The Vietnam War as Text: Toward a Literary and Social Theory

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"Vietnam was not a temporal thing…it is always with us."
—Tim O'Brien, September 20, 2001, *New York Times*

I dreamt of poetry last night. Of poems entwined and twisted within each other, a worldly maze of text that sputtered and spun tales of helicopters and dark, sad eyes, and gray, impious cigarette smoke tracers. And the names of places I could not pronounce but knew by heart from ideas that became my maps. In my dream, each poem became a puzzle to be dissected and defined, labeled but never understood, read but unrecorded as other texts might be.

Images of soldiers young enough to stem from my own procreation, glass bottles dripping clear fluids through plastic tubes into nameless arms, bodies on canvas stretchers carried by 19-year-old boys with hardened hearts, confused minds, tired eyes. And always, the sound of Hueys.

Last night I dreamt of a place that I have never been, yet seem to know well; sometimes too well, wishing, at times, that I had been born a few years earlier so that I would have been forced to deal with this place straight up, to go there and fight, because I had to, or to run and hide, because I had to. And other times wishing that I had been born a few years later, far enough away, young enough anyway, for it to be but a chapter in a history book instead of a collection of iconic memories spreading out in the rear view of my adolescence.

Last night I dreamt of Vietnam as I have come to know it – not so much as a pugmark memory of my youth, where I prayed every night for the safe return of an uncle flying F-4s over a place he wrote and called "the North," or of my refusal to register for the draft at 16 years old when a friend's older brother came home in a bag – but of a war not *of* words, only *in* words: of the Vietnam War as a text.

The closer I got to the basic form, the clearer it became that there was no vocabulary for this war story, no narration to the newsreel and no historical foundation upon which to lay my head. I existed precisely nowhere. And voices emanating from thin dark eyes buried beneath thinner straw lids said, "There it is."

And when I awoke, I realized that this war, this text and all the literature it has catalyzed, keeps coming, year after year, decade after decade.

If a text, by definition, is interpretable, than is not every book that is penned about the Vietnam War a literary effort to understand why: the *Great Why* of a war that might never be answered, but in the effort, provide some form of healing to those who will write on and read of the tragic mystery that was America in Southeast Asia, countless dead and 30 years gone by?

What can be interpreted is often developed into theory, then models, axioms…even truisms. But Vietnam, even with its constant trickle of exploratory prose, has resisted all. Any number of social and literary critics have withdrawn from the task of explaining the strangest of socio-military paradigms, refuse to label the unnamable, retiring to such obtuse yet descriptive phrases as "retreat from meaning," a "continuum of wretched excess" and what Melling (1990) has called "a condition of 'reality wholly other' than any the soldiers had known."

Literary theory applied to the text of Vietnam? Of course, a story about war, with its mythological symbols and metaphorical heroism; a formula is a formula, right? Not quick square peg-round hole stuff, just sharpened pegs and bottomless holes. Try to add gook-ear necklaces to the *Iliad*, see how the application of formula works.

And social theory? Ha.

"We seek to understand…one of the most significant yet curiously understudied movements in recent U.S. history," report McAdam and Su in *American Sociological Review* (McAdam & Su, 2002). "Although the Vietnam era anti-war movement remains one of the most intense, large scale, and divisive movements in American history, it has been almost totally ignored by social-movement scholars" (McAdam & Su).

Many would take issue with this statement, relying on the semantic deference between theory and movement, but the point is, 30 years later, our country's best minds are still wondering. Perhaps we are, "afraid of," as Beidler (1982) has said in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*:

> Being sentenced by unspoken national consent to solitary confinement with the memory of it, urged to tell no tales, please, on the grounds that even were the experience of Vietnam susceptible eventually to certain methods of explanation, there would be virtually no one in the entire country who would care to hear about it. (Beidler, 1982)

What, then, was, and is, the writer's task in contributing to the experience of Vietnam? Is it enough that the books considered the best for rendering the experience of that war reasonably accessible if not intelligible were often former soldiers or journalists who experienced the vast ambiguities and atrocities and wrote in search of their own closure? Or is it, as Melling (1990) persists, that "The Vietnam writer must present the reader with a devastated text – a structure whose brokenness contains the idea that the motives…were as senseless as the attempt to interpret them by the military."

The traditional war text died in Vietnam along with its master narrative. The resistance to the war was not imaginatively provided by the North Vietnamese with their stoic persistence and impenetrable language but by the counterculture sharing their peace signs on our TV screens with faraway images of the soldier's scream.

"The literature of Vietnam," says Jerome Klinkowitz, "is a representation of the myths and images that sustained dissent and translated the war into a domestic encounter rather than an encounter with the Vietnamese" (Klinkowitz, 1980).

So the writer has no model, no clear enemy and essentially no clear cut agenda, purpose or direction. It is left for the writer to abandon traditional literary modalities, to make for him or her what the war made for the American public—not a place or a cause but a state of mind; what Melling calls, "an American surrogate, a rock 'n' roll war…a war conceived in America, administered in America, resisted in America" (Melling, 1990).

If Vietnam was too surreal to be taken as non-fiction and too real to be fictive, what kind of war story should one tell?

War Stories

As a writer, I have come to believe that there is no such thing as fiction, that every word splashed on a page emanates from a thought, a memory, an experience, whether real or imagined; a thought that originates in the writer's mind. And at the same time, I have come to embrace fiction as the only way to tell a true story, the genre allowing the writer, the real world protagonist, to take words and make them images that magically travel from black and white type on a page into some form of perceived reality that may or may not have occurred, though that fact is irrelevant in the process.

Indeed the lines of literary truth are easily blurred, not only in the writer's hand and the reader's imagination, but in the mind of the literary theorist as well. The post-structuralist critic, Jacques Derrida, struck a major blow to traditional thinking when he affirmed much of what the philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche professed forty years prior.

"The world is text," Derrida has said, "Nothing stands behind…the concepts, being, consciousness, presence and self are creations, fabrications, patchworks—interpretations" (Booker, 1996).

