COMMENTARY BY GARY MILLS

Vietnam Memoir as Satire

Edward Hagan's *To Vietnam in Vain: Memoir of an Irish-American Intelligence Advisor, 1969-1970*

Edward Hagan is an influential voice in the study of Irish and Irish-American narratives. His 2010 work, *Goodbye Yeats and O'Neill: Farce in Contemporary Irish and Irish-American Narratives*, explores the literary mechanism of farce—struggle against absurdity—engaged by influential Irish authors such as Beckett and Tim O'Brien to awaken readers and spur reflection. After 45 years of narrative explication, this Irish literature scholar focuses his lens on his own struggle with the absurdity and destruction surrounding his year as an advisor in Vietnam. In his 2016 memoir, *To Vietnam in Vain: Memoir of an Irish-American Intelligence Advisor, 1969-1970*, Hagan explores the collateral damage to not only the narrative arc of his life, but also the impact on the Irish-American consciousness. His memoir augments the Vietnam War literature canon and advances our understanding of conflict and unpacks the Irish-American struggle to balance a resonate obligation to fight for America while also maintaining an allegiance to Irish anti-imperialist, revolutionary roots. The timing of Hagan's memoir aligns not only with his own need for pause to grapple with his war, but also with America's fomenting need for an open and transparent dialogue about Vietnam. Hagan's contribution to this conversation, *To Vietnam in Vain*, embraces disorientation and narrative fragmentation. It not only gives us a glimpse into the war that derailed the pre-war American narrative, but also crafts a memoir with the cutting edge of satire.

Before moving to Hagan's work, it's critical to have an understanding of the disorienting events leading up to Hagan's tour in Vietnam. By 1968 America's "Victory in Vietnam" (Hagan 176) trajectory was no longer sustainable. Growing anti-war activism, counter-culture experimentation, and the civil rights movement's growth in leadership and voice in the U.S. had overwhelmed the socially-constructed levies separating Americans by class, race, and religion, creating a powerful cultural current for change. During this year, violent rupture points opened across all these movements at a time of growing international unrest. North Korea provoked the U.S. with the capture of the USS Pueblo on 23 January; the North Vietnamese launched the propaganda profitable, but costly, Tet Offensive on 30 January; U.S. casualties for the year reached a war high of 16,899 with a combined total of 36,825 deaths since 1956 ("Military"). On 27 February, Walter Cronkite delivered his somber and prophetic "mired in stalemate" assessment of the war on national TV ("We"). Peace advocate and civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on 4 April in Tennessee. His killing ignited outrage and riots across the country. Robert Kennedy was assassinated on 5 June in California, halting the potential for another young, idealistic Irish-American leader in the White House. Anti-war protests and riots at the Democratic National Convention on 28 August shifted political perspectives and party agendas. These traumatic narratives were disorienting enough, but they were being chased by growing stories of American brutality and cultural alienation.

Following what was arguably the most disorienting year of the decade, the last year of the 60's did provide some escape as America's space program took astronauts to the moon on 20 July 1969. This accomplishment was a natural extension of the post-WWII, pre-Vietnam narrative of America's superior technological might wielded in defense of democracy across the globe. However, this version of the American narrative was soon overshadowed as hidden horrors surfaced. The My Lai massacre that took place on 16 March 68 became public knowledge on 13 November 1969 (Olson and Roberts 163). The corrosive entropy of '68 was fully exposed by '69. These events resulted in dramatic shifts in policy and practice. The war front was reimagined as the U.S. struggled to disentangle itself from the conflict it had fueled. The American handoff of more of the fighting to the South Vietnamese Army, dubbed "Vietnamization," (Webb 13) ran parallel with the arming and training of friendly enclaves and villages, called "pacification," (Webb 257) across South Vietnam. This transition was victory's surrogate, which Nixon later called "Peace with Honor." It's at this troubled nexus in October of '69 we join Army Lieutenant Edward Hagan as he starts his tour as an intelligence advisor to South Vietnamese counterparts in the Phong Dinh Province of the Mekong Delta.

