

## Searching for Closure: Vietnam War Literature and the Veterans Memorial

by Charles J. Gaspar

That many soldiers returned home from the battlefields of Vietnam only to find themselves mired in another battle in their own country is well recognized now. A vignette which opens the Preface to Frederick Downs' compelling memoir, *The Killing Zone*, makes this point dramatically:

In the fall of 1968, as I stopped at a traffic light on my walk to class across the campus of the University of Denver, a man stepped up to me and said "Hi."

Without waiting for my reply to his greeting, he pointed to the hook sticking out of my left sleeve. "Get that in Vietnam?"

I said, "Yeah, up near Tam Ky, in I Corps."

"Serves you right."

As the man walked away, I stood rooted, too confused with hurt, shame, and anger to react. (n.pag. [vii])

This theme — that there was no easy closure for the trauma of the war experience for the individual soldier — recurs throughout many Vietnam War narratives. "Senator," a wounded veteran in James Webb's *Fields of Fire*, knows this truth and rebukes his father's cajolery with the assertion that "It'll never be over, Dad. Most of it hasn't even started yet" (392). Similarly, Tim O'Brien's hero in his first novel, *Northern Lights*, tells his brother only half jokingly, "Glad I didn't wear my uniform. Look plain silly coming home in a uniform and no parade" (24). Indeed, powerful recent narratives such as Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* and Philip Caputo's *Indian Country* have shifted the focus from the soldier in combat to the soldier as he attempts to reconnect with the mainstream of American society. The reality of that painful experience is also captured in Bob Greene's recent book, *Homecoming*. Formatted as a "sort of oral history of the homecoming experience," the collection of letters to Greene validates both the range and depth of the emotions felt by the soldiers on returning to their homeland (45).<sup>1</sup>

For the nation as a whole, concurrently, the war in Indochina produced a rift that has not yet closed. With far-sighted concern, Norman Mailer, in *The Armies of the Night*, observes that "the two halves of America were not coming together, and when they failed to touch, all of history might be lost in the divide. . . . [H]ad the two worlds of America drifted irretrievably apart?" (179). That was in 1967. In 1975, rather too easily perhaps, President Gerald Ford called the war "finished" (qtd. in Karnow 623), and that year does, in fact, delimit our nation's combat involvement in Southeast Asia. Yet the

repercussions have been felt in both national and international politics since that time. A decade after President Ford stated his desire for closure, Robert Stone, author of *Dog Soldiers*, offered in a 1985 interview this more clear-sighted metaphor:

You're right; it didn't end over there. What it meant, its significance, didn't stop there. It's like a wound covered with scar tissue or like a foreign body, a piece of shrapnel. [I]t is embedded in our history. . . . I don't think it is a mortal wound for this society, but I think it is a very, very painful one. (qtd. in Schroeder 154)

On the international level, notes political scientist Timothy Lomperis, the lessons of Vietnam are often invoked: "everywhere in the Third World where the remotest prospect for American intervention in some local conflict looms, the ghost of Vietnam again and again casts its shadow" (3). On the national level, Laura Palmer posits in *Shrapnel in the Heart*, returning Black soldiers "found [that] their service in Vietnam was one more reason for discrimination in America" (xvi). These, of course, are but two of the areas in which the War has affected American history.

On two levels, then, the personal and the national, there exists an impulse to reconnect, to reunify. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, designed by Maya Ying Lin in 1981 and situated on the Washington, D.C., Mall, provides a physical site for this process of reconnection. As Harry Haines observes, "The Wall, in effect, broke the silence of the immediate postwar years [and] returned the veteran to discourse[.]" thus marking a vital "reintegrative phase" ("Disputing" 142).<sup>2</sup> Yet the Memorial provides more than the *locus amoenus* for healing. In its structure, placement, and form, the Memorial represents both for the soldier and for the civilian, the soldier's experience, not only of the War itself but also of his return home to a nation at war with itself. In this the Memorial serves, as Catherine Howett suggests, a "symbolic function" founded on "the language of communication, of semiotic meaning" (6). More specifically, I suggest that five of the Memorial's architectural features — Frederick Hart's representational statue of three American soldiers, the arrangement of the names of those Americans who died in the conflict, the black granite walls, the abstract shape of the Wall itself, and the context of this Memorial — subtly speak to the viewer, asking him or her to participate vicariously in, and to analyze, America's experience in Indochina on two parallel planes.

These two levels of inquiry may be discerned in analogous artistic expression in the plot, structure, and rhetoric of many of the major Vietnam War narratives. Philip Beidler's comment, in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, conveys this need for inquiry; the importance of Ron Kovic's narrative, *Born on the Fourth*

of *July*, is that it presents “a search for a context, an attempt to connect the experience of the war with some idea of a representative American consciousness” (159). Because of the breadth of this inquiry, and because I examine artifacts from two different art forms, this paper ranges broadly and descriptively between the literature and the Memorial. In the spirit of *ut pictura poesis*, I propose that both the Memorial and the literature express similar themes — ones advocating understanding, connection, and closure.

