

ALLEGORICAL NARRATIVES OF THE VIETNAM WAR

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- **ABSTRACT:** In this article, the allegorical narrative is examined as a type of extended metaphor in which one simultaneous or parallel narrative structure is maintained together with another, one less “visible” or literal than the other. Three American novels of the period of the Vietnam War are analyzed as examples of allegorical narratives: Asa Baber’s *The Land of a Million Elephants* (1971); Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* (1967), and Norman Mailer’s *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967). The first, in spite of its apparent allegory, is shown to be more of a generalized fantasy, in the mode of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, on western imperialism in Southeast Asia, while the second and third novels are more successful in constructing more specifically historical and critical allegorical narratives.
- **KEYWORDS:** Allegorical narratives. Vietnam War literature. War fiction.

What the critical definitions or formulations of allegory have in common seems to be some kind of parallel structure with two distinct, or at least distinguishable, levels of meaning, one “visible” or literal, and 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, p.6), or a textual narrative with “[...] at least two distinct meanings, one of which is partially concealed by the visible or literal meaning” (CHILDERS; HENTZI, 1995, p.8), for it is, “[...] in its most general formulation a way of giving form to something which cannot be directly narrativized” (LENTRICCHIA; McLAUGHLIN, 1995, p.369), or a way to “[...] signify a second, correlated order of persons, things, concepts, or events.” (ABRAMS, 1971, p.4). Frye (1971) 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.

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

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in the course of one's existence. The literal journey thus gains a 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 widely read prose allegory in English literature, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (Part I), 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 "progression".

Although the second level of meaning may be disguised or "concealed", in Childers and Hentzi's formulation (1995), 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 that the allegory, like its related shorter forms of fable, exemplum, parable, and beast fable – all of which are traditional DIDACTIC forms of narrative – the purpose 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, in any case, be denied that the narrative literature of allegory has many distinguished examples: Plato, Apuleius, Dante, Tasso, Spenser, Dryden, Swift, Kafka, Orwell, or to extend the list to contemporary American literature: the somewhat ingeniously overextended Sixties' allegory of the contemporary world as a university campus, John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*, or *The New Revised Syllabus* (1966).

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 and other forms of poetic 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 fascism. The war in Vietnam was morally and politically suspect (American imperialism masked as anti-Communist crusade), even militarily ambiguous (the lack of visible front lines and easily identifiable enemy) that a few authors have attempted to represent it indirectly and obliquely – through allegory. The closest analogy to the cultural impact of the Vietnam

War is perhaps that of the First World War, which was similarly ambiguous in its political and moral dimensions, absence of justifiable cause and subsequent arousal of significant domestic protest, etc. The First World War also tended to inspire more poetical forms of literary representation than its sequel, in which journalistic accounts often overshadowed fictional narratives.

One seemingly obvious allegorical example for the Vietnam War would be Asa Baber's *The Land of a Million Elephants* (1971), a novel about a mythical land called Chanda, in which the local people live in their traditional ways, with a life-affirming religion and easy-going, non-materialistic way of life until military and diplomatic representatives of the Great Powers come to impose THEIR values upon them – even at the threat of destruction for non-compliance. Yet, the novel cannot be strictly regarded as an allegory of the Vietnam War, since the fantastic elements in themselves do not constitute allegory, and the parallel narrative that the literary definitions indicate as an essential element of the form cannot be easily established. Although the city "sits in a saucer of hills reminiscent of Dien Bien Phu" (BABER, 1971, p.18), the country is vaguely Southeast Asian. It could be Thailand or Laos, and if it is meant to be South Vietnam, the people of Chanda themselves seem to be more like the *montagnards* of the hills than the Annamese of the Vietnam coast. The powers interested in controlling Chanda are not only the capitalist powers that fought colonialist or interventionist wars with Vietnam and divided the country into two (France, Great Britain, the United States) but socialist (the Soviet Union), all of whom both compete and cooperate in the name of imperial domination (the author himself served with the Marines in Southeast Asia in 1961, that is, the period preceding direct US military intervention). Although there are episodes in the narrative that suggest the war-to-come (jungle-training exercises in US military camps, elaborate plans for the defense of Chanda, and spying and diplomatic maneuvering among the Great Powers in their imperial ambitions), there is no indication of why the Western Powers are behaving in this way, and it soon becomes clear that this short novel is allegorical only in a broad sense of a comic, satirical, and perhaps cautionary tale of East versus West, or, more precisely: a stereotyped peaceful and backward East versus a progressive and aggressive West. The two opposing sides are thus broadly caricatured.

