

## ALLEGORICAL NARRATIVES OF THE VIETNAM WAR

TOM BURNS

*Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG)*

**ABSTRACT:** In this article, three novels of the mid-1970s, published at the end of the Vietnam War – Jonathan Rubin’s *The Barking Deer* (1974), Joe Haldeman’s *The Forever War* (1975), and Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* (1974) - are analyzed as examples of allegorical narrative, whose theoretical aspects are initially discussed. It is argued that the peculiarities of the Vietnam War (morally and politically suspect and even militarily ambiguous) made some authors attempt to represent it indirectly and obliquely through varied narrative strategies like allegory and fantasy, rather than the realism of classic war narratives.

**KEYWORDS:** Allegory; Vietnam narratives; Vietnam War literature.

**RESUMO:** Neste artigo, três romances de meados da década de 1970, publicados ao fim da Guerra do Vietnã – *The Barking Deer* (1974) de Jonathan Rubin, *The Forever War* (1975) de Joe Haldeman, e *Dog Soldiers* (1974) de Robert Stone – são analisados como exemplos de narrativa alegórica, cujos aspectos teóricos são inicialmente discutidos. Argumenta-se que as peculiaridades da Guerra do Vietnã (moral e politicamente suspeita e mesmo militarmente ambígua) fizeram com que alguns autores tentassem representá-la indireta e obliquamente, através de várias estratégias narrativas como alegoria e fantasia, ao invés do realismo de narrativas clássicas de guerra.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Alegoria; Narrativas do Vietnã; Literatura da Guerra do Vietnã.

What the critical definitions or formulations of allegory have in common is some kind of parallel structure with two distinct or distinguishable levels of meaning: one “visible” or literal, another figurative. Thus, allegory has been defined as “an ‘extended metaphor’ in which characters, actions, and scenery are systematically symbolic, referring to spiritual, political, psychological confrontations” (FOWLER 1982: 6) or a textual narrative with “at least two distinct meanings, one of which is partially concealed by the visible or literal meaning” (CHILDERS & HENTZ 1995 : 8), for it is, “in its most general formulation a way of giving form to something which cannot be directly narrativized” (LENTRICCHIA & MCLAUGHLIN 1995: 8), or a way to “signify a second, correlated order of persons, things, concepts, or events (ABRAMS 1971: 4). Northrop Frye even seems to think of allegorizing as the most common kind of literary activity, whether for writer or critic, as occurring whenever one says, more or less consistently, that one means *this* as well as *that* (FRYE 1971: 111).

Take the common extended metaphor of a journey to stand for the progress of a person’s life from birth to death. There is, on one level, the narrative of the journey itself, with its beginning and eventual end, with various kinds of stops, detours, reverses and obstacles along the way, and, on the second or allegorical level, this literal journey representing the various stages, advances and difficulties that occur in the course of one’s existence. The literal journey thus gains significance beyond itself. In the journey as allegory, the parallel aspects may be developed, for example, for moral, philosophical, or theological purposes, as in the most well known prose allegory in English literature, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, whose first part was published in 1678). The theological parallel of a man named Christian on his way to salvation, a journey through places whose names indicate their function or

meaning, fraught with sin and temptation, and aided or hindered by a number of symbolic characters, is deliberately and consistently invoked by the narrator so that the two levels of this exemplary journey are maintained by a similar structure of progression, in which the sequence of events in the narrative is paralleled by Christian's moral, spiritual, and even psychological "progress."

The second level of meaning may be disguised, or "concealed" in Childers & Hentzi's formulation by the literal or "surface" level, so that obscure allegories may result: William Blake's prophetic poems are the most notorious example. It is probably more common, however, that the purpose of the allegory, like that of its related shorter forms of exemplum, parable, and beast fable—all of which are traditional didactic forms of narrative—is to elucidate and explain the second level rather to mystify and conceal it. Leaving aside old and new literary debates on the value of the allegory—its origins in Biblical typology, allegory vs. symbolism, the attack on allegory as mechanical or artificial, with its detractors (I.A. Richards, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound) and its defenders (Mikhail Bakhtin, Paul de Man), it cannot be denied that allegorical narrative has many distinguished examples: Plato, Apuleius, Dante, Tasso, Spenser, Dryden, Swift, Kafka, and Orwell. To mention a more contemporary American example, John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966) is an ingenious, even if rather overextended allegory of the Sixties as a university campus.