And there can be no better example as when we are speaking of war, of taking this thing we have labeled as life and reducing it to the barest of all common denominators. When we speak of war we can take the unthinkable the horrific and make it necessary, even heroic. We can put a man or a woman in a camouflaged uniform, hand them a killing weapon, drop them in a killing environment and watch the unreal become real.

Or we can stand back, observe, study, dissect and objectify the subject in an attempt to create a plausible theory about it. Only the Vietnam War refused to be objectified. At best, it was always the perfect and the worst parody.

"The problem," says Martin Shaw "is that war is seen by social science as a means, governed by ends which are determined in economic, social and political life" (Shaw, 1988). Indeed, it is difficult now, after all these years and this contributed body of knowledge, to isolate the ends for which the Vietnam War was engaged. And even for those who tried to make some socio-political sense through textual vehicles, it came off as a type of literary conceit, "far more interesting," as Beidler offers, "far more interesting for its own aesthetic and intellectual possibilities than for the prospect for any large significance it might be made to squeeze out of the experience at hand" (Beidler, 1982).

No one can fault the writer for not trying though. While America's impression of war was changing, so too was America.

> War, as a means, has unique characteristics which are becoming more and more contradictory to the ends for which it might be waged; and it has its own logic and rationality which can impose themselves on society. War appears not only to be escaping from the control of rational social interests, but to be taking society with it. (Shaw, 1988).

Fast Forward

A case could easily be made that the "logic and rationality" of invading Iraq has its roots in the procurement of oil and presidential popularity points. Is America somehow hungrier for war now than before, or is it in need of some validation, some nationalistic pride, and some rallying point around which we can find our collective identity lost among the mass media-induced march toward the anomic malaise that lines widespread homogeneous lifestyles? Are we to rely on social commentaries from the likes of Joan Didion or Robert Putnam, even iconoclastic pop figures as Michael Moore and Hunter Thomson, while we wait for serious discourse on modern social theory of war to emerge?

"The question is whether America now courts death," asks former war correspondent Chris Hedges (2002). He continues,

> We no longer seem chastened by war as we were in the years after the Vietnam War. The Bush administration has revised its "Nuclear Posture Review" to give us "more flexible nuclear strike capabilities." If America allows a government to move in this direction, some will contend, it shall become a flirtation with our own obliteration, and as Hedges calls it, "an embrace of Thanatos.

Given a free hand, an open genre and no professional constraints, a writer who has seen or become a student of recent war, American style, can make the unreal come true and the real appear false. They can take a state of being, of consciousness and of presence and interpret them as *they* see them, which neither make them real nor imagined, only interpreted. Often it is found in personal narratives, factual reports, meta-fiction styled novels, oral histories and poetry—all of which command a need to tell it the way it was, or at least the way the writer experienced it, saw or interpreted it. The question still remains: what is true?

As observers of war, simple readers of the text even, the task of discerning the difference is not so easy. And given the nature of the subject, it shouldn't be. Only the war itself can be the final authority, its participants, objective or subjective, witness to its hellish real-time narrative.

What should challenge us, though, is deconstruction of the political rhetoric that places a nation state at war in the first place. To do that, an understanding of the social theory of war must be accessible and clearly stated–not an easy task.

"The attempt to treat war or the preparation for it within society, under the rubric of social rationality reaches a point where it breaks down under the recognition of what war has really become," says Shaw (Held & Thompson, 1989). Indeed, ancient and folkloric definitions of war hardly apply anymore.

There is a difference between mythic reality and sensory reality, and never more so than in wartime. Hedges (2002) explains:

> In sensory reality we see events for what they are. Most of those who are thrust into combat soon find it impossible to maintain the mythic perception of war. They would not survive if they did. Wars that loose their mythic stature for the public, such as Korea or Vietnam, are doomed to failure, for war exposed for what it is—organized murder.

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Yeah, well, war is hell, right? So how the hell do you write about war? Is the requirement that one "goes" to war? Must one always take either a liberal or conservative approach? Can one parody a war, jumping from gonzo journalism to provocative writing to scholarly inquiry? Or is it that when a war is being waged, every member of the participating society is somehow engaged in a type of battle, whether he or she takes the life of another on the actual battlefield or fights the very justification for that war by their own means of protest, public or private, in their now semiotic minds, the subjectified media always a breath away?

"The anxieties and tensions of war, and most especially combat, profoundly affect perception and thought, saturating the senses and blurring perception," says Roger Beaumont in *War, Chaos and History*. "Intense and prolonged fear, preoccupation, fatigue, horror, panic and pain may add to whatever imperfections of human memory normally recasting the events in other categories of history" (Beaumont, 1994).

War stories are as old as time, as ubiquitous as the simple struggles between men that escalate from argument to armament; maybe to Armageddon. But war stories of old, from Biblical tales to WWI, "the war to end all wars," to the great WWII, all attempted to carry with them a certain element of right and wrong, of black and white, if for no other reason than man himself trying to make some sense of the insensible.[1] Maybe that gives ammunition to Derrida's attempt to constantly deconstruct binary opposition, to his denial of the dualistic distinction between literal and metaphorical language. However, in the case of Vietnam literature, it was the metaphorical images gleaned from the honest reportage and "hands on" experience that exposed the surrealism that was the "truth" if not the "experience" of the Vietnam War.

Truth. Most veterans of Vietnam cringe at the association of truth with their experience. It is nearly common thought that much of what happened in Vietnam was too weird and surreal to be true or too hauntingly weird and still true to be labeled surreal.

If the more traditional narrative history of war can be assigned any success at extolling central thematic control, it is that of designating a winner and a loser. One side kills more than the other and gets the gold, the land, the castle, the girl, the hero and the right to puff out his chest, simple as that; Darwinism between the covers. However, the mainstream journalistic coverage of the war, especially before the Tet Offensive of 1968, was rarely speckled with metaphor. The literal truth was buried beneath controlled propaganda and dated cliché.

After 1968, the definition of war was changed. Catalyzed in the Korean War and the newly prospering rank and file's anomie when the American Dream failed to provide a true sense of purpose and direction, black and white got mixed, became gray, the winners lost, the losers won.

What Theory?

