"History's Heavy Attrition": Literature, Historical Consciousness and the Impact of Vietnam[1]

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In America's bicentennial year, *Friendly Fire* author C.D.B. Bryan lamented that "there just haven't been many books written by Vietnam vets about their experiences over there. I suspect this might have less to do with their inability to achieve the objectivity necessary to come to grips with experiences in that war than it does with the fact that the Norman Mailers and Thomas Heggers who were capable of writing the Vietnam era's equivalent to a *Naked and the Dead* or a *Mister Rogers* were also capable of avoiding the draft."[2] Apart from Bryan's exaggeration of the mediocrity of Vietnam literature a decade ago, for which he was rebuked by more than one indignant vet-turned-author, both the quantity and the quality of published novels, poetry, personal narratives and oral histories have lately elevated fictional and quasi-fictional writing on the American war in Vietnam to the level of a genre.[3] The literature inspired by a generation of involvement in Indochina has spawned a significant, though not overwhelming, number of academic specialists and university courses; moreover, scholarly attention to this body of writing has begun to transcend the confines of literary criticism, branching off into the sophisticated realm of cultural, political and historical analysis. With more than 300 novels now in print, a steadily widening audience for this kind of writing, and the major American publishing houses reporting expanded printing schedules for Vietnam-related paperbacks, this awakening interest shows no sign of abating.

Canadian Review of American Studies, Volume 17, Number 3, Fall 1986, 301-316

Contrary to the "puzzle" thesis popular among some Vietnam historians in which fiction and conventional historical analysis are believed to complement each other and facilitate a multi-level cognition of the war, an extensive reading of Vietnam literature reveals that all is not harmonious between literary artists and historians.[4] On the contrary, a great many fiction writers reveal decidedly anti-historicist leanings in their treatment of Vietnam; often their aim is not to enhance our historical understanding of the war but to undermine it. The central purpose of this study is to undertake an intensive and much-needed examination of literary artists' attitudes toward the historical study of the war. As many fiction writers and even some historians themselves have recognized, history is suffering its own unique brand of post-Vietnam syndrome. That literary artists of such diverse backgrounds and dispositions as are writing about Vietnam should agree upon the failure of conventional history to comprehend the war, and that in so doing they should appeal to more or less the same "metahistorical" critique, suggests their collective conviction that historians need to be reminded, however unmercifully, of some of the inherent limitations of their discipline.

A century and a half has passed since British historical philosopher T.B. Macaulay asserted that absolute truth is not merely elusive for the historian but unattainable, bound as it is to the vicissitudes of the literary imagination. Unlike the scientist or the poet, Macaulay believed, the historian is condemned to inadequacy by the very nature of his task. He must aspire to meet an objective which is in the end unattainable, that of combining in a single forum the fundamentally hostile powers of creativity and analysis, imagination and control. "Perfectly and absolutely true," he wrote bluntly, "history cannot be...."[5] Yet notwithstanding the recurrent and often brilliant extrapolation of this principle since Macaulay's day, as in Hayden White's thesis that the meaning of historical analysis is *prefigured* by its basic narrative structure, professional historiography has had no small measure of difficulty resisting the alluring pull of the social sciences, their positivistic *raison d'être* and their methodology.[6]

To be sure, few historians today can be accused of perpetuating Henry Adams' enthusiasm at the turn of the century for the dawning age in which man might "study his own history in the same spirit and by the same methods with which he studied the formation of crystal."[7] It is obvious, however, that since the heyday of "literary" historians like Macaulay historical scholarship has been influenced dramatically by all of the cultural and technological forces which are commonly subsumed under the heading of "modernization." The legacy of this historiographical evolution is readily apparent today in the professionalization and diversification of the discipline, in the melding of anthropological, sociological and historical methodologies, and in the widely accepted precept that historical truth can be *discovered* by a meticulous examination of the *data*. New social historians and intellectual historians

influenced by the *Annales* school of French historiography, in particular, have adopted a deterministic ethos which rejects "any suggestion of a teleological process in history" along with "particular reason, momentary purpose and individual action" in favor of underlying rhythms and configurations of thought and action.[8]

With respect to historical writing on Vietnam, there is perhaps no better example of the positivist ethos at work than in Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam*, which professes "to provide a reliable empirical record of American actions in Vietnam and, in the process, to clear away the cobwebs of mythology that inhibit the correct understanding of what went on—and what went wrong—in Vietnam."[9] Of course, all historians of Vietnam do not share Lewy's faith in "reliable empirical records" and "correct understandings," and he has been justly criticized by many of his peers for his reliance upon evidence which is less than indubitable.[10] What Lewy states about the nature of historical knowledge is not, however, fundamentally uncharacteristic of professional historical writers in general. George C. Herring's *America's Longest War*, for example, is one of the finest histories of the Vietnam War, and his acknowledgment that "there are no sure answers" is a clear rejection of any claim to inerrancy. Nonetheless, his stated intention to "integrate military, diplomatic and political factors in such a way as to clarify America's involvement and ultimate failure in Vietnam" gives the appearance of being little different from Lewy's.[11] The common assumption is that, by recourse to a body of data and a specific mode of analysis, the historian may arrive at the truth respecting a certain set of events.

