

## GONE TO PIECES EVERY ONE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN CLARK PRATT

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**If you don't mind, I will begin by asking about *The Laotian Fragments*. Why fragments?**

— Because I think that modern life is so complex that the only way to adequately understand what is going on is to realize that the modern perception is fragmented, that we receive information in the way of fragments, that somehow, as Allain Robbe-Grillet has said in his discussion on the modern novel, the entire perceptive quality of that which we see is fragmented; I don't think I can write a novel about the Vietnam War in its totality without just perceiving the bits and pieces of that totality as we perceive it while we were there.

**— Perhaps your *Vietnam Voices* helps us to understand the structure of *The Laotian Fragments*. But why were you so interested in recording all that complexity Vietnam was?**

— Well, because Vietnam —and the war itself— was a fragmented war. If you talked to anyone who was there you would get a completely distorted reality... If you talked to one person who was there about the war, you get one view; you talk to another person, you get another view; in actuality there were wars going on on three sectors, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, at approximately 16 years of war, times three... so you must find about 48 different wars going on within the Vietnam War. So, anyone who pretends to know the total overview of the war is talking subjectively. I saw the Vietnam War as a part of the whole modern consciousness; In essence, I see *The Laotian Fragments* as a microcosm of the entire modern scene, where one person trying to figure out, as the Professor does in the novel, what is really going on, even for the participants, cannot come up with anything except, as he says at the end in a sort of scholarly way: "You have to look at everything to get the truth". But what the truth is, he doesn't know.

**— I found the book very complex. In fact, you write in the first pages "pity the poor soul who reads this for the first time". Further readings led me to finding new meanings that were not so obvious —at least they were not for me— in the first reading. There are subsequent themes I'd like you commented upon —prostitution, for instance. It seems to me you deal with that activity, not only from the standpoint of sexual morality, but in a broader sense of moral prostitution, or else, cultural confusion and decay within the Vietnamese culture. In other words, can the LBFMs you write about in the first pages transcend to something else than moving cabaret figures?**

— Well, the LBFM is an acronym [Little Brown Fucking Machine]. One of the moral centres of any novel, a modern novel, is the language; and so, you have the Americans looking at these human beings who were prostitutes and call them LBFMs. But that's an acronym the same way you have KIA for "killed in action" or CIA. People don't talk to each other, they don't communicate with each other, except through these acronyms. In reality, the fact of prostitution around an occupying army is as old as there have been occupying armies. But that concept here, the LBFM, is part of the overall immorality of any human action which is based on power. My favourite 'prostitute' is the Madam at Lulu's, who looks at the American colonel who says "My God, what are you doing here?" and this is terrible... and she looks at him and she says: "You tell me what you're doing here; you know what I do, but I don't know what you do", and then she says "You Americans and your *moralité*." I think that in Vietnam, what had been a traditional thinking about American morality just was thrown out of the window —and became an extremely immoral way of doing things. And it is mirrored in the language: they [the LBFMs] were human beings, but the Americans reduced those women to acronyms.

**— What do you think would have been the product of the interaction in those two cultures, mixed together and in that way?**

— Somebody else has said that better than I can: Donald McQuinn in his novel *Targets*; as a Vietnamese man is talking to an American man, both are aware, they are discouraged at the progress of the war. And the Vietnamese says to the American: "We've grafted the worst of our culture and the worst of your culture." And then says "I do not feel happy about the eventual result." And I think that to a great extent this happened both in Vietnam and in Laos, and I'm not going to say that there wasn't in actuality any positive action taken by the Western powers, but I just feel that in general, the Americans really never understood the ancient culture, the history of it —chose often the literature that somehow the Americans were going to tame savages in Vietnam. What they didn't realize is something that Crèvecoeur knew very well; when the Americans were furthering the Westward movement of culture in the Nineteenth century, a movement was begun in the Far East, and in neither case did they understand the death of the culture.

**— As you use such props like the tape recording or the teletype message to add to Blake's actions, did you specially mean to transmit an atmosphere of technical sophistication, did you want to show the inequality of means in the sides involved in war?**

— Sure. Technical sophistication is something I'd call 'technical dependency' as much as 'sophistication'. One forgets sometimes that the birth of the English novel, the Western novel as such people forget the *Quijote* and some of the greatest Spanish novels —Americans forget a lot— ...well, the birth of the novel in English came with *Pamela*, which was essentially an epistolary novel. *The Laotian Fragments* is an epistolary novel brought up today, within technology. It is really nothing different than the history of the epistolary novel with tape recordings, both covert and overt letters, it is again the kind of —I would call it hyperrealism. It is

the kind of experience that a reader gets looking at the fragments, which is identical with the kind of experience he gets when he goes somewhere and learns something. When two people meet, they exchange letters, they tell stories... other people talk about other people. And that's the way I felt. And so, the technology there is recurring. The irony is that the technology does know its work, and what one depends upon technologically may or may not be true; and to me, one of the main ironies of *The Laotian Fragments* is the fact that with all of our technology, the American mission as such has to get saved by Nature, by the rain; it just happens to come along when it isn't supposed to.