[1] Indeed the lines may be even more blurred than I state. In WWI, we were not sure exactly who we were fighting until well into the war, the Civil War were members fought each other over what was highly touted as 'The slave issue" yet was ideologically much more and the quick reversal of Russia from ally to foe near the end of WWII.

Social theory is the view that men adopt to explain how society operates, how it holds together. Every social theory incorporates theories of sovereignty, of order and authority, of law, of rewards and punishments, and of cultural change and progress over time. How wars are fought has changed. But an evolving theory of war appears to have lagged. How does one apply laws of nature to the asymmetry of Iraq in the same context as they did WWI without reverting to even less empirical principles as found in ethics? Darwin's natural selection, doctrines from Machiavelli, Spencer, and Nietzsche…all applicable to the study of war through relativism. Or are they?

When one pictures the sturdy young Brits headed off to the trenches of France as if it was a rugby match, can we really make the connection of that image to this mullah-fueled jihad madness in Iraq that, at its core, is more comparable in its ideologies to the Crusades than Vietnam?

The history of war is tied to literature on many levels, maybe never more obvious than in the works of Shakespeare. War was a ubiquitous subject during Shakespearean times. Border disputes, conquest of new territories, religious squabbles, feudal discrepancies between royalty, civil wars as well as entire nations at war permeated Elizabethan prose.

By the early- to mid-twentieth century there existed a substantial work of social theory of war, often of a comparative kind, but it seemed to fall short of something comprehensive enough for society to use as preemptive evidence of what could happen in Southeast Asia when nationalism and political ideals were groundlessly touted. Theorist, like the rest of us, had not experienced a war like Vietnam or Korea. Sorokin (1925) had discussed the reactions of authority and subordination in *The Sociology of Revolution*. Weber produced a definition of the state which indicted its monopoly of armed force, Compte believed that an industrial society was replacing a military society, but even classic Marxism, which had enjoyed an interesting rebirth within the counter-culture politics of a Leftist thinking, university-based movement, could not be sustained past 1970. After the convolution of Vietnam, we could not help but ask ourselves if there could now *be* a modern sociology of war.

In hindsight, the most prophetic types came from other disciplines. Herbert Marcuse (Philosophy), who concentrated his work on revolution after the war was over, and C. Wright Mills, whose appeal was not just for the study of war but for the critical intellectual activity against it, are two intellectuals that come to mind. (Mills, one might argue, did not take the hard line stance that he should have at the time.)

The work of French sociologist Gaston Bouthoul (1951) is applicable to this discussion in that he discusses the obstacles to a scientific study of war.

"Before attempting to outline the basic dynamic laws of war phenomena," says Italian Sociologist Franco Fornari (1975),

> Bouthoul points out for us some of the obstacles to a scientific study of war which can also be recognized by psychoanalysis. These consist in 1) the pseudo knowledge of war, i.e., the belief that war is a known fact, the causes of which are immediately intelligible; 2) the illusion that war depends entirely on the conscious will of men while, on the contrary, conscious motivations should be regarded merely as epiphenomena, and 3) the "juridical illusion" of

> war, that is to say, the sum total of all those juridical rationalizations and theories that have always striven to legalize war.

Bouthoul's ideas may have been applicable to the conflict in Vietnam, specifically as he states that it is foolish to think that the causes of war are immediately intelligible.

The Greek dramatist Aeschylus wrote, "The reward of suffering is experience." Unfortunately, as is often the case with war, those who suffer do not live to appreciate the knowledge of experience. And it is left for the historians and writers to define the experience.

But suffering can be molded into experience and policy, if studied objectively and rationally. Timely criteria were introduced by Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger after the Beirut, Lebanon, disaster in 1983. There, 241 Marines were killed in one suicide attack during their 14-month peacekeeping mission. Weinberger's criteria said

1. Commit only if our or our allies' vital interests are at stake.
2. If we commit, do so with all the resources necessary to win.
3. Go in only with clear political and military objectives.
4. Be ready to change the commitment if the objectives change, since wars rarely stand still.
5. Only take on commitments that can gain the support of the American people and the Congress.
6. Commit US forces only as a last resort. (Powell, 1995)

One must wonder what became of this tragically catalyzed and short lived doctrine and why he couldn't have pushed it through Congress twenty years prior.

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The turning point in how a war story is told, let alone how it is perceived at home and fought in a foreign country, begins with the Korean War between 1950 and 1953, a conflict President Truman once labeled a "police action."[2]

When one is reminded of such liberal and deceitful use of metaphor, Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense* comes to mind.

"What therefore is truth?" he asks. "A mobile army of metaphors…a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after a long usage seem to a notion fixed" (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998).

For those who have never witnessed a war first hand, this is what happened.

Sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, when addressing the question of "a Communist interlude," asks first of all "when?" He defines that period as between November 1917 (the so-called Great October Revolution) and 1991, the year of the dissolution of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union and the fall of the USSR itself in December of that year.

> To be sure there are still a few states in Asia that considers themselves to be governed by Marxist-Leninist parties, to wit, China, the Democratic Republic

[2] Ironically, the Korean War, though spurred by America's Great Red Scare, replete with images of Khrushchev and Chairman Mao marching into Washington and using the dying embers of a torched American flag to burn the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the first few celluloid episodes of "I Love Lucy", was somehow kept from the annals of literary war history to any degree.

> of Korea, Vietnam and Laos. And there is Cuba. But the era in which there was a socialist bloc of states…is over. (Wallerstein, 1999)

America has now resumed trade with Vietnam. It is becoming an increasingly popular travel destination, enjoys a building economy and seems to be moving well beyond Third World status—all under a style of government that the American public was told would "domino" all the way back to the West. There is no ambivalence in the goals of the current Vietnamese government. They want to enjoy the benefits proffered by First World nations.

And so now, with many thousands of veterans of that war still struggling with the post traumatic stress rooted in the ubiquitous ambivalence of *why* they had to go and fight, how are they, as men, not soldiers, supposed to interpret the text of their own past? As Freud concluded nearly a century ago, "In the confusion of wartime…we ourselves are at a loss as to the significance of the impressions which press in upon us," finalizing his thought, "Ambivalence goes all the way down to the foundation of life" (Freud, 1957).

