing that severe fighting took place in the Highlands, Kien writes that the episode "was a symbol of paradise lost" (196). Yet the virtues implicit in the owner's words—love of home soil, the necessity of hard work, the desire for independence, and the need for peace—seem, unless there be no truth whatsoever in Vietnamese fiction—to be enduring traits of the Vietnamese.

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In both novels, Communism is overshadowed by Vietnamese patriotism, dwarfed by it, shamed by it. In Duong's *Novel Without a Name*, Quan dreams that he encounters a symbol of Vietnamese nationalism, a peasant soldier of centuries earlier who tells him: "We fought to defend the altar of the ancestors, the future of our country, we never fought for the cheers and applause of others" (265). The novel clearly distinguishes between those who sacrifice from those who benefit from the misery of others, between those who protect the ancestral altars from those who merely seek applause. Three vignettes come to mind. Consider, first, My Ly, a local Party secretary, a non-combatant, who speaks of certain victory because of the advantages of "the dialectical materialism of Marxist thought" (151) while chewing roast duck, the food of another man. His transparent patriotism does not fool the prosperous farmer, Mr. Buu, who feeds him. "Never have the little despots conducted themselves so shamelessly," he says and continues:

> Before, out of every ten of them you could find at least seven who were honest, civilized. Even during the worst intrigues, at least they feared public disgrace. Now the ones who hold the reins are all ignoramuses who never learned the most basic morals. They study their Marxism-Leninism, and then come and pillage our vegetable gardens and rice fields with Marx's blessing. In the name of class struggle, they seduce other men's women. (133)

According to Mr. Buu, many a North Vietnamese general is little better than a whoremaster, perhaps suggesting a comical spin on the phrase, "our great spring victory":

> We country folk have gagged ourselves, our stomachs and our mouths, even our penises. But when it comes to the generals, they know how to take advantage of a situation. Wherever they go, whether it's north or south, they make sure they have plenty of women. In the old days they had concubines, now they call them mission comrades. It's still the same thing. (137)

Those who betray family members to the state, Mr. Buu calls jackals. "Even their faces have changed," he notes. "Those aren't human faces anymore" (138).

In her second case, Duong allows two members of the Communist hierarchy to speak for themselves. In a cruel parody of the Marxist slogan that "religion is the opium of the people" (163), she depicts two prominent Communists, one a cynical college professor, who knows that Marxist Leninism is the true opiate, a mere replacement for more traditional religion: "So you think we're atheists? No way! We demolished the temples and emptied the pagodas so we could hang up portraits of Marx, enthrone a new divinity for the masses" (163). After drawing an analogy between recanting one's crimes against the state and church confession, the professor scoffs at the canonization of Karl Marx. "To canonize Marx they had to erase the real person," (164) he states. His account of the philosophical inspiration behind his country's government is far from sanctified, for he calls Marx a "debauched little dwarf," who "hung out in brothels," was particularly fond of gypsy girls, and impregnated his own maid. When his conversation on the crowded train is reported, he vehemently outfaces the subordinate who accuses him only to boast to his colleague: "Well? Did you see that? A nation of imbeciles. They need a religion to guide them and whip to

educate them" (167). The distinction between these two fat-cat cadre and wounded North Vietnamese soldiers on the train could not be clearer.

Finally, in an orgy of looting that followed the fall of Saigon in 1975, Quan attempts to discipline his troops by pointing out what they had just destroyed was valuable American medical supplies that would have treated thousands of sick people and television sets that would have provided them entertainment. At that moment, Kha, one of the few soldiers to have survived the conflict as long as Quan, ten long years, notes: "But the ones who get to watch have nothing to do with the people. . . . The people, that's my mother, my father, your parents, the soldiers, none of them will ever get a crumb" (274). The soldier then explains a much earlier scam—purportedly a fundraiser to build a cemetery for Viet Minh killed in the anti-colonial resistance against the French—which only funneled money to the local cadre. "They put the people on an altar," Kha states, "and feed them incense and ashes. But the real food, that's always for them" (275). While wanting to curse Kha, Quan also knows this soldier is correct in his assertions.

