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Thirty Years After: American Vietnam War Literature in Italian

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(23.000 bytes, including notes and bibliography)

It is well known that the American War in Vietnam had a great impact in Europe from 1966 up to the American withdrawal and the fall of Saigon. The Vietnam War triggered off an unprecedented anti-imperialist political awareness in Italy, too. Several books and essays on history and politics –some translated from English and French–¹ came out between the mid sixties and the early seventies and were the most important references on imperialism until the coup d'état against Salvador Allende and Chile's legitimate government aided by the CIA in 1973. Seminars on the Vietnam War became frequent in schools and universities; newspapers and journals, not necessarily left-oriented, continued publishing articles critical of American intervention. The slogan "Yankees Go Home!", chanted during the major Italian anti-imperialist mass demonstrations, came to mean only one thing: "Americans Get Out of Vietnam!"²

In the publishing world, the so-called "Sessantotto", the 1968 protest movement, was also characterized by the end of the "editori protagonisti" (protagonist publishers), such as Mondadori, Einaudi, Garzanti and, later, Feltrinelli, that is, the end of a long period – from the 1930s to the 1960s – dominated by a few publishers with a strong, articulated and recognizable cultural project involving intellectuals and thinkers. The late sixties saw, on the one hand, the birth of several small and very small publishers, and on the other, a strong process of concentration among the major companies. Within this new and ambivalent situation, American Vietnam War literature was not considered to be an important issue. The small publishers were more

¹ See for example the works of Noam Chomsky, Jean Chesneux and Fernand Gigon.

² Students didn't know that it was introduced in Italy at the time of the Bay of Pigs, in April 1961.

interested in explicitly political texts and, in any case, Vietnam War literature was not so abundant in the early 1970s in the US, either.³

Nonetheless, some major works – I would say fewer than twenty – of Vietnam war literature did eventually come out in Italian.

Italian translations of American Vietnam War Literature: a chronology.

Let's now examine, in a sketchy chronological approach, what happened in Italy in the 40 years from 1965 to 2005,⁴ and then compare this with publication figures in the USA, which I drew from John Newman's monumental bibliography (1996) and from some talks I had with John Baky, Director of the Special Collection on "Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War" at La Salle University in Philadelphia.⁵ According to these figures, about thirty novels related to the Vietnam War were published in 1967 in the USA ; then, this figure dropped to about twenty novels a year, with some less productive years (1970 and the period between 1973 and 1977;⁶ there followed an evident increase in the number of novels published between 1983 and 1992 (up to fifty novels in 1987), which dropped - but didn't stop - after 1992.⁷

As I mentioned before, Robin Moore's *The Green Berets* (1965) came out in Italian in that same year. But subsequently Italian publishers completely forgot Vietnam War fiction which, especially after 1977, had produced excellent texts appreciated by both critics and the reading public.

³ Curiously enough, the overtly anti-communist *The Green Berets*, published in the USA in 1965, was translated and published in that same year by the leftist publisher Feltrinelli. My guess, so far unproven, is that the leftist publishing company was somehow interested in notions of tactics and strategy of guerrilla warfare. Otherwise, it would be hard to understand why such an anticommunist novel should have been translated by a leftist publisher.

⁴ See the two short bibliographies at the end of this paper.

⁵ See John Newman, ed., *Vietnam War Literature: An Annotated Bibliography of Imaginative Works About Americans Fighting in Vietnam*, Metuchen (NJ): Scarecrow Press, 1996, 3rd revised ed.: it includes only "imaginative works" (novels, short stories, plays) and not the memoirs, some hundreds. As for John Baky see the archive he founded at La Salle University (Philadelphia) intitled "Imaginative Representations of the Viet Nam War Collection", the best collection of this kind in the world.

⁶ One interpretation attributes this to the rejection of several novels by American publishers, both for a sort of shock and a repression of the Vietnam topic.