When Robert McNamara, former Secretary of State under the Johnson and Nixon administrations and one of the chief architects of the war, first published his feigned apologia, America was hoping more for a *mea culpa*. In *In Retrospect,* written in 1996, McNamara's historical rhetoric began in the very preface of the book. At no point in the entire text does the author actually "apologize" for his part in the multitudes of killing.

> I truly believe that we made an error not of values and intentions but of judgment and capabilities. I say this warily since I know that if my comments appear to justify or rationalize what I and others did, they will lack credibility and only increase people's cynicism. (McNamara, 1996)

Even if America was quietly becoming cynical about the war, in 1966, '67 and early '68, the truth had been so blurred that the public did not know what to think. And when that state of crowd ignorance develops, almost anything is possible, even the killing of 58,000 Americans and at least ten times that number of North Vietnamese. But what did the Vietnam experience end up as in the unrehearsed descriptive other than an insanity-based metafiction recreating itself in an actual time and an actual place?

And through the hazy images of "Nam Lit" came opposing, though not uninformed, voices. Col. Larry D. New, USAF, interpreted the application of 19th century Prussian war theorist Carl von Clauswitz' ideas of modern warfare theory.

"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make," von Clausewitz (1989) stated, "is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking." The nature of US wars since World War II had been asymmetric and contextually based. Vietnam was the first war that even the best writers would take years to describe. And when they did, it sounded nothing like war, which Vietnam was nothing like.

"Rearticulating the desired end state is also problematic when conditions change during the conduct of war," says Col. New (von Clausewitz, 1989). "This trend is likely caused by the politics of decision making. Politics in a democratic society tend toward ambiguity in policy." Of course, the most often asked question returns: If that was the case with Vietnam, why then didn't we just pull out?

Even if policy was made on theory, what theory applied to this war?

"Culture," the novelist Robert Stone once recalled, "is the answer one gives to the question, 'Who are you and what is your story'" (1983). The Vietnam War was fought during a time of major socio-cultural change. Many positive things came out of that tumultuous period.

"For the Vietnam War to become a part of our cultural discourse, a story we can continue to tell ourselves, it must be joined to a cultural framework it explicitly challenges," says the academic William Adams. "And joined in such a way as to extract some salutary meaning from the event in spite of its powerfully corrosive possibilities" (Calhoun, 1989).

Vietnam as a text, therefore, cannot be excluded from UC Berkeley or Kent State or declining sexual mores or the breakdown of the family basic family unit. The times and the changes are where we focus our discussion of war as a text, as a post-structurualist example of anti-Platonic thinking, of who has the right to tell it, how it is best told and whether or not the truth has, or ever can be told in words and pictures. Vietnam, the war (and times) in text, from the propaganda-esque reporting of the early 60s to the early 90s personal memoirs of healing, can be considered the ultimate example of Derrida's interpretation of Plato's *Pharmakon*, of words and text becoming both poison and cure (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998). The best writers of the times spent time in Danang and Golden Gate Park.

Back Flash

If one were to research Vietnam literature, he would find hundreds of volumes, books covering the history of the region as far back as the 2nd Century B.C. when China conquered Vietnam, from when the Vietnamese expelled the occupying Chinese armies in 939, from the arrival of French missionaries and traders in the early 1500s and up through 1883 when the French captured Hanoi and divided the North into the two regions of Annam and Tonkin. They would be able to trace the birth of Ho Chi Minh in 1890, the Japanese occupation of Vietnam in 1940 and the eventual surrender of Saigon to British troops in 1945. They could recall the Geneva Accord later that year as Ho Chi Minh simultaneously declared independence for his country while the French surrendered at Dien Bien Phu and the country was partitioned at the 17th Parallel.

Once the U.S. first became involved in the conflict though, beginning in 1950 with our providing economic aid to the French who had been battling the Vietnamese in the Indochina War for nearly 5 years, the available American literature began a gradual decline and developed a somewhat myopic view of the events leading up to President Kennedy's decision to send in Green Berets and military advisors to train South Vietnamese troops.

What narratives were available were reflective primarily of the American view, not the French or Vietnamese. To go back and balance the views now would be to essentially re-write history since America showed little concern then, as they do now, for the views of others. Besides, the information provided the American public began to take on a more journalistic viewpoint, in effect, disarming our need to question events. If the papers printed it, well, it had to be true.

To follow the Vietnam War as text, though, is to follow a most unique evolution of a relationship between literature and subjectivity, between what we were being told in the press and what we were being told by the men and women who had been there. How

could those reporting on the war, and eventually those writing about it, separate themselves from it morally, ideologically or emotionally? For those who were there and wrote about it, there just was no way. They returned home changed individuals to a changed country.

"If language and reality rarely crossed paths during the war," states Lorrie Smith, "then the search for retrospective meaning inevitably leads us into a linguistic mindfield" (Gilman & Smith, 1990). Yet this "linguistic mindfield" is precisely the genre of text that was able to apply palpable and accessible language to something that was all too palpable yet inaccessible to the sane mind. The burden of responsibility (if such a thing ever existed) fell to those who struggled to maintain sanity while serving in Vietnam. No one can ever say what catalyzed the books. For many, their novels, memoirs and poems were written the way the VC fought: underground, at night, off the main road and in the jungle. And if they thought that a certain formula would work, it had to be abandoned, quite similar to the American military operations themselves.

"A lot had to be unlearned before you could learn anything at all," said Michael Herr (1977). The best Vietnam texts are meditations on exploration, learning, unlearning, improvising, ontology and epistemology in a fox hole.

As always, there was a price for this hard-won insight.

"There are no precise data on the number of soldiers who suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after the Vietnam War," Richard Gabriel tells us in *No More Heroes: Madness and Psychiatry in War*. "Figures range from 50,000 to 1,500,000 PTSD cases, figures which indicate that at least 18 percent and possibly as much as 54 percent of the force suffered psychiatric symptoms" (Gabriel, 1987).

While these figures are similar to documented cases of war-catalyzed mental illness post WWII, the primary difference was the social climate that awaited the returning soldiers.

