

## DOMINANT THEMES IN THE LITERATURE OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Pilar Marin.  
Universidad de Sevilla

The tragedy that was the Vietnam war is close enough in time for us to remember its most relevant incidents, but it may be convenient to review some important dates before dealing with the literature it produced. It was, as one of the men who wrote about it has pointed out, the longest war ever fought by the United States and the only one it has so far lost.

As early as 1950, President Truman sent thirty-five military advisers to the French in Indochina. By 1954, the United States was supplying eighty per cent of France's war expenditures in Vietnam. But, since President Eisenhower refused to send any American troops to Asia, the French surrendered. The first great escalade began in 1964, under President Johnson's presidency. It was he who ordered the bombing of North Vietnam in March of 1965, and the American Army in full force landed in Da Nang. The war continued until the Peace Agreement was signed in Paris in 1973 and the United States began its troop withdrawal. The Saigon government surrendered to North Vietnam on April 30, 1975.

When dealing with war literature in the United States the unsolvable question always arises as to why that country has produced such a literature in that subgenre which is as rich in quantity as well as in quality. In any rapid review of American literature it soon becomes evident how many of its masterpieces deal with war, a subject treated by so many great writers. From Stephen Crane through Dos Passos, Hemingway and Cumings, continuing on to Mailer, Vonnegut and Jones, it's a long and impressive list. One possible explanation and answer to such a question is that one of the traditional themes in American literature is that of the rite of initiation, the test the adolescent has to go through to achieve manhood. A test which literally, in the war novels, becomes the test of fire, but which of course can be other kinds of experiences such as those found to name only a few, in Mark Twain and his Huck Finn and at the core of the novels of Faulkner and William Gass. While I will not affirm that «the test» is the central theme of all American literature, it certainly is in Hemingway's short stories dealing with World War I (1). It is also one of the crucial themes in the *Thin Red Line* by James Jones and it certainly is central to the *Red Badge of Courage*. Again, as we shall presently see, it is a theme which reappears in the novel of the Vietnam war. The change which takes place in the youth passing (or failing) the test is, together with the test, at the core of many of these novels. That is what makes them essentially psychological works of fiction.

Most American war novels are written by men who directly participated in the struggle. They were its eye-witnesses in different capacities. From World War I through the Second World War and the Korean Conflict, ambulance drivers, soldiers and officers have left us an account of their war experiences. The *Red Badge of Courage* is of course the great and astonishing exception. But the books dealing with the Vietnam War follow the general pattern and they were written either by combat veterans or by eye-witnesses like the war correspondents. That is why we find in these works, next to a vivid realism which, generally speaking, only those who have experienced the situation can provide, a sort of catharsis suffered by the authors. It is as if by putting pen to paper they were trying to rid themselves of the ghosts of a terrible experience and/or to heal a deep trauma. How each writer deals with his mass of experience depends on his skill. A truly great writer is able to transcend the merely historical and informative level of the combat experience, the death of a friend, his own being wounded or the killing of an enemy, making of the war a metaphor of life in itself in which everything happens at an accelerated rhythm, portraying the army as a symbol of an oppressive establishment bent on crushing the individual or of life in its most demoniacal and insane aspects. Or, and this is the case in many war novels and certainly in those dealing with Korea and Vietnam, the combat experience is portrayed as an episode that strengthens the ties binding the men who go through it together. The men who have experienced combat, perhaps the traumatic event of being wounded or losing a close friend, are afterwards always different from «the others» and they feel, at least while the war lasts, close to each other. They have passed the rite of initiation. In the words of Henry Fleming: «He had dwelt in a land of strange, squalling upheavals and he had come forth» (2).

Books and short stories on the Vietnam War began to appear in 1964 and the flow of them hasn't stopped yet. Although no really major work dealing with this war has yet been written, the great avalanche of prose on this subject started in 1968.