Barring any omissions on my part in my research into Italian translations of American Vietnam War literature, one must skip all the seventies and wait until 1987, that is, twenty-two years after Moore's novel, in order to see another Vietnam War novel in Italian. Of course, the Italian translation of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, (1969) came out very soon (1970), but it is essentially a novel about WWII, though it might have been read by some as a Vietnam novel in disguise. The only exception is Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), published in Italian one year later, but which is only very indirectly about Vietnam and has a very non-fictional title. *Why Are We in Vietnam?* sounds like a political essay and this is probably why people bought it, as well as the fact that it was Mailer's, a well known author in Italy at the time).

Let me open a very short parenthesis here: if little Vietnam War fiction was translated, the situation regarding poetry was even worse and it has remained bad up to the present day. Actually, no Vietnam War poetry has ever been translated into Italian.⁸

Eventually, after twenty-two years of essays and articles and of total silence in the field of Vietnam War fiction (with the only exception of Richard Elman's *Taxi Driver*,⁹ 1987 saw the publication of two novels, which were translated into Italian because of the two movies based on them: the more successful was Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, published with the somehow more appealing title *Nato per uccidere*, that is, the famous "Born to Kill" line on Joker's helmet, which also appears in Kubrick's movie. The other is actually a novel written after the movie was released, Dale Dye's *Platoon* (it was published the year after the movie came out). Something similar happened in 1990 with Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*

⁷ Of course, I am also including the Vietnam series here. On the series see my *Musi gialli e Berretti Verdi. Narrazioni USA sulla guerra del Vietnam*, Bergamo: Il Sestante, 2003, pp. 37-60.

⁸ With the exception of four poems and one very short story by W.D. Ehrhart I translated in 2000 for the Italian journal of American Studies *Ácoma*. Neither has any drama been translated, except for Arthur Kopit's *Indians* (1968), translated in Italian in 1970 ("Indiani", *Sipario*, n. 2, 1970).

(published after Stone's movie) and later with *Forrest Gump* (published in Italian in 1994, after Zemeckis' movie). This is a very predictable situation depending on the success of the movies, a situation very similar to that in the US where several Vietnam War novels were re-published and sold well only after the movies were out.

In 1989, ten years after winning the National Book Award, Tim O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato* was eventually translated by a small, quality publisher (Leonardo) linked to the Mondadori family.¹⁰ The critical reaction to *Going after Cacciato* was very limited and this was to be the case with all of O'Brien's works translated into Italian (five so far, since *If I Die on a Combat Zone*, *Northern Lights* and *Tomcat in love* have not been translated yet);¹¹ I don't think that *Going after Cacciato* sold well.¹²

As it is well known, O'Brien's works could have sparked off a debate not only on the Vietnam War, but on some questions of trauma representation central to his work (in Italy could have helped to fight some stereotypes of "americaness" in relation to war attitudes: this was not the case. In Italy the Vietnam War had been the topic of too much publishing in political and historical essays and pamphlets, and this had perhaps saturated or "killed" the market for Vietnam War fiction. Furthermore, the title of O'Brien's chef d'oeuvre, containing both a present continuous ("Inseguendo", going after) and a past participle ("Cacciato", which in Italian means "the hunted one" or "the one kicked out"), isn't particularly appealing.¹³

In the same year, 1989, Mondadori, the major Italian publisher, published Richard Currey's *Fatal Light*, another interesting Vietnam

⁹ Elmans' novel (1976) was translated into Italian in 1976 only because of the success of Scorsese's movie.

¹⁰ Two years before, in 1987, a more important publisher, Garzanti, had brought out a translation of O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age*, but that had not been a success, either.

¹¹ For the bibliographical data concerning these novels see the bibliographies at the end of this paper.

¹² I have tried more than once to have precise data of the copies sold, but the editorial staff of Mondadori was unable to give me precise figures.

¹³ I would have translated it as "Inseguendo il disertore", "Going after the deserter".

narrative, perhaps too fragmentary and poetical to be a success in Italy, which went unnoticed.

