

Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*: Vietnam, A Matrix For Personal and National History*

Since its publication in 1985, Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* has attracted a fair amount of attention from critics. Its link with Vietnam, its imagery, its handling of popular culture, its quest motif have--among other things--been recognized by critics.¹ However, in my opinion this rich novel has not received enough attention not only as an inquiry into the Vietnam war but as an allegory of the American experience as a whole. *In Country* is at the heart of the time honored American tradition of Hawthorne Faulkner and Styron: expressing the need to exorcise the demon of historical guilt in order to heal the image of the bruised self.

On one plane, *In Country* is a novel of initiation at the center of which is Sam (Samantha) Hughes' attempt to discover her identity. Being the posthumous daughter of a Vietnam veteran, her main target is to retrace her father's role in the disastrous war. Sam fulfills all the requirements of the quester. At age eighteen and on the brink of a college career, she is at the crossroads between childhood and adulthood. Embodying the innocence and enthusiasm of a novice, she believes all answers are available if she tries hard enough. Relying on books, mass media and direct questions, which reveal great insensitivity to the

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vulnerability of old wounds, she frisks about, making household terms of Vietnam and things associated therewith. As a result of her perseverance, the father figure whom she seeks and who is encased in a certain historical reality, gradually emerges first as an unassuming and "colorless" photograph and eventually as a much more human but disastrously disappointing character. That such a discovery should prove to be the scourge of maturity is to be expected from a novel of initiation. Although Sam is more confused than enlightened she, nonetheless, emerges at the end of the novel as a much chastened figure; the quest has been her rite of passage.

Sam's quest for her father should by necessity point to another, simultaneous reading, that of allegory on the national level. It is an allegory of the American experience at large, depicting in images and tropes the persistent American obsession with self-discovery in a national context. While critics have recognized this link, they have limited it to an inquiry into the post-Vietnam era; I see it as an attempt to probe the very ethos of America.

In this reading of the novel Sam Hughes represents something more than a teenager coming of age; in her the personal and the national meet. The name Sam is bisexual, standing for both Samuel and Samantha, also for the American voice of authority, Uncle Sam. Thus Sam is at once a representative of the American public and the American government, Mason also includes her heroine's name Sam A. Hughes, on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. "How odd it feels, as though all the names in America have been used to decorate this wall" (245) hereby closing the

circle between the seeker and what is sought and bringing together the self and other. And who is the other in this novel? It is not only the culprit American government, but also the victim Vietnam veteran, and even the more remote Vietcong, the enemy.²

Sam's quest is foiled from the very start by American popular culture. David Booth describes this hallmark of Mason's fiction. "Few writers have made better use of resources from pop culture to structure their narratives or give body to their characters than Bobbie Ann Mason" (98). When we first meet the heroine, she is on the road to Washington to visit the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. Mason turns the road journey into a minute and faithful account of day to day American life in the summer of 1984: election campaigns, pop songs, brand names, lists of prices. Sam sees the road as the vortex of American life,

She sits by the pool, watching the traffic--
an endless river of it, families on vacation
and salesmen out patrolling their territory
and weirdos on the prowl and trucks
hauling goods. Everything in America is
going on here, on the road (17).

This scene--and it is not the only one in the novel--establishes the close link between the personal and the national; it makes of Sam's quest for a father figure a lance which attempts to cut through the heart of America.

In this reading, Vietnam represents more than the drawn-out guerilla battles of the sixties; it becomes a trope for other historical tragedies: the witch-trials, slavery, the

treatment of the Indians, the civil war, all an aberration of the American ideal of the city on a hill and all bringing to the fore the need to examine and correct. Robert Brinkmeyer rightly sees in the novel "the tension between a facile American optimism that overlooks the dark sides of history and the knowledge of defeat and despair in the Vietnam experience" (32). Behind this statement one reads the American dilemma of reconciling the myth of American innocence with Melville's famous "power of blackness" (828) manifesting itself in the many misdemeanors of American history. This paradox surfaces in the thoughts of Sam Hughes as she contemplates the duality of American life.

