

ALIENATION AND ENVIRONMENT IN THE FICTION OF VIETNAM

Pilar Marín

Universidad de La Laguna

Most of the literature of the Vietnam War was based on personal experience and it was written by men who participated in it, either as combatants or as war correspondents. Even if, as Tim O'Brien maintains, "Each soldier... has a different war"¹ since he registers only that which he is predisposed to register, the literature of Vietnam presents certain characteristics common to most of it that are the direct result of the type of conflict being fought, and the circumstances in which its witnesses and participants found themselves. Therefore, what sets the Vietnam War apart from others is also that which differentiates its literature from the literature of previous wars. One of these differentiating characteristics is its prevailing sense of alienation which is fostered by, projected on and expressed through the physical environment.

A brief examination of some of the elements that made Vietnam different will clarify some of the reasons for the profound feeling of alienation found in its literature. It will also allow us an examination of the terms in which that alienation is described. The two most evident historical facts about the Vietnam War are that it was the longest military involvement ever fought by the United States and the only one that country has so far lost. From the literary point of view, these facts are very important. Most books about the Indochina conflict were published after it was over, so that the grim atmosphere surrounding its ending must necessarily have had an effect on the writers dealing with it. It was also a guerrilla war, fought mostly in the jungle by small groups of Americans, and it was a war in which both friend and foe were undistinguishable or one in which the enemy was either elusive or outright invisible.

Vietnam was also an amorphous war that was never declared and it had a gradual, hazy beginning. Philip Caputo, who fought in it and lucidly wrote about his experiences, has commented on this point: "...one of the odd things about that war is it was so amorphous, it had no concrete beginning. There was no Pearl Harbor, no North Koreans going over the D.M.Z., or ANYTHING LIKE THAT"². Just as it began gradually, it dragged on, in an (at least) senseless way, impelled by its own momentum and punctuated by scattered climatic moments. That same feeling of aimlessness, which becomes more apparent in the later novels, but which is there from the beginning in these literary works, informs the combat operations described in the literature of Vietnam. The tension is there, the reality (or surreality) of the booby trap, the

fear of the sniper; but so is the “aimless thrashing” (in Caputo’s words) of the platoon in the jungle, the merging of days into endless nights, the emptiness.

The feeling of formlessness, at least to the mind of the veteran-writer is partly the result of the absence of clear objectives of the Vietnam War, of any stated ideological or political purpose. Wilson points out how “the Vietnam books present the plight of the common American soldiers who find themselves expected to fight for no other reason than to kill”³. And, in fact, the ignominious “body count” is substituted for the attaining and holding of any kind of military objectives. Caputo remarks: “In the patriotic fervor of the Kennedy years, we had asked «What can we do for our country?», and our country had answered: kill V.C.”⁴ A sentiment echoed in endless books on Indochina, as in *Fields of Fire*, where the following dialogue takes place:

- That’s the game out here. That’s what we are for. To kill gooks.
- Funny. I thought there was more to it.
- There is, Senator, there is. But it all goes together. Kill gooks and make it home alive⁵.

But if the War was historically amorphous in the sense of not having a clear beginning, and if, once there, it seemed to the average grunt to lack clear aims or objectives, there was nothing vague about the way the American soldier entered and left the War. I use the word “entered” consciously, since it was a conflict of total immersion where most soldiers spent weeks at a time in the jungle, or months in an isolated base. A sense of isolation dominates the soldier because of the abrupt way in which he and his companions were taken into war, and because of the equally sudden manner in which, a year later, they were taken back to the United States. As one veteran put it: “going there we flew with a group of men we had known for a few weeks during training; landing, our sense of isolation increased as we were divided into replacement groups, then divided again and again, until we found ourselves in platoons and assigned to squads of 10 or 12 men”⁶. The one year tour of duty, with its constantly rotating system, compounds the sense of isolation of the soldier and its direct consequence is a morbid but understandable obsession with time on his part. The end of the War comes just as abruptly for the veteran as its beginning was for the recruit. “—And one day you were at Khe Sanh and the next day you are on a 727 flying back to San Francisco and in a week you are back home in civilian clothes.”⁷ Tim O’Brien at the end of his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone...* has described graphically the flight back to the United States with the stewardess spraying the cabin “killing mosquitoes and unknown diseases, protecting herself and America from Asian evils, cleansing us all forever”⁸. Not only will this sudden entrance and departure from the war contribute to the problems of adjustment of the veterans on their return, but it also helps to create an image of the Vietnam Conflict as having been fought in a vacuum. It is a slice from the life of these men, disconnected from the past