— **While reading it one is continuously reminded of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*...**

— Yeah

— **...mainly that passage when the gunmen were shooting at the people at the same time they listened to Wagner's "Walkirie"...**

— Yeah, I agree with you. At the beginning of the novel you have the party, and everybody is dressed up in their party suits. And so you have the rock music... and so you have that element where *Apocalypse Now* and *The Laotian Fragments* are also alike: that we both stuffed from the same author, Joseph Conrad. The end of *Apocalypse Now* is more dubious, but still is directly from *Heart of Darkness*. Mind that metaphor Coppola and I share... B 52s drop bombs into the jungle, and Blake in his journal says that the B 52s drop bombs and the jungle swallows it all up just like a long boat going along the shoreline firing into the jungle... that's one of the *Heart of Darkness* influences.

— **Somewhere in one of Mailer's works I read a comparison he established between *Catch-22* and the Second World War on the one hand, and *The Naked Lunch* and Vietnam on the other. Do you share his opinion?**

— No, I don't completely, because *The Naked Lunch* is a bizarre, hermetic, drug-filled, degraded novel which to some people became representative of some people in the 60s. I think that Mailer—that bad comment— goes a bit overboard. *Catch-22* I think prevailed. Beidler talks about *Catch-22* becoming "giddily real", meaning that *Catch-22* predicted the war, and then *Catch-22* became a paradigm, became the foundation of the whole war, and the people saw the war as a catch—twenty-two. Maybe for some, particularly those who were stoned or were on dope, it seemed more like *The Naked Lunch*, but I wouldn't care it quite that far. I'd rather keep it within the round world of *Catch-22*. Because this novel was not written about World War II, it was written about the 1960s—the late 50s and the 60s, and it was a predictive novel, not a backward-looking novel.

— **It was a prophesy, not a recording.**

— Good.

— **As all these issues still arouse a good deal of susceptibilities, it is not odd, then, that the works on Vietnam stir up many a strong feeling. Do we have to wait too long yet until the American public come to terms with all Vietnam was?**

— The American public?

— Yes...

— I don't know if they've come to terms, because they know nothing about it. You cannot come to terms with something which you do not know. And as I mentioned at the beginning of the interview, every person who was there, or every person who writes about it carries a particular attitude around and within him or her. So, despite some good books that are coming out now, I doubt seriously that the American public as a whole will really understand what Vietnam was, it is already becoming a mythic experience... it is in danger of becoming a great Paul Bunyan of the American myth, it was always evoked in those of us who were there. And the same kinds of feelings people had during a time are being reproduced. I've been in a Conference just now and I watched the war getting referred to all over again. And people don't seem to have changed their minds one little bit, no matter how much they read, how much they know.

— **Despite the large number of novels written on Vietnam?**

— Well, what has happened in my experience in talking about the novels, even the experts suddenly find out that there are twice as many novels as they thought there were. The person who may have read two or three novels suddenly looks and sees that there are 250 more and so, what they do is look at summaries, they look at fragments, they look at a little bit here, and so, what is happening now is that people are reinterpreting and reinspectng the Vietnam War by a bunch of fragments. A little bit of this and a little bit of that. If there is no way, for instance, that the CIA is ever going to release any of its material, and that makes a 30 per cent, at least, of the whole war, this means there is a 30 per cent of information people will never know. There is a whole segment we've never been talked about. So, how can you come to terms with only a 70 per cent of the war?

— **Reading the works written in the 60s, and reading what is being written right now, the differences in scope, in pitch, in the author's reflections, are so great that they certainly seem to show two contradictory vital experiences. Obviously, this follows a shift in the opinion of the Americans on the war but, shouldn't the writer have a sixth sense that allowed him to do his literature and his share of recent American culture in terms of independence?**

— That's a big question; let me answer it in two parts. The writings of the 60s were written while the war was going on. Most of the fiction, the political science, and the histories at that point, all had a basic, and didactic, and polemical political mood, either to show how gloriously the Americans were fighting, or how the war had to end. If you look at a lot of the political tracts they're either pro or con the war. Then, now in the 80s you would expect that there'd be a little more balance. The writers of the 60s were as true to their hearts as they knew how to be. They were writing about something that had happened just yesterday and happened *to them*. Now we are beginning to get writers who are attempting to be objective—however, as I tried to show by *Vietnam Voices*, to look only at the fiction presents only one of the pragmatic perceptions. To look at the whole history is partly impossible, it's too much of it. Let's take off a few of the percent I talked before, because very few Americans speak Vietnamese, and the Vietnamese aren't going to have any of their histories at this point except perhaps the political tracts; this

way we cannot have a 50 or 40 per cent of the war. So, the writers of the 80's should be able to attain a little bit more distance —however, they've not. Take the latest book by Larry Heinemann, *Paco's Story*. An intensely personal, intensely emotional, beautifully written book, but it allows no distance on the war. What it does is expand on one of the fragments and so I'm still very pessimistic about anyone ever getting a handle on the war.