In accordance with this simplified scheme, the characters are divided into life-affirming Good Guys (the prophet Buon Kong, the king's mistress Wampoom, the black American drifter Charlie Dog, the beautiful but mute girl Dawn) and life-denying Bad Guys (mostly military officers like General Grider, Colonel Kelly, Lieutenant Goodfellow, the missionary Roger Blake, the Dutch Protestant commercial traveler von Westoff, and diplomats like the Russian Nadolsky), with a few in-between types, with minor flaws or human differences, who, nevertheless, take no part in the greater evil (the little King who is loath to oppose the military men,

the randy Greek waiter Andreas, the opium-smoking Danny Campo, the powerless Indian Major Poon, the maniac pilot Mennan, the betel-chewing Chandese Captain Kong Lo, the homosexual diplomat couple Sumner-Clark and Coakley, and even the diplomatic clerk Glover, a relatively innocent victim who accidentally trips a booby-trap while on a picnic in the bush).

Rather than allegory of the classic Bunyan-type, we seem to be more in the world of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., whose fantastic, satirical fiction of the Sixties clearly inspired Baber. The short, episodic passages of varied length divided by breaks in the text rather than chapters; the leisurely pace of the narrative, which may be interrupted by descriptions or digressions of various types; the whimsical narrative tone that does not disguise its openly fictional status; the indiscriminate mixture of the topical and the fantastic; even the pseudo-wisdom of the spiritual leader's sayings and the nature of the characters, who remain types despite the eccentricities suggested above, are all features of Vonnegut's novels like *Cat's Cradle* (1963) or *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Like Vonnegut, Baber is given to broad strokes of caricature for his comic satire of the contemporary world. Here is General Grider, for example, pondering the attributes of the local people: "[...] given a little American leadership these people could think for themselves." (BABER, 1971, p.109). While this is a stereotype of the American military staff-officer or politician too confident of his own culture's superiority, it is probably not very far from the actual mentality of General William C. Westmoreland, Commanding Officer of the American military forces in Vietnam, who pursued his (equally) unsuccessful policies of prosecuting the war in South Vietnam without bothering to consider the South Vietnamese.

The *Land of a Million Elephants* begins in this way: "Try this: a jungle dawn, see? The night sky dying and monkeys calling." (BABER, 1971, p.7). This opening invitation to join in an admittedly imaginative, clichéd scene (as opposed to the beginnings of the war narratives of realism, which usually say something like: "this is the way it was") is fairly maintained throughout the course of the novel, which offers a description of the people, their "exotic" customs, their "happy and sad" history, the story of the elephant-tamer Buon Kong, who like Moses comes out of nowhere to give the local people pithy lessons in "harmony", who is scorned by the court but eventually proves to be the savior of the "Crew", as the people of Chanda come to be known. Under his leadership, the Crew flees to the magical Plain of Elephants when the city comes under attack from the combined military forces of the West. These evil powers, unable to prevent the exodus and finding themselves in "control" of a city without any people, decide to persuade these people of their error by dropping a tactical nuclear bomb on the Plain of Elephants, for repeated, unsuccessful conventional attacks with tanks and bombs have proven to be ineffectual against the combined forces of peace, love, and harmony. Even the

nuclear device does not explode but is magically metamorphized into thousands of tiny (psychedelic?) mushrooms. The victory is of Life over Death, the ultimate Sixties' fantasy of Hippydom overcoming the Pentagon (at the anti-war March on Washington in October, 1967, chanting youths attempted to "elevate" the Pentagon): the Vietnam War as comic myth, complete with a "happy ending".

Two other novels have more successfully used the allegorical method – with the "visible" classic narratives of a chase, on one hand, and a hunt, on the other – to make a contemporary and critical (as opposed to Baber's ahistorical and mythical) comment on the war through historical critiques of the society that made it possible. In both cases, the war itself is present, although obliquely, indirectly, allegorically. In Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* (1975), for example, 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. Yet, 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 people moving in semi-secret, official and unofficial channels, jockeying for financial gain, willing to maim or kill without the slightest qualm, even with a certain sadistic joy, were elements as present in the society of California of the late 1960s (when the action of the novel takes place) as they were in the war in Vietnam. The counter-cultural Sixties, the era of "hippies" and civil rights often associated with the decade was dead by the late Sixties; this was a time of "bad shit" (to use a common expression of the period), a time of random street violence, political assassinations, race riots, bad drug trips.