"In war," Gustav Hasford notes in a rare moment of introspection in *The Short-Timers*, "truth is the first casualty."[12] If this is the case for war in general, it must be doubly so with respect to Vietnam, for no other conflict in U.S. history has been burdened so overwhelmingly by the tension between fact and fiction, truth and deception. It is precisely the belief that the *truth* of the Vietnam War is accessible to the powers of rational historical analysis which many literary artists have found to be not only erroneous but contemptible. They have, in essence, taken their cue from R.G. Collingwood's criticism that positivist historians "neglect their proper task of penetrating to the thought of the agents whose acts they are studying" (p. 228). Not a few Vietnam fiction writers share Mark Baker's frustration and anger toward those who "treat the war as though it were a vague event from the distant past, beyond living memory." In his oral history of the war, *Nam*, Baker decries the tendency of academics, journalists and filmmakers to ignore "the humanity and individuality of the boy inside the box, relegating him to the cold storage of statistics, history and politics." A college graduate and part-time anti-war protestor himself, Baker explains how he learned more about the Vietnam War discussing it over whiskey with his veteran roommate than by reading about it. "This book is not the Truth about Vietnam," he writes, "But these

war stories, filled with emotion and stripped of ambition and romance, may bring us closer to the truth than we have come so far."[13]

The recurrent anti-intellectualism of Vietnam fiction, a theme which has somehow gone unnoticed by most scholars of this literature, attests to the seriousness of the breach between literary artists and historians. The trend began as far back as 1955 with Graham Greene's prophetic *The Quiet American*, the first and perhaps finest novel on the American involvement in Indochina.[14] Greene prefaced this work by saying that it was "a story and not a piece of history." The tenor of the work suggests, however, that he knew what he was writing was both historical and prescient. From the unheeded legacy of the French war and Alden Pyle's unwavering faith in the domino theory, to the horror of napalm bombing, Greene was meticulous in recounting the Americans' growing role in the war in this crucial period. Although there is much truth to the recent suggestion that Greene's "commitment to history provides *The Quiet American* with its very powerful critical perspective,"[15] it is equally apparent that he viewed intellectuals' treatment of the war with marked, if ambivalent, disdain. Taking care to link Pyle's inglorious demise with his unyielding loyalty to the ideas of American historians and political analysts, as personified in the character of York Harding, Greene writes: "[Pyle] had an enormous respect for what he called serious writers. That term excluded novelists, poets, and dramatists unless they had what he called a contemporary theme, and even then it was better to read the straight stuff as you got it from York....[Pyle] never saw anything he hadn't learned in a lecture hall, and his writers and lecturers made a fool of him" (pp. 24, 32).

Clearly, Greene's juxtaposition of "novelists, poets and dramatists" with "serious writers" and "the straight stuff" signifies his conviction that the essential nature of the war was no more accessible to historians than to literary artists. Several recent scholars of Vietnam literature have illustrated that this has remained one of the most prominent themes among American writers.[16] What is equally important, however, is that Greene's anti-intellectualism anticipates a similar but more highly charged antipathy toward the role and status of the social sciences among literary artists in the Vietnam era. Of course, the "ivory tower" criticism of academics did not originate with the war. But given the discrepancies between life in wartorn Vietnam and what *Saigon* author Anthony Grey astutely calls "the reflective, unhurried ways of the academic world," it is hardly surprising to find Vietnam literature permeated by irreverence toward the protected world of professional scholarship.[17] As Baker notes sardonically, in war "the abstractions of scholarly debate become the very concrete matters of survival" (p. xvi).

Anti-intellectualism in Vietnam fiction is not merely a knee-jerk response to the lofty stateside pastimes of academics, however. As early as the withdrawal of French forces in the mid-1950s scholars from prominent American universities were involved directly in the U.S. government's strategy-

planning for Indochina. The famed Michigan State University team of fifty social scientists and public administration experts started the trend in 1955 by going to South Vietnam to make recommendations on the reorganization of President Diem's administration. Although the team's influence in the affairs of the Diem government was negligible by 1963—many had in fact become critical of Diem—these intellectuals nonetheless shouldered a lion's share of the blame for "intellectualizing" and thus obscuring the truth behind the American involvement in Vietnam.[18]

John Shy is a professional historian who took part in a similar contract-research project for the Pentagon in 1965 on "Isolating the Guerilla." Like former members of the Michigan State group, he later lamented that no one of any influence ever read the recommendations made by his team, "perhaps not even...Sir Robert Thompson and the others who prepared a slim volume of conclusions and recommendations allegedly based on the historical case studies prepared by the rest of us."[19] Yet these scholars remain implicated, if unfairly, in the government's handling of the war. As Frances FitzGerald has observed, their studies "added a new dimension to the art of public relations." Not only did they provide American policy with respectability, she concludes, but they helped entrench the view that those who did not possess expertise in a specialized academic or technical field "could not speak with any authority on the subject" of the war.[20]