Hagan's explicit purpose is to make his readers feel the disorientation he experienced not only during his deployment to Vietnam but also growing up as the son of Irish immigrants in Inwood, New York as the Cold War grew in scale and consequence as the Vietnam conflict was claiming more American blood. "I hope my readers will appreciate being disorientated; I hope to reward them with a more realistic experience of the war as lived by this former soldier" (5). We are caught at the center of a narrative vortex, which allows a layered, yet fragmented, look at what moved a nation to simultaneously protest and persist in a war that placed Hagan's soul, as well as America's, "in deep distress" (162). We join "a war in progress" (3) in 1969—a conflict devoid of "antecedents" (4)—waged without an understanding of history, culture, and an analysis of our own first-hand experience. Keep in mind, official U.S. casualty reports from Vietnam go back as far back as 1956. Hagan asserts that being dropped into the middle without real awareness represents the standard American foreign policy procedure: "America continues to make such thrusts—in Iraq, Afghanistan… hell, we're sending advisors to Nigeria to hunt down Boko Haram" (4). It was a war that was enacted without any sense of the narrative: "I had to figure out the antecedents of my war in Vietnam, mostly by myself, because hardly anyone knew what they were or even deemed them important" (4).

Readers are allowed to drift into the middle of the narrative torrent. "My war sprawls and flows in uncontrolled directions" (13). "The story of the war […] is too often told as the close-ended narrative of a year" (4). We must "dispense with the false consciousness" of an orderly narrative structure "to reveal fake demarcations and suggest personal and national entanglements" (4-5). As we experience Hagan's narrative shifts, we are moved in all directions relative to his year with Advisory Team 56. We encounter a sprawling range of social, cultural, and combat narratives that disorient, conflict, but still coalesce through his use of fragmentation and irony.

Inspired by Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," Hagan gives us his constant across the variable war narratives: "So a true war story is a kind of true lie. And a 'true lie' is an irony. So irony is the truth" (13). This formula gives us a memoir that works as vailed satire, which is necessary for any reflection on war. Irony alone doesn't add the sting of satire, but it's a key component. Gilbert Highet provides a blueprint of satire in *The Anatomy of Satire*. "All good satires are eminently various. The original Latin word *satura* means 'medley,' 'hotch-potch' and the best satirists have either known this or divined it. In plot, in discourse, in emotional tone, in vocabulary, in sentence structure and pattern of phrase, the satirist tries always to produce the unexpected, to keep his [her] hearers and his [her] readers guessing and gasping (18).

Highet goes on to describe three essential elements of good satire: "The first is to describe a painful or absurd situation, or a foolish or wicked person or group, as vividly as possible" (18-19). This helps audiences "anaesthetized by custom and dullness and resignation" move towards the truth, or "at least that part of the truth which they habitually ignore" (19). The second element is the application of "uncompromisingly clear language to describe unpleasant facts and people" (20). The author's intent is to "shock his [her] readers" (20). The final element is the emotion the artist wishes to "evoke in his [her] reader. It is a blend of amusement and contempt" (21). Hagan applies all of these components. Most notably he provides an "unexpected" disorientation through narrative fragmentation and structure.

We experience the unexpected across key family narratives—principally the "long line of Hagan warriors" (66). Hagan's grandfather is a key figure; he joined the Royal Scots Fusiliers after leaving Ireland for the United States. He was a Second Boer War (1899-1902) hero receiving four battle clasps for his Queen's South Africa Medal. However, he reportedly deserted his unit during the fifth engagement. In an unexpected turn, he later volunteered to re-enlist during WWI to reportedly get his record of desertion expunged. He served at Gallipoli, and spent some of his tour as a garrison guard of Turkish prisoners of war. We then experience family-generated gaps and additions to his narrative. "Family lore about his World War I service says that he was one of only five men in his unit to survive the 1915 Battle of Gallipoli [...] I think we needed this story of my grandfather's survival at Gallipoli to think well of the guy, to forgive his absence, to salve his pain" (64-65). Running from a fight—either a street brawl as a child or combat as a man—was unacceptable: "I was not to embarrass the family with cowardice" (66).