In Stone's novel, accordingly, the drug culture of the utopian psychedelic Sixties has been transformed. "Hard" drugs like amphetamines, cocaine, and heroin prevail over the hallucinogens – drugs, that is, which are used for achieving numbness and paranoia rather than spiritual exploration or exaltation. Absconded 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, as 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 once utopian 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 is a domestic, parallel equivalent of what is going on over in "Nam".

In its wide geographical scope, sombre 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.” (SALDÍVER, 1991, p.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. If the early Stone novel *Hall of Mirrors* (1968), for example, takes place in the American south and is critical of right-wing Americanism, the later *A Flag For Sunrise* (1981) has its setting in the Caribbean and Latin America, where the author “returned to Vietnam by way of Tecan” (KARL, 1983, p.116), with characters from the military and CIA meddling in hemispheric affairs.

While the allegorical parallel of late Sixties California and the war in Vietnam is established in *Dog Soldiers* in theme and mood, in other senses as well, both material and symbolic, the Vietnam War has also been brought home — in the form of three kilos of unadulterated heroin. Brought by Hicks into the US, this “piece” of Vietnam is able to work its magic and poison in 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 was finally contemplating doing, “the Vietnam War would now never leave the United States” for “the soldiers would bring it back with them like an addiction” (FITZGERALD, 1970, p.423-424). One might say rather that they brought it back *as* an addiction, for Vietnam was the first war fought with many of the soldiers strung out on heroin, as opposed to being drunk on alcohol like the soldiers of World War II and the Korean War. By 1971, 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 drug came from Laos, was 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 in the streets and around US military bases by children (FITZGERALD, 1970, p.423). Its purity was so far superior to anything obtainable on the streets of American cities that many 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 a large quantity of pure Asian heroin, a number of people will become determined to seek it out and obtain possession by whatever means available. 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” (as one character says), 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 says, 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 intensifying its effects. Symbolically, the heroin is both the promise of liberation or undefinable 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 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” with the narrative structured around who controls the drug and how long he can keep it. But it is a “thriller” but with an ironic twist, since Ray Hicks, in the role of the tough, street-smart detective of classic thrillers, is technically the criminal. As in the thriller, too, each character has his or 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 till 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 Marine, hard-boiled private-eye, and martial arts warrior of countless novels and films, Hicks is, surprisingly, not sentimentalized, as 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 pathetic writer Gerald in his fashionable home in the Hollywood hills, because Gerald wants to undergo the thrill of a heroin experience as something he can later write about. Hicks kills Gerald 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, therefore, the heroin is a way of affirming his waning identity and receding manhood, perhaps even his very humanity since he seems on his way to becoming completely numb, scarcely human, but it quickly becomes clear to him 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” or perhaps only their assistants, themselves corrupt, 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. Paranoia 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, anti-Communism being the official pro-ideology of the Vietnam War.

Converse’s wife Marge, who becomes Hicks’s lover-companion in the course of the flight-pursuit action, is also not quite clear about what has happened. Having become involved in the deal through her husband, she thinks it is possible just to give the heroin back and so return, as it were, to a prior state of innocence. She and Converse, in their naiveté and desire to make a quick and easy dollar, have tapped into structures of power and malice that they had no idea existed, so that when everybody else keeps abusing them as losers, fools, assholes, etc., 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 pharmacopia of California life, then to the pure heroin that Hicks lets her try, whose physical effects of well-being are firmly attested to by several characters. There is no hypocrisy here about how heavy drugs are “bad” for you; although manifestly bad for health, they are used, as here, to ease pain and anxiety and to achieve an unearthly euphoria.

In a sense, therefore, all of the characters, not just Marge, are “users” (KARL 1983, p.114). The financial transaction for Converse, who is nearly unconscious, gives his life a certain excitement, although rather more than he bargained for. For Hicks, the philosophical nihilist (“form is not different from nothingness” is his formula, which in the end he achieves), running the heroin is a way of giving his life a structure. Beyond the allegorical parallels of the period, Stone also contrives a number of parallels with Joseph Conrad’s classic novella *Heart of Darkness* (1989) to suggest more timeless themes. The novel’s epigraph, quoted from Conrad, cites violence, greed, desire, and especially “pitiless folly”, which are all important elements in this novel as well. Hicks, who has seen combat in Vietnam, has been called the Kurtz of this novel (KARL, 1983, p.114) – and perhaps the “Kurtz” of the Marlon Brando character in Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 Vietnam film *Apocalypse Now*, as well – a man tortured by dreams and hallucinations of past degradations, this mission being being another, final descent into darkness. Heroin may be seen in this literary context as an analogue to the ivory of Conrad’s story, a substance that affects all the characters inspiring greed and violence and disrupting the loyalties between husband and wife, friends, and human solidarity in general. In Stone’s

harrowing vision, human virtue cannot compete with a powerful commodity like three kilos of pure “scag”.

