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Võ Phiến and the Sadness of Exile

John C. Schafer

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PRESS

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Võ Phiến and the Sadness of Exile



John C. Schafer

Võ Phiến
and the
Sadness of Exile

John C. Schafer

Second Edition



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For Quỳnh

Humboldt State University Press showcases HSU research and scholarship with a broad scope of print and electronic publications including books, journals, conference proceedings, data sets, open textbooks, and more. These open-access works connect Humboldt State University with a worldwide community of researchers and scholars.

Anyone who listens for the unheard voice of the South Vietnamese in ordinary life—in revolution, war, and exile—will find John Schafer’s book an excellent guide to a sharp echo of that voice: Võ Phiến. This is a well-researched and comprehensive study of the prolific writer’s mind-set, and of the evolution of his literary skills.

Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang, Ph.D.

*In English-language scholarship on Vietnam, John C. Schafer is one of the few scholars who devote themselves to literary studies. His **Võ Phiến and the Sadness of Exile** is the first full-length book of criticism on a modern Vietnamese writer ever published in English. Schafer’s work is impressive with his erudition of the historical and cultural background of the country, his understanding of the subtleties of Vietnamese language and literary styles, and his insightful analysis of Võ Phiến’s work. With this book, not only Võ Phiến but also several important aspects of Vietnamese contemporary literature will be made available to English-language readers.*

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, Critic, Victoria University (Australia)

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When she was growing up in Huế, my wife, Cao Thị Như-Quỳnh, used to read essays and stories by Võ Phiến in *Encyclopedic (Bách Khoa)*, a journal her parents subscribed to. She encouraged me to read Võ Phiến many years ago and has been an invaluable sounding board as I've worked on this project. I have discussed many aspects of my approach to Võ Phiến with her and have profited greatly from her insights. Quỳnh also helped me understand some difficult passages and has assisted me in translating excerpts from Võ Phiến's work.

Võ Phiến graciously agreed to a written interview and when I had other questions after the interview, he answered them as well. I had interviewed Võ Phiến in the early 1990's while doing research on the early development of the Vietnamese novel, but did not know him well. In 2003 I wanted to interview him about his own life and work. I asked the writer, Thế Uyên, who was my partner in the Vietnamese novel project, to ask Võ Phiến if he would agree to be interviewed. Võ Phiến declined, citing bad health—he had survived two heart operations—and a failing memory, a side effect, he said, of the medicine he was taking. But he agreed to answer written questions and so we began an exchange of letters that continued until 2007. As a result of this correspondence, we got to know each other better, and Võ Phiến began to address me using the familiar pronoun “anh,” not as “giáo sư” (professor) or by using the more formal pronoun “ông.”

At my request Võ Phiến also sent me some of his family photographs and introduced me to Nguyễn Bá Khanh, who sent me a collection of slides that he had taken of Võ Phiến and his wife. The photographs that are included were selected from those they provided.

Cao Huy Thuần and Nguyễn Hoàng answered several miscellaneous questions as I worked on this book. If they couldn't answer a question, they referred me to someone

who could, usually a scholar associated with the exile journal *Forum* (Diễn Đàn) published in France. One of those scholars, Đặng Tiến, kindly sent me several of his articles on Võ Phiến that I could not obtain here in the U.S.

Professor Eric Henry of the University of North Carolina reviewed an early draft as did four other anonymous reviewers. My thanks go to them. My good friend George Ellis also read a draft of my book and made many constructive suggestions. I'm grateful to him and also to James Gaasch and Ron Fritzsche, colleagues at Humboldt State University, who encouraged me throughout this project.

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Permission to quote from Võ Phiến's works and to use photos from the first edition had to be obtained again for this edition. I want to thank Võ Phiến's wife and also Nguyễn Bá Khanh, who took three of the photographs, for granting their permission.

Finally, I wish to thank the Humboldt State University Press for selecting my book for re-publication and Cyril Oberlander, Dean of the Humboldt State University Library, and Claire Reynolds, Library Publications Specialist, for helping me get this second edition ready for publication.



Võ Phiến, circa 1998

LIST OF WORKS DISCUSSED

I list below all the works by Võ Phiến that are discussed in the pages that follow. Within each category (Novels, Short Stories, etc.) works are arranged alphabetically by English title. I hope that this list will be a useful addition to “Works by Võ Phiến” on p. 321. I include it because most of the works I discuss are short stories and essays that Võ Phiến published in collections. Since the titles of the individual short stories and essays do not appear in “Works by Võ Phiến,” one cannot look there to find information concerning a particular story or essay—in what collection(s) it appears, for example, or what its Vietnamese title is. This “List of Works Discussed,” however, includes this information.

This list should help you with another complication. The title of six of Võ Phiến’s seven story collections and one of his essay collections (*A Letter from Home*) is the same as one of the selections in that collection. This list should help avoid confusion caused by a repetition of titles. Here is some other information conveyed by this list:

My Classification of Works by Võ Phiến

Vietnamese scholars (and sometimes Võ Phiến himself) are not certain whether some of his works should be considered short stories (truyện ngắn), informal reflective essays (tùy bút), or formal essays (tiểu luận). For example, “A Truly Quiet Place” was originally published in a collection of “stories” (truyện) but Võ Phiến reprinted it later in a collection of informal reflective essays (*Tùy Bút II*). This list represents my decisions regarding classification, but I always take into account where Võ Phiến reprinted his works. For example, Võ Phiến’s decision to reprint “A Truly Quiet Place” in a collection of essays influenced my decision to classify it as a *tùy bút* narrative essay and not as a short story.

Reprints and Translations

In addition to indicating the first collection in which the work appeared, I also indicate the collection, if any, in which it has been reprinted. If a work has been translated, I give the name of the translator and the English title. For these reprints and translations I do not include complete bibliographic information because that is available in “Works by Võ Phiến” (pp. 321–324), “Collections Containing Reprints of Works by Võ Phiến” (p. 327), and “English Translations of Works by Võ Phiến” (p. 329–330).

Date Work Was Written

Usually, but not always, at the end of a story or essay by Võ Phiến there will be a date. Knowing that Võ Phiến has published most of his works in newspapers, magazines, and journals, and then later selected some for republication in a collection, I first thought that this date was the year of original publication. In a letter (April 15, 2004), however, Võ Phiến told me that this date indicates when he wrote the work, not when it was originally published. When available, I include this date because knowing it helps us relate a particular work to personal events in Võ Phiến’s life and to political and military events that were occurring when the story or essay was created.

Source for Page References

If a work that I discuss has been republished, I indicate which edition of that work I later cite in the chapters that follow, i.e., the work to which the page numbers in my parenthetical citations refer.

Novels (*Tiểu Thuyết*)

Alone (Một Mình). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1965. Written in 1963. Reprinted in *Novels I* (Tiểu Thuyết I), 1993. Page references are to *Novels I*.

Intact (Nguyên Vẹn). Des Moines, IA: Người Việt, 1978. Written in 1976 and 1977. Reprinted in *Novels II* (Tiểu

- Thuyết II), 1988. Translated by James Banerian as *Intact* (1990). Page references are to 1990 translation.
- Men* (Đàn Ông). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1966. Reprinted in *Novels II* (Tiểu Thuyết II), 1988. Page references are to *Novels II*.
- Saying Good-by* (Giã Từ). Saigon: Bách Khoa, 1962. Written in 1960. Reprinted in *Novels I* (Tiểu Thuyết I), 1993. Page references are to *Novels I*.

Short Stories (*Truyện Ngắn*)

- "All Finished" (*Xong Cả*). In *Really Short Stories*, 2nd ed. (Truyện Thật Ngắn). Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1995. Written in 1995.
- "Birds and Snakes" (Chim và Rắn). In *Changing World* (Phù Thế). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1969. Written in 1967. Reprinted in *Short Stories I* (Truyện Ngắn I), 1987. Page references are to *Short Stories I*.
- "Cousins" (Anh Em). In *A Moonlit Night in Spring* (Đêm Xuân Trăng Sáng). Saigon: Nguyễn Đình Vượng, 1961. Written in 1957. Reprinted in *Short Stories I* (Truyện Ngắn I), 1987. Page references are to *Short Stories I*.
- "I Am Many People" (Tôi Nhiều Đứa). In *Really Short Stories*, 2nd ed. (Truyện Thật Ngắn). Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1995. Written in 1991.
- "I'm Here" (Em Đây). In *Really Short Stories*, 2nd ed. (Truyện Thật Ngắn). Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1995. Written in 1991.
- "Mr. Five Chéo" (Ông Năm Chéo). In *Really Short Stories*, 2nd ed. (Truyện Thật Ngắn). Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1995. Written in 1991.
- "Night Rain at Year's End" (Mưa Đêm Cuối Năm). In *Night Rain at Year's End* (Mưa Đêm Cuối Năm). Saigon: Tự Do, 1958. Written in 1957. Reprinted in *Short Stories I* (Truyện Ngắn I), 1987. Page references are to *Night Rain at Year's End*.
- "Paying Attention" (Đề Ý). Published as "Several Letters" (Năm Ba Lá Thư) in *Illusion* (Ảo Ảnh). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1967. Written in 1963. Reprinted with new title,

- “Paying Attention,” in *Short Stories II* (Truyện Ngắn II), 1989. Page references are to *Short Stories II*.
- “The Prisoner” (Người Tù). In *The Prisoner* (Người Tù). Qui Nhơn, Vietnam: Bình Minh, 1957. Written in 1955. Reprinted in *Short Stories I* (Truyện Ngắn I), 1987. Page references are to *Short Stories I*.
- “A Reason for Living” (Lẽ Sống). In *A Moonlit Night in Spring* (Đêm Xuân Trăng Sáng). Saigon: Nguyễn Đình Vượng, 1961. Written in 1958. Reprinted in *Short Stories II* (Truyện Ngắn II), 1987. Page references are to *Short Stories II*.
- “Returning to a Country Village” (Về Một Xóm Quê). 1965. In *Returning to a Country Village* (Về Một Xóm Quê). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1965. Written in 1957. Reprinted in *Short Stories I* (Truyện Ngắn I), 1987. Page references are to *Short Stories I*.
- “Telling a Story Late at Night” (Kể Trong Đêm Khuya). In *Night Rain at Year’s End* (Mưa Đêm Cuối Năm). Saigon: Tự Do, 1958. Written in 1956. Reprinted in *Short Stories II* (Truyện Ngắn II), 1989. Page references are to *Short Stories II*.
- “Until the Ghost Dies” (Đến Khi Ma Chết). In *Love Cherished for a Thousand Years* (Thương Hoài Ngàn Năm). Saigon: Bút Nghiên, 1962. Reprinted in *Short Stories II* (Truyện Ngắn II), 1989. Page references are to *Short Stories II*.
- “The Unusual Husband” (Người Chồng Bất Thường). In *Illusion* (Ảo Ảnh). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1967. Written in 1966. Reprinted in *Short Stories II* (Truyện Ngắn II), 1989. Page references are to *Short Stories II*.
- “Writing a Letter at Noon” (Viết Thư Buổi Trưa). In *Love Cherished for a Thousand Years* (Thương Hoài Ngàn Năm). Saigon: Bút Nghiên, 1962. Reprinted in *Short Stories II* (Truyện Ngắn II), 1989. Page references are to *Short Stories II*.

Tùy Bút (Informal Reflective) Essays

- “Bubbles in Tea” (Hạt Bọt Trà). In *Country and Homeland* (Đất Nước Quê Hương). Saigon: Lửa Thiêng, 1973. Written in 1972. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy

- Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays I*.
- "The Chinese Guava" (Ổi Tàu). In *Informal Reflective Essays II* (Tùy Bút II). Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1987.
- "Cold" (Lạnh). In *Exile* (Ly Hương). Des Moines, Iowa: Người Việt, 1977. Written in January 1977. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Exile*.
- "The Coldness of the City" (Cái Rét Đô Thị). In *Country and Homeland* (Đất Nước Quê Hương). Saigon: Lửa Thiêng, 1973. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays I*.
- "Following in the Footsteps of a Dish" (Theo Chân Một Món Ăn). Place and date of original publication in Vietnam not indicated.¹ Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays I*.
- "Grass Tossed in the Wind" (Cỏ Bồng Phất Phơ). In *Exile* (Ly Hương). Des Moines, Iowa: Người Việt, 1977. Written at Tết (Lunar New Year), 1977. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Exile*.
- "Hội An" [Town in Quảng Nam Province]. In *Illusion* (Ảo Ảnh). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1967. Written in 1966. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays I*.
- "Leisure and Elegance" (Nhàn và Nhã). In *Country and Homeland* (Đất Nước Quê Hương). Saigon: Lửa Thiêng, 1973. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays I*.

¹In *Informal Reflective Essays I* (1986), the publisher indicates that essays marked with an asterisk in the table of contents "appeared in newspapers [in Vietnam] but were never printed in a book" (1986, 7). The following informal reflective essays that I list in this section are marked with an asterisk: "Following in the Footsteps of a Dish," "The People of Bình Định," and "Spring and the Swallow."

- "One Autumn" (Một Mùa Thu). In *Exile* (Ly Hương). Des Moines, Iowa: Người Việt, 1977. Written in 1976. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Exile*.
- "The People of Bình Định" (Người Bình Định). Place and date of original publication in Vietnam not indicated. Written in 1972. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays I*.
- "Pudding and Civilization" (Chè và Văn Minh). In *Country and Homeland* (Đất Nước Quê Hương). Saigon: Lửa Thiêng, 1973. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays I*.
- "Saying Good-by to Summer" (Giã Biệt Mùa Nắng). In *Exile* (Ly Hương). Des Moines, Iowa: Người Việt, 1977. Written in August, 1976. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Exile*.
- "Spring and the Swallow" (Mùa Xuân, Con Én). Place and date of original publication in Vietnam not indicated. Written in 1973. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays I*.
- "A Spring of Quiet and Peace" (Một Mùa Xuân An Lành). In *Exile* (Ly Hương). Des Moines, Iowa: Người Việt, 1977. Written in May, 1976. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986. Translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông as "A Spring of Quiet and Peace" (1983, 1985). Page references are to 1985 translation.

Tùy Bút (Informal Reflective) Narrative Essays

- "Again, a Letter from Home" (Lại Thư Nhà). In *A Letter from Home* (Thư Nhà). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1962. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays II* (Tùy Bút II), 1987. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays II*.
- "A Day to Dispose of" (Một Ngày Để Tùy Nghi). In *Changing World* (Phù Thế). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1969. Written in 1969. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays II* (Tùy

- Bút II), 1987. Translated by Võ Đình Mai (1985, 1989). Page references are to 1985 translation.
- "Drops of Coffee" (Giọt Cà Phê). In *Illusion* (Ảo Ảnh). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1967. Written in 1967. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays II* (Tùy Bút II), 1987. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays II*.
- "Ế ị" [The cry of a street peddler]. In *Illusion* (Ảo Ảnh). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1967. Written in 1966. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays II* (Tùy Bút II), 1987. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays II*.
- "Remembering My Village" (Nhớ làng). In *Collected Writings* (Tuyển Tập). Los Angeles, CA: Văn Mới, 2001. Written in 1972.
- "A Truly Quiet Place" (Một Chỗ Thật Tịch Mịch). In *Changing World* (Phù Thế). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1969. Written in 1969. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays II* (Tùy Bút II), 1987. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays II*.
- "When One Stops Resting" (Lúc Dừng Nghỉ). In *Changing World* (Phù Thế). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1969. Written in 1969. Reprinted in *Informal Reflective Essays II* (Tùy Bút II), 1987. Page references are to *Informal Reflective Essays II*.

More Formal Essays (Tập Bút) and Books on Literary Topics

- "Acknowledging Some Aspects of Exile Literature" (Vài Ghi Nhận về Văn Học Lưu Vong). Written in 1987. In *Essays on Literary Topics* (Tập Bút), 1989.
- "Breadth in Stories" (Chiều Rộng Trong Truyện). In *Essays on Literary Topics 1* (Tập Bút 1). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1965. Written in 1964. Reprinted in *Essays on Literary Topics* (Tập Bút), 1989. Page references are to *Essays on Literary Topics*.
- "Characters in Novels" (Nhân Vật Tiểu Thuyết). In *Essays on Literary Topics I* (Tập Bút I), 1965. Written in 1961. Reprinted in *Essays on Literary Topics* (Tập Bút), 1989. Page references are to *Essays on Literary Topics*.

- The Contemporary Novel* (Tiểu Thuyết Hiện Đại). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1963. Written in 1962. Reprinted in *Essays* (Tiểu Luận), 1988. Page references are to *Essays*.
- “The Death of a Genre” (Cái Chết của Một Văn Loại). *Review* (Tân Văn) 20 (December 1969). Reprinted in *Essays on Literary Topics* (Tập Bút), 1989. Page references are to *Essays on Literary Topics*.
- “Detail in Stories” (Chi Tiết Trong Truyện). In *Essays on Literary Topics I* (Tập Bút I), 1965. Written in 1960. Reprinted in *Essays on Literary Topics* (Tập Bút), 1989. Page references are to *Essays on Literary Topics*.
- “Life” (Thế Cuộc). *Village of Literature* (Làng Văn), no. 71 (July 1990): 39–41.
- Literature in South Vietnam: An Overview* (Văn Học Miền Nam, Tổng Quan), 1986. Reprinted in 1988 and 2000. Translated by Võ Đình Mai as *Literature in South Vietnam: 1954–1975* (1992). Page references are to 1992 translation.²
- Looking at Ourselves through Our Literature* (Chúng Ta Qua Cách Viết). Saigon: Giao Điểm, 1972. Reprinted in *Essays* (Tiểu Luận), 1988. Page references are to *Essays*.
- “Loving and Eating” (Yêu và Ăn). In *Miscellaneous Essays* (Tập Luận). Saigon: Trí Đăng, 1973. Reprinted in *Essays on Literary Topics* (Tập Bút), 1989. Page references are to *Essays on Literary Topics*.
- “Returning to Detail in Stories” (Lại Chi Tiết Trong Truyện). In *Essays on Literary Topics I* (Tập Bút I), 1965. Written in 1960. Reprinted in *Essays on Literary Topics* (Tập Bút), 1989. Page references are to *Essays on Literary Topics*.
- “Writing Under Fire” (Viết Trong Tiếng Súng). Place and date of original publication in Vietnam not available. Written in February, 1968. Reprinted in *Essays on Literary Topics* (Tập Bút), 1989. Page references are to *Essays on Literary Topics*.

²I have changed slightly some passages in this translation to make the English more idiomatic. In doing so I have consulted the original Vietnamese version to make sure my changes are true to Võ Phiến’s intended meaning.

More Formal Essays on Non-Literary Topics (*Tạp Luận*)

- "The Clear-cut Americans" (Người Mỹ Dứt Khoát). In *Again, Letters to a Friend* (Lại Thư Gửi Bạn), 1979. Written in 1977 and 1978. Reprinted in *Miscellaneous Essays* (Tạp Luận), 1987. Page references are to *Again, Letters to a Friend*.
- "The Colorful Older Americans" (Cụ Mỹ Muôn Màu). In *Again, Letters to a Friend* (Lại Thư Gửi Bạn), 1979. Written in 1977 and 1978.
- "The Complicated Americans" (Người Mỹ Rắc Rối). In *Again, Letters to a Friend* (Lại Thư Gửi Bạn), 1979. Written in 1977 and 1978.
- "Current Art News: Career Troubles for the Writer Võ Phiến" (Thời Sự Văn Nghệ: Tai Nạn Nghề Nghiệp của Nhà Văn Võ Phiến). Võ Phiến published this under the pen name Thu Thủy in *Encyclopedic* (Bách Khoa) 303 (August 15, 1969): 75–76.
- "Each Group Is Separate" (Từng Lóp Cách Nhau). In *Miscellaneous Essays* (Tạp Luận). Saigon: Trí Đăng, 1973. Written in 1966. Reprinted in *Miscellaneous Essays*, (Tạp Luận), 1987. Page references are to *Miscellaneous Essays*.
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PREFACE

The first edition of *Võ Phiến and the Sadness of Exile* was published in 2006. In 2010 the entity that published this edition —Southeast Asia Publications at Northern Illinois University—ceased operation. When people contacted me seeking a copy of my book, I had to tell them that their only option was to find a library that had it. In the fall of 2015, however, Humboldt State University, where I had taught for twenty-two years, established the Humboldt State University Press. I submitted my book for consideration and it was accepted: Humboldt State University Press agreed to publish a second edition. I was pleased because, like all authors, I want my book to be available for readers, but also because Võ Phiến deserves more attention than he has received. My only regret is that Võ Phiến died before I could give him the good news that this book about him would be re-published. He died in Santa Ana, California, on September 28, 2015. He was ninety years old.

Võ Phiến's accomplishments are known and appreciated within Vietnamese communities in the diaspora, but he is not well-known outside these communities, primarily because very few of his works have been translated into English. I hope more translations will be done. Until they are, because my book—thanks to the Humboldt State University Press—will remain available, readers can at least get a feel for Võ Phiến's accomplishments by reading it.

Because it is published under a Creative Commons license that allows free downloads from the web, it will be easy for readers to obtain. Those who wish a hard copy can purchase one through Amazon, with the proceeds going to the Humboldt State University Library.

Võ Phiến's main theme is, as my title suggests, the sadness of exile. He wrote, however, over forty books and covers a variety of topics. He is famous for his stories of country characters with colorful nicknames like Uncle Broken

Kettle Spout, Brother Three Crab Claw, Brother Two Broken Beak, Uncle Four Wilted Lily, Uncle Five Bowlegged and Brother Four No More. I describe these stories and translate passages, including a long passage about Brother Four No More's wife and her encounter with a frog fisherman (See pp. 144-152). Võ Phiến had a wry sense of humor that comes through in many of his essays and stories. I am delighted that, thanks to the Humboldt State University Press, English-language readers will be able to obtain my introduction to his life and work.



Map of Vietnam, 1954-1975

INTRODUCTION

*Pain, that's the price the exile must pay. There's no avoiding it.*⁴
—Võ Phiến

I cannot remember the exact day, or even the month, but I know it was in the fall of 1971. I was sitting in the teachers' lounge of the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Huế chatting with Vietnamese colleagues. To improve my Vietnamese I had been reading some very sentimental and predictable stories in Vietnamese, including several Vietnamese translations of works by a Chinese writer named Quỳnh Dao, a popular writer at that time. Very light reading but very appropriate to my limited literacy in Vietnamese. I had grown tired of this fare, however, and wanted some suggestions for more interesting reading. "What contemporary writer would you recommend I read?" I asked my colleagues. They thought for a while, and then one suggested Võ Phiến. Later at a local bookstore I picked up a copy of *Love Cherished for a Thousand Years* (Thương Hoài Ngàn Năm), a collection of Võ Phiến's short stories published in 1962.

That was my introduction to Võ Phiến. I have continued to read him over the years because I have appreciated his writing and have learned a great deal from it about Vietnamese culture, about the effect of war and revolution on the lives of humble villagers, and about the sadness of exile and the difficulties of living and writing in a strange land. Unfortunately only one novel, one critical work, two short stories, and seven short essays by Võ Phiến have been translated, and so English-language readers have been exposed to only a very small sample of his work. My purpose in this book is

⁴*Letters to a Friend*, 1976, 75.

to introduce English-language readers to arguably the most respected writer within the Vietnamese exile community.

Certain aspects of Võ Phiến's situation make him an interesting figure. First of all, he lived in interesting times. He participated in or witnessed major movements and events of the twentieth century—European colonialism and the revolution to overthrow it, the spread of communism and the United States' attempts to suppress it, the disruption of traditional village life, and the flight of people across the earth to escape war and political upheaval. We have many accounts of these movements and events, but few are written by people from small villages in what is called "the third world."

"When water buffaloes fight, flies and mosquitoes get killed" (Trâu bò húc nhau, ruồi muỗi chết). Vietnamese I met in Vietnam used to quote this proverb to describe the dangers of living where political and military battles funded by the major powers take place. Accounts of these clashes that reach English-language readers are usually written from the buffalo's, not the fly or mosquito's, perspective. We rarely hear from people like Võ Phiến who grew up in Bình Định, a province that was a battleground for a quarter of a century. Võ Phiến provides a fresh and valuable perspective on some of the major movements of the twentieth century.

For *Vietnam: A History*, Stanley Karnow interviewed Mark Smith, an American soldier from the First Cavalry Division whose operational area was Võ Phiến's province of Bình Định. Smith told Karnow that he was fascinated by the beauty of Bình Định Province, the rice fields divided so precisely, the lush green mountains rising above them. But he was intimidated by the "subtle, incomprehensible" villages: "whole societies right in front of us, yet impenetrable even after we had entered them, never understanding anything or seeing anything understandable, the people staring at us as if we were from Mars" (1983, 468). By reading Võ Phiến we get to look into those villages, to meet the people who lived there, and to learn something about them and the society in which they lived. Vietnam is now at peace, but soldiers from the "first world"—the United States, Great Britain, Australia—

are still being sent to defeat or police societies that neither they nor their commanders comprehend. The place names change, but the problem of appreciating other perspectives remains.

Many people witness major movements and events, but only a few write moving accounts about them. Not everyone has sufficient time, education, talent, or motivation. Fortunately Võ Phiến possessed all these things. He knew three literary traditions—Chinese, Vietnamese, and Euro-American—and drew on all three to produce an impressive body of work, close to forty books in all, including eight collections of short stories, four novels, a book of poetry, twelve collections of essays and dialogues, eight books of criticism, and five translations. In addition, he has also produced a six-volume series called *Literature in South Vietnam*, a selection of work—fiction, reportage, essays, and poetry—written in South Vietnam during the years 1954 to 1975. Võ Phiến has provided short introductions for most of the one hundred and eighteen writers whose work is represented in this series.⁵

Another aspect of Võ Phiến's career makes him interesting. He was a well-established writer before he left his homeland and has continued to write influential works since his arrival in the United States in 1975. Many writers well known in the South before 1975 who have sought refuge in the United States (or France, or Canada, or Australia) have not produced much writing as exiles. They have, in the words of the critic Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, "persisted like tutelary village gods in the village hall, shadowy echoes of a former time" (1996, 14). Some now popular exile writers—Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn, for example—did not take up writing until they came to the United States. Võ Phiến, however, has produced works on both sides of the 1975 divide: roughly forty per cent of the works enumerated above were written in the United States. By looking at his work, that written in Vietnam before 1975

⁵The number of actual people represented is less than one hundred and eighteen because some writers have contributed works of more than one genre and thus are represented in more than one volume. Nhã Ca, for example, has contributed a short story, a piece of reportage, and some poetry.

and that written later in the United States, we can see the complete sweep of a literary life. We can see the kind of creative writer Võ Phiến was in Vietnam, see him reacting to revolution and war and separation from his home village, and then we can see him struggling to adapt, both personally and artistically, to exile and life in a strange land.

When the major powers intervene in third world countries, they force citizens of those countries to make difficult choices. Should they throw their lot in with the foreign power and the regime it is backing? Should they try to remain neutral and politically uninvolved? Should they join the opposition movement and work to overthrow the current regime? Rarely do we see the end result of these agonizing choices. The foreign power eventually returns home, leaving the citizens of the country to deal with the consequences of their decisions. Rarely do we learn how the story ends for particular individuals. With Võ Phiến, however, we get the beginning and the end of the story: we learn about the agonizing decisions he made to abandon the revolution and throw his lot with the Saigon regime and its American allies, and we learn the consequences of those decisions.

One consequence of Võ Phiến's decisions was exile in the United States and along with this exile came the necessity of living among a people—the Americans (*người Mỹ*)—whose customs and beliefs at different times confused, amused, irritated, or terrified him. Because he wrote three collections of essays on American life, we learn his views. These works differ dramatically from most accounts by immigrants. Immigrant accounts typically are written in English by second- or third-generation immigrants who have mastered English but know little about the homeland of their parents and grandparents. They know something about what America offers, but have a much dimmer sense of what they have lost. Already caught up in the fast pace of life in the industrial West, they find it difficult to imagine alternatives. Many immigrant accounts celebrate the American dream or at least have some good things to say about American life and culture.