Extending the warrior arc, Hagan's father served during WWII, deploying with the 133rd Anti-Aircraft Battalion assigned with defending the critical resupply harbor in Cherbourg, France. The unit arrived months after D-Day, and at that point the Luftwaffe could no longer mount attacks on the harbor. The unit's trucks, their most powerful weapon at this stage, were ultimately used to move men and supplies to the rolling front across France and Germany. The unit closed out its WWII service as garrison guards for "civilian prisoners and American deserters" (81). His father's service too created narrative gaps:

> As a child I though my father, as a World War II soldier, must surely have engaged the Germans in battle. I told him he must have been very brave. He said, very deliberately, "Let me tell you something; the one time I fired a rifle in World War II was on a day that I shot at two crows [based on a dare]

> and missed." [...] My father seemed to think that the birds knew something. I always liked my father's mysticism: he was a big fan of divining rods for finding the right location to drill a well. And crows are smart. (68-69)

We are shown unexpected narratives ignited by cultural and family mythologies. They intertwine bravery and cowardice, service in a world war separated from harm and accented by guarding traitors and deserters. Adding to this is the irony of Hagan warriors fighting for and against British imperialism. Hagan's narratives twist in oblique ways that challenge and disorient. However, we are left with one anchor point for Hagan men across time and contexts—to fight was honorable. "Grandfathers, uncles, cousins, and my father had served in a variety of military forces: the British Army, the IRA, and the American Army. I was expected to follow them. I had a vision of being haunted by them all, even as I had profound doubts about my upcoming, undesired service for my country" (66-67).

In one of Hagan's more powerful vignettes, "The American Black and Tans," he takes us away from Vietnam and transports us to another war that influenced not only his family but also the Irish fight for freedom. He shares his mother's childhood stories of Cloonkeelane, Ireland where she suffered senseless brutality at the hands of Black and Tans—predominantly British WWI veterans hired as temporary constables to help quell The Irish War of Independence between 1919-1921 (166). "The only war stories I ever heard from her were about the savage treatment of her family by the Black and Tans back in Ireland" (182). Hagan adds texture and striking detail through excerpts from T. Ryle Dwyer's *The Squad and the Intelligence Operations of Michael Collins* (2005). Hagan draws from Dwyer's research to share orders Lt. Colonel Gerald Smyth, the commander of the Black and Tan division, reportedly issued to his men: "You may make mistakes occasionally and innocent persons may be shot, but that cannot be helped, and you are bound to get the right parties some time. The more you shoot, the better I will like you, and I assure you no policeman will get into trouble for shooting any man" (167). The crashing echoes from both empire and resistance are deafening for Hagan.

Across the cultural juxtapositions of Ireland and Vietnam, we are aligned by wars' common horror—the fragmentation of warriors' (and their nations') humanity: "The orders [of Lt Colonel Smyth] closely resemble the American practice of shooting near the VC to test their reaction" to identify them as enemy soldiers or civilians (167). "[...] some door gunners though this was an acceptable practice" (166). We see the same senseless Black and Tan brutality at the hands of U.S. Forces across South Vietnam where body counts and massive airstrikes spurred the "routineness of American

atrocities" (59). These not only devastated the Vietnamese, but also went on "to kill some part of each of us" (59) as a result of the "impossible situation" (166) of identifying Vietcong combatants from innocent civilians; the impossible situation of solving corruption in the South Vietnamese government; and the impossible situation of American bureaucracy providing anything beyond a mere "fantasy of control" (167) in a land where U.S. attempts to help were thwarted by its own "cultural blindness" (189).

