theories and methodologies

The Sympathizer: A Dialectical Reading

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VIET THANH NGUYEN'S AWARD-WINNING NOVEL, *THE SYMPATHIZER*, INTERPELLATES AN INTERNAL VIETNAMESE READER ALONGSIDE AN American (or Anglo) reader through a dialectical appeal subsequently developed into a complex plot. The novel simultaneously demolishes the legitimacy of the American dream and that of the revolutionary communist one. Nguyen launches this two-sided attack with ironic digs whose target oscillates between Americans and Vietnamese. The critique begins lightheartedly when the Vietnamese-born, communist narrator concedes that the English of his American friend from the Central Intelligence Agency, Claude, is excellent—a point the narrator makes "only because the same could not be said" of Claude's fellow Americans (5). In the same disarming manner, he notes, "Even if" the narrator's Vietnamese compatriots "found themselves in Heaven," they "would find occasion to remark that this was not as warm as Hell" (24). Then he turns back to "America," which "would not be satisfied until it locked every nation of the world into a full nelson and made it cry Uncle Sam" (29). What quickly becomes evident is that the plot (and perhaps the point) is the narration. In an extraordinary formalist feat (or coincidence), the narrative illustrates the materialist dialectic as proposed by Marx and Engels (122–38). The narrator's confession, which frames the novel, becomes linked to his material reality in an extreme and vivid form when the narrator is imprisoned and consequently generates the narrative from the knowledge that his bruised body allows his mind to piece together. He incarnates, in his slippery and changeable identity, the essence of social reality: dynamism. This dynamism, as the subject (and hope) of Marx and Engels's theorization, illustrates through Nguyen's vertiginous plot the Marxian dialectic. The dialectic holds that opposites—as Hegel pointed out—inhere in one another and that the process of change occurs through transformation of quantity to quality. It also shows, dramatically, how the law of the negation of negation operates. These aspects of the dialectic are cleverly developed through a process that

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PMLA 133.2 (2018), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.2.388 Published online by Cambridge University Press

implicates the reader and is nothing short of brilliant, recalling the poem that opens Charles Baudelaire's collection *Les fleurs du mal* (*Flowers of Evil*), "Au lecteur" ("To the Reader"), at the end of which the poet addresses his reader as an "[h]ypocrite" ("hypocrite") while also resembling him and being his "frère" ("brother").[1] Although Nguyen's narrator does not reach out to the reader in this type of direct address, he does establish complicity with the reader through the use of metaphor and revelations in the plot.[2]

Paradoxically, Nguyen's two-way critique is linked to the ability to see the other side and to sympathize with it. The ability involves an intellectual and emotional understanding of otherness: "[W]hen I say 'we' or 'us,' . . . in those moments . . . I identify with the southern soldiers and evacuees on whom I was sent to spy." The narrator links this innate ability to his being "a bastard," though he concedes that not all bastards have this predisposition (36). That essential and innate tendency to blur lines that are imposed through norms or conventions harks back to the way his Vietnamese mother blurred the line between her status as a maid and that of the white, French priest who was the narrator's father and who had sex with his mother when she was just a child. This ironic reference also makes clear to the reader the racial and cultural hybridity of the narrator and the scope of his action as he takes on a form of dynamism. Because of the narrator's natural aversion to the idea of marriage, his consequential bachelorhood "suits" his "subterranean life as a mole, who burrows better alone" (37). However, the narrator confirms he is not deprived of the ability to fall in love, something he does "two or three times a year" (39).