Võ Phiến, however, is not a second- or third-generation immigrant. He came to the United States when he was fifty years old as a political refugee because he feared imprisonment and possibly execution if he remained in Vietnam. He is therefore not an immigrant writer, but an exile or refugee writer. Renny Christopher says that while “exile” and “refugee” may be used interchangeably, these terms can also be used to distinguish those who “embrace the perspectival shift they experience” (exiles) from those who have this shift forced on them (refugees) (1995a, 34). Though I believe most people understand “exile” to refer to a forced or a self-imposed departure from a country, Christopher’s distinction could be useful. Honoring it means we would have to call Võ Phiến a refugee, not an exile, writer. Unlike some other exile and some immigrant writers, particularly second- or third-generation immigrants, Võ Phiến does not celebrate the American Dream or other aspects of American culture. Far from it. Instead of embracing Christopher’s “perspectival shift” and telling us things we have heard before, he keeps his Vietnamese perspective and provides a new and often surprising view of America.

Besides perspectives suggested by the terms “immigrant,” “refugee,” and “exile,” another useful perspective is provided by the term “diaspora.” Used for many years to discuss Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion, “diaspora discourse,” says Clifford, is now “loose in the world, for reasons having to do with decolonization, increased immigration, global communications, and transport—a whole range of phenomena that encourage multi-locale attachments, dwelling, and traveling with and across nations” (1994, 306). In the first issue of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Safran identifies diasporas as “expatriate minority communities” whose members share several of the following experiences, beliefs, and hopes:

1. They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places;

2. They maintain a “memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland”;
3. They “believe they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host country”;
4. They hope to return to their ancestral home when the time is right;
5. They are determined to maintain or restore this homeland;
6. Their consciousness and solidarity are “importantly defined” by this continuing relationship with the homeland. (1991, 83–84; see also Clifford 1994, 304–305)

Vietnamese in expatriate communities around the world, at least those of Võ Phiến’s generation, can be said to be part of a diaspora as Safran defines the term: They share the experiences and perspectives that Safran enumerates. In discussing Võ Phiến and his work this diasporic perspective is useful, preferable to an immigration perspective weighted down by “voluntarism or American triumphalism” (Wong 1995, 11). Diasporas are “not exactly immigrant communities,” argues Clifford; they are not sites “where the canonical three generations struggled through a hard transition to ethnic American status.” The recent immigrations of non-European peoples of color “disrupt linear assimilation narratives”; their immigration often has a “less all-or-nothing quality, given transport and communication technologies that facilitate multi-locale communities” (311).

A diasporic perspective is also preferable in some ways to the perspective provided by the term exile, a term that can encourage an overly individualistic focus and obscure the transnational quality of the expatriate community to which a writer like Võ Phiến belongs. Clifford points out these possible limitations when he compares diaspora to travel:

Diaspora is different from travel (though it works through travel practices) in that it is not temporary. It involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home (and in this it is different from exile, with its frequently

individualistic focus). Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots and routes to construct . . . forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference. (307–308)

Võ Phiến has made few non-Vietnamese friends in the United States. In a letter he told me that he had only two American friends (April 25, 2003).⁶ He has been sustained by a community of overseas writers and readers—those who live near him in Southern California and those who live far away in New York, Paris, or Melbourne, places which he has visited and where his books and the journals that he has helped to establish are sold. Võ Phiến has also worked to nourish this community by writing essays to help Vietnamese in the diaspora understand their plight; he also has written introductions to the works of other overseas writers and published collections of their work. Because it helps us articulate this transnational community consciousness that Võ Phiến feels deeply, a diasporic perspective is useful.

No term or perspective, however, captures completely the complex life of a writer like Võ Phiến. One problem with diaspora is that Võ Phiến wrote sixty per cent of his works, including his most famous, before he left Vietnam. Adopting a diasporic perspective could lead us to overlook the first half of his literary life, though as we will see (in chapter V), Võ Phiến's perspective was in some ways diasporic and transnational before he left Vietnam. In the '60s and '70s when Võ Phiến was living in Saigon unable, because of the war, to return to his native village, the "original homeland" about which he maintained a "memory, vision, or myth" was not the nation state of Vietnam but his "quê hương," or "native region," in Bình Định Province. A diasporic perspective may encourage overly simplistic definitions of homeland.

Christopher's suggestion to call writers who resist the "perspectival shift" of coming to America refugees not

⁶See chapter VI, p. 235.

exiles means Võ Phiến should be called a refugee writer, but it seems odd to call someone who has been in the United States for thirty years a refugee. Though other terms capture some aspects of Võ Phiến's life and work, I will refer to him as an exile writer. Besides being convenient (a phrase like "diasporic writer," for example, is awkward), "exile" connotes sadness and Võ Phiến was often unhappy in America, though, as we will see, his unhappiness, too, had a transnational character, stemming from his objections not to American life in particular but modern life in general. I will suggest in chapter V that the term that fits Võ Phiến's situation the best is the Vietnamese term "*ly hương*." Meaning "separation from one's native region," and used to describe both people who are removed from their native village (and therefore also from the world of traditional Vietnam) and those who have left the country of Vietnam, "*ly hương*" captures Võ Phiến's predicament more accurately than any English word.

Only a smattering of Võ Phiến's works has been translated, and so his audience has been restricted to Vietnamese readers. Võ Phiến and other Vietnamese exile writers resent the fact that their work has been pretty much ignored in the West. Thụy Khuê, an exile critic who lives in France, says the neglect is partly their own fault: determined to keep the Vietnamese language alive in exile communities, exile writers have insisted on writing in Vietnamese. But Thụy Khuê and other exile writers, including Võ Phiến, refer also to Euro-American prejudice against works by Asian writers to explain why their works have been neglected. Asian writers can attack communism, Thụy Khuê argues, but there will never be a "Chinese, Vietnamese, or Cambodian Solzhenitsyn" (2000, 43).⁷ In an essay called "The Vietnamese Americans," Võ Phiến says that

⁷Michael Lind argues that Vietnamese who attack communism have not become acceptable in "American liberal intellectual circles" for two reasons: first, because they are Asian; and second, because, like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (and unlike more accepted exiles like Vaclav Havel and Joseph Brodsky), they have not "criticize[d] Communism from a Social Democratic perspective" (2001/2004, 1). Lind is explaining why the work of the Vietnamese anti-communist poet Nguyễn Chí Thiện has been neglected. Võ Phiến admired Solzhenitsyn, Arthur Koestler, and other European critics of communism (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1996, 22).

Asian writers cannot achieve recognition in the United States. Mai Thảo, another exile writer, praises his friend Võ Phiến for realizing that, as far as their literary efforts are concerned, "It's us to us only. There's no way to reach them [Western readers]; every road is blocked, every door is shut" (1985, 118).

The situation is more complex than Võ Phiến and Mai Thảo suggest, however. The Vietnamese translator of the essay in which Võ Phiến expresses his pessimistic views feels compelled to point out in an endnote that the year before Võ Phiến wrote his essay the Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston received the National Book Critics Circle award for *The Woman Warrior* (74). Kingston, however, is an Asian American writer who writes in English; Võ Phiến and other exiles who live in the United States but write in Vietnamese are harder to classify, but probably should be classified as Asian or Vietnamese writers. When Võ Phiến and other Vietnamese writers came to the United States in the 1970s, the border between Asian American studies and Asian studies was very carefully maintained. The term "Asian American," which was coined in the 1960s by college activists of Asian descent, was still relatively new. It was chosen to mobilize Asians of different ethnicities in a pan-Asian united front to fight racial discrimination and achieve their civil rights. The Asian American movement was inspired by the Black Power movement, and until Filipino Americans insisted they were brown not yellow Asian American activists talked of Yellow Power (Espiritu 1992, 32). Asian American studies emerged as a field of study in U.S. universities when students of Asian descent demanded courses and programs relevant to their lives.

"Roots" have always been important to Asian Americans, Sau-Ling C. Wong explains, but the word evokes two possible meanings: "either 'origin,' where one or one's family hails from in Asia; or else commitment to the place where one resides." It was this second meaning "on which Asian American studies was founded" (1995, 10). Asian American studies, explains Wong, began as a "cultural nationalist

project.” It “was spearheaded by American-born and raised, Anglophone, mostly male, Asians; it features certain premises—anti-Orientalism, valorization of working-class ethnic enclaves, ‘claiming America’—that explicitly or implicitly discourage, if not preclude, critical attention on things Asian” (3).

This domestic or indigenized, as opposed to transnational or diasporic, approach to Asian American studies was articulated by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong in their preface to *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974). This preface helped to shape the field of Asian American studies and divorce it from Asian studies. This divorce is indicated in the title of the anthology, *Aiiieeeee!*, which suggests the way the Asian American writers included in it “got their China and Japan”: they got them “from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering whined, shouted, or screamed ‘Aiiieeeee!’” (vii). In the eyes of the *Aiiieeeee!* group, Asian American writers were Japanese-, Chinese-, or Filipino-Americans who learned about their ancestral homes from comic books and other media controlled by white America. The Asian American writer of the *Aiiieeeee!* group was defined by certain “sensibilities and cultures that might be related to but are distinct from Asia and white America” (viii). To earn the designation “Asian American” one had to acquire “‘American’ credentials on ‘American’ soil.” A fear of “exoticization” and the fact that many American-born cultural critics were monolingual English speakers encouraged a “disavowal” of Asian influences (Wong 1995, 4). But one also had to avoid becoming too assimilated to the culture of white America. For the *Aiiieeeee!* group being an Asian American writer was a tricky balancing act.

In the 1980s this domestic, culturally nationalist approach to Asian American studies began to be questioned and by 1995 the field had arrived at a theoretical crossroads. A series of events was leading to a denationalization of Asian

Amerian studies, a movement revealed by three “cultural phenomena”: an easing of the cultural nationalist concerns that motivated the Aiiieeeee! group, a growing permeability between “Asian” and “Asian American,” and a shift from a domestic to a diasporic perspective (Wong 1995). Events prompting this denationalizing include changes in U.S. immigration laws in the mid-1960s and the Vietnam War, two events that led to more Southeast Asians coming to the United States. Included among the Southeast Asians were Vietnamese like Võ Phiến with a deep and first-hand knowledge—not one gleaned from American comic books!—of Asian culture. In the 1960s and ’70s, Asian American literature was a literature written by writers of East Asian descent; Filipinos were the only Southeast Asians represented. As recently as 1982 Elaine H. Kim said this literature consists of “published creative writings in English by Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent” (1982, xi). In the 1980s and ’90s, Asian American literature began to include more works by South and Southeast Asian writers. The arrival of Hmong, Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese refugees—people whose “relationships with U.S. imperialism may be much more complex than has been recognized in an identity politics derived largely from East Asian American experiences”—broke up the old alignments based on an Asian American population dominated by East Asians (Wong, 5).

Other causes of this denationalizing, which has continued into the twenty-first century, are global transport and communications (relatively cheap jet travel, the Internet, e-mail, satellite TV), the rise of Asia as an economic power, and “the circulation of Asian transnational capital” (Wong, 7). Identity formation is not what it was in the “steamboat era,” says Wong. Many Asian Americans lead lives that “blunt the acute binarism between Asian and American,” (7) lives like that of the Chinese investor mentioned by Ong who is “based” in San Francisco but claims, “I can live anywhere in the world, but it must be near an airport” (1993, 41).

These developments have shaken up the field of Asian American studies and produced some translations of Viet-

namese works but, interestingly, most of the works that have been translated were written by writers living in Vietnam, a fact that confirms Võ Phiến's view that Americans take more notice of Asian writers who stay home than of those who come to the United States ("The Vietnamese Americans," 73). Extremely few works written in Vietnamese by Vietnamese exiles have been translated into English, a fact I discovered when I compiled *Vietnamese Perspectives on the War in Vietnam: An Annotated Bibliography of Works in English* in 1997. When I compiled that bibliography, I found five anthologies that included some translations of short stories by exile writers. In three of these anthologies, works by exile writers make up a very small proportion of the selections.⁸ I also found only two novels—Võ Phiến's *Intact* and Nhã Ca's *At Night I Hear the Cannons* (Đêm Nghe Tiếng Đại Bác) (1993), both translated by James Banerian. Finally I found Trần Tri Vũ's memoir, *Lost Years: My 1,632 Days in Vietnamese Reeducation Camps* (1988), translated by Nguyễn Phúc. There were eight works in all. One or two works have been published since my bibliography was published, including Trần Vũ's *The Dragon Hunt* (1999).

Most works that have been translated are by north-erners who fought against the South Vietnamese regime and its American allies—Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh) (1991), Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's *The General Retires* [Ông Tướng về hưu] and *Other Stories* (1992), Dương Thu Hương's *Paradise of the Blind* (Những Thiên Đường Mù) (1993), Lê Lựu's *A Time Far Past* (Thời Xa Vắng) (1997), and a collection of short stories by Lê Minh Khuê given the English title *The Stars, the Earth, the River* (1997), for example. These are fascinating works and one can only applaud the efforts of translators and publishers who have made them available for English-language readers. Still, the almost exclusive focus

⁸The anthologies are: *Vietnamese Short Stories: An Introduction*, ed. and trans. James Banerian (1986); *War and Exile: A Vietnamese Anthology*, ed. Nguyễn Ngọc Bích (1989); *The Other Side of Heaven: Post-War Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers*, eds. Wayne Karlin, Lê Minh Khuê and Trương Vũ (1995); *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion*, ed. John Balaban and Nguyễn Quý Đức (1996); and *Night, Again: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam*, ed. Linh Dinh (1996). The last three anthologies contain only a few works by exile writers.

by American publishers on works by writers from the North is puzzling. Probably it reflects a (very laudable) desire to heal the wounds of war, to understand and reconcile with the other side; or perhaps a fascination with the “exotic other” — northerners associated with the Democratic (later Socialist) Republic of Vietnam⁹ may be thought to have more interesting stories to tell than Vietnamese we see on the streets of Los Angeles, Montreal, or Sydney.

Võ Phiến and other exile writers who live in the United States but write in Vietnamese may have also failed to attract attention because they are neither fish nor fowl, not exactly Asian writers and not exactly Asian American writers. Their indeterminate status may prevent them from showing up on the conceptual radar screens of American scholars and publishers. An interesting question, which I explore in my final chapter, is whether the growing permeability of the border between Asian and American studies will lead to a heightened appreciation for Võ Phiến and other exile writers who straddle these two fields of study.

Though few works written by Vietnamese exiles in Vietnamese have been translated, some autobiographies written in English have appeared and have been well received by English-language readers. Some of the better known include Lê Lý Hayslip’s *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989), Nguyễn Quí Đức’s *Where the Ashes Are* (1994), and Andrew X. Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala* (1999). Perhaps these works have succeeded because their authors have heeded this advice that Võ Phiến gives to Asian exile artists and writers seeking fame in America: “[O]nce you are in America, you should do as the Americans do. You should paint and write about things that the American public knows and can relate to. To gain recognition, you should feel and think like a true American. How

⁹After the August Revolution of 1945 (see chapter I), Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam and the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. After Việt Minh forces defeated the French in 1954, the Geneva Accords left the DRV in control of only the northern part of the country. On 2 July 1976, a little more than a year after communist forces defeated the Saigon regime, the National Assembly founded the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

can you possibly be acclaimed when you are nothing more than an Asian?" ("The Vietnamese Americans," 73).

It may be that Americans and other English-language readers can "relate" better to autobiography, a genre that, for reasons explained in chapter VI, Vietnamese who tell their stories in Vietnamese rarely choose. To make sure readers can relate to them, autobiographies written by Vietnamese in English, particularly if they are writers who came to the United States when they were adults, are often ghost written and heavily edited. Lê Lý Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, for example, was written with Jay Wurts. More than one-third of the manuscript was cut and some violent incidents were omitted or toned down because, according to Hayslip, Doubleday editors felt that readers were not interested in anything "so awful" (Christopher, 1995a, 79). Works by younger writers like Nguyễn Quí Đức and Andrew X. Pham, who came to the United States as young children, probably only required the normal amount of editing. Members of Generation 1.5, as those who come to the United States as children are sometimes called, usually speak English fluently and are likely to become familiar with the genre of autobiography as a result of growing up and going to school in the United States. They are less likely to need Võ Phiến's advice about thinking and feeling like a "true American."

Encounters with discourses that differ both in content and form from those we are accustomed to can, however, provoke valuable reflection. Võ Phiến succeeded with his Vietnamese readers in part, as we will see, because he provided them with opportunities for such encounters. Influenced by Russian, French, British, and American writers, he experimented with new ways of structuring his narratives and essays. When Võ Phiến came to America, however, he did not heed his own advice to write what Americans wanted to read; he always wrote for Vietnamese, and so when someone like myself reads his works it is like eavesdropping on a private conversation. This is particularly true with Võ Phiến's essays on America most of which are cast as letters to a "dear friend," a fellow refugee. Reading them you feel as if you

are perusing a bundle of old letters found in the attic. When you discover that the people talking in the letters are talking about you—about Americans—the strangeness of your situation increases, but, of course, so does your curiosity. You cannot resist reading on, and so you do, comforted by the fact that you are, after all, reading published works and by your awareness that Võ Phiến and other exile writers want to reach a wider audience. The value of these overheard stories and conversations that I report on here is that they allow us to encounter the feelings and thoughts of a leading Vietnamese exile writer before they are edited to accommodate American sensitivities. Though I primarily report on these stories and conversations, I also translate many passages so you can overhear them yourselves.

Plan of the Book

To understand Võ Phiến's works one needs to know something about his life and where he grew up, and so I begin in chapter I, "The Man from Bình Định," with a brief biography that includes information on the recent history of Võ Phiến's home province of Bình Định. In chapter II, "Weighing the Political and the Personal in the Early Fiction," I introduce some stories and novels written between 1956 and 1969. Võ Phiến has said that his first works reflect an obsession with politics and that it took him awhile to liberate himself from this obsession. Following up on this observation of Võ Phiến's, I look first at works that he considers political, then at works written when he says he had moved on to other concerns. In this chapter I focus on the content of Võ Phiến's early fiction.

In chapter III, "A Passion for Concrete Detail: Võ Phiến's Narrative Technique," I turn to form, to features of Võ Phiến's style and narrative technique that are evident in his early fiction. I find four features: a focus on character, a reliance on physical description, a preference for framed narratives, and a passion for detail. Common to all these features is an interest in the concrete as opposed to the abstract, and I end this chapter by considering what might have caused Võ Phiến to attach such a high value to concreteness.

Because many Vietnamese critics believe that Võ Phiến displays his talents best in a form called *tùy bút* (informal reflective essay), I discuss his early works in this form in chapter IV, “Developing an Aesthetics of the Common in *Tùy Bút* Essays.” Vietnamese critics and literary historians struggle to define *tùy bút*. I conclude that this literary form has four defining features: nostalgia, an appreciation of the finer things in life, a subjective quality, and a digressive structure. It is important to understand these features of the traditional *tùy bút* essay because Võ Phiến worked both in and against this form, using it to talk not about the pleasures of the well-to-do, the subject of traditional *tùy bút* essays, but about the enjoyments and pains of humble villagers. In the process he developed what I, drawing on an observation of Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, call an aesthetics of the common (1996, 124). In terms of form, Võ Phiến produced some texts that resemble *tùy bút* texts produced by his predecessors, texts I call “*tùy bút* essays,” but also some texts that are difficult to distinguish from short stories, texts I call “*tùy bút* narrative essays.” I discuss examples of both *tùy bút* types in chapter IV, including “Again, a Letter From Home,” a *tùy bút* narrative essay that is one of his most famous works.

In chapter V, I explain why Võ Phiến felt that he was “An Exile in His Own Country” (the title of this chapter) before he became an exile in the United States. By looking at works like “Birds and Snakes,” “Remembering My Village,” “Ế ị” and “A Truly Quiet Place,” I show that this feeling of in-country exile derived from two causes: from Võ Phiến’s feeling that war had destroyed his village, both physically and spiritually, and from his conviction that big cities like Saigon, where he lived from 1959 to 1975, were noisy, crowded, ugly, and cold—places where warm human relationships like those he had known in Bình Định were hard to find. The “essential sadness” of exile, Edward Said observes, “the unhealthy rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,” can “never be surmounted” (1990, 357). Võ Phiến suffers from and expresses Said’s “essential sadness,” but his writing forces us to consider certain terms in

Said's statement, terms like "native place" and "true home." In chapter V, I make the case that in speaking of Võ Phiến it would be a mistake to identify these terms only with the country of Vietnam.

In chapter VI, "Exile in America," and chapter VII, "Coping with the Pace of Life and the Death of Literature," I concentrate on works Võ Phiến has written in the United States, first—in chapter VI—on his essays about American life written in the late 1970s; and then—in chapter VII—on his novel *Intact* (1978) and some stories, essays and dialogues written in the 1990s. In his early essays on America Võ Phiến describes how he and other Vietnamese reacted to America when they first arrived—their fears, confusion, and amusement when confronted with a different way of life. In chapter VI, I summarize these essays and offer possible explanations for aspects of them that might puzzle English-language readers—the fact, for example, that they contain only criticism and no praise of American culture. In chapter VII, I examine *Intact* and other works in which Võ Phiến returns to an old concern, the fast pace of modern life, but also expresses some new worries: the rise of television and the death of literature. By looking at his novel and more recent essays and stories, we will see that Võ Phiến's grief is not with America in particular, but with modern life in general.

In the final chapter, "Contradictions and Possibilities," I suggest that to understand Võ Phiến's life and work one must realize that both are fraught with contradictions. He promotes new ways of writing and reading but misses the old; he is intensely political but dislikes political writing; he loves country villagers but ridicules them harshly at times; and he loves his country and his people but does not think they can do anything "grandiose." Any evaluation of Võ Phiến's work, I argue, must take into account these contradictions. After "Contradictions" I move to "Possibilities"—to some thoughts about who will read Võ Phiến in the future and for what reasons.

Vietnamese Forms of Address and the Names of Characters

In my descriptions of Võ Phiến's stories you will encounter characters like Brother Four No More, Sister Four Lime Stick, and Uncle Five Bowlegged. Some comments on Vietnamese forms of address and nicknames will help you understand these colorful appellations. In Vietnamese, kinship terms (uncle, aunt, grandfather, etc.) do double duty as pronouns and one must choose the right pronoun pair—the right first-person and second-person pronoun—for every conversation. For example, when a young child speaks to her father's older brother, she uses the pronoun *cháu* (niece) to refer to herself and the pronoun *bác* (uncle) to refer to her uncle, so "I will help you" becomes "Niece will help uncle" (Cháu sẽ giúp bác). These kinship pronouns are also used for "fictitious" relatives, people who are not blood relatives but who are close to the speaker.

Then there are nicknames and kin numeratives. In speaking to relatives and close friends Vietnamese may use personal names, along with the appropriate kinship pronoun, if the person being addressed is older than the speaker. (It is a breach in etiquette to refer to an elder without using a kinship term.) For example, a boy or girl may refer to his older sister whose name is Mai as Sister Mai (Chị Mai). But Vietnamese often use nicknames or kin numeratives instead of personal names. Villagers in Võ Phiến's native province of Bình Định use both. When kin numeratives are used, the first-born in the family is referred to as Hai (Two), the second-born as Ba (Three), the third-born as Bốn (Four), and so on. Though it would be more logical for the first-born to be called "first" or "one," this is not the custom in most of rural central and south Vietnam, though it is the custom in north Vietnam where the first-born is called Cả (literally: biggest, oldest).¹⁰ Therefore someone referred to as Bác Bảy (Uncle Seven) is one's uncle (a real uncle or someone who is like an

¹⁰One explanation for calling the eldest child "two" is that "'Number One' (cà) was reserved for the mother, who was considered as the father's first child" (Nguyễn Đình Hoà, 1980, 32).

uncle—someone well-acquainted with the family) who was the sixth-born in his family.

Because there would almost certainly be more than one “Uncle Seven” or “Sister Four” in a village, one had to use a name along with the kin numerative to distinguish, for example, the Uncle Seven who lived at the north end of the village from the Uncle Seven who lived in the south end. Võ Phiến’s villagers preferred nicknames to names, usually nicknames that highlighted a physical feature or some humorous aspect of the person’s personality or life history. Thus we get names like “Uncle Five Bowlegged.” As Võ Phiến’s narrator explains in “Birds and Snakes,” a story about Sister Four Lime Stick and her fellow villagers, “Our way of referring to each other and judging each other was a little rude but affectionate. Sister Four Lime Stick’s neighbors were Brother Three Broken Claw, Uncle Five Bowlegged, Brother Two Broken Beak, Brother Broken Tea Kettle Spout,¹¹ etc. Everyone was understanding of this joking by their relatives in the hamlet. No one complained about it” (297). The kinship terms in the above quotation—Sister, Brother, and Uncle—reflect the narrator’s relationship to the characters. When I refer to a character, I use the same kinship terms as the narrator.

A Word about My Secondary Sources

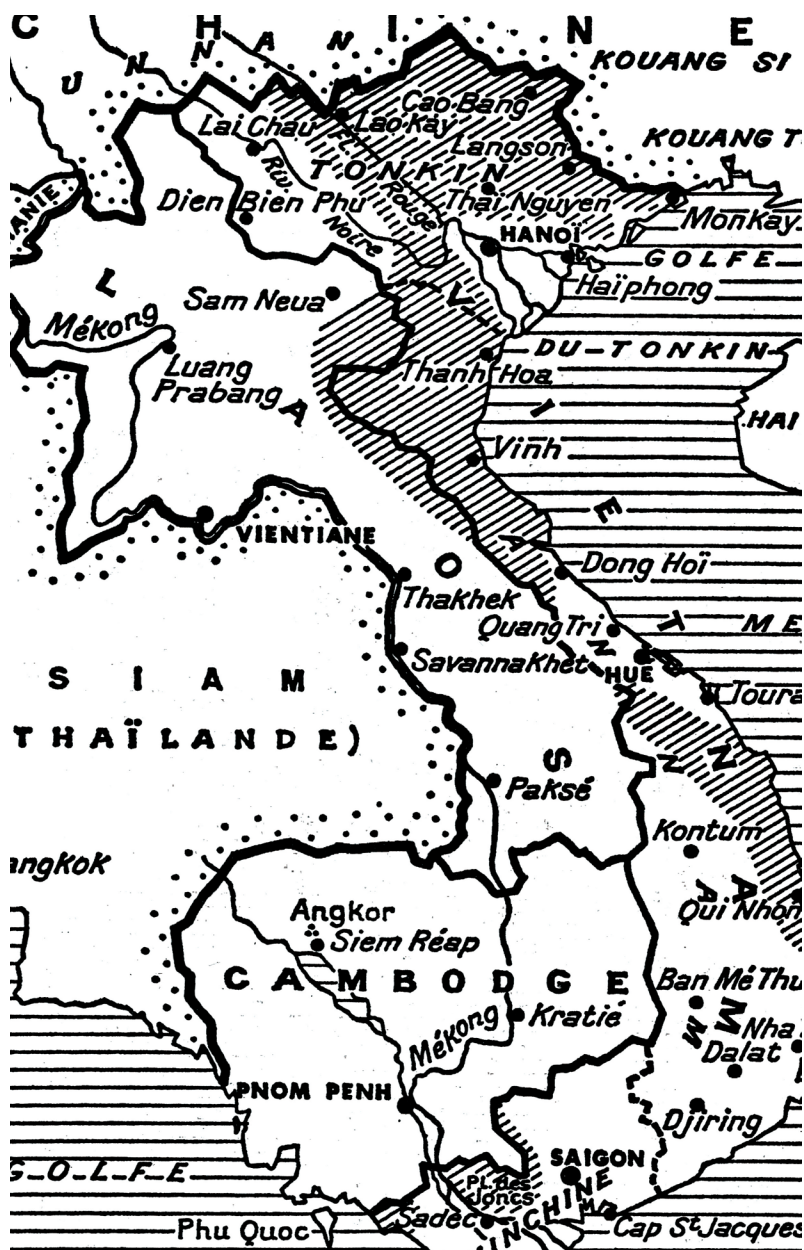
Almost all my secondary sources are Vietnamese-language works. Little has been written about Võ Phiến in English, primarily because so few of his works have been translated. Vietnamese sources are, in any event, essential because I strive to do more than simply describe Võ Phiến’s work and offer my own evaluation of it: I attempt to convey what Vietnamese readers, primarily those in the Vietnamese exile community but also readers in Vietnam, think about Võ Phiến. I quote Vietnamese critics and scholars often and so you will hear many voices in this book besides my own. I have benefitted greatly from listening to these voices and I hope you will as well. In many ways this book is not mine

¹¹I am not certain why no kin numerative is used in addressing Brother Broken Tea Kettle Spout.

alone; it belongs also to those whose works have helped me understand Võ Phiến's life and work.