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and the future, somehow lifted out of the total experience of their lives, and yet crucial in their development. William Jayne has expressed it well. The feeling coming from his words is not only expressive of isolation, of alienation from their culture, but of having, somehow, existed in a vacuum, in a place and time outside real life and real time, lifted out of both:

We went to Vietnam as frightened, lonely young men. We came back, alone again, as immigrants to a new world. For the culture we had known dissolved while we were in Vietnam, and the culture of combat we lived so intensely for a year made us aliens when we returned... We came to maturity just as we experienced this cultural dislocation. And we each had to do it alone⁹.

As a consequence, the stories written by the veterans, whether fiction or memoir, usually begin in medias res, with the arrival in Vietnam, or at the very most, beginning in basic training a few weeks before the flight to Asia. As Walter H. Capps has pointed out regarding these works: "Before they reach conclusion they break off, as if the chronicle doesn't go anywhere, as if it involves a plot that can find no resolution, as if the telling engages a sequence of a deep emotional involvement that has been interrupted or is still trying desperately to find its way."¹⁰ They are intensely personal stories that cover a very definite and special span of time, that of the one year tour of duty, and they start and end as abruptly as that crucial year did. What Philip Caputo says in *A Rumor of War* could have come from dozens of other novels about Vietnam. He considers the experience to have been, fundamentally, a personal one. "... it is a soldier's account of our longest conflict... as well as the record of a long and sometimes personal experience"¹¹.

Given the characteristics of the War that we have so far pointed out, and the consequent feeling expressed by another veteran that "in Vietnam there seemed to be neither past nor future, only the very meaningless present"¹², the result is that its literature is removed from history, out of time and space, developing in a present disconnected from past and future. Frederick R. Karl believes that by handling the War this way, its writers "make the war more nightmarish: that is, so removed from anything familiar in time or space that it just hangs there", and he refers to the disembodied quality of this fiction, unassociated with anything occurring back home or even on the base: "The men enter a surreal area where they fight a battle —jungle, sun, sky, mud, a phantasmal enemy, loss of distinction between friend and foe."¹³ This sense that the world has receded, that individual sacrifice is worth nothing, all make the men hang together in the presentness of Now.

It is a Now that develops in a very definite environment which for one thing is not only removed from its surrounding time periods but that is, physically, extremely remote from what the soldiers, stressing the fantastic, surreal quality of their present, call "The World". While the participants in the War are thousands of miles from home, living an experience disconnected from their

previous reality, life goes on as usual, without them. In *Fields of Fire* one of the characters comments on their situation:

Airplane drivers still drive their planes. Businessmen still run their business. College kids still go to college. It's like nothing really happened, except to other people. It isn't touching anybody except us... We been abandoned, lieutenant. We been kicked off the edge of the goddam cliff¹⁴.

Caputo tells us in *A Rumor of War*: "The air conditioned headquarters of Saigon and Danang seemed thousands of miles away. As for the United States, we did not call it the World for nothing; it might as well have been in another planet."¹⁵ Besides, the soldiers were not only totally isolated in the jungle. When they come into contact at all with the culture and the people of Vietnam, they are just as totally alienated from them. Tim O'Brien has described this cultural isolation in *Going after Cacciato*, in the chapter called "The Things they didn't Know". Among the facts about Vietnam, its culture and life, of which the Americans were totally ignorant, are the following: "Not knowing the language, they did not know the people. They did not know what the people loved or respected or feared or hated... It was impossible to know."¹⁶ The isolation of the American soldier in Vietnam is both physical and psychological, resulting in an alienation that finds a focus and a projection in and upon something tangible and symbolic of that alienation: the land itself.

Because if the United States is the distant "World", and Vietnam does not really exist except as a remote place where a war is fought, if past and future are equally unreal and what remains is a sense of alienation in a surreal Now, that Now has a very definite personality and characteristics. Its center is the jungle, the environment in which most of the combat novels take place, and it is on the land where the soldiers will project their fears and feelings. The land and especially the jungle of Vietnam becomes the symbol and reflection of their experiences and emotions. It is the concrete reality that embodies everything the Vietnam War has of alien and surreal.