America the beautiful. It is beautiful indeed The United States is so peaceful and well-organized It is a good country. But she keeps getting flashes of it through the eyes of a just-returned Vietnam soldier The soldiers must have felt...as though they belonged nowhere (231).

In keeping with the American literary tradition of making a small town a metonym for the USA, Hopewell aptly named, provides a taste of Americana. Dubbed "Dopewell" (233) by one of the characters, the town thrives on provincialism, broken relationships, TV fantasies, fast food chains and heady optimism. Hopewell encapsulates the infantile pursuits of American culture, best exemplified in the lives of its residents such as Sam's boyfriend, Lonnie, and his family, with their fancy weddings, frilly bedrooms and cute spice racks. Significantly, as Sam matures she comes to see the sham exterior and shies away

from Lonnie and his family. Responding to a newspaper account of a house decorated "with hurricane posts wrapped in satin ... [and] crepe paper streamers," Sam reflects, "Packaging was supposed to deceive...but it never really did." This seemingly casual statement acquires horrific proportions when applied to Vietnam. "Her father came back from the war in a plastic bag. Attractive and efficient. A good disguise" (120). When horror is compared to a popular American icon, it becomes even more gruesome. "His corpse in the body bag was probably like hamburger" (102).

The duality of infantile deception and mature but searing knowledge, not only in Sam but as a feature of American life, is sustained throughout the novel. Irene, Sam's mother, points out to her that it was country boys who believed the Vietnam rhetoric. One of those country boys was Dwayne Hughes, Sam's father, and some of this naivete comes through in his letters and diary. But these same country boys, including Dwayne, were also guilty of unspeakable horrors "some of them cut off the ears of the enemy for souvenirs. It was awful. They brought them home and showed them off" (123). And it is not only individuals who combine such infantile naivete with willful destruction, but the nation as a whole.

"That explains what the whole country was doing over there. The least little threat and America's got to put on its cowboy boots and stomp around and show somebody a thing or two" (221).

Even more perversely, this immature culture seems bent on turning, in retrospect, its war horrors into playthings like plastic “M-16s and M-60s, tanks, mortars, choppers, fighters” (112). This American syndrome appears to go back much further than Vietnam and will not stop at desecrating history by turning it into farce for consumer purposes. As Sam is taking a trip through the years trying to read her father’s diary, she is obscenely approached by a stranger.

The man was wearing a Confederate - flag
T-shirt that said I’M A REBEL AND
DAMN PROUD OF IT (201).

But even as Sam keeps bumping into such naive horrors, she continues to live in a world where junk food, shopping malls and, flashy ceramic cats are substitutes for meaningful relationships.

In the context of the over-all structure of the novel, Sam’s petty experiences are invariably weighed down by overtones. Her uncle Emmett, another Vietnam veteran, digs up the foundation of the house to fix a leak saying:

“You take a structural weakness. One thing leads to another, and then it all falls apart” (60).

The apocalyptic message here may be a far cry from the fire and brimstone jargon of the early New Englanders, but the message is just as viable. Booth calls this novel “a lament for America in the aftermath of Vietnam” (100). Mason’s denunciations are not of moral laxity, for her

characters “grapple less with problems of right and wrong than with matters of technological progress and utility” (Brinkmeyer, 22). Although she does not denounce Biblical sins with resounding Biblical language, the landscape she presents so matter-of-factly is one of moral apathy, one which possesses “the geography of a ‘waste land’” (Booth, 99).

Sam thought about how it used to be that getting pregnant when you weren't married ruined your life because of the disgrace; now it just ruined your life, and nobody cared enough for it to be a disgrace (103).

If Hopewell, America in miniature, abounds with “cultural confusion” (Brinkmeyer, 23), is it any wonder if such behavior is transposed on to the government and a Vietnam war is fought?

Such knowledge will not, however, carry with it a solution. Sam may have, unlike her mother and uncle, doggedly pursued facts, but she has also discovered that facts can be hopelessly inadequate:

She thought of all the documents on file there that were connected to her--her parents' wedding license, birth certificates, death certificates. She wished she had copies of all these official proofs that she was who she was, but it was a silly thought (96).

