

## Bard of the Viets

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Illustration: Damien Chavanat

### **The Committed**

Viet Thanh Nguyen  
Grove Press: 2021

It took fifty years and a circuitous route through exile and a mix of Asian and colonial cultures for Vietnam to get its bard. The Homeric voice comes not from the north, which has produced plenty of good writers, including Bao Ninh and Nguyen Huy Thiep. Not from the south, with Le Ly Hayslip and Truong Nhu Tang. And not from the West, with narrators ranging from Graham Greene to Tim O'Brien. It was a DP, a displaced person, who finally gave us the panoptic view from above (or below) that pans through all the folly, depravity, hypocrisy and terror that took Viet Nam—the land of the southern Viets—and changed the country's name into a misspelled synonym for war.

Viet Thanh Nguyen, whose name means true-blue Vietnamese or the voice of Vietnam, has produced in the first two parts of a planned trilogy—*The Sympathizer*, published in 2015, and *The Committed*, published six years later—an extended commentary on the origins and aftermath of the Vietnam tragedy. He sets the scene on the main stage of colonialism, where the tenacious Viets, after freeing themselves from a thousand years of Chinese rule, make quick work of their successors, the French and the Americans, leaving the Viets free to bungle their own postcolonial destiny.

Nguyen's novels are kaleidoscopic confessions that function at their most basic level as spy stories. The hero, aka the Captain or Vo Danh, which means nameless or anonymous and who is

also known as the Crazy Bastard, because he is the Eurasian offspring of a French priest and the Vietnamese maid whom he refused to elevate to the status of mistress, is a ‘secret policeman for the Special Branch’ who tortures Viet Cong prisoners by day, while working at night as a double agent for the Communists. Vietnam during the war was crawling with spies, and the Captain is modelled on the greatest of them all, Pham Xuan An, who was a quadruple agent who worked at various times for the French *deuxième bureau*, Edward Lansdale’s CIA, the North Vietnamese Communists and South Vietnam’s Office of Political, Cultural, and Social Research, the spy shop that Ngo Dinh Diem ran out of his Presidential Palace. The likeness is complete down to the use of invisible ink and schooling in southern California. But Nguyen gives his hero wider scope by putting him on the staff of a general in the army of the Republic of Vietnam who flees to California at the end of the war in 1975.

The General opens a liquor store in Los Angeles and organises a brigade of revanchist Rambos who will reinvade Vietnam across the Laos border and free the POWs who are being held there. The part about the POWs is not true, but the part about reinvading Vietnam is true. Lieutenant Colonel ‘Bo’ Gritz, the most-decorated Green Beret of the Vietnam War and the real-life model for Rambo, led a group of mercenaries on two failed raids into Laos at the behest of actors Clint Eastwood (Dirty Harry), William Shatner (Captain Kirk) and Ronald Reagan, who at the time was starring in the biggest role of his life, president of the United States of America. Texas billionaire Ross Perot would finance another twenty attempts to refight the Vietnam War and win it. (The virus of regret is so long lasting that we last saw its symptoms displayed during the failed coup of 6 January 2021, when the flag of the former Republic of Vietnam—a country that ceased to exist almost fifty years ago—was paraded through the halls of the US Congress alongside the battle flag of the Confederacy—a country that ceased to exist more than a hundred and fifty years ago.)

The Captain is sent on his suicide mission to Laos by the General, who wants him killed for diddling his daughter, but instead of being killed, the Captain and his blood brother Bon are captured and thrown into a Vietnamese re-education camp. Here the Captain is tortured into writing the confession that we hold in our hands as Part I of Nguyen’s trilogy. His torturer is Man, the third blood brother in this thesis and antithesis that will eventually resolve itself into some sort of synthesis. (Bon, which means good in French and another dozen things in Vietnamese, including difficult path and displacement, is a rabid anti-communist. Man is a diehard revolutionary, while the Captain is a Communist sympathiser who has given up on communism. Named with Homeric epithets, Nguyen’s characters embody ideas that wrestle each other in perpetual agon.

Nguyen writes what academics call transnational literature—stories that conduct conversations across time zones and cultures, but in Nguyen’s case, he is also jabbering away with dead people, historical figures and ghosts. A PhD from Berkeley with a love for American literature (Ralph Ellison figures prominently in his writing, and the novelist’s son is named Ellison), Nguyen is a great borrower from the canon, lifting literary themes, playing with them, punning, spoofing. His jokes alone will keep graduate students busy for years. In the acknowledgements to his novels, he lists his sources for these rocambolesque romps through world literature and the history of ideas.