This land, which plays such a crucial and meaningful role in the literature of the Vietnam War is never really described and it hardly ever elicits an aesthetic response from the soldiers. At the most we get a sketchy description of the mosaic of rice paddies viewed from the plane, of the menacing presence of the hills and mountains, a mention of the beauty of the beaches and the sea, of the dozens of shades of green of the jungle when viewed from the helicopters. One possible reason for this lack of real description is that most combat literature is written from the point of view of the "grunt", the infantry soldier, and not many panoramic views were afforded to him. Instead, what we find are the feelings aroused in him by the jungle or projected onto it by the soldiers. That is why the land becomes a living presence with an identity of its own, sometimes a mirror of the fears and worries of those dealing with it, sometimes

the creator of the emotion. It becomes not only one more character in the literature of the Vietnam War, many times showing a more distinct personality than the seemingly identical and puppet like Vietnamese populating it, but also a vehicle for the expression of the feelings of the Americans.

Del Vecchio's *The Thirteenth Valley* opens with a highly significant description of the setting in which the novel develops. It is not a picturesque description of colours and scents or of the land's natural beauty. Indeed, it gives no visual details; but typically, it is a description of the feelings aroused by the land in the men. The endurance, almost the eternity of the life of the valley is stressed, as is the working together of its elements and above all its serene identity. There is here a vision of a contented organism living in self-contained isolation. The ending of the chapter in question underlines the intruding character of the American soldiers into this seemingly eternal, primeval isolation. "Long before the soldiers arrived, the life forms of the valley had established a stable, symbiotic balance... the Khe Ta Laou river valley is difficult to enter, hard to traverse. For a very long time it had remained isolated... the equilibrium is sharply structured —a state perhaps which invited disruption."¹⁷ The soldier will be thrust into this virgin territory, a foreign and disruptive force. Although one of the characters in the novel calls the land "a neutral adversary"¹⁸, he is the exception. The land, and above all the jungle, is in the literature of Vietnam, something monstrously alive, dangerous and terrible. It is a very real enemy to be reckoned with. Even the endurance of the land becomes menacing to another character in the same novel, who ontemplating the jungle muses: "The land knows all, has seen all, has always known it, has always absorbed the blood and returned men to their humus components"¹⁹. Words such as these also set the basis for the contrast between the permanence of the land and the transitory, foreign nature of the Americans who find themselves there in their Now.

The living and voracious presence that is the land seems to swallow up the handful of soldiers literally dropped into it. With reference to a recent movie, David Halberstram, a Vietnam correspondent and the author of several books on the Indochina War, comments: "[Platoon] understands something that the architects of the war never did; how the foliage, the thickness of the jungle, negated U.S. technological superiority. You can see how the forest sucked in American soldiers."²⁰ Book after book describes this feeling the soldiers have of being swallowed up in a never-never land of lights and shadows, eerie silence and terrifying sounds, where all sense of time and space and of direction is lost. In *A Rumor of War* we find: "The trail looped and twisted and led nowhere. The company seemed to be marching into a vacuum, haunted by a presence intangible yet real, a sense of being surrounded by something we could not see."²¹ Larry Heineman, in *Close Quarters*, describes the feeling of walking into the jungle as follows. "It felt as though I had walked through a wall. The air was different there, the ground felt funny under my feet... I wanted so bad to turn around and walk backward for a moment, to look and see that sliver of space between the gate halves fall back, like the lip of a well I have fallen in."²²

The soldiers stress the feeling of abandonment they experience once the helicopters leave, the sense of having fallen into a vacuum, walked through the mirror, outside of time and space, of experiencing total alienation: "Charlie Company was now cut off from the outside world. We had crossed a line of departure all right, a line of departure between the known and the unknown."²³ And further on we read: "We had once again crossed that line between a world of relative stability and one that was totally unstable; the world where anything could happen at any moment."²⁴ It is no wonder, then, that the soldiers, lost in a vacuum, immersed in the unknown, were to project their feelings on the surroundings. The jungle is alive all right, all manner of creatures lurk in it, not to mention the Viet Cong. But, it is nature itself that comes alive in the mind of the grunts. In *Dispatches*, Michael Herr tells us: "Forget the Cong. The trees would kill you, the elephant grass grew homicidal, the ground you walked on contained malignant intelligence."²⁵ In *Meditations in Green*, a novel which takes place almost entirely inside the perimeter, the jungle surrounding the base becomes, under the paranoid eyes of the soldiers, a living, menacing, encroaching, presence: "Of course, it is not as if bushes were innocent... they aren't dumb, despite what you may think they are clever enough to take only an inch or two at a time. The movement is slow but inexorable, irresistible, maybe finally unstoppable,... And one day we'll look up and there they'll be, branches reaching in, jamming our 60's, circling around our waists."²⁶ Griffin, the protagonist, "could feel the jungle, huge and silent, move right up to the wire and lean its warm dark presence against his skin".²⁷