In 1990, two years after its US publication, James Purdy's *In a Shallow Grave* was brought out in Italian by a small publisher. Although not a great success, it was a significant event because it presented the point of view of a veteran that was very different from the stereotypes put forward in the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* movie series, which, at that time, were relatively well known in Italy (especially *Rambo* because of the central role played in it by Sylvester Stallone).

In 1991, Leonardo, which had already published *Going after Cacciato*, very consistently brought out both a translation of O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (originally published in 1989) and one of Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (originally published in 1977). Now, apart from a couple of interesting reviews by Alessandro Portelli and Guido Fink (who, by the way, are academic reviewers and not professional journalists), O'Brien's fiction went almost unnoticed. The Italian translation of *The Things They Carried* was reprinted twice in two years, but its limited success was not comparable to the reactions it had in France where, translated as *À propos de courage* (About courage), it won the Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger (the Best Foreign Book Award) in 1992. Since Leonardo soon (about 1995) stopped most of its publishing activities, O'Brien's and Herr's masterpieces have never been republished and copies could for a short time only be found at second-hand stores. Fortunately, *Dispatches* was republished in a revised translation in 2005. One should add that *Dispatches* had a much wider readership in France where it came out as *Putain de guerre* (Which may both mean "Bitch of War" and "Shitty War"), and was a bestseller for a while.

Besides O'Brien and Herr, an Italian translation of Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* also came out in 1991; this also sold poorly, but is still available.

After the two books by Le Ly Hayslip I mentioned above, which were somehow warmly received because of Oliver Stone's movie, Instar, a small but courageous publisher in Torino, translated the Pulitzer prize-winner *A God Scent from a Strange Mountain* by Robert Olen Butler in 1995, i.e. three years after the American version had come out. Butler was invited to Italy to present his series of short-stories, but this did not seem to help the success of his book in Italy.

The following year, in 1996, O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* was published by Mondadori and as in previous cases and as would be the future case of *July, July*, published by Feltrinelli in 2004, this didn't lead to any reassessment of his other novels. In the same year, Einaudi published an excellent translation of Tobias Wolff's *In Pharaoh's Army*, which got some good reviews but didn't sell that well. Six years later, the same publisher tried to exploit Wolff's relative fame by publishing the short-story *The Barracks Thief* (1985) in book format.

In 1998, another very small publisher brought out a translation of James Crumley's *One to Count Cadence*, trying to take advantage of previous books by the same author, but with no luck.

In 2002, besides the already mentioned *The Barracks Thief*, *Up North* was published, a Vietnam War detective story by Nelson de Mille; like most of his novels, it was quite successful.

In 2004, Piemme, a medium-sized publisher brought out, after twenty-seven years, the Pulitzer prizewinner *A Rumor of War*, translated as *La voce del Vietnam – The Voice of/from Vietnam*.¹⁴ Finally, in 2005, as I had anticipated, an almost unknown publisher from Torino (alet) has republished Herr's *Dispatches*, fortunately in a revised translation.

Therefore, what we have here is a certain number of American Vietnam War novels, published in a period spanning forty years, which are not

¹⁴ This is the same publisher which has just published in 2005 Seymour Hersch's *My Lai Vietnam*.

perceived as a group, but as individual works. And, of course, in a sense they are: most American Vietnam War writers, when interviewed, explain that they consider themselves simply as writers and not as “Vietnam War writers”. The Italian public at large believes that there is such a thing as “Vietnam films”, but not such thing as “Vietnam War fiction”. When Italian people I meet find out I have been working on Vietnam War fiction for several years, they always end up asking me “What is the great Vietnam War novel?”; if I answer “The works of Tim O’Brien, Michael Herr, Robert Stone or other”, they go like “Oh!?”, an unclear response, which I believe means “I didn’t know” or “you mention these people I don’t know, but very likely there is no such a thing as a good Vietnam War novel”; and then we move on to the topic of Vietnam Hollywood cinema.