Although the experience of the Vietnam War has been well represented in contemporary American literature through the familiar narrative genres and modes established by the literature of previous wars (i.e. journalistic and historical accounts, oral and written memoirs, autobiographies, and combat novels of traditional realism), allegory, fantasy, and other forms of narrative have also been employed. The reason for this alternative may have something to do with the nature of this conflict compared to that of previous wars. The Vietnam War was a war qualitatively different from the Second World War, which has typically been represented

as a morally justifiable war against racism and fascism. The war in Vietnam, on the other hand, has been regarded as so morally and politically suspect (American imperialism masked as anti-Communist crusade) and even militarily ambiguous (the lack of visible front lines and easily identifiable enemy) that some authors have attempted to represent it indirectly and obliquely. One method for an oblique representation would be the allegorical. It may be noted that the closest analogy to the socio-cultural impact of the Vietnam War was that of the First World War, which was also ambiguous in its political and moral dimensions, absence of justifiable cause, and subsequent arousal of significant domestic protest. That war also tended to inspire more poetical (in the sense of *poesis*) forms of literary representation than its great sequel, in which journalistic accounts often overshadowed fictional narratives.

A short form of the allegory is the beast fable, the most well-known example of which in English literature is Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale." In the beast fable, animals stand in for humans, as can be seen in the prologue of Jonathan Rubin's *The Barking Deer* (1974), a Vietnam novel about a Special Forces team in a *montagnard* (indigenous forest people of Southeast Asia) village. The novel begins with a story set "in the time of the Houang-Bang Dynasty," when Kra the Tiger and Bru the Eagle engage in a fierce struggle to over the *muntyjac* prey. Each predator swears that he does not want to eat the *muntyjac* (deer), but just give it a proper home. In their furious battle, however, the two destroy the *muntyjac*, leaving only a red smear on the ground. The *muntyjacs* that live in the forest bark out the story as a warning, but sometimes others do not heed it and end up getting eaten. If the tiger represents the Viet Cong and the eagle the Americans, the *muntyjacs* are the forest people who are fought over, competed for by the American advisors and their enemy, the Viet Cong, for control over the supply routes of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The fable foretells the action of the novel to follow.

Interpreting signs, portents, and stories turn out to be important to all three sides of the conflict—tiger, eagle, and *muntjac* caught in the middle. Interpretation, or a reading of the signs, becomes important in the novel for the characters of all sides—American, Viet Cong, *montagnard*. In the context, interpretation officially falls to the village sorcerer or medicine-man, Yo Blo, but he is initially puzzled and cannot read the signs, for the spirits are either reeling with joy or milling in terror at local events. Both cases are a prelude to what ensues among the villagers themselves as a result of taking the side of the Americans and welcoming them into their village. The “black rain” that falls on the sorcerer becomes the black flags on the map of General Ba, the Viet Cong commander, each flag standing for a US Special Forces camp blocking the supply route along the border and furnishing a target for his forces to destroy. To undermine the villagers’ confidence in the Americans, Viet Cong theatrical skits warn them that it is better to stay away, for all the signs point to a bad outcome. Another (mis)reader of signs is Colonel Quoc, the North Vietnam Army commander, who ignores the chart of the Astrological Ministry that warns him that his mistress Hue is not right for him (she is in fact a VC agent). The plot of the novel, which need not be retold here as it is drawn to tedious length, will work out how the warnings indicated by the signs come true.

ii.

By contrast with the beast fable, which hearkens back to earlier literary narratives, *The Forever War* (1975), by Joe Haldeman, who served in Vietnam as a combat engineer, takes the allegory into the futuristic realm of science-fiction (the novel won both the Hugo and Nebula awards, the Sci-Fi genre’s most prestigious literary prizes) even while it closely parallels attitudes and events of the Vietnam War. In an introductory note to the paperback edition, the author recognizes that “[t]wenty-five years later most young readers don’t even

see the parallels between *The Forever War* and the seemingly endless one we were involved in at the time” (HALDEMAN 1975: 9). The most striking resemblance is the metaphorical aspect of time, in which “America’s longest war” seemed to go on so long (in fact, ten years), although not quite as long as the 1,143 years of the inter-galactic fictional war depicted in the novel. The relatively short time of lived experience as opposed to the vastly longer periods of actual time on earth parallels the combat soldier’s perceived concentration of life experience within the 365 days in-country, as opposed to the drawn-out calendar year of the “World,” as the US was called by combat soldiers. The place they actually inhabited seemed unreal, fantastic, and they often felt as if they had aged before their time.