To placate those who argued that the Wall itself was not an appropriate symbol of the proud service of the veterans, a realistic statue of three soldiers and a nearby American flag were added. Uproar ensued: Maya Lin initially reacted by asserting that these added dimensions were “Like drawing moustaches on other people’s portraits” (qtd. in Buckley 68).<sup>3</sup> More recently, though, Lin has seen the juxtaposition of styles as “ironically correct”: the two styles, abstract and representational, seem to Lin to “artistically [memorialize] the fact that we *still* can’t make up our minds about the Vietnam War” (qtd. in Horowitz 16). To be sure, the statue, flag, and Wall are in separate sections of the Memorial’s two-acre site. Charles Griswold, noting this placement, proposes that “the physical and aesthetic distance between these two additions and the VVM [Vietnam Veterans Memorial — the Wall itself] is so great that there exists no tension between them. All three finally just seem to be separate memorials” (711).<sup>4</sup> Yet the placement of these parts of the Memorial works for another, more important, reason: the viewer needs to stand back, and consciously work, to discover a place where she or he is able to take in the entire scene. It’s difficult. There are, perhaps, only three or four areas where one can see simultaneously the statues, the flag, and the Wall. That difficulty — which emphasizes that viewing the Memorial is a process that requires active participation — seems analogous to the trouble which we as individuals and as a nation have in comprehending the War. For we feel the need to include both an historical perspective, embodied in the shape and placement of the Wall itself, and a personal element, here most immediately apprehended in the statue of the soldiers.

In advance of the major literature of the War, Norman Mailer expresses this concern with the difficulty of attaining a proper perspective when he introduces Book Two of *The Armies of the Night* with these words:

[I]f you would see the horizon from the forest, you must build a tower. . . . So the Novelist working in secrete collaboration with the Historian has perhaps tried to build with his novel a tower fully equipped with telescopes to study . . . our own horizon.  
(245)

“Of course,” notes Mailer wryly, “the tower is crooked, and the

telescopes warped” (245). Ironically, Mailer’s “battle” on behalf of the antiwar movement began on the Washington Mall, the very site where, more than ten years later, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial would be constructed. Appropriately, however, Mailer’s concerns are compatible with the most thoughtful of those authors who portray the lives of men engaged in the maze of combat in Southeast Asia, who wish to picture, to adapt Hemingway’s phrase, “the way it was” for the individual soldier while concurrently examining larger, national issues. To come to this bifocal way of understanding, one must have a carefully placed vantage point. John Del Vecchio, in *The 13th Valley*, enunciates his authorial position on his important Acknowledgements page: the genesis of his large, classically controlled narrative springs from an anonymous soldier’s telling the author that “People gotta know what it was really like.” In the subsequent paragraph however, Del Vecchio cites numerous scholars, both military and civilian, for their assistance “with the theoretical constructs of war causation” (n. pag. [v]). Elements of the historical and personal thus combine, asking for understanding on two levels.

Because it is with the lives of the soldiers that the major narratives begin, I will consider first the statue. As in the literature, the details, seen here in Figure 1, provide a sense of realism: the canteens, the bandoleers of ammunition, the weapons, the “boonie” hat — all these are small details which signify important elements of the soldier’s life. Even more compelling, as Figure 2 demonstrates, are the soldiers’ facial expressions; a quiet determination clearly mingles with a sense of weariness on these youthful faces with the tired eyes. Philip Caputo, in *A Rumor of War*, captures this feeling of weariness well:

The company had run nearly two hundred patrols in the month I had been with it, and then there were all those nights on the line. The men were in a permanent state of exhaustion. They were in a shaft, plunging daily from one level of fatigue to the next. . . . (237)

Yet, because there can be no break, they persevere.

Indeed, the most striking feature of Hart’s sculpture is the sense of surprise and wariness which the soldiers evince, both in their faces and in their stances. In mute warning one soldier has placed his hand on his buddy’s back. The three soldiers have stopped, slightly offset from a direct confrontation with the Wall. This is a moment quite unlike the apocalyptic vision mockingly derided in *Paco’s Story*; as Heinemann satirizes that fictitious statue, a soldier is imagined holding “a corpse of a [second,] dead GI heavenward, as if just that minute he clean-and-jerked it” (151). Nor is it a moment like that memorialized in the statue of the flag-raising at Iwo Jima. That is clearly a photographic instant; this statue, conversely, conveys a diachronic quality, for the moment of quiet, interrogative repose could continue indefinitely.



Fig. 1. Frederick Hart's representational sculpture of three soldiers at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.



Fig. 2. The soldiers' faces express weariness, surprise, and a quiet determination to persevere.

Whether the soldiers are returning from a patrol (as their placement at the edge of the brush intimates) or coming upon their own memorial, as critic Tom Wolfe suggests, many years after returning "home" (4), what has caused these men to pause is something which they recognize as larger than themselves. And it is, clearly, something which they do not understand.

Leaving the soldiers and entering the area of the Wall itself, viewers are drawn in, as Figure 3 suggests; they become immersed in what Maya Lin has called a "sea of names" (qtd. in Horowitz 12) — over 58,000 of them, identifying all those who perished in the war in Southeast Asia. Griswold proposes that the structure might present "a delicate allusion to the ancient *tholos* tomb . . . buried in the earth and approached by an angled, graded passage downward" (706). The allusion may be valid for one who stops and intellectualizes about the structure and its engraved names; but the immediate experience is one of disorientation, chaos, confusion. As poet Robert Morgan writes, this sea of names begins "almost / imperceptibly in the lawn / on one side and grow[s] on black pages / bigger than any reader," frightening the viewer, almost overpowering him (291). The experience becomes, asserts Joel Swerdlow, "like finding bodies on the battlefield" (571). These emotions, of disorientation and confusion, are precisely those portrayed in the literature of combat. Certainly, part of that sense of impending chaos derives from the spatial formlessness of the War — what Caputo, describing the experience of Vietnam combat in 1965 compares to stepping over the edge; or what Webb, in *Fields of Fire*, pictures with this image: "'We are here.' [Snake, the veteran soldier, explains sarcastically.] He then made a circle in the air. 'They are everywhere else' " (77).



