The Vietnam War was in many senses a great unknown from the point of view of the American public as well as for the international community. Obscured in its every day events and reality by the great political and ideological upheavals it produced in American society, the movements in favor and especially those against the war achieved more «visibility» than the conflagration itself. Reduced by official communiques and the mass media to the dreadful «body count» and the «kill ratio» and by the pacifist movements to a narration of American atrocities, the day to day life and psychological problems of the U.S. infantryman in the jungle remained, at best, in an obscure second plane. The war was fought on the other side of the world, with scant participation by the American civilian population. It would seem that an insalvable rift separated the American people from their soldiers, literally lost in the Asia jungle. The books dealing with the Vietnam War, as I have said, by participants in one capacity or another, provide some insights into the problems and motivations as well as the traumas produced in them by this military engagement which until their publication had remained largely a mystery.

In a first and perhaps necessary attempt to classify it, we might divide the literature of the Vietnam War into four great groups. Only one example from these groups will be mentioned here and I will deal only with what hopefully can be classified as novels.

Under the first major division of this prose we have straight journalism, books

of which the best by far is *Dispatches*, by Michael Herr. As war correspondent in Vietnam, Herr has captured, above all, the language of the era and place. In his work it serves as a mirror of the moods and feelings of the men involved, vignettes of the soldiers in remote jungle outposts, contrast with the chaos of Saigon during the war. There is in the author a curious longing to belong, to be accepted by the combatants. This desire on the narrator's part is all the more striking in a war in which there is certainly no romanticism and no glamour. But to the sense of belonging to a closed group (the combatants in a company isolated in the jungle), I will return later.

To the second cluster of Vietnam war prose belong those books which were written by participants in the struggle but which are really little more than diaries. They record the events of each day, sometimes, as in *The Killing Zone* by Frederick Downs, with the date heading the incidents to be related. There is very little if any introspection and psychological development in the characters and it is the war itself what lends unity to the story. We find a third group of novels in which the stories of fictitious characters take place against the real background of combat in the jungle or historical events. Such a book is *Fields of Fire* by James Webb.

To the fourth and last group belong works which although totally autobiographical, provide an insight into the psychological development of their protagonist and an analysis of the kind of experience he goes through. I should name two under this heading since I shall refer explicitly to both. They are: *If I Die in a Combat Zone...* by Tim O'Brien, and the best of all of the Vietnam novels written to date: *A Rumor of War* by Philip Caputo. Next to these lengthier works there are dozens of short stories, many of which have been collected in a volume called *Writing under Fire*. I have used the term «book» in many cases, because this is an elusive kind of literature, and it is sometimes difficult to classify it under a particular heading or place it as belonging to a definite genre.

Like so many other Vietnam War works, *The Killing Zone*, published in 1978, was written by a university man. It tells of his experiences during his Vietnam tour. Downs served as an army lieutenant from September 1967 to January of 1968. Toward this latter date, he was wounded, lost an arm and was discharged. In the fall of 1968, the author returned to the University of Colorado. The reason for his writing about the Vietnam War is expressed in the preface to his book. Downs tells how one day, when he was crossing the Denver campus, a young man came up to him and pointing at the hook which had taken the place of his lost arm, said:

—Get that in Vietnam?

—Yeah, up near Tan Ky in I Corps.

—Serves you right.

—As the man walked away, I stood rooted, too confused with hurt, shame and anger to react. Ten years have passed. The hurt and anger still flood over me with the memory... I think it is necessary now give another view of Vietnam, that of the day to day life of an infantryman on the ground.

I have always been asked what I thought about Vietnam, but never what it was like to fight in Vietnam (4).

The situation described by Frederick Downs appears occasionally in other Vietnam War novels, and it invariably produces in the veterans who wrote them an understandable bitterness. It underlines the separation, probably greater than during any other war, as I have said, between the American non-participants and the soldiers who fought the war. If in all war novels the soldiers underline their isolation from non-combatants and even from officers far from the line of fire, their feeling of separation was never as strong as in the Vietnam War. Through these novels we see that anything outside of Vietnam is called «the Real World» or «the world». The jungle is «beyond» that world. This separation, due partly to sheer physical distance but above all to the political atmosphere surrounding the struggle in Indochina is pathetically underscored in a short story entitled «He that Died on Wednesday» (5). It's the story of a wounded soldier who returns home and marries his girl friend. She has not only been unfaithful to him but has given money and even her own blood to help the North Vietnamese. It is when the war is individualized in the person of her husband that she feels remorse although her main worry seems to be to keep her secrets from him.