"Not only warriors are privileged to undergo the profound psychological transformation that separates peace from war," writes Barbara Ehrenreich in *Blood Rites* (1997): "Whole societies may be swept up into a kind of altered state marked by an emotional intensity and a fixation of totems representative of the collectivity: sacred images, implements, or in our time, yellow ribbons and flags."

Of course, this collective identity never came to fruition with Vietnam. As many of those who have chronicled war will say, "The first casualty when war comes is truth." Even in the earliest days of the U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, truth was a casualty.

Actually, the first reported human casualty was U.S. Army Specialist Fourth Class, James T. Davis, 25, of Livingston, Tennessee. The truth in reporting had long since given way to propaganda and political rhetoric. It would take returning soldiers to dispel their own brand of oral interpretation before truth, or some version of it, began to regain a foothold.

In the meantime, the draft lottery was established by the U.S, Government, effectively reducing the anti-war movement by 50% (those with a number over 150 had little to worry about with respect to being drafted and would now have to enjoin the protest for more altruistic reasons other than whether they themselves would have to go). Even by 1969, there was still no real evidence coming forth to signify an end to the U.S. involvement. And by then, enough veterans had come back and to detail the illogicalness of the whole thing.

In this case, the text of war became the text of oral tradition, of stories not so much being told around the campfire – tales with a message passed on from father to son and mother to daughter – but of tales similar in intent, only with a modern twist: tell a tale with a lesson. These were Vietnam vets, many scarred both physically and emotionally, who had returned to a society that only reluctantly listened to their oral narratives of a strange conflict without rules or reason. This may be where what theory of modern warfare that exists began – when the soldiers began to return *en masse* and spoke of the chaos. By then, it appeared, social theorists were not only losing academic ground to literature but to psychologists and historicists as well.

"In the twentieth century," says Roger Beaumont (1994) in *War, Chaos and History*,

> academic and official historians tended to deal with war from a broader operational perspective, leaving the 'microdynamics' of war mainly to novelists, filmmakers, journalists and memoirists. In the mid-1970s, however, a countercurrent rose to the New Military History, which had eschewed "drum and trumpet" combat history.

This counterculture of opposition to the war was widespread by 1969. It had spilled over into every aspect of our society, saturating the media, political strategy and discussions between neighbors over the backyard fence. While the nation's leaders refused to openly use the term, a revolution was taking place in our country, a revolution at the center of which was campus unrest caused by students seeking the truth and inner city African Americans seeking equal rights. Social change was in the air, but it lacked the definitive clarity and concentrated leadership of similar revolutions

"If we attempt to give a historical review of some major issues in the theory of social change, we find ourselves in a rather awkward position," says Marcuse.

> The scientific concept of social change is one of the achievements of present day sociology…On the other hand, we cannot hope to understand this notion and its far-reaching implications without taking into account the preceding theoretical conceptions from which it was derived and which continue to operate in the doctrines that have replaced them. (Marcuse, 1998)

This, I believe, may be the basis for the lack of immediate and emergent theory of war post Vietnam – what occurred in Vietnam and how it affected the United States had no precedent theoretical conceptions that would apply to the far-reaching effects of the war. The culture of the 1950s and early 60s has been displaced by something else, something new and strange and threatening to the *status quo*.

If Derrida was to take one approach to the "world as text," then other theorists and writers would take another. N. Scott Momaday, considered the dean of American Indian writers, has produced work revolving around issues of identity, the nature of myth and the mystery of the word. He says in, *Man Made of Words*, "We don't really begin to exist…until we convert ourselves into language" (1991).

But Momaday's ancestors were from the Kiowa and Cherokee Nations. The oral history in the Native American culture is highly revered. Derrida is French; their sometime pretentious protection of their language has much to do with its correct usage, though one can only guess if this footnote had any bearing on the interpretation of Derrida's work.

* * * *

At 14 years old, my draft number was 13. All of a sudden, I was against the war. Instant karma. Instant dove. Give me a sign. Point me to a campus. And don't tell my parents.

We, as a nation, though, were still divided, still looking for evidence, for statistics, for truth, some of which finally came in literary form – *after* the U.S. had pulled our troops from Vietnam. Indeed, of the approximate two dozen Vietnam titles in the hyper-cannon of "Nam lit," the majority were published near the end of the war and continued through the late 80s and early 90s.

Well before then, the war in Vietnam was fought on fronts much closer to our homes. It was being waged as protest marches on college campuses, in popular music such as Country Joe McDonald's cynical, "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to Die Rag" and Jim Morrison's Doors dark, brooding "The Unknown Soldier." It was fought in all forms of media, from the extreme left to the extreme right, in political discourse at every level; everywhere, it seemed, the war was debated in a highly charged, highly public and highly emotional forum. The discursive text could take the form of any type of communication, any aspect of our popular or high culture. And all too often, the real issues, the real happenings of men and women dying in the fields of Vietnam, were glossed over by grotesque profiling of the parties into simple binary opposites: you were either a Hawk or you were a Dove, for the war or against it.

But the journalistic narratives coming out of the war during the period 1965-1968 were, as Jean-Francois Lyotard called such Post Modern Condition, "narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive…and so on" (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998).

The result of this division was a renewed fueling of information into the opposing sides; ammunition, if you will, sometimes true, sometimes not, to supply the charges and counter-charges being made with added zeal. And as was the case with Congress' requests for more troops, always the stakes went up.

Like trying to make sense of a dream, the public turned toward others to try and help them understand, to find some truth, to find answers, to ultimately decide if we should be there at all, allowing our men and women to die for an increasingly ambiguous reason.

Enter the first wave of real Vietnam literature, a cultural journalism that began a slow, sad, painful revelation of change that tried, at first failed, and then tried again and again, maybe never to reveal the truth about a war, about a strange conflict in a foreign land; for narratives can never do all that. Again, only the war itself can tell the truth.

Any text should ultimately bring the reader closer to the truth. And though much of the reporting coming out of Vietnam, especially after the Tet Offensive in 1968, attempted a type of honesty in its style of realism,[3] the hard hitting element of truth was the truth about the fallibility of human beings. It was an example of philosophic reality, of Kierkegaard asking what truth was and telling us, "Truth is an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness" (Osborne, 1992).

