

THE BOOK REVIEW

SUNDAY, AUGUST 8, 1982

LOS ANGELES TIMES

THE UNFINISHED WAR

VIETNAM AND THE AMERICAN CONSCIENCE by Walter H. Capps (Beacon: \$12.95)



Photo by John Kelmis; montage by Donald Burgess

I picked up somewhere—it must have been as a little kid at the knee of an intimidating adult—the notion that human maturity was another word for perfect. I'm now among the many who've had to adjust to the sadder reality that coming of age is in fact coming to terms with one's physical, mental and moral limitations—with what you are, what you can be, and what you'll doubtlessly never be, like it or not. While maintaining the quest for improvement, maturity must include graceful accommodation to creaturely imperfection, a sighing resignation to one's shortcomings. Cast in theological terms, it's to rely finally not upon ourselves but upon the savior of divine forgiveness. I think to deny mortal flaws is to court a despair that lasts as long as breath.

These things can also be said about the world's nations attaining maturity, and Walter Capps explores similar ideas as the United States tries even now to extricate itself from its terribly traumatic coming of age in Vietnam.

Where has Vietnam left us? Not only, says Capps, with a national of psychically scarred, uncomprehending veterans

(some shamed by their defeat, some shamed by their involvement), but with the conscience-stricken nation itself still split down the middle. One camp calls for a more contemplative orientation toward human life, and a more benign American role in it. The other chafes to re-establish vibrant, vigorous and unrepentant American resolve through a reawakening of religious and political conservatism.

And whither America? Are we, in our chagrin, to fall back into an arrogant adolescence, a blustering defensive posture that itches for a nuclear shootout? Or can we grow up healed and whole, at peace at last with ourselves and with the world we share?

Though Capps is impressively conversant with his subject and its literature (he has directed Santa Barbara's Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and is now a professor of religious studies at UC Santa Barbara), he cannot foretell which future awaits us. But in this admirably non-strident study of the "consequent malaise" of Vietnam he has posed the questions with thoughtful precision and clarity.

How the war's veterans and their families will recover (if they do) from either the casualties of combat or the unprecedented social punishment inflicted upon them is problem enough. Henry Kissinger tells them the Vietnam War was "a terrible tragedy" in which the United States should never have gotten involved, and a one-armed survivor of a battle near Tam Ky is told by a stranger in Denver who observes the wound: "Serves

Reviewed by Huston Horn

you right." For such people the war remains unfinished as long as there are Vietnam-related suicides, criminality, family disintegration and physical reactions to Agent Orange.

But whether the two Americas we live in can ever be reconciled—can ever find together an equanimity of middle age—is more gravely troubling still. Many, for example, hear the voice of unassailable reason (maturity?) in the words of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.: "It would seem to me," he said not long ago, "that the lesson of Viet-

nam is that our motives aren't all that different from those of any other country, and that there are limits to our power and our virtue, and that we're not omnipotent and we're not omniscient, and that we must, instead of trying to run the world, try to define where our vital interests lie and concentrate our powers and concerns there."

A little progress there, one might sense, from the time a Washington official declared that other nations have "interests" whereas the United States has "a sense of responsibility." But such a stance of measured humility and confidence is seen by the religious Right (and plenty of others not so religious, but equally Right) as a perfidious abrogation of America's biblically enjoined commission. And that is? To drive from the face of the earth the Anti-Christ, whose deceptive coloration nowadays is godless Communism and such related sins of the flesh as homosexuality, deteriorating family life (men doing the cooking), abortion-on-demand and the ERA.

Never mind that Ho Chi Minh was once perceived by the U.S. State Department as a lover of human liberty one might favorably compare to Patrick Henry. It is just such devils God has in mind, the fundamentalists tell us, and America's divine assignment is to obliterate them—or be obliterated for apostasy. Our faltering resolve in Vietnam was not because of increasing second thoughts that we had possibly launched ourselves on a misguided mission; rather it was because we lacked godly fortitude. It is high time the rascals were shown we are made of better stuff than that!