Going back to *The Killing Zone*, the book is no more than a diary giving the day to day events of the author's tour of duty, and it is the war that lends unity to the narration. The style is simple, straight reporting, and the language poor and limited. The main interest that *The Killing Zone* offers is informative, and, as is the case in so many of these novels, a glossary explaining the terms, slang and abbreviations of the Vietnam War follows the text.

There are two statements in *The Killing Zone* which, had they been developed, might have given us a much better novel. When he lands in Vietnam, Downs tells us: «Underneath my confidence were the ever present frustrations, worry and curiosity about war and about my role in it» (6). Here is the ever present worry of those about to go into combat, about to face the test. The second statement is revealing of the kind of war that is being fought in Vietnam, and which affects the form and content of these novels. Downs writes: «November would be spent in the jungle of the Central Highlands where everything seems impermanent and the only thing of value to either side was survival» (7). Survival is the only aim of the soldiers. The chaos and impermanence of guerilla war will psychologically affect them and it will be reflected time and again in the structure of the novels. But, since these two points are not developed in *The Killing Zone*, I will deal with them in *Fields of Fire* and *A Rumor of War*, where, as in so many of these works, these two concepts show up. In the last mentioned works, I shall examine these relevant themes that appear in the Vietnam novels themselves and then place them in the framework of American war literature in general.

*Fields of Fire* (8) by James Webb, a former Marine Captain in what was the Republic of Vietnam, is a novel in which we are told the story of a group of men at a given moment in their lives. Using a device already traditional in American war novels (John Dos Passos, Norman Mailer, James Jones), Webb presents five main characters, besides a number of minor ones, who represent a cross-section of American society. They go in the social scale from Snake, a city boy off the streets, through Cannonball, a poor Southern Black, Cat Man the Chicano, to Lieutenant Hodges and Goodrich, a Harvard graduate who is quickly nicknamed «Senator».

The structure of the novel is not very coherent. In theory, it alternates chapters which give us, as in a flashback, the biography of the characters, with others dealing with their experiences in Vietnam. But there doesn't seem to be a real plan to the book. What weakens the novel most are the last chapters in which, as in a lengthy epilogue, we are told how each family receives the news of a son's death and the medals given by Congress, as well as the return of Goodrich to the United States. The novel thus becomes unnecessarily long and there is a debilitating relaxation after the tension maintained during 300 pages of jungle fighting and the final battle. Webb's failure at ending his saga brings to mind the masterful ending of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

*Fields of Fire* is at its best in dealing with combat in the jungle, with the way guerilla war affects the psychology of the soldiers and with how these men feel about war. As to the type of war they are going to fight and its effects on men, the Commander tells Hodges before the latter leaves for the bush: «This ain't World War II where we can pull you out to Australia and a parade after a month of fighting... You spend a month in the bush and you are not a Marine anymore. You're not even a goddam person» (9). This point will be elaborated on by Philip Caputo in *A Rumor of War* too. In *Fields of Fire* Gilliland, a sergeant who returns to California, answers the question whether there is a front in Vietnam. «Shit man, I don't know... there was a rear. But we were never on any front or anything. We just roamed around the bush or went somewhere on an operation for a while and then left. We just moved in circles mostly» (10). In this conflict there is not an objective to win and to hold. It is guerilla war that gives shape to the Vietnam novels. They are formed by a series of incidents in which the climax is survival or death in an ambush. Combat is usually at night. Physically the Vietcong and friendly Vietnamese are identical and what is more important, the enemy is hardly ever seen. Peter Jones in *War and the Novelist* points out how on the issue of guilt after killing, a change becomes pronounced in the novels of Korea and Vietnam. The enemy in war novels is traditionally reduced to a subhuman status reflected in the terminology (Hun, Gook, Wook, Chink) but what I find more significant in the Vietnam novels is the invisibility of the enemy which is closely connected to the issue of guilt or lack of it when finally laying hold of the potential killer. Soldiers in Vietnam die because a mine goes off, sometimes it has been set off manually and a whole platoon is wiped out by an unseen enemy. Tension grows, frustrations accumulate and finally explode and we find scenes like the following one: «Below him, in the field, the prisoner had done something, said something wrong and two men were hitting him... the prisoner was the only tangible enemy to focus their frustrations on. It didn't bother Hodges» (11).

