

COMMENTARY BY EDWARD F. PALM

The Quiet American Revisited:
Orientalism Reconsidered

In any discussion of the serious literature inspired by the American experience in Vietnam, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* looms large as our inaugural Vietnam novel. Greene's portrayal of an earnest young American CIA operative blinded by the cultural constructions of the Cold War and armored in his good intentions has often been praised as prescient. Now, in hindsight, Graham Greene alone back then seems to have appreciated the extent to which we had constructed an orientalist "other" out of our own nationalistic needs and anxieties in Vietnam.

Fowler's impromptu lecture to Alden Pyle in Part II, just before the Vietminh attack, is a case in point. Fowler's presumed insight into what their hosts that night—two scared young Vietnamese conscripts—really want may be essentially correct: They may want only "enough rice" and for "one day to be much the same as another"; and, as it turned out, we were indeed "trying to make a war with the help of people who just [weren't] interested" (94). But, in presuming to speak for the Vietnamese with such authority, Fowler too reveals an underlying attitude of paternalistic racism; and what is worse, as I intend to show, Fowler here and elsewhere, probably speaks for his well-intentioned creator, who stands as a telling example of one of Edward Said's key tenets about the underpinnings of imperialism: We are all inextricably mired in our own cultures, and our perceptions and beliefs, consciously or unconsciously, are conditioned and limited by our cultural

presuppositions (*Orientalism*10). The real issue here, one *The Quiet American* serves to highlight, is whether it is ever fair, or even valid, to judge a work of a bygone era by today's critical and moral sensibilities.

What follows, then, is a close reading of *The Quiet American* along the same lines as Chinua Achebe's famous deconstruction of *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe argues that Conrad's Marlow, for all his professed liberal sympathies, is guilty of a paternalistic racism that, in its own way, is almost as harmful as the colonial system he decries. Achebe cogently demonstrates that there are limits to Marlow's tolerance. He accepts "natives" so long as they stay in their place, and he too routinely lapses into the tropes of imperialism, revealing his own presumption of racial and cultural superiority. The controversial part of Achebe's essay, of course, is his refusal to concede any authorial distance between Conrad and his character or even to grant that *Heart of Darkness* may still be valuable as a text illustrating the impossibility of completely transcending one's own ethnocentric cultural biases. Achebe finally faults Conrad for paying little or no attention to the actual African people at that time, charging him with constructing a demeaning "other" out of his own good intentions instead. And to Achebe, any work that dehumanizes and "depersonalizes a portion of the human race" cannot qualify as a "great work of art" (257).

Achebe is clearly holding Conrad to an impossible standard, one that Graham Greene too in this case could not meet. His cynical reporter Thomas Fowler, for all his protestations about not taking sides, likewise betrays an intractable allegiance to Western civilization and its prejudices in subtle ways that, at first glance, may not be readily apparent. And, like Conrad's Marlow before him, Fowler may indeed reflect a paternalistic racism that Greene, inextricably mired in an imperial culture, may not have been fully aware of, even as he railed against the evil done by those armored in their good intentions. Where I part company with Achebe, however, is in seeing such lapses as inevitable and our efforts at discovering them as finally redeeming the works and serving as our best safeguard against lapsing into the same, age-old imperial pattern.

Achebe, for instance, will not even grant that Conrad's recourse to a narration within a narration in any way insulates Conrad from Marlow's "moral and psychological *malaise*." Conrad was further responsible, in Achebe's view, for establishing an "alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters" (256). The relationship between Greene and his narrator in this regard presents an interesting contrast. In terms of formal structure, there is certainly more aesthetic and moral distance between Conrad

and his narrator than between Greene and the cynical, self-serving Thomas Fowler, who more clearly than most sees the evils of colonialism but is content to reap its rewards. But the distance, as I intend to show, is there. What is key to this discussion is what Fowler cannot see, constituting a form of dramatic irony that certainly extends to Greene as the prisoner of his times. *The Quiet American* too ultimately lacks an adequate “alternative frame of reference.” Supplying it, however, is not Greene’s responsibility but ours as readers.