One may not take that highly dubious, favored-nation theology seriously, but one is warned to take those who espouse it seriously—and then some. But while we're talking Bible, let's recall that puffed-up Jonah was disabused by Yahweh himself of such narrow, self-serving nationalism centuries ago. All the same, something deep in the national psyche still resonates

A company in combat: progress inch by inch, survival by the second, character under fire

THE 13TH VALLEY by John M. Del Vecchio (Bantam: \$15.95)

Vietnam, 1970—six years after U.S. military intervention. The Tet Offensive and My Lai massacre are history. Lyndon Johnson has stepped down. Vietnamization begun. In less than three years the last American soldier will depart this faraway place where once more than a half million had served. The war is winding down.

But not for Company A of the 101st Airborne. This expert infantry unit is bellies its way—inches by waxy inches—in the Khe Ta Laoi Valley in central Vietnam

where South ends and North begins. The transport helicopters that dropped Company A at the landing zone are heading back to home base. The company is alone.

Reviewed by Ralph B. Sippel

Somewhere in the dark are an unknown number of North Vietnamese regulars, defenders of a major supply depot. Guns and food are being shipped through an elaborate network of tunnels under the valley

floor. Alpha Company's job is to break it up. Its incursion into enemy territory is the narrative skeleton of a 600-page first novel, a book the author has taken great care to flesh out.

Packed around realistic combat sequences are, among other things, whole sections of Vietnamese history extending back 5,000 years; a series of updated topographical maps of the combat area showing the progress of the assault; flashbacks to the civilian lives of various company members, and an extensive glossary of military acronyms and vernacular propping entry to the world of "boonies" at Khe Ta Laoi.

Becoming familiar with army jargon such as "dink," "redball," "frag," "Jody," "boocoo" is to better understand the involuntary but abiding camaraderie of men in

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InVerse

In Denise Levertov's *Candles in Babylon* (New Directions \$12.95, hardcover; \$5.95, paperback), the best poems are about pigs, the worst about poetry. What's in between is too often meaninglessly "poetic."

*We knew nothing of risk
only the sacred pleasure
of sun and sand and the
beckoning ocean*

"Sacred" here merely gives "pleasure" an austerity foreign to its usual sense. As a buzz word it donates romantic pur-

Reviewed by Kenneth Funtun

ity to the occasion at the beach. But "beckoning ocean" is even worse. How does an ocean beckon?

Other showpiece phrases include "the mountains of your mind," "solitary lovers in infinite arid" and "desire hungers."

Levertov's poems inhabit varied territory—and aside from their bad technique—variety may be why "Candles in Babylon" falls as enjoyable reading. Books of poems should give us the same cover-to-cover unity as books of prose. Reader and poet both gain from an author's dedication to one purpose.

Unfortunately, the quest for such book-length intactness is arduous to follow. Too often, we find assembled best of poems covers the uninspiring exercises of a revered poet's most recent decade. *Candles in Babylon* collects many fine individual poems, together they may not give unity.

Our quest is better satisfied by a gigantic anthology, such as *Arizona Anthem*, edited by Blair Mouton. *Arizona Anthem* (Minneapolis: Poems, 6249 Levee Road, Suite 200, Scottsdale, Ariz. 85253: \$45, illustrated), which uses the glue of state to unite picture and poem, people and place.

Even a few poetry magazines offer greater unity than many books. *River Styx* (Big River Assn., 7420 Cornell, St. Louis, Mo. 63130: \$3.50, paperback) collects contents around a mythopoeic theme—such as "Roads and Paths" or "The Elements"—so that each poem adds to and further explores the one topic.

Semidiat (Box 129, Richmond, Va. 05476: \$15, paperback) offers thin single-poet pamphlets as issues. Many are about the writer's regular—rent-paying—employ. "Corporate Security" by Dorothea Condry, a secretary, and "It's a Job" by Duane Davis, a former-social-services caseworker, have made lively examples recently.