Intellectuals were also identified closely with the decision-making process at the uppermost levels of government, particularly during the Kennedy era when "there were more former Rhodes Scholars on the seventh floor of the State Department than in most first-rate university faculties."[21] Hence, popular distrust and resentment of the intellectual community which produced "the best and the brightest" to direct the war effort emerges as a prominent theme in Vietnam literature. It is derived, moreover, from an increasing consciousness among writers who served in Vietnam of the connection between class, education and political power. Notwithstanding the efforts of novelists like John Del Vecchio to portray American G.I.'s as deep thinkers, the authoritative study on the draft in the Vietnam era illustrates that most of the U.S. fighting force was comprised of "those already economically, socially and educationally disadvantaged."[22] As Snake, an urban ghetto dropout, says of Harvard in James Webb's *Fields of Fire*, "That's one of the places that gives us all these Senators and Congressmen and Secretaries that never know their ass from first base about what goes on in the street. Or over here."[23]

Webb's hostility toward the closed and protected world of the academic and political elites in the U.S. is unmistakable in his final climactic chapter when Senator, having returned home with only one leg, finds himself completely alienated from the "fog-headed intellectualisms of his schoolmates." Echoing Greene, Webb writes: "His classmates and professors reminded him of Tocqueville's descriptions of the stratified, vaporous intellectuals

who brought about the French Revolution in the name of unattainable ideals. Someone needs to clue them in, he would muse, about what's really happening down there where the spears fly" (p. 404).

A profound sense of alienation from the politico-intellectual elite running the war contributed to the almost mystical demarcation between "the Nam" and "the World" among Americans—correspondents as well as combatants—in Vietnam. One of the most significant undercurrents in Vietnam fiction, as in Vietnam-inspired film and fine art, is the notion that the power of rational analysis is no more useful in revealing the essential character of the war than it was in providing the rationale for being in the war in the first place. Since the war's ignominious close several scholars of American foreign policy, not all of them of the now unpopular "liberal moralist" school, have substantiated what many suspected all along: the American government and the command in Vietnam were engaged in a large-scale campaign to deceive the American public and press.[24] General Westmoreland's unexpected retreat from his $120 million libel suit against CBS has done little to allay such suspicions. Whether or not this policy of deception was adopted in the name of National Security or a "higher morality," as Philip Geyelin has suggested, seems to have become a moot point. Twenty years of what one critic has called "social and historical engineering" by American officials has cast a long shadow, not least in the minds of literary artists, over the possibility of determining what actually happened in Vietnam.[25] The despair of ever discerning the *truth* from room upon room of Pentagon files and vast stores of "official" data permeates much of their work. In Bryan's words, "Instead of honesty, Americans were given numbers: body counts, tonnage counts, mission counts, truck counts, weapons counts....Counts? *Kownts*? The word had become alien and meaningless in its repetitions."[26]

The popularized delineation between "the Nam" and "the World," then, remains symbolic of the discrepancy between the experience of many Americans fighting in the jungles of Vietnam on the one hand and "official" interpretations of the nature and progress of the war on the other. Programs—strategic hamlets, pacification, Vietnamization—all represented the intellectual foundations of official policy in Vietnam. Yet, as Tim O'Brien suggests in this moving passage from *Going After Cacciato*, the men fighting the war had "no sense of order or momentum....They did not have targets. They did not have a cause. They did not know if it was a war of ideology or economics or hegemony or spite....They did not know the names of most villages. They did not know which villages were critical. They did not know strategies. They did not know the terms of the war, its architecture, the rules of fair play."[27] In short, what was presumed to be rationality at the upper echelon of the American policy-making hierarchy frequently translated into irrationality and even absurdity among the lowest ranks, those fighting the war and reporting it from the ground. "It's all the Nam," writes Del Vecchio. "It don't

fit into the mind of the world, so yer head shifts."[28] Some novelists, like Gustav Hasford, take this idea to its logical extreme and assert that "the world is the crazy part. This, all this world of shit, this is real" (p. 123).

It is because of the unreality of the "official" war that many oral historians, novelists and writers of memoirs have rejected the rationality of conventional historiography in favor of these various fictional and quasi-fictional approaches. What they are saying, paradoxically, is that fiction is more suited to the problem of discerning the essential history of the war. Apart from being one of the finest works by an American on the Vietnam War,[29] for example, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* represents the most vociferous attack on the ruling principles of traditional historiography. Indeed, his running critique of "straight" history in this stream-of-consciousness-styled memoir sparked the current debate over the historicity of Vietnam fiction. "History, attitudes—" Herr writes bluntly, "you could let it go, let it all go" (p. 44). Decrying the exaggerations, fabrications and outright lies by American officials in charge of the war and the inclination of journalists to legitimize them, Herr claims that the same "wash of news, facts and stories" that provided the rationale for escalating the war rendered its "most obvious, undeniable history" into a secret history:

> Straight history, auto-revised history, history without handles, for all the books and articles and white papers, all the talk and the miles of film, something wasn't answered, it wasn't even asked. We were backgrounded, deep, but when the background started sliding forward not a single life was saved by the information. The thing had transmitted too much energy, it heated up too hot, hiding low under the fact-figure crossfire there was a secret history, and not a lot of people felt like running in there to bring it out. (p. 51)

On this basis, Herr concludes somewhat ostentatiously, *Dispatches* is "formal history, like Gibbon" (in McInerney, p. 203).