Greene first hints at Fowler’s unreliability as a narrator in Chapter 1 with the image of the yellow blossoms that have fallen between the keys of his typewriter (12). On the most immediate level, the image works as an obvious allusion to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73, a poem that perfectly sums up Fowler’s angst over his December - May romance with Phuong. The key here, however, is that the yellow leaves in this case have fallen into Fowler’s typewriter, suggesting the way in which his personal needs as a lonely middle-aged man have jaundiced his view of the public events in Vietnam. In the contest for Phuong, Fowler is anything but *degagé*, and as he seems to realize at the end, his decision to become *engagé* in setting up Pyle benefits only himself. America, as Greene seemed to realize, would not have given up under such circumstances; a lost Alden Pyle would simply be replaced, perhaps with someone less honorable and more effective. Fowler gets Phuong back, but the guilt he feels, coupled with Phuong’s continuing fascination with things American, suggests that Greene knew full well that America had turned the heads of the Mandarin-class in Vietnam—the Western-educated Vietnamese that we had “brought . . . up in *our* ideas” (95), as Fowler complains during his debate with Pyle in the watchtower. Greene was one of the few in the mid-1950s to see what a dubious and dangerous alliance we were forging and was practically alone in dramatizing our folly so effectively.

What Greene does not seem to see is how his narrator, ironically contradicting his professed concern for the people, effectively relegates the non-Westernized Vietnamese to an inferior “other” worthy of only cursory time and attention. Aside from *pro forma* interactions with Vietnamese menials’ such as his landlady and her husband, Fowler associates only with Westerners and with Mandarin-class Vietnamese. He speaks no Vietnamese, which at one point he even denigrates and dehumanizes as sounding like the “twitter of hedges,” the “gossip of birds” (145). Fowler here, of course, has lapsed into one of the classic tropes of imperialism. As Edward Said has pointed out, there is no such thing as a “suprapolitical objectivity” (*Orientalism* 10). Fowler stands as the perfect example of the key effects of indoctrination in European culture and its presumption of cultural superiority

(*Orientalism* 7). One's own language becomes normative and all others, particularly Eastern languages, suggestive of subhuman communication.

Ironically, to the Vietnamese people who do not speak English, he does speak French, the language of the colonizer. This linguistically reinforces Fowler's presumption of the inferiority of Vietnamese language and culture and ultimately begs the question of to what degree was Greene himself unable to shake his assumption of cultural superiority in confronting an Eastern "other." The answer, I suspect, is Greene, as a European, was never quite able to transcend a smug sense of the superiority of European culture. In keeping with one of Said's key observations about the hegemony of European culture, his Fowler is sympathetic only to non-Westernized Vietnamese who know and accept their place (*Culture and Imperialism* xviii). Fowler's anger toward the Vietnamese policeman who presumes to use the French familiar form in addressing Phuong (15), for instance, reveals more than his chivalry (and it is "chivalry" on Western terms).

Likewise, his condescending readiness to speak for the two scared sentries in the watchtower (92-97) is telling. He is ready to speak for, but not to speak to, Vietnamese people. On patrol with the French army and later, after the marketplace bombing, Fowler certainly displays the requisite human sympathy toward the victims of the war America was helping to foment, but where in the novel is there any suggestion that Fowler has tried to get to know the people of the countryside as individuals? He isolates himself in the Western community and socializes only with Mandarin-class Vietnamese like Phuong and her sister, who have turned their backs on their own people and culture.

Other critics—most notably Zathia Pathak, Saswati Sengupta, and Sharmila Purkayastha, in a collaborative article—have shown how, under the imperial relationship, Phuong uses both her silence and her sexuality to get what she wants, "a European marriage," but go on to suggest that the price of her "escape" is a cultural sellout on both sides (412-417). Renny Christopher's analysis is more useful, I think, for reminding us that what Pyle and Fowler both find most attractive about Phuong is her subservience and that, in this respect, Greene is holding up this love triangle as symbolic of the sort of contest he saw taking place between the old and new colonial orders over Vietnam (154-163). As Fowler himself observes in rebutting Pyle's naive claim to exceptionalism—another perennial facet of the imperial mind set (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xxiii)—America could hardly claim to have come into Vietnam with "clean hands" (124). We wanted the cultural validation that comes from having loyal, subservient followers and admirers no less than France had wanted such validation before us.