Vietnam War novels indirectly about the Vietnam War

All that I have said so far could go under the label of “marginalizations, displacements, undervaluations,” etc. There are, however, other more successful novels which are somehow indirectly tied to the Vietnam War, but which cannot be considered Vietnam War novels *strictu sensu*. More than twenty of these are detective novels, in which the protagonist is a Vietnam vet whose experience in Vietnam keeps re-emerging throughout his investigation: this is the case of James Lee Burke, James Crumley, John Maddox Roberts and particularly Michael Connelly, whose Harry Bosch stories have been bestselling translations in Italy since 1997 and are now available even in Italian supermarkets and newsstands.¹⁵ When Michael Connelly came to meet his Italian readers in 2002, he was asked about Bosch’s Vietnam experience and memories. Of course, these novels are sold and read chiefly as detective stories, but nevertheless they convey feelings and emotions linked to the Vietnam experience and to the problems of the vets’ readjustment. On this last

¹⁵ One can add to them two novels by Nelson De Mille and one by Sue Grafton and I believe that soon a translation of Tony Hillerman’s *Finding Moon* will be out, definitely one of the least intriguing of his detective stories.

topic, an important novel for the Italian public was Stephen King's *Hearts in Atlantis* (English publication 1999, Italian one 2000): people bought it in supermarkets, though it didn't sell as well as King's other horror stories, and soon discovered, perhaps with disappointment, that the central topic was a "generational problem" strictly linked to the Vietnam War. Also significant is that the act of gratuitous violence of two boys on a little girl seems to be even more important, in the psychological development of the major characters (the girl included), than the horrors of the Vietnam War.

Major Omissions

If we open a chapter on omissions, we could all go on and on adding titles. According to John Baky and to John Newman's comprehensive *Bibliography of the Vietnam War*, there are about two thousand published American novels on the Vietnam War.¹⁶ We can agree that 90% of it is trash or very mediocre fiction, including the numerous porno novels.¹⁷ If I had to make a list of other works of American Vietnam fiction that should be translated into Italian in order to offer a better understanding of that literature, I would at least add Robert Stone's *Dog Soldier* (two of his works have been translated but not this one), one work by Ward Just and Charles Durden, at least two other works by Robert Olen Butler besides *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, Joe Haldeman's *1968*, and Tim O'Brien's *Tomcat in Love*. But my first choice would be to publish a better translation of *Going after Cacciato* and *The Things they Carried*, whereas I think that the available translation of Michael Herr's *Dispatches* is good as it is. To these three I would add, still as my first choice, Steven Wright's *Meditations in Green*.¹⁸

Many good Vietnam War novels are very difficult to translate: it's not just because of the military jargon and the slang, which are extremely

¹⁶ See note 5 above.

¹⁷ A few dozens of these novels can be found at La Salle's Archive (see above).

imaginative,¹⁹ but because it is very difficult to translate the feeling of inadequacy that many writers try to convey. Furthermore, the postmodern attitudes of O'Brien and Herr, and the untranslatable "greenish" metaphors proposed by Wright, make these texts difficult for an Italian public who are rarely familiar with the works of Pynchon and Barthelme, Coover and Ishmael Reed.

Conclusions

So, in a sense, what has been translated into Italian is sufficient to give a good idea of what American Vietnam War literature is all about. But the way it was published, the way it was organized into specific series and collections, has marginalized most of these works and made them somehow unreadable, not just because of translation problems. One of the reasons lies in the amazing production of historical and political texts on the Vietnam War I mentioned before: if, as it has been said and written several times, the United States needed, deserved a counter-history, a counter-history which happened to be generally anti-war, Italy thought such a fictional counter-history wasn't necessary, because it had been produced by essays, because Italy had been strongly pacifist since 1945. In Italy American Vietnam War fiction was considered somehow pleonastic: and this was a mistake. It was a form of arrogance which fed different forms of prejudice and anti-Americanism: it made some Italians incapable of distinguishing between different kinds of Americans and between different kinds of literature. However this is not the only reason.