The above examples give a sense of the relentless irony that turns on the narrator, and it becomes a predictable aspect of the text, an aspect that the reader anticipates with growing dread and pleasure.[3] In this ironic portrayal of the narrator's identity, the French version of assimilation is brought to bear on how this process plays out when the narrator is in the United States: "If an American closed his eyes to hear me speak, he would think I was one of his kind." In fact, the narrator goes on, "[m]y vocabulary was broader, my grammar more precise than the average educated American" (7). Having attended Occidental College, in California, before returning to Vietnam and into the General's service, the narrator assimilated in a way that was not just linguistic but also eagerly cultural: "To speak . . . [a] language," wrote Frantz Fanon, that quintessential *évolué* ("assimilated colonial") from a French colony, "means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (17–18). The narrator's uneasiness toward language comes from his desire to master English as spoken in the United States and assume that country's culture alongside the ambiguities and real fear of discovery as an undercover communist. In the novel, these sources of a particular form of hybridity—here, I mean simply a mixed identity that is linked to a corollary intent of passing—subvert the novelistic form: we soon learn that the narrative is a confession, addressed to a commandant and managed by a commissar, that also refers to various other texts, some of which affect the form and our reception of the text. Whereas Graham Greene managed to bring to our attention a balancing ethical act in *The Quiet American*, Nguyen brutalizes the very notion of ethics through his monstrous "bastard" in *The Sympathizer*. Brilliant narrative coups lead back to a creative illustration of the dialectical method. But Nguyen is less interested in participating in an ethnic literature (related to immigrants) than in producing a philosophical space that emerges from a moment in history, a moment known as one of violence, war, and separation from a homeland that does not represent any kind of choice. He is also questioning the memorialization of the Vietnam War through the (imperialist) cultural mechanisms of the United States

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.2.388 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that work to validate the military reasons for the presence of so many Vietnamese in the West. Meanwhile, his ambition is clearly to surpass that memorialization in an argument that co-opts his reader to his side. Nguyen's elegance as a thinker and a writer emerges because Nguyen bypasses any discussion of his characters' disenchantment with the reality of communism in favor of an ingenious plot that dramatizes the tragedy of that reality and incarnates the structure of thought that spawned it. Remarkably, key moments of the plot are linked to a coming to consciousness through telling and, especially, writing, thus making the entire enterprise thoroughly literary. The compactness of the enterprise's totality also makes it literary, in that it implicates in the diegesis the writer (narrator) of the confession and its reader: his friend and blood brother Man, a Vietnamese communist. Any reference to the reader here or in Nguyen's text must include this internal reader.

The narrator and his two best friends, Bon and Man, bond in school through a ritual that consists of making a cut in their palms and mingling their blood. The agent from the Central Intelligence Agency, Claude, who was in Vietnam when it was a French colony, has lived through the period when his agency and Ho Chi Minh were on friendly terms. Claude presents the young narrator with a manual by an academic from the United States, Richard Hedd, entitled "Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction: Understanding and Defeating the Marxist Threat to Asia." Later in the novel, the narrator encounters Hedd in California, at a dinner organized to garner support for exiled Vietnamese to return to their country to take it back from the communists. The General and his family; the narrator, who serves the General; and the narrator's other blood brother, the anticommunist Bon—along with other Vietnamese—have remade their lives in the United States as anticommunists, after fleeing from Saigon to Guam and eventually making their home in California. Man has stayed behind in Vietnam.

The language of the novel, in keeping with the narrator's most basic preoccupation of passing, is rife with metaphor: the rain is "amniotic water bursting over the city," whereas the narrator's guitar, which the narrator has to leave behind when he leaves for Guam to escape to the United States, shows "its full, reproachful hips" on his bed. The white envelopes containing sizable tips for the servants at the General's lavish home in Saigon become "tickets to nowhere" as the fleeing masters drive away from the house (23). When Saigon is about to fall to the communists and Bon and the narrator are preparing to leave, having secured places on the plane to Guam with the General and his family, Man, Bon, and the narrator go to a bar together before their imminent separation. Bon does not know that Man, who is to remain in Vietnam, is a communist nor that the narrator is a communist spy, a mole in the General's entourage. As the three friends sing, each experiencing the moment differently, the narrator describes them as "feeling only for the past" and directing their "gaze from the future, swimmers doing the backstroke toward a waterfall" (17). Marines (Vietnamese soldiers in American marine gear) stumble out of the "vaginal darkness. . . . [E]ach showed off a spare pair of testicles" (17), which are grenades attached to their belts.

