

Abandoned

Reconsidering the literature of South Vietnam

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Kabul has fallen. The twenty-year American occupation of Afghanistan is, for now, over. A few short weeks after US forces pulled out of the country, the Afghan army dissolved into rocky dust, a stratum of sediment tamped beneath the Taliban assault. Now ghosts stalk the craggy graveyards of empire. A helicopter alights. A disgraceful runway escape. Another Vietnam?

We should pause at these easy comparisons and equivocations. Afghanistan and Vietnam are more than wars; they're also countries. But, at least for Americans, Vietnam is more than a country—it's also a demon. It's a meme, a ritual, pregnant with a half-century of US domestic strife. When the Vietnam cliché is invoked, it doesn't refer to a people in Southeast Asia—it refers to mid-century American social conflicts. It registers the high-water mark left by a tidal wave of national struggle over ideals like freedom and civil rights. The struggles between the races, classes and generations were condensed into a single white-hot point and projected on to a scapegoat: Vietnam.

I'm an American with family and friends who fought on all sides of the war: among hawks and doves, and among Vietnamese communists and republicans. I don't intend to relitigate whether our intervention in the Indochina Wars was morally justified or strategically sound. Rather, my point is that America's domestic post-war settlement was a betrayal of the South Vietnamese, and that this betrayal has had lasting ideological consequences that have distorted the Anglosphere's understanding of Vietnamese history and culture.

The mid-century American cultural revolution was quelled by inscribing Saigon with our sins and casting it into the wilderness. These upheavals transformed America in valuable ways, but it was also transformed from a country of men and women who contributed blood and labour to the cause of South Vietnam to one where the very soul of South Vietnam was denied. This is why South Vietnam has been forgotten in recent documentaries and literary anthologies. By 1975 a new myth had taken hold: South Vietnam was a 'puppet', America's toy to toss aside. Like Cain, we shrugged: Are we our brother's keeper? Now we wander in and out of each new war. We amble through the echoes as Saigon's blood cries out from the Earth. The repressed returns, and we present each new scene in time-honoured disguise. To exorcise the ghosts of our dead generations and break from this samsara of disavowal, we must go beyond the fifty-year-old consensus of 1975 and make devotions to the spirits we've abandoned.

A hundred years ago, the Jesuit missionary Léopold Cadière described Vietnam's hungry ghosts:

Alas so many forsaken souls! ... The souls of ... those who died violent deaths, the warriors fallen on the battlefield, those taken in riots; those who drowned ... and so many others, thousands on thousands, millions of others, they form the vast cohort of abandoned souls. These souls suffer. None offer them the food, nor clothes, nor gold, nor silver, nor the perfumes they require ... Thus, the souls grow terrible, they avenge themselves, they punish the mortals who've forgotten them. They pour out their wrath upon their parents, on their neighbors, and it is then left up to each person to seek,

through divination or by all sorts of magical rites, which evil spirit is causing their afflictions, and then to try to appease, through the desired means, the enemies they've made in the supernatural world.

The abandoned souls demand commemoration, but our offerings must go beyond tacit acknowledgement and take a physical form. Moreover, whereas the individual ghost is appeased through offerings of joss, perfumes and other goods, how does one make oblations to the soul of a people? I think translating their literature can be our offering of incense at the graveyards of empire, because a people's literature is a time capsule of national genius. Just as history is possible only because human beings can reach across the centuries to share the thoughts of their predecessors, literature is a means to commune with the spirits, to let them possess us, to speak through us and to whisper their testimonies into our hearts.

We can't commune now, because the current literature in translation is overwhelmingly written by Northern communist and communist-dissident authors of the post-reform era. The foundational relationships of translation were explicitly founded to reconcile the Vietnamese communists with the American (liberal, white) intelligentsia, often against the wishes of the former South Vietnamese intellectuals and diaspora-community political leaders, who had little to gain from such a bargain. Neither did the South Vietnamese refugees, who wrote in Vietnamese, fit into the then burgeoning field of Asian American studies. The parallel development of these two publishing industries has dominated the Anglosphere public's consciousness of 'Vietnamese' literature: on the one side, dissident and quasi-dissident former communists like Bao Ninh, Duong Thu Huong, Nguyen Huy Thiep and Pham Thi Hoai; on the other side, Vietnamese Americans like the MacArthur genius-grant winner Ocean Vuong and the Pulitzer Prize winner Viet Thanh Nguyen. We should heed Cadière: 'The ma and qui, the myriad species of demons and devil, appear to be, most often, forgotten human souls who've turned wicked.'

We must propitiate these hungry ghosts. But the point is not to resurrect them—we need not fear awakening the lost cause of South Vietnam. Indeed, as the Afghanistan debacle has shown, the opposite is the case. By ignoring the ghosts of South Vietnam, we've carried them with us like a guilty conscience. But by recognising them, by translating their literature, we instead regain a lost piece of ourselves and open an avenue of closure to their sons and daughters among us in the diaspora.