Time is the organizing principle of the novel and its central trope. The action begins in 1997, i.e. nearly a quarter of a century in the future relative to when the book was published and the end of the Vietnam War, 1975, a link to the last war that provides veteran instructors. A major has “a row of ribbons stitched into his coveralls, including a purple strip meaning he’d been wounded in combat, fighting in the old American army, must have been that Indochina thing, but it had fizzled out before I was born” (HALDEMAN 1975: 11), the protagonist observes, showing the distance of his generation from Vietnam. The “collapsar jump” has recently been discovered, a phenomenon that makes interstellar time travel instantaneous and requires a revision in Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity: an object (ship) traveling at “near light-speed” along a line toward a “collapsar” will reappear in another collapsar field, “repelled at the same speed at which it approached the original collapsar” without colliding with it (HALDEMAN1975: 8). The elapsed time between the collapsars is zero, making it possible to physically cover vast distances of interstellar space in no time at all, although some time is required going from to the locale of the designated target, the “portal planets,” which are made up of “flotsam that whirled around the collapsars” (HALDEMAN 1975: 8).

Besides the obsession of the soldiers with time that does not seem to pass, other aspects suggest specific parallels with the war, such as a timeless militarism, as a costly war continues, century after century, whose motives and aims become ever less clear. The origins of the war are also vague: a “drone” or automated probe returned one day from space with data that suggested a colonizing ship had been attacked and destroyed near the star Aldebaran, in the constellation Taurus (hence, the designated enemy are the “Taurans”). Thenceforward, all colonizing vessels went out with armed escorts. As the protagonist says, “The Colonization Group got shortened to UNEF, United Nations Exploratory Force. Emphasis on the Force,” and inevitably, it was decided to send “foot soldiers to guard the portal planets of the nearer collapsars” (HALDEMAN 1975: 8-9). The parallels suggested here are the Tonkin Gulf Incident (August 1964), where a US ship was reportedly attacked by an unseen North Vietnamese boat and aggressive actions followed, eventually leading to the deployment of US Marines to defend air bases the following year, which was the beginning of American ground forces in Vietnam. The novel’s “Elite Conscription Act” of 1996, aimed at mobilization to meet the perceived Tauran threat, also suggests the controversial incremental personnel increases in draftees required for the war instead of the government’s calling up of the reserves.

Nor is it difficult to accept the premise that military hierarchy, with its issues of command, obedience, loyalty, competence, will always be with us, along with the continuing contingencies of strategy and tactics, intelligence estimates, transport, and supply (just as in the US Army, a Table of Organization of succeeding companies, or “strike forces,” is supplied in the novel for each military campaign, complete with names and ranks of strikers and support personnel). Certain aspects of military life remain the same in the novel, while others undergo adjustment or even reversal: “chow” (meals) has become “chop,” but ground troops are still called “grunts”; marijuana is still smoked but only after night-chop; women

serve in combat in equal numbers with men; and they routinely sleep together, but, the women are “compliant and promiscuous by military custom (and law)” (HALDEMAN 1975: 42). The Selective Service is here truly selective, for the draftees are not society’s rejects but its elite, with high IQs and strong and healthy bodies. The historical war becomes relevant in the novel’s conception of the enemy aliens, the “Taurans,” who are inscrutable, unseen, and unknowable. Like the Vietcong in the bush, “[n]obody had ever seen a Tauran” (HALDEMAN 1975: 3).

The readjustment of veterans to civilian life is another of the novel’s parallel themes. Thomas Wolfe’s *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940) would be an appropriate title for Haldeman’s novel (whose earlier version contained a long section titled “You Can Never Go Back”), but the theme of Wolfe’s was that homecoming is impossible because leaving home behind to encounter the world irrevocably changes the person. Haldeman reverses the emphasis in accordance with the experience of the Vietnam veteran: it is the world that radically changes over time, making it difficult for the characters to cope with what becomes an “alien” environment. The continuity in human societies and questions about what constitutes humanity has always been central to science fiction, a genre that is really more about the present (or, as here, even the past) than an unknowable future. Science fiction imaginatively explores the implications of social change and the consequences of socio-political experiments.

For the first Tauran campaign, Private William Mandella (perhaps alluding to Nelson Mandela and his extended servitude) undergoes training on the planet Charon (who in Greek mythology transports souls across to the land of the dead). Mandella is a member of a Strike Force of fifty men and fifty women who are sent to Stargate collapsar and then on to another collapsar to build a military base and defend it against armed drones. The training, which focuses on surviving in strange environments with dangerous atmospheric and topographical

conditions, kills a dozen people and turns out to be inadequate for the actual conditions of battle (as was so much of the training for combat in Vietnam, as can be seen in the two parts of Stanley Kubrick's film *Full-Metal Jacket*). The "fighting suits" that the soldiers wear protect them from extreme temperatures but are also dangerous to wear and subject to lethal accidents with untrained or insufficiently cautious users. The alternative camouflage allowed by the suits (desert yellow, space pitch-black, spotted forest green) also turns out not to conform to the environment of the battle.