Though perhaps the most provocative expression of doubt about the capacity of conventional historiography to reveal the essential character of the war, Herr's critique by no means stands alone. On the contrary, it follows in the long-standing and deeply entrenched tradition which originated with Greene's mock admission that *The Quiet American* was not "history" but a "story." William Lederer and Eugene Burdick's *The Ugly American*, obviously intended as a sequel to Greene's work, represented nothing less than a damning indictment of American foreign policy. Written by a navy specialist in Southeast Asian affairs and a former Rhodes Scholar, respectively, this fictional work included a "Factual Epilogue" in its bid to "convince the reader what we have written is not just an angry dream, but rather the rendering of fact into fiction."[30] Robin Moore's *The Green Berets*, the first bestseller on Vietnam, also purported to have "blended fact and fiction" into "a book of truth." Although many critics have pointed out, appropriately, that Moore's "Batman" approach to the Special Forces in Vietnam made this book nonsensical, it is not insignificant that he believed that he could

"present the truth better and more accurately in the form of fiction."[31] David Halberstam, too, has recently admitted that the inspiration to write *One Very Hot Day* was derived in large part from his inability to "portray the frustrations and emptiness of this war" in his earlier nonfictional *The Making of a Quagmire*.[32]

In the 1970s and '80s, moreover, the fictional and quasi-fictional works of Phil Caputo, Tim O'Brien, C.D.B. Bryan, Frederick Downs, James Webb, Mark Baker, Al Santoli, John Del Vecchio, Anthony Grey, and Peter Goldman and Tony Fuller have all been prefaced by the same implicit or explicit rejection of "formal history."[33] Their motives for writing, it is important to bear in mind, are as varied as the authors themselves. Yet from O'Brien's poetic introspection to Downs's hawkish glorification of combat, the great majority of fiction writers are acutely conscious of the historicity of their work. Like Herr, they are intent upon portraying a level of reality which transcends the "fact-figure crossfire" of traditional historiography. They perceive themselves, in short, as historians of experience rather than of analysis, of impression rather than of synthesis. Their purpose, in the simple words of the unknown soldier who inspired Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, is to tell people "what it was *really* like" (Acknowledgments).

Many literary critics sympathetic to the aspirations of these writers have argued that Vietnam "was in countless hidden and obvious ways drastically different from every other war in our history and the weight of Vietnam's sorry distinctions has exerted some curious effects on the literary attempts, in both memoirs and novels, to capture its singular quality."[34] Although it is questionable whether Vietnam was as "drastically different" from other wars as it was "sorrily distinct" for having been unpopular and unsuccessful, there is an element of truth to this observation. It is abundantly clear that the best works of fiction on Vietnam aspire to *capture* rather than *document* the absurdity, anguish, violence and surrealism of the war.

Stanley Cooperman's penetrating *World War One and the American Novel*, a revaluation of First World War literature and literary criticism, affords some illuminating insights into the question of Vietnam's "singular quality" insofar as his approach is uniquely both literary and historical. In the first place, Cooperman's discussion of the devastation which characterized American fictional accounts of World War I suggests that Vietnam may not represent as great a departure from the experience of warfare in general in this century as many of these writers would have us believe. During the Great War, Cooperman notes, an "Alice-in-Wonderland" view of the conflict arose out of the great gulf between military theory and practice, the anonymity of the enemy, and the overwhelming impact of the physical environment—in this case mud.[35] Though it might be argued that the experience of World War II was much different, the parallels between the Great War and Vietnam become obvious. The themes of technological warfare, troop expendability,

attrition and incompetent military and political leadership which run through Vietnam fiction also permeate the literature of World War I. Several critics of Vietnam fiction have suggested that "post Vietnam syndrome and the effects of Agent Orange are proof that this was no ordinary war" (S.C. Taylor, p. 14), but again, the psychological devastation to the generation of 1914-18 and the introduction and sustained use of gas warfare seem to have set horrific precedents. On the national scale, certainly Britain's experience in World War I paralleled America's in Vietnam in its destruction of the nation's "sense of innocence—that peculiar amalgam of optimism and confidence."[36]

Cooperman makes the point, moreover, that in the twentieth century men do not make war; rather, war is made on them. Whereas war was formerly a "standard literary device for exploring human consciousness" or a purely narrative tool, as in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, the experience of the Great War had the effect of rendering environment—war itself—the chief protagonist. This produced not only dissension among literary critics accustomed to "humanist" war literature—that is, narrative characterized by balance and harmony—but also a movement among authors of fiction toward negation and inhumanity. Impact, fragmentation and imbalance became the goals of their work because these were the distinguishing qualities of the experience of the Great War. Thus writers like Lawrence Stallings, according to Cooperman, made "the great refusal": they had refused to "force this impact into patterns limited by the abstractions of highly intellectualized aesthetic standards." Their protest and moral despair, he concludes, "are, in their own context, aesthetically no less than historically authentic" (pp. 193, 200. 242).