*The Sympathizer* thanks the key figures who informed Nguyen about the Vietnam War, which he knows mainly from books, having been born in the Central Highlands town of Ban Me Thuot in 1971. Four years later he was fleeing Vietnam with his parents and older brother to a

refugee camp in Fort Indiantown, Pennsylvania. His parents, Vietnamese Catholics, were double refugees, having already fled North Vietnam in 1954, at the end of the First Indochina War. Nguyen spent three years with a foster family in Pennsylvania before being reunited with his parents in San Jose, California, where they had opened an Asian grocery store, *Moi Saigon* (New Saigon). Nguyen thanks a long list of people for their stories about Vietnam, including David Butler, Larry Engelmann, James Fenton, Dirck Halstead, Charles Henderson, Tiziano Terzani and Frank Snepp. For his characters' knowledge of torture, he thanks Douglas Valentine's *The Phoenix Program*, Alfred McCoy's *A Question of Torture* and Truong Nhu Tang's *A Vietcong Memoir*. The list goes on for another page, but we know already that this novelist is a sponge and spinner.

Nguyen's acknowledgements in *The Committed* are equally extensive, but they have shifted with the terrain, since the story by now has moved from southern California in the 1970s to Paris in 1981, where Bon and the Captain have been resettled after escaping from Vietnam as boat people and spending two years in an Indonesian refugee camp. Nguyen begins his acknowledgements by thanking 'the thinkers who have influenced me over the years, or to whom I wanted to respond'. The list includes cultural theorists, Marxist philosophers, Communist ideologues, feminist critics and revolutionary practitioners. The first paragraph includes Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, Simone de Beauvoir, Walter Benjamin, Aimé Césaire, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Franz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci, Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Paul Sartre and Voltaire.

*The Committed* opens with an epigraph on negation—which is Nguyen's great white whale—a quote from Rithy Panh, a survivor of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge killing fields: 'Nothing's more real than nothing'. In the opening line of the novel we are introduced to an 'ark' of boat people who are 'less than nothing'. The novel plays on Ho Chi Minh's exhortation, '*Nothing* is more precious than independence and freedom'. The hero, following his stint in a Vietnamese re-education camp, has learned to read this statement with an emphasis on the first word. Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom. The final words of our 'revolutionary in search of a revolution'—our nameless, anonymous hero aka the Captain—revolve around his being forced to stare 'into the disturbing space of the negative'. This includes Vietnam's authoritarian state, where the Captain has learned 'how a revolution fought for independence and freedom could make these things *worth less than nothing*'.

'The only revolution you can commit to is the one that lets you laugh and laugh and laugh, because the downfall of every revolution is when it loses its sense of absurdity,' he concludes. 'This, too, is the dialectic, to take the revolution seriously but not to take the revolutionaries seriously, for when revolutionaries take themselves too seriously, they cock their gun at the crack of a joke.'

*The Committed* is full of jokes at which a gun could be cracked. The hapless Captain begins his refugee life in Paris cleaning toilets in the Delights of Asia, the city's 'worst Asian restaurant'. He advances to selling drugs to the anti-communist Vietnamese who resettled in France after 1954 and to the French intellectuals and students who occupy the other end of the political spectrum. The Captain is an equal-opportunity opportunist, good at slithering out of situations where people, sometimes for good reason, want to kill him. His story is filled with chase scenes, narrow escapes and the cross-cultural bonding that results from his accidentally assuming leadership of Paris's Asian drug cartel, which used to be run by Chinese river pirates from the marshes outside Saigon. After the pirates are killed by the rival Algerian gang, the

Captain himself is about to give up the ghost, when he and the Algerians realise that they suffered for years under the heel of the same French boot.

The appearance of drugs in Nguyen's novel is no accident. Another name appearing in his acknowledgements is that of Alfred McCoy, who began as a graduate student at Yale documenting the drug trade in Southeast Asia. The French, like the British in India and China, financed their Southeast Asian empire through drug running and addicting the local population to opium. The CIA, with its fleet of Air America planes and military suppliers, picked up the business. By the end of the Vietnam War, the US was plying its soldiers with speed, steroids and painkillers, as well as the ubiquitous cannabis, opium and heroin. 'We couldn't have financed the government without selling opium to the natives!', says a character in the novel about France's Indochinese administration. 'Now that was an effective business model. Vertical integration and horizontal monopolization meant we had total market control.'

To understand the history of the Vietnam War, Nguyen has to go back to its roots, back to colonialism, European expansion into the Third World, global capitalism and the liberation movements that swept over Asia and then caught fire in North Africa before France lost the Algerian war in 1962. Colonialism is the 'dancing partner' of capitalism, he says. The Captain defines colonialism as an 'exploitive and murderous system of domination, theft, and embezzlement', which sounds better in French, when 'dubbed *la mission civilisatrice*'.

Along with colonialism, *The Committed* analyses what it means to be a capitalist, which our hero defines as 'a legalised criminal who targets thousands, if not millions, and feels no shame for his plunder'. (Think of the Sackler family with their profits from opioid addiction now safely tucked into offshore accounts.) One should consider as well 'the Chinese and Vietnamese varieties of capitalism', represented by the novel's Vietnamese-Chinese drug boss, who practises 'gangster capitalism', which is actually the piratical, original form of capitalism, in 'contrast to American cowboy capitalism and French cosmopolitan capitalism'.