The target is the supposed Tauran base of operations on the planet Aleph, which orbits around a collapsar, but the mission goals are rather vague. Battle commences with a computerized clash between systems that is over as soon as it begins. The military jargon actually sounds familiar: "We have just engaged the enemy with two fifty-gigaton tachyon missiles and have the destroyed the enemy vessel" (HALDEMAN 1975: 45). The grunts are to attack the base without damaging too much equipment and take a Tauran prisoner alive. They kill a group of aliens with laser weapons, and Mandella is sickened by the act in a way that suggests the novice soldier who recognizes humanity in the enemy: "They were thoroughly repulsive, but their worst feature was not a difference from human beings but a similarity" (HALDEMAN 1975 :52). "They weren't aliens," he has to remind himself, "we were" (HALDEMAN 1975: 55, emphasis in the original). The furry, grass-eating creatures reappear, seemingly unafraid, and the language specialist thinks they are not Taurans after all but natives of the planet who are not dangerous but simply curious. The suggestion is that these are civilian casualties and wantonly killing them because they might have been the enemy constitutes an atrocity, a common dilemma for the soldier in Vietnam who could not tell civilians from Viet Cong.

In the battle that follows, standard infantry tactics apply—form a line, fire grenades, advance by fire-team to final combat assault—and the Taurans are easily eliminated in their

imitation of a human-wave attack and with less sophisticated technology (they still use radio instead of “phased neutrino communications” and their weapons emit lethal bubbles that can easily be evaded). To Mandella, the battle seems like murder. “The Tauran hasn’t seemed to have any conception of person-to-person fighting” (HALDEMAN 1975:72). A platoon leader who wants to keep the killing at a minimum is relieved by Sergeant Cortez, whose name suggests the Conquistador who slaughtered the Aztecs with superior technology. Cortez tells his troops that “[m]ercy is a luxury, a weakness we can’t afford to indulge at this stage of the war” (HALDEMAN 1975: 63), an admonition that recalls fears of the unpredictability of the Vietnamese enemy, for which the safe procedure was to fire when in doubt. To forestall hesitancy, Cortez has given them a “post-hypnotic suggestion” that calls up pseudo-memories of Taurans murdering, raping, and eating colonists from Earth, which the soldiers realize is ridiculous but still find compelling, calling up the desired blood lust. Mandella has a euphoric rush, glad to be “getting the chance to kill some of those villainous baby-eaters. Knowing it was soyashit” (HALDEMAN 1975: 68). Vietnam is recalled in both the superior firepower of the invaders and the demonization of the enemy, which suggests the propaganda about Viet Cong atrocities that the American soldiers heard rumors about or were told by their superiors.

The next campaign, Yod 4, is more of an even match and so suggests a parallel to the point at which the US realized that the NVA and the VC would not be so easily defeated as was first thought.(JASON 2000: 58). Mandella is now a squad-leader, the year 2007. With the time-dilation, he has been in the army for ten years and after the present campaign will be able to retire, “a twenty year man, and only twenty-five years old” (HALDEMAN 1975: 80). As in Vietnam, boredom is a problem for troop morale, and military intelligence on the enemy remains faulty. Technology, which is constantly being updated, is still dangerous, and several troops die from “explosive decompression” in what is evidently the author’s critique of the military cult of the so-called Technological Sublime. The commodore defines what is

happening by referring to Alvin Toffler's concept of "future shock" from the 1970s. "We're caught up in a physical situation that resembles this scholarly concept. The result has been disaster. Tragedy...Relativity traps us in the enemy's past; relativity brings them from our future. We can only hope that the next time, the situation will be reversed" (HALDEMAN 1975: 99-100).