Including many different voices does present problems, however. Because many Vietnamese have the same family name (Nguyễn and Trần, for example, are very common), when I cite a scholar I must cite his complete name to avoid confusion. It is also not the custom to refer to Vietnamese by using only their family or given name. Because of these customs related to names, paragraphs in which I quote or paraphrase several Vietnamese critics or scholars may contain several long names. Usually the names are in parentheses at the end of a sentence, however, and therefore should not be too distracting.

I do not mean to suggest that one should pay no attention to the people who offer their opinions and insights regarding Võ Phiến's work in the pages that follow. In fact, I hope readers will take an interest in them. The more you know about them the better able you will be to evaluate their opinions and insights. To encourage you to take an interest in my sources, and help you distinguish those with similar names, I provide, in the appendix, information on some of the Vietnamese writers and scholars whose voices you will hear in this book.



Map of Indochina in 1950. Gray areas are those held by Việt Minh forces. (© Editions Gallimard)

I

THE MAN FROM BÌNH ĐỊNH¹²

*When you get to Bình Định suddenly the people become “thần hậu.” . . . A thần hậu person is cautious, discreet, and filled with a quiet sadness and regret.*¹³

—Võ Phiến

Võ Phiến's real name is Đoàn Thế Nhơn. Võ Phiến is a pen name purposely chosen to echo the name of his wife, Võ Thị Viễn Phổ, whom he married in 1948. Võ Phiến was born in 1925 in the village of Trà Bình, which is in the district of Phù Mỹ in Bình Định Province in central Vietnam. Trà Bình is about thirty-five miles north of the coastal town of Qui Nhơn (see maps of Vietnam on pp. xxviii and 170). Place of birth, where one grew up—probably this is useful information in understanding any writer. In Võ Phiến's case, it is extremely important information because the subject of many of his works has been village life in the district of Phù Mỹ, a small patch of land lying between the South China Sea and the mountains of the central highlands (see map of Bình Định on p. 170). Even after Võ Phiến left Bình Định, first for Saigon, then for America, his native region was never far from his mind. Though war and exile prevented him from physically returning, he was always making mental journeys back to Bình Định, journeys that inspired some of his best-known works.

¹²This account of key events in Võ Phiến's life is based on the following sources: Hoàng Khởi Phong 1994, 52–58, 31–37; Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, *Võ Phiến*, 1996, 17–26; Tạ Chí Đại Trùng 1998; Trần Long Hồ 1998; two published interviews of Võ Phiến: one with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng, “Talking with *Literature*” 1968/1989; and one with the journal *Encyclopedic*, “Talking with *Encyclopedic*,” 1969/1989. In addition, in a written interview with me (April 25, 2003) and in personal correspondence (May 10, 2003, April 15, 2004) Võ Phiến has responded to some specific questions that I asked.

¹³“The People of Bình Định,” 138, 141.

Võ Phiến also saw himself as being a man from Bình Định, that is as a person who had the qualities he associated with people from this province—the qualities he mentions in the epigraph for this chapter. In two essays—“The People of Bình Định,” the source for the epigraph, and in “Hội An”—Võ Phiến explains that the people of Bình Định differ from people in “the land of Quảng” (xứ Quảng)—the three provinces north of Bình Định that have “Quảng” in their name: Quảng Bình, Quảng Ngãi and Quảng Nam. These provinces are famous for producing revolutionaries and for being hotbeds of political activity. “Urge them a little and they rise up. If they’re a little dissatisfied, they rebel,” says Võ Phiến. “The old, the middle-aged, the young—Quảng people of all ages are passionate about politics In each Quảng person it seems there flows a little political blood” (“Hội An,” 204, 209). But when a traveler, proceeding southward from the land of Quảng, gets to Bình Định, the people are calmer, less rebellious, less interested in politics.

These traits, Võ Phiến says, are reflected in literature. Poets and prose writers from Bình Định do not pour out their emotions in showy, noisy fashion; instead they speak gently, more discreetly, more cautiously than poets from other regions. Though they feel deeply, they keep their feelings in check. Clearly Võ Phiến aspired to conform to his conception of a Bình Định writer and for the most part he succeeded: his works are quiet and reflective and in them he almost always speaks in a modest, unpretentious way. Most people find that Võ Phiến in person resembles his literary persona. I found that to be the case in two meetings with him.¹⁴ Trần Long Hồ, a younger writer who visited him in California in 1995, was also impressed by Võ Phiến’s gentle manner:

Anyone who meets Võ Phiến will recognize one thing: that he is naturally gentle, modest, and

¹⁴In 1986 my wife and I interviewed Võ Phiến at his home in California. The focus of the interview was not Võ Phiến’s own work but the early development of the Vietnamese novel, a topic I was researching at the time. In 2003 I met him by chance at a gathering of exile writers in Santa Ana, California.

sincere. This quality is revealed not only in his appearance but in his accent, which, following the Bình Định pronunciation, is slightly heavy on the “o” and “a” sounds. Not only in his accent but also in his manner it seems that Võ Phiến still retains his simple, truthful, and polite personality; he still speaks in the unaffected manner characteristic of people from Bình Định. (1998, 125–126)

At times, however, as we will see, Võ Phiến does speak intemperately. In a country at war for over a quarter of a century it would be surprising if he succeeded completely in controlling his emotions. Võ Phiến detested political fanaticism, which he blamed the communists for promoting, and so he is most likely to become intemperate when discussing their ideas and tactics. One can see Võ Phiến’s life as a long struggle to control violent passions engendered by war and remain a “thần hậu” (discreet, calm) man from Bình Định.

But that struggle came later. Vietnam was not always at war when Võ Phiến was growing up in Bình Định. As a child he was comforted by his family, but more, one senses, by older members of his extended family than by his parents. Shortly before Võ Phiến was born, his father, a schoolteacher in Bình Định, had a falling out with a district chief, and left to teach in the South. Nine years later, in 1934, his mother joined her husband in Rạch Giá in southwestern Vietnam. Until the war with the French broke out, his parents would return to Bình Định in the summers, but after 1945 ten years passed before he was reunited with them. In his entire life, he lived for only three years in the same house with his father and less than ten with his mother. Võ Phiến has described the first time he remembers seeing his father. It was in 1931 when Võ Phiến was seven years old. His father returned from Rạch Giá dressed in fine Western city clothes, cutting quite a figure in the poor village. Võ Phiến was proud of his father but understandably their separation had distanced them from each other.

Trần Long Hồ says that “it seems that his [Võ Phiến’s] father had another wife in the South and had children”

The Boy of Bồ Đề

*Someone returns to Bồ Đề Giếng Vuông
Leaving me with longing and sadness
(folk poem)*

Returning to the old Bồ Đề Giếng Vuông
Do you see a bewildered child?
As the moon wanes, the sun sets,
He wanders there alone.

Looking back after sixty years I still can see
That figure far away in Bồ Đề Giếng Vuông
That figure appearing in the mist,
On the deserted hill,
With the quiet hamlet all around him
And dry bamboo leaves on the ground.

A dove at the end of the garden, wild flowers on the deserted hill,
A moor hen cries loudly from the bushes;
The winter wind reaches him through the tattered thatched roof,
The summer sun shines on him at the edges of rice paddy and pond,
And overhead the flutter of the dragon flies.
From winter to summer—four seasons in Bồ Đề Giếng Vuông—
He's still there all alone;
Changes come, he's not even ten years old,
Alone amidst the many graves of ancestors.

From that hamlet of long ago the child listens,
And looks in all directions through the darkness,
But he cannot see the image of an old and tired man
Feeling and searching for a place to rest
On a continent far away.

Bồ Đề is the name of the hamlet where the author lived as a child. The hamlet of Giếng Vuông was a little less than a kilometer away from Bồ Đề. In Bồ Đề people wove mats. Bồ Đề mats, like Gò Găng conical hats, were local products that were popular in Bồ Đề. [Võ Phiến's note]

(1998,129). Võ Phiến's father's 1931 visit lasted for several years, long enough for him to conceive two children, Đoàn Thế Hối and Đoàn Thị Tĩnh. "Hối" means "repent" or "regret" and "Tĩnh" means "wake up." Trần Long Hồ thinks that perhaps Võ Phiến's father chose these names to indicate how he felt about starting a family with another woman in the South. Đoàn Thị Tĩnh, Võ Phiến's sister, died when she was about four and his brother Đoàn Thế Hối was raised in the South. These were not, however, Võ Phiến's only siblings, though he did not know this until after the war ended. When he was thirty, Võ Phiến learned that he had four additional siblings, all born in southern Vietnam. During the war against the French communication between the central and southern regions was difficult and Võ Phiến lost contact with his parents. After the war, thanks to a notice he put in a newspaper, he finally found his parents and learned that he had two more brothers (Đoàn Thế Tâm and Đoàn Thế Định)¹⁵ and two sisters (Đoàn Thị Hoà and Đoàn Thị Diệu Ngọc).

Unlike most Vietnamese children Võ Phiến did not grow up in a household filled with siblings. He was raised by his mother and, after she joined her husband in the South, by his paternal grandmother. Võ Phiến's grandmother lived in a hamlet called Bồ Định, a cluster of about twenty families most of whom lived close to each other, but his grandmother's house was separate from the rest, a location that decreased his interaction with other children in the hamlet. Trần Long Hồ wonders whether this relative isolation explains why Võ Phiến as an adult had few close friends and why he wrote works with introspective and lonely characters (130). Võ Phiến wrote few poems, but in one he wrote in 1993 he looks back on his hamlet and on "The Boy of Bồ Định" who lived there a long time ago (see p. 26). This poem suggests that Võ Phiến's was afflicted with loneliness and melancholy as a child. During his years in Bồ Định hamlet Võ Phiến was clearly influenced a great deal by his grandmother. She figures prominently in one of his best-known works, "Again, a

¹⁵Đoàn Thế Định is also known as Đoàn Thế Tông.

Letter from Home," and he refers to her often in his essays. The source of many of Võ Phiến's characters and stories are in tales told him by his grandmother about earlier times, a period she referred to as "mọi lần," or "once, long ago."

Because Võ Phiến's paternal grandfather died young, when his grandmother was around thirty, and his father lived in the South, he had little contact with male figures from his immediate family, but he did spend time with various male relatives, including two great uncles. Both Đoàn Thế Đại, his paternal grandfather's youngest brother, and Lê Đình Mẫn, his grandmother's younger brother, were important influences on his life. Lê Đình Mẫn had passed the first rung of the civil service exams to become a mandarin and so was called Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm (Ông Tú Từ Lâm). The civil service exams were given in Chinese, so Mr. Degree-holder knew Chinese and could read, for example, the regulated poems of the T'ang Dynasty in their original Chinese. Võ Phiến learned Chinese from his uncle and other older relatives, becoming proficient enough to translate a book about eastern medicine from Chinese to Vietnamese (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996, 21).

The old-style education based on the mandarin exams was, however, already a thing of the past when Võ Phiến was born. The last examination session was held in 1919. As a young man he attended Franco-Vietnamese schools in which courses were taught in French and Vietnamese. But Võ Phiến was obviously influenced by what he learned from his great uncles and other older relatives. The fact that his early moral and intellectual training appears to have come primarily from members of his grandparents' not his parents' generation may help explain his intense interest in the past. Mr. Degree-holder is an important character in "Again, a Letter from Home," "Returning to a Country Village," and the novel *Men*, works in which he represents the past, an older Vietnam that was vanishing quickly due to Western influence and war.

Though his father's absence during the early years of his life was partially justified by war and economic necessity, Võ Phiến must have been affected by it. His conflicted feelings toward his father, combined with the fact that he was

raised by his grandmother, by all evidence a strong and capable woman, may explain Võ Phiến's unusual sympathy for the plight of women in traditional Vietnamese society. In many Võ Phiến stories the admirable characters are women, and the men, though they may be endearing in some ways, are often indecisive and confused, and some are also rogues or weaklings or lazy ne'er-do-wells or some combination of all these types. "[Võ Phiến's] female characters usually dominate the atmosphere in his works," comments Đặng Tiến, a critic who lives in France. "The universe in a Võ Phiến work is the universe of women, of wives" (1974, 57).

Võ Phiến went to secondary school in Qui Nhon, the capital of Bình Định Province, and later studied in secondary schools in Huế and Hanoi. As a young man, he was influenced by four men who were teachers, writers, and researchers: Lam Giang, Chế Lan Viên, Đào Duy Anh, and Hoài Thanh. The first two men taught Võ Phiến in a private school in Qui Nhon, the last two at Thuận Hoá School in Huế. Though Võ Phiến had started at a public secondary school, he came down with malaria and after missing half a year of study while convalescing, he had to attend the private school to catch up. Lam Giang was a pen name. His real name was Nguyễn Quang Trứ. Lam Giang appreciated his student, Võ Phiến, who was only five years younger than he was. According to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, it was Lam Giang who first encouraged Võ Phiến to try his hand at writing (1996, 18). When Lam Giang went to Huế to teach, he invited Võ Phiến to come with him.

Though Lam Giang later co-authored a dictionary and some works of literary research and wrote some well-received memoirs and reportage, he never became as well-known as Võ Phiến's other teachers. Chế Lan Viên achieved fame in the 1930s for some haunting and gloomy romantic poems filled with references to the Cham, an Indianized people whose language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian family. The Cham were pushed southward by Vietnam's southern movement (*nam tiến*), and by the early 1400s the Kingdom of Champa had disappeared. Always more political than Võ Phiến, Chế Lan Viên used the sad fate of the Cham to speak indirectly

about Vietnam's loss of independence to France. Later he joined the revolution and wrote poems filled with hatred for the imperialists. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc,¹⁶ who left Vietnam by boat in 1986, says he once heard Chế Lan Viên praise Võ Phiến, his former pupil. Then Chế Lan Viên mentioned that Võ Phiến had sent a letter home to a relative quoting these sad lines from *The Tale of Kiều* (ca. 1800), a narrative poem that all Vietnamese love: "What else is there to say; your daughter's doomed to live / on foreign land and sleep [be buried] in alien soil." Võ Phiến was comparing himself to Thúy Kiều, the heroine of the poem, who says these lines to her mother when she volunteers to marry the evil Scholar Mã to save her father from false charges (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1998a, 15).

Đào Duy Anh, a non-communist patriot, ended up on the communist side but was never completely trusted by the Hanoi leadership. He became a very highly respected historian, lexicographer, and literary scholar. Đào Duy Anh was more important to Võ Phiến's emotional and intellectual development than was Chế Lan Viên. Though Huế did not have a university at that time, the secondary schools there were better than those in Qui Nhon and the intellectual atmosphere was more lively. While attending Thuận Hoá School, he caught the attention of Đào Duy Anh who was teaching there. In return for tutoring his children, Đào Duy Anh let Võ Phiến stay at his home and eat with his family. After the August Revolution of 1945, the new government brought Đào Duy Anh to Hanoi to teach history at a newly opened university. Võ Phiến accompanied his teacher to the northern capital. While in Hanoi, Võ Phiến continued his studies and also helped Đào Duy Anh prepare a French-Vietnamese dictionary. This older scholar was for Võ Phiến the supportive father he never had and also an important influence on Võ Phiến the writer. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc sees Đào Duy Anh's influence in Võ Phiến's detailed approach to research and in

¹⁶Nguyễn Hưng Quốc is the author of *Võ Phiến* (1996), an important study of Võ Phiến's life and work. See appendix for more information on him and other Vietnamese scholars whom I cite often.

his fondness for historical explanations of cultural and social phenomena (1996, 19).

Võ Phiến also expresses his appreciation for another teacher at Thuận Hoá School, Hoài Thanh, who in 1942 published *Vietnamese Poets* (Thi Nhân Việt Nam), a highly acclaimed review of the so-called new poets. Like Chế Lan Viên, Hoài Thanh later joined the revolution and was an ardent communist. In a 1965 interview with Lê Phương Chi, Võ Phiến had this to say about his two former teachers, Đào Duy Anh and Hoài Thanh: “Now they live under the communist regime, but in some respects I will always be grateful to them” (147).

As a student in colonial Vietnam Võ Phiến learned French and read a variety of French writers, including the following: Marcel Proust, Emile Chartier Alain, André Maurois, André Gide, and Alphonse Daudet. He not only read French writers; he also wrote about them and occasionally translated their works. After the French war ended and the American presence in Vietnam increased, Võ Phiến also read American writers, probably in French translations—Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and William Faulkner, among others. In his later essays on literary topics, in his *The Contemporary Novel* (1963), a study of the *nouveau-roman* movement, and in many reviews in the journal *Encyclopedic* (Bách Khoa), Võ Phiến reveals that he was familiar with a wide variety of Russian, French, German, British, and American writers, including Leo Tolstoi, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Uwe Johnson, W. Somerset Maugham, Pearl Buck, and even Ian Fleming, author of the James Bond series.

In interviews and in letters written to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, Võ Phiến suggests that though he read widely and somewhat haphazardly, particularly after moving to Saigon in 1959, Proust, Maurois, and Daudet were the most formative influences on his own style. Võ Phiến refers to Proust often and clearly admired his detailed descriptions. As for Maurois, Nguyễn Hưng Quốc is probably correct in seeing his influence in Võ Phiến’s more recent dialogues, the form Võ Phiến uses in *To Write* and *Dialogues* (1996, 19). In discuss-

ing the various forms of the Vietnamese essay in *Literature in South Vietnam*, Võ Phiến mentions Maurois' dialogues about the British in *Les Silences du Colonel Bramble* (1918) and *Les Discours du Docteur O'Grady* (1922). In these works Maurois, who was an interpreter in England during World War I, has some British officers converse around the mess table on various topics. Maurois' *Cours de Bonheur Conjugal* (1951) may also have encouraged Võ Phiến to employ dialogue. In this work a professor uses a dialogue between two lovers to teach a course about love and marriage. Võ Phiến cites Maurois to make the point that logical arguments can be dressed in very pleasing literary clothing (*Literature in South Vietnam*, 181). As for Daudet, reading him probably helped Võ Phiến sharpen his wit and comic touch. "I love Daudet for two things," Võ Phiến says: "for the poetic flavor that permeates his stories and for his comic but compassionate tone. That little smile that Daudet glued to my lips when I was young, it is still there, right?"¹⁷

It could be fruitful to investigate more thoroughly how French (and Russian and English) writers influenced Võ Phiến's work, but studies of influence are always speculative: who can say for sure what reading experiences have contributed to a work of art? In understanding Võ Phiến's work, it seems more useful to focus on the Vietnamese context, including the historical situation in Bình Định Province where Võ Phiến spent his formative years. Though a detailed account of the August Revolution and the first Indochina war is not appropriate in this short introduction to Võ Phiến, a few comments on the situation in Bình Định during the years 1945–55 may be helpful.

Taking advantage of a vacuum of power resulting from the defeat of the Japanese, who had occupied Vietnam since 1940, Hồ Chí Minh and his forces seized control in the north and declared the independence of Vietnam. This was the August Revolution of 1945. The French, however, were not about to relinquish their power in Indochina. Hồ Chí

¹⁷Võ Phiến's comment about Daudet comes from a letter he wrote to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc on 20 July 1991. See Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996, 20.

Minh went to Fountainbleau to negotiate a settlement with the French but came home with only a *modus vivendi*, essentially an agreement to cease hostilities. Tensions escalated. Disputes between Vietnamese and French officials in Haiphong over who had the power to levy customs and pass labor laws led to violence. War broke out after the French, in order to establish their authority, bombed Haiphong on November 23, 1946. In December Việt Minh forces were forced out of Hanoi but they regrouped in the mountains between the Red River Delta and the Chinese frontier, the so-called “Việt Bắc” region (north Vietnam).

In the first years of the war, Việt Minh forces were primarily in a defensive posture and concentrated on harassing attacks; beginning in 1950 they mounted major offensives. In the fall of 1947, before these offensives began, Việt Minh forces already controlled from a half to two-thirds of the entire country.¹⁸ They controlled “close to eighty per cent of both the land and people of northern and central Annam [term the French colonialists used for Vietnam]” and retained this control at the end of the war (Buttinger 1967, 740). The map on p. 22 reveals that in 1950 the Việt Minh held sway over a great deal of Vietnam.

Operating from the Việt Bắc, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam administered the regions it controlled. Different approaches were applied depending on whether the region was a “free zone,” a “guerilla base,” a “guerilla zone,” or an “occupied zone” (Chesneaux 1966, 185–90). In what Việt Minh officials called “free zones,” i.e., areas firmly under their control but which were subject to French air raids and paratroop landings, agricultural and industrial production could be carried out and a semblance of normal life preserved. In “guerilla bases,” outposts inside the communication lines of the French Expeditionary Corps, life was not at all normal and in “guerilla zones,” areas where military operations were occurring, it was even less so. The French were firmly established in the “occupied zones” — Hanoi, Huế, the Saigon-Chợ

¹⁸Buttinger says “at least half” (1967, 739); Chesneaux says “about two-thirds” (1966, 185).

Lớn area, the valley of the Lower Mekong, the industrialized north (Nam Định, Hải Phòng, Hòn Gay), and the rubber-producing areas of Cochinchina.

Because the coastal provinces of central Vietnam offered limited incentives for colonial exploitation, the French had never established a firm presence in them, and as a result they were a “free zone” safely in Việt Minh hands. Between the coastal towns of Qui Nhơn in Bình Định Province and Vinh in Nghệ An Province, the Việt Minh controlled all but a narrow coastal strip from Đà Nẵng to Quảng Trị, a stretch that included the city of Huế (Buttinger, 740). Even this strip was not securely in French hands. From a string of fortified villages built on coastal sand dunes lying between Huế and Quảng Trị, Việt Minh soldiers would attack French forces on Highway 1. The French called this dangerous stretch “The Street without Joy” (Fall 1961, 137). In March 1948, the Việt Minh divided the country into six “liên khu” (interzones). Central Vietnam south of Huế was Interzone V. To sum up: when the resistance war began, Võ Phiến was in Bình Định Province, a Việt Minh-controlled “free zone” that was part of an administrative unit called Interzone V.

The fact that Võ Phiến grew up in Interzone V is important for several reasons. First, it resulted in Võ Phiến experiencing communism more directly and completely than other writers associated with the Republic of Vietnam, writers who were too young to be politically aware of events during and after the August Revolution or who came from other zones where the communists were in less firm control. Because Interzone V was in Việt Minh hands, communist cadres, Võ Phiến has explained, were able to implement “agricultural taxes, campaigns of denunciation against landowners and wealthy farmers, repression against middle farmers and small bourgeoisie, etc.” In other parts of the south, the Việt Minh were not in firm control, and so until 1954 they maintained “the pretense of being only Việt Minh fighters, comrades of the people in the war for independence” (*Literature in South Vietnam*, 105).

The fact that Võ Phiến grew up in Interzone V is important for another reason. Because most of this zone was controlled by communist forces during both Indochina Wars, it became one of the most hotly contested regions of the entire country. First the French and then the Americans, both working with forces of the Saigon regime, mounted large operations to gain control of Bình Định Province. I describe some of these battles in chapter V because as they became more and more intense, involving increasing amounts of fire power, and as more and more villagers were driven from their homes, Võ Phiến became convinced that his village was destroyed, if not physically then spiritually. Like the villagers forced to flee, he became separated from his native region, an exile in his own country.

After the August Revolution in 1945, Võ Phiến, like most students in Huế, was eager to join the liberation army. He was issued a uniform and assigned the job of delivering mail by bicycle to troops based in the Huế area. Later he worked on a propaganda assault team operating in central Vietnam. In mid-1946 he went to Hanoi to continue his studies—this is when he again met Đào Duy Anh—but returned by train to Bình Định in December 1946, when country-wide resistance to French domination was about to begin. Võ Phiến worked at a customs office in Gò Bồi for nine months and then was assigned to teach in the People's Secondary School of Interzone V, a school that provided literacy and cultural training to cadres in the Việt Minh forces.

Early in 1948 Võ Phiến married Võ Thị Viễn Phổ, who was five years younger. Võ Phiến has always been reluctant to talk about his wife, or any aspects of his private life—at least in public forums—and so we do not know a lot about her. Lê Phương Chi reports that when he asked Võ Phiến, in a 1965 interview for the journal *Book News* (Tin Sách), whether he had chosen his wife or the marriage had been arranged by his parents, “Võ Phiến’s smile vanished, and this reply slipped out: ‘Heavens! So this also relates to literature?’” But Võ Phiến did volunteer this much: “Let me answer in this way: we married each other because we loved each other” (134). In this same

interview he also said that during the resistance in Interzone V he and his wife shared many hardships, more so than the average family because he was for a while in a communist prison.

Võ Phiến did not enjoy teaching Việt Minh cadre, apparently put off by their fanaticism and their conviction that no aspects of life fell outside the domain of politics. By 1951 his dissatisfaction with the communist regime had intensified. Đoàn Thế Khuyển, a cousin of Võ Phiến's, and Tạ Chí Diệp, a friend from school days, and his former teacher Lam Giang had also grown disaffected with communism and were seeking to communicate with the non-communist Vietnam Nationalist Party (Quốc Dân Đảng), a party with ties to Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang party in China. His cousin and friends encouraged Võ Phiến to join them. Võ Phiến was reluctant to do so. His first child was born during this period, an event that gave him hope for the future and cooled his enthusiasm for politics. In addition, Võ Phiến, knowing that the communists were well organized, feared any overtures to the Vietnam Nationalist Party would be detected. Because those inviting him were a relative, a friend, and a respected former teacher, however, he never refused them in a clear-cut manner.

Later his fears were realized. Việt Minh authorities became aware of Tạ Chí Diệp's attempt to contact Nhất Linh, the famous novelist who was a leader in the Vietnam Nationalist Party, and in 1952 arrested Võ Phiến and other members of this group. Verdicts and punishments were meted out by a people's court. Võ Phiến's cousin and four other men were given the death penalty and executed. Lam Giang was given a life sentence with hard labor and Võ Phiến was sentenced to a five-year prison term. Tạ Chí Diệp escaped and avoided punishment. One of those deciding Võ Phiến's fate was a former student of his at the People's Secondary School in Bình Định, a fact which may explain his lighter sentence (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996, 21). Luckily for Võ Phiến, the war ended in 1954 and the Geneva Accords called for the release of all political prisoners. So Võ Phiến served only two years of his

five-year sentence. Apparently Lam Giang was also released at the same time, though Võ Phiến's biographers do not say so. Certainly he survived to write some well-received reportage, and to be jailed again by communist authorities after 1975 (*Literature in South Vietnam*, 222).

Võ Phiến's problems were not over when he was released. An International Control Commission policed the treaty, but its personnel could not be everywhere. Some of Võ Phiến's friends went to Qui Nhon thinking they would be safe there, but Việt Minh cadres found them and took them to the north. To avoid the attention of the Việt Minh authorities, Võ Phiến disguised himself as a peasant farmer who sold chickens. With baskets of chickens hanging from a bar on his shoulder, he went to small outlying markets and eventually made his way to Huế, a city safely in non-communist control.

Võ Phiến has provided few details about his time with the resistance, his relationship with the Vietnam Nationalist Party, and his time in a Việt Minh prison. This has frustrated at least one of his readers. "Accounts of Võ Phiến's life during the period 1945–1955," says Hoàng Nguyên Nhuận, "raise hundreds of questions" (2004). When I asked Võ Phiến in my written interview for more details about this period of his life, he politely avoided the questions, pleading a failing memory, but expressing also a reluctance to revisit a painful time of his life. For example, when I asked him about what he taught Việt Minh cadre at the People's Secondary School of Interzone V, he replied in this way:

It's been a long time, forty-five years, almost half a century, since I participated in the work of supplementing the cultural knowledge of communist cadres. The thoughts and feelings that I had at that time have now become dim, not clear anymore. I'm afraid any comments I made wouldn't be accurate. So what's the use of commenting on our differences now? (April 25, 2003)

Fortunately we know more about Võ Phiến's life after the first Indochina war ended. After his release from prison, Võ Phiến began a pattern that he continued for forty years: working as a civil servant and writing in his spare time. In South Vietnam, his "day job" was to work as a director of information at the provincial level (Ty Trưởng), first in Quảng Trị Province where he stayed for a little more than half a year, and then in his native province of Bình Định, where he remained until 1959. This was after the Geneva Accords and the division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel and so Võ Phiến, having made his break with communism, was now serving the Saigon regime led by Ngô Đình Diệm.