The dissident voice of Bao Ninh is not usually found in such blatant set pieces, but rather by innuendo, implication, and tone. For instance, Kien notes that his scout unit is often spared "political indoctrination. Politics continuously. Politics in the morning, politics in the afternoon, politics again in the evening" (*Sorrow* 8). Hardline advice from political commissars goes unheeded when Kien believes his men would benefit from less discipline (29). The three don'ts, political slogans forbidding love, sex, and marriage that Kien learns in school, are undercut by Phuong, his rebellious girlfriend, who has more romantic ideas, "Let's go. Leave the straw heroes to their slogans" (132). Even during a victory

celebration in Saigon, troops ridicule the admonishments they receive over the loudspeakers.

More telling in *The Sorrow of War* is the deadening conformity in North Vietnam which snuffs out the artistic sensibilities of those nearest to Kien. His father, upon dismissal from the Party for being a "suspicious malcontent, a rightist deviationist" (124), one who was out of step with the times, unable to "accede to certain socialist ethics" (125) soon became "senile and quite strange" only able to paint works which Kien labels "ferocious, diabolic" in nature. His mother's second husband, a poet, "had gone into hiding to escape the anti-intellectual atmosphere of the state ideologies that came with Communism" (57). The effervescent, free-spirited youth of Kien's girlfriend, Phuong, cannot save her from her surroundings. "Her fine soul will be warped by the coarse style that's overtaking us," Phuong's mother confides to Kien; "she will be destroyed unless she's given preferential treatment for her artistry" (201). In the novel, however, she is not given special consideration and her artistic spirit is destroyed.

Because of their rarity in *The Sorrow of War*, the few overtly dissident statements are all the more emphatic. By 1974, Kien, very much aware that his simple peasant fighters have very little say in the conduct of the war, listens to a fellow soldier explain his imminent desertion: "We have so many of those damned idiots up there in the North enjoying the profits of war, but it's the sons of peasants who have to leave home, leaving a helpless old mother [sic] to hardships" (21). Later in 1977, just before a brawl between himself and another NVA veteran, Kien hears the former officer, now a street tough, analyze the consequences of the American War: "Victory, shit! The victory we got was for morons. Call that civilization and progress? Garbage!" (155). Even if war did not come to the idyllic safe haven mentioned

above—the South Vietnamese coffee plantation—the consequences of the victory surely would, as one of Kien's soldiers notes:

> That's the way to live! What a peaceful, happy oasis. My lecturers with all their Marxist theories will pour in and ruin all this if we win. I'm horrified to think of what will happen to that couple. They'll soon learn what the new political order means. (199)

Both Bao and Duong assume what is virtually a Communist aristocracy, comfortable, corrupt, incompetent, driven more by greed and self-interest than either patriotism or nationalism. The ghost that Duong writes of, that symbol of Vietnamese nationalism, always has tears in his eyes. *Novel Without a Name* and *The Sorrow of War* suggest it is with very good reason.

While the novels under discussion share with their American counterparts the by now familiar litany of the horrors of war—disillusionment, drug use, racism, desertion, loss of moral compass, bloodlust, conflicts within ranks, soldiers cracking under stress, sexual assault, and a breakdown of discipline—the North Vietnamese novels are distinct from most imaginative narrative written by Americans in their recognition and depiction of the suffering of Vietnamese women, their reverence for the immemorial rhythms of Vietnamese civilian life, and their unrelenting criticism of Marxist bureaucrats. Sadly enough there is another frequent omission from American memoirs and novels of the Vietnam War—the plea, implicit or explicit, for reconciliation. Duong, with her international audience, pleads explicitly for reconciliation with Americans. Bao, still published in Vietnam, in depicting bravery and decency among South Vietnamese,

implicitly pleads for reconciliation among his own people, whether from the North or South. Though perspectives may differ, motivations for many an imaginative writer remain the same on both sides of the Pacific. Duong, I believe, speaks for all survivors of that conflict who put pen to paper—whether they label their experience the Vietnam War or the American War. "I never intended to write," she told a French journalist. "It just happened, because of the pain" (*Paradise* 270). ❑

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