This surfeit of metaphors aligns with the narrator's constant feeling of inauthenticity, first as not a true Vietnamese but then also because, beneath this feeling, his identity as a communist somehow nullifies everything the narrator says in his narrative. For most of the plot, the character is the anticommunist General's right-hand man, but Nguyen converts his reader, in Baudelaire's terms, into a "hypocrite" and a "brother," appealing to the reader through metaphor, which depends on shared knowledge of a common language. Metaphor involves deviating from the ma-

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terial truth and requires the reader's participation to unfold. Indeed, like Baudelaire, Nguyen views "confessions," or repentance, as cowardly "lies." Baudelaire writes, "Nos péchés sont têtus, nos repentirs sont laches" ("Our sins are mulish, our confessions lies"). The sins cannot be washed away through repentance, the narrator's Catholic background notwithstanding. Hypocrisy—a quality shared between the reader and the narrator beyond metaphor—is operative once we learn the narrator's true identity as a communist, because we become complicit with the narrator when our knowledge of that identity (a knowledge that coincides with his) surpasses the other characters' knowledge (except for that of Man) in the diegesis.

The light tone with which the novel begins soon turns dark, and we sense the negation by the father of the narrator's being: "He called me nothing at all" (Nguyen 21). The narrator, acknowledging his constant performativity in the relentless play of language, remarks that, like the prostitutes he encounters in the waiting area in Guam, "performers perform at least partially to forget their sadness" (38). By the time we reach the last part of the novel, when the narrator is imprisoned and being interrogated, we have been thoroughly schooled in the contingency related to roles, power, and hierarchies and, like the reader in Baudelaire's poem, been taken through the gamut of vices: "la ménagerie infâme de nos vices" ("the disorderly circus of our vice"). The word "nothing" returns in the end as the key, "the punch line," which will then make the narrator punch himself and beat his head against the wall until he has to be tied down in his cell by the "baby-faced" guard, the commandant, and the commissar (Nguyen 370). Under interrogation, the narrator has been asked by the commissar to try to remember the one thing that he has not confessed, and the narrator's body undergoes an excruciating form of torture by bright lights and other means to prevent his mind from resting so that his torturer may elicit the confession. It is only after "nothing" has emerged as the thing not confessed that the narrator is able to finally acknowledge, in rewriting his own words to remedy his incomplete confession, "a growing sympathy for the man" in the pages he has written (372). Baudelaire and his reader—to whom his poem is addressed—know that elusive monster: "Ennui!" ("BOREDOM"). Baudelaire writes, "Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat" ("You know it well, my Reader. This obscene / beast . . ."). Ennui, a type of boredom that is linked to inertia, is—in Baudelaire's poem—cleverly also associated with cowardice in our souls, a cowardice that makes our souls sick: "C'est que notre âme, hélas, n'est pas hardie" ("it is because our souls are still too sick").[4] In Nguyen's novel, the self-irony is softened only when the narrator is copying out what he has already written and when he therefore has enough distance from his discourse to acknowledge the full sense of his inaction and can recognize himself in his text as he takes the role of its reader. And in subsequently writing the additional scene of his torture, he feels sympathy for his friend Man, who "was my interrogator but also my confidant; he was the fiend who had tortured me but also my friend" (374). Man has arranged for the narrator and Bon, imprisoned in the same camp, as well as Bon's relative, to escape. We learn that Man has become "the faceless man" after being burned (375), and he is unrecognizable except for his smile and his palm, marked by their childhood vow of friendship. Through this encounter, where his blood brother is transformed into his torturer, the narrator understands that the revolution he lived for "had gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard hoarding power" because "independence and freedom," ideals for which the revolutionaries fought, turned out to be the things of which their "defeated brethren" were deprived (376).