By late 1968, when the first few books appeared, even established marquee writers such as Norman Mailer, Mary McCarthy and Robert Bly began denouncing first

[3] After Tet, all things in the war changed, from journalism to public opinion to the underpinnings of confidence in whether we could even win this war, let alone the question of our being there at all.

the Johnson and then the Nixon administrations. Indeed, most of the early work was non-fiction, anti-war, political in nature and forced the reader into again questioning truth and responsibility, to taking the public forum, the cultural text, and transforming it into private thought.

For the reader, this was not an easy task. Not only was public opinion constantly being courted by Hawks and Doves alike, but, on occasion, as was the case with Robin Moore's *The Green Berets* (written in 1965, a detailed work of realism under the guise of fiction), the cinematic elements of the *story* itself were strong enough to sway many readers into a pro-war state of mind.

David Halberstam's 1968 novel *One Very Hot Day*, like *The Green Berets*, was written in a hard-boiled, plain and realistic tone and remains in print today, well over 30 years after the initial printing. For the reader searching for answers, these early works, along with David Rabe's 1969 screenplay-styled *Sticks and Bones* and Michael Casey's 1972 collective of poetry entitled *Obscenities*, this was simply detailed and authoritative information, like straight journalism without the governor on.

What it did, though, was open the door to more adventurous, compelling and between-the-eyes narratives that came at the reader with the gloves off. Tim O'Brien's first of several books on the war, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1975), was published barely two years after the Nixon/Kissinger "Peace with honor" slate in the '73 peace treaty and resulting cease-fire.

"The overall blurring of perception referred to as the 'fog of war' includes the direct stresses arising from the ordeal of battle but also censorship, secrecy, deception, propaganda, camouflage and rumor," says Beaumont (1994). Even after the war was over, the censorship continued. A nation wanted to sweep ten years in Southeast Asia under the rug. Lots of vets, however, were trying to crawl out from underneath it and reify their lives.

Though the war was officially over, the healing had only just begun. This was the first time in the history of war literature that the final authority ended with the individual, not the academics, the historians, the ghost writers or the government. Those who had seen the war and experienced the real time, real world narrative learned that, as Tim O'Brien (1990) would say:

> To generalize about war is to generalize about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. Perhaps war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells you the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life.[4]

As "Nam lit" wound up speed, the common theme, again, was the foot soldier, the "grunt" that humped his way up and down the lush hills, searching for an invisible enemy. Very few heroes were ever made of airmen, unless they were shot down. Nor was there much mention of Navy personnel since it was inferred that they lay safe at

[4] Tim O'Brien was, himself, a grunt, and when *If I Die…* first came out, the reviews were equally hardened: "One of the most disturbing and powerful books about the shame that was/is Vietnam" (Minneapolis Star and Tribune); "O'Brien writes with pain and passion on the nature of war and its effect on the men who fight in it" (Washington Star); "…gaining strength by dodging the rhetoric…must be one of the few good things to come out of that desolating struggle" (Manchester Guardian).

anchor miles off the coast. In the 'Nam, it was regular Army and Marines who were regarded; officers and tacticians were rarely portrayed as heroic.

The thought was that this was a jungle war that reduced men to animals, doing animal-like things to each other. And then they returned home to a country, *sans* any welcome, retaining many of the animal qualities required "in country"; qualities that simply allowed the soldier the *chance* of making it back to "the world."

While the first round of literature often portrayed the soldier in types – reluctant draftee, hardened grunt, professional baby killer, disabled protest vet, bumbling ROTC lieutenant and troubled addicted vet – as the war wound down and the reality of what had gone on over there emerged, the American reader began to search even harder for the truth.

O'Brien had opened the door in '75, but it was still several years before the first real wave and most seminal of 'Nam Lit' would emerge. 1976 was the country's Bicentennial, Jimmy Carter was the President. Every politician wanted to put the war behind him. Skepticism and malaise were rampant as Americans tried to regain their faith in the country.

Back home, though, the Vietnam vet still struggled, wrestled with the indictment of the system, with the effects of Agent Orange and with an ever-present feeling of betrayal by a country that forced them to go and then abandoned them upon their return. Often he fit the stereotype of the psycho vet, the begruntled protester and addicted, disabled shell. The returning vet was, indeed, an either/or figure: the patriotic, decorated war hero or the My Lai-esque, psychopath who was unable to return to a civilized society.

In 1976, though, a streak of best-selling works about the war began with Ron Kovic's personal memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July*. Kovic drifts between first and third person narration, often slipping into a stream-of-consciousness where he passionately displays his transformation from gung-ho teenage Marine into disabled war protester, along the way indicting everybody from the field commanders to the VA Hospital personnel.

Derrida (and Nietzsche) would love Ron Kovic's story because he proves that this binary logic leads directly to dualistic thinking, a "division of all aspects of life into binary sets of opposed categories" (Kovic, 1976), as he says, that ultimately leads to a hierarchization with one pole valued over the other.

Recent history and our re-established relations with Vietnam have shown that such impoverishing of ideologies and language cannot work in the long run. And yet one must not look at 60s radicalism and let cynicism take root. All the campus unrest, the protests, the civil rights riots, they were effective; maybe not to the degree that the hard-line organizers such as the Weathermen and the Black Panthers had wanted, but, nevertheless, the New Left, as it was referred to, had effected change. Nixon was bowing under public pressure to end the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the feminist voice was given mainstream recognition, if not a degree of acceptance, and many segregation laws in the South were repealed.

"A political force had gripped the imagination of an entire generation," Stanley Aronowitz (1996) tells us, "because unlike the conventional postwar New Deal left (post WWII), that busied itself with system maintenance, it had *ideas*. It possessed the political will to try to make them part of the political culture."

But as Hedges (1996) tells us, "In wartime, the state seeks to destroy its own culture…as the cause championed by the state comes to define national identity…those who question the value of the cause and the veracity of the myth are branded internal enemies." Yet the internal struggle and revolution did have effect because the state was unable to destroy the culture and proponents of change possessed the power of the ideas, the power of truth. It only had to be systematically exposed.