One reason for this paranoid projection of feelings on the land that makes the soldier endow it with menacing, homicidal, quasi human characteristics, is its impenetrability, its assimilation with the fear of the dark unknown that lurks in the mind of all human beings. But another reason is the very real relation that existed between the human enemy, the Viet Cong, and the land. Vietnam is an alien country for the Americans, but Vietnam, and above all, the jungle, is home for the Viet Cong. They own it, they rule it and use it to their advantage. Anderson, in David Halberstram's *One Very Hot Day*, "sensed terribly how alone he was —he was in *their* jungle, they could see him, know of him, they could see things he couldn't see..."²⁸. The ground itself, the traditional home and friend of the infantryman, has been turned into a death trap by the Viet Cong, so that the world of the soldier is upside down, because "mines and booby traps transform that friendly, familiar earth into a thing of menace"²⁹. So, in some novels, the identification between the enemy and the land is total, a complete symbiosis is achieved in the mind of the American soldier. In *Going After Cacciato*, the Vietnamese warrior the Americans find in the tunnel, warns them of this identification. He says: "The soldier is but the representative of the land... the land is your enemy. Accept it, the land cannot be beaten."³⁰ If the land in *Cacciato* is inhabited by spirits of the ancestors of the Viet Cong and *is* therefore the enemy, in many novels it is viewed as an allied of its people, the Vietnamese. When in *A Rumor of War* a soldier dies of sunstroke, Caputo reflects: "It is as if the sun and the land itself were in league

with the Viet Cong, wearing us down, driving us mad, killing us."²¹ Michael Herr seems to share the feeling expressed by Del Vecchio quoted earlier to the effect that this is alien territory where the Americans are intruders and disrupters and will therefore be destroyed. In *Dispatches*, he reflects on the landscape: "Everything up there was spooky and would have been spooky if there had been no war. You were there in a place where you didn't belong... a place where they didn't play with the mystery but killed you right off for trespassing."²²

The sense of loneliness in the midst of this alien, hostile land, controlled by the enemy, is compounded by the small number of men that generally operated together. In the words of a veteran: "Just completely alone. Just me and my platoon."²³ An isolation which produces a sense of "being marooned on a hostile shore from which there was no certainty of return"²⁴. As a consequence, once the helicopters have left and the platoon's only tie with the world to which it belongs is the radio, the men "tended to draw together, seeking the reassurance that comes from being physically together "because even the illusion of being alone in that haunted, dangerous wilderness was unbearable"²⁵. The horror of getting lost in the jungle, especially at night, haunts these men. They cling desperately to the man in front, because as Tim O'Brien says, "The man in front is civilization. He is the U.S. of America, and every friend you have ever known."²⁶ In their hostile environment, the buddy is the only salvation from a totalness of alienation. In the midst of the unknown he is the point of reference, the tangible link with a world that has receded out of reach.

Jeffrey Walsh has pointed out how war, the most pointless and destructive of all human activities, frequently inculcates in the front line writer a feeling of existential loss that may result in the participant experiencing a vision of "nada". This nihilistic recognition confirms the sense harboured by the intellectual of his own alienation, that war is what Philip Caputo called Vietnam, "an ethic wilderness"²⁷. These words are particularly pertinent to a war in which, as pointed out, no stated ideals or objectives existed, and which was physically fought in an alienating environment, a veritable wilderness, completely isolated from anything that was part of the cultural background of the participants. A separate culture springs up there, graphically described by Michael Herr in *Dispatches* and specifically mentioned as such by, for example, Del Vecchio²⁸. A new language is born to describe new situations and emotions for which no vocabulary existed because they had never happened before. This vocabulary is so remote from the mainstream of American culture that many Vietnam books carry a glossary to clarify their meaning.