Karl (1983, p.114) 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, since they were willing to take risks and sacrifice their lives. Already considered dead by their tribal societies, they might, for example, be the leaders of a suicidal attack. 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 concrete 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 narcs onto himself, achieving his own sought-for transcendence, which, however, turns out to be futile, since he does not escape and there is no one to witness his annihilation. Converse survives, even if undeservedly; by abandoning the heroin, he saves 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 narcs get the heroin after all, which they will resell, enriching themselves while poisoning and corrupting the junkies who buy it. If vice is not punished, the moral point that the novel makes is clear enough: if America has corrupted South Vietnam (politically, economically, socially, morally), it has in turn been corrupted by the experience.

Norman Mailer’s novel *Why Are in Vietnam?* (1967), written and published during the early period of American intervention in Vietnam, when political and military leaders were certain in their arrogance of imminent victory, is another successful allegory of the war, which, like Stone’s work, freely employs other narrative devices to make a moral point. There are extended allusions to earlier American fictions of male adventure and conquest, in the form of ironic parallels with these works, and radical experiments in narration, especially multiple narrative voices, that Mailer would employ in later works and leave as a legacy to contemporary American fiction.

Why Are We in Vietnam? is about male power in both fantasy and reality, a favorite theme of the author’s and, the reader hardly needs reminding, of the classic fiction of the American canon. Here, Mailer is once again working on the double dimension of the psychic and the political, in an attempt, it has been said, to discover the point where the human and non-human meet. The non-human here is not the demonic or occult powers of the unconscious, as in some other novels by the author, but the mysterious powers of the natural world (although the discussion

here will concentrate mainly on the human agencies). It is noteworthy that while in Mailer's immediately previous novel (*An American Dream*, 1972), in which occult powers are evoked, political reality (beyond Mailer's usual paranoid vision) is evaded, but by the mid-Sixties, the time of the writing of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, the Vietnam War had escalated to a point where its social and political implications had to be faced. Thematically, the rugged individualism of the "American Adam", as represented in *An American Dream*, was now especially inappropriate: the macho proclivities of that novel were the protagonist's tools of survival – tools that were perceived as the gist of the problem in the collective context of the Vietnam War.

Writing at the height of the engagement of US military forces in Vietnam and the growing civil resistance to that engagement, Mailer does not offer yet another polemical treatise on the current political situation, as the question in his novel's title might suggest (despite the title, the word "Vietnam" is not even mentioned until the last page). Nor, in the mode of the author's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), about the Second World War, does he offer the reader a combined combat novel and analysis of questions of power in the civilian world through an analysis of the military. Mailer's strategy in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is to attack the war by attacking the institutional powers in American society that he thought made it possible. As Karl observes (1983, p. 12), the political discussions in the *The Naked and the Dead* and the author's novels of the Fifties here give way to images, metaphors, symbols of a "politicized" America. The treatment is not only "head on", explicit, satirical – the common properties of Mailer's work both fictional and polemical – but also, in a new way for him, indirect, metaphorical, allegorical.

As a work of narrative fiction, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* succeeds in being both traditional and innovative. On one hand, there is the narrative, an adventure tale, in which the author alludes to the works of such classic American writers as Mark Twain, James Fenimore Cooper, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, but, at the same time, the text functions as a contemporary parody of that kind of narrative. In the voice(s) of its scurrilous narrator, "D.J." it is also a familiar kind of American non-fictional text: the anti-corporate polemic. These devices serve the political allegory.

