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## Return of the Nameless Man

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The wit and exuberance of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and its sequel, *The Committed*, entice the reader to reflect on colonialism, war, and racism.

Reviewed:

### **The Sympathizer**

by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Grove, 403 pp., \$17.00 (paper)

### **The Committed**

by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Grove, 345 pp., \$27.00



Viet Thanh Nguyen; illustration by Johnalynn Holland

“I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces,” says the narrator of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s 2015 novel, *The Sympathizer*, by way of introduction. He’s not talking to us. The book is a political prisoner’s mea culpa, addressed to his jailer, the Commandant, who is faceless in that he’s an abstract presence throughout the book but also literally so (napalm).

The narrator's captors have demanded a confession, so, from a cell in Vietnam—"this jackfruit republic that served as a franchise of the United States"—the narrator sifts through his entire life in search of his crime. No shortage of material there. He admits to being a double agent, aide-de-camp to a general in the American-allied Vietnamese army but privately sympathetic with the project of revolution. This calling requires him to lie to everyone, including Bon, his dearest boyhood friend.

His transgression isn't just ideological, but by the time he fesses up to a murder, readers are the ones who sympathize with him. He's the bastard child of a French priest and a Vietnamese girl, a poor boy with nothing but the belief that radical change will liberate his people; he's the nation itself, riven by politics and blood. We understand "two-faced" as an insult, but maybe it need not be. The narrator earns a scholarship to study in America ("the lone representative of our people at a sylvan little college called Occidental, its motto *Occidens Proximus Orienti*"), where a professor tells him, "You embody the symbiosis of Orient and Occident, the possibility that out of two can come one."

*The Sympathizer* is an exuberant, sustained charm offensive. The narrator is nameless to underscore that he's an everyman, more idea than person. (I thought of Ralph Ellison's indelible protagonist and how hard it is to call him the "Invisible Man," as it sounds like a superhero.) If Nguyen's hero had a name, we'd use it with familiarity, as shorthand for a fiction that comes on strong and wins readers over, the way we name-drop Augie March, Holden Caulfield, or Alexander Portnoy. Speaking of Portnoy, here's Nguyen's narrator at thirteen, masturbating into the family dinner:

Oh, you poor, innocent, mute squid! You were the length of my hand, and when stripped of head, tentacles, and guts possessed the comely shape of a condom, not that I knew what that was then. Inside, you had the smooth, viscous consistency of what I imagined to be a vagina, not that I had ever seen such a marvelous thing besides those exhibited by the toddlers and infants wandering around totally naked or naked from the waist down in my town's lanes and yards.

The language is always this rhapsodic, a pleasure to read aloud, but Nguyen's is an assiduously political project. The narrator goes on:

This sight scandalized our French overlords, who saw this childhood nudity as evidence of our barbarism, which then justified their raping, pillaging, and looting, all sanctioned in the holy name of getting our children to wear some clothes so they would not be so tempting to decent Christians whose spirit and flesh were both in question.

Early in the novel, Saigon falls (or is liberated; who's to say?) and the narrator accompanies his general to salvation in Southern California. That the Americans stopped participating doesn't mean the war is at an end. In the sprawl of Los Angeles, the turncoat receives orders via encoded letters from a handler in Paris. The key to the cipher through which spy and overseer communicate is a text called *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction*, written by one Richard Hedd. Get it?

*The Sympathizer* is very funny, and not only because of such puerile jokes or what amount to sight gags (as when the narrator chauffeurs the General and Madame about in a compact car). The humor is in the book's voice, its willingness to provoke, its embrace of reality's absurdity:

We were strange aliens rumored to have a predilection for *Fido Americanus*, the domestic canine on whom was lavished more per capita than the annual income of a starving

Bangladeshi family. (The true horror of this situation was actually beyond the ken of the average American. While some of us indeed had been known to sup on the brethren of Rin Tin Tin and Lassie, we did not do so in the Neanderthalesque way imagined by the average American, with a club, a roast, and some salt, but with a gourmand's depth of ingenuity and creativity, our chefs able to cook canids seven different virility-enhancing ways, from extracting the marrow to grilling and boiling, as well as sausage making, stewing, and a few varieties of frying and steaming—yum!)

This parenthetical digression is representative of the novel's breathless verbosity. It overexplains like a fibbing child, but what is it trying to get away with?