Mandella arrives back on Stargate in the year 2023, the campaign having lasted seventeen years, local time. In the meantime, The Conscription Act, a short-timer's nightmare, has been modified, with five years subjective service now mandatory instead of the former two years. The surviving soldiers of Yod-4 are offered positions as instructors, but by this time they all want to return to civilian life. The Earth, however, is no longer the place that they had once left: world population has now reached nine billion, with five to six billion unemployed (an analogous situation faced by returning Vietnam veterans). Former friends and sweethearts are now two decades older, many relatives have died, and a third of the population is homosexual, which, owing to overpopulation, is encouraged by the government. The economic situation is precarious. Currency is no longer money but "calories." Well-fed people had been murdered in the Ration War of 2007, and this "undeclared class war" evidently functioned like the catastrophic control mechanism on growth once envisioned by Thomas Malthus. Subsistence farming arose and relieved urban problems, but it also encouraged larger families, with a resulting doubling of the population once again.

The maladjustment of veterans to this civilian dystopia comes gradually, as they are first received as heroes, fêted and given press coverage but then soon forgotten and left to their own devices. Mandella's first shock is his mother greeting him at the station with a huge armed bodyguard. Urban muggers, called "riders," ride the elevators (his mother lives on the 92<sup>nd</sup> floor) looking for victims. Everyone carries a weapon of the traditional type, but laser weapons are prohibited. Intravenous drugs are sold in bars like drinks. Food prices, especially

meat, are astonishingly high. “Everything seemed to have gotten a little worse, or at least remained the same,” Mandella observes (HALDEMAN 1975:130). Jobs are now assigned only to the needy. For people to get a job to supplement their ration books, they have to contact a “dealer,” who negotiates the sub-letting of jobs by job-holders for half-salary.

It is felt that “in the past, people whose country was at war were constantly in contact with the war. The newspapers would be full of reports...The enemy was a tangible thing” (HALDEMAN 1975:131). As in the Vietnam era, the war seems ever so distant from daily life. In both the fictional and historical wars, the main effect of the war on the home front is economic (the Vietnam War ushered in a new period of deficit and inflation), and it turns out that the war is self-perpetuating. “The most important fact about the war to most people was that if it ended suddenly, Earth’s economy would collapse” (HALDEMAN 1975:131). In Mandella’s discussions with people who know he is a veteran, their anger about high taxes seems abstract: “they were convinced that the Taurans would never be any danger to Earth, but they all knew that nearly half the jobs in the world were associated with the war, and if it stopped, everything would fall apart” (HALDEMAN 1975:143).

The war is also behind the decline in the quality of leadership: “any person who showed a shred of talent was sucked up by UNEF, the very best fell to the Elite Conscription Act and wound up being cannon fodder” (HALDEMAN 1975:130-131). By contrast, the “best and brightest” did not do the actual fighting of the Vietnam War, which was left to the working-class, but were the people who made it happen. As for his own personal prospects, Mandella’s knowledge of physics has become out of date; only his combat skills are “marketable” and a dealer accordingly offers him a job as manager for a bodyguard organization. His girlfriend Marygay has moved to a commune in South Dakota, but when he joins her he finds even this semi-rural life has been invaded by urban menace in the form of

“jumpers,” pirate-gangs that raid and kill farmers. Former soldiers can only use their skills in perpetrating violence.

Caught in this socio-economic dilemma, Mandella and Marygay reenlist in UNEF and are immediately commissioned as lieutenants and assigned to a new campaign, “Tet-2,” waged during the years 2024-2389. Their Rest and Recreation is taken on a special planet called Heaven, whose advanced hospital technology provides for the regeneration limbs (he a leg, she an arm) that they have lost in combat, an episode that serves as “wish fulfillment for any seriously injured combat soldier”(JASON 2000: 59). For the next campaign in the continuing war, “Sade138” of the years 2458-3143, Mandella, as a major in command of his own Strike Force, undergoes a course of Indoctrination and Education, in which, through electrodes, he “absorbs” millennia of military theory and history and the skills to handle every type of weapon from the most primitive to the most up-to-date through “cybernetically-controlled negative feed kinesthesia” (HALDEMAN 1975:173)—another kind of wish-fulfillment, If only for the complete war-lover.

Other parallels are suggested. Mandella learns of an unsuccessful veteran’s rebellion that tried to “take on all of UNEF, Earthside,” with “lots of support from the population” (HALDEMAN 1975:177), which suggests organizations like the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and civilian antiwar activists. During a defensive operation against the Taurans, a fellow officer’s warning that Mandella may be killed by his own men by exposing them to danger as a supposed punishment suggests the “fragging” attacks on officers who were perceived to risk men’s lives in the later part of the Vietnam War. Finally, the persistence of the centuries-long war remains the allegorical focus: “the 1143 year-long war had begun on false pretenses and only continued because the two races were unable to communicate” (HALDEMAN 1975: 249). The word “races” suggests a war between members of the same species; their inability to communicate implies more than the lack of a common language. The

war is said to have begun back in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century because of “old soldiers” (i.e. Vietnam vets) who were still around, many of whom in positions of power, including the groups using the newly discovered collapsar jump for space exploration. Their aggressive responses to Tauran vessels encountered in space started the conflict, which recalls the intelligence debacle of the destroyers U.S.S. Maddox and Turner Joy, which triggered the shooting war by giving the US government an excuse to attack North Vietnam.

iii.