Radical narrative strategies, which include multiple voices and constantly shifting points-of-view (with, admittedly, the always imminent threat of the prose turning into verbal "overkill"), as well as the status of D.J. (i.e. "Disc Jockey to the World") as both narrator and protagonist, problematize the text as a straightforward narrative. Such problematization is more appropriate than an updated classic tale to a more complex vision of contemporary American reality. The reader can easily recognize in D.J.'s narrative voice the following discourses: macho Texas boastfulness, ghetto slang the "tall tale" of American folklore, the exaggerations of American power, the jargons of psychoanalysis, advertising, big business and the

military. In his biographical essay on the author, Bufithis (1978, p.285) finds even more specific "languages":

In rapid-fire shifts, [D.J.] speaks the language of an urban black, a pedantic psychiatrist, a corporate bureaucrat, a Southern redneck, a revivalist preacher, an academic philosopher, a physicist, a McLuhanite media critic [...] D.J. is the recording secretary of repressed compulsions—dreams of power, ecstatic sexual hopes, hatreds and bigotries.

Such a list suggests a polemical text, but instead of giving a drawn-out answer to the question in the title, the narrative ignores it completely to proceed with the story of a group of Texans in Alaska, North America's last frontier: a father (Rusty), who is the head of a corporation in Dallas, his son (D.J.), his son's friend (Tex), and two of his managers (referred to by D.J. as "middle-grade assholes"), on a hunting trip in the mountains. The trip is being paid for by Rusty, who hopes to bag a Grizzly Bear, the largest and most dangerous of North American game. Rusty is initially balked in this enterprise by the local guide, Big Luke Felinka, who, following his professional hunter's code of ethics, insists that the season is not propitious for hunting these particular animals.

Rusty, however, is obsessed with the bear, believing that he must kill one in order to maintain his status back in Dallas as Great White Hunter. Mailer presents this insistence on a large-animal-brought-down-with-a-good-shot as a kind of bogus Hemingway project: in a Hemingway hunting story, the challenge is intense, personal, and heroically understated – never the trivial case of having to impress someone. Nor is Rusty concerned with hunting "ethically" according to one's upbringing as young male guided by men like Big Luke into the culturally acceptable behavior of men in the woods. Cooper's "Deerslayer" may be invoked here: an asute hunter and a crack shot, Deerslayer learns his woodsman's lore and love of the forest from the two Mohican Indians who are his companions. Rusty, urban capitlist, is willing to forego the traditions and the lore: all he wants is a trophy.

In the allegory, Rusty may be said to personify Corporate America, its inauthenticity and its evils. He is a mean-spirited, competitive head of a plastics corporation in Dallas – "plastic" being Mailer's key metaphor (as it was, popularly, in the counter-cultural Sixties) for the sterile pragmatism and spiritual inauthenticity of American society. D.J. characterizes his father's corporation as "the Great Plastic Asshole" a microcosm of the United States itself: "America as shit-producer [...] a gigantic asshole out of which energy and waste pour, Texans as the biggest assholes of them all." (KARL, 1983, p.12). Accustomed to throwing his weight around, Rusty is, like the American corporation, also adept at public relations. He is more

dangerous because he can be charming: “a high-grade asshole” who “usually appears the contrary” (MAILER, 1967, p.38).

Despite his personable front, Rusty’s eyes fill his son with dread

[...] because they remind him of his favorite theory, which is that America is run by a mysterious hidden mastermind, a secret creature who’s got a plastic asshole installed in his brain whereby he can shit out all his corporate management of thoughts. (MAILER, 1967, p.37).

This paranoid and scatological vision of waste and oppression directly recalls a similar vision of American inauthenticity, in William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1966). In its satirical aspect, one might go back further, to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. In both Burroughs and Swift, as well as in Mailer, “shit” becomes literal and metaphorical.

The emphasis on the sense of smell in Mailer’s novel is relevant here, not only as the means of registering disgust (as in Swift) but as the natural sense of hunter and prey. At the same time, smell is also allied to the sense of vision. D.J. explicitly claims for himself an excremental vision to validate himself as ambiguous narrator (“Dr. Jeckyll”, in his own formulation). He claims as his main virtue the ability to be able to “see through” shit: “There’s not a colon in captivity which manufactures a home product that is transparency proof to Dr. Jeckyll’s X-ray insight. He sees right into the claypots below the duodenum of his father.” (MAILER, 1967, p.50). He later claims that this ambiguous gift of excremental vision can be extended to his scatological panorama of American history:

[...] all the woe and shit and parsimony and genuine greed of all those fucking English, Irish, Scotch and European weeds, transplanted to North America [...] all gutted, shit on, used and blasted, man, because a weed thrives on a cesspool, piss is its nectar, shit all ambrosia [...] (MAILER 1967, p.221).

