

Sympathy for Nothing

Robert Ware

The Novel Club – January 7, 2020

What does it mean to believe in nothing? For the protagonist in Viet Thanh Nguyen's "The Sympathizer," it is a great relief, indeed a revelation. The book is, except for the final portion in the prison camp, written as a first person narrative in the form of the protagonist's confession to an unnamed "Commandant" who we are not introduced to until the end. We are never told the narrator's name.

The narrator's ultimate insight, discerned only after enduring a session of psychological and physical torture intended to be his reeducation in a communist prison camp, is that "nothing" – meaning (it would seem) the absence of a distinct ideological, racial or social viewpoint – is the answer that resolves all of the conflicts that torment him.

The arduous and somewhat surreal final chapters of the book – in which the narrator is denied sleep, tortured by sadistic prison guards (including his now-horribly disfigured boyhood best friend), forced to relive his most painful memories, and constantly tormented by ghosts – are a culmination of the conflict, hypocrisy and deceit that the narrator both endures and engages in during the course of the book.

He is a captain in the in the South Vietnamese army during the Vietnam War. He serves as the aide-de-camp and junior officer of intelligence to a South Vietnamese General who is the head of the National Police. When the story begins, the narrator lives with the General and the General's family in his villa in Saigon, just as the city is about to fall to North Vietnamese forces.

At the outset, he proclaims himself a "man of two faces" and a "man of two minds," and the them of "duality" emerges throughout the book in many forms. The narrator's dual perspective gives him an ability to understand, and relate to, people with very different, even opposing, worldviews – thus he is a "sympathizer" not just in his identity as an undercover communist agent, but also in his ability to understand the perspectives of others.

Sympathy for Nothing

Robert Ware

The Novel Club – January 7, 2020

The duality at the center of the book is the narrator's role as a North Vietnamese communist spy with access to the highest ranks of the South Vietnamese national police, which is responsible for detecting and dealing with spies and other internal enemies to the South Vietnamese regime. In this role, the narrator is required to maintain the appearance of total commitment to the South Vietnamese – and American – cause, while secretly disclosing information to the communists.

The author's dual loyalties, and other conflicting demands and commitments he must navigate (which we will discuss), is a major driving force in the book, but Nguyen is clearly interested in all kinds of dualities – large and small – which arise repeatedly the form of contrasts, double meanings, contrapositives and paradoxes in various forms. Indeed, the humor and energy in the book seem to feed off of these contrasts. Thus, the General is described as follows: "He was an epicurean and a Christian, in that order, a man of faith who believed in gastronomy and God; his wife and his children; and the French and the Americans." (p. 2)

Another division that the narrator must reconcile is the opposing ideological orientations of his two boyhood friends, Man and Bon. The three men swore a blood oath as teenagers to remain forever as brothers, but the events in Vietnam sent them in different political directions. Bon is a South Vietnamese patriot. He hates the North Vietnamese communists because they murdered his father. Man becomes an officer in the communist movement and the narrator's handler, serving as the narrator's primary contact with his communist superiors. But the narrator does not reveal his true allegiance to Bon. And while he supports the communist side, he is not as passionate or as educated as Man. So he is positioned between both sides, understanding and appreciating both but not fully a part of either.

His actions as an undercover agent also leave him with feelings of guilt and confusion. As with all spies, in order to remain undetected, he works on the surface for a cause that he opposes so that he can achieve his larger aim of victory

Sympathy for Nothing

Robert Ware

The Novel Club – January 7, 2020

for the North Vietnamese. As such, he must remain silent and can do nothing to save a female communist agent who is arrested and later raped in his presence. He carries out the murders of two innocent men, the “crapulent major” and Sonny, which leaves him guilt-ridden and tormented by their ghosts. As the narrator’s story unfolds, the guilt and anxiety caused by his actions as a spy continue to build.

But perhaps the most challenging duality at play in the book is the narrator’s struggle with his mixed racial and national origins. His mother was a Vietnamese peasant and his father a French priest. His mixed racial and national heritage is a central theme of the book, and it serves as both the narrator’s personal struggle as well as an allegory for the plight of the Vietnamese people.

The narrator, and by extension that of the Vietnamese people, grapples with his identity and attempts to come to terms with the suffering that has been inflicted upon him by outside forces, while at the same time attempting to understand how those forces have shaped and become a part of him.

On these topics, Nguyen’s fascination with double meanings and his sardonic humor is frequently apparent. It is certainly no accident that when the narrator is sent to study in the United States in order to learn the American way of thinking, he enrolls at “Occidental” College. He notes that the informal moniker for American soldier as a “G.I.” derives from the words “government issue” and observes sardonically that the multitude of mixed race children fathered by those soldiers during the years of American intervention and occupation are also a form of government issue.

The author endures racist taunts and comments by American soldiers, as well as similar abuse from the Vietnamese for his European ancestry. While the narrator’s mixed race heritage makes him an outcast among the Vietnamese and the Americans, but also gives him a unique insight into both cultures. These insights and observations are shared throughout the book, often in a darkly amusing way.