What did his work for the Ministry of Information involve? According to Võ Phiến, the information and communication apparatus was quite primitive in central Vietnam in the late 1950s.¹⁹ There was no television, which did not appear until the late 1960s, and facilities to produce radio broadcasts existed only in the provincial capitals, not at the district, village, or hamlet levels. Journalists were present in the provincial capitals and some district seats but rarely brought information to or from the countryside. In this context, Võ Phiến says the duty of the Provincial Office of Information (Ty Thông Tin) was:

to disseminate information (international, domestic) at the district, village, and hamlet levels. The information was disseminated in various ways: by gathering the people and reading news over a loud-speaker, by distributing some Saigon newspapers to the people, and by announcing and explaining government policies. Another duty of the information offices was to be aware of the people's concerns and opinions and pass them on to higher levels so that the government would understand the attitude of the people. (Letter, April 15, 2004)

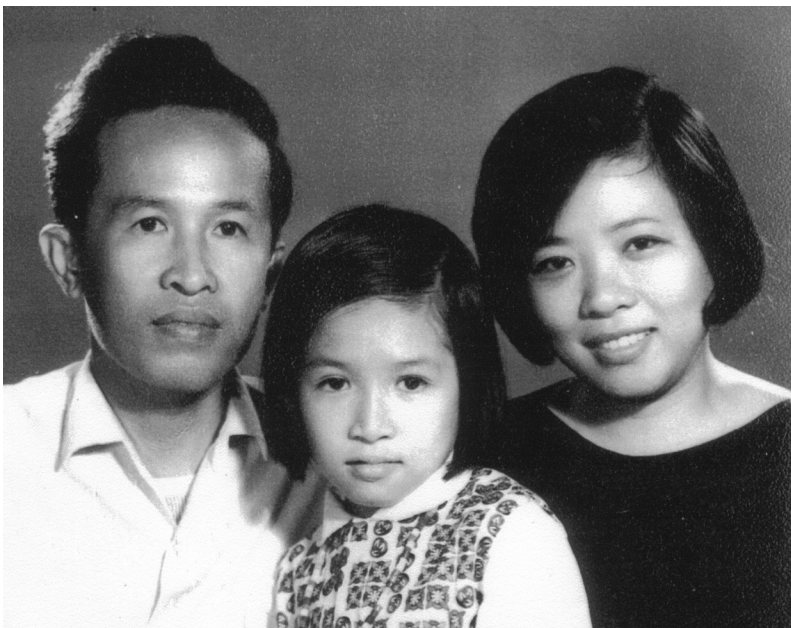
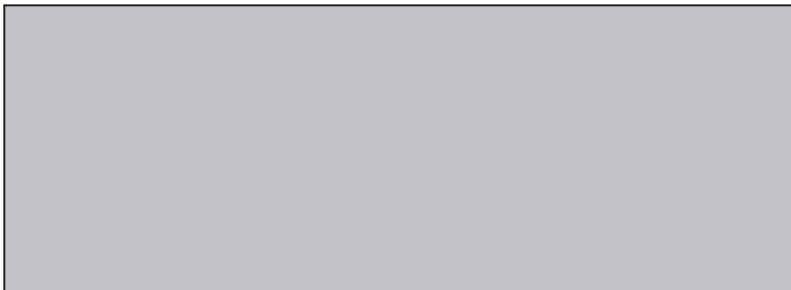
¹⁹Võ Phiến explained what working in the field of information in the late '50s involved in a letter to me (April 15, 2004).

During this period Võ Phiến was also writing. He first caught readers' attention with two collections of short stories published in Qui Nhon in the 1950s, *Love* (1956) and *The Prisoner* (1957). These stories draw on Võ Phiến's experience during the resistance to French rule, including his time in a Việt Minh prison. Having achieved some success as a writer, Võ Phiến decided Saigon would be a better context within which to develop and display his talent. He asked to be transferred there and in 1959 his request was granted: he was made a cultural affairs officer in Saigon. Later he became assistant director in charge of training and served in other positions—director of the film department, for example, and inspector, a position that required him to visit branch offices of the Ministry of Information all over South Vietnam.

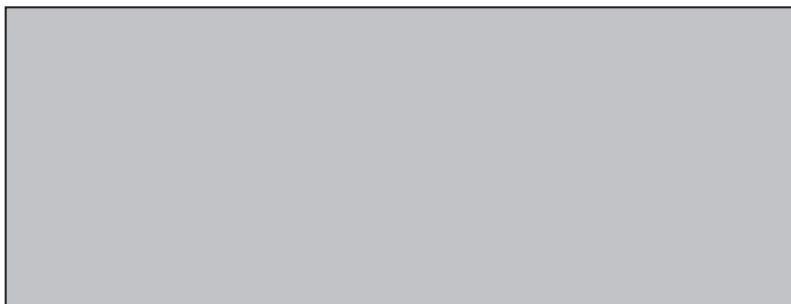
Because Võ Phiến has not said much about his work as a civil servant in Vietnam, one can only speculate about how he felt about it and how it affected his work. He certainly paints a bleak picture of office work in his novel *Alone* (see chapter II). In essays and stories published in the mid and late '60s he objects to city life in general—the noise of traffic, the dust, the crowded living conditions, and most importantly the difficulty of establishing warm human relationships. Working in a large office in Saigon was probably another aspect of city life that he did not like. When he came to America and his sponsoring family asked him what he did in Vietnam, he was careful not to mention his day job because, he told Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, "I was tired of the life of a civil servant." He told his sponsors that he "worked for a newspaper."²⁰

Probably, however, he reaped some benefits besides his salary from his work for the Ministry of Information. His position as Director of Information for Bình Định Province enabled him to stay informed about developments at the village level and in that way probably assisted him in his literary pursuits. Many of his stories and essays describe life in villages in Bình Định during and after the first Indochina war. *Country and Homeland* (1973), an essay collection with many

²⁰Letter to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, August 21, 1995; reprinted in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996, 210–11.



Võ Phiến, his wife, and daughter in 1969 in Saigon.



references to things he has noticed in various towns in South Vietnam, was facilitated by the travel Võ Phiến did when he was made an inspector (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1996, 23).

In Saigon Võ Phiến soon became an important figure in the new literary culture that developed in South Vietnam in the late 1950s and 1960s, a culture that included a mixture of northern writers who had fled the communist north in 1954, people like Võ Phiến from central Vietnam, and southern writers. His literary talent became more and more appreciated. In 1960 a committee of his peers selected him to receive a National Literary Studies and Art Award from the Saigon government for his short story collection *Night Rain at Year's End* (1958). He published articles and stories in several Saigon periodicals, but was most closely associated with *Encyclopedic* (Bách Khoa), a leading Saigon literary journal. Võ Phiến's stories, criticism, translations, and comments on the literary scene appeared regularly in *Encyclopedic*, sometimes under another pen name, Tràng Thiên. In 1962 he established a publishing house called New Times (Thời Mới) to publish his own works and those of other writers, including new writers whose work he felt deserved recognition. Between 1956 and 1975 he himself wrote and published over twenty works in a variety of genres—novels, short stories, essays, and translations. When the Saigon regime collapsed, Võ Phiến was a well-known and respected literary figure, one of a relatively small group of intellectuals who played a major role in shaping public opinion about many issues, both literary and political.

Võ Phiến mentions his grandmother quite often in his writing, but he rarely describes other members of his family and so we do not know much about them. As explained above, the sister closest to him in age died as a young child and his other siblings lived in the South. The oldest brother, Đoàn Thế Hối, was seven years younger than Võ Phiến. Because Võ Phiến grew up in Bình Định and Đoàn Thế Hối grew up in the village of Vĩnh Hoà in the southern province of Rạch Giá, Võ Phiến couldn't have known his brother very well. They had very different political views. A politically active high school student during the resistance, Đoàn Thế Hối worked

for the revolution after the Geneva Accords. Arrested in 1958 for pro-communist activities, he spent five years in prisons of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime. When he was released in 1963, he joined communist forces operating in Rạch Giá and was killed in a bombing raid while on an operation there in 1967. Võ Phiến was reunited with his brother shortly before he was killed. Đoàn Thế Hối managed to sneak into the town of Sóc Trăng, where his wife and children lived, for a wedding of a cousin, and it was there that Võ Phiến saw his brother for the last time.

Though Đoàn Thế Hối's political views differed from Võ Phiến's, he shared his older brother's passion for literature. Under the pen name Lê Vĩnh Hòa, a reference to the southern village where he was raised, he wrote stories and reports for several resistance journals and achieved some recognition as a writer before his early death. Not surprisingly communist critics praise his work, contrasting his "revolutionary" (cách mạng) writing with the "reactionary" (phản động) writing of his older brother (see, for example, Vũ Hạnh 1980, 40). Just as predictably those associated with the Saigon regime dislike it. Tạ Chí Đại Trùng, the first cousin of Tạ Chí Diệp, who was arrested by the Việt Minh along with Võ Phiến, reports that selected writings by Lê Vĩnh Hoà have recently been translated in France. This collection was reviewed, he says, in a Vietnamese-language journal of the University of Paris "just as if he [Lê Vĩnh Hoà] were a great author." This disturbs Tạ Chí Đại Trùng because he thinks Lê Vĩnh Hoà writes like a high school student (1998, 108).

Võ Phiến left for the United States with his wife and daughter, Đoàn Minh Đức, on 22 April 1975, eight days before the communist troops entered Saigon. He realized that, with his political background, staying in Vietnam was not a realistic option. Võ Phiến was not only someone who had abandoned the revolution and become an anti-communist writer; he was also a government official who worked to spread information—"propaganda" from the communist perspective—damaging to the National Liberation Front and the Hanoi regime. He also lent his services to the radio sta-

tion Mother Vietnam (Mẹ Việt Nam) that was supported by American funds. According to Viên Linh, who also worked for this station, “Mother Vietnam was a secret radio station that broadcast directly into North Vietnam from a station in Đông Hà [a town near the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Vietnam]” (quoted by Hoàng Nguyễn Nhuận, 2004). Viên Linh says that Vietnamese in charge of Mother Vietnam reported directly to the American Embassy. Here is how Võ Phiến describes his work for this station:

At the radio station Mother Vietnam I had only small responsibilities and held them for only a short period of time. Each week I would write (at home) several editorials (bình luận), then deliver them to the station and receive my payment, which was based on the number of articles I wrote. This work only lasted for, I’d guess, about five or six months and then Saigon fell. Thanks to that job, however, Mother Vietnam helped me avoid falling into the hands of the communists! (Letter, April 15, 2004)

In his final comment, Võ Phiến is explaining that because he worked for Mother Vietnam, the American officials in Saigon classified him as someone deserving of evacuation to the United States. The fact that fellow writers who either chose to stay, or could not make it out, including those who had less contact with the Americans than Võ Phiến, spent years in re-education camps suggests that his short association with Mother Vietnam saved him from considerable suffering.²¹

Võ Phiến has four children, two born in the resistance area, two in the Nationalist zone. When the Saigon regime collapsed, one son, Đoàn Thế Phúc, was studying in Australia and two sons were in Saigon. One son, Đoàn Giao Liên, had been drafted into the army as soon as he finished medical school. As a doctor in the army he could not leave his unit in 1975. His younger brother, Đoàn Thế Long, was also study-

²¹For information on what happened to some anti-communist writers who stayed in Vietnam, see note 26.

ing medicine but had not yet been drafted. It is not clear why he did not come to the United States with his parents and sister.²² Both Đoàn Giao Liên and Đoàn Thế Long eventually came to the U.S. under the Orderly Departure Program in 1992. The son studying in Australia also came to the U.S., and so all members of Võ Phiến's nuclear family are now in the same country. After spending time at a refugee center at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, Võ Phiến and his wife and daughter went to Minneapolis where there was a family willing to sponsor them. After two years in the Midwest, Võ Phiến, like many other Vietnamese refugees in the East and Midwest, resettled in California where the weather was warmer and there was a larger Vietnamese community. He went to the greater Los Angeles area, first to Santa Monica and then to Highland Park. In California he could not avoid becoming a civil servant again, this time for the County of Los Angeles where he worked first in the tax office and later in the retirement section. "Working and writing on the sly," Võ Phiến has said, "I was happy and did this for fifteen years."²³ He was a retirement benefits specialist II when he retired himself in 1994, after enduring heart surgery twice.

His work on the sly included editing and publishing as well as writing. In 1978 Võ Phiến and Lê Tất Điều, a younger writer who in Vietnam had worked with Võ Phiến for the journal *Encyclopedic*, started the exile journal *Literary Studies and Art* (Văn Học Nghệ Thuật), the first scholarly Vietnamese journal to be published overseas. Võ Phiến was the director or publisher (chủ nhiệm) and Lê Tất Điều was the editor (chủ bút). After heart surgery for the first time in October 1985, he tried to continue his work for this journal, but then decided, regretfully, that he could not and ended his involvement in 1986.

Despite having to endure heart surgery again in 1992, Võ Phiến has continued to write and to edit and publish the works of others. In the '90s he published several volumes of

²²Võ Phiến told me that "he was in an age group that couldn't leave the country" (Letter, May 10, 2003).

²³Letter to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc. See *Võ Phiến*, 1996, 212.

his own essays and dialogues and a collection of short stories (see “Works by Võ Phiến,” p. 321). Toward the end of the decade he completed a seven-volume series called *Literature in South Vietnam* (Văn Học Miền Nam), which consists of a critical overview and six anthologies of work produced by more than one hundred different writers in South Vietnam between 1954 and 1975. There are volumes devoted to fiction, poetry, drama, essays, and memoirs. Võ Phiến provides short introductions to the writers whose works are included. It is a considerable achievement, one that represents a great deal of work, and while it inevitably has provoked some criticism—mostly from people upset because some writer’s work was left out—it should be appreciated by readers and researchers, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese alike, who are interested in what Vietnamese were writing during the American war.

Võ Phiến’s hard work to collect and introduce works written by writers who now live outside Vietnam has increased his literary reputation in the exile community. This community, however, like communities everywhere, contains people with different political beliefs and literary tastes. “I think we are, by our own closed-door admissions, a fractious, untrusting tribe unified only because we are besieged by larger forces,” says Andrew X. Pham of the Vietnamese American community in the United States (1999, 208).

Some people, though not many, believe that Võ Phiến is too anti-communist; others, also a small minority, believe that he is not anti-communist enough. Most readers admire his witty and meticulous descriptions of people, food, and customs, but there are some who do not. Some think he is a good literary historian, but there are those who question his critical judgment. If, however, you surveyed Vietnamese of the diaspora and asked them who was the most respected writer in the exile community, Võ Phiến’s name would appear at the top or near the top of the list.

Before he left Vietnam, at least one journal devoted an issue to his life and work and in recent years three different exile journals, two in the United States and one in Canada,

have done so as well.²⁴ In 1996, *Võ Phiến*, a full-length critical study by Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, appeared. It is clear that overseas Vietnamese admire and respect Võ Phiến.

Most Vietnamese exiles respect Võ Phiến not only for his literary accomplishments but also for his character. Vietnamese are tolerant of writers and artists who lead unconventional and even disorderly private lives, but they hold in special affection those who demonstrate the traditional virtues. According to Trần Long Hồ, “Võ Phiến is not only a talented Vietnamese writer, but also an exemplary person who lives an orderly and unassuming life, who has a simple manner and a peaceful spirit, and who loves his country, his family, and his friends with all his heart” (1998, 127).

It is time now to look at the work of this man who has provoked so much discussion and admiration in the Vietnamese exile community.

²⁴*Literature* (Văn), Saigon: July/August 1974; *Village of Literature* (Làng Văn) 43, Canada: March 1988; *21st Century* (Thế Kỷ 21) 78, California: October 1995; and *Literary Studies* (Văn Học) 150 & 151, California: October and November 1998.

II

WEIGHING THE POLITICAL AND THE PERSONAL IN VÕ PHIẾN'S EARLY FICTION

They [Võ Phiến's characters] verify the significance of life and of the right to live with fragments, coincidences, common things. They wake up and so become dangerous to the regime.²⁵

—Nguyễn Mộng Giác

When asked in a 1968 interview to “provide an overview of the development of [his] works,” Võ Phiến responded in a way that is both revealing and a little puzzling. Here is what he said:

In 1954, I abandoned the communist region and came here [to anti-communist South Vietnam]. That choice obsessed my mind for a period of five or six years. I thought about the regime that I had rejected and the situation in which I was living, etc. So the works that I wrote during this period—*The Prisoner*, *Night Rain at Years End*, *Saying Good-by*, etc.—carried many vestiges from my political reflection. Gradually I escaped that obsession, in order to turn to more general and broader topics—reflections on the meaning of life: in *Alone*, *Men*, and *Illusion*. (“Talking with *Literature*,” 371)

When pressed by the interviewer to explain this obsession and how he escaped it, Võ Phiến became a little impatient:

²⁵Nguyễn Mộng Giác 1987, 76.

Half the country lives under a communist regime; the other half is threatened by it. I'd be greatly surprised to learn of a Vietnamese who didn't think about the communist regime. Communism is the common obsession of all of the [Vietnamese] people at this time.

We writers can reflect in words, we can speak out about this obsession. In speaking out we liberate ourselves from it. (372)

This comment is revealing because it helps us understand that it was impossible for people of Võ Phiến's generation to escape politics. Võ Phiến was twenty years old at the time of the 1945 revolution. Any passion that one has at the age of nineteen or twenty, Võ Phiến has written, will receive all your mental and physical energies, and you will never forget the events of that time. For people of his age that passion was the revolution, an event that he says "deflowered" the spirit of his generation ("Each Group Is Separate," 111). For nearly ten years Võ Phiến was a part of the resistance, working within an intensely political environment. "[F]or those who grew up in the resistance," Võ Phiến explains, "all of life was political. It made no difference whether you were a soldier or a cadre, whether you taught school or collected agricultural taxes. Those who participated in the resistance in any activity had to think about political theory everyday. . . . It wasn't enough to offer up your body to be killed on the battlefield. That body had to be motivated at all times by a passionate belief" (106). Given his passionate involvement in the resistance, his decision to leave it and abandon communism was not easy: "To abandon the war zone or the resistance area to enter a city, or to leave the North to migrate to the South, was not simply to move in space: it was to abandon a view of life, a way of thinking and feeling; it was to deny completely activities to which one had devoted one's passion, on which all one's youthful hopes had been placed" (106).

Võ Phiến's early stories, the ones he wrote in the late '50s and early '60s, are shaped by his experiences in Bình Định Province during and after the resistance period. Though fic-

tion not autobiography, they are inspired by people he knew and events he witnessed during the war against the French and the years following the signing of the Geneva Accords. It was Võ Phiến's ability to recreate the mood and feel of this period that first gained him fame, as Phan Lạc Phúc explains in an article written in 1969: "[R]eading an outstanding writer or poet is like entering a particular world. The most fascinating world of Võ Phiến is the fear, the perplexity, and the bewilderment of a place on earth that had just metamorphosed from a communist to a Nationalist region. His characters have not forgotten the terrifying obsessions of nine years [1945–1954] and they face an uncertain future" (29).

In "Each Group is Separate," Võ Phiến explains that if he knows this world well, better than some other non-communist writers, it is in part a result of his age. He classifies non-communist writers into three groups based on their age at the time of the resistance: the old, the middle-aged, and the young. Members of the old group, which includes Nhất Linh, Vũ Hoàng Chương, Quách Tấn, Đỗ Đức Thu, and Đông Hồ, were in their forties and fifties during the resistance period. Võ Phiến considers them essentially pre-war writers because they had their most productive years before 1945.

The middle-aged group, to which Võ Phiến belongs, experienced the resistance during the prime of their youth. This group includes Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, Chu Tử, Doãn Quốc Sỹ, Thanh Tâm Tuyền, and Vũ Khắc Khoan.

Members of the third group, the younger writers, might be only ten years younger than those in Võ Phiến's group but they were much less obsessed with politics. They either grew up in cities not controlled by communists or, if they were in the communist-controlled region, they were too young to be strongly affected by politics. The decision to abandon communism was not their decision: it was made by their parents.

Võ Phiến places Dương Nghiễm Mậu, Nguyễn Đình Toàn, Nhật Tiến, Viên Linh, and Thế Uyên in this group of younger writers. Because writers in this third group had not lived within a communist system as adults and knew communism only as a theory, they did not oppose it as vehemently as

writers in Võ Phiến's group. In their works they focused not on the evils of communism but on problems in the South—deterioration of moral values, dictatorial politics, wartime hostilities, the uncertain future.²⁶

Võ Phiến's comments in that 1968 interview are therefore revealing and useful because they remind us of the intensely political climate within which he lived and wrote. Twenty years later Võ Phiến was still emphasizing the political nature of the works he wrote during the period immediately following the Geneva Accords. In *Literature in South Vietnam: 1954–1975*, Võ Phiến says that writers like himself who before 1954 had lived in a communist-controlled region of south Vietnam and northern writers who had fled to the south “all were devoted to one cause: to expose the real face of communism” (63). In this same work Võ Phiến contrasts a first phase of post-war writing (1954–59) with a second phase (1960–63). He and Nghiêm Xuân Hồng, Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, and Đoàn Quốc Sỹ, he says, inaugurated the first phase “with works that were heavily political and had a strong emphasis on the issue of communism/anti-communism” (124).

Võ Phiến's comments about his early stories are, however, a little puzzling because though he places himself in the intensely anti-communist middle group, and though he

²⁶Many of the writers in Võ Phiến's three groups have spent long periods in re-education camps, and some have died there. In 1989 the United States and Vietnam agreed on an “Orderly Departure Program” (ODP) to counteract the problem of people leaving Vietnam by boat and putting themselves in danger of drowning at sea or being killed by Thai pirates. This program gave priority for U.S. admission to those who had spent at least three years in a re-education camp. Some of the writers Võ Phiến mentions have come to the United States under this program. Here are some brief facts about several writers in the groups Võ Phiến describes: Chu Tử: Tried to escape Saigon on 30 April 1975, but was shot down by a stray B-40 rocket while standing on the deck of a ship leaving Vietnam. Đoàn Quốc Sỹ: Except for a four-year span from 1980 to 1984, spent most of the period from 1976 to 1995 in communist prisons; finally released after Amnesty International and other human rights groups lobbied for his freedom; came to United States under ODP and now lives in Houston, Texas. Nguyễn Mạnh Côn: Died in a re-education camp in 1979 after going on a hunger strike. Thế Uyên spent three years in a re-education camp, taught Vietnamese literature in Hồ Chí Minh City for several years, and then came to the United States. (Seattle) under the ODP. Vũ Hoàng Chương: Arrested in Hồ Chí Minh City 13 April 1976; died three months later in prison. Brief biographical sketches of these and the other writers Võ Phiến mentions can be found in Võ Phiến's *Literature in South Vietnam* (215–239). See also Trần Dạ Từ's *Writers and Artists in Vietnamese Gulags* (1990).

has said (and seems to regret) that his early stories reflect an obsession with politics, these stories are not political in any crude or obvious way: they certainly are not propaganda tracts. These early “political” stories do differ, however, from later stories written during the period when Võ Phiến says he was no longer obsessed with politics. To understand this difference we will look at works on both sides of the divide Võ Phiến sets up. First we will consider the title stories from the short story collections *The Prisoner* and *Night Rain at Year’s End* and the novel *Saying Good-by*, works written, Võ Phiến says, when he was obsessed with politics; and then at *Alone, Men*, and “The Unusual Husband” (from *Illusion*)—all written after his “escape” from this obsession. This chapter highlights the content of his early fiction; the next chapter focuses on form—on Võ Phiến’s narrative technique.

The ‘Political’ Stories

In “The Prisoner,” written in 1955, just one year after Võ Phiến himself was released from prison, the narrator focuses on the behavior of a fellow prisoner, a nineteen-year-old youth named Trần Kỳ Vĩ. In the beginning of the story Vĩ has aroused the narrator’s suspicion: one night he sees him removing a small tin box from under the head of an old prisoner who is sick and dying. After the old man dies, the narrator confronts Vĩ and asks him about the tin box. The young man promises to tell him everything if the narrator will keep quiet about the incident. Vĩ insists that there was no money in the old man’s box, only letters written by his daughter, Nhung, and then he explains why these letters are so important to him. The old man, Vĩ tells the narrator, was a fisherman named Đỗ Nghĩa Hành, who was sentenced by a people’s court to twenty-five years of hard labor for trying to help other fishermen in his village. When the French forces landed troops near the village, all the fishermen submerged their boats in the harbor so the French would not destroy them. When the French troops left, they planned to bring them to the surface. But when a week went by and the troops had not left, the villagers, fearing their boats would be ruined,

elected the old man to present a request to the French commander. The villagers wanted the commander to promise that his troops would not destroy their boats if they brought them to the surface. Mr. Hành asked Vĩ to translate the petition into French, a request he did not refuse because he was in love with Nhung, the old man's daughter. The French officer agreed to the petition, so the boats were saved, but Mr. Hành and Vĩ were not so fortunate. The Việt Minh authorities later accused them of cooperating with the enemy and a people's court handed them the sentences they were now serving.

Though "The Prisoner" arouses sympathy in readers for the old man and the youth—their sentences are harsh, conditions in the prison are bad. The story is not an exposé of Việt Minh cruelty but rather an exploration of character. Gradually the narrator learns more about Vĩ who keeps seeking him out in order to confide intimate details about his relationship with Nhung—including the fact that he has "conquered her completely." Vĩ never shows the narrator the letters written by Nhung, however; he just talks about his relationship with her, revealing details of their trysts. The narrator describes the last time Vĩ talked to him about Nhung:

I remember that the last time he talked about love with me was one night in the middle of winter. It wasn't raining but it was very cold. He didn't have a sleeping mat or a blanket, so he rolled himself up in a bag that he had sliced open. He moved close to me and in whispers described what Nhung looked like. He told me about a night of love on the seashore, the waves crashing loudly at their feet, the lights of fishing boats visible out in the open sea. The story continued and gradually he became bolder and more shameless and told me all about the kissing and hugging, their intimacy. Occasionally I would make him stop so I could hear a deer near the fence of the camp, or an owl that suddenly flew by and perched on a tree branch outside our room. (62)

The next day the young man is gripped by fever. He sleeps for three days. Then his stomach, arms, and legs swell, his breath becomes foul smelling, a white discharge appears around his mouth, and finally he dies. In a hidden pocket of Vĩ's shirt the narrator finds a letter from Nhung that indicates that Vĩ has fabricated these stories of intimate encounters. In her letter Nhung politely suggests that Vĩ should contact her parents if he is interested in her. The story ends with the narrator speculating about what might have driven Vĩ to his wild exaggerations: Were they a way of satisfying sexual urges? Or was he trying to continue a love that was completely unrequited, blocked from the start? Or were his tales an attempt to impress the narrator, the boasting of a young man too proud to admit to himself or others that he would die in prison before experiencing the love of a woman? The reader senses that Vĩ was driven by a combination of all these things.

The main character of "Night Rain at Year's End," written in 1957, is a Việt Minh cadre named Lung who is operating in the central highlands. He and a comrade named Ngọc are in the hills living in a cave and eating mushrooms and wild game. When the story opens, Lung is about to go to the town of Ân Hiệp, which is under enemy control, to link up with cadre members there. Before he goes Ngọc tells him to give his greetings to Cúc, a girl that he fell in love with when he lived in Ân Hiệp three years ago. It will be easy to find her, Ngọc says. Her brother Hiếu is a comrade.