On the level of political allegory, Rusty’s quest is motivated by the need to assert his power and domination at the expense of whatever or whoever threatens to hinder it. He therefore deliberately disregards Luke’s misgivings and warnings and steals away from the hunting-party with his son, where on their own they stalk and dangerously wound a large Grizzly bear. D.J. carefully moves in closer to observe (in Hemingway fashion) the dignity of the dying creature’s last moments, but Rusty betrays him by giving the bear the *coup de grâce* from a safe distance. To D.J.’s further immense but repressed disgust, Rusty claims the kill as his own, when D.J. knows that it was his own shot that was decisive in felling the beast. Rusty has disregarded the rules of the hunter’s lore as well as the official rules of the outing, as set down in Luke’s safari company’s contract, and he has also cheated his own son, whom he is presumably instructing in the ways of the masculine world.

A literary parallel with William Faulkner’s canonical hunting story, “The Bear” is relevant at this point, and not only as part of Mailer’s self-proclaimed project of pitting himself against the modern masters. Thematically, Mailer’s story effectively shows how Faulkner’s old-fashioned values have been thoroughly corrupted. In Faulkner’s story, it will be recalled, the innocent Ike McCaslin learns the ways of the woods near his southern home and the irreplaceable value of the natural world in the face of urban and technological encroachment. At the end of the (the first version of the) story, Ike refuses to shoot the old bear, which has become for him symbolic of the untamed wilderness. The hip D.J., by contrast, kills his bear but is robbed of it by his mentor, and he eventually sickens of the whole business of the hunt, which in Faulkner takes on an aura of a sacred ritual. For D.J., the hunt itself becomes an encroachment on the natural world. He becomes a wise observer, not of the lore of the woods but of the ways of men. It is to the point that Faulkner’s Ike McCaslin is taught to hunt and track by Sam Fathers, his Negro-Indian spiritual father, and is confirmed in the lesson by his real father, a landed aristocrat who quotes Keats and talks of courage, honor, duty, and humility, pressing home the practical lesson of the bear in abstract terms.

By contrast, D.J.’s father, Rusty, lacks the cultural sophistication, the aristocratic background, and the moral tradition for such a lesson. He is merely a corporate capitalist bully who condescends to his yes-men and speaks mostly in obscenities. He despises the professional competence and integrity of Big Luke, and instead of the hoary virtues imparted to Ike by his father, Rusty teaches his son, on two occasions, only that winning is all that matters: first, in the episode of illegitimately taking credit for his son’s kill; second, in the flash-back episode of a one-on-one, father-son football game in Dallas, in which Rusty viciously bites his son to avoid losing. If this is indeed meant to be a lesson, competitiveness and dirty tricks will, no doubt, be of more use in corporation-land than courage, honor, duty, and humility.

Other contrasts between the two fictions are to the point. T.J.’s wilderness cannot be found near his home, since Texas is a sterile land of wealth based on oil, but must be transported to Alaska, the last American frontier but only for rich tourists: Rusty’s group of absurdly over-gunned executives from Dallas, a city that itself suggests reactionary politics and political assassination (the detailed description of the men’s weapons is a fine parody of Hemingway). It is noteworthy that one of these “middle-grade assholes” spent some time in the ballistics department of the FBI, along with police chiefs from US ghettos and Third World countries, a resource for the American firepower applied in the Sixties both at home and abroad. These men are out of their natural urban environment, and unlike Faulkner’s Mississippians, who hunt the legendary Old Ben, they are concerned merely with obtaining an animal trophy they can display at home and boast about at dinner parties.

For this physically and spiritually flabby group, D.J. realizes, Big Luke feels as if he has to disregard his own hunter's code and escort the men from site to site in a helicopter (which D.J. dubs the "Cop Turd"), an updated version of Leo Marx's "Machine in the Garden" and, significantly, the main American combat vehicle of the Vietnam war. This technological encroachment is made more ironic when the Cop Turd at one point saves Rusty from an attack by a furious Grizzly (as in Vietnam, such vehicles were designed to drop men into a combat zone and extract them efficiently). Hunting in Mailer's novel has nothing at all in common with the Faulknerian ritual designed to expand man's consciousness of the importance of the natural world against the arrival of a destructive civilization, but a banalization and commodification of the ritual that itself is a part of that civilization.