Early on, the narrator mentions his undergraduate thesis, "Myth and Symbol in the Literature of Graham Greene." Greene is sort of a red herring (a pun worthy of Nguyen). All the fictional derring-do—spies and traitors, two murders, a jaunt to the Philippines, an incursion into Laos to rendezvous with his comrades—is the stuff of a thriller. But *The Sympathizer* is so aware of itself that the intrigue feels like a distraction; the real thrill is in the language, the intelligence, the book's airtight design.

The tense moments mean readers who love Greene won't be entirely disappointed, but I was mostly unable to appreciate the spycraft as more than metaphor. Nguyen has hit on an elastic and effective analogy—a double agent succeeds because he's never seen as his true self. Is this the lot of every immigrant, whether to America or elsewhere? Have the nations that made war in Vietnam ever truly seen the Vietnamese people? *The Sympathizer's* digressions and jokes and bombast distract from the fact that it's a book of ideas (has anything ever sounded less appealing?). It's not hard to see why it won the Pulitzer Prize, though it is hard to believe it's Nguyen's first novel.

The General dispatches the narrator to meet with a filmmaker, known only as the Auteur. As a bona fide Vietnamese person, the narrator offers the director some input on a script about the war, called *The Hamlet*. The filmmaker's disdain is perfect:

Have you read Joseph Buttinger and Frances FitzGerald. He's the foremost historian on your little part of the world. And she won the Pulitzer Prize. She dissected your psychology. I think I know something about you people.

Still, the narrator is hired as a consultant. He reports this to his handler: "A job I characterized as *undermining the enemy's propaganda*."

In the narrator's relationship to this quixotic project we can see the author's statement of purpose:

The Auteur would make *The Hamlet* as he intended, with my countrymen serving merely as raw material for an epic about white men saving good yellow people from bad yellow people. I pitied the French for their naïveté in believing they had to visit a country in order to exploit it. Hollywood was much more efficient, imagining the countries it wanted to exploit.

*The Sympathizer* is not a riposte to *Apocalypse Now*, but it is more efficient still than a Hollywood production. The whole book possesses this same wry pity for the colonizer, and blurs the distinction between good yellow people and bad yellow people. The white people are largely beside the point. "At Yan'an," we're reminded, "Mao said that art and literature were crucial to

revolution. Conversely, he warned, art and literature could also be tools of domination.” I was depressed to realize how much my sense of this history was shaped by Francis Ford Coppola.

Our hero travels to the Philippines for the shoot as “technical consultant in charge of authenticity.” In a fake cemetery (“the names of the dead that Harry had written on the tombstones, copied from the Los Angeles phonebook and attached to people presumably still alive”) there’s a fake gravestone erected for the narrator’s real mother. An act of genuine mourning—“Mama, I said, my forehead on her headstone. Mama, I miss you so much”—is interrupted by the pyrotechnics of a battle scene. Another joke: the injustice of almost dying in a pretend war!

But real war might be in the offing. The narrator’s boss is arming some devoted soldiers: “The General was either going to send these fools to their deaths from his armchair or he was going to return, like MacArthur to the Philippines, to lead the heroic invasion himself.” Bon and the narrator volunteer to be among them; their mission ends in incarceration, which we’ve been waiting for since the first page. The writing register, unreal throughout, feels here close to hysterical. Then the novel dares something else: real sentiment. The confessor comes up with something for which he must atone. Years earlier, he watched the gang rape of a fellow revolutionary, unable to intervene. As one of the perpetrators says of him, dismissively, “He couldn’t get it up to give her the treatment anyway.”

A gag about impotence proves to be not a joke at all. The scene is gross; even in a book not short on ecstatic descriptions of gore, our narrator’s inability to do anything about the horror before him is chilling. It’s often hard to remember which side the narrator is on; it’s hard to know if we’re supposed to be rooting for him or condemning him. Maybe that’s not the fog of war; maybe that’s how the world actually looks.

A forced confession is psychological torture. His imprisoners mean to break him, but the narrator arrives at a revelation. Recalling Ho Chi Minh’s dictum “Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom,” he decides he agrees. That is to say *nothing itself* is more precious than those. It’s more wordplay: “Uncle Ho’s empty suit turned inside out, a sartorial sensation that only a man of two minds, or a man with no face, dared to wear.”

At many points in *The Sympathizer* the pleasure of Nguyen’s language distracted me from the point:

Having liberated ourselves in the name of independence and freedom—I was so tired of saying these words!—we then deprived our defeated brethren of the same.

Besides a man with no face, only a man of two minds could get this joke, about how a revolution fought for independence and freedom could make those things *worth less than nothing*.