I believe that what has happened with Vietnam war literature is not all that different from what happened with the western genre. In Italy, a country with absolutely no "Frontier" in the American sense, with no "Land of great

¹⁸ Some of Wright's other works have actually been translated into Italian and Einaudi will soon publish his most recent *The Amalgamation Polka*, an extraordinary novel about the Civil War published by Knopf in February 2006 which is clearly a post-Vietnam War Civil War novel.

¹⁹ See Paul Dickson's *War Slang Dictionary*, New York: Pocket Books, 1994.

opportunities”, western movies were extremely successful from WWII to the Seventies (during Fascism, of course, it was not possible to see those movies). Almost two generations of Italians grew up watching those movies, first in cinemas and later on TV. For all the amazing success of western movies, western novels have never really taken off: Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* was translated only once in 1965 and soon forgotten, Louis L’Amour’s bestsellers are not available any more and Zane Grey’s novels have never been translated into Italian to my knowledge. Only recently has there been some interest in western stories, but this has been for the innovative style or topic of writers such as Cormac McCarthy and Annie Proulx, among others.²⁰ The spectacularization of the (macho) epic attitude of the western movie is less apparent in the western novels which never conquered the Italian reading public.

Italy’s other widespread American cinema genres included (together with classical comedies and musicals) the war film, particularly WWII films. War novels were also quite successful, both by European and by American writers (as for the Americans, after Hemingway, Italian translations of James Jones, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, etc., came out very soon.)

But when one moves to the Vietnam War, one discovers a phenomenon similar, though less apparent, to what happened with western fiction. Devoid of the spectacularization a film gives, Vietnam War literature has not succeeded in capturing the Italian reader. When this literature has been successful, is because it was inserted in another genre or subgenre: the detective-story or the thriller. While the “Literature of the ‘just war’” was and is relatively popular, the “literature of the ‘dirty war’” is not.

Only recently, as I have been trying to show with my boring chronology, has there been an increasing interest in Vietnam war fiction (after

²⁰ An interesting omission is the long list of excellent works by Larry Mc Murtry: only one text, *Crazy Horse* (1999), is now available in Italian.

1987 and recently with the publication of *A Rumor of War* and the reprinting of *Dispatches*). What are the reasons for this new interest?

Here let me finish with another similarity. I think that what is happening here is somehow similar to what NYU historian Marilyn Young has described as the “Re-emergence of the Korean War”. In her essay, she explores the mechanisms through which the Korean War was erased from American consciousness so that it became assimilated to the “good war” which had preceded it, rather than to the “bad war” in Vietnam which was to follow. It is only after the Vietnam War that many writers, and particularly many poets, found the legitimacy for their writing: they had learned from the Vietnam War witnesses that witnessing was a right, and an urgency and so they eventually decided to make some of their works public.

Marilyn Young quotes the introduction of the poet W.D. Ehrhart to an anthology of poets of the Korean War: “The Vietnam War seems to have been a catalyst for most of these poets, releasing pent-up feelings that had perhaps been held in check by the personal and cultural stoicism bequeathed to them by their generational older brothers.”²¹

Now Italy has been far from war for a while, let’s say from 1945 to Gulf War I: actually we didn’t participate in the operation Desert Storm, but we realized we were very close both geographically and politically to the war theatre. Then we actually went to war: Bosnia, Afghanistan, Gulf War II and now Lebanon. So the answer to the question “why translating Vietnam War Literature into Italian now?” is definitely not theoretical: American Vietnam War literature is the literature we feel closest to what is happening to Italy (and not only to Italy) today.

Honolulu, November 2005

²¹ W.D. Ehrhart quoted in Marilyn B. Young, “La lunga marcia fino a *Il grande Lebowski*: il ri-emergere della guerra di Corea”, *Ácoma. Rivista internazionale di studi nord-americani*, a. VI (primavera 1995), n. 15, pp. 45-58.

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