Much Vietnam fiction is characterized by the same rejection of "humanity" and balance in favor of "impact." Like the First World War authors, Vietnam fiction writers are, to cite Cooperman, "fresh from a technological slaughterhouse, from their experience of futility of cause, futility of leadership, futility of death itself; they are in no mood to be reasonable" (p. 199). Thus, as Philip D. Beidler has argued in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, novels, personal narratives and oral histories of the Vietnam War are unified thematically by their emphasis upon "sense-making." The implication here is that the definitive quality of the war resists intellectualization or, in Beidler's Coopermanesque terminology, it refuses to be cast in terms of "some abstract notion of formal articulative design" (pp. 62-63, 90, 139-55).

Like most critics of Vietnam fiction, Beidler is cautious not to overstep the bounds of conventional literary criticism. But among those literary pursuits which fall under the heading of "formal articulative design" he might well have included conventional historiography. Although he has overstated his thesis that Vietnam's "insane dynamic" rendered it resistant to any method

of explanation whatsoever, it is clear that these fiction writers are intent upon forging new means of expressing their experience of the war. Gordon O. Taylor has identified the problem as one of "means in relation to ends, of literary method in relation to a subject resisting definition by literary precedent" (p. 295). While he, too, fails to press this line of reasoning past the domain of literary critique, his observation applies equally to history.

Fiction, it may be argued, is the literary mode which best expresses the history of the war in the minds of many soldiers who fought it and correspondents who reported it because they *experienced* it as fiction. The definitive qualities of the war were not the harmony and balance of either classical war literature or conventional history, but fragmentation, alienation and inhumanity. The positivistic ethos of much contemporary historiography, moreover, signifies all that was "poison" about the Vietnam experience. The same confident objectivity and precision in the use of evidence by which many of the historical profession claim to discern historical truths characterized U.S. policy-making in Vietnam. No American war has ever been more rationalized; intellectuals, nay, historians themselves, were implicated in this process at a variety of levels. And yet the war was lost, both in Vietnam and at home. How then, these literary artists force us to ask, can such analyses as Guenter Lewy's presume to "clear away the cobwebs of mythology that inhibit the correct understanding of what went wrong in Vietnam" when no one could do so thirty, twenty, even ten years ago?

As might be expected, this marked anti-historicism in Vietnam fiction has come under heavy fire from conservative critics. Zalin Grant led the way in 1978, largely in response to the wide acclaim accorded Herr and Caputo, with a biting critique of what he called the "dope and dementia" interpretation of Vietnam. Comparing Vietnam fiction to the "free wheeling madness-is-money" approach of films like Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Grant accused film and literary artists of propping up "the concept of the veteran as a victim of the war's madness" at the expense of "objectivity."[37]

A far more penetrating, though no less polemical, criticism of anti-historicism in Vietnam fiction is to be found in James C. Wilson's anti-war *Vietnam in Prose and Film*. In chapters provocatively entitled "The Dope and Dementia Theory" and "Recovering a Secret History" Wilson criticizes novelists and writers of personal narratives for failing to place the war in any historical perspective. "Instead of history," he correctly notes of Herr, Caputo and Ron Kovic, "these writers give us their own fictions, which effectively dehistoricize the war." But in so doing, he argues, they *deny* history and play into the hands of those who would prefer to keep the war a mystery, namely the government and the military. "The Vietnam War was *not* a cartoon or fairy tale, nor was it outside history," Wilson asserts. "The novels and personal narratives that dwell in this 'Neverneverland' further obscure an event already obscure in the minds of most Americans" (pp. 44-54).

Does Vietnam fiction deny history? Herr, Caputo and Kovic would say that *it* denied *them*. Indeed, they would agree wholeheartedly with historian Ernest R. May that at practically every stage of the conflict, but particularly in the Kennedy-Johnson years, "historical reasoning entering into decisions about Vietnam was at best superficial."[38] "You couldn't even find two people who agreed about when it began," Herr writes,

> Mission intellectuals like 1954 as the reference date; if you saw back as far as War II and the Japanese occupation you were practically a historical visionary....Maybe it was already over for us in Indochina when Alden Pyle's body washed up under the bridge at Dakao, his lungs all full of mud; maybe it caved in with Dien Bien Phu. But the first happened in a novel, and while the second happened on the ground it happened to the French, and Washington gave it no more substance than if Graham Greene had made it up too. (pp. 50-51)