Allegory need not be fantastic, as the two previous examples suggest, but may also be compatible with the fiction of realism, as shown by Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* (1974). The action of the novel takes place mostly on American soil, although the two main male characters, one a journalist, the other a soldier, begin their respective sojourns in Vietnam. The Vietnam War (during which the author spent some time as a journalist) is symbolically and psychologically “brought home” to the US through allegory. The novel’s dense, Conradian atmosphere of constant fear, unspecified menace, and a number of characters moving in semi-secret, official and unofficial channels, jockeying for financial gain, willing to maim or kill without qualm, even with a certain sadistic joy, were elements as present in the paranoid California culture of the late 1960s as they were in the war in Vietnam. Stone shows convincingly that the counter-cultural Sixties, the legendary era of “hippies” and civil rights, was effectively dead by the late Sixties. This was, to use a common expression of the period, a time of “bad shit”: random street violence, political assassinations, race riots, and bad drug trips.

In Stone’s novel, accordingly, the drug culture of the utopian psychedelic mid-Sixties has been transformed: “hard” drugs like amphetamines, cocaine, and heroin, i.e. drugs used

for achieving numbness and paranoia, prevail over the hallucinogens once used for spiritual exploration or exaltation. Living in his mountain retreat, Dieter, former spiritual master of Hicks, one of the protagonists, is the only character who takes psychedelic mushrooms, a throwback to an earlier time. He cannot persuade Hicks and Marge to dump the heroin they are carrying and try to recapture the former days of glory, because they know those days are gone. Not peace and love, but racial menace, violent psychopaths, and mean streets are the current mode of existence in California, concomitant with the increasing violence in Vietnam and paranoid fears of the soldiers fighting there. The scene that Hicks encounters on his night out in Oakland, for example, is a parallel domestic equivalent of what is going on over in The Nam.

In its wide geographical scope, somber mood, and political critique, *Dog Soldiers* resembles other novels of Stone's, which have been characterized as hard-edged, "postmodern meditative realism...embedded in an inter-American, hemispheric and global dimension" and "demonstrating how the United States government tries constantly to project its structures outward, creating and recreating its North-South dichotomy" (SALDIVER 1991: 537-538). The US's defining its own idea of a proper world order at the expense of other countries and cultures is one of Stone's main themes.

Although the allegorical parallel of late Sixties California and the war in Vietnam is established in *Dog Soldiers* in plot, theme and mood, the war is brought home—in both material and symbolic senses—in the form of three kilos of unadulterated heroin. As Philip D. Beidler puts it, the novel imagines a "drug netherworld that in its manic horror and pain and violence is a stunning replica of Vietnam itself"(BEIDLER 1982: 110). Parallels include torture, betrayal, the inability to distinguish friend from foe, and corrupt authority.

The uncut heroin smuggled by Hicks into the US becomes an "piece" of Vietnam, able to work its poisonous magic on the US much as the war itself did in the country of the

invaders. While the US might have left Vietnam, which by the early Seventies it finally contemplated doing, “the Vietnam War would now never leave the United States,” because, as Frances FitzGerald has written, “the soldiers would bring it back with them like an addiction” (FITZGERALD 1970: 423-424). In this novel, one might amend that statement to say that they brought it back *as* an addiction: Vietnam was the first war fought with many of the soldiers strung out on heroin, as opposed to being drunk on alcohol, as were combatants of World War II and the Korean War.

By the end of the 1960s, the US military command estimated that ten percent of the troops in Vietnam were doing heroin, an admission of the soldiers’ unwillingness to prosecute someone else’s war in a more professional manner. The opium was grown in Laos, processed in Vientiane, and came to Vietnam by air-drop in planes financed by the US, or through customs, whose inspectors multiplied their salaries by lack of rigor, and it was often sold on the streets and around US military bases by children (FITZGERALD 1970: 423). Its purity was so far superior to anything obtainable on the streets of American cities that some soldiers who became addicted to it actually extended their tours of duty in Vietnam to remain close to the source.