Angry at his father's duplicity, D.J. and Tex leave their adult companions behind to climb into the icy mountains of the Brooks Range, a scene reminiscent of other classic American fictional heroes (Natty Bumppo, Huck Finn, Jake Barnes) on their quest for the imagined purity of the natural world and the concomitant rejection of the moral pollution of human society. Like Faulkner's Ike, D.J. leaves behind his rifle to confront the wilderness in all its peril, and his thoughts seem to take on the rhythms of Faulkner's prose even while they lose the "sacred" character of Ike's illuminations. Lying under the Arctic night, for example, the two boys experience an intense desire to bugger one another. The feeling is an expression of neither love nor lust but the desire to rob the other of his imagined power: "[...] there was a chance to get in and steal the iron from Texas's ass and put it in his own [...]" (MAILER, 1967, p.219). It is significant that only here is Tex called "Texas". As the boys are magnetized by, and in Sixties' fashion "tuned into", the ion-rich layers of the Arctic Circle, freed from their aggressive fathers (Tex's dad is an undertaker, another agent of death), the tenseness between them passes but not the meaning of the experience:

[...] now it was there, murder between them under all friendship, for God was a beast, not a man, and God said, "Go out and kill—fulfill my will, go and kill", and they hung there each of them on the knife of the divide in all conflict of lust to own the other yet in fear of being killed by the other and as the hour went by and the lights shifted, something in the radiance of the north went into them, and owned their fear, some communion of telepathic and new powers, and they were twins, never to be near as lovers again, but killer brothers, owned by something, prince of darkness, lord of light, they did not know, they had been touched forever by the North and each bit a drop of blood from his own finger and touched them across and met, blood to blood, while the lights pulsated and glow of Arctic night was on the snow, and the deep beast whispering Fulfill my will, go forth and kill, and they left an hour later in the dark to go back to camp [...] (MAILER, 1967, p.219-220).

In camp, they find the older men "[...] with the same specific mix of mixed old shit which they had heard before in the telepathic vaults of their new Brooks Range electrified mind [...]" (MAILER, 1967, p.220), a metaphor that seems to promise a Sixties' stoned, psychedelic awareness of the shit-and-plastic of their elders' corrupt world. And yet the two boys do not vanish, like Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym, into the northern whiteness, but return with the men to Dallas, where the reader learns, on the very last page of the novel, that D.J. is telling the whole story at one of those reviled dinner parties, given for him and Tex on the eve of their induction into the army and expected shipping out to Vietnam. The hoped for counter-cultural collective resistance and the promise of self-renewal are both thereby exploded.

The injunction of the voice in the mountains to "go forth and kill" an ironic echo of Biblical imperative to go forth and multiply, has been interpreted as Mailer's belief in an evil nature, which perceives the two boys as merely responding to the commandment of their "blood", that man will make war because that is his nature: "The origin of man's barbarity is in nature itself. Evil was in nature before it was in man." (BUFITHIS, 1978, p.285). It is unclear whether this curiously Manichean belief is supposed to belong to the critic or the author, probably the former, since he cites Burroughs as Mailer's inspiration for an original (but American) evil. Granted his argument that Mailer in this novel is exploding the pastoral, Edenic myth, it does not necessarily follow that Mailer thinks nature, even human nature, is evil. A reading more in tune with the novel's political themes suggests that the evil is in man, not nature, which, ignorant of human ethical categories and "indifferent" to human fate, can be violent and peaceful by turn, as shown by both the playful and violent activities of the bears that the boys observe in the mountains. Nature depends on killing for the continuation of life, but the boys have translated a natural process into a cultural project of sterile death (i.e. for trophies, not food) handed down to them by their fathers and their culture. In Vietnam, they will indeed be "killer brothers".

One answer to the question of the novel's title, therefore, is that Vietnam is a result of what our "fathers" i.e. men of the nation's historical past and its mythical inscription into the family and communal life of the individual, have made in the present. The appropriation, exploitation, indiscriminate destruction and killing with up-to-date technology are certainly one thing that these Fathers have done both at home and abroad, with the rhetorical aid of public lies and fraudulent patriotism – all elements in this hunting tale that duplicates allegorically what the US was doing in Vietnam.