These fiction writers dehistoricize the war simply because from their vantage point it lacked historical coordinates. History pervades these novels but, as their critics contend, very often it takes the simplistic form of a burnt-out armored vehicle from the French war or a long-demolished Vietnamese shrine. To be sure, sarcasm is the prevalent mood, a reflection of these writers' view that such crucial historical factors as the French defeat in Indochina and the cultural background of the Vietnamese were ignored by American officials. And this failure to put American involvement in Vietnam in some kind of "historical perspective," in turn, produced much of the incomprehensibility of the war on the ground. "We never had too much indoctrination about the Vietnamese according to their culture, their traditions, how different they were going to be," recalls Rifleman Thomas Bird. "They were shockingly different from the moment we got there" (in Santoli, p. 35). Historians like FitzGerald and May have argued that this lack of responsible historical analysis contributed to the dismal failure of American policy in Vietnam. It is hardly surprising, then, that the "historical perspective" Wilson and others would like to see in Vietnam fiction rarely transcends the bitter cynicism of "hearts and minds, Peoples of the Republic, tumbling dominoes, maintaining the equilibrium of the Dingdong by containing the everencroaching Doodah" (Herr, pp. 19-20).

Tim O'Brien has skillfully capsualized the tension produced by the lack of a historical perspective among senior ranking military men in his reconstruction of a conversation with a chaplain named Edwards. Having gone to the chaplain to express his doubts about the moral legitimacy of the war, O'Brien is told that he has "read too many books, the wrong ones, I think there's no doubt, the wrong ones." Not content to leave the matter unresolved, O'Brien provokes Edwards' wrath:

> Captain Edwards shouted. "All right, Private O'Brien, goddamnit, who do you read? Who the hell tells you the war is wrong?"
>
> Calling me 'Private O'Brien' was a cue. "Sir, I read the newspapers....I've read books by Bernard Fall—"
>
> "Bernard Fall," Edwards shouted, "I've read Bernard Fall. He's a *professor*. A lousy *teacher*." (*Combat Zone*, p. 65)

There is, of course, a tremendous irony in this passage. As O'Brien well knew, Fall accurately predicted in 1964 that the U.S. would follow in the steps of France and fail in the second Indochina war.[39] There is perhaps no more poignant fictional metaphor for the denial of history in the Vietnam War.

In the last analysis, the schism between fiction and history on the Vietnam War is metahistorical in nature, relating to the problem of historical knowledge. Proponents of the "puzzle" thesis, which holds that "fiction and memoirs serve historians as adjuncts to history," have tended to perceive the tenuous relationship between the fiction writer and the historian as derivative of their different focuses and interests. While it is necessary that the latter ask the "big" questions about the war, questions of policy and strategy which do not properly belong in the domain of the foot soldier's memoir or fiction, this division of responsibilities implies a certain harmony of purpose rather than what Sandra Taylor has called a "fundamental difference." In fact, many fiction writers' rebellion against history occurs at a far more basic level, that of historical consciousness itself.

Like most analysts of Vietnam fiction (and one appreciates her quandary), Taylor is ambivalent about the issue of historical truth. On the one hand she insists that these literary artists have not given us literature void of "universal truths," a term which she fails to define. When it comes to the question of discerning the truth in this "multi-dimensional picture of the war," however, her response is far from conclusive. What she fails to recognize is that Vietnam fiction and memoir writers in general reject the notion that the absolute truth about the war—Mark Baker calls it *Truth*—is accessible to the human intellect, literary or historical. All of the confusion, alienation and surrealism aside, they suggest, the Vietnam War is simply too immense and complex to attempt to recapture it with any authority.

Many critics of Vietnam fiction would probably agree with Wilson's observation that the "dope and dementia" books reflect a "very serious contemporary problem—the despair of not being able to understand external reality and history" (p. 51). He is correct in perceiving in Vietnam fiction a crisis of historical consciousness. Had he read Hayden White or even T.B. Macaulay, however, he would have recognized that far from revealing a "serious contemporary problem" he has merely rediscovered the quintessential problem of historical knowledge: there can be no "external reality" or history independent of the literary imagination. Absolute truth, therefore, is not only elusive for the historian but unattainable. This age-old problem has taken on the appearance of having originated very recently for two main reasons. The first is that contemporary historians in general have been lulled into a false sense of confidence in their own ability to reveal historical truths; the second is that the nature of the Vietnam War and its impact upon the U.S. have illuminated the problem of historical knowledge like no other event in that country's recent history.

Regarding the first of these factors, the suggestion has been made by Hayden White, Russel B. Nye, Peter McInerney and others that historians have lately begun to recognize "the fictive character of historical reconstructions" (McInerney, pp. 188-90). There may be an element of truth to this claim, but the case ought not to be overstated. Historical works published as recently as the 1980s which embrace White's dictum that the distinction between fiction and history is socially, not structurally, imposed have been received as unconventional if not daring.[40] Without belaboring the point, there remains a great deal of the positivistic ethos in contemporary historiography and, more pointedly, in the historical treatment of the Vietnam War.