One potentially trustworthy beacon for Hagan is his Irish ancestry. Hagan "translated the situation into Irish terms" (166). This need for cultural translation and alignment is not unique. In Anne Roper's *True Lives: Green Fields of Vietnam* (2002), a television documentary about Irish veterans who served in Vietnam, cameras follow Michael Coyne's trip back to Vietnam to retrace his tour along the Ho Chi Minh trail as part of a M48 tank crew. Near An Loc along the Cambodian border, he recalls his initial translation moment after being ordered to search frightened Vietnamese civilians emerging from the jungle: "Suddenly I realized that I was no better than a Black and Tan. I don't think I would have thought about that side of it if I hadn't been Irish" (qtd. in "The Green Fields").

Hagan reveals the toll this transition demands: A metamorphosis that Americans, including more than 2,000 drafted American green card holders and volunteers from Ireland, (Roper) went through as a result of the "soul-sickness with the emptiness of our duties," (26) which over time turned soldiers into "bureaucratic warrior[s]" (14) and "lukewarm monsters":

> I wasn't a major monster; after all, I never fired my M-16 on those missions—a kind of technical virginity. Claiming innocence on such grounds make me feel like a "flabby devil," to use Joseph Conrad's phrase in *Heart of Darkness*. Revelations tells us: "So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." I and my fellow American advisors were, at the worst and best, lukewarm monsters. (59-60)

His Irish grounding helps to stabilize incongruences and allows these hybrid labels to push his readers into his realm of ironic—"true"—terms.

Conflicted labels produce a pause, but the jolt for readers arrives in the form of the tension and contempt they feel as Hagan (ultimately all veterans) is "trapped into a situation in which my [his] moral choices were foreclosed by my [his] mere existence in the situation. I was in Vietnam. We were there to make war" (174). The obligation to fight in a war without just cause or legitimacy made all Vietnam veterans "prisoners of our own culture" (145). Ultimately, the "why" of the war was not "worthy of a soldier's

blood" and it did not give "the soldier the moral imperative to shed his enemy's blood" (189). As a result, trust in higher echelon leaders eroded along with empathy for the Vietnamese combatants and civilians. This context and its supporting logistics generated isolation: "[...] and one-by-one each of us went home alone, never again to see almost 100 percent of the guys we had spent a year with. And when we got home, hardly anyone noticed that we'd been away for a year, so maybe we had been in a Beckett play" (124). In the end, readers feel the isolation and crave accountability.

Vietnam's war story lacked truth. And in the void flourished echoes of British and French imperialism that perfectly fit the situation: "The Communists knew that our greatest weakness, despite our own revolutionary efforts, was the charge that we were a colonial power, the French with a bit more class and money (as the Vietnamese S-2 staff confided in me one day)" (194). The American blueprint for building a dependence and necessity for advanced technologies—weaponry through companies such as ArmaLite, Bell, Colt, Fairchild, and others; infrastructure through Brown and Root, KBR, and RMK (Kidwell 16); and agriculture through fertilizer suppliers like Monsanto (Hagan 190)—would work even better, and more profitably, than a boot to the throat.

This narrative dissonance was further complicated by American war narratives that were a popular staple—movies that "clear up the fog of battle rather neatly" for viewers but continued to "fog our thinking," (146) especially about the realities of war:

> Stuff happened in Vietnam unlike any scene in the movies running in our heads before we got there. The stuff reinforced the soldier's feeling that Vietnam was not on the planet as, in soldiers' parlance, "The World" was the States. (That "World" was often defined by its movies.) So the out-takes from the surreal film that the soldiers found themselves acting in do not fit with *Von Ryan's Express* (1965) or *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), although the combat I saw seemed as unreal as the celluloid varieties available in stateside movie theaters. (146)

"We like illusions and dreams of fortitude," (8) and the war movies of the 60's provided them in spades: *The Guns of Navarone* ('61), *The Longest Day* ('62), *In Harm's Way* ('65), *Battle of the Bulge* ('65), *Mosquito Squadron* ('69), and close to a hundred more.