Sympathy for Nothing

Robert Ware

The Novel Club – January 7, 2020

Americans are generally depicted with disdain – hypocritical, deceitful and irredeemably racist. Claude, the CIA agent who is the narrator's oldest American friend – the two having met when the narrator was a nine year-old refugee whom Claude groomed to become a South Vietnamese intelligence officer – is a close friend but ultimately wants to exploit the narrator to serve American interests. Tellingly, the narrator describes Claude as “our most trusted American friend, our relationship so intimate he once confided in me to being on-sixteenth Negro.”

The American professor that the author works for – referred to as “The Chair” – exemplifies a casual, clueless racism while perceiving himself to be broad-minded. He is married to an Asian woman, and he analogizes the asian appearance of his son to be like foreign weeds choking native foliage. (p.63) The Chair asks the narrator to prepare a list delineating his “Oriental” and “Occidental” qualities, which the Chair points out are opposing qualities, and he suggests that the narrator, an “Amerasian,” is in a position to reconcile the two cultures.

But reconciliation does not seem to be what the narrator is seeking. The world he inhabits is one of cruelty, exploitation and deceit. Everyone, the Americans, the South Vietnamese and the communists are serving only their own selfish interests, exploiting anyone who can be useful to them, wantonly murdering their enemies, and abusing those who they see as having no particular worth. While Nguyen finds a dark humor in these circumstances, it is a humor mostly premised on the ridiculous hypocrisy and absurdity of those who do not recognize the evil of their actions or worldview. The narrator's evaluation of the General is characteristic of his perspective: “Whatever people say about the General today, I can only testify that he was a sincere man who believed in everything he said, even if it was a lie, which makes him not so different from most.” (p.23)

Whether or not one is inclined to agree with Nguyen's take on the many injustices he catalogues, the book's constant cynicism is wearying.

The only exception from the narrator's cynicism is his love for his mother, who died from tuberculosis when the narrator was in college. He is grateful for her

Sympathy for Nothing

Robert Ware

The Novel Club – January 7, 2020

unconditional love and laments that, in her circumstances as a Vietnamese peasant, she was regarded as worthless and made to suffer.

All of these themes, and certainly Nguyen's talent for satire, are found in the extended narrative surrounding the narrator's engagement in the movie business. The story is at once a pointed satire of the movie *Apocalypse Now* and its director – referred to in the book as "the auteur" – who seems to represent Francis Ford Coppola and perhaps a number of other Hollywood luminaries. Here we see the American arrogance and self-centered myopia on full display – through both the making of the film (which involves the exploitation of Vietnamese in a Philippine refugee camp) and the inability to see any aspect of the war from anything other than an American perspective. In a sad and touching way, the movie set creates an alternative reality that allows the narrator to connect with his deceased mother – which is (of course) soon after brutally and wantonly destroyed by the Americans. The double-sided reality that Nguyen plays with during these passages seems to be full of significance for him as both allegory and satire. In the end, the narrator is not able to achieve his desire to include non-American perspectives in the movie, but it goes on to be an amazing commercial and critical success.

Upon his return from the Philippines, the tensions at the heart of the book escalate. The narrator becomes involved in the General's counterrevolutionary plot, assisted by right wing American politicians, to assemble a force of former South Vietnamese soldiers to attack and destabilize the communist regime in Vietnam. He dutifully reports these activities to Man, effectively exposing the plot and dooming it to failure. He is remorseful and guilt-ridden over the assassinations of the crapulent major and Sonny, and he is torn between his duty to disclose the plot and his love for Bon, who will certainly die when he participates in the counter-invasion. He desires to both "betray Bon and save him at the same time."

Sympathy for Nothing

Robert Ware

The Novel Club – January 7, 2020

These conflicts become overwhelming, and the narrator is swept along in the conspiracy without knowing how he will manage to save himself or Bon. As expected, the invasion is a disaster, leaving many killed and the narrator and Bon as prisoners in the communist camp. At this point, the identity of the Commandant becomes known to us, and notwithstanding his loyalty to communist cause, the narrator is tortured reeducated because his experiences and background have made him untrustworthy. He realizes that the communist revolution, like everything else in his world, does not adhere to its professed ideals. At his lowest point during the torture, the narrator longs to be executed and put out of his misery, but instead he finds clarity in his answer to the question: “What is more precious than independence and freedom?”

“Nothing” is the answer, and one way to interpret that climactic realization is to conclude that the narrator’s essential cynicism has prevailed. There is simply no use in trusting anyone or embracing any ideals or ideology. While it seems like a depressing way to exist, one can see how it might be a relief to the narrator, and indeed to the Vietnamese people who have been exploited and abused for so many years.

But that is not Nguyen’s intention, as we learn in the book’s final pages. The narrator is freed, and he joins other escapees from the communist regime – the “boat people” – and proclaims that, despite everything, he is not cynical. He still considers himself a revolutionary, a hopeful creature that is in search of a revolution that will someday deliver on its promise. But at the end, the narrator is satisfied that the belief in “nothing” is the key to living on in search of that perfect revolution.