When the narrator is being interrogated, he recalls the many interrogations he has

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witnessed and in which he has participated. The commissar is convinced that the narrator is not being entirely truthful and that his confession is incomplete. He is being asked to remember something he did not put into the confession. Finally, he realizes that the lacuna involves a female communist agent who was captured and held by the General's men. Unable to give away his identity as a communist, the narrator witnessed her torture in silence. Four local policemen raped her repeatedly. A striking moment in the plot occurs when the rapists ask for her name: "My surname is Viet and my given name is Nam," she says (350). This answer is a direct reference to the title of Trinh T. Minh-ha's pseudo documentary film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), which is ostensibly composed of interviews with Vietnamese women recounting their experiences to interviewers who are offscreen. The documentary is unnerving because the women's delivery of text is hard to follow and often difficult to trust. But more significant for the film's closeness to the form of this novel, the women turn out not to be the ones who experienced what they recounted: they are Vietnamese women living in America, who, in the second half of the film, play themselves.[5]

Nguyen's clever reference to this film through the female agent catapults the episode into its philosophical framework, which posits the limits of (documentary) narrative. When the woman stops screaming, the narrator recalls, "She was staring directly at me. . . . I had the feeling she did not see me at all" (351). Whereas elsewhere the narrative is carefully crafted, here we witness its complete breakdown. In a sentence that lasts two pages, the narrator addresses his oldest friend and now agent of his own torture:

> They learned their lesson well, and so have I, so if you would please just turn off the lights . . . if you could see I have nothing left to confess . . . if some of us had not called ourselves nationalists or communists or capitalists or realists . . . if the French had never sought to civilize us . . . if the Chinese had never ruled us for a thousand years . . . if I had never been born . . . please, could you please just let me sleep? (353–54)

This rambling is set apart from the self-conscious, constructed sentences and occurs after the revelation of the horrific rape, which the narrator witnessed. The commandant comes in to assert that the narrator is as guilty of rape as those who watched the rape of Vietnam and did nothing. The narrator finally admits that he is guilty of the "thing" he "had not done" (357): "nothing." This term leads back to the formative moment for his unstable identity when his father called him "nothing," and it returns to the monstrousness of the "Ennui" described by Baudelaire, who, in an ultimate metaphor, "rêve d'échafauds, en fumant son hookah" ("dreams of the guillotine, while smoking his hookah"; my trans.).[6] The narrative firmly links the hybrid's position—which is not of his making—to the accomplishment of monstrosity that, for its part, requires his agency, which does "nothing." Further, the references to the film hybridize the story itself in the sense that Trinh's documentary, which contains the key for unlocking our full understanding of the narrative, completes and complicates the diegesis by drawing it out to a different storytelling process.

A similar narrative feat occurs through the protagonist's stint as the consultant for *The Hamlet*, a Hollywood film on the Vietnam War. The reference is to Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, which comes from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The narrator, as a native of Vietnam, is supposed to act as a corrective to an admittedly outsider representation of Vietnamese in the film, though it is, in reality, an imperialist one. Shot in the Philippines, the film uses Vietnamese-looking actors for the main roles, while crowd scenes are peopled by Vietnamese refugees, whom the narrator has to manage. Nguyen's rage against Coppola, the

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"Auteur" in *The Sympathizer*, about how Vietnamese are represented is latent in the novel.[7] As Nguyen recently stated, his experience of the film as a child in the United States was one of indignation: "It was an antiwar movie about the war in Vietnam, but the movie was about Americans. . . . The Vietnamese were silent and erased" (qtd. in Streitfeld). Yet Nguyen does not get carried away.