The levity (maybe “mania” is more apt a word) blunts how sobering this is, ideals always giving way to violence, to cruelty, to nothing at all.

Nguyen created the ultimate seducer; it makes sense that the author wouldn’t be able to quit him. *The Sympathizer* ends with the narrator once more fleeing Vietnam, this time without the aid of the US military. The book’s final words are “*We will live!*” and *The Committed*, Nguyen’s new novel, a sequel to his first, begins with that first-person plural—“We were the unwanted... 150 of us sweating in a space not meant for us mammals but for the fish of the sea.” The first chapter is brutal, getting at the horror behind the charming coinage “boat people,” as those Southeast Asians fleeing by sea were known. Nguyen copes by laughing:

The father of one of the dead children cried, My God, why are You doing this to us?

And it struck us then, the answer to humanity's eternal question of *Why?*

It was, and is, simply this: *Why not?*

Our old narrator has acquired a passport and assumed a name, Vo Danh; more importantly, he's secured refuge, in Paris, accompanied by Bon, who is still unaware of his friend's true sympathies. The men rendezvous with the woman the narrator has been pretending is his aunt but is really his longtime handler. (She's *someone's* aunt—not important to say whose, here.) The aunt is a bisexual intellectual who mixes in Parisian political circles and beds a woman charged with Pol Pot's legal defense. ("How do you know he was responsible for these deaths?" the lawyer demands, classic party banter.) In a novel that must be called overstuffed—less a judgment than a fact—the aunt was the one character I wanted more of. Très chic!

The men do what immigrants have always done: head to Little Asia, find their community. They're looking for the Boss, a man with whom they'd been imprisoned: "After the revolution, the communists had relieved him of his excess wealth, but these overeager plastic surgeons had sucked away too much fat from this cat." In Paris the Boss is a gangster, and he puts the men to work selling drugs.

"Seeing the failures of both communism and anticommunism," the narrator tells us in one of the recaps a sequel requires, "I chose nothing, a synthesis that neither capitalists nor communists could understand. You may think that I am being a nihilist, but you could not be more wrong." Nguyen alights on this idea often enough that we know it's important, but I don't find it especially easy to parse. It's true that you can't mistake the novel's humor as nihilistic—it is not brutal or mean, but ironic and charged.

Vo Danh is following orders, and also there's the matter of money (it is the 1980s, after all):

Was I actually becoming that most horrid of criminals? No, not a drug dealer, which was a matter of bad taste. I mean was I becoming a *capitalist*, which was a matter of bad morals, especially as the capitalist, unlike the drug dealer, would never recognize his bad morality, or at least admit to it.

Vo Danh means to cultivate a clientele among the aunt's circle, particularly a Parisian politician, BFD. Our narrator's loyalties aren't divided, but he has ulterior motives. As one of his fellow gangsters puts it, "But besides the financial profit, let's just say this is from the goodness of my heart. I also detest him because of his politics. And his socialist president as well. Not my president." He can compromise BFD's career, or exact revenge against the men who refuse to see him:

When I opened my mouth and broke the beautiful china of their French language, they heard what the poet, boy wonder, gun runner, and slave trader Rimbaud must have heard and then plagiarized from some nameless African or Oriental traveler: *I is an other*.

Nguyen exerts control over the story rather like the auteur he parodied earlier. In his first novel, the target was America, the means the thriller: double-crossing, assassinations, secret codes. Here, the strategy has changed and the target is France, Vo Danh's father's land, and therefore maybe his fatherland. The aunt corrects him:

Your father was a colonizer and a pedophile, which go hand in hand. Colonization is pedophilia. The paternal country rapes and molests its unfortunate pupils, all in the holy and hypocritical name of the civilizing mission!

I find I'm stumbling when I refer to the narrator using the name that's been provided. It doesn't suit him as well as namelessness does, perhaps because he's less person than device. As he says in response to the aunt's words above, "When you talk about me like that, I feel like a symbol."

Outfitted as "a completely harmless and well-disciplined Japanese tourist," the narrator hits the streets of Paris to ply his wares. Bon has the clever idea of targeting the members of the local Union for the Advancement of Vietnamese Culture—they can make some cash while also identifying some expat communists for termination: "Would our war never end? At least for Bon, it appeared that it never would, not until he was dead or incapable of continuing in his quest to kill all the communists in the world."

