



Journal of Veterans Studies

Review by Anne Yvonne Brinton

A Shadow on our Hearts: Soldier-Poetry, Morality, and the American War in Vietnam.

Adam Gilbert | University of Massachusetts Press, 2018 pp. 426 ISBN 978-1-62534-301-7

Remarks made a number of weeks ago by the U.S. president regarding his expectations of the ongoing deployment of active duty troops along the nation's southern border inaugurated a conversation among the veteran community on Twitter. 280 characters at a time, they delved into critical ethical questions. *What constitutes a lawful or unlawful order? What rules govern the escalation of force? How should soldiers respond to possible hostile acts from nonetheless unarmed civilians? And how must military leadership, in particular junior officers and NCOs, maintain the discipline and integrity of their troops under chaotic and frightening conditions?*

Perhaps now more than ever, it is imperative to consider the moral costs of what we as a nation require of our women and men in uniform, whether as part of America's ongoing war on terror, which is now entering its eighteenth year; or in pursuing our foreign policy interests overseas; or in securing America's geographical and political boundaries at home. Adam Gilbert, who earned a PhD from Cambridge University and later spent time as a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Sussex, attempts to do just this in his groundbreaking new study of the soldier's experience of Vietnam.

A Shadow on Our Hearts: Soldier-Poetry, Morality, and the American War in Vietnam is an ambitious book, which bridges three interrelated academic disciplines and attempts to fill gaps in each. Historians, Gilbert claims, presume either the virtue or sinfulness of the Vietnam war, but rarely explore them in depth and generally do not consider poetry as a text warranting serious analysis. Moral philosophers may delve deeper into the problem of war as a moral activity, but neglect history "and the elucidatory value of cultural representations" such as poetry, and seldom consider the perspective of war's participants in any great detail. Literary studies often explore soldier poetry, but typically fail to "draw historical lessons and moral messages" therefrom (Gilbert, 2018, p. 3).

Writing as a historian, Gilbert centers soldier and veteran poetry not only as literary texts, but as a critical part of the historical record of the war. His methodology draws from literary criticism and moral philosophy in order to deepen his analysis of the poems themselves, but also to "explicitly address moral matters that often remain implicit and unexplored in historical accounts of the conflict" (p. x). His own assessment is blunt: the American war in Vietnam was not just unwise in a military or Cold War foreign policy sense; it was a comprehensive "moral failure" (p. 2). And he sets out to explore "the intricacies of that ethical error," using the voices of those who participated in the war (although only in particular ways), primarily as expressed through the medium of poetry (p. 2).

Of his theoretical influences, among the most important are the two "pillars" of just war theory, which emerged early in the 20th century and reached full articulation after the Second World War (Kolb, 1997, para. 1)—the notions of *jus ad bellum* (the problem of whether or when it is permissible, or indeed, required go to war) and *jus in bello* (the problem of how to fight the war once it is clear that the war can or must be fought); Albert Camus's concept of rebellion, in which to reject or rebuke war is to affirm humanity; and Carolyn Forché's work on poetry as an act of not just witnessing but bearing witness—which, like rebellion, is a moral act and one which allows an individual to reclaim or rehabilitate the self.

Unlike most historical monographs, *A Shadow on Our Hearts* has, by design, no clear thesis or central argument. Instead, Gilbert offers a set of moral problems or quandaries, each of which, he suggests, may be partially reconciled through the use of poetry. Given that the Vietnam war itself seems to raise so many questions and offer so “few clear answers,” such an approach may be uniquely apropos (Gilbert, 2018, p. 7).

Following his exceptionally dense theoretical introduction, Gilbert presents four thematic chapters, each of which reads soldier poetry through a different lens: that of Climates, Others, Violence, and Responsibility. Each of these chapters warrants individual consideration. In each chapter he identifies and describes an element of the war which raised—and raises—moral concerns, and then evaluates the ways in which the writing of poetry as an act of rebellion or witness-bearing enabled the writer to rebuke war and work towards a sense of common humanity.