"We are in Vietnam because we are what we corporately are" (POIRIER, 1972, p. 129), although this may refer to a collective identity beyond business corporations. D. J., for example, becomes the locus for a typically American mixture of disparate voices that will respond to the commandment to go forth and

kill. Poirier, however, thinks that these shifting narrative voices show that there is no source of authority in Mailer's novels, since Mailer's aim is to "[...] refer us to determinates in American life that are mysterious and unlocatable, and the more powerful for being so" (POIRIER, 1972, p.131), a description is more appropriate to later novels about the political culture of the US, like those of Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo, since the powerful beings and institutions of Mailer's Sixties were in fact identifiable, even though there is an attempt to occlude the source. D.J.'s polyphonic narrative is rather expressive of the divisions and contradictions within American society, a re-creation, as it were, of the duplicities and tensions that help explain why the nation finds itself in Vietnam – a divisive "pluralism" rather than one that ends in the false ideological unity of a patriotic front. The command to "go forth and kill" in Vietnam was not, after all, emitted by nature but by the leaders of the US government.

In an apparent attempt to make allegorical parallels clearer, Karl (1983) suggests that Rusty be identified as the war's leaders, i.e. both President Johnson at home, disdainful of the malcontents protesting his war, and Commanding General Westmoreland in Vietnam, interested only in a body count (a metaphorical equivalent of Rusty's animal trophies). D.J.'s slippery identity, however, makes it more difficult to extend this allegorical reading to his complex character. The disgust he displays toward his authoritarian father and his youthful desire for more authentic experience suggest an identification with the youth of the counter-culture, who both protested the war and adopted alternative life-styles, while D.J.'s his laying down of arms and retreat into the mountains suggest yet another response of the young men of draft age during the period: self-exile in Canada. On the other hand, since D.J.'s protest remains mute – he says nothing when his father cheats him, even though he is bursting with the injustice of it – rather suggests a correspondence with the "silent majority" people who did not object to the war for being fearful of parental, community, and governmental disapproval and punishment.

D.J. may also be identified with the active element of Nixon's "silent majority" the young soldiers who were inducted into the war and did the actual fighting, since at the end of the novel this is what D.J. becomes. His father is after all a formidable adversary, and both D.J. and Tex are very much sons of their fathers, members of an expansionist (historically, for example, in relation to Mexico), macho, Texas culture, which in its "patriotic" aspect can be seen as synechdochic for all the leaders that got the country into the Vietnam war and the national will, spurred on by another Texan, President Johnson, who guaranteed its continuation. Given the influence of this regional-national culture and their own youth (the two boys are only sixteen), D.J. and Tex would be likely to perceive the war, any war, simply as an adventure, somewhat like hunting big game in Alaska, with combat the ultimate test of their newly acquired manhood. Such is the impulse that sends many a young

man with his head filled with tales of heroism off to foreign wars. D.J.'s final ecstatic exclamation, "Vietnam, hot damn!", is a testament to such misguided enthusiasm, but in this novel, unlike war novels of a realistic mode, there is no epilogue to record his disillusionment.

Why Are We in Vietnam?, rich in implication, has patriarchy triumph over filial resistance and corporate power (Dallas) over nature (Alaska): an allegory of the American postwar era, which included and was typified by the imperialist adventure in Vietnam. Resistance in this novel is only temporarily effective, with D.J.'s cunning as his main resource, suggesting the Vietcong guerrilla cunning against the US military. And yet, the power of ideology, which seems to be Mailer's main target in this novel, an ideology handed down from the mythicization of the national past and reconstituted with every succeeding generation, is the patriarchal, regional, national ethic of predatory militarism that disregards difference to celebrate triumphs at home and abroad. At the end of the novel, tragically, the boys do not transcend – but merely become – their fathers.

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NARRATIVAS ALEGÓRICAS DA GUERRA DO VIETNÃ

- *RESUMO: Neste artigo, a narrativa alegórica está examinada como um tipo de metáfora extensa em que uma estrutura narrativa simultânea ou paralela está mantida junta a uma outra, com aquela, menos "visível" ou literal, dando sentido ou significado simbólico a esta. Três romances norte-americanos da época da guerra em Vietnã estão analisados como exemplos de narrativas alegóricas: *The Land of a Million Elephants* (1971), de Asa Baber; *Dog Soldiers* (1967), de Robert Stone; e *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), de Norman Mailer. O primeiro se mostra mais como uma fantasia generalizada, no modo de Kurt Vonnegut Jr., sobre o imperialismo ocidental no sudeste da Ásia, enquanto o segundo e terceiro romances têm mais sucesso em construir narrativas alegóricas mais historicamente específicas e críticas.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Narrativas alegóricas. Literatura da guerra de Vietnã. Ficção de guerra.*

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