— **Fortunately, works like Heinemann's *Paco Story* can offset the 'Rambo' syndrome, can't they?**

— Oh, I hope so. I'm terribly concerned about the Rambo mentality. That is the California, the media image, that is the technology that you were asking about in your first questions. It is the impact of technology, industries tv, industries film...

— **Along with Heinemann, a few of literary figures have been discovered: I mean men like O'Brien, Webb —not to mention one- book writers, like Durden. Can we expect another Dos Passos or Mailer to rise from the experience of Southeast Asia?**

— Well, you asked earlier why I used the fragments, whose sources came from Dos Passos. As far as Dos Passos is coming up, I was indebted to him in *Vietnam Voices*, which is a work of art, not a work of history. As far as Mailer is coming up, you will remember that *The Naked and the Dead* is about one action, in one front of the war, it covers only the Japanese; I think John Del Vecchio's *The Thirteenth Valley* is the closest thing we have to Mailer. It is very similar, directly from Mailer. But you don't read Mailer finding out what happened with the Second World War, because it had nothing to do with the European front at all. Neither do you read *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to find out exactly what happened in the Spanish Civil War. You read fiction to find out what people think and what individuals thought about it. And then you try to read history to get the whole panorama. I don't think there is going to be any one novel written about the whole war. It is simply impossible. Most of the 'great' novels are set in Vietnam. For instance Anthony Grey's *Saigon* or, say, a pretty good book like Thomas Flemming's *Officers' Wives*, are set in Vietnam; they say nothing about Laos, nothing about Cambodia. You just get a part of the war. So, that's again why I used the collage technique in an attempt to present the whole war.

— **Little wonder, the cinema marketing casts an eye on these writings. I particularly don't care about the end product of books like *The Green Berets* or *First Blood*; what scares me is the treatment Hollywood may give to *The Short Timers* or *The Thirteenth Valley*. Do you feel the same?**

— Yes, I'm scared to death about that. I turned down an offer from Quinn Martin Productions to buy the rights of *The Laotian Fragments*. They wanted to develop a situation comedy, which takes place in one police station with bunches of zany characters coming in and out. It is funny they wanted to do that with *The Laotian Fragments*. They said: no hardlines, it's going to be a comedy; they offered me some money and I said: *no*. What happens is that the writers do not maintain editorial or authorial control over their material once they've sold it, and Hollywood's task is to sell films. As you see, I am very worried about that. I'll let

you know more in a couple of years, because I've just heard another book about the 'Raven' air controllers is being built upon by Hollywood studios. It's a book that is going to be published, it's a book I had a lot to do with, But I have no part in it. Apparently Hollywood studios —two or three, anyway— are bidding on the rights to a book about the 'Raven' Air Force Controllers and they are not considering money at all, so I don't know that is going to happen.

— **Finally, has the Great Vietnam War American Novel been written?**

— A great novel, great novels have been written about the Vietnam War already. It all depends on what you want a novel to do. *War and Peace* is the greatest novel ever written about a war. But it is about the whole Russian-French controversy; it's not only the battle of Borodino, but it's the whole social system at the time. I suppose it may be possible to do that, but it will have to be a war-and-peace kind of approach; because of the fragmentary nature of this world, I doubt very seriously if you would be able to achieve the kind of focus in the battle of Borodino, for instance, Tolstoy got; it would have to be a fragmentary novel, a kind of collage. If you want to get a kind of war-and-peace novel of Vietnam —I think as far as the novels about the human condition in Vietnam, about what is felt like, which is what basically *The Naked and the Dead* is about— then you get novels like William Pelfry's *The Big V*, which is possibly one of the most brilliant novels I've ever read about men in combat. What it does not have is the historical perspective, the characters' background *The Naked and the Dead* has; you get novels like Ward Just's *Stringer*, which is a highly philosophical novel, a beautifully written story of the old army versus the new technology; you get a novel like Takeshi Kaiko's *Into a Black Sun*, which is probably the best single novel examining the failure of the American action in Vietnam. Let me insist, what there is is the single novel written about a single part of the war. I just don't think we're going to get the kind of panoramic novel about the war. Look at Europe: What is the novel of the One Hundred Years War? What's the novel of the wars of the Spanish Succession? Vietnam was at arms, as far as the Americans are concerned, from 1953 through 1975; as far as the Vietnamese are concerned, it's being going on for hundreds of years; as far as the French are concerned it takes differently. So, asking for *the Vietnam War Novel* is like asking for the novel of American life since the end of the Second World War. We've got lots of novels, but do not have *the one*.

(This interview was held at Colorado State University-Fort Collins, in November 1987).