Climate

By “climate,” Gilbert means not only Vietnam’s almost hallucinatory heat and humidity, and its jungle, riverine, and mountain ecologies, but also the broader cultural, psychological, and political milieu shared by most of the young American men who fought there. The culture of boyhood at mid-century, for example, included games, toys, and hobbies meant to sanction violence, desensitize the emotions, and prepare young males for soldiering. He explores the emotional climate of pervasive fear, and the political climate of doubt, observing that doubt—about the wisdom or purpose of the war, about the support of the people at home, about the constancy of allies and the innocence of civilians—was “so embedded in the milieu of the warzone that it can be understood as an important part of its climatic texture” (p. 67). By fully exploring the contexts in which Vietnam-era soldiers lived and fought, Gilbert aims to combat easy assumptions about the explanatory force of character or individual intent. In perhaps the chapter’s most interesting intervention, he introduces the notion of “moral luck”—derived from the work of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Thomas Nagel—the existential coin toss which sometimes seemed to be all that stood between heroism and homicide. Here he presents the example of a soldier who blindly fires his weapon into a village hut. If the inhabitants of the hut are enemy fighters, the soldier is a hero who may have just saved his own life and those of his comrades. But if, as was indeed the case, the inhabitants are an old man and a small girl, the same act renders the same soldier a war criminal.

Others

Friend and enemy. Asian and Occidental. Civilian and soldier. Officer and enlisted. Grunt and REMF (Rear-Echelon MotherF*****). Black and white. Self and other. War, Gilbert argues, “necessitates, inculcates, and is even caused by” a clear division between the self and the other, with the other standing in as an existential threat (p. 88). But the categories of us and them “are never fixed” (p. 106), emerging instead from the broader context or climate, and prone to slippages and shifts, as in the terrible confusion between civilian and soldier, ally and enemy, which characterized the war as a whole. Vietnam was a racialized war, with, as Gilbert contends, the primary barrier not between ally and enemy, but between American and Vietnamese, regardless of political allegiance. Inculcated by Cold War American culture, intensified during military training, and expressed through the use of racial slurs: “gook,” “slope,” etc.—the dehumanization of an Eastern enemy was required for effective fighting . . . but could be undermined, and at least partially overcome, by imagination and empathy. Here lies the most important contribution of soldier and veteran poets. In imaginatively identifying with a racial other, as one man did when he wondered if “alien” inhabitants of the villages he patrolled in turn saw him as something less or other than human, soldier poets acted

as Camusian rebels, rejecting artificial divisions and offering instead “an affirmation of our common humanity” (p. 138).

Violence

Here is the heart of the book—its most-distressing and most-important chapter. Violence, of course, is central to war, as war is “a contest of violence” (p. 140). The purpose of war is to hurt the enemy more than he can hurt you. In the words of one of Gilbert’s subjects, it is to “kill, maim, cripple, and destroy until the people whose lives you are deliberately making miserable either give up or all die” (p. 141). Despite this seemingly self-evident fact, it is all too possible to read accounts of warfare that neglect or elide or euphemize the physicality of violence against the human form. This must be remedied. The act of violence, Gilbert observes, citing the discovery of Snowden’s secret at the end of Joseph Heller’s novel *Catch-22*, proves the material fact of the body and also violates the sense of self. It can result, of course, in physical death—but also in “ontological death” (p. 143), or the collapse of a worldview or way of life. Soldier poetry reflects the pervasiveness of violence and death, restoring both to the center of the narrative where they belong. Poets detail the vulnerability of the body: collapsed lungs, fractured bones, arterial hemorrhages, genital mutilation, vomit and other effluents, irreparably damaged brains. By bearing witness in this way, they rebel against war, revealing it for what it is.

Responsibility

Gilbert makes it plain that he believes, as do his subjects, that “the American intervention in Vietnam” was a violation of nearly all of the criteria required by either *jus ad bellum* or *jus in bello*. Thus, for people whose ethical framework allows for war at all, it was unjust and unjustifiable alike (p. 199). *But whose fault was the war? Who must shoulder the blame for the terrible damage done?* The poets try to answer.