This is not to accuse the entire historical profession of being unselfconscious in its pursuits, however. As the past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Warren I. Cohen, has observed, the Vietnam War and the disenchantment with diplomatic history it occasioned have in recent years produced "the most intensive soul-searching" among historians in this field.[41] One result of this dramatic interrogation of the aims and methodology of diplomatic history has been the gradual consolidation of a new, invigorated "international" orientation, including a concerted attempt to move away from the traditional ethnocentricity of the discipline. Another, it might be argued, has been the admission among some historians of Vietnam that, in George Herring's words, "there are no sure answers." This latter trend is presently being challenged, however, by a rejuvenated conservative school of Vietnam historiography, one which provides a provocative and much-needed counterweight to traditional liberal interpretations of the war but, in so doing, tends to adopt the positivist approach of its mentor, Guenter Lewy.[42]

The second contributing factor in this crisis of historical consciousness is essentially a corollary of the first. Unlike many of the esoteric questions pondered by historians, the quest for the *truth* about Vietnam is not confined to university seminars and scholarly historical journals. On the contrary, as Americans come out of the shell shock of the postwar decade it is apparent that the need for answers, for truths, for lessons, for illuminating historical analysis is more urgent with regard to the issue of Vietnam than it has been for any other conflict since the Civil War. This is a cultural need, whether it takes the form of a desire to confront the guilt produced by the Vietnam experience or to vindicate the war's villains and avenge its victims, or even to apply the lessons of Vietnam to American involvement in Central America. A war as divisive and unpalatable as Vietnam places a heavy burden upon history, especially in a country as self-righteous and as accustomed to victory as the United States. The fact that history is simply not equal to the task of yielding absolute truths has placed it on a collision course with the profound cultural need to know the truth about Vietnam. Hence, the despair of not

being able to understand external reality and history has revealed itself as a by-product of the war rather than as a function of the historical process in general.

Clearly, the nature of the war contributed to this confusion. "Social and historical engineering" by American officials, for example, may have raised grave doubts about the possibility of discerning the facts from the fictions in official source materials. In reality, however, determining by subjective means the accuracy and validity of various data has always been the plight of the historian. As Collingwood suggested in "The Historical Imagination," it is "the historian's picture of the past, the product of his own *a priori* imagination, that has to justify the sources used in its construction. These sources are sources, that is to say, credence is given to them, only because they are in this way justified. For *any* source may be tainted: this writer may be prejudiced, that misinformed....The *a priori* imagination which does the work of historical reconstruction supplies the means of historical criticism as well" (p. 245). Moreover, because the war continues to evoke emotion and outrage in some circles, there are various theories afoot which hold that the history of the war is being deliberately kept incomprehensible. As noted above, Wilson believes that a conspiracy exists among some in the government and the military to keep the war a mystery. Conspiracy or not, Wilson's argument that the "entire course of events has been recorded" in histories such as FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake*—a work which many consider to be as imaginative and inventive as any novel—tends to be self-defeating.

Unlike World War II, the war in Vietnam does not fit cleanly into America's elaborate national mythology. It did not come with ready-made truths, nor has it been met by the kind of unanimous approval or disapproval which allows history the luxury of orthodoxy. In the poignant words of Bruce Russett, a diplomatic historian for whom Vietnam once meant nothing less than the tumbling of such intellectual dominoes as the "goodness" of World War II, "Vietnam has been to social scientists what Alamogordo was to the physicists."[43] Of course, the despair of Vietnam vets-turned-authors extends far beyond this crisis of historical consciousness. That they must contend with the humiliation of defeat, the conspicuous silence of a country which for a decade preferred to forget them, and the psychological and physical abuses of the war to themselves and their families should not be understated. These are first and foremost the laments of this literature. But between the lines the message to historians is clear. As Michael Herr summarily exclaims: "Not much chance anymore for history to go on unselfconsciously" (p. 44).

Notes

[1] This paper was first delivered at the April 1985 Popular Culture Association Conference (Vietnam Area) in Louisville. It has since been revised slightly. The quotation cited in the title is from Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York, 1977), p. 53.

[2] C.D.B. Bryan, cited in Martin J. Naparsteck, "The Vietnam War Novel," *The Humanist*, 38-39 (July-Aug. 1979), 37.

[1] Literary scholars will undoubtedly take issue with this nebulous category, "quasi-fictional." Recognizing the complexity and diversity of the literary aims and styles subsumed by this term, I use it here merely as a means of juxtaposing primarily literary expressions of the Vietnam experience with conventional Vietnam historiography.

[2] The most recent and perhaps best articulated expression of the "puzzle" thesis is Sandra C. Taylor, "The Vietnamese War as Meta-History," *Peace and Change*, 9 (1986).

[3] T.B. Macaulay, "History," in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History* (New York, 1956), p. 72.

[4] See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973). Historical philosopher R.G. Collingwood described positivism in 1939 as "a conception, or rather misconception of history as the study of successive events lying in a dead past, events to be understood as the scientist understands natural events, by classifying them and establishing relations between the classes thus defined." See *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), p. 228.

[5] Henry Adams, cited in Russel B. Nye, "History and Literature: Branches of the Same Tree," in Robert H. Bremner, ed., *Essays on History and Literature* (Ohio, 1966), p. 128.

[6] Gordon S. Wood, "Intellectual History and the Social Sciences," in John Higham and David K. Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1980).

[7] Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford, 1978), p. vi.