This part of the story does not simply inflict vengeance on Coppola; instead, it explores the narrator's relation to Vietnam and questions the status of homeland for the refugee. For example, in the cemetery on the film's vast set, the narrator arranges for one of the gravestones to be dedicated to his mother, and he provides a picture of her to be inserted next to her name on the stone. His effort to make the film better, to give his people a voice in it, transforms the artificial setting into a space for authentic feeling—he even robustly opposes the Auteur's inclusion in the film of a scene in which a young girl is raped by four men from the Viet Cong. But, like any questioning of rape in the narrator's real life, it amounts to "nothing," and the scene is shot in his absence: "They owned the means of production, and therefore the means of representation, and the best that we could ever hope for was to get a word in edgewise before our anonymous deaths" (Nguyen 179). This propitious moment allows Nguyen to signal the importance of thinking about the material along with the discursive by connecting the means of production with the means of representation. Before wrapping up on the set, the narrator, filled with emotion, is approaching his mother's gravestone when an explosion hurls him into the air. He is burned and needs to be hospitalized. The extras (his people) whom he had hired visit him in the hospital and confirm his fears that the explosion was ordered by the "Auteur," who hates him and hates being challenged by a mere native. The lengthy section in the Philippines, the details on the film's shooting, the narrator's emotional reaction to the cinematic choices made by the Auteur—all work to undo the adulation of Coppola in American popular culture and by cinephiles the world over. Nguyen cleverly uses this section to insert the representation of the Vietnam War, the depiction of American heroism, and the paucity of Vietnamese self-representation into the critical framework of the novel. But he also reveals the Vietnamese refugees to be as easily changeable (from anticommunists to Viet Cong) when they eagerly torture and rape as actors. In this way, he remains true to the double critique lightheartedly made at the start of the novel.

The narrator's rumination at the end of *The Sympathizer* marks the novel's ethical stand: "while nothing is more precious than independence and freedom, *nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom*" (375). These reflections are possible only after the narrator has confessed his inaction while observing the rape of the female communist agent. In the film, the narrator tries to intervene in the rape, telling the Auteur that the rape need not be shown so graphically, but the narrator finds out in this and many other instances that he has no agency in the decision making. The Auteur is God. The first version of the quotation is from Ho, a quotation that could incite a person to die in serving the ideals of independence and freedom. But its mischievous echo now invites an uneasy ambiguity because of the "also" and because of the new meaning of "nothing." It picks up from the narrator's inaction and suggests that revolutionaries lapse into ennui and could, sooner or later, put baser things above those same ideals, thus making the elevation of baser things "worth less than nothing" (376), whereby even "nothing" then could take on a value greater than what a complete lapse in ethics reduces those ideals to.

This novel's hybridity stems first from the self-proclaimed hybridity of its narrator. But the novel goes much further in incorporating other narrative spaces: Trinh's

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film, *Apocalypse Now*, and different genres, such as the confession or the mystery novel. In its form, it plays with the three basic laws of dialectical materialism, suggested cleverly in the language and bolstered by the plot and rhetorical devices. In a nutshell, the narrative is precarious because a given statement or movement of plot already contains its opposite, which can appear at any time through the narrator's irony or through a sudden reversal or revelation. The surfeit of metaphors, similes, and other types of comparisons, as well as other forms of rhetoric that mirror the narrator's performative role in the plot, are qualitatively transformative—that is, they lead to changes in the plot and propel the novel into a philosophical space for considering this heavy historical moment that has not been healed collectively. Most strikingly, the negation of the negation ("nothing") is presented as the pivotal moment for the narrator's self-knowledge. In Lenin's terms, such negation is "a moment of connection, . . . a moment of development retaining the positive" (qtd. in Dunayevskaya 51). The moment allows the narrator to gain a higher understanding of his bifurcated selfhood, to finally have "sympathy" for himself, and he arrives at the moment through (re)writing his confession for the commissar. Nguyen's narrative brilliance then transforms this consciousness into a call for a more politically inflected collective.

Startlingly, after the self-revelation that "nothing" brings, the narrator is transformed into a "we" and "us" as he bids Man goodbye: "we took the rucksack . . . we went, rucksack over our shoulders . . . [,]" reciting silly rhymes, "but if we had thought of anything more serious we would have fallen down under the weight of disbelief, of our sheer relief" (Nguyen 377). Released through the emergence of "nothing" and its negation, he need not be merged into one. He can inhabit the different versions of himself as he is watched by his communist friend, the one person who can be trusted with that full knowledge. The first-person plural form continues when the narrator meets his other friend, Bon, whom he hasn't seen for more than a year, the time he has been locked up writing his confession. Bon, of course, is unaware of the secret identity of his two closest friends. When Bon says that the narrator "looks like hell," the passage verges on madness: "Us? What about him? Our disembodied minds laughed but our embodied selves did not. How could we?" (377).[8] This ingenious narrative "we," which refers to the split narrator, finally at ease with all his selves, brilliantly concludes with a larger collective that is given the last word: "we swear to keep, on penalty of death, this one promise: '*We will live!*'" (382). This declaration is a concession, perhaps, and a wink to the now-forgotten communist chant: "Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh, we shall fight, we shall win!"