Aronowitz's ideas appear to work when applied to Vietnam because he comes at the war from an inside-out perspective – he discusses the state of radical thinking as it applied to the period; no different than Marcuse's application of revolutionary theory, Ehrenreich's social psychological approach, Fornari's psychoanalytical perspective or Hedges' experiential realism.

Hedges, who spent a good deal of his life covering the war as a journalist ("war and conflict have marked most of my adult life," 2002), retains that sense of "I-was-there,-now-fuck this-theory-crap-and-let-me-tell-you-how-it-really-was" attitude. Yet he is able to provide the reader enough simple applied theory to explain the concept of war, if not to question why we, as a developed race, have allowed it to sustain over time. His style and background are similar to the "Nam writers" who exposed the war in their own cathartic literature.

The Truest War Stories

Nineteen seventy-seven brought Michael Herr's *Dispatches,* considered, along with O'Brien's 1990 *The Things They Carried,* as one of the two masterworks of Vietnam writing. Herr, a journalist who covered the war (and went on to write parts of the scripts for both "Apocalypse Now" and "Full Metal Jacket") wrote in a wild, anecdotal style. *Dispatches* is so successful because, while it is non-fiction, the narrative is rarely objective, often absurd in its moral and material contradictions. The reader can feel the surrealistic conflict of the war, the madness that characterized the strange yet true tales that Herr told; there were no overt attempts at dualistic thinking or binary opposition in this narrative—it was as if Herr got out of the way and let the war itself tell the story.

Many a vet and social commentarist hold *Dispatches* in high regard not so much because of the content itself, but because of the psychotic style and tone that mimicked the war in Vietnam itself.[5]

Not everybody could handle Herr's meta-fiction though. That same year Phillip Caputo released his personal memoir *A Rumor of War,* which landed on the best-selling list, followed shortly by Marine lieutenant James Webb's first novel, *Fields of Fire.* Vastly different in style and characterization, Caputo, also a Marine lieutenant writes in non-fiction realism with a novelist's attention to detail and scene, while Webb stuffs his novelistic prose with such technical expertise that the fictional characters seem flat in comparison.

Hedges (2002) reminds us:

> Many of those who set out to write their memoirs, or speak about the war, do so with shame. They know war's perversion. It corrupts nearly everyone. To

[5] After he read the book, author William Burroughs said, "It is difficult to convey the impact of total experience as all the facades of patriotism, heroism and the whole colossal fraud of American intervention fall away to the bare bones of fear, war and death" (Melling, 1996).

be greeted by an indifferent public, by people who would rather not examine, in the end, their own darkness, makes the effort Herculean.

Any way you look at it, Kovic, Herr, Webb and Caputo tore down much of the pretentious barriers that had been built as protective mechanisms by the proponents of the war. They told us stories of collateral damage, of race and gender issues within the ranks, of same-side killings, of unspeakable atrocities that the Hawks put off to propaganda. It may not have been absolute truth, but it was as close as you could have gotten without being there and having to decide if what you were witnessing was real or not.

A few critics may have questioned the dramatization and grasp for emotive response by the writers, citing historical amnesia and abuse of the meta-fiction device, but on a literary level, the academics hailed the various forms and styles that were used to permeate an audience that both wanted to know and wanted to forget.

Indeed, some were better able or better equipped to forget. Twenty four percent of the combatants who served in Korea became psychiatric casualties serious enough to require treatment for some period of time. The combatant in Korea was one and a half times as likely to become a psychiatric casualty as to be killed by enemy fire. The figure is somewhat less in the Vietnam War (Gabriel, 1996).

Oddly, for those of us who lived on the broad cusp of involvement, whether our only memory was of fathers and uncles having to make decisions that more fortunate (read: white, upper-class, well-connected) men never had to face, or whether we were old enough to carry a draft card, burn it or despise those who burnt them, as a demographic cross section, we didn't fully embrace this first round of literature until years later. We either didn't have to, didn't want to or couldn't. Possibly we had defined our own safe haven of knowing just enough to stay away but not enough to have a real experience with the war. Quite possibly we had a fear of forgetting but a fear of remembering as well; a type of Homophobia, as defined by Gloria Anzaldua, where we, "conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows" (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998). It seems strange to consider that a segment of our population were afraid…afraid of books.

"We have seen not lust but tenderness," Anzaldua adds, but, "on its face we have uncovered the lie" (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998).

While it is difficult to assign actual context, let alone truth, to the letters, the oral history segment of Vietnam literature is perhaps the most pure of any genre, if such a thing can be said about any narrative. More often than not, there is a pervading sense of remorse, of sadness, of guilt, of lost innocence and of a slightly matured indictment against a country and a society that, if they didn't know any better, should have. Maybe, the reconstructed reality of their tales includes just the right amount of raw dramatic overtures. But regardless of their selection and construction, some critics consider them the best that we have.

Some oral histories retain a sense of finality, like the books themselves write their own final chapter based upon the costly lessons learned. Others tap into a sense of fluid testimony, almost with the idea that they could grow into a greater work, a memoir or even a tome of historical significance.

But always the best works of any genre, especially when we are speaking of war, place the experience as protagonist, the personal relationship requiring more

characterization than the characters themselves. Every word must be written and read in context of the narrative itself.[6]

The same can be said for social theory of war. Anthony Giddens's contribution, *The Nation-State and Violence* (1985), is as close to an oral history of war as social theory has come. Giddens, says Shaw, places himself clearly alongside those, like sociologists Skocpol and Mann, who are attempting a non-economic reductionist theory of state power. Giddens' work is distinguished because it locates these issues within synthetic sociological theory and a generalized critique of previous positions, as Shaw (1988) says, "which marginalized war and militarism."

Giddens'early work seemed to identify the state itself as a major problem of social theory. But more recently, he has indicted the centrality of power afforded the international and military context of the new state power. Each newly-emerging nation-state brings with it its own paradigm for stability. This is the type of theory that must be specifically applied to the constantly changing political climates around the world. Every region carries its own set of ideologies, natural and fundamental vicissitudes, and all the fluidity that goes with it.

The same can now be said of the corresponding text of war, however interpreted or experienced.