In the novel, then, it is not surprising that when Hicks smuggles in such a large quantity of pure Asian heroin, a number of people are determined to seek it out and get possession by whatever means available. These efforts constitute the narrative. Although the heroin is intended to make the three main characters thousands of dollars, its real street value is actually in the millions, since its purity means it can be “cut to infinity” and resold. It therefore draws the greed of everyone like a magnet, and by its very presence upsets the criminal economics that determines so many people’s lives: the “bikers” (motorcycle gangs), “black dudes” (ghetto people), the mafia and other dangerous groups, who both move it and

consume it. As Hicks realizes, the heroin (“scag,” “horse,” “H.,” “smack,” “shit,” are some of its nicknames) is only owned by the person who controls it.

Materially, therefore, the heroin’s purity guarantees its power as desired object both by increasing its sale value and by intensifying its effects. Symbolically, the heroin is both the promise of liberation or indefinable fulfillment and the corrupting agent of its seekers. The material whiteness of the substance symbolically belies the corruption, violence, and deceit involving all the people trying to acquire it. The heroin therefore becomes Stone’s metaphor for the Vietnam War in the sense that it brings the effects of the war, the violence and paranoia that the soldiers experienced, back to the World, civilian life. On one hand, it allows the user to bear a paranoid reality in euphoric indifference and, on the other, it makes him an addict of a system that corrupts both individual and society.

Given the paranoia of the drug’s possessor, the plot of the novel becomes a variation of the classic chase in the “thrillers” that are an important part of American literature, since the narrative is structured around who controls the drug and how long he can keep it. It is a thriller, however, with an ironic twist: Ray Hicks, in the role of the tough, street-smart detective of classic hard-boiled detective fiction, is technically the criminal. Like the thriller, however, each character has his/her own motives for participation in the crime. For Hicks, the courier who brings the drug over from Vietnam, smuggles it into California, fights off several challenges to take it over until the very end, when he is destroyed in the process, it represents more than money, to which he is fairly indifferent. A Nietzsche-reading warrior, Hicks sees the stuff as a challenge, a means to “correct” living, the way of a modern Samurai, with clear thinking, courage, skill in martial arts, and an unsentimental ability to size up people’s motives as his weapons.

A fictional construct of hard-boiled private-eye, Marine combat veteran, and the martial arts warrior of countless novels and films, Hicks is not, however, sentimentalized, as so many

of these anti-heroes are (he has, for example, a cold, reptilian quality to his face, the eyes of a snake, as Marge notes). In one affecting scene, Hicks administers a lethal overdose to the writer Gerald in a fashionable home in the Hollywood hills. Gerald wants to undergo the thrill of a heroin experience as something he can later write about, and Hicks kills him not only to prove to the Hollywood hustler Eddie Peace that he, Hicks, cannot be hustled, but also because for him the heroin has become a reason for living and must not be trivialized.

Hicks's friend who originally set up the deal, the journalist John Converse, is a former Marine who wrote an anti-Marine Corps play but has not had much luck since. For him, the heroin is a way of affirming his waning identity and receding manhood, perhaps even his very humanity, because he is on his way to becoming completely numb, scarcely human. It quickly becomes clear to him, however, that in handling such dangerous stuff he is way over his head. Lacking Hicks's advanced survival skills, Converse soon falls into the hands of a pair of very nasty "agents," who torture him for information as to the whereabouts of the drug. These two men seem to be pursuing the heroin out of simple greed but are also under the orders of a shadowy federal narcotics agent named Antheil. The paranoia of the period is the common-denominator emotion. State repression is identified in Antheil with anti-Communism, as he is also the persecutor of Marge's father, an ex-Leftist.

Converse's wife Marge, who becomes Hicks's lover-companion in the course of the flight-pursuit action, is not quite clear about what has happened. Having become involved in the deal through her husband, she thinks it is possible to give the heroin back and so return, as it were, to a prior state of innocence. Converse and Marge, in their naiveté and desire to make easy money, have tapped into structures of power and malice that they had no idea existed. If all the other characters keep abusing them as fools and losers, it is an evaluation that in the context is essentially correct. Marge, a student of anthropology at Berkeley who has dropped out of school to work in a porno movie theater, is mainly defined by her drug addiction, first

to dilaudid, a prescription drug from the rich pharmacopoeia of California life, then to the pure heroin that Hicks gives her a taste of, a drug that offers a feeling of extreme well-being and whose effects are firmly attested to by several characters. There is no hypocrisy here about how heavy drugs are (morally) bad; although they are manifestly bad for health, they are used here to ease pain and anxiety and to achieve an unearthly euphoria.