While Christopher herself fails to point to it, perhaps the most fitting symbolic representation of the sort of relationship we sought with the Vietnamese is Pyle's dog. In return for meeting what we presumed to be their basic needs, we expected doglike love and obedience. Fowler, of course, is characterized as not liking dogs, a trait symbolically suggestive of his somewhat redeeming ability to see that his own hands were not clean in the contest for Phuong. He is at least being honestly selfish. As he himself admits, Phuong for him is "the hiss of steam, the clink of a cup . . . a certain hour of the night and the promise of rest" (12)—in short, as he later admits to Pyle, a buffer against his old age (104-105). The fact that he disapproves of doglike obedience on an international scale is simply indicative of good character development. Fowler exhibits the sort of inconsistency we are all capable of in securing something we really want. The important point, however, is that on an even more fundamental level Fowler cannot see that Phuong is not "Vietnamese" at all—at least not in a culturally distinct and authentic sense. She is that hybrid that Said terms the "good native" (*Culture and Imperialism* xviii), one of those who accept and emulate the values, manners, and mores of the colonizer, thereby providing what colonizers most need and desire from the imperial relationship—validation of their own cultural superiority. This, I suspect, is the dimension that Greene himself, as a product of European culture, could not see.

Another case in point is Fowler's unabashed admiration for the perfectly assimilated bank official and his wife, both of whom had made their separate peace with the war by retreating into Western culture. They are one of two couples whom Fowler, early in the novel, observes dancing and goes on to describe as "small, neat, aloof, with an air of civilization we couldn't match." Fowler reinforces the impression in the following terms:

They never, one felt, dressed carelessly, said the wrong word, were a prey to untidy passion. If the war seemed medieval, they were like the eighteenth-century future. One would have expected Mr. Pham-Van-Tu to write Augustans in his spare time, but I happened to know he was a student of Wordsworth and wrote nature poems. His holidays he spent at Dalat, the nearest he could get to the atmosphere of the English lakes. He bowed slightly as he came round. (39)

Greene breaks off the reverie with Fowler's sudden, guilty recollection of the boorish, ugly American Granger, whom he and Pyle had earlier deserted in a brothel. Greene obviously means the scene as an ironic contrast and as a value judgment

against America and its presumption of cultural superiority. But the deeper irony here—which Greene himself does not seem to see—is that the cultural model Fowler finds so laudable is hardly Vietnamese. Mr. Pham-Van-Tu and his wife are representative of the collaborationist class who have been completely co-opted by Western culture and ultimately estranged from their own culture.

There should be something sad, and not praiseworthy at all, in the sight of Asians trying so hard to be Westerners, an insight Fowler almost seems to arrive at in the watchtower in rebutting Pyle's clear preference for the "educated" over the "peasants." Fowler ironically asserts that he and Pyle "deserve to have [their throats] cut" for bringing them "up in *our* ideas" and for teaching them "dangerous games" (95). The effect, of course, is one of dramatic irony, and one could argue that Greene intends it as a way of characterizing Fowler as just as flawed and self-deceived as Pyle. If, for instance, Greene intended Pyle's dog to symbolize the sort of demeaning relationship we hoped to achieve in Vietnam, then the dog's fate further suggests that Greene was certainly aware that political and cultural collaboration both were bitterly resented among the Vietnamese in that time and place. But the dramatic irony, I believe, probably extended to Greene himself. I doubt he was able to see, or at least fully appreciate, this contradiction in Fowler's character. It is telling, for instance, that the paradigm he chooses to fit the Phams into is the eighteenth century, the age otherwise known as the "Enlightenment." Greene here has once again fallen into one of the tropes of imperialism, the idea that native Vietnamese culture represents an inherent darkness in need of our enlightenment.

Similarly, in the watchtower, before the debate he and Pyle begin to have over the responsibility of the West, Fowler indulges in a decidedly racist reflection on why their voices seem to have had a calming effect on the two Vietnamese sentries: "Perhaps they thought the sound of our white voices—for voices have a colour too, yellow voices sing and black voices gargle, while ours just speak—would give an impression of numbers and keep the Viets away" (96-97). The traditional defense, of course, is that the racism here is an appropriate and realistic facet of a character set in this time and place and that the character should not be assumed to be speaking for his creator. From Achebe's standpoint, the issues would be whether Greene has set up an "alternative frame of reference" from which we can recognize the racism of both Fowler and Pyle and whether he done enough to insulate himself from the "moral universe of his history" (256).