When he arrives in Ân Hiệp he meets with a male comrade named Sơn and also with a female comrade named Thu. The latter is a very attractive and self-assured twenty-year-old woman who tells Lung that the Party should let them talk more about communist theory instead of insisting they talk only about the negative aspects of the enemy regime—the tax system, the corrupt officials, etc. When at the end of their second meeting he touches her shoulder in a friendly gesture, she quickly brushes him away. "Don't," she says, "I have to go." During a third meeting Lung observes an ant crawling among the hairs on one of Thu's very white and beautiful arms, arms that he wishes he could gently caress. After this meeting

Lung is arrested and interrogated. From his questioners he learns that Thu and Son, who is Thu's brother, have both been arrested and that their real names are Cúc and Hiếu. At this point he realizes that Thu is the woman that Ngọc fell in love with three years ago.

While imprisoned he overhears his captors, an administrator and a secretary, talking about how technology is changing the world. The secretary, a young man about thirty, rambles on about how the future will be shaped by scientific developments, not by any political theory, Marxist or non-Marxist. Then they leave and as a soft rain continues to fall on the village the words of a sad lullaby drift through a window of the room where Lung is being held. He begins to realize how much he has missed the small, ordinary events of everyday life:

Those images of life that overwhelmed his senses that evening were old, familiar images. Why did he suddenly feel so close to this old and ordinary life? Had he really, he asked himself, acted to create a different society, to wipe away this intimate way of living? Had he really been determined to do that? The smell of wet earth and wet leaves, the sound of a lullaby, of a soft rain falling at night—how irresistible and sweet these things were, and how restless they made him. (1958, 20)

At first glance this story would appear to provide even less evidence of political obsession than "The Prisoner." Lung, the lead character, is a Việt Minh cadre and is presented just as sympathetically—if not more so—than are representatives of the Saigon government. He also seems positively apolitical, more interested in the mundane aspects of ordinary life than in any political ideology. Where is the evidence for political obsession in "The Prisoner" and "Night Rain at Year's End" and other stories in the collections in which they occur? One way to answer this question is to consider what communist critics say about these stories. All of Võ Phiến's works have been banned in Vietnam since the communist victory in 1975,

a decision based not just on these early stories but on all his works and his decision to abandon the revolution and cooperate with pro-American regimes in the South. Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn, author of *Culture and Art Serving American Neo-Imperialism in South Vietnam: 1974–1975*, classifies Võ Phiến as one of those writers who worked “most enthusiastically” to use literature to “distort the revolution and oppose communism” (1990, 239).

In making their case against Võ Phiến, both Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn and Lữ Phương, another communist critic, mention Võ Phiến’s early collections *Love* and *The Prisoner*. These are, says Lữ Phương, “collections of short stories that oppose communism in an extremely hateful manner” (1981, 73). Neither critic discusses the story “The Prisoner,” but Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn discusses “Night Rain at Year’s End.” What bothers Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn is that by the end of the story Lung has become so enamored of the everyday aspects of the existing society that he has lost sight of his mission: “He [Lung] feels that social life around him is precious and worthy of love and he criticizes himself for becoming a revolutionary and working to overthrow that society” (240). Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn is also bothered by what he sees as a contradiction in “Night Rain at Year’s End.” He says Võ Phiến encourages intellectuals not to become involved in the “era of technology,” but that is exactly what “international reactionary capitalist intellectuals” were involved with when they supported the American high-tech war against the Vietnamese revolutionary movement.

In other stories Võ Phiến is more critical of Việt Minh soldiers and cadre and of life in the Việt Minh-controlled regions. His story “Cousins” features a character named Hạnh, a younger cousin of the narrator, whom communist authorities force to marry a poor peasant. She protests by committing adultery and becoming a prostitute. In “A Moonlit Night in Spring” a character named Hải worries that Việt Minh troops will run off with his young wife.

In some stories—“Returning to a Country Village,” for example—no Việt Minh soldier or official behaves badly,

but the narrator portrays the revolution in an irreverent manner. In this story, which has many autobiographical elements, the narrator returns to his home village of Thanh Bình to tell his grandfather that his granddaughter, the narrator's older sister, has died in a hospital. As he walks toward his village, he reflects on its history and on events in his own life. He emphasizes that there are no heroes in Thanh Bình, only ordinary people. The only villagers, he says, who achieved any notoriety were Bái Công and Biên, the assistant village chief. Bái Công distinguished himself by being good at martial arts, but he also loved to gamble and drink. Villagers out late at night would find him lying flat on his stomach, his face in a rice berm, singing to himself. When he got old he could be seen cooking mash for his pigs. As for Biên, the assistant village chief, Võ Phiến writes:

During the time he held power he didn't do anything to leave a favorable impression. Late one night a villager opened the door to his room and was surprised to see assistant village chief Biên sleeping with his wife. Faced with being so inconveniently discovered, Mr. assistant village chief flew softly out the window, thinking that was the most peaceful way to settle the matter. He never thought the incident would reach the ear of the canton chief, but it did. Alarmed, this official announced that on that night assistant village chief Biên had trampled on his own happiness. The villager suffered for a second time, and his wife became more embarrassed and afraid. And assistant village chief Biên met an obstacle on his road to fame. (14)

Because these events in the lives of Thanh Bình's two most distinguished citizens, Bái Công and Biên, occurred during colonial times, before revolutionary forces took over the village, the narrator is not demeaning the revolution in this part of his narrative. But then he goes on to describe what happened to Bái Công and to some of his own (the narrator's) relatives when revolutionary forces liberate Thanh Bình. He

explains that a great uncle of his (who appears to be modeled on Võ Phiến's great uncle Lê Đình Mẫn, or Mr. Degree-holder), a man who had never had a career or a job of any kind, was made Commissioner of Labor in the new village committee. Then he explains who else received important positions. Traditionally in Vietnam wives of officials were addressed using their husband's title. That is why, in the following passage, the narrator's aunt receives the title "Mrs. Military Affairs."

Gradually people learned that the revolution had a lot more new and strange things in store for them [besides his great uncle becoming Commissioner of Labor]. My Aunt Bốn, with pride mixed with shame, ran to tell my grandmother that she had become Mrs. Military Affairs. For heaven's sake! It was miraculous! If it weren't for the revolution, who would have known that my Uncle Four was so talented in military tactics that he could be commissioner for village military affairs. And Bái Công also stepped up and accepted the position of Commissioner for Foreign Affairs. In this way each village had a sufficient number of commissioners—for cultural affairs, social affairs, etc. Many people in the village of Thanh Bình suddenly felt new because of the revolution. But the revolution wasn't content to stop with Mr. and Mrs. Commissioner. It was determined to move down to the masses. Almost everyone had a title, each village had innumerable leaders called team leader, group leader, company leader, village leader, joint households leader [Though puzzled by this need for such "tight organization"] People happily raised their hands high above their shoulders and greeted all their comrades young and old in the village of Thanh Bình. (20)

The communist revolution is not Võ Phiến's main target in "Returning to a Country Village." He is describing the foibles of country people and the vicissitudes they encountered when forced to adapt first to colonialism, then to the

communist revolution, and finally, after 1954 and the division of the country at the seventeenth parallel, to the new Nationalist government. But the ironic tone he adopts in speaking of revolutionary practices clearly would not endear him to critics like Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn who hold different political views.²⁷

None of the characters in these early short stories, however, are spokespersons for any political program. Even Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn seems to recognize this when he says that in Võ Phiến's stories "anti-communist feeling" is sometimes more prominent than "anti-communist thinking" (244). As this critic suggests, the anti-communism of the stories Võ Phiến wrote in the late '50s and early '60s was a subtle and sophisticated anti-communism. In tributes to him in exile journals writers use words like "tinh vi" (subtle) and "sâu sắc" (profound) to describe it. In the politically charged climate of the late '50s these qualities were rare. In 1955 Ngô Đình Diệm launched a "Denunciation of Communists" (Tố Cộng) campaign to eradicate remnants of the Việt Minh and their sympathizers. Former members of the resistance were called upon to renounce communism at public ceremonies and to attend reeducation courses (*Pentagon Papers* 1971, 311). If they refused they were jailed or simply liquidated, some by guillotine, a hated symbol of colonial repression that Ngô Đình Diệm revived (Eliot 1976, 7). Immediately after the Geneva Accords the revolutionary leaders in the South had emphasized political action, not armed struggle, to prepare for elections that were to be held in 1956. As a result of Ngô Đình Diệm's "Denunciation of Communists" campaign and his refusal to allow elections, the communist leadership in the South decided to switch from political to military action. In the late '50s and early '60s the propaganda on both sides was a blunt instrument, a mixture of slogans and oversimplified arguments, directed primarily at poor villagers. In

²⁷Even some readers who hold political positions similar to Võ Phiến's are bothered by the "coldness" (lạnh lùng) of Võ Phiến's tone when he makes fun of villagers. See Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1996, 145. I discuss this criticism of Võ Phiến in chapter IV.

this context Võ Phiến's sophisticated stories were appreciated by anti-communist intellectuals and denounced by cultural cadre working for the revolution.

A writer named Vũ Hạnh confirms that it was their subtlety that made Võ Phiến's early stories effective in the political wars. Vũ Hạnh should know. He worked with Võ Phiến for the journal *Encyclopedic* while at the same time maintaining connections with the liberation movement. He was arrested several times by various regimes in Saigon, who suspected—what turned out to be true—that he was a communist agent. He writes about Võ Phiến in *Special Agents of Neo-imperialism on the Culture and Thought Front*, which was published in Hanoi in 1980. Võ Phiến's method, says Vũ Hạnh, enabled him to reach intellectuals. He would “attack suddenly, retreat suddenly, like guerilla warfare”; he would present “conservative ideas in simple dress but embellished with some intelligence”; he would “bring forth topics that appeared to be the result of deep reflection.” This method was much more effective with intellectuals than “the heavy-handed [big knife-large hammer] tactics of the many anti-communist pens-for-hire that were writing at that time” (32).

Võ Phiến's stories disturb committed revolutionaries like Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn, Lữ Phương, and Vũ Hạnh because his characters are more interested in the personal than the political; they are driven more by inner urges and desires than by patriotic rhetoric and slogans. They are confused, undecided, groping for meaning—not the kind of people that make committed revolutionaries. The dominance of personal over political motivation is perhaps most vividly dramatized in Võ Phiến's first novel, *Saying Good-by* (Giã Từ), which was written in 1960 and published two years later. Only ninety-two pages long, this work should perhaps be called a novella. Set in Qui Nhon, the largest city in Bình Định Province, *Saying Good-by* is told in the first-person, but we learn more about a character named Mr. Three Thê (Ông Ba Thê) than we do about the “I” who tells the story. When the story begins the narrator is leaving Qui Nhon and a friend, a fisherman, is giving a going away party on his boat for him. When the narrator

asks his friend who the other guests will be, he mentions Mr. Three Thê, a man who, we learn, “represents the history of that period of his life when he lived in the land of Qui Nhon,” and so in saying good-by to him, the narrator is saying good-by to his past (11).

Though in later works, particularly in those written in the United States, Võ Phiến creates nostalgic portraits of life in Binh Định when he was young, in *Saying Good-by* he paints a sympathetic but unflattering portrait of life in his home region. At the end of the story, the narrator is more than ready to say good-by to his past. To express his mood—part sadness, part relief—he compares it to that of the beautiful Zinaida in Turgenev’s story “First Love” who kisses a wound left by a former lover who had whipped her. “I felt as if I also were kissing a past that contained heartbreak and foolishness. And while kissing it I was amazed and didn’t understand why I was doing what I was doing” (91).

Mr. Three Thê, who embodies the narrator’s past in Qui Nhon, was a sergeant in the French colonial army who was discharged for showing more interest in partying and gambling with his cronies than in doing his duty. After this incident he remains unemployed, living off the charity of his friends. To support himself, he sends his children—first his oldest son, Toàn, and then his daughter, Loan, and finally his younger son, Phong—with note cards to the homes of his friends, his former drinking and gambling buddies. The note cards, written in French and addressed “cher ami,” are requests for money. The scenes in which Toàn visits various homes to deliver these cards are subtly but richly drawn. The reader senses the shame that Toàn feels when he delivers these cards and waits for his father’s friends to put some money in an envelope. Finally, he refuses to go anymore and the job falls on Loan. Not quite sixteen and very attractive, she is vulnerable to the advances of older men. After Toàn senses that something happened to her when one “cher ami” got “truly bold,” he refuses to let his parents send her anymore, and the job is given to Phong, their younger brother. Phong later becomes a thief. After an attack by French troops, he blackens

his face to look like a Moroccan or Senegalese soldier in the foreign legion and steals things from people's homes.

While Mr. Three Thê's family is still living off his "cher amis," the August Revolution occurs. All the main characters, including the narrator, join the resistance, but they all do so (with the possible exception of Loan) for reasons that are more personal than political. Mr. Three Thê embraces the revolutionary movement with great enthusiasm because, the narrator explains, he was unemployed and liked the fact that revolutionary work involved mostly talking. He adopts a northern accent (because many Việt Minh cadre were northerners) and fills his speech with cliché expressions: "We'll kill the enemy and save the country, *at the same time* [đồng thời]; we'll build a new person, and *at the same time*, we'll progress in . . ." (30). He would repeat the expression "at the same time" (đồng thời) so often that he began to be called Mr. Three Thê At-The-Same-Time (Ông Ba Thê Đồng Thời). An uncle of the narrator, whose revolutionary work was similarly confined to exercising his tongue, was called Mr. General Situation (Ông Đại Cuộc) because he referred so often to the "general situation" in his speeches designed to recruit followers. Both these men develop other interests after they find themselves in a Nationalist region after the Geneva Accords. Mr. At-the-Same-Time becomes obsessed with conspiracy theories regarding the actions of politicians and goes from house to house forcing them on people. Mr. General Situation, in his mid-seventies and a bit senile, spends his time standing on the porch of a movie theater where he enjoys taking in the passing scene.

The narrator joins the resistance army because of what he calls a "careless accident" (59). He has known Mr. Three Thê's daughter, Loan, since she was a young girl but falls in love with her later when they attend meetings to discuss political activities related to the resistance. Loan is more dedicated to the cause than the narrator: "[A]t meetings when only the two of us were there, she would talk calmly about duty, moral behavior and honesty while my fingers would touch her thick, beautiful hair and then search out her body"

(33). When she tells the narrator she is going to become a battlefield medic or nurse, he can't conceive of playing the woman's role, of staying home and sewing clothes to send to her, so he enlists before she does. As it turns out, she does not become a nurse; after the narrator has gone off to war she marries another resistance soldier and accompanies him when he is relocated to the north in 1954.

No "careless accident" causes Loan's brother Toàn to join the resistance army, but his motivation, according to the narrator, is also more personal and psychological than political. Toàn not only joins the army but becomes a Party member as well, an action that would suggest political commitment, but in the narrator's analysis the underlying reason for Toàn's actions is guilt.

He painfully blamed himself for it all, the ruin later of his younger brother and sister. Because he didn't have the courage to continue begging for a living for the family, his sister had to come forward and interact with men who had ample opportunity to take advantage of her. It was also his fault that his brother had to beg, lost all sense of decency, and turned into a useless person. For many years he quietly harbored a guilt complex. Then events suddenly supplied him with a reason to convert all those hateful old "cher ami's" of Mr. Three Thê into capitalists, into enemies. . . . The Party wiped away his heavy responsibility for Phong's bad morals, for the destruction of Loan's good character. He sighed deeply and contentedly. What is hateful is only the stinginess of the old teacher, the crazy cruelty of Chief Clerk, etc. [men to whom Toàn had delivered requests for money]. All the causes rest there, with the rich, selfish, and depraved capitalists.

Toàn entered the Party and fought with the fervor of someone atoning for sin. (59–60)

This is the narrator's interpretation of Toàn's motivation. Toàn himself speaks very little to anyone about anything and never talks with the narrator about his motivation for

joining the resistance and becoming a Party member. The fact that Toàn marries the daughter of Chief Clerk Hà, one of the men he brought a “cher ami” note to, suggests that perhaps Toàn was not as overcome with hatred for his father’s cronies as the narrator suggests. In March 1953, Toàn is killed while attacking French forces in the Mang Giang pass. In other words, he dies in the struggle to “kill the enemy and save the country,” at least that is how his death would be portrayed in a communist account, but in Võ Phiến’s treatment Toàn dies in a quest for absolution from guilt. When readers of *Saying Good-by* hear the patriotic slogan “Kill the enemy and save the country,” it is mouthed by the lazy and morally deficient Mr. Three Thê At-the-Same-Time. By associating revolutionary slogans with this very colorful but distinctly non-heroic character, Võ Phiến creates an unflattering portrait of those involved in the resistance.

It is not surprising therefore that Hanoi critics have rejected and banned works by Võ Phiến. Until recently, communist critics believed that literature must follow the dictates of socialist realism and feature revolutionary cadre only in heroic roles. What is a little puzzling is Võ Phiến’s insistence that his early stories reflect an obsession with communism and with his choice to abandon the revolution. “Obsession” seems too strong a word for these stories that seem primarily explorations of character. Nguyễn Quốc Trụ, a critic now living in Canada who admires Võ Phiến’s work, sees the change in Võ Phiến’s writing after 1960 a little differently, not as a movement away from politically obsessed writing but as a movement from primarily autobiographical stories to more completely imagined works of fiction. The stories in *Love* and *The Prisoner*, he says, “resemble immediate reactions to the period. In them reality overshadows fiction; the intent to explain and clarify the attitude toward life of some characters moves these stories beyond the domain of literature” (1974, 38). Nguyễn Quốc Trụ applies the Western truism “A writer’s first book is always an autobiography” to Võ Phiến. Only later, this critic argues, during the period 1960 to 1963 when Vietnam was relatively peaceful, did Võ Phiến begin to

write “authentic short stories,” stories that were more “literary” and less autobiographical, stories in which the characters lead lives very different from the author’s own.

Võ Phiến’s early stories are obviously based on the author’s experience in the resistance and in them, as in many Vietnamese texts, the line between autobiography and fiction is difficult to draw. “Returning to a Country Village” appears to be more autobiography than fiction: events in the narrator’s life—his father leaving to work in the south, the importance of his paternal grandmother in his life, his eccentric great uncle, etc.—parallel events in Võ Phiến’s own life. Other stories, “Night Rain at Year’s End,” for example, contain fewer characters and events that one can say with certainty are autobiographical. Some Vietnamese readers, like the critic Nguyễn Quốc Trụ, believe that reality overshadows fiction in Võ Phiến’s early stories but they don’t read them as truthful accounts—pure non-fiction. Other readers, however, apparently believe these stories are pure autobiography. The critic Viên Linh, for example, assumes the “I” in *Saying Good-by* is Võ Phiến himself, even though the “I” in this story, the narrator, fights in a battle in March, 1953, when Võ Phiến was in a Việt Minh jail (1974, 37). Viên Linh may identify the “I” in this novella with Võ Phiến because the genre of autobiography, as I explain in chapter VI, is not as clearly defined or as well-established in Vietnam as it is in the West. While fiction writers everywhere draw on their own lives to write novels and short stories, Euro-American writers are, I believe, more hesitant about introducing fictional elements into an autobiographical account than are Vietnamese writers.

In that same 1968 interview in which he talks about being obsessed with his decision to abandon communism, he also says that a writer must be careful not to be overwhelmed by the many events of everyday life. “If you can’t restrain them, if you get carried away by them, then you can’t create.” Literature, he continues, even realistic literature, “doesn’t find the fresh ingredients of everyday life to be delicious.” This is how art differs from journalism. “The journalist values things hot and fresh from the oven, etc. The artist doesn’t

often touch things that are too hot" ("Talking with *Literature*," 374–75). Literature will always, he says, reflect the spirit of the time, but rather than consciously trying to put this spirit into their works writers should simply let it seep in from their unconscious ("Life," 1990, 40). Perhaps to allow time for this seepage Võ Phiến writes stories about events in the past.

Võ Phiến's comment that by writing "we can speak out about this obsession" and in that way "liberate ourselves from it" may be the most revealing part of his 1968 interview. In the fiction he wrote from 1954 to 1960 Võ Phiến's "speaks out" by writing stories about people whose lives are not dominated by politics or determined by the social class they belong to but rather are shaped by events in their personal and family histories. Võ Phiến's early stories are apolitical in this sense and paradoxically in some contexts—a Việt Minh training school for cultural cadres, for example—this apolitical quality was what made them political. Nguyễn Mộng Giác is, I believe, describing this paradox in the quotation that is my epigraph for this chapter. Võ Phiến's stories suggest that politics is not the be-all and end-all of human existence. In both "Night Rain at Year's End" and *Saying Good-by* a leading character falls for a young woman who talks of politics when he wants to talk of love. When Võ Phiến says that after writing *Saying Good-by* he escaped an obsession with politics, what he may mean is that when he finished this novella he no longer felt the need to argue that there is more to life than politics.

The Triumph of the Personal

Võ Phiến's early stories were set in Bình Định during the resistance period. Not a good place or time for those who wished to avoid politics, and in his early stories Võ Phiến portrays those who have this wish as moving against the tide. Lung in "Night Rain" and the narrator in *Saying Good-by* are affected by people whose political commitments are more passionate than theirs. *Alone*, according to Võ Phiến the first work written after he was able to put politics behind him, is set in a very different place and time—in Saigon during a relatively peaceful period before the American War broke

out. In *Alone* Võ Phiến's main character, a civil servant named Hữu, finds himself surrounded by people who are completely occupied by those ordinary aspects of human existence that Lung in "Night Rain" yearned for. In the office snack bar his office mates chatter away about this and that, mostly idle talk—about whether the chief of the office will or will not be transferred, about a co-worker named Hạo being scolded for not finishing a report, about the coming retirement of an older worker. Previously these inconsequential things held his interest but not anymore. Now he feels detached from his office mates and their concerns: he feels "alone," hence the title of this novel.

At home he feels alone as well. He lives with his present wife Quynh, who is fifteen years younger than he is, and three children, two older children from a previous marriage and a young baby. His son Quế is only four years younger than his wife, and his daughter, Thu, whose age is not given, is not much younger than her older brother. Hữu suffers from some ailment that is never clearly diagnosed. After work he lies in bed, pulls a blanket over him, and hears his wife and Thu talking as they prepare a meal but he is not involved in their concerns. His wife is kind and attentive but he has lost interest in her. They go to the movies but he remains lost in his own thoughts. One evening somewhat reluctantly he lets Quynh massage him and apply oil to his back and temples. Afterwards he looks quietly at his wife lying next to him and thinks of her as someone trying busily to save a drowning man (167).

There was a time when he felt more closely attached to Quynh. He met her four or five years ago, perhaps during the war (it is not made clear) on an island where her father was a maintenance worker. Hữu fondly remembers his early meetings with her:

Before, when they weren't yet married and would sneak away to be together, Quynh would lay her face on his chest, or rest her cheek on his shoulder, or sometimes bury her head under his arm. She wouldn't say anything, but Hữu knew

she liked the warm, strong scent of his body. And he was confident and proud of his body; he felt good about his breath, even his sweat. On those occasions he would support Quỳnh's head with one hand while with the other he would search for her face and lightly caress her eyebrows. (114)

Now Hữu has lost confidence in his body: instead of feeling that the scent of his body is something attractive, he worries about his excessive sweating. He is afraid he is becoming like old Mr. Secretary Nga (ông ký Nga), a neighbor who also sweats, who is bald, has lost his teeth, and flops his lips when he talks. (He is called "Mr. Secretary" because thirty years ago he was a civil servant, a clerk in a government office.) The sweat and also his sickness appear to be outer manifestations of some inner psychological problem. His disease remains mysterious, undefined: "His disease had no name or age. He would get one symptom almost cured and then another would appear. His disease consisted of symptoms with a thousand shapes all linked together in a never ending progression" (144).

Though Hữu's sickness is never diagnosed exactly, we understand it better as the novel progresses. It seems clear he is suffering what in English is called a mid-life crisis. The fact that he has lost interest in things he once enjoyed, like socializing with his friends, suggests this is the problem as does his feeling that he is stuck in a boring marriage and his worry that he is losing his ability to attract women. This last worry becomes more pronounced later in the novel. Hữu's relationship with a character named Châu, the daughter of the somewhat pathetic but still lovable Mr. Secretary Nga, reveals a great deal about what troubles him. Châu is still a student and clearly much younger than Hữu, whom she calls "Chú" (uncle). Early in the novel we learn that he has received a letter from Châu while she was in Nha Trang visiting an aunt. He is both excited and puzzled by this letter from his neighbor's daughter because it didn't contain any important news. He sends her a carefully crafted reply. Only many pages later do we learn that he became strongly attracted to

Châu during visits to her house when he would talk to her father. Châu was very grateful to Hữu for bringing her father home in a cyclo after finding him drunk near the Bạch Đằng wharf. Châu is described as a cheerful and attractive young woman with hair that is always uncombed and disheveled.

After Châu returns from Nha Trang, Hữu runs into her on his way home from work one day. In a neighborly spirit she invites him into her house and then goes to the kitchen to prepare the noon meal, leaving Hữu with her father. Hữu is in an agitated state because he is confused about Châu's attitude toward him. She has written him a letter, which suggests she may have some special feeling for him, but the look in her eye and her smile reveal nothing more than a general friendliness. Telling her father that he has to use the toilet, he walks into the kitchen and approaches Châu, who is startled at first but then returns to her work. Then he does something that he later sees as a revealing and defining action:

Now what should he say? How should he begin? What should he do now? Then for some reason he didn't understand he noticed a strand of hair falling over Châu's forehead. Foolishly, without thinking, he reached with his hand and brushed it upward.

Surprised, Châu stepped back, exclaiming, "Uncle!" Hữu was startled, frightened. That exclamation expressed opposition, displeasure, resignation, disappointment. (215)

Reflecting on this action later, he says, "It was like a bad sign, like a bell announcing the end of a passage of his life" (217). His failure with Châu enhanced his worries that he was no longer attractive to women. While he was sick, he did not desire women, but "suddenly he needed to be with one. At this time, as far as he was concerned, Quỳnh was not a woman. She was a habit, a duty. He had to prove to himself that he still was the man he had been in the past" (218).

This search for proof of his manliness leads him to Nga, a prostitute whom he has visited in the past. Seeing her as "like the last proof of his life force," he sets out to conquer

her "body and soul" (266). He visits her often in her small room and eventually moves in with her. Võ Phiến's richly imagined depiction of Hữu's relationship with Nga is perhaps the highlight of the novel. Though he has sought out Nga to prove his manhood, Hữu clearly cares for her. After his first stay with her after being rebuffed by Châu, he pulls her back when she starts to get up and kisses her back just below her shoulder, "a kiss not of desire but of affection resulting from having known each other for a long time" (224). Before he moved in with her, he couldn't always see her because she would be entertaining someone else. When he arrived at her room, the door would be closed, and he would hear footsteps inside and the sound of furniture scraping on the floor. On these occasions "he felt a terrible pain, felt as if his body were being crushed by the cruel lust of that other man in the room whose face he had never known. Sometimes when he came to see her, the door would be locked on the outside, and he would wonder where Nga had gone, who she was with, who she was talking to" (267).

Hữu's relationship with Nga is doomed to failure because he will not be satisfied until he has possessed her completely. He is troubled by her reaction to his passionate lovemaking, which he senses amuses her but does not move her. "When [in lovemaking] he acted passionately, recklessly, and forcefully, Nga would laugh and look into his eyes with an expression of fond amusement on her face, like a mother amused by the eagerness of her baby to suck at her breasts" (270). After Hữu moves in with Nga he knows all the objects of her "poor miserable life"—her mirror, comb, water jar, ladle—but still feels he has not conquered her completely. "After each time they were together, she would put her clothes back on, acting as if she were pulling her body back to her, keeping herself intact, arranging her own private life, arranging her feelings about herself. . . . She was still intact" (283).

At the end of the novel Hữu has left Nga and returned home. He realizes that Châu is in love with his son, Quế, a fact that explains why despite his inappropriate behavior she is still polite and cheerful with him. He realizes too that he is

still in love with Châu. After these realizations, Hữu thinks about an old fellow office worker who has recently retired but, not knowing what to do with himself, still comes to the office often. Hữu learns that he spends his days playing with a little dog in the yard of his house. Does this old man's fate prefigure Hữu's? Hữu thinks that this old retiree eventually will find something to make his life meaningful—perhaps growing plants, raising swallows, playing cards, raising dogs—but the reader finishes this novel not very hopeful about the chances of either the old man or Hữu finding much in life to interest them.