There is, of course, no mention of ideals, political issues or specific reasons to fight. Although Huntington in *The Soldier and the State* (12) sees this characteristic as beginning with the Korean War novels, and Peter Jones rightly says that «novels of World War II do not deal with politics and national issues...» (13), in my opinion this lack of ideals and political issues is a constant in American war literature since its beginnings. The reason to go to war is a different matter which we shall see in *A Rumor of War*. In *Fields of Fire* we are told that «he (Warner) was the only member of the platoon who spoke consistently of national objectives, Communism or winning a war. But, even he had recently ceased such speculation» (14).

The novel reflects a sense of unity among those who are fighting, regardless of country or side. This is a theme which appears in many war novels and it is especially strong in the works of John Dos Passos. In *Fields of Fire*, one of the soldiers says: «We are closer to being Gooks than to being them (the officers) and yet we are wanting to kill Gooks» (15). However, the need for survival triumphs, since as Sartre said, «all war is manicheism» (16) and in the words of a soldier «there are mamasans and babysans and anyway... it's them or us» (17). And later, Snake tells Goodrich who insists that there is more to war than killing «gooks»: «There is Senator, there is. Kill gooks and make it home alive» (18). As the author says, «the only real test of success anymore was how many came back whole from each patrol» (19). This existential despair, this need to survive from day to day is reinforced by the fact that their Vietnam tour lasts a year, that the war will continue whether they are there or not. But, it will not be their war anymore because it never meant much more than survival to them.

There are, however, those who re-enlist. Marked forever by the war, having experienced an almost total isolation from the rest of the world, they are incapable of returning. Innumerable novels have told of the difficulties war veterans find in adapting themselves to the civilian world at peace. We find that Snake who in *Fields of Fire* enlisted out of a need to belong, signs up again after his tour of duty is over because «he was now twenty... and what would parallel the sense of urgency and authority and —need. Of being part of something. And of being needed and being good» (20). Hodges is given the opportunity of accepting a desk job which he turns down because «... it forced him to face himself... the rest of his life would be anticlimax. There was nothing on the other side. What does a man do when his war is over, wondered Hodges» (21). Frederick Henry after he deserts in *A Farewell to Arms*, after he discards his uniform, the symbol of belonging to a group, misses «the feeling of being held by your clothes» (22). Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* tells of his restlessness after the war too (23). In its broader aspect it is the fear to face reality, to slow down and think after the existential turmoil imposed on them by the war. Snake and Hodges die in combat, but Goodrich has to face a world which doesn't understand him because it has not shared his experiences. These are familiar issues in American literature.

Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, published in 1977, tells of the author's experiences in Vietnam as a Marine lieutenant in 1965. In 1975 Caputo returned to Saigon as a reporter and he was one of the last Americans to be evacuated when the capital surrendered to the North Vietnamese. *A Rumor of War* is not a great novel, but it is compact, unpretentious and its author analyses with great honesty his reactions to the situations in which he is involved as well as the change that takes place within him. Divided into three parts, with a prologue and an epilogue, each part covers Caputo's different assignments in Vietnam. The short epilogue describes the fall of Saigon, ten years after the other events related in the novel. Written in a simple, straightforward language from which all rethoric is absent, the author is one of the few Vietnam novelists who responds to the beauty of the country, to the looming imperturbability of the Anamese Range, a symbol of permanence in an impermanent world. Caputo does not idealize and he never apologizes. There is in this work an evident parallelism with Hemingway's which may be a direct influence or simply the result of a similar reaction to similar situations.

The title of the novel was taken from the Gospel of Saint Mark. It, along with the quotations heading each chapter, illustrate the universality of the war experience. These quotations are taken from English language literature from Shakespeare to the English poets of World War I.