The men run afoul of some Algerian dealers, and Vo Danh sees even this turf war as a matter for postcolonial critique:

My Algerian brothers, have you never read Ho Chi Minh's case against French colonization? We should not be fighting each other, we should not be robbing each other, we should be working together against our abusive stepfather! Forget the "Marseillaise," whose lyrics are a little too murderous for me. Let's sing "The Internationale" instead! Come on, you wretched of the earth, with gusto! *Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout!*

*The Sympathizer* could conceivably be enjoyed by an aficionado of the spy novel. Its sequel is more ironic about the conventions of crime fiction. Yes, there's the big boss, banally evil in his polo shirts, and the rival gangs from the former colonies at war in the seedier of Paris's arrondissements. But Nguyen seems more comfortable, now, with the artifice of his project. The African gangster charged with guarding a brothel called Heaven tells Vo Danh:

You lived through what Gramsci called a war of maneuver. Violence, revolution, or at least confrontations in the streets. Me, I am in what Gramsci called a war of position. The war for ideas, for alliances, coalitions, new movements; the struggle for a new vision—

*The Committed* does not ask for our credulity, but our attention. The book is so intellectually rigorous I wanted a syllabus (in truth, as above, the author provides one).

The plot whirrs and clicks like a Rube Goldberg contraption. Vo Danh skirmishes with the Algerians even as he and Bon plan the assassination of a Vietnamese dignitary, scheduled to appear at the Vietnamese Union's big to-do ("staging a culture show was really an acknowledgment of one's cultural inferiority"). This affair provides the book's showdown set piece, and there's even a romantic subplot, the return of Lana, the narrator's former boss's daughter. She appears as the book draws to a close, bearing news that would beggar belief if that's what Nguyen were asking of us. I was happy to see her again.

*The Sympathizer's* pivotal moment was the narrator's imprisonment, which led to the revelation that he witnessed that gang rape. *The Committed* one-ups its predecessor with two moments of imprisonment, one with Vo Danh as victim, one as jailer. First, he's taken captive in an empty warehouse by the rival Algerians. They force him into (what else?) a game of Russian roulette. The violence once again brings catharsis: he recalls his escape from Vietnam. "Of course, things didn't turn out so bad on the boat. For us, anyway. Or for the women. Who knew these pirates were of the most peculiar kind?"

The memory of Thai buccaneers making off with the boat's "slimmest, most hairless young men and boys" is enough to push Vo Danh to pull the trigger on himself. The motif of sexual or bodily violation as the ultimate expression of the colonial project—the point of no return—is maybe repetitive, or perhaps that is Nguyen's point. Hollywood looms again; it's hard not to think of Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, and it is to the author's credit that a scene rendered on the page is as stressful as one that unfolds on-screen. It's in keeping with the author's larger project that the pistol isn't loaded after all.

In a decade whose fiction is dominated by autofiction, there's something *démodé* about Nguyen's novels, which I think can fairly be considered a single artistic endeavor. (I'm leaving out his short stories, collected in a volume called *The Refugees*, though these, too, are worth reading.) *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* are, to borrow James Wood's phrase for such novels, perpetual-motion machines, their exuberance perhaps a suitable method given how vast a subject he aims to tackle.

The breathless voice and sprawling plots of these novels made me think of *Midnight's Children*: manic language and impossible story suit the strange truth of colonialism. Nguyen does Salman Rushdie one better by deploying the conventions of genre fiction; he gently seduces the reader into two rambling, discursive works passionately interested in war and violence, race and identity, colonialism and history.

*The Committed* has some of a sequel's inherent inelegance—the book's repetitions and reminders of what's come before will be useful to most readers, who won't, as I did, read these novels back-to-back. In the new work, either emboldened by his first novel's success or determined to challenge himself, Nguyen is willing to risk more, from the plain falsity of the characters' intellectual diatribes to gags like a giant "THE END" stuffed into the middle of the book. Readers can clearly see there's more to come after it, and in fact Nguyen has spoken of his intention to write a third installment of the story.

Though I've said these are novels of ideas, I'd like to take a cue from Vo Danh or whatever we want to call our narrator to contradict myself. Postcolonial critique is an intellectual lens that can blur reality into abstraction. Story—even an exaggerated one—can remind us that we're talking about real people, real history, reality itself.

Near the end of *The Committed*, a Parisian berates our hero:

Communitarian! A miserabilist! Someone who wallows in his misery, who cannot transcend the petty circumstances of his identity or his obsession with skin color, who cannot think outside of his little group, his *community*, and who can never *ever* just be *human*, much less *universal*!

These are novels about a specific people—the colonized, the war-scarred, the immigrant—that also transcend those "petty circumstances" of identity. The choice between being Vietnamese and being human turns out to be a false one after all.

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