It is not difficult to see why Võ Phiến places this work on the apolitical side of the divide he mentions in that 1968 interview. The outside world only rarely impinges on Hữu's life and the life of his co-workers. We learn of the presence of Americans and the buildup to withstand communist advances only from passing references. The son of the head of personnel in Hữu's office, an officer in the air force, dies suddenly of a disease right before he was to leave for the United States for training. Hữu finds an American cigarette lighter under Nga's bed, which she says fell out of the pocket of an American customer. These passing references are the only indications of the political turmoil gripping the country. We hear a lot about "office politics"—petty disagreements, impending transfers and arrivals, etc.—but nothing about the political situation of the country. In this novel the world shrinks to this small office and the few men who work there, and finally the focus is on one man, Hữu, who struggles alone to solve not the problems of his country but his own personal problems.

How does the author intend for readers to judge Hữu? In *Alone*, as in many Võ Phiến stories, the women are more admirable than the men. Châu and her mother, the chief breadwinner in the family, have to put up with Châu's father, who had an affair with a songstress and has a weakness for drink. Hữu is unfaithful to Quỳnh. What's more while he himself is chasing other women, he suspects, wrongly it turns out, that his wife is having an affair with a young bachelor who works in his office. (The bachelor came to Hữu's house

to borrow money from him, not to see his wife.) Never does Hữu reveal any awareness of the irony of his accusing—in his mind, at least—his wife of infidelity while he himself is unfaithful. While old Mr. Secretary and Hữu struggle with their problems, the women in their lives cook them meals and work to keep the family together.

Hữu is not, however, a callous, unfeeling individual. Because Châu's mother works at the market every day and her father, the long retired secretary, is distracted by his own problems, no one takes care of her. One time when Châu was sick Hữu noticed that her blanket was dirty and that her hair smelled because it had not been washed. We learn that "Châu was embarrassed, and he [Hữu] felt sorry for this girl who was sick and was not being taken care of properly" (202). Hữu's attraction to Châu originates at least partly from sympathy for her situation. Hữu also, as we have shown, cared deeply for Nga and sympathized with her predicament. Although Hữu is certainly overly preoccupied with his own problems, he has not lost his capacity to care for others. The narrator's attitude toward him is not harshly judgmental but understanding and tolerant, and one suspects that this is the attitude that Võ Phiến is encouraging us to take toward his main character.

In stories written in the mid-'60s, Võ Phiến's was clearly interested in male-female relations, especially in how men treated women and how women reacted to this treatment. His focus on this topic in *Alone, Men*, and in short stories like "The Unusual Husband" (from the collection *Illusion*) makes one wonder whether Võ Phiến was at this time abandoning one kind of politics—the anti-communist struggle—for another, more domestic kind: the politics of male and female roles within Vietnamese society. In *Alone* he explores male-female relations from the man's point of view. Hữu is not the narrator—the novel is told in the third not the first person—but the reader is privy to the thoughts of Hữu, and another minor character, a man named Hạo, but not to the thoughts of any of the female characters (or the other male characters). We learn a great deal about what Hữu thinks the women in his life think of him, but we can only guess what

they are really thinking based on their actions and words. In his next novel, *Men*, actually a novella since it is only one hundred and three pages long, Võ Phiến also employs a limited third person point of view, but in this work one of the characters whose thoughts and feelings the narrator knows is a woman—Lê, the main character of the story. Lê has considerable experience with men and has observed them carefully and thought about them a great deal. Because the narrator presumes to know Lê's thoughts, the reader gets them directly and does not have to guess at them based on her words and actions.

Men takes place in Saigon in the late '50s or early '60s between the two Indochina wars. Lê, who is from a village in the country, first comes to Saigon when Khảo, her ne'er-do-well husband, is dismissed from a job in the district police office of the new, non-communist government. Khảo was a Party member during the resistance but was later expelled after being arrested and put in jail for smuggling. After his release, he was caught trying to leave the resistance area and imprisoned again. He was released when the war ended in 1954. In need of a job, he contacted his fellow prisoners, talked profusely of their shared suffering at the hands of the communists, and landed the job in the police department. He is, however, soon dismissed from this job, for some unspecified "fishy" activities, and so announces to Lê that they have to go to Saigon. This is how husband and wife and their young son end up in Saigon.

Khảo's troubles continue in the big city. While making a living by acting as a middleman between sellers from the countryside and their customers in the city, someone accuses him of cheating and he ends up in jail again. Out of money and desperate, Lê has to rely on some of Khảo's friends. When Khảo is released she is pregnant and Khảo abandons her. She sends her older child back to her father to raise, pays a woman to take care of her baby, and becomes a mistress of various men in order to make a living.

We learn this information when Nguyễn, Lê's brother, reflects on the life of his sister after visiting her in Saigon. The

story begins and ends with a visit by Nguyễn to his sister's apartment. Besides these two visits, which frame the story, only one other visit is described. On this visit, as on his last, Nguyễn meets and talks not with his sister, who is not there, but with her friend Thục. Though Nguyễn is "on stage" for only about thirty pages of this 103-page novella, he is an important character in the story. He is the only person besides Lê whose thoughts and feelings the narrator presumes to know. If we see men through his sister's eyes, we see women through Nguyễn's, particularly women like his sister and her friend, women whom society would call "spoiled" (hư). While Lê observes men and reflects on their idiosyncracies, Nguyễn observes these two women and ponders whether society's judgment of them is fair.

Because Lê's story is framed by Nguyễn's visits and his reflections, because he gets the first and last word, so to speak, the male perspective ultimately predominates in this novella, but before it is over Võ Phiến's narrator allows readers to understand what his female characters Lê and Thục think about men. We learn that when she first committed adultery and began to learn the intimate habits of men other than her husband, "it was as if a whole new world had opened up to her" (51). For example, after lovemaking her husband used to smoke a cigarette, stir restlessly, and grumble and complain for no reason. Tại, with whom she had her first adulterous experience, would also smoke after lovemaking but unlike her husband didn't move around and grumble like her husband. Then she reflects on the various ways men act "at that time":

Men, oh, for heaven's sake, men! Some stared into her eyes at that time, some touched her with their hands. They watched, checking her facial features and each fiber and muscle of her body to gauge her reactions. Some used all their strength, leaving her gasping for breath. They searched for excitement, wanting to enjoy their own strength, the effects of their wild exploit; they wanted to meet and see their own aggression . . . They wanted

to charge brazenly into a woman's private regions; they enjoyed their ruthless invasion, their taking possession of new territory, their destruction of secret places. And she couldn't bear the way some men looked at her afterwards, as she was putting on her clothes. It was awful! (53)

We also learn about Thục's experiences with men. In some ways Thục has more cause to be angry at men than Lê. The main problem with Khảo is that he is constitutionally unable to make an honest living. The men in Thục's life are several degrees worse. We learn Thục's story when Nguyễn makes his second visit to the apartment that Lê and Thục shared. After Thục tells Nguyễn that Lê doesn't live there anymore, he stays to chat for a while. Thục, who is from the Delta province of Châu Đốc, has ended up in Saigon because her parents would not let her marry a boy she had fallen in love with. They left the village together, but the boy later abandoned her. She worked as a servant, but was fired when she struck an insolent son in the family. An uncle got her a job in a sewing factory and married her to a major who neglected to tell her that he already had a wife. The first wife found out about his new alliance, and so Thục had to part with the major whose child she was carrying. Thục tells Nguyễn that she tried to commit suicide by taking sleeping pills, but was saved when Lê found her and took her to the hospital to have her stomach pumped out.

Before Nguyễn leaves the narrator tells us what Nguyễn thinks about Thục and his sister:

This girl, Nguyễn thought, who has been living with my sister is like her. She doesn't need much, just a man who would marry her properly. Then she would be satisfied, would be proud enough to return to the village to make a living. But now as each day passes that wish gets harder to realize. And their failure is not completely their fault. A women's sense of honor is really strange. (37)

Nguyễn leaves Thục's place feeling "as if his own life were being weighed down by the mixed-up, aimless life of this worn-out girl in the city" (40)

About halfway through this novella, a man who turns out to be an important character in this story arrives by motorized cyclo at Lê's door. This is Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm, a friend of Lê's father's and a character that intrigued Lê when she was a child in the village. Though this is his first appearance in this story, he is not a new Võ Phiến character having appeared in "Again, a Letter from Home" published in 1962, which will be discussed in chapter III. Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm is obviously modeled on Lê Đình Mẫn, Võ Phiến's grandmother's younger brother. Like Võ Phiến's relative, he has passed the first stage of the mandarin exams and so has earned the right to be called "Mr. Degree-holder." In *Men*, however, he does not conform in dress or manner to the image of the typical Confucian scholar. Lê remembers that when he took a stroll, he would wear a peasant shirt, loose-fitting shorts, a white Western hat, and sunglasses, and carry his long pants over his shoulder in case he needed them. His character, too, was "a little loose, he lived to enjoy himself, liked to roam free of restrictions, until gradually he couldn't bear any ceremonial constraints, even if those constraints involved only dress" (63).

Mr. Degree-holder is portrayed in *Men* as someone very much out of place in the Vietnam of the late '50s, early '60s. He passed the mandarin exams the last time they were offered in Huế. As a new Franco-Vietnamese education system replaced the old exam structure, there was less need for someone steeped in the Confucian classics. He has no wife or home, having lost both when he angered his wife and her family by incurring gambling debts and then pawning land he owned to cover them. He sold his land and became a wanderer, staying with families he knew, repaying them by sharing his knowledge of traditional medicine, astrology, and geomancy. Poor security in the village drove him to Saigon where he had stayed with a nephew but lost that place when

the nephew was arrested for draft dodging. He comes to stay with Lê because he has no place else to go.

Mr. Degree-holder is an important character. I will have more to say about him in chapter V where I discuss Võ Phiến's objections to city life and his nostalgia for his native village in Bình Định. In *Men* a similar nostalgia is the bond that connects Mr. Degree-holder and Lê. The old man is an economic burden to Lê but he reminds her of home, of her youth in the village when life was free of worries. And she shares his regional prejudices regarding the superiority of village things. The pork and mackerel sold in large Saigon markets, they agree cannot compare to the pork and mackerel that were available in their small village market. One evening Mr. Degree-holder, Lê, and Nghĩa, Lê's current boyfriend and the father of a child she is expecting, stay up late talking. Mr. Degree-holder laments the fact that none of them can return to their home village—Nghĩa because he is from the North, and he and Lê because of the poor security situation in central Vietnam. After Mr. Degree-holder has poured out his heart, and after Nghĩa goes home, neither Lê nor the old man can sleep. A dog is howling and mosquitoes are getting through the old man's net. When Lê goes near the old man to fix the net, he guiltily beseeches her to sleep with him. Overcome with pity for the old man, this fellow villager who has realized he has nothing, not even a pot in which to brew the Chinese tea he loves, Lê cannot find the strength to refuse his request. It is a useless gesture, however: "His efforts fail, his efforts to create a truly close relationship with another person" (91).

The novella ends with Nguyễn returning one Sunday to Lê's apartment to tell her that Khảo was killed when a mine went off near a bus station. Lê is not there, however, and he meets Thực. He learns that she has just tried to commit suicide again and that while she was in the hospital a "friend," a girl who was living with her, stole her clothes, radio, a fan, and 2000 piasters. Instead of staying in the hospital long enough to get better she sneaked away and came back to her room. On his way home after visiting Thực, Nguyễn reflects on her strange, paradoxical behavior. She has no home, just a room

in a run-down part of Saigon that she shares with a despicable roommate, but she is “so attached to that room and that friend that she cannot bear being away from them for even five days. She’s attached to these small, mean aspects of her life yet at the same time is determined to abandon life completely” (103).

Sometimes Nguyễn thinks Thục keeps trying to commit suicide because she is hot-headed, stubborn; other times he decides she has no other choice: “If men fail,” he thinks, “it’s only their careers that are ruined, only their honor that’s dirtied—completely external. But women, each time they fail their personhood is wounded, their souls are stricken; their bodies are offended in the most private and deepest place, and their entire soul and body are lost” (102). What Nguyễn suggests is that women have no “external” career, only their “internal” lives as wives and mothers, and so when they fail in these roles they have nothing to fall back on. As he rides home that Sunday “struggling with the problems of women,” Nguyễn discovers on his face the trace of a smile. He finds this smile “ridiculous because it didn’t relate in any way to his present mood” (103). Feeling he should “adjust his aberrant behavior,” he stops smiling, then decides the matter is not important enough to require adjusting, and so “discards that flavorless shell [the trace of the smile] like a person talking forever who, when he notices the cigarette he’s holding has gone out, quickly tosses it away” (103).

It is not easy to determine the narrator’s or Võ Phiến’s attitude toward Nguyễn and to men in general. Like Hữu in *Alone*, Nguyễn is a caring person. He sympathizes with his sister and Thục whom he feels have been treated badly by the men in their lives. He is attracted to Thục—we learn “there was a time when he visited her regularly” (101)—but he also values his own freedom and appears worried that if he should become too involved with Lê and Thục’s troubles this freedom would be curtailed. Although the smile Nguyễn discards at the novella’s conclusion is ambiguous, its emergence when he is pondering the sad plight of women suggests that his outlook on life is fundamentally too optimistic to be disturbed forever by their problems. In discarding this “ridic-

ulous" and "aberrant" smile it seems that he is not criticizing himself for being in a frivolous mood after leaving a woman who keeps trying to kill herself; rather, he appears to be setting aside the whole thorny problem of how society treats women.

I have suggested that in *Alone* Võ Phiến expresses a tolerant attitude toward his male characters—that he exposes their foibles but stops short of any harsh judgment. Is this true of this novella as well? His character Lê, who has reason to judge men harshly, is certainly tolerant, an attitude captured in this passage: "Men! She was tired of them. But she was like a shepherd. Though her flock caused her all sorts of trouble, she still liked this one because of his broken horn, this one because he was a picky eater, this one because he was docile. She loved them for their bad habits and their weaknesses" (92). Does Võ Phiến share Lê's tolerant attitude? To a certain extent I think he does, but Lê in *Men* is described as not being a good judge of character. Witness her choice of a husband! Nguyễn knew Khảo was a poor choice but his sister, he believes, "listened only to her heart" (23). Lê's mother suspected that her husband's friend, Mr. Degree-holder, "couldn't be trusted when it came to moral conduct," but Lê, who "often realized she was inferior to her mother when it came to a woman's instinct for self-protection," listened to her heart again and let the old man take advantage of her kindness (90).

Though it has caused her to lead a hard life, Lê's tolerance of weakness in the men she has known is presented as an admirable trait. As for Võ Phiến, one senses that he loved all his characters, but perhaps especially his eccentric male characters—men like Mr. Secretary Nga in *Alone* and Mr. Degree-holder in *Men*—for the same reason Lê was fond of the men in her life: because their deficiencies and peculiarities made them interesting.

Võ Phiến in *Men* does not directly attack the larger social system that leaves women like Lê and Thục in such desperate straits. His character Nguyễn realizes that Lê and Thục's misfortunes are not entirely their fault; and we learn

that Nguyễn is sensitive to the fact that women, because they have no external careers, are less able to weather failures in their personal lives. There are these hints that Nguyễn and his creator are aware that women suffer from a double standard, but they remain only hints.

Võ Phiến is not interested in attacking sexual inequality but in exploring character. Although the war has made it impossible for either Lê or Mr. Degree-holder to return to their home village, Võ Phiến suggests that they are both lost and alone in Saigon primarily because they made some bad decisions, because they suffer from some very human weaknesses. Lê is too trusting, listens too much to her heart. Mr. Degree-holder is too enamored of the past. Are these really weaknesses? They are in the sense that they make it difficult to survive in a modern city like Saigon where it helps to be practical and up-to-date. But as I will argue in chapters V and VI, Võ Phiến was rather fond of these “weaknesses” exhibited by his characters Lê and Mr. Degree-holder.

Võ Phiến’s next published work after the novella *Men* was a collection of stories called *Illusion* (1967) which has the subtitle “Short Writing by Võ Phiến.” Võ Phiến’s decision to call these stories “short writing” (đoản văn) rather than “short stories” (truyện ngắn) probably reflects the fact that most of them could be considered informal reflective essays (*tùy bút*) rather than short stories.²⁸ Because most of the stories/essays in *Illusion* are about people from rural villages struggling to adjust to city life, we will discuss them in chapter V, but one story, “The Unusual Husband,” treats male-female relations and so will be discussed here.

Although male characters in *Alone* and *Men* treat women badly, they don’t physically abuse them. The husband in Võ Phiến’s short story²⁹ “The Unusual Husband,” however,

²⁸When Võ Phiến later reprinted the seven works from this collection, he put one selection in *Tùy Bút I* (Informal Reflective Essays I), four in *Tùy Bút II* (Informal Reflective Essays II), and two in *Truyện Ngắn II* (Short Stories II). By labeling *Illusion* “short writing” Võ Phiến avoided the problem, which I take up in the next chapter, of generic classification.

²⁹Võ Phiến reprinted “The Unusual Husband” in *Short Stories II*, which suggests that he considered it a short story, not a *tùy bút* essay.

beats and stabs his wife. He is insanely jealous not only of men that his wife works with but also relatives—his uncle, her uncle, even her own father! “Of course, he was violent,” his wife, the first-person narrator, says. “He beat me like a drunken French soldier; he beat the cabinet, beat the door and attacked my uncle with a hammer and knife” (16). She had been a performer in reformed operas but her husband made her quit that job when she married him. She got other jobs, one as a telephone operator, but eventually stops working completely, tired of her husband’s suspicions of co-workers.

Her husband is insanely jealous in part because they have such a close and open relationship. In the evenings they would sit close to each other. “At any moment we could touch any spot on our bodies or in our minds. . . . We didn’t distinguish which life was his, which life was mine, didn’t set a clear border between what was in his mind and what was my own private life. It was like living in two connected rooms that always allowed free passage from one to the other” (13–14). During these moments of open communication she would report everything that happened to her during the day, including each conversation with male co-workers, and these innocent confidences fanned the flames of his jealousy.

Though her husband caused her endless grief, it is clear that she loves him. They often went to the movies. When the movie was over, he would go to retrieve his Vespa and she would wait for him under a street light.

He would bring the Vespa up to the sidewalk, stop and turn his head, looking for me. No one looked like him at these times—worried, very discrete, and especially very calm. People were pouring out of the theater but there in the crowd was one man waiting for me, caring about me. At those times I loved him, was crazy about him. He was gentle in a subtle way. What woman wouldn’t want to entrust herself entirely to such a resolute man who saved for her this much delicate feeling? (17)

Eventually she leaves him, unable to stand his fits of jealousy and his beatings anymore. But when the story ends, she is thinking of returning to him:

If only he didn't stab, didn't intend to kill me, I would be happy to live with him forever. The crude violence was a clearly defined way of behaving. Away from him I lived in confusion and uncertainty. The threat of his strong will was not as worrisome as the threat of emptiness, of vacant space, of having no direction, no strong will before me. My mother will say I've been infected by his craziness, but I'm not sure I won't return to him. (26-27)

Though the husband in this story is a frightening character, this short story doesn't suggest that Võ Phiến, having escaped an obsession with anti-communism, has become, in the mid-'60s, obsessed by the politics of sexual equality. The husband in this story is "unusual," as the title makes clear. Insanity, the reader learns, runs in his family. Võ Phiến was clearly interested in the role women played in the family and in society. The universe of many Võ Phiến's works is often the universe of women, as Đặng Tiến has pointed out (1974, 57). But like his character Lung in "Night Rain at Year's End" Võ Phiến is not disturbed enough about the imperfections of traditional society to mount a campaign to reform it. He is leery of rapid political or social change. In his fiction he strives to create characters who are first and foremost individuals, not representatives of a downtrodden group or of some political faction.

Võ Phiến believes that literature must be kept separate from politics. When he was asked in 1968 how the two were related, he presented and rejected two possibilities: the communist arrangement, in which literature serves the regime, and the system in other countries, where literature is used to denounce and oppose those in power. Writers should be respectable citizens, they owe that much to the state, but literature, he insisted, "is an activity different from politics and from morality; it has its own duties, which often

aren't compatible with or related to politics (or morality)" ("Talking with *Literature*," 374). As a writer in a country torn by war and political upheaval, Võ Phiến has had to wrestle often with this issue of the proper relation of art and politics. Even in "Writing Under Fire," an essay written immediately after the Tết Offensive, at a time when Saigon writers were pressured to support the war effort, Võ Phiến is not enthusiastic about a political role for writers. The belief that literary figures have important things to say about politics, he says, reflects Vietnam's traditional conception of the scholar official as a jack-of-all-trades, an outdated notion in this modern age of specialization. In this essay Võ Phiến, does, however, conclude—reluctantly, one senses—that writers do have a responsibility to serve the nation in a time of crisis, that they should, for example, write folk poems to convince Việt Cộng soldiers to "chiêu hồi," or switch to the Saigon side, but only because writers are more versatile with language than other citizens. He implies that in doing so writers would be acting as citizens, not as writers.

Acting on his own advice, after the Tết Offensive Võ Phiến began writing a series of essays on political topics, including ones in which he analyzes various deceptions, schemes, and cruelties of the other side.³⁰ In "Kidnapping Young Children," he describes a communist plot to kidnap eight and nine-year-old children and take them to the North where they would be trained for future battles. These essays infuriated Hanoi critics who mention them as another reason to ban his books (see Lữ Phương, 1981, 73–75), but they have endeared him to his supporters in Saigon. Phan Lạc Phúc, an editor of *Tiền Tuyến* (The Front), the newspaper that published "Kidnapping Young Children," praises this essay in an article that appeared in *The Front* in March 1969: "This essay . . . , which *The Front* was honored to print, contains keen observations based on actual experience and practical reflections derived from nine years of living under the 'yoke of Father Hồ.' Not only myself but all members of the editorial board have to

³⁰These essays have been reprinted in *Miscellaneous Essays* (1987).

recognize that rarely does one encounter an anti-communist essay that pierces to the marrow like this one. He [Võ Phiến] wrote many essays like it" (1969/1974, 30).

Vietnamese exiles also single out this essay for praise. In a 1995 article appearing in *21st Century* (Thế Kỷ 21), published in Garden Grove, California, Phan Lạc Tiếp says that Võ Phiến:

saw the errors, the cruelty, and the inhumanity of those who caused our unfortunate separation [from the homeland]. He saw the underlying intention and the cruelty of those who were maintaining the war. That idea surrounds many of his works, but it is most concrete and clear in a short article called "Kidnapping Young Children." . . . Võ Phiến described the secret intentions [of the communists] in a book that the poet Hà Thượng Nhân translated into French.³¹ This book circulated widely at the Paris Peace Conference where it caused a stir regarding the presence of North Vietnamese communists in the South. His heart was broken, he was humane, but he still incurred the resentment of Hanoi. He was extremely discerning. They were afraid of this quality in him. And they were right to fear it. (28)

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc also praises Võ Phiến for writing these anti-communist essays, saying it was especially courageous given the writer's stated worries about literature becoming a tool of politics and his conviction that great works of literature rise above the political issues of the day to address more grandiose and metaphysical issues (1996, 91). No doubt Võ Phiến's turn in the late '60s from fiction to essays is prompted by his feeling that in essays, particularly those he called *tạp luận*—essays on non-literary topics—he could discuss political issues without compromising his views about the dangers of literature serving politics. Let too much politics seep into his fiction, and he worries that he is obsessed; politics in a "tạp luận," however, is evidence only of a citizen doing his civic duty.

³¹Presumably this book was *Miscellaneous Essays* (Tạp Luận) (1973).

III

A PASSION FOR CONCRETE DETAIL: VÕ PHIẾN'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

*Novelists, no matter what view they are espousing, must have a love for people. They must have a passionate desire to understand, observe, and search out information about humankind, everything from noble psychological qualities to physical and mental defects and awkward and embarrassing gestures. After all, they love people, not beautiful people.*³²

— Võ Phiến

Four features of Võ Phiến's narrative technique stand out in his early fiction:³³ his emphasis on character development, his reliance on physical description, his preference for framed narratives, and his passion for details. After surveying these four features, we will consider some criticisms of his style and then conclude with some thoughts about what motivated Võ Phiến to tell stories in the way he did.

Character Development

An obvious and very important aspect of Võ Phiến's style is his focus on character. His portraits of people, especially of country people, are carefully drawn, full of details that particularize them and make them difficult to forget. Many of his most unforgettable portraits are of minor characters: Bái Công and assistant village chief Biên in "Returning to a Country Village," Mr. Three Thê in *Saying Good-by*, Secretary Nga in *Alone*, Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm in *Men*, for example. Clearly Võ Phiến lavished a great deal of his attention on char-

³²"Characters in Novels," 211–12.

³³These features are evident in his informal reflective essays as well. I discuss problems in genre differentiation in Võ Phiến's work in the next chapter.

acters like these and some readers believe they are his major achievement: “The most successful feature of both Võ Phiến’s short and longer stories is his characters,” says Nguyễn Hưng Quốc. “The artistry he revealed in crafting characters is what makes him stand out in comparison to other contemporary Vietnamese writers” (137).

In an essay he wrote in 1961, “Characters in Novels,” Võ Phiến makes clear his view that writers of fiction should make character development their primary goal. This goal, he suggests, is more important than furthering a particular political cause or exposing a social problem: “You have to have characters that have a clear personality, living characters that are lively and real so the work has vitality. As for what the work talks about—the social, philosophical, or political problem it addresses—that can be whatever the author wishes” (212). Modern readers in the West would not be surprised by this advice, at least readers in countries where writers are free to write what they wish, but it was not the kind of advice that Vietnamese writers even as recently as the 1960s, even in relatively free South Vietnam, were accustomed to receiving.

In “Characters in Novels” Võ Phiến draws heavily on the views of a French critic named Charles Plisnier.³⁴ According to Plisnier, after an author creates a character, the character assumes a life of its own and the author’s job is simply “to obey”—to let the character develop according to his or her psychology unrestrained by any preconceived notions of plot or message that the author may have: “Forcing them [characters] to act according to one’s wishes is child’s play—nothing difficult about it. But as soon as a novelist begins to force a character to follow his or her wishes . . . , then, in my opinion, that person is no longer a true novelist because the first duty is to obey” (quoted by Võ Phiến, 214).

Unlike the “true novelist” Plisnier talks about, the creators of traditional stories in both China and Vietnam could not give free rein to their characters. They had to make sure they served the moral message that literature was supposed to

³⁴The title of Plisnier’s book was *Roman, papiers d’un romancier* published by Grassier in 1954.

convey. The well-known Sino-Vietnamese expression “Literature carries doctrine” (Văn dĩ tải đạo) sums up the prevailing view. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, the creator of a very popular nineteenth-century verse narrative called *Lục Vân Tiên* (ca. 1860), for example, was careful to make sure his hero and heroine embodied the Confucian virtues of loyalty-filial piety and chastity. The moral intent of his narrative is made clear in the opening lines:

Attention everybody! Be quiet and listen,
 Recollect past mistakes, avoid bad consequences later;
 Men take loyalty-filial piety as your rule,
 Women take chastity as the word to improve yourselves.
 (lines 3–6)

Because in traditional literature characters had to be exemplars of moral principles, there was no way, Võ Phiến explains, an author could “obey” his characters: “Obey one’s own imaginary characters? Our predecessors wouldn’t have been able to conceive of such weakness. To make them conform to their moral principles, to ensure that good prevailed over evil, they would not hesitate to kill their characters, either by having them be devoured by tigers,³⁵ or struck by the thunder god; they showed no reluctance to control their characters” (214). Some people would say that Plisnier goes too far, Võ Phiến says, but his point about “obeying” characters, letting them develop in an unrestrained fashion, is useful because “to speak truthfully we still have the habit of forcing our characters to follow where the plot takes them” (214).