The moral effects of the conditions under which the war was fought, both physical and psychological, are identified by some writers with the environment and expressed in terms of its characteristics. In any war moral desintegration may occur when men are sanctioned to kill, witness the case of Chrisfield in Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*. In the Vietnam War, that disintegration, when it does occur, is associated with the physical environment, its characteristics

defined with those of the jungle. Caputo has described how it happens. "It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush, an ethical as well as a geographical wilderness."³⁹ A place where "Everything rotted and corroded quickly... bodies, boot leather, canvas, metal, morals."⁴⁰ The war is fought in "a wilderness without rules or laws"⁴¹, far from the restraining influence of church and law. Caputo is not the only writer to identify the physical and moral vacuum in which the soldiers move, expressing in those terms of alienating emptiness in which the war is fought, and the resulting moral confusion. James Webb mentions the "brutish state" to which the men sink and how, isolated in the jungle, they become more and more like the enemy, savagely retaliating against their brutality⁴².

But even in this physical and moral wilderness, the soldier can find a saving grace, a way to escape total spiritual alienation. War may destroy a man, bring out the worst in him once the boundaries of civilization have been erased and with them their possible moral teachings. But, in the Vietnam novels the isolated soldiers discover, also, the bonds among men. They not only try desperately to mentally dehumanize the enemy to make their task more bearable, but, above all, they develop the "buddy system", that is, strong links with their fellows. The man in front who represents civilization, is also the soldier's anchorage to salvation. In Vietnam "Men fought for their own lives and for the lives of the men beside him."⁴³ The bonds established are so strong that veterans refer constantly to their feelings of guilt at returning home leaving their friends still in Vietnam. Perhaps those men were the only reality in an otherwise surreal environment.

Most books about the Vietnam War break off abruptly when the combat tour of duty is over, or, at the most have a brief, epilogue-like chapter on the return home. But if Vietnam itself closes the book, it is invariably with a view of the land, and it is on the land that the final reflections of the returning soldier are projected. There is no mention of the enemy, hardly ever seen alive; of the people, whom they cannot understand. Only the land remains. In Tim O'Brien's words, "it's the earth you want to say good bye to... You never knew the Vietnamese people. But the earth, you could turn a spadeful of it... and that much of Vietnam you would know"⁴⁴. Caputo, leaving Vietnam, takes one last look from the banking plane: "Below lay the rice paddies and the green folded hills where we had lost our friends and our youth."⁴⁵ Those are the realities that remain after an otherwise surreal, alienating, incomprehensible experience, whose meaning the Vietnam veterans are still trying to unravel in their novels dealing with the return to "The World".

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Notes

1. Tim O'Brien, *Going after Cacciato* (New York: Dell, 1975), p. 236.
2. A. D. Horne, ed., *The Wounded Generation: America after Vietnam* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1981), p. 111.
3. James C. Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (London: McFarland, 1982), p. 47.
4. Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine, 1977), p. 218.
5. James Webb, *Fields of Fire* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Bantam Books, 1979), p. 269.
6. Horne, p. 161.
7. Horne, p. 121.
8. Tim O'Brien, *If I Die In A Combat Zone* (New York: Dell, 1969), pp. 202-203.
9. Horne, p. 161.
10. Walter H Capps, *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), p. 78.
11. Caputo, p. XIII.
12. Capps, p. 100.
13. Frederick R. Karl, *American Fictions, 1940-1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), pp. 115-116.
14. Webb, p. 210.
15. Caputo, p. XX.
16. O'Brien, *Cacciato*, p. 310.
17. John M. Del Vecchio, *The 13th Valley* (New York: Bantam, 1982), pp. I-II.
18. Del Vecchio, p. 165.
19. Del Vecchio, p. 163.
20. Del Vecchio, "Platoon", *Time Magazine*, January 26, 1987, p. 45.
21. Caputo, p. 80.
22. Larry Heinemann, *Close Quarters* (New York: Popular Library, 1974), p. 48.
23. Caputo, p. 79.
24. Caputo, p. 277.
25. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Avon, 1968), p. 66.
26. Stephen Wright, *Meditations In Green* (New York: Schribner's, 1983), p. 132.
27. Wright, p. 298.
28. David Halberstram, *One Very Hot Day* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 120.
29. Caputo, p. 277.
30. O'Brien, *Cacciato*, p. 107.
31. Caputo, p. 272.
32. Herr, p. 95.
33. Horne, p. 125.
34. Caputo, p. 106.
35. Caputo, p. 107.
36. O'Brien, *If I Die...*, p. 91.
37. Jeffrey Walsh, *American War Literature: 1914 to Vietnam* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1983), p. 3.
38. Del Vecchio, p. 405.
39. Caputo, p. XX.
40. Caputo, p. 217.
41. Caputo, p. 217.
42. Webb, p. 210.

43. Caputo, p. 217.
44. O'Brien, *If I Die...*, p. 203.
45. Caputo, p. 320.