The beginning of the prologue to *A Rumor of War* is revealing of the themes not only of the novels of Vietnam but from all American war literature. In it Caputo explains how his novel does not deal with politics, power or strategy, nor with the reasons for war. As he says «it is simply a story about war, about the things men do in war and the things war does to them» (24). He explains his reasons for going to war, and next to curiosity—what leads the camel to water so often in American literature—(25), it was his thirst for adventure or the need to escape from the mediocrity of an uneventful life what led him to enlist. He writes that he has gone to war «to find in a commonplace world a chance to live heroically» (26). In this regard but in a different context, Henry May commented on how so many young Americans went to war in 1917 as though combat were to be an antidote for their dissatisfaction with life. It was this search for something that accounts for much of the shattering impact of the war on them (27). This was, of course, the case of the novelists of World War I, but what is most interesting is to note how in 1967 a writer would go to battle for those same reasons. What is even more important, the idea of the test is also present in Caputo, just as it was in *The Red Badge of Courage* and in *The Thin Red Line*, and in so many novels. Caputo says: «I needed to prove something» (28). There is also in him a certain amount of idealism, of the infectious Romanticism that, for a while at least, was Kennedy's legacy. That idealism was quickly shattered by war.

We carried along with our packs and rifles the implicit convictions that the Vietcong would be quickly beaten and that we were doing something altogether noble and good. We kept the packs and the rifles. The convictions we lost (29).

Soon all dreams of glory have disappeared, been crushed by the reality of aimless war of attrition. As in the other novels here discussed, Caputo deals with men who are simply going around in circles. The author finds himself wishing «that I had been the veteran of a conventional war, with dramatic campaigns and historic battles for subject matter» (30). Caputo expresses the same unfulfilled longing voiced by Crane's Henry Fleming and Dos Passos' Andrews in their dreams of a heroic past.

As for the lesson taught by war, Caputo says «most of all we learned about death at an age when it's common to think of yourself as immortal» (31). Hemingway mentions the same dreadful feeling, the realization of one's mortality, both in *Men at War* and in *Accross the River and Into the Trees* (33). The rest of the passage from Caputo's *A Rumor of War* from which we are quoting is equally close to Hemingway. «We lost it all at once and in the span of months passed from boyhood through manhood to a premature middle age, the knowledge of death, of the implacable limits placed on man's existence, severed us from our youth» (34). This awareness born of war experience, is at the core of Hemingway's philosophy (34). And there is also in this quotation from Caputo the reference to the speed with which every-

thing happens in war which reminds us of Hemingway's remark that in war «everything has speeded up» (35). Both authors understood that this speeding up of experience which war offered them would normally take a lifetime to obtain. In Caputo's words: «It was as if a lifetime of experience had been compressed into a year and a half. A man saw the heights and the depths of behavior in Vietnam» (36).

Caputo refers explicitly to the trauma that war produces in the soldiers and their consequent isolation from those who have not shared the same experience. He underlines that closeness among the combatants, a common theme in Vietnam novels, as Peter Jones has pointed out and I have indicated above (37). This closeness is made stronger by their isolation from the rest of the world, a fact already mentioned but one that can now be better developed.

Unity of space and time is achieved through the isolation of the platoon in the jungle. In the middle of a savage natural surrounding, as if to underline the commander's remarks to Hodges in *Fields of Fire*, quoted above, Caputo says: «It was as if in comradeship we found an affirmation of life and the means to preserve at least a vestige of humanity» (38). However, as an expression of that manicheism present in war, and as a confirmation of Hodges' commander's words, Caputo says that «out there, lacking restraint, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country, and a relentless enemy, we sank to a brutish stage» (39). If the soldiers in these works commit atrocities, remember Chistfield in Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*. Like these characters in the novels of Vietnam, he was sanctioned to kill. He never learned where and when to stop killing.