By stressing character and not surrendering to the tyranny of a tight plot, Võ Phiến felt he could write modern fiction not old-fashioned moral tales like Nguyễn Đình Chiểu’s *Lục Vân Tiên*. No doubt he worried about being obsessed with politics in his early fiction because he realized that if he did not beat down this obsession he would turn out stories with

³⁵In *Lục Vân Tiên*, an evil prospective father-in-law of the hero and his wife and daughter, all of whom abandon the hero when he becomes blind, get eaten by tigers.

characters who served his political agenda—moral tales in modern dress not modern fiction like the Russian, French, British, and American novels he admired. Probably, too, another kind of moral tale, the stories of revolutionary heroism that he must have encountered during his time with the Việt Minh, served as an additional example of an approach to be avoided. Though Võ Phiến has written generally about the intense political atmosphere that prevailed during the Resistance, to my knowledge he has not explicitly described the rules that revolutionary writers had to follow. In *Literature in South Vietnam: 1954–1975*, in a section in which he seeks reasons why there is no great Vietnamese novel about the war, he touches on this subject briefly. Northern writers have not been able to produce a great war novel, he says, because they have constantly had to worry about conforming to official positions. As a result their works are “propagandistic in nature and purpose” and contain only “ready-made one-dimensional characters” (1986, 177).

In these comments Võ Phiến is referring to the second Indochina war, but during both Indochina wars revolutionary writers were required to write works of socialist realism, an approach that originated in literary discussions in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, in talks on literature and art that Mao Tse-tung gave in Yunan in 1942, and in local applications and adaptations of these Soviet and Chinese ideas laid down by Trường Chinh and Hồ Chí Minh. A key tenet of socialist realism was that literature should serve politics. Trường Chinh defined this approach in a 1948 essay called “Marxism and Vietnamese Culture”: “a method of artistic creation which portrays the truth in a society evolving towards socialism according to objective laws. Out of objective reality we must spotlight ‘the typical features in typical situations’” (285).³⁶ The required emphasis on the typical—the typical revolutionary hero, for example—must have troubled Võ Phiến who was determined to create particular individuals defined by their atypical quirks and habits.

³⁶Trường Chinh quotes Friedrich Engels’ famous definition of realism.

Vũ Hạnh, Võ Phiến's former colleague who worked secretly for the revolutionary movement, objects to Võ Phiến's odd and forlorn characters. "[Y]ou can waste a lot of time looking for positive and impressive characters, or even characters who achieve a minimum of success, in the works of Võ Phiến," he says. "Almost all the men are foolish and lonely types—like brother Brother Four No More [a character in "Again, a Letter from Home"] who amuses himself by pulling hair out of his nose" (1980, 25). And "most of the women in Võ Phiến's works are victims of sexual urges, their own and those of men" (27). Võ Phiến, says Vũ Hạnh, "cannot see the heroism of the people" (38). Vũ Hạnh wrote this critical analysis in 1980 but it indicates clearly the restrictions placed on revolutionary writers in both wars. Those who wrote for the revolution could not obey their characters; they had to obey the dictates of socialist realism and produce exemplary heroes.

Writers not associated with the communist movement, however, also found it difficult to shake off the idea that "Literature carries doctrine." In earlier Vietnamese fiction, Nguyễn Hưng Quốc observes, including stories written in the '30s by Nhất Linh,³⁷ a very influential predecessor of Võ Phiến, characters always seem to stand for something: their motivating energy comes from some force "behind them," not from their own natures.³⁸ In *Severance* (Đoạn Tuyệt), for example, Nhất Linh's novel attacking Confucianism,³⁹ the characters Dũng and Loan represent positions in the debate between the old and the new, between individual freedom and responsibility to family, and between love and duty. In contrast, says

³⁷Nhất Linh (1906–1963), a pen name for a writer named Nguyễn Tường Tam, was a towering literary figure in the 1930s and 1940s. A politician, famous novelist, and leader of a group of writers called the Self-Strength Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn), he advocated modernization and attacked Confucianism. For more information on his life and work, see Jamieson (1993).

³⁸In *Literature in South Vietnam: 1954–1975*, Võ Phiến says Nhất Linh was not the last writer to write "thematic novels" (tiểu thuyết luận đề), by which he means novels written to further a political or philosophical position. "After 1954, many others arrived to swell the ranks of writers with a theme. . . . The post-Geneva period in the South was a time . . . to expound a cause" (165).

³⁹This novel has been translated. See Nhất Linh, *Severance*, trans. James Banerian (1997).

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, behind Võ Phiến's characters there lies nothing at all.

They stand alone, live alone. They are not the spokespersons for a viewpoint, not representatives of a faction. They are simply themselves. When we remember them, we don't remember any conflicts or problems. We remember only a facial feature, sometimes only a forehead, a jaw with buck teeth, pale skin, greedy eyes; or we remember some weird or unusual habit. . . . In other words, we remember them as we remember people we know, or to speak a little more truthfully and courageously, when we remember them we remember ourselves. (1996, 136)

All four features of Võ Phiến's technique are interrelated. It is difficult to develop a character adequately with plot alone, without using detailed description, a point well understood by Võ Phiến:

The ambition of story writers is to reach the human soul because only if they do that is their work justified. You can narrate a hundred actions, but no matter how strange and marvelous they are if in the end they don't reveal any truths about humankind, if they don't help us better understand our human soul, then the product won't justify all the effort put into writing and reading it. Unfortunately, however, the human soul is revealed in each cough, in each step, in the way that person scolds her children, quarrels with her parents, even in the way she spits. Story writers have to attend to minute details like these in order to present a life clearly; they can't just evoke a vague faceless shadow of a person. ("Detail in Stories," 192-93)

What Võ Phiến was engaged in was a project to wean his Vietnamese readers away from what Phạm Quỳnh, in a pioneering article on the novel published in 1921, called "straight-line narration" (tự thuật đường thẳng), the kind of

narration that their traditional stories prepared Vietnamese readers to expect (8). Though this project was begun by a group of pioneering southern novelists in the early twentieth century⁴⁰ and was continued in the 1930s and '40s by Nhất Linh and other writers in the Self-Strength Group, Võ Phiến advanced it significantly. By straight-line narration Phạm Quỳnh meant the tendency of narrators of traditional Chinese and Vietnamese stories— *The Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, *Lục Vân Tiên*, for example—to concentrate on actions and to leave out descriptions of characters or scenery unless they contributed directly to the plot.

In "Detail in Stories" Võ Phiến clarifies the difference between traditional straight-line narration and the kind of narration he preferred by comparing Chinese and Vietnamese works to European and American works. The writers of traditional Chinese stories, he says, describe a character or scene only very briefly before immersing the reader in the action. Therefore if weather conditions are described in some detail, the reader knows something ominous is about to happen. A description of a strong eastern wind in *The Three Kingdoms*, for example, presages the destruction of Tào Tháo's navy at Xích Bích. In Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, however, "the rain pours down and there is thunder and lightning the afternoon the young Zhivago buries his mother, and it is raining the night when the nurse Lara says good-by to her lover, the doctor. Although rain storms like these don't dampen the hair of a single character, they provide an external frame for the internal turmoil that exists in the hearts of the characters" (194).

To reveal character the social context, not just the physical context, should be described. In "Breadth in Stories" Võ Phiến says that writers should situate their characters in a "broad" social setting: "They should make sure that behind their major characters one can see the faces of relatives, people who love them, and people who hate them; writers should make sure that along with the chatter of a few major characters one can also hear squabbling at the market, a car out

⁴⁰See Cao thị Như-Quỳnh and Schafer 1988; and Schafer and Thế Uyên 1993.

on the street, so that one can get some idea of the confused struggle to make a living that is going on around the major characters" (207). Writers should create a broad social setting, Võ Phiến says, not because people want to "see society but for the sake of the major characters. Characters are immersed in that society and wherever they go they carry that context with them; only within that context can characters express completely their individual personalities, reveal their true colors" (207).

Physical Description

Because Võ Phiến uses physical description to reveal character, we have already mentioned this second narrative technique in discussing the first, but Võ Phiến's attention to the physical details of his characters is so pronounced it requires a separate section. Almost every memorable Võ Phiến character has a distinguishing physical feature, often an unattractive one, that sets that character apart from others. Vĩ in "The Prisoner" is "skinny, his face full of scabies, his hair falling out from an illness that almost killed him" (54). Thiện in "Telling a Story Late at Night" has soft, clammy hands. In *Alone* the main character Hửu sweats uncontrollably and other workers in his office each have a distinguishing physical feature or habit: old mister Thông has buck teeth, Hạo has a flat face and keeps swallowing his saliva, worker Sáu has only one eye, and Mr. Secretary Nga is missing most of his teeth. Even the female characters in *Alone*, though presented as generally attractive, have physical blemishes: Châu's hair is always disheveled and Nga, the prostitute, has pimples on her back and a scar on her shoulder. Characters in *Men* have their distinguishing physical features as well: Khảo, Lê's ne'er-do-well husband, has eyes that include unusually large expanses of white; he also moves his arms crazily as he talks. Mr. Degree-holder is distinguished by his unusual dress: baggy shorts with long pants thrown over his shoulder. In a review article on Võ Phiến's early stories, Nguyễn Mộng Giác says:

None of Võ Phiến's characters has a normal appearance. Either their eyes are too revealing. Or they are too bald. Or their cheekbones are too high. Or they have buck teeth. Or they are too skinny. Or their skin is too pale. If they eat enough, then their manner of eating is messy. If they dress well then they are crude in the way they talk, laugh, smack their lips, or swallow. If they aren't crude, then they are small-minded and stingy, devoid of nobility. (1987, 71–72)

In addition to physical features, physical actions—especially smiles, looks, and gestures—are very important in any Võ Phiến story. Subtle and silent non-verbal actions, very small movements of some part of the body, become key events, and in some stories, “Paying Attention,” for example, they drive the plot completely. In the stories already surveyed there are many examples. In “Night Rain at Year’s End,” when Lung touches the shoulder of Thu, the attractive female cadre member, and she brushes his arm away, his gesture suggests his growing disenchantment with the revolution and hers her commitment to it. In *Alone* when Hữu removes a strand of hair from Châu’s face, and she exclaims “Uncle,” his impulsive gesture and her reaction to it mark a key turn in the plot. Realizing that his relationship with women has changed, he seeks out Nga, a prostitute, to prove to himself that his vitality is not completely exhausted.

In the examples above a woman rejects a man’s gesture of affection, but often the woman responds, and a non-verbal dialogue of looks and gestures, which cements their relationship, or at least advances it significantly, ensues. In “Writing a Letter at Noon” from the collection *Love Cherished for a Thousand Years* (1962), Tuyền, while writing his girl friend, Trang, a letter, remembers their first meeting. It was on a moonlit night when both of them were taking a horse-drawn cart from An Khê to their home villages in Bình Định Province. Traveling with them is one other passenger, a rather coarse fellow with a bad complexion who violates rules of normal behavior

by singing boisterously. Curious as to what the girl (Trang) thinks of the singer, Tuyền glances in her direction:

As the cart passed a turn, the moonlight suddenly illuminated her face. And exactly at that time Tuyền's eyes met hers, which were looking at him. It was as if she had been searching for him, waiting to catch his eye. The two of them smiled at each other. On the girl's part the smile was an explanation. From the time the singing became very loud, she had been waiting for Tuyền, and that smile was if to say: "See that! I also know that fellow is impolite. Though he's sitting next to me, I don't approve of him at all. But what can I do, it's all his doing, I have nothing to do with his rudeness." As for Tuyền's smile, it was just a cheerful way to say he understood and agreed with her. (199)

In *Alone* there is a similar exchange of looks and smiles. When the main action of the novel takes place, Hữu has lost interest in Quỳnh, his present wife, but he remembers an early meeting four years ago when he visited her family on Phuong Hải Island. Quỳnh was filling up a thermos in the kitchen when she overheard her father in an adjoining room invite Hữu and his friend to stay overnight on the island and enjoy a meal of rice cakes stuffed with shrimp. Hữu saw Quỳnh look up, waiting to see how he would reply.

The sound of water pouring into the thermos was suddenly replaced by another sound. Startled, Quỳnh turned but not quickly enough. Water quickly began flowing over the table. As Quỳnh brushed the water onto the floor, Hữu smiled. He watched her supple fingers as she softly stroked the table with one hand while reaching down to her thigh with the other to pull her pant leg up higher. He watched the way she avoided the drops of water falling from the table. His smile gradually softened into something like tolerance, acceptance. Suddenly he felt happy, then vaguely contented. Finished wiping the table, Quỳnh

looked up and saw that Hữu was still watching her. She looked directly into his eyes and frowned slightly, pretending to be angry, then quickly turned away, smiling. (148)

This scene reveals Hữu at the height of his powers. His mid-life crisis stems in part from his fear that his looks and gestures no longer have the same effect on the opposite sex: "When he was still young, each gesture, pose, each small action—a word, a laugh, a glance, a blink—caused an echo in the space around him. But now he could gesture and glance all he wanted but there was no resounding echo. Only indifference. Silence" (275).

Võ Phiến's stories contain many scenes similar to those in the passages quoted above. For Võ Phiến the language of love is a language not of words but of looks, smiles, and gestures. While mini-dramas of looks and gestures occur quite frequently in Võ Phiến's stories, and are often key events in the plot, they don't usually dominate the entire narrative. An exception is the story "Paying Attention," which is constructed around three unspoken "dialogues" between a man and a woman: one at a store called Nam Hoa, one near the west gate of the Bến Thành Market, and one at the Phi Yến Ice Cream Parlor. This is an epistolary story: It consists of letters which the girl, Thao, is reading as she paints her fingernails. The letters are from Tập, with whom she has broken up but whose letters she continues to receive. The letters are his answers to her question: When did you first pay attention to me?

Tập describes the exchanges at each of the three locations, but lavishes most care in describing the scene in the ice cream parlor. As he describes it, each clink of their ice cream dishes, each scrape of their chairs, is pregnant with meaning. Especially important is a gesture by Thao. He is sitting behind her at another table and he sees her reach behind her back with one hand and touch each button to make sure it is fastened. Tập has fallen in love with Thao because of gestures like this one. "I like," he says in one letter, "the way

you express worry, discreteness, and embarrassment in your gestures. . . . You truly have a body of many words" (264).

Võ Phiến's use of unusual, often displeasing physical features to identify his characters and his concentration on gestures have one thing in common: both reveal intense interest in the human body and a faith in its ability to communicate significant information. Võ Phiến's fascination with the body has not gone unnoticed by critics. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc suggests that it is what distinguishes Võ Phiến's works from those by Vietnamese writers of previous literary periods:

To sum up, in Vietnam under the gaze of medieval⁴¹ writers and poets people were seen primarily as will or ambition; observed by romantic writers, primarily as feeling or emotion; in the eyes of realists and socialist realists, primarily as a class, a segment of society; in the eyes of contemporary writers influenced by existentialism, primarily as fate or some concept or idea. For Võ Phiến, however, a person is first a body. (1996, 151–52)

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc suggests Võ Phiến got this interest in the body from his idol Proust, a writer who believed that "all the stirring and concerns within the soul of a person had corresponding external manifestations" (146).⁴²

Whatever its source, Võ Phiến's admiration for the communicative power of the human body is unmistakable. In "Paying Attention" Tập describes for Thao a trip he took to a radio station where he saw some female singers performing in a soundproof studio. He could see them but could not hear them, but still marvels at their "eloquence": "Although their mouths were shut, they still could speak with complete ease, speak with each part of their body. Their bodies were truly lively, eloquent" (263). Later Tập writes: "There are spoken

⁴¹Vietnamese use the term "medieval" (trung đại, trung cổ) to refer to the period from 111 B.C. to the fifteenth century A.D.

⁴²In "Returning to Detail in Stories," Võ Phiến seems to confirm Proust's influence in this regard by alluding to his famous madeleine: "Each gesture, each word revealed externally is the result of so many complicated inner actions. The flavor of a piece of cake in the mouth awakens an immense and distant past" (200).

words that are intelligent and significant, but there are also significant gestures that can surely be called intelligent. Some people are good at writing intelligently and profoundly, some at speaking smartly, but there are also people who reveal their intelligence without writing or speaking" (263). Like his character Tập it seems clear that Võ Phiến admired people who had this talent. A writer not an actor, Võ Phiến could not be eloquent or intelligent in the same way. Perhaps he decided, however, that by carefully describing the power of the body to communicate without words he could write eloquently and intelligently with them.

Framed Narratives

A third characteristic of Võ Phiến's narrative style is his preference for narrators who primarily observe and only occasionally participate in the key events of the narrative.

In "The Prisoner," for example, the "I" who tells the story does play a role in the events he relates, but it is a fairly minor one. The main characters are the youth Vĩ and the old fisherman. In *Saying Good-by* the first-person narrator, the one who is saying good-by to Qui Nhon, observes carefully and reports extensively on Mr. Three Thê and his family. We learn much less about the "I" who tells the story.

Many stories are quite elaborately framed. In *Men*, the story of Lê, the woman forced to become a kept woman, is sandwiched between two visits by her brother, Nguyễn. He is not a first-person narrator but we see his sister through his eyes. In this as in other stories an elaborate chain of observers is set up: Nguyễn is watching his sister, the third-person narrator is watching Nguyễn watch his sister, and behind these character is the watchful eye of Võ Phiến, their creator. "The presence of an observing character," says Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, "of someone outside the action, is, in my view, the main element that creates a unified whole of Võ Phiến's short stories and some of his novels" (1996, 145).

Võ Phiến is fascinated—obsessed would not be too strong a word—with eyesight, with vision. In Võ Phiến's stories there is always someone seeing and/or being seen. In

"Telling a Story Late at Night," the activity of watching dominates the narrative. In this story the narrator, who works for the railroad, meets another employee named Thiện who tells a story about falling in love with a girl he watched from his window. So we have the narrator carefully observing Thiện as he describes in great detail how he fell in love with a girl that he observed through his bedroom window. According to Võ Phiến's friend, author and critic Nguyễn Mộng Giác, "It would not be going too far to say that the characters of Võ Phiến . . . gather all of their energy into their vision. They are quiet, awkward. They are timid, undecided. But their eyes are always open wide. If we wish to find a constant quality in Võ Phiến's entire literary career, that quality would be the judgmental way of looking exhibited by his characters" (1987, 73).

A Passion for Detail

A fourth characteristic of Võ Phiến's narrative style is his very detailed descriptions. Because Võ Phiến's observing narrators must concentrate their vision mightily to produce these descriptions, and since what they describe are often physical features and actions, this characteristic is clearly related to ones already discussed. It deserves a separate category, however, because Võ Phiến is interested not only in small physical features and gestures; he is interested in smallness more generally and has developed what might be called an aesthetics of smallness (and, to a certain extent, a politics of smallness as well). This aesthetics of smallness is closely related to an aesthetics of the common: Võ Phiến frequently associates small, mundane objects with the lives of poor, ordinary people. Because Võ Phiến's interest in the small and the common is more pronounced in his informal reflective essays than in his fiction, I will discuss it more fully in chapter IV, which is devoted to Võ Phiến's work in that form.

Võ Phiến's passion for detail, however, details of all kinds, not simply physical features and gestures, and his tendency to link the small with the common, are also evident in his early fiction. In "Night Rain at Year's End," Lung is mes-

merized by a tiny ant crawling on the beautiful white arm of Thu, the attractive female cadre member, and when the story ends has realized that what he values most are small details like this, the little things that make up an ordinary life. "Why," Lung asks himself, "have I just now become so attached to an ordinary life, to coincidences, to the small details of life?" (21)

When in *Alone* Hữu moves in with Nga, his growing familiarity with her life and with his new surroundings is described in terms of small, common things:

As the days went on he gradually became accustomed to his new life. New sounds and images began to become familiar to his senses. His sharing of everything with Nga didn't present him with just a view of an alley out her window, the scent of the skin on her back, or the knowledge that her shoulder had been broken once by a brass *kỳ lân* [mythical animal];⁴³ it presented him also with images of dead cockroaches in the water jar, of a ladle made of a small, rust-spotted condensed milk can that tinkled against the jar, of the small gray purse that Nga liked the most and carried whenever she went downtown, of a big bag that she used to take clothes to the laundry, etc. (282)

Hữu values greatly some details of Nga's past life that she reveals to him on one visit before he moved in with her. One detail relates to the mythical animal mentioned in the passage quoted above. Nga tells Hữu that after her father died, she and her mother moved in with her paternal grandmother and a mean uncle who liked to drink and gamble. When the uncle got angry one night he threw a brass *kỳ lân* at her, breaking her shoulder. He tells her too about a pet pig that she taught to lie down, bow, and stretch its legs; and about a seventy-five-year-old Chinese woman in the house

⁴³A *kỳ lân* is "an animal that is shaped like a deer but has a bigger body. It has the tail of a buffalo and the breasts of a horse. It does not eat living things and it is very smart. . . . According to tradition, whenever a spirit or genie is born, a *kỳ lân* appears to announce its arrival." See Trịnh Văn Thanh 1967, 570.

next to hers who anticipated her death and laid out everything needed for her funeral ahead of time—money for rice, clothes, etc. Hữu's passion for these details from Nga's life is revealed in this passage: "The more ridiculous the detail, the more inconsequential it was, the more Hữu was moved by it. These pieces of her past life that Nga conveyed to him were more precious than anything that had happened to him in recent days. He proudly cherished them in the same way a devotee clings to the sacred bones of the Buddha" (268).

Hữu hopes that by learning these personal details of Nga's life he can conquer her completely, but is disappointed to discover that this isn't possible. She sleeps with him and exhibits a playful affection for him, but refuses to commit herself totally to him emotionally. Hữu considers Nga's lack of interest in the details of his own life to be a sign of her holding back. To prevent his feet from sweating, Hữu puts paper inserts soaked in a disinfectant in his shoes. It bothers him that Nga never notices this detail of his life: "Why didn't she pay attention?" he wonders. "Strange! What's the reason? Why didn't she ever ask about it?" (284).

Though probably more interested in details than Võ Phiến's character Nga, some readers have suggested that Võ Phiến pays too much attention to them. It is time now to turn to this and other criticisms of Võ Phiến's narrative technique.

Reactions to Võ Phiến's Narrative Technique

For a variety of reasons, including the late development of a workable script to write the Vietnamese language, prose fiction is a relatively new genre in Vietnam. Long verse narratives remained popular late into the nineteenth century. The first prose novel was not written until 1910.⁴⁴ When Võ Phiến first began to write short stories and novels, some writers and readers were still adjusting to this new genre, prose fiction. The situation required a certain degree of mutual accommodation. Most readers appreciated Võ Phiến's style, but some did not, and one senses that part of the problem was

⁴⁴Trần Chánh Chiêu's *The Unjust Suffering of Hoàng Tổ Anh*. See Schafer and Thế Uyên (1993).

that he told his stories in a way that they found new and a little strange.

As we have seen, Võ Phiến had strong convictions regarding how stories should be told and was not overly patient with readers who remained nostalgic for older techniques. "Some people say our ancestors were refined and elegant people who could say profound things in only a few words, . . . that Asians reveal their nobility by not chasing busily after details, that such a tiresome chore ill befits the manner of a true artist" ("Detail in Stories," 200). Chinese Tang poetry and Vietnamese poems influenced by this form (works admired for their elegance and ability to say profound things in few words) are worthy of respect, Võ Phiến admits, but in this age when we "drive Western cars, live in Western houses, read Western books, eat Western bread, . . . why should we worry about the little that's left, like the novel, and refuse to utilize some good things from the West?" (200).

Võ Phiến's early fiction was generally well received when it first appeared and critics continue to praise it today. "No one can deny," says Nguyễn Đình Toàn in a review of *Saying Good-by* published in 1962, "that Võ Phiến has a subtle pen. By making careful choices, by using words cleverly, Võ Phiến compels readers to pay attention to each word, even when he is describing trifling matters" (40). Along with the praise, however, comes some negative criticism. Nguyễn Đình Toàn sums up how some readers react to Võ Phiến's style:

In reviews of Võ Phiến's stories that have appeared in the press, some have observed that he writes very meticulously. They add the word 'too' and say 'too meticulously.' Others observe that precisely because he is excessively meticulous, because he attaches too much attention to detail, Võ Phiến's works become cumbersome, and that cumbersomeness leads to slowness. (40)

Võ Phiến has also been accused of being cold and too analytical—of "splitting a hair to make four" (chẻ sợi tóc làm

tu), a criticism that is provoked at least in part by Võ Phiến's passion for detail (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1996, 146).⁴⁵

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc thinks the term "analytical" (phân tích) commonly used to describe Võ Phiến's style is not quite accurate, at least if it is used to suggest a penchant for psychological analysis of characters. Võ Phiến is more an observer than an analyzer of a character's behavior, he argues. For Võ Phiến "in many cases to analyze simply means to change the angle of observation" (146). Võ Phiến's reputation for coldness stems, Nguyễn Hưng Quốc suggests, not from his excessive analysis but from his preference for telling stories from the point of view of a character who is distanced in time and/or space from the events being described. Often this distance is created by having the character reflect on life in his or her hometown or village in earlier times, reflection sometimes prompted by the character being about to leave that place (the "I" in *Saying Good-by*, for example) or by having returned to it after a long absence ("Returning to a Country Village") or by having encountered something in the city that reminds the character of life in the home village ("Birds and Snakes"⁴⁶). This distance, according to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, leads to a gaze that is "alert" and "cold," and under this gaze "any warmth, if it existed, in the souls of people, warmth that was the secret reason for each action and gesture, cools and dissipates. Life as a result has a tendency to become tasteless, meaningless, and to a certain extent absurd" (145).

We see what could be considered coldness in stories like "Returning to a Country Village," which I discussed in chapter II. Though one senses that Võ Phiến has a great deal of affection for characters in that story—villagers like Bái Công, assistant village chief Biên, and the narrator's great-uncle, the labor commissioner—a lot of the humor in this story comes at their expense. The narrator, who has assumed a perspective of ironic detachment, is distanced from their concerns.

⁴⁵In descriptions of Võ Phiến's style this phrase "splitting a hair to make four" often comes up. See, for example, the interview with Võ Phiến in "Talking with *Literature*," 1968, 375; Nguyễn Vy Khanh 1998, 87; and Thụy Khuê 1990, 93.

⁴⁶I discuss this story in chapter VI.

Besides coldness Võ Phiến is criticized for the loose structure of his stories. Nguyễn Đình Toàn, as mentioned above, finds his stories “slow” and “cumbersome,” faults he traces to Võ Phiến’s passion for detail. Others suggest Võ Phiến’s problems with plot or structure stem from his love of character development and his preference for elaborately framed stories. Võ Phiến describes not only major but minor characters in detail, and this definitely slows up the plot. Often his minor characters are fascinating—those like Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm in *Men* and Mr. Secretary Nga in *Alone*, for example. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc argues that the most fascinating characters in the Võ Phiến “album” are minor characters like these (139). Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm and Mr. Secretary Nga, however, do interact with main characters.

Sometimes, however, Võ Phiến will describe in great detail a character who does not interact in any significant way with the main characters and the reader is left wondering why so much attention has been lavished on him or her. In *Alone*, for example, there are long descriptions of other workers from Hữu’s office, characters who rarely if ever interact with Hữu. More than ten pages are devoted to a character named Hạo. We learn that Hạo is trying to get permission from his boss to take his wife on a vacation, we are privy to his reflections on what it means to live a “profound life,” and we learn of his habit of frequently swallowing his saliva as he sits in his office and his mind wanders from subject to subject. But it is not clear what role, if any, his creator sees him as playing in the story. Probably these descriptions of characters burdened by private concerns that they do not discuss with others are meant to give his novel “breadth,”⁴⁷ to emphasize what Võ Phiến later referred to as the “coldness of the city” (see chapter V) where social interaction is more difficult to achieve than it was in the village. But the loving attention Võ Phiến pays to minor characters like Hạo gives his stories a digressive quality. Using the term favored by Plisnier, the French critic Võ

⁴⁷See Võ Phiến’s essay “Breadth in Stories.”

Phiến admired, Võ Phiến may sometimes “obey” his characters too much to please all readers.

In Võ Phiến’s stories, however, it is not always easy to distinguish minor from major characters. Often this is because Võ Phiến carefully frames his stories by including in them characters who are primarily observers of, not participants in, the central events of the story. In stories in which Võ Phiến employs the first-person point of view (“The Prisoner,” “Telling a Story Late at Night,” and *Saying Good-by*, for example), these observers are the narrators who refer to themselves as “I.” In stories in which Võ Phiến uses a third-person point of view (*Men*, for example), the observer is a character whose consciousness the author presumes to know.