[8] Generally speaking, reviews of Lewy's work were not favorable. See Peter McInerney, "'Straight' and 'Secret' History in Vietnam War Literature," *Contemporary Literature*, 22 (Winter 1981), 92, including n.21. Lewy's critics decried what seemed to them an obvious connection between his extensive use of official American documentation, on the one hand, and his conservative interpretation of the war or defense of the *status quo*, on the other. The cooling of the liberal onslaught against the Vietnam War and the emergence of a viable conservative school of Vietnam historiography suggest that this blanket rejection of Lewy's interpretation along with his methodology was, in retrospect, too harsh.

[9] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States in Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York, 1979), pp. ix-x.

[10] Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (New York, 1979), p. 61.

[11] Mark Baker, *Nam* (New York, 1981), p. xii.

[12] Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (London, 1955).

[13] James C. Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (Chapel Hill, 1982), p. 14.

[14] See, for example, Gordon O. Taylor, "American Personal Narrative of the War in Vietnam," *American Literature*, 52 (March 1980-Jan. 1981); Pearl K. Bell, "Writing About Vietnam," *Commentary*, 65-66 (Oct. 1978); Philip K. Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Georgia, 1982); Naparsteck; Jack Beatty, "Mixed Memories," *The New Republic*, 185 (18 July 1981); D. Keith Mano, "Best of Season," *National Review*, 29 (2 Sept. 1977); Theodore Solotaroff, "Memories for Memorial Day," *New York Times Review of Books* (2 Sept. 1977). The best treatment of this theme, however, is to be found in McInerney.

[15] Anthony Grey, *Saigon* (New York, 1982), p. 519.

[16] Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York, 1972), p. 115.

[17] John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed* (New York, 1976), pp. 18-19.

[18] FitzGerald, p. 115.

[19] See Richard Barnet, *Roots of War* (Baltimore, 1972), esp. ch. 3.

[20] See Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War and the Vietnam Generation* (New York, 1978).

[21] James Webb, *Fields of Fire* (New York, 1978), p. 78.

[22] For "liberal-moralism" see Jerald A. Combs, "Cold War Historiography: An Alternative to John Gaddis' Post-Revisionism," Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations *Newsletter*, 15 (June 1984), 14-15. For a provocative discussion of the government's campaign of deception, see Philip Geyelin, "Vietnam and the Press: Limited War and an Open Society," in Anthony Lake, ed., *The Vietnam Legacy* (New York, 1976).

[23] For "social and historical engineering" see Wilson, ch. 3.

[24] C.D.B. Bryan, *Friendly Fire* (New York, 1976), p. 209.

[25] Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York, 1975), p. 320.

[28] John Del Vecchio, *The 13th Valley* (New York, 1982), p. 26.
[29] For a dissenting opinion on the quality of Herr's work, see Dale W. Jones, "The Vietnams of Michael Herr and Tim O'Brien: Tales of Disintegration and Integration," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 13/3 (Winter 1982), 309-20.
[30] William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York, 1958), "Authors' Note."
[31] Robin Moore, *The Green Berets* (New York, 1965), pp. 1-2. For criticism of this work in novel and film see Beidler, pp. 37-39; Wilson, pp. 36-37; and Herr, p. 200.
[32] David Halberstam, *One Very Hot Day* (New York, 1984), "Afterword."
[33] See Philip Caputo, *A Rumour of War* (New York, 1977), p. xiii; Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (New York, 1969), "Preface"; Webb, "Acknowledgments"; Baker, pp. xii-xvii. Al Santoli, *Everything We Had* (New York, 1981), p. xv; Del Vecchio, p. 1; Grey, pp. 748-50. and Peter Golman and Tony Fuller, *Charlie Company: What Vietnam Did to Us* (New York, 1983), p. x.
[34] Bell, p. 74. See also Naparsteck, p. 37; and G.O. Taylor, pp. 294-96.
[35] See Stanley Cooperman, *World War One and the American Novel* (Baltimore, 1967), pp. 55-77.
[36] See Michiko Kakutani, "Novelists and Vietnam: The War Goes On," *New York Times Review of Books* (15 April 1984).
[37] Zalin Grant, "Vietnam as Fable," *The New Republic*, 128 (1978).
[38] See Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (Oxford, 1973), esp. pp. 115-16.
[39] See Bernard Fall, *Street Without Joy* (New York, 1964), esp. ch. 15.
[40] To cite but one example, Keith Walden's *Visions of Order: The Canadian Mounties in Symbol and Myth* (Toronto, 1982) is based explicitly upon White's dictum. Reviewer Reginald Whitaker calls this work a "departure" and a "deviation from convention." See *Canadian Historical Review*, 65 (March 1984), 122.
[41] Warren I. Cohen, "The History of American-East Asian Relations: Cutting Edge of the Historical Profession," *Diplomatic History*, 9 (Spring 1985).
[42] Norman Podhoretz' *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York, 1982) best exemplifies this trend. See also Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy* (California, 1982).
[43] Bruce M. Russett, *No Clear and Present Danger: A Skeptical View of the U.S. Entry into World War Two* (New York, 1972), p. 21.