History whether personal or national cannot be understood by facts alone. "The books didn't say what it was like to be at war over there" (48). Since there are as many Vietnam stories as there are veterans, Sam concludes that history and a historical persona have many facets and will therefore remain elusive.

Not only is history not reversible, it is bound to repeat itself. In a fit of impatient indignation Emmett blows up at Sam,

"You can't learn from the past. The main thing you learn from history is that you can't learn from history. That's what history *is*" (226).

Whatever healing is offered the veterans remains something less than potent. The official and qualified V.A. with all their technological gimmicks remain as inept as Sam with her good-natured but amateur gestures. The hurts of the veterans remain as complicated and irreversible as Buddy Mangrum's failing health and his child's birth defects. Again closing the circle between self and other, the soldiers of *both* sides are referred to, in a touch of Shakespearean irony, as insects. If the Vietnamese are called "fleas" or "ants", the fact remains that one of the main American protagonists is also named Emmett or ant. The self is inextricably linked with the other. Although the Vietnamese are more in the background, there are repeated indications that the unjust killings and the consequent degeneration of mind and body were mutual experiences. At one point, the inevitable interaction between self and other is referred to in mundane, perhaps even comic terms.

The Vietnamese used anything the Americans threw away--bomb casings and cigarette butts and helicopter parts and Coke cans. It was like Emmett rigging up things in the house. It was Vietnamese behavior ... making do with what he could scrounge. The Vietnamese could make a bomb out of a Coke can.

Emmett had helped kill those Vietnamese, the same way he killed the fleas, the same way people killed ants. It was easy, her father wrote (209).

If ultimate truth is not knowable and the mistakes of history inescapable, where then does Sam's quest lead? Subdued by her new found wisdom, "she will never really know what happened to all these men in the war" (204), Sam, her uncle and grandmother, three Vietnam "casualties" end up at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington. But what is the memorial? Barbara Ryan asks "Is the memorial the homage of a grateful government or a symbol of wasted lives and a war fought for unknown causes?" (210) Mason is careful to give multiple views of the monument. It is "a gleaming pencil against the sky" (238), "a black gash in the hillside," "a giant grave" (239). Architecturally it is ironically similar to an American icon, "the white wings of the shopping mall in Paducah" (240). To keep up its sombre appearance, the memorial stands in constant need of touch-ups. The words "NEVER AGAIN" (241) seen in its proximity will most certainly be hollowed out by the shortness of human memory.

Eventually the memorial is something of an abstraction. It "cuts a V in the ground, like the wings of an abstract bird, huge and headless" (239) while Dwayne Hughes' name is "A scratching on a rock. Writing. Something for future archaeologists to puzzle over, clues to a language" (244). The memorial then stands as a stylized edifice to unanswerable questions burying within itself the facts and the fantasy, the confrontation and the escapism, and the guilt shared by the self and other, but ultimately it resolves nothing. Although critics have referred to Emmett's phoenix-like renewal at the site (Booth, Brinkmeyer), healing and hope both remain as fragile as the limp carnation and geraniums brought to the black structure.

As a modernist novel, *In Country* has raised rather than answered questions, and it brings its stock of unanswerables to the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. In its failure to provide answers the memorial in turn is not only in the modernist tradition but at the very heart of American culture. As a stylized edifice to unanswerables, the memorial relates directly to the American tradition. Isn't *The Scarlet Letter* with its stock of unanswerables one of the most stylized novels ever written?

Notes

1. See by way of example, *Morrissey* (Fall 1991), *Durham* (Spring 1990) and *White* (Summer 1988).
2. See *Ryan* (Spring 1990) for a different handling of the question of self and other in this novel.

The Dilemma of Pragmatics

Abstract

F. de Saussure's langue/parole distinction cannot be abolished without serious logical and philosophical consequences. E. Coseriu's concept of norm (*The Theory of Language and General Linguistics*, Madrid, 1967) as an intermediary between langue and parole is discussed. It is argued that N. Chomsky's competence/performance opposition obscures linguistic reality. The role of pragmatics in the study of language is stressed.