The novel also comments extensively on communism and the party that pretends to represent its ideals. In this case, the Captain suggests engraving on the pedestal of Ho Chi Minh's statue the epigraph: 'Now that we are powerful, we don't need the French or the Americans to fuck us over—We can fuck ourselves just fine.'

For those who believe that the Second Indochina War was a cocky mistake by Americans who figured they could refight the French war and win it, *The Committed* does a splendid job of inscribing this tragic mistake in the colonial context it deserves. The novel explains what is otherwise inexplicable: American hubris, its colonial pretensions, and even the misbegotten methods it employed to subdue a native population that after a thousand years of fighting the Chinese and a hundred years of fighting the French would make quick work of the brutal but bungling Americans.

Viet Thanh Nguyen dismisses what he calls 'middle-brow literary realism' in favour of European modernism. He has infected US literature with thinking and mongrelised it with a refugee's voracious borrowing from the first, second, third and every other world he has passed through. This is fancy stuff, beyond the ken of many emocore critics and people who like their literary genres straight up. But Nguyen has outrun them. After picking up a Pulitzer Prize and a MacArthur 'genius' award, he now sits on the Pulitzer jury, writes a column for the *New York Times* and wields a spreadsheet to organise all the claims on his attention as a 'public intellectual' (a term he finds a tad pretentious).

The critics were gobsmacked when Nguyen—after being rejected by thirteen publishers before finding one who was mixed race—brought out his first novel. A refugee who had grown up speaking Vietnamese in a San Jose grocery store was running rings around the homegrown talent. He was doing the police in different voices. Hell, he was doing the police in different languages and in words beyond language. As the Captain tells a fictional Francis Ford Coppola, whom he is advising during the filming of a fictional *Apocalypse Now*, the Vietnamese do not scream AIIIIIIIIII!!! when dying. They yell AIEYAAHHH!!! (The chest note produced by swapping *E* for *H* gives a far more dignified death rattle.) Instead of writing bodice rippers, crime novels, thrillers, spy stories and war stories one at a time, Nguyen was tessellating all these literary genres into a fantasia at once comedic and profound.

Nguyen's two novels provide the most extended exegesis yet to be offered on the Vietnam War, its roots in French colonialism, the rise of Vietnamese nationalism, the allure and corruption of communism and the final victory of capitalism as it flattens the world into a craving for consumer culture. Does this sound like the recipe for ponderous tomes? It could be, if Nguyen were not having so much fun skewering pretentious filmmakers, ARVN revanchists, corrupt politicians, Communist apparatchiks and drug-running spooks. He is a brilliant satirist, targeting everyone from Hollywood filmmakers to French *philosophes*, including Bernard-Henri Lévy, another 'public intellectual', who appears in *The Committed* as a sybaritic dandy. Thomas Pynchon excels at this kind of cultural criticism punctuated by gunfights and trippy parties, but Nguyen does it better. He and his family have lived these experiences, and he comes from an oral, tonal culture that sings these tales from memory. The narrator is 'my alter ego who emerged from inside of me and who by now has a life of his own', Nguyen told an audience at the New York Y, during a book tour event in March.

'I'm pretty sure a lot of Vietnamese people don't like me,' he said. The communists hate him for attacking their failed revolution, now ossified into an authoritarian state. Former ARVN soldiers and Republican refugees hate him for mocking their failed attempts at refighting the Vietnam war. And the Vietnamese who want to forget that they are Vietnamese and pass as full-blooded citizens of France or the United States hate him for reminding them that 'nothing ever dies', as Nguyen titled the scholarly work that was published between his two novels. In other words, there is no escaping the memory of war no matter how hard people shut their eyes and pretend to be free of history. (This truth is being rediscovered today in the United States during a sickening upwelling of anti-Asian violence.)

'*The Sympathizer* was about American imperialism. *The Committed* is about colonization. It is more of a Vietnam war novel,' Nguyen said at the Y event. And the third novel? 'I guess I'm allowed to reveal it,' he said. 'The hero will make amends and seek revenge.'

The one thing that brings all the Vietnamese together—left, right, communist, capitalist—is musical variety shows. The most famous of these is *Paris by Night*, which combines modern pop stars with traditional folk songs, one-act plays and vaudeville sketches. In Nguyen's trilogy, this kind of variety show is called *Fantasia*. Lana, the general's daughter and the Captain's love interest, is the featured star who performs what the Vietnamese call yellow music—romantic love songs that are banned in Vietnam in favour of 'blood-stirring red music'. The Vietnamese at home have found ways to route around these strictures, while the Vietnamese scattered throughout the world turn out *en masse* to see these romantic revues. Perhaps in volume three of Nguyen's trilogy, the Crazy Bastard will join the lovely Lana as MC of *Fantasia*, disguised as an

ageing Communist crooner, while seeking revenge on Cholon gangsters, ARVN generals, Communist apparatchiks and all the other people in this world who can't take a joke.