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So who are the South Vietnamese? The name is misleading. Ostensibly it refers to the inhabitants of the coastline and river valleys stretching from the seventeenth parallel to the Gulf of Thailand. But, in fact, many of the citizens of the republic, particularly among the intellectual and literary elite, had recently fled from the North: more than 800,000 of them by 1956. The South Vietnamese were a motley crew. There were Christians and Buddhists, integral nationalists, Trotskyists and social democrats, to name a few. The political and ideological rivalries that divided the country first took root in the 1920s, but over the course of the Second World War they had begun their full, bloody bloom. The average Vietnamese was well aware of the struggles between the Great Viet monarchists, the communists and the Kuomintang-inspired nationalists. Whether they revered Maurras, Sun Yat-sen or Lenin, their ideological war was not an American invention.

But a country is more than map coordinates and a geopolitical posture; it also needs a force of internal cohesion. The North's programme was legible enough: the North was Marxist-Leninist. It officially mourned Stalin's death. Its mass organisations carried out the everyday work of moulding citizens' souls. It was red, aggressive, ruthless and effective. The South, on the other hand, was strangely hollow. It was eroded into the geography, pounded into shape by the footsteps of refugees. Like an arroyo carved out of a dry lakebed, each assassination, each denunciation, each confiscation and each threat and theft contributed its fluid to a flood of vengeful ire. The South was a marshy basin of losers. It was a struggle among the forsaken: between religious sects, communist sympathisers, robber barons, regional magnates and political defectors. Their fight fatefully enrolled the United States, which brought along its buffoonish formula of deep-pocketed arrogance and shallow ignorance, pouring rockets on to a funeral pyre.

What kind of national literature can grow under such chaos? Whatever the cause, most contemporary Vietnamese literary critics agree that South Vietnam produced some of the best Vietnamese literature ever written, far better than what was coming out of the North at that time. Maybe heavy-handed censorship undermined Northern literature, while the intellectual freedom of the South gave its literature room to grow. Or maybe the secret to good literature is philosophy, and South Vietnam's receptivity to luminaries such as Heidegger, Sartre and Barthes, mingled with a domestic efflorescence of Buddhist, Confucian and Catholic theology, breathed fresh air into the younger generation of authors. One of my favourite explanations was given me by the author and former communist guerrilla Nguyen Ngoc. To be great, he told me, a national literature must transcend narrowly national problems and reach towards human problems. The North yoked authors to the plough of national interest, but in the South they roamed to wider pastures. Today, the eighty-nine-year-old Nguyen Ngoc leads a cohort of intellectuals reintroducing South Vietnamese literature after four decades of suppression. Shouldn't we do the same?

We should, because South Vietnamese authors spoke to the universal human aspects of their condition. They were a band of refugees, raised in decades of violence and vendetta. They were driven together under the sigil of freedom, so they made human freedom into an analytical problem. They wrestled with it, they doubted it, they disassembled it and they rebuilt it. Their standoffish obsession with freedom is visible as early as Thanh Tam Tuyen's 1956 poetry anthology *I'm No Longer Alone*. Its publication was a turning point for the psychoanalytic and existentialist strands that weaved their way through the next two decades of Southern writing. He expressed freedom by breaking with the strictures of grammar and narrative logic to more closely approach lived experience. His verse and prose were sprinkled with existentialist themes of forced freedom and alienation, as well as dirges to the Spanish Revolution and the Vietnamese Trotskyists murdered by the Viet Minh death squads of 1946.

Similar themes were picked up and intensified by some of South Vietnam's most celebrated authors, like Duong Nghiem Mau. His first two novels, *Mother's Legacy* and *Poison Age*, should be ranked among the most interesting literary treatments of the postcolonial condition ever written. *Mother's Legacy* is a national allegory. It follows the four scattered bastards of two dead fathers, both casualties on opposite sides of the revolution. The children return to their shared mother's deathbed to murder one another in a struggle over her pitiful estate. The novel includes reflections on race spoken through a *métis* youth conceived through rape at the hands of an African legionnaire.

Whereas *Mother's Legacy* provides an allegorical portrait of the national condition, *Poison Age* delves into the plight of those caught in early 1950s Hanoi. The protagonist is a college boy who, despondent, wanders through a city teetering on the abyss of civil war. He watches helplessly as a whole generation of young lovers, friends and family—and such seemingly stable virtues as political independence and filial piety—dissolve in a maelstrom of pointless violence. The characters rationalise the absurdity of their situations with bad faith appeals to justice and revenge, blurring the distinction between eudaemonia and euthanasia. For those trapped in the city, which is bloated with refugees, the only escape is to choose a side. Mau poses a question to us: Must freedom mean everything is out of control? Must freedom mean subjecting oneself to intangible abstract forces and making their will your own? The book was republished for the first time in 2018, to the chagrin of party hardliners.