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, I use Robert Lowell's translation from the site *Charles Baudelaire's* Fleurs du mal / Flowers of Evil, which provides some of the best translations by various translators of every poem in *Les fleurs du mal*.

2. Lorentzen discusses the way metaphor familiarizes the writer's position for the reader (11). Caracciolo considers phenomenological metaphors—in particular, metaphors that convey the feel of the character and bring the reader closer to it.

3. This type of two-way critique in postcolonial writing has a long tradition. Waberi's Voltairean fable, *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* (*In the United States of Africa*), and Dadié's classic rewriting of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (*Persian Letters*), for example, cleverly stage a critique of colonialism or its aftermath, without sparing the native. The Moroccan sociologist Abdelkébir Khatibi notably coined the term "double critique" to designate this type of two-way critique (43). Nguyen's book, on the surface, joins a corpus beyond Asian American writing and could be inserted into a type of exilic, diasporic, postcolonial writing alongside authors such as Dany Laferrière and Henri Lopès or Vietnamese writers using French or English such as Linda Lê, Kim Lefèvre, Nguyen Huu Khoa, Monique Truong, and Kim Thúy. Lefèvre's classic *Métisse blanche* stages her narrator's strangeness in much the same way as *The Sympathizer*

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.2.388 Published online by Cambridge University Press

stages its narrator's strangeness. Lefèvre's narrator contemplates a photograph and then looks in a mirror that confirms her "altérité" ("strangeness"; 155). The narrator has a mother who has transgressed and produced a child (the narrator) who, like Nguyen's narrator, has to confront her "monstruosité" ("monstrousness"; 14). Education is also a key factor in this text: the narrator expresses a sense of superiority in relation to Vietnamese who are not convent-educated and a distinct uneasiness among French people. Lefèvre's text also has a more clearly gender-inflected interest in identity, experimenting with the narrator's relationship with other women and engaging ideas of third space creatively. Nguyen's creativity in *The Sympathizer* is focused on a narrative voice that completely carries the plot through the twists and turns in the confession; it pursues far less the tropes of hybridity or biracialism beyond their establishing the space for the narrator's discourse.

4. Although in Lowell's translation, the souls are sick, it might be more precise to say that the souls lack boldness.

5. Originally, these interviews were conducted in Vietnamese by Mai Thu Vân and translated into French. Trinh translates them into English. Juxtaposed cleverly with archival footage and print material, the interviews bring into focus the impossibility of accessing the original.

6. Lowell's translation does not use *hookah*. Lowell translates the last stanza as follows: "It's BOREDOM. Tears have glued its eyes together. // You know it well, my Reader. This obscene // beast chain-smokes its yawning for the guillotine— // you—hypocrite Reader—my double—my brother!" (Baudelaire, "To the Reader").

7. Nguyen's use of "Auteur" for the filmmaker refers to the godlike status Coppola enjoys. It draws on auteur theory, often associated with the *Cahiers du cinema* and the French New Wave filmmakers, whereby the filmmaker, as an artist, has a distinctive style that is actualized by his control of the entire filmmaking process.

8. There is one deviation from this use of "we" in this section: "We have paid for Bon's fare and our own with the commissar's gold, hidden in my rucksack's false bottom" (378–79). The singular possessive, "my," seems to be an unintended discrepancy because the next reference to it is "we, carrying in our rucksack our rubber-bound cipher and this unbounded manuscript . . ." (379).

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