According to Hagan, it's not until *The Deer Hunter* (1978) that these public narratives became "the most meaningful depiction of the war" (41). "The film consciously avoids realism. Realistic scenes from the war are placed in a collage of memories; time is obliterated" (41). These unhinged events are accented by the dramatic self-infliction of fragmentation: "The Russian roulette scenes suggest a metaphor for the war itself; the

communists held the gun to our heads while we shot ourselves in the head. The result: a fractured and chastened community back in America" (41).

Beyond Vietnam, these conflicted narratives have a destructive effect on Hagan's Irish-American identity. Nostalgia and a desire to relive the pre-war narrative were an escape, but they began to cripple Irish communities:

> Today some Irish-Americans from the New York area seem to be frozen in a past dominated by the war and the Irish neighborhoods they grew up in during the 1950s and 1960s. Nostalgia derives from the Greek "nostos"—home-coming and "algos"—pain [...] Memory of the nurturing the school gave us coexists with and complements Irish-American patriotic impulses, yet many Irish-Americans feel alienated from the country they claim to love. (58)

The template that shaped what he calls the "Catholic American patriot" (1) of the 1950s and 1960s had eroded. Traditional Irish-American narratives clash with the cultural entropy not only in Vietnam, but also across America. The generative narratives of "their neighborhood and [...] the vision of Ireland they inherited from their parents" (58) were tainted and hijacked by the war. "The war permanently fractured Irish-Americans' sense of community, family, and countries (America and Ireland)" (58-59).

Hagan's conflicted narratives are powerful by themselves, but he amplifies their impact through the structure of the book itself. Across 58 narrative vignettes, he reveals brief, but rich, views of war in Vietnam and Irish-American culture through battlefield imagery, intelligence reports, North Vietnamese propaganda leaflets, Congressional and military archives, correspondence with family and friends, classic and contemporary songs, movies, TV shows, war literature, classic literature, and many other genres and mediums. Most of Hagan's narrative vignettes are just three pages long, so the reader's perspective is constantly shifting to new vantage points. His use of staccato narratives and short vignettes reminds me of message traffic I received when I served as an intelligence officer in the Air Force.

These classified summaries and incident reports were succinct observations that rarely connected with any context beyond the borders of their own pages. Intelligence officers were expected to form a coherent story from these daily updates to then share with commanders and warfighters on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis. Hagan's structure demands that each reader work as an active participant (analyst) in the crafting, alignment, and negotiation of meaning. The typical advantage of prior knowledge (what we thought we knew about Vietnam) is superseded, and it is

replaced by the "realism of discontinuity" (160). Along the same lines as his actual tour in Vietnam, we are given only what's at hand, and must negotiate meaning across a "goalless war" (124) marked by bureaucratic madness with "no goals but their own continuance" (25).

Hagan succeeds not only in generating disorientation through narrative fragmentation and structure, but he also generates realism through discontinuity and irony-filled experiences with the unexpected. He creates a memoir with the cutting edge of a work of satire. As a result, we see the cultural and moral eddies that continue to ensnare all of us: "Vietnam is deeply imbedded in the American unconscious" (9). And this delay carries a deadly penalty. "But there is a much deeper consequence of the war: We learned to ignore evidence. We seemed to prefer lies to truth, and maybe we always have" (9). We see the stark, surreal way this legacy of Vietnam has given birth to new conflicts. We remain lost as cultural markers and narratives have yet to recover.

Hagan points to the active agent across this cultural fissure—lies, the "phony nonsense," (59) that manipulated a nation's culturally-primed patriotism, which was "[...] expected of Irish-American young men" (53). This type of fissure and alienation will continue unless we can collectively balance, assess, analyze, and learn from all narratives (lies and truths) to better understand ourselves. "[...] but the irony of a second place finish in war offers a salvation that we ought to have accepted before we settled for more second place finishes in other places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Losing wars should lead to self-analysis. We have successfully avoided it" (30).

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