South Vietnam's grappling with freedom wasn't limited to men. Women authors for the first time exploded into Vietnamese literary life, and they took the country's readership by storm with a casual disdain for traditionally gendered social prescriptions. Authors like Tran Thi NgH, for example, scoffed at expectations that women should discuss sex with pious modesty. Instead of eschewing politics, women like Nha Ca embraced graphic depictions of war, atrocity and the psychology of life on the home front. Women also tackled social class. Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu documented the lives of the urban poor, and her award-winning novel *Mossy Frame* is reminiscent of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard* in its psychologically and socially sensitive portrayal of a collapsing rural patriarch during the revolution. It was republished in 2016.

Nguyen Thi Hoang's 1964 novel *The Student's Embrace* is especially remarkable, not only for its philosophical ruminations and its jarringly poetic and disembodied yet evocative prose. It was also a literary scandal that firmly established the hitherto taboo topic of female sexual desire. The plot follows a young woman who leaves behind the libertinism of life in the city to become a secondary-school teacher in the mountain town of Dalat. Like Nabokov's *Lolita*, or Duras's *L'Amant*, a play of seduction unfolds between an adult teacher and a young student. The novel was denounced as debauched by some of the leading authors and critics of the time, while others recognised the quality of the prose, the sincerity of its social portrait, its innovative phenomenological sensitivity to objectification and its implicitly feminist rejection of passivity and propriety. It sold in record numbers and was reissued an unprecedented four times in the first few months after its release. After the conquest of Saigon in 1975, the book was banned under obscenity laws, and copies were burned in streetside bonfires 'to abolish perverted cultural products'. In April 2021, the novel was officially republished for the first time, after forty-five years of circulating only underground or among the diaspora.

Many of the classic novels of formerly banned South Vietnamese literature have recently gained official recognition from their erstwhile enemies, but why haven't they received any attention from their former allies?

This national literature may have been lost forever if not for the tenacity of the Vietnamese diaspora. While being spiritually annihilated, the South Vietnamese were physically digested as refugees. But their literature was salvaged by giants, like Vo Phien, who devoted his savings and golden years to collecting, cataloguing and analysing South Vietnamese literature, all while holding down a day job as a minor bureaucrat for the city of Los Angeles. His seven-tome series,

Literature of South Vietnam, was published between 1986 and 1999. This enormous collection introduced, analysed and anthologised the work of more than 100 South Vietnamese writers, a painstaking process slowed by medical issues and a lack of manuscripts.

Yet Vo Phien was more than a critic and archivist. He was also a novelist, magazine editor and talented essayist whose insightful and lyrical reflections still stand as invaluable windows on to rural violence, urban displacement, anomie and the refugee experience. Many of his most notable essays were written in a typically Vietnamese genre called *tuy but*, a freely wandering meditative prose whose style is reflected in the genre's name, 'yielding to the pen'. Although Vo Phien has been the subject of an excellent and freely available intellectual biography by John C. Schafer, his most impressive *tuy but* remain to be translated. Three deserve particular attention for the insight they give on the war: 'Again, a Letter from Home' (1962), 'The Neighbours' (1967)—also titled 'Birds and Snakes'—and 'Remembering my Village' (1972). These poetic essays follow the fates of Vo Phien's family friends. They combine moving portraits of the lowly villagers who so often remain stereotyped, passive and anonymous in other accounts of the war. Together they amount to a kind of impressionistic 'history from below' of his hometown on its path from the 1945 August Revolution to its obliteration during the 1972 Easter Offensive.

Diaspora figures like Vo Phien, Nguyen Mong Giac, Pham Phu Minh and, in France, Thuy Khue built a lively Vietnamese-language public sphere in print and blogs. But there are countless nameless others who spent decades crying out in the wilderness. Today their voices are channelled through the lips of their children. We can hear them echo in Aimee Phan's criticism of the Ken Burns *The Vietnam War* documentary. We can also hear it in E.M. Tran's obituary for her father:

The Vietnam he knew is a ghost, his identity formed around a corpse. He is an outsider wherever he is, unknown to both the country he inhabits and the country he inhabited ... With his departure, an entire history, yet another gone from a generation that exists in-between, now a pile of dust. This disappearance panics me—who will remember him when the people who remember him are gone?

Nobody will, if we stay on this path. The thin thread of memory is fraying fast. Many of the younger generation, to borrow the words of Viet Thanh Nguyen, 'have lost [their] mother tongue, or had cut it off in favor of an adopted tongue'. Only a small and dwindling number of the diaspora have the skills needed to read Vietnamese literature. A portal is closing, and with it the chance for millions of Vietnamese Americans to commune with their forebears. This is a second American betrayal.

But beyond the betrayal, we are also cheating ourselves. South Vietnamese literature is full of thoughtful reflections on freedom and national belonging under conditions of social upheaval and fratricidal violence. We are shielding ourselves from the hard-earned lessons of the South Vietnamese, many of whom are now our compatriots. They watched as brother turned against brother, partner against partner, as town and village alike crumbled under the weight of passion and revenge. Their literature cradles the most intelligent and perceptive contemplations forged out of that world-making war. Their poems were psalms to millenarian dreams that, like great tidal forces, bore down upon them. These demons haunt us today.

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