Debriefed by Dreams: Michael Herr

hardly stories at all but sounds and gestures packed with so much urgency that they became more dramatic than a novel . . .

_Dispatches_

‘He had always understood what was going to happen there, and in that small and quiet novel, told us nearly everything.’ Thus Gloria Emerson, in her account of a recent interview with Graham Greene,\(^1\) reiterates a view of _The Quiet American_ which has generally prevailed since the novel’s American publication in 1956. With the passage of time, and the fading in the United States of initial criticism of _The Quiet American_ as anti-American\(^2\) — and with the passage of the American war in Vietnam through phases prophetically implied in Greene’s portrayal of Alden Pyle — the novel has become an established point of reference for those interested in problems of literary response to the war. As a set of defining images, if not of elaborated arguments, it has entered the ‘record’ of an unquiet American era, not necessarily terminated by American withdrawal in 1975. Along with Greene’s dispatches from the period 1952–5, or rather as the moral and aesthetic distillation of these reports from Indochina, _The Quiet American_ is as likely to be cited as ‘evidence’ by historians and reporters as to be lauded as exemplary by literary critics.

Frances FitzGerald’s _Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam_ mentions Greene in terms calling for the reader’s recognition of his authorship of _The Quiet American_, which appears in her formal bibliography. Mary McCarthy, in the

G. O. Taylor, _Chapters of Experience_  
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course of her Vietnam reportage discussed in the previous chapter, assumes an awareness of Greene’s novel as a kind of authenticating credential, Greene’s difficulty in obtaining documents for travel in the United States constituting a passport to the principality of her approval. A reviewer of Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers*, a novel only partially set in Vietnam but profoundly ‘about’ the war, speaks of the protagonist as driven by ‘the fear that traditionally afflicts Quiet Americans in South-East Asia.’ (William Lederer’s and Eugene Burdick’s *The Ugly American* had earlier prompted a reviewer to note that the ‘authors have apparently heard of a rather more sophisticated work by Mr. Graham Greene.’) In these and other instances, it is Greene the former Indochina hand and author of this particular novel, as much as Greene seen more generally in the context of a long career, who hovers ghostlike, witness to a prophecy fulfilled.\(^3\)

Its brevity and lightness of touch, and the fact that it is as often invoked with nostalgia as with detailed analysis, have not kept Greene’s novel from acquiring this authority. And it is not only what Ms Emerson calls the ‘first great warning’ against American involvement contained in *The Quiet American* on which its authority rests. In its capacity to seem now to have quietly told us nearly everything in 1956, the book appeals (despite, or perhaps paradoxically due to, British authorship) to a collective American yearning for a prior point of moral clarity, which developments since 1956 seemed until recently to have kept out of American literary reach.

Over the past ten years or so, however, American writers in increasing numbers have attempted to distill images of the war’s private as well as public meanings, images which might fix those meanings in the national consciousness with the force of art as well as entering them in the documentary record. As we have already seen in the case of McCarthy, extending an autobiographical narrative into certain kinds of close encounter with the war, the efforts of these writers more generally have come to constitute a process of ongoing inquiry as to the appropriate terms of literary treatment. Whether the experience of Vietnam, viewed as personal encounter or as cultural collision, was so extreme as to enforce revised angles of literary approach; or whether the literary experimentations already under way in the 1960s were bound in any case to be applied to the experience of Vietnam; the problem of means in relation to ends, of literary method in relation to a