Feelings and ideas already familiar to us from other war novels are expressed by Caputo too. The heroic dreams of Henry Fleming are not unknown to Philip Caputo. He says: «I had entertained myself with fantasies of personal heroics» (40). The self doubt when faced with the test of going into battle that Fleming suffered and which Hemingway's hero in «In Another Country» fought, haunted Caputo also. He tells us in *A Rumor of War* that «I worried that I might behave badly» (41).

The soldiers in *A Rumor of War* find themselves in a totally alien environment where they have «crossed a line of departure between the known and the unknown» (42). Our novelist continues: «the trail looped and twisted and led nowhere. The company seemed to be marching into a vacuum» (43). For Peter Jones, the immersion into a totally alien environment suggests the conditions of human existence conceived by Sartre and Camus: the loneliness of a man in a hostile environment. In this vacuum, in the words of Caputo, «the men tended to draw together, seeking the reassurance that comes from being physically close» (44). Tim O'Brien in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* has expressed it in similar terms. He writes that «the man to the front is civilization. He is the U.S. of America and every friend you have ever known» (45). This is a guerilla war and a war of technology in which the enemy is all around them but invisible. Eric Kahler has argued that machines produce a schizoid alienation from the fact of killing. But such combat is also a psychological shield which is shattered when the soldiers come into contact with something that humanizes the Vietcong. This is evident in Caputo's reaction when he discovers an enemy cache full of personal objects and family photographs. His reactions are mixed. «It was comforting to realize that the V.C. were flesh and blood, but this same realization aroused an abiding sense of remorse» (46). There is a short story



about the Vietnam experience called «The Room» (47) in which an officer withdraws his troops after having phocused his binoculars on the face of a young enemy. He can not kill in cold blood.

The second part of *A Rumor of War* is called «The Officer in Charge of the Dead». Here Caputo tells of his assignment identifying corpses and tabulating the American and enemy dead. It is at this point in the novel that the author's or narrator's psychological desintegration begins. Obsessed with death, with the desintegration of the human body, he begins to have nightmares and to see his fellow officers as if their faces were covered by the mask of death. In the third part of the novel, Caputo has returned to the jungle and the description of the kind of war being fought comes up again. «It was no orderly campaign, as in Europe, but a war for survival» (48). Increasingly isolated, war becomes individualized for Caputo. He hates the enemy not for political reasons, but because they have killed his friends. As Peter Jones has written, «In battle men forget the generalities that have unleashed the war... In fighting units they fight on command, but they die for each other, not for causes» (49). And Caputo says: «Revenge was one of the reasons I volunteered for a line company. I wanted to kill somebody» (50). Combat becomes a catharsis which Caputo hopes will rid him of his ghosts. Suddenly he loses his fear of death and becomes indifferent to it. In his words we again find a parallelism with Hemingway's ideas (or Frederic Henry's) in *A Farewell to Arms*. Caputo tells us: «I would die as casually as a beetle is crushed under a boot heel... I was a beetle. We were all beetles trying to survive in the wilderness» (51). The similarity with the scene in which Frederic Henry kills the ants on the log over the fire is evident.

Finally something snaps in Caputo's mind. He orders his soldiers to take two Viet Cong prisoners and to kill them if they resist. His men fulfill his orders, but since one of the boys was not V.C., Caputo is courtmartialled. The trial becomes a farce because, as Caputo says, war in general is to blame and what the authorities try to conceal is «war bringing out the evil in man, which no one wants to admit» (52).

At this point in the novel's progress, Caputo has reached the same emotional situation as Hemingway's hero. Psychologically isolated, he has to dedicate every mental effort to the keeping of his sanity. The part of the narrative where he describes his emotional situation at this moment is almost a paraphrasis of what Hemingway has expressed in his short stories and novels (53). He says that «all (my) emotional energies (were) spent on maintaining my mental balance... The war simply wasn't my show any longer. I had declared a truce between myself and the Viet Cong, signed a personal armistice... I was through with governments and their abstract causes... I would endure and accept whatever happened with grace» (54). Hemingway's «separate peace» and his code of endurance are implicit in Caputo's words. Although it is impossible to explore the parallelism farther here, let it suffice to notice the obvious similarities, both of ideas and in terminology, between the two writers. Is it the influence of a master on a younger author or a parallel reaction of two men before similar experiences? The point is that, within American literature, we find one more writer who, traumatized by war, desperately fights to maintain his mental balance and arrives at a similar assessment of the nature of his reactions to the experience.