For those of us who were alive during the Vietnam War, if even as a distanced child without specific relation to the war; and for those of us who were not yet born, we owe it to ourselves to define that experience, as Thoreau says, "however measured or far away." (Thoreau, 2001). It was a time of puzzles, of confusion, of nightmares, of strange dreams coming true. We must remember the Vietnam War as it was, inverted, insurrected, subjugated and discontinuous. The only sensible thing that can be said about the war is that it made no sense. We more than owe it to ourselves and to those who perished needlessly to peel back what layers still cover our own Vietnams. And our own Afghanistans, Iraqs and (insert country here) to come.

Beyond psychotherapy or communion of veterans, a thoughtful piece of prose has proved more than worthy in this journey.

Postscript

In the wake of our country's response to the terrorist attack on 9/11/01, most working journalists had a field day with the commodified sound bites and bird-food commentary we were fed by our government. Public opinion and rousing support of our military gave the Bush Administration much license. The mainstream right wing press passed the propaganda turkey around the table, in the process treating war like a game of Monopoly, which, in many ways, it is.

Objectively, any war is terrifying. In the case of the Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq, subjectively, it seemed oddly uninvolving. This realization has catalyzed the Bush Administration to continually up the stakes, to go right for the heart of "American values" in their campaign to justify the invasion of Iraq to the public and to the countries will listen to his clichéd high rhetoric.

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[6] Other oral histories include Keith Walker's *A Piece of My Heart* (1985), in which he focuses on women vets and their lives after the war, and Bernard Edelman's *Dear America* (1985), which is primarily a collection of letters written during the war portraying the lives of American soldiers.

And if this seems more than vaguely familiar to those of us who were of age or have studied the Vietnam War, we cannot help but make comparisons. Of course, the similarities are, in many cases, unmistakable. Yet when speaking of war, how can we endeavor to overlap such traumatic matrices in our collective thought? How can we say what one war signifies and another symbolizes?

"One cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war," said Einstein. Yet has not the human race evolved out of its battles and devolved by still allowing this practice, simultaneously?

The literature that evolved out of the Vietnam War, at least the texts that have risen to the hyper-cannon of "Nam Lit," are, for the most part, experiential, emotive prose penned by writers who began as soldiers and naïve journalists, young men who lived the experience and allowed the mayhem to enter their psyche. The American public waited for five, ten, sometimes fifteen years for Herr, Caputo, O'Brien and co. to distill and re-order their time in Southeast Asia into a paradigm cohesive enough to be publicly palatable. And like the feeling of America's involvement in Vietnam in the 60's and early 70's; as the beginning is indefinable, so too is the end – thematic texts using that war as literary elements of storytelling continue to be written.

Why then, do we feel the immediate need for thoughtful honest detailing of our country's latest military campaigns? Is it that by our announced exit from Vietnam in 1973, the country just wanted to forget what they did not really understand in the first place? Is it that we have taught ourselves immediate gratification and instant-hit information so well that we cannot wait a year for a perfect retelling of a war that still wages?

Maybe our best writers feel that the entire affair has been so co-opted and mediated that it is nearly impossible to create any narrative that does not reek of "me too." Other than the rush-to-press titles and the quick oral histories told by embedded reporters, the lack of response to such events by our best pens intrigues me still.

As a country, though, a nation state that had been brought to its socio-cultural knees in the division catalyzed by the Vietnam War, answers to the collective question of "why" were not immediately forthcoming in 1973. Cursory inclusions in the professional journals would emanate from social theorists or members of the academic community, but, as a whole, the paucity of conclusive theory was bewildering. Why should we now expect honest and truthful discourse within months of declared victories? Should we be satisfied with pop-culture Bush-bashing and well-researched though soul-less texts until at such time as significant perspectives emerge? Do we have to wait for the returning Marines to reconstitute to remember…and then write about Baghdad?

When Saigon fell in '75, one could certainly appreciate even the intellectual sect moving with the communal party line, "We are tired of this war. We are tired of the ambiguity, the body counts, and the political rhetoric see-sawing in this 10 year storm. Give it a rest."

But as we have seen, a price for this lack of social discourse (on a potential Vietnam War replay) and objective mainstream discussion immediately following September 11 may have been the "license to kill" granted to the Bush Administration. One wonders, what if our best scholars and best pens had stood in explorative

juxtaposition to the national “circle the wagons, gather a posse” sentimentality and dared our nation to look in the mirror and ask why? Why does the rest of the world hate us?

In many ways, we are still at war. Not just in Iraq, but here at home. It is a multi-front war, a war still raging inside those who fought in Southeast Asia and South America and the Dark Continent and every covert operation this country has staged, and it is a war of truthful reporting; what is and what isn’t, a war carefully doled out to us in palatable daily snippets of occurrence. And lest we forget or re-contextualize, America did fight a war like this before, losing on all fronts home and abroad but winning back something (call it an attempt at understanding) years later when truth was exposed by words of the men who fought it, written in the metaphorical blood of memory. No one planned it that way, like most things attached to the Nam, it just plain happened.

It is troubling that we should allow the justification so soon of the pain of so many and the ultimate pain of the unknown. Will our children have to wait for a generation to pass to know of our actions in Afghanistan or Iraq? This re-emergence of war, war preparation and militarism as current sociological issues is a reflection of many things: a stolen presidency, a return to neo-colonialism, a last ditch effort by the oil companies to retain their power base, a right wing power elite making up for eight years of a Democrat in the White House and others that may or may not make themselves known with time.

By the end of 2004, this author predicts that roughly fifty percent of the number killed in the attacks of 9/11/01 will have died in the war in Iraq. By the time the country withdraws from the region, well over 5,000 American soldiers will have perished and mass chaos will still exist. One cannot force Western ideologies and dogma on a people who resist it with an ancient and diametrically opposed valuation of the human life without a cost. Did the 58,000 who died in Indochina leave no legacy at all? How much money does Halliburton need? You cannot buy the future of your grandchildren with the greed of today.

When one exposes themselves by asking “why” and “how” at a time like this, the truth may hurt or it may bring great relief. But it always frees us.

Imagine if more of us had asked why in 1964.

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