In Stone's harrowing vision, human virtue cannot compete with a powerful commodity like three kilos of pure "scag." In a sense, as Frederick R. Karl has noted, all of the characters, not just Marge, are "users" (KARL 1983: 114). The financial transaction for Converse gives his life a certain excitement, although rather more than he bargained for. And for Hicks, the philosophical nihilist ("form is not different from nothingness" is his formula, a condition that in the end he achieves), running the heroin is a way of giving his life structure. Beyond the allegorical parallels of the historical period, Stone also contrives a number of literary allusions to Joseph Conrad's classic novella *Heart of Darkness* of 1898 to suggest more timeless themes. The novel's epigraph, quoted from Conrad, cites violence, greed, desire, and especially "pitiless folly," all of which are important elements in this novel as well. Heroin may be seen, in this literary context, as an analogue to the ivory of Conrad's story, a substance that affects, or infects, all his characters, inspiring greed and violence and disrupting the loyalties between husband and wife, and friends, and threatens human solidarity in general. In this sense, Hicks, who has seen combat in Vietnam, has been called the Kurtz of this novel (KARL 1983: 114). Even more to the point, he is the "Kurtz" of the Marlon Brando character in Francis Ford Coppola's cinematic adaptation of Conrad's novella and allegory of the war, *Apocalypse Now*—a man tortured by dreams and hallucinations of past degradations, this mission being another, final descent into darkness.

Frederick Karl has identified Stone's title as referring to groups of Native American braves, "dog soldiers," who were marginalized within their tribes for being homosexual or

otherwise socially deviant, but who were given the chance to redeem themselves in war, as they were willing to take risks and sacrifice their lives. Already considered dead by their tribal societies, they might, for example, become the leaders of a suicidal attack (KARL 1983: 115). The white “dog-soldiers” of Stone’s novel, Converse, Marge, and Hicks, each deal with their real fears, paranoia, and outcast status in their own way. Converse is afraid all of the time, disturbed by memories of the violence of a fragmentation bombing of Cambodian soldiers he witnessed as a reporter and by the more immediate fear of the corrupt narcotic agents. Marge fears for her daughter, Janie, who is also shuffled from place to place, but she deals with her own bad thoughts through the blissful numbness of pills and heroin. Hicks takes the heat from the narcotic agents onto himself, achieving his own sought-for transcendence, which, however, turns out to be futile, because he does not escape and there is no one to witness his annihilation. Converse survives, even if undeservedly. Only by abandoning the heroin can he save himself.

In the end, however, there are no neat moral adjustments: Converse and Marge will certainly not become model middle-class citizens. Hicks is dead. The evil narcotic agents get the heroin after all, which they will certainly resell, enriching themselves while corrupting the junkies who buy it. If vice is not punished, the moral point that the novel makes seems clear enough: if America has corrupted South Vietnam (politically, economically, socially, and morally), it has in turn been corrupted by the experience.

iv.

In conclusion, these three allegorical novels represent the Vietnam War obliquely and indirectly, as has been argued, because such a strategy seemed more appropriate for a war in which neither the war aims nor the declared enemy was tangible, and the war itself seems

only indirectly related to everyday life at home. One might say that the (perceived) exotic nature of Vietnamese culture calls out for representations that outdo even its homemade exoticism. To achieve such a representation, the allegorical approach entails the creation of a parallel world.

In Rubin's work, the lack of comprehension of a native culture and resilience of native populations to the machinations of foreign invaders are emphasized through semiotic confusion. Haldeman, for his part, creates a fully realized world of the future engaged in an "intergalactic combat instigated by generals and politicians, waged for profits, and conducted as a devastating fiasco from beginning to end" (FRANKLIN, quoted in: Jason 2000: 59), a description that needs only to substitute "global" for "intergalactic" to see its relevance for the Vietnam War. In both cases, the fantasy and the historical worlds are linked by events, hopes, motives, and failures. Both the endless reports of a still-to-be-achieved victory and the trauma of veterans who find little in their return home to societies that have effectively rejected them are evoked in this allegory.

Finally, Stone's allegorical novel alludes to classic narratives of American literature: of the chase. The point seems to be to make an historical critique of the society that sought global transcendence in a civil war in far-off Southeast Asia. Similarly to Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* novel of 1967 (another allegory, whose action takes place in the frontier territory of Alaska, that alludes to classic narratives of the chase/hunt), Stone shows how the United States, the home-front, is a literal and metaphorical battleground that is carrying on the war, is a nation whose historically constructed institutions and attitudes have made the war possible.

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