Caputo ends his novel in the plane that is taking him home. His conclusion is direct and most brief. «We had done nothing more than endure. We had survived.

and that was our only victory» (55). At this point, let us remember that in Plato's «Dialogues», courage is defined as «the capacity to endure».

Summing up this brief review of the dominant themes to appear in the literature of the Vietnam war, we can clearly see that it belongs to the mainstream of American war literature. New motifs appear, as they do after every war, which are the logical consequences of a different type of conflict, fought for different reasons, in a different way or in particular surroundings.

In these works, we have noted the recurrence of themes that are traditional in American war literature. War is seen as the test of manhood, an initiation rite. These novels of Vietnam, like those of World War I and World War II reveal to the reader characters, all of them young men, who are deeply worried as to what their behavior will be when the terrible moment comes. In *A Rumor of War*, *The Killing Zone*, *If I Die in a Combat Zone...*, in *Dispatches*, as in all these stories and novels, there is a constant lacking of what we would call political ideas. As a reason to enlist, curiosity and a desire to escape from the boredom and a thirst for excitement again show themselves to be the basic drives of narrators and protagonists. The reality of war shatters all their illusions and dreams of a heroic moment. The parallelism with Hemingway, here treated in only one novel but present in others too, is evident in many points: the early learning about the reality and finality of death, war seen as a speeding up of life experiences and revealing of the depths of human behavior, the progressive isolation of the man who has undergone a certain type of experience which can not be shared with those outside it and his terrible fight to endure and maintain his mental balance in the terror of his isolation.

This is, however, a new type of war. It is a guerilla conflict of aimless moving about in the jungle in which survival and endurance become the only goals. If the guerilla war influences the structure of the novels, as it does in denying them a solid story-line, the isolation in the bush stresses man's existential loneliness. As a reaction to this isolation we notice the real strengthening of the ties among the combatants. They are men who, lacking ideals, fight and die for each other, a fact which is all the more striking in a technological era.

All this is rather surprising to find after generations of writing about the disillusion war produces in man. It seems strange that others will still believe in the romance of war and the heroism of men. Although the novels of Vietnam again show us how illusions are shattered by conflict, they also give us many examples of true heroism. Like the novels of World War I and World War II, the prose of the Vietnam conflict emphasizes the possibility and the reality of enduring with grace under pressure.

## NOTES

(1) Pilar Marín, *La gran guerra en la obra de Hemingway y Dos Passos*. Salamanca, 1980. pp. 143-63.

(2) Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*. New York, 1962, p. 108.

(3) Frederick Downs, *The Killing Zone*. New York, 1978, pp. i.

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) W. C. Woods, «He that Died on Wednesday», in *Writing under Fire*, J. Klinkowitz and J. Somer, eds. New York, 1978, pp. 152-64.

(6) Frederick Downs, *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 99.

(8) James Webb, *Fields of Fire*. New York, 1979.

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 68.

- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- (12) Samuel P. Huntington. *The Soldier and the State*. New York, 1967. p. 389.
- (13) Peter Jones. *War and the Novelist*. Columbia (Missouri), 1976. p. 178.
- (14) James Webb. *Op. cit.*, p. 152.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- (16) J. P. Sartre. *What is Literature?* New York, 1956. p. 66.
- (17) James Webb. *Op. cit.*, p. 163.
- (18) *Ibid.*, p. 269.
- (19) *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p. 333.
- (21) *Ibid.*, p. 310.
- (22) Ernest Hemingway. *A Farewell to Arms*. New York, 1969. p. 243.
- (23) F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*. New York, 1953. p. 2.
- (24) Philip Caputo. *A Rumor of War*. New York, 1978. p. X111.
- (25) John Dos Passos. *One Man's Initiation: 1917*. Ithaca (NY), 1969. p. 5.
- (26) Philip Caputo. *Op. cit.*, p. 4.
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