In my view, an "alternative frame of reference" is indeed there. It is evident in Fowler's acknowledgment that he too hardly knew Phuung as an individual. As

he admits at the end of Part Two, in reflecting back on how he had rebutted Pyle's paternalistically racist assertion that Phuong was a "child":

"She's no child. She's tougher than you'll ever be. Do you know the kind of polish that doesn't take scratches? That's Phuong. She can survive a dozen of us. She'll get old, that's all. She'll suffer from childbirth and hunger and cold and rheumatism, but she'll never suffer like we do from thoughts, obsessions—she won't scratch, she'll only decay." But even while I made my speech and watched her turn a page . . . I knew I was inventing a character just as much as Pyle was. One never knows another human being; for all I could tell, she was as scared as the rest of us: she didn't have the gift of expression, that was all. (133-134)

Christopher is right to take Greene to task for that last comment. Fowler's characterization of Phuong as lacking the "gift of expression" is no better than Pyle's insistence on her childlike simplicity as a widely shared cultural trait among the Vietnamese (133,176). To Fowler too—and probably to Greene behind him—Phuong remains essentially an inferior "other." Even worse is Fowler's presumption that she leads an essentially subhuman life free of the burden of self-consciousness—that "she'll never suffer like *we* do from thoughts, obsessions" (133, emphasis mine). But the important point is that Greene does have Fowler display at least some degree of self-awareness. Unfortunately, in couching that awareness in terms of a stereotype—namely, the inscrutability of the Easterner—Greene himself has probably lapsed into one of the tropes of imperialism.

What does redeem Fowler, in my view, is his realization that an old imperial order was merely giving way to a more insidious neo-imperial one that could and did promise more in the way of material prosperity than the old order ever did. The wish Fowler expresses at the end—that "there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry" (189)—represents a twofold epiphany: first, as indicated above, his realization that only he had benefitted from Pyle's death, not Phuong and certainly not Indochina; and, second, an even deeper realization that he had never become *engagé* at all. He and Phuong are going off to England to establish their separate peace. But to expect more in terms of an alternative frame of reference, to expect that an author reared under imperial system would anticipate and reflect today's sensibility, would be unrealistic in the extreme. We as readers are responsible for bringing that dimension and that standard of judgment to bear.

The final issue, in terms of Achebe's criteria, is whether Greene does enough to insulate himself from the moral universe of his own story. From Achebe's standpoint, the answer would be an obvious "no." Achebe, however, would hold works of art up to an impossible standard, or perhaps, in keeping with our postmodern sensibility, he would erase that traditional distinction between a work of literature and a polemic. That Greene is guilty of the same sins as Conrad before him—of dehumanizing and depersonalizing "a portion of the human race" (Achebe 257)—is a given. It was inevitable and unavoidable, given where he came from and who he was, that he would view his culture and his language as normative. The more worrisome notion, to my mind, is the conviction that the ultimate measure of a work of literature should be how well it conforms to, and reflects, our contemporary moral sensibility.

What I am advocating, in one respect, may seem like a reactionary stance—a reversion to an earlier sensibility by which texts were respected and judged on their own terms. *The Quiet American*, it must be admitted, is essentially a modernist text. The outcome and the tone both are in keeping with the quintessential modernist stance toward the world, the response summed up under Hemingway's resonant phrase, "irony and pity" (113-114). Greene seems to have seen it as a sad inevitability that America would intervene and make an even worse mess of things in Vietnam. In one sense, it is regrettable that he was willing to resign himself to that outcome. But, as a wise professor of mine used to remind his students, every generation reads literature in light of its own preoccupations, problems, and pursuits.² Just because a contemporary post-structuralist reading of the novel reveals a self-serving nostalgia for, and even a residual investment in, a repressive and dehumanizing imperial order does not invalidate the novel's worth as a work of art and certainly not as a polemic. Greene's ability to make us empathize and identify with an unreliable and morally deficient narrator, at least initially, is the novel's strength, not its weakness.

In this regard, *The Quiet American*, as is the case with so many good works of literature, anticipates the subtleties of reader-response theory. As products of today's sensibility, we ultimately catch ourselves and realize why our initial inclinations and sympathies may have been wrong, and out of that sort of dialectic comes a more fully informed appreciation for the insidious temptations of that era. Who is to say that, confronted with the same pressures and problems as Greene's Fowler and Pyle, he or she would not have opted to settle comfortably into the path of least resistance or, potentially worse, naively commit him- or herself to a course of action likely to cause more harm than good? The novel prompts that sort of soul-searching. But, even more importantly, it is ultimately about the problem

of premature moral judgment. As Fowler is forced to admit about Pyle, "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused" (60). It is a line that speaks to us and to the condition of literary criticism today no less than to the world of Green's novel.

Notes

1. They are, of course, "menials" from Fowler's point of view.
2. The professor was Ernest Moyné, late of the University of Delaware.

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