Interestingly, they rarely blame the Vietnamese themselves. Despite acknowledging, as they must, the often-atrocious violence perpetrated by the revolutionary fighters of Vietnam, “the poets understand that it was not [their enemies] who placed them and other Americans in the way of harm and asked them to be agents of harm as well” (p. 200). The “most obvious candidates”: Kennedy, Johnson, McNamara, Kissinger, Nixon, and so on, of course fall in for their share of the blame (p. 206). So do foolish or negligent officers, Congress, Dow Chemical, and the American people as a whole. The poets locate blame broadly with American culture: not only with the people who voted for hawkish politicians, but with “religion, anticommunism, patriotism and distrust of dissent,” as well as what Gilbert terms “bystander apathy,” and “the failure of generational responsibility” (p. 223).

It is especially difficult to write about war without weighing in, in one way or another, on the related questions of whether the war ought to have been fought, and if so, whether it ought to have been fought in the particular way that it was. Indeed, moral neutrality, Gilbert claims, is an impossibility in the writing of any history, although he believes that most historians acknowledge their standpoint “and with that out of the way proceed with the rest of the study” (p. 16). He positions his work as a useful corrective to this tendency, and to a certain extent in the broader context of modern war history it is. But such an assertion, when it comes to Vietnam war scholarship specifically, is odd. In contrast to the world wars, for example, the rectitude of the American intervention in Vietnam and the nation’s conduct there have never been taken for granted. While Gilbert admits that scholarship on the war is “ingrained with the textures of right and wrong” (p. 2), numerous historians have delved more deeply than he acknowledges into what that meant “on the ground.” Nick Turse’s nearly unbearable *Kill Everything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*,

which makes a case for the outright criminality of official American policy, is only one example (Turse, 2013).

This brings me to a broader critique. Gilbert cites only a fraction of the available historical scholarship on the war, and that often cursorily. While his intent is certainly not to produce an operational or campaign history of the war, but rather a deep exploration of the human experience of battle, greater engagement with the process and prosecution of the war, as exhaustively explored by other scholars, would allow for further insight. As is, the reader is left wondering if these soldier poets distinguished between the search and destroy missions of the Westmoreland era; the seemingly more productive clear and hold strategy that characterized Creighton Abrams's command; or between the heady early days of the active American combat role in the spring of 1965 and the last grinding months of our presence in Vietnam in the early '70s, when it was all but clear that the struggle was lost. Given the particularities of Vietnam era forward deployments—typically a single year “in country” for Army, Navy, or Air Force personnel (thirteen months for Marines)—this line of inquiry might be challenging, but would likely yield evidence of important changes in soldier mentality over time.

Gilbert's choice to limit his study to those soldier and veteran poets who experienced combat directly is probably a wise one, if only because it enabled him to curate a manageable archive of poems and to maintain his focus on the centrality of battle. It also reflects the experiences of a majority of troops who served in the Vietnam theater. As a massive Harris poll, submitted to the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs in 1980 indicates, thirty percent of veterans reported experiencing “heavy combat,” and an additional twenty-eight percent “moderate active combat.” The actual impact of battle, moreover, must be reckoned much higher, as the poll of necessity only reflects “a cross section of survivors” (Harris and Associates, 1980, p. 7-8). As a result of his decision to exclude those who supported warfighters in logistical, supply, communications, or medical roles, however, *A Shadow on Our Hearts* should not be taken as a comprehensive study of the Vietnam-era service member's experience. The REMF's tale, as suggested by reviewer David Wilson, writing for *The VVA Veteran* and himself a veteran of the war—one who has paid a terrible price for his service (2018, n.p.)—remains to be told.

References

- Harris, L. and Associates (1980). *Myths and realities: A study of attitudes toward Vietnam era veterans*. Submitted by the Veterans' Administration to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs United States Senate. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31210004592661;view=1up;seq=61>
- Kolb, R. (1997). Origin of the twin terms jus ad bellum/jus in bello. *International Review of the Red Cross*, Number 320. Retrieved from <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/article/other/57jnuu.htm>
- Turse, N. (2013). *Kill anything that moves: The real American war in Vietnam*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Wilson, D. (2018). A Shadow on our hearts by Adam Gilbert. *The VVA Veteran*. Retrieved from <https://vvabooks.wordpress.com/2018/04/30/a-shadow-on-our-hearts-by-adam-gilbert>