Sometimes, outside of rare magazines and anthologies, the satisfying full-length book of poems arrives.

The Mud Actor by Cyrus Cassells (Holt, Rinehart & Winston: \$14.50, hardcover; \$7.95, paperback) is one, defined by its author's search for a usable past. Personal history, childhood and family lore are explored. Finally a

visionary experience in Hiroshima brings Cassells this realization: "He is the reincarnation of a Japanese civilian killed in the 1945 atomic blast. In this, the poet finds hope and the reality of world brotherhood—since 'not one consciousness was destroyed' and 'everything in life is resurrection'."

Denise Cooper's *The Tenderness of the Wolves* (The Crossing Press, Trumansburg, N.Y. 14886: \$11.95, hardcover; \$4.95, paperback) is also so unified, giving focus to child homosexuality, high school and mass murder. With disturbing nonchalance, his language exalts the rubricness of the world we live in: "I sculpt/a hug into raping. I completely unravel his talent." As finely crafted as any book this year—and as powerful.

Birth of a Poet by William Everson (Black Sparrow: \$14, hardcover; \$10, paperback) is not a book of poems but a series of meditations on the poetic vocation. Transcribed from lectures given at UC Santa Cruz, it makes thought-provoking reading.

Everson—who for nearly 20 years was known as Brother Antoninus—states: "Beauty is wholeness," and with wholeness arrives the holy, "the point where God is."

True. No coincidence then that both Cooper and Cassells intertwine their poems with a question Everson considers essential: "Why does God permit evil?"

Cassells' answer involves reincarnation, but Cooper's response is more inventive. His God is irritated by "our" world's quotidian evils—rape, murder and mutilation—but prefers not to meddle. In Cooper, God a Libertarian, alternately bored, confused and incensed about events below Him. He rarely acts; consequently, to the puny and parents on earth. He is known only via "vague" idea.

Cooper's by Theodore Weiss (Macmillan: \$11.95, hardcover; \$5.95, paperback), we witness the deterioration of that once clear idea—ironically through the eyes of a figure in a deteriorating Italian fresco.

The medieval figure in the painting—who speaks almost this entire 62-page poem—can remember how God fashioned "men, His breath sealed in, like song/within a pipe, a clay-pitched, chirping/bird." But the present day, says the figure—by turning our eyes away from the One—has lost God's song and knows only "the truth in His extreme torment, 'the terror of our emptiness.'"

Even Denise Levertov addresses "a former-shivering God" in a closing poem as "spark, or remote light," comparing Him to the lamb, "this perverse/weak/animal, whose muzzles's nudging/suppose there is milk to be found in us?"

These examples may show only the simplicity of our poets' notions. Or perhaps they remind us to pause, to examine our own simple notions about wholeness, unity and God?

Funtun and Holly Prado alternate as "In Verse" contributing critics.

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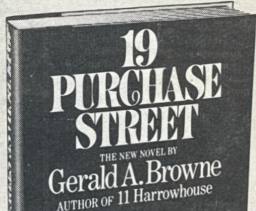
—Barbara A. Bannon, Publishers Weekly

"...a bestseller if ever I saw one. Ingenious..."

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—John Barkham Reviews

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'Unfinished War'

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to religious calls to patriotism, and Capps can assert that the irresolution of Vietnam and the chastening side effects have created Jerry Falwell's success.

It is a silly grown man who forgets his own impurities and who expects (and depends on) the best from every one. It is a silly grown nation which does the same. The mature in both cases search for a middle ground of reality between (as Capps says) the

impulses of a too-innocent Eden and the expectations of an apocalyptic Armageddon.

Concludes Capps: "A world so easily divisible into such absolute contrasts is already severely fragmented. The real issue is whether healing can occur and wholeness be discovered before the trauma of the unfinished war is reenacted."

Horn, an Episcopal priest, is the director of the Catech Y in Pasadena (and does the cooking at home).

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