Readers may first assume that this observer is the main character but come to question that assumption when another character takes center stage. These observers, Nguyễn Hưng Quốc says, “appear like a VIP who opens and closes a conference but participates only sporadically in the events of the meeting” (143). This displacement bothers some readers. Viên Linh, for example, objects to the fact that the first-person narrator in *Saying Good-by*, the one who is “saying good-by” (to Qui Nhon), “appears only now and again.” If he appeared any less, Viên Linh says, this would be not his story but the story of Mr. Three Thê and his family (1974, 37). Because he describes his minor characters carefully, they sometimes become the central images of the story. “Appearing next to these central images, the major characters are sometimes pushed aside, becoming observers, people outside the event. The result is that the structure of the story is completely deformed in comparison to traditional ways of structuring narratives” (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1996, 139).

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc sees this pushing aside of an important character occurring in the short story “Telling a Story Late at Night,” and he relates it to Võ Phiến’s practice of framing his narratives. This is the story in which the first-person narrator meets a character named Thiện who tells a story about falling in love with a girl named Châu Thị C. (only the initial of the character’s given name is used). I dis-

cussed it briefly above to illustrate Võ Phiến's obsession with vision and his preference for narrators who are observers not participants. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc feels that C. is the most "dramatic" character in the story and in a sense she is: at least four men fall in love with her and she dies under mysterious circumstances. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc finds Võ Phiến's decision not to put C. in central focus, to make her someone we hear about from others, "strange" but revealing of Võ Phiến's narrative technique. A more traditional writer, he says, would have made C. the central character (140).

Though potentially a more dramatic character, C. is not the central character because clearly Võ Phiến is less interested in her than in the mind of Thiện. Though Nguyễn Hưng Quốc says Võ Phiến rarely engages in psychological analysis, this is a very psychological story. In it Võ Phiến explores different ways men pursue women. To see this clearly, it is necessary to describe this story more fully. The person who "tells a story late at night" is Thiện, a railway worker, and the person he tells it to is another worker. This second worker hears Thiện's story one night when they are both staying at the same boarding house for railway employees. This second worker just lets Thiện tell his story, interrupting him only occasionally to seek clarification or make a comment. Thiện therefore is the active narrator and the other employee is a listener and observer.

Before he tells his story, Thiện shows this other employee a newspaper containing a report about a twenty-five-year-old woman named Châu Thi C. who was found dead in her home. It is not clear whether she committed suicide or was murdered. Thiện's story involves this woman. One summer nine years ago, after he graduated from high school, he accompanied a professor from Huế and his family to Nha Trang where they were spending their vacation. His job was to take care of the professor and his wife's children.⁴⁸ One night he looked from his window through a window of

⁴⁸Some scenes in this story were probably inspired by Võ Phiến's trip to Nha Trang in the summer of 1944. He went there, like his character Thiện, to tutor a professor's children—the children of Đào Duy Anh (see Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996, 18).

the house next to his and saw a beautiful young girl who was, he guessed, about sixteen years old. A few days later he saw her again:

Suddenly the light in C.'s room went out. A short while later the window swung open wide. Then C.'s white silhouette appeared in the frame of the window. C. stood there for a long while. Nervous and dazed, I stood motionless as a statue. We faced each other quietly, neither of us making any signal or movement, but my heart was full of pleasure. It was as if C. held my head lovingly in her arms. There was no question about it: C. saw me and was looking at me. She had arranged it so we would see each other. Only a few meters apart, each person standing in their individual rooms, we formally expressed our feelings for each other. I trembled, my mind was in turmoil. C. gradually withdrew. The white silhouette slowly dimmed and then was lost in the darkness of the room. The window remained open. (43)

That summer Thiện met C. only once. The family and Thiện had started out on an excursion but the daughter of the couple took sick and Thiện returned home with her. C. comes to the house at this time either because she was sent there on an errand or because she wanted to come. Thiện is not sure which. Thiện is so shy and embarrassed he can hardly speak even though C., sensing his predicament, tries to get a conversation going by asking polite questions. Finally she leaves; seventeen days later the family for whom Thiện has been working goes back to Huế and he returns to his village, full of regrets for acting so strangely in front of C.

Two years later he sees C. again, this time in Saigon where he is studying and rooming with a student named Kim. While reading one of Kim's books one Sunday afternoon, a love letter for Kim falls out. Since Kim has a lot of girl friends and gets many letters, Thiện is not too surprised until he realizes the letter is from C. Some lines in the letter suggest that Kim and C. have been intimate. Later he searches

through a suitcase of Kim's and finds a photo of C., confirming that the author of the letter is indeed the girl Thiện knew in Nha Trang. Upset over his discovery, Thiện goes to a restaurant/club where he meets a not unattractive but squint-eyed prostitute and has his first sexual experience. On another Sunday he sees C. when she comes to the house where he and Kim are staying and engages in a lover's quarrel with Kim. He does not meet C. face to face, but watches Kim and C. through a crack in the boards of his room as they talk in an adjoining room. Thiện does not see C. again. "Gradually," Thiện explains to his listener, "the image of the squint-eyed girl became associated with scenes of suffering involving C., with C.'s photo, with memories of C." (62). Later that squint-eyed girl becomes Thiện's wife.

When the story ends we do not know the cause of C.'s death. Thiện says she was married, then broke up with her husband who went to Cambodia. C. began living with an assistant province chief who was accused of corruption. After he was arrested, and while police were holding him, C.'s husband returned and they began living off the wealth of the assistant province chief.

Thiện's tale resembles a confession, or the kind of statement someone would make to a psychological counselor, with the listener, the other railroad employee, assuming the role of a father confessor or counselor. "This story I've just told . . . Probably you see a sick mind," Thiện says. "Yes, a ridiculous sickness. I know my excessive emotion is ridiculous. A story like this couldn't happen to everyone. . . . I'll forever regret that the only love of my life was not normal, meaning it wasn't healthy like everyone else's" (62-63). To reassure him, the man who has listened to his tale says this:

Do you think the easier an emotional encounter is the more pleasurable it is? Certainly girls and boys in primitive society didn't tremble uncontrollably when they looked at each other as you did. They met more easily. But your love is richer by far. The restrictions of present day society that every day become more complicated

and subtle, the formalities of polite behavior, the troublesome regulations of social relations—these have made us lose our habit of meeting spontaneously. Previously we would have acted simply and naturally; today when we find ourselves in similar situations we are afraid. But though our social relations lack spontaneity, they have become infinitely more pleasurable.

The rules, the obstacles of social life that occasionally oppress the natural emotions, can create psychological sickness. But I think it is the existence of these rules that makes the glance of a girl all the more discreetly amorous. The trembling hands clasping the chair, the window panels opened secretly into the late night air, the handkerchiefs that girls bite fiercely—all these things make love richer. We should call them the bitter attractions of life. (63–64)

“Most of Võ Phiến’s male characters chase after some shadow of a woman,” says Nguyễn Hưng Quốc (154). How they do so, the different styles of courtship they adopt, are of great interest to Võ Phiến. Though as we have seen, he admired the silent language of love—gestures, glances, smiles—he also recognized, as he does in this story, the psychological dangers of repression—the negative aspects of a love like Thiện’s, a love that is all seeing and no talking and certainly no touching. He saw both the sweetness and bitterness of love-at-a-distance. The “bitter attractions” of this kind of love are Võ Phiến’s theme in “Telling a Story Late at Night,” not C.’s admittedly dramatic life, and this is why she is not allowed to take center stage.

Accounting for Võ Phiến’s Artistic Vision

What motivated Võ Phiến to adopt the particular set of techniques that we have described? Vũ Hạnh offers a Marxist interpretation based on Võ Phiến’s class background. Võ Phiến, says Vũ Hạnh, belonged to a “small-scale village landowner group” (lớp địa chủ thôn quê cỡ nhỏ) that was on the wrong side of history, threatened by a revolt of the

proletariat. Realizing they were facing defeat at the hands of “progressive forces,” members of this group had no glorious topics to write about, no heroes to praise. This explains why defeatist characters and a defeatist attitude permeate the works of Võ Phiến:

In any work by Võ Phiến readers can see landowners who have fallen on hard times and are full of resentment and hatred, but at the same time one can also see indirectly but quite clearly, in characters and events, how much these landowners feared the Revolution. The landowning class and the feudalists had been defeated a long time ago and so their hopelessness was as certain as fate. One sees Võ Phiến’s obsession with this fate in his view of human life; it explains why his characters have negative and defeatist personalities. (31)

Võ Phiến’s class affiliation, in Vũ Hạnh’s view, explains not only his unheroic characters but also his focus on the minutiae of life—his passion for detail. With no glorious and exciting deeds to chronicle, he focuses on little bits and pieces of life, a focus typical of small village landowners who “didn’t dare to nourish strong ambitions” (30).

Limited in this way by his nature and by his ideology, Võ Phiến did not have the capacity to live a lofty life and to feel strong emotions, so he did not have a rich imagination and a wide perspective. Võ Phiến just kept on the look out for and recorded the falling pieces of life, most of which were broken and deteriorating, and then he would pound these pieces some more. Or he would scrape up from the ground worms that no one had noticed and fashion them into a story for the amusement of people who thought as he did. (32)

Though Vũ Hạnh’s attack on Võ Phiến is vicious and predictable, by calling attention to Võ Phiến’s class background he contributes to our understanding of Võ Phiến’s

work. Though not himself a member of the working class, he offers a different perspective from that of exile critics who generally praise Võ Phiến. If exile critics do identify faults or questionable features in his work, they do not trace them to Võ Phiến's class background, perhaps because most of them come from similar backgrounds. In Nguyễn Hưng Quốc's view, for example, the cold, distant, and mocking attitude toward villagers that some readers detect in Võ Phiến's work stems, as we saw above (p. 104), not from class differences but from his preference for narrators who are literally distanced in time and space from life in their home villages (1996, 145). Vũ Hạnh's explanation for this coldness should also be considered. In a work published in 1969, a semi-autobiographical story called "Birds and Snakes," which we will discuss in chapter V, Võ Phiến's narrator explicitly raises the issue of class differences, so one cannot discuss this story without considering them.

Võ Phiến's class origins are unquestionably important in one sense. Though Võ Phiến was not from a wealthy family, he was from a family that valued education. His great uncle was a Confucian scholar and his father was a teacher. His family was wealthy enough to send him to school where he met teachers who introduced him to a world of writing. It was his wide reading that encouraged him to move away from traditional "straight-line narration" in which plot is king in order to see what could be accomplished by adopting a more modern style featuring detailed descriptions of character and scene. He read widely and often expressed his admiration for the descriptive powers of Tolstoi, Dostoevski, Proust, and other Western writers. Võ Phiến followed developments in the novel in France very carefully and in 1963 published *The Contemporary Novel*, a survey of recent developments in the novel focusing on the *nouveau-roman*, or "new novel," movement that appeared in France in the late 1950s and continued into the '60s.⁴⁹ Writers caught up in this movement—Nathalie

⁴⁹In *The Contemporary Novel* Võ Phiến focuses on writers associated with the *nouveau-roman* movement, but he also refers to works by writers not usually identified as belonging to this movement—the American writers John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and Truman Capote, for example, and the German writers Franz Kafka and Uwe Johnson.

Sarraute, Claude Simon, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Michael Butor, for example—rejected the traditional novel and set out to write “anti-novels” —works that deliberately opposed the conventions of the traditional novel. In a work like Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* there is no clear plot and little characterization; instead the reader is presented with visual perceptions that readers must make sense of by putting themselves in the situation of a jealous husband.

When Võ Phiến looks back at the *nouveau-roman* movement twenty-three years later, in *Literature in South Vietnam*, he concludes that “although this new literary school [the *nouveau-roman* movement] did create quite a stir among writers in Saigon, it did not leave any truly deep imprint” (124). It was a short-lived movement, he says, and so “the fact that it has not caused any great change in our own novel is not surprising.” It has, however, Võ Phiến says “given us a number of new stylistic devices, and helped many a writer of this period gain a broader perspective and understanding of the art of fiction. One cannot fail to note that the works that appeared in the ‘60s and later all showed a much more varied, open, and freer approach to creative writing” (170).

In *The Contemporary Novel* Võ Phiến says that although these new novelists in Europe and America do not all subscribe to the same principles, they come together on one point: they all agree that “life itself is more ‘precious’ than life skillfully arranged in a story” (90). No doubt Võ Phiến’s familiarity with recent experiments in the Western novel emboldened him to do some experimenting of his own. We may see the influence of this movement, for example, in Võ Phiến’s willingness to abandon tight plots and concentrate on character development. It is interesting that while Võ Phiến discusses the *nouveau-roman* movement in a section of *Literature of South Vietnam* titled “The Novel,” when he gives examples of works of his own that bear the influence of this movement he mentions works from these collections: *A Letter from Home* (1962), *Illusion* (1967), and *Changing World* (1969). Võ Phiến and his readers have trouble classifying the texts in these collections: Are they short stories or *tùy bút* essays? “As fiction,” Võ Phiến

says of these texts, “they have characters, and they contain a variety of searches for and discoveries of different aspects of the human soul. But, again, they contain no plot, no story line that would progress in a certain way” (170). I will discuss the problem of how to classify texts like those in these three collections in the next chapter. I mention the problem here because it is no doubt caused in part by the influence of the *nouveau-roman* movement. Intrigued by the experiments of the *nouveau-roman* writers, Võ Phiến decided to do some experimenting of his own. In the process he produced some texts that neither he nor his readers knew what to call.

Any writer who wished to abandon the straight-line narration of traditional Vietnamese stories would have to include more description of character and scene, and Võ Phiến was not the first or only Vietnamese writer to do so. In meticulously describing small things, often physical features and gestures, however, Võ Phiến gave his style an individual flavor. As his Vietnamese reviewers point out, not many writers broke a thread in as many pieces as he did.

Where did this passion for small detail come from? Vũ Hạnh says Võ Phiến focused on life’s fragments because the revolution had a monopoly on loftier topics, but in his essays on detail in the novel and in *The Contemporary Novel* we find another explanation, one that could also be considered progressive. In these works of criticism he makes it clear that he believes that looking at smaller and smaller things is the wave of the future. He sees a connection between the move toward more detailed description in the arts and a similar movement in the sciences. First microbes were discovered, Võ Phiến points out in “Detail in Stories,” then atoms, then electrons. “Each day the small is becoming more and more prominent and is being considered more and more important. It seems, too, that people are also using a more powerful artistic microscope to observe things than they did in the past. In this way progress is made” (196). He takes up this point again in “Returning to Detail in Stories”: “In the old days we looked at the moon with the naked eye and saw it as a nice round mirror. Today we look at it through a telescope

and see so many uneven spots that we call this mountain or that sea. Today story writers also use a microscope of their own to examine the psychology of their characters, desiring to see the dark, extensive, and rich world of the unconscious" (199–200).

In *The Contemporary Novel* Võ Phiến sees the history of character development in the novel as a process of zooming in closer and closer, as a movement from the distant shot to the close-up. In the heroic romances of the seventeenth century, he says, writers looked at characters from afar and portrayed them as admirable; in the traditional novel, writers—Balzac, for example—saw characters closer up and realized they were like the ordinary people one met on the street; and in new novels, writers—Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, for example—are probing the unconscious with a microscope and discovering all sorts of interesting and mystifying things. Võ Phiến suggests, however, that in this process of increasing magnification these experimental writers are, as they themselves proclaimed, breaking characters into such small pieces that character as we have known it ceases to exist. Though Võ Phiến was not willing to zero in as close as the French *nouveau-roman* writers, these comments in his critical works suggest that in concentrating on small details Võ Phiến felt that he was participating in a widespread intellectual and artistic movement.

Võ Phiến's approach to narration exhibits an impressive unity of purpose. The four features of his style discussed above can be seen as parts of one artistic vision. "Both his [Võ Phiến's] habit of observation and his habit of judging a person's character based on observation have something in common," argues Nguyễn Hưng Quốc: "a belief in things concrete, in things that one can see, in things that can be perceived by using the sense of sight" (1996, 151). All four narrative techniques that I discuss above can be seen as reflecting what Nguyễn Hưng Quốc calls "a belief in things concrete." Making character development a more important priority than narrative structure (the first technique discussed above) does not suggest a belief in the concrete, but relying heavily on physical

description (the second technique) to reveal character does. It indicates Võ Phiến's conviction that, as Nguyễn Hưng Quốc says (altering Pascal's famous dictum), "The body has its reasons that the mind and soul cannot know" (152). In "Detail in Stories" Võ Phiến argues that by associating the inner psychological state of a character with a detailed description of the external environment writers can "excite" the memories of readers thereby making their characters "less abstract" and more memorable (194). Võ Phiến's preference for narrators who are observers and for complexly framed narratives, the third technique mentioned, suggests Võ Phiến's confidence that careful observation of concrete things (objects, gestures, actions) from different perspectives leads to insights. Finally, Võ Phiến's concentration on small objects of ordinary life, the final technique mentioned, is perhaps the clearest evidence of the author's love for things concrete and observable.

It seems likely that Võ Phiến's preference for the concrete reflects more than simply a search for a modern style. He put his faith in the concrete, I believe, because he had lost faith in the abstract, particularly abstract political theories. Distrust of lofty political theories, of rosy rhetoric glorifying war, is a theme found in many narratives written by authors with experience of war. One thinks, for example, of Frederick Henry in Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* who, having seen the suffering war causes, finds words like "honor" and "courage" to be "obscene," preferring instead the names of concrete towns and villages. Members of Võ Phiến's generation lived through two long wars and witnessed many political upheavals. It is not surprising that he grew weary of movements and the rhetoric that accompanies them. "Unfortunately grandiose controversies often unavoidably affect the lives of humble people," Võ Phiến says in a *tùy bút* narrative essay discussed in chapter IV. "These small means are utilized to realize grandiose things" ("Again, a Letter from Home," 115). Võ Phiến wanted to call attention to the small people, very real and concrete, that got swept up into battles over abstract political theories.

Occasionally in his early fiction already surveyed, and more often in *tùy bút* texts essays that we will discuss next, Võ Phiến makes clear his distaste for “grandiose theories” that have left poor country people caught in a crossfire between warring factions. In “Night Rain at Year’s End,” Lung is bored by the political talk he overhears between the administrator and the secretary, preferring instead the small details of village life. In “Returning to a Country Village” the narrator sympathizes with country people like Bái Công and assistant province chief Biên who are continually having to adjust to a new regime. Toward the end of the novel *Men*, Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm and Lê’s boyfriend, Nghĩa, talk late one night at Lê’s place. Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm laments the fact that people have lost all connection with the past. Political movements come and go, he says, leaving people with no sense of stability. Nghĩa suggests that maybe it is only old people who crave stability. I’ve seen the “the masses” (quần chúng) rise up several times, he says, to “overthrow this regime, set up that regime, crush this person, cheer that person,” and “their hearts are violent and fierce, like the means they use to achieve their ends: bombs, bullets. The masses—I’ve never seen anything that suggests they’re tired of it all like you uncle” (84). The two men then mull over the phrase “the masses.” The narrator’s summary of their thoughts makes clear that both men detest them:

Five times, ten times, they had either participated in or witnessed uprisings of the masses. Now, depressed and disappointed, they had set them aside, but that force was still there, almost completely intact. If a wind blew, it was ready to rise up like a wave, submerging and rolling over everything. It thrashes around but doesn’t feel any pain. After a night of activity, people rise and pick up here a piece of leg on the side of the road, there an arm hanging on the branch of a tree. Whose is it? “The masses” ask each other. . . . It’s not “the masses.” The masses are still intact. Always they are intact as usual. Curious, they stop for a brief

time, examining the piece of leg, the arm. Then they noisily go off again. They're still busy with meetings, demonstrations. They're still healthy. The more healthy they are the more excited they are by the blood that's been spilt, the falling pieces of dismembered arms and legs. Occasionally there occurs a death that stops the masses for a while. They raise the corpse up. Bury it in great style. Gather. Have a funeral. Engage in collective remembering. But do the masses gather in great numbers, like water overflowing a berm, to feel real pain? Be careful! That is their anger, their fierce planning. Don't think that they are worried about that death. On the contrary, when they cry out in pain like that they are healthier than ever. (84–85)

Though this is the narrator speaking, the views expressed, I suspect, are Võ Phiến's. I suspect, too, that, for Võ Phiến, dwelling in a leisurely fashion on the small concrete details of traditional Vietnamese life was a way of registering his opposition both to the cycles of violence described in the above passage and to the rapid social change caused by war.



Võ Phiến in 1973, two years before he came to the United States.

IV

DEVELOPING AN AESTHETICS OF THE COMMON IN *TÙY BÚT* ESSAYS

[T]ùy bút is the form that is most accepting of [Võ Phiến's] special talents, the form that best allows him to display his literary skills.⁵⁰

—Nguyễn Hiến Lê

While Vietnamese appreciate Võ Phiến's fiction, he is best known for his work in a form Vietnamese call *tùy bút* (literally "following [tùy] the pen [bút]"), one type of non-fiction prose essay, among several, that Vietnamese write. Vietnamese writers and critics, including Võ Phiến, struggle to define *tùy bút*. Their struggles are reflected in decisions about how to group Võ Phiến's works in anthologies and in lists of published works. Võ Phiến reprints four selections from *Illusion* (1967), a collection with the non-specific subtitle "Short Pieces of Literature by Võ Phiến" (Đoàn Văn của Võ Phiến), and three texts originally published in *Changing World: A Collection of Stories* (1967) in *Tùy Bút II* (1987). However, in his list "Works by Võ Phiến," included at the end of *Võ Phiến*, Nguyễn Hưng Quốc places both *Illusion* and *Changing World* under the heading "Tùy Bút," a decision which indicates that he considers the texts in these collections to be essays, not short stories (1996, 199–201). This list gives the impression that after publishing his novel *Men* in 1966, Võ Phiến did not publish another work of fiction until 1978 when his novel *Intact* appeared in the United States, but this is true only if the texts in *Illusion* and *Changing World* are all essays.

⁵⁰From the "Forward" (Tựa) to Võ Phiến's collection *Country and Homeland* (Đất Nước Quê Hương) (1973), 13–14.

Because many Vietnamese critics and scholars, not just Professor Lê whom I quote in the epigraph for this chapter, agree that Võ Phiến displays his talents most clearly in his *tùy bút* essays,⁵¹ it is important to explain what they have in mind when they use this term. First I will describe four features that critics generally agree are exhibited in texts called *tùy bút*. Next I will discuss some texts by Võ Phiến, first those that have all these four features and everyone agrees are *tùy bút*, then some more problematical texts, texts that may also have these four features but would appear to be more stories than essays, texts that Võ Phiến and his critics have found hard to classify though many people feel they are the best works he wrote. Finally, I will argue that perhaps Võ Phiến's greatest achievement, exhibited most prominently in the *tùy bút* texts that he wrote before coming to the United States, is his development of an aesthetics of the common.

Defining the *Tùy Bút* Form

The first feature of the *tùy bút* essay is nostalgia: a tendency to mourn the passing of things and customs associated with a former time. "Almost everyone knows," says Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, "that one of the most important characteristics of *tùy bút* is a spirit of nostalgia" (1996, 125). The first Vietnamese writer of *tùy bút* essays is believed to have been Phạm Đình Hổ (1768–1839) who wrote essays in Chinese that reflected fondly on life in the Lê dynasty. During Phạm Đình Hổ's lifetime this dynasty was in a state of decline, losing power first to Trịnh lords and then to the kings of the Nguyễn dynasty. Phạm Đình Hổ described cultural activities in existence during this period of change—the drinking of fine tea, the cultivation of flowers, the art of geomancy, wedding rituals, and funeral rites. "If while reading Võ Phiến we reread Phạm Đình Hổ," observes Nam Chi, "we see that the two men are not that far apart; they have similar worries and choose similar topics" ("Brother from Bình Định," 1987, 28).

⁵¹"The *tùy bút* was the 'foundation' of Võ Phiến's literature" (Trần Long Hồ 1998, 136). Others agree. See Nguyễn Hữu Nghĩa 1988, 12; Trần Văn Nam 1998, 144; and Quỳnh Giao 1998, 110–115.

The writers of *tùy bút* who influenced Võ Phiến the most, however, were Nguyễn Tuân (1910–1987) and Vũ Bằng (1913–1984), who both were from northern Vietnam.⁵² In his most famous work, *Echoes of a Former Time* (Vang Bóng Một Thời), Nguyễn Tuân describes members of the leisure class during feudal times, a class to which Nguyễn Tuân's own father belonged.⁵³ In some selections he describes the passion members of his father's generation had for fine Chinese tea and wine, for poetry, and for raising orchids. The arrival of the French and the collapse of the mandarin system had left these men with no political power and so, as Nguyễn Tuân describes them, they devote themselves to living artistically. Though Nguyễn Tuân depicts what could be considered the idle pursuits of the aristocracy, he also highlights traditional Vietnamese virtues—courtesy, good manners, modesty, a liberal and broad-minded attitude toward life. *Echoes of a Former Time* evokes nostalgia not only for fine Chinese tea and good poetry, but also for these old-fashioned virtues.

"Earthenware Teapots," included in *Echoes of a Former Time*, provides a good example of Nguyễn Tuân's approach and will help us understand not only the importance of nostalgia but other aspects of the traditional *tùy bút* essay. "Earthenware Teapots" begins with the arrival of a boy and a servant at a pagoda. The boy's father, Elder⁵⁴ Six (Cụ Sáu), has sent them to ask the head monk for some water from a well on the grounds of the pagoda, water that the boy's father believes makes the best tea. He has a guest in his home and wants to serve him a fine cup of tea. Next we hear another "tea story," this one told to Elder Six by his guest. It concerns a beggar who comes to a wealthy man's house and finds him drink-

⁵²I say this because both were contemporaries of Võ Phiến and he discusses them at some length in *Literature in South Vietnam: 1954–1975* (180–83). In essays he also mentions Tân Đà (1889–1939) and Thạch Lam (1910–1942). Very few Vietnamese have written *tùy bút* and so inevitably someone who does will be influenced by the relatively few examples of this form available.

⁵³Not everyone agrees that *Echoes of a Former Time* is a collection of *tùy bút*. Nguyễn Tuân resembles Võ Phiến in writing texts that people struggle to classify, texts that Thụy Khuê calls (in reference to texts in *Echoes of a Former Time*) "non-forms" (*phi hình thức*) and "non-generic" (*phi thể loại*) (2004, 10).

⁵⁴"Elder" (*Cụ*) is "a term used in speaking to a very elderly person by persons of any age" (Cooke 1968, 129).

ing tea with some friends. To their surprise he asks not for money or food but for permission to drink tea with them. The wealthy man agrees. The beggar then takes a small earthenware “one person” (độc ẩm) teapot from his knapsack, brews the tea, and drinks it. Before leaving, the beggar thanks his benefactor politely but says the tea wasn’t to his liking because it had rice husks in it. This turns out to be true. Later, when he dumps out the dregs, the house owner sees rice husks mixed in with the tea. A few years after this guest told his story to Elder Six, he returns to look for his friend. He finds that his fortunes have declined and that he now makes his living selling teapots at the market.

Nguyễn Tuân later joined the revolution and began writing works to support it, works very different from those in *Echoes of a Former Time*. The other northern writer of *tùy bút* who probably influenced Võ Phiến, Vũ Bằng, left the north and came south before 1954. He is known for essays, written in a very nostalgic tone, about dishes he knew in his home region—braised fish, sweet potatoes cooked in ashes, leechi fruit from Cầu Hố village. Vũ Bằng’s wife could not join him in the south and in some of his essays he expresses his longing for her. Vũ Bằng was not the only writer in Saigon who was separated from his native region. When the war escalated in the early ‘60s, writers from the less secure areas of south and central Vietnam came to the cities, especially to Saigon, where they rubbed shoulders with refugees from the North like Vũ Bằng. Living far from their home regions they began to miss them. In *Literature in South Vietnam: 1954–1975*, Võ Phiến talks about a “movement to return to the source” (phong trào về nguồn) that he says came of age around 1963:

I wish to recognize a special aspect of our people’s psychological state at the time. It was then that, all of a sudden, a great many people sort of turned around and figuratively speaking came “home” again. You came “home” with a new love, a new appreciation for your native land, for every little particularity of the place where you were born. You looked again at everything with a fresh eye,

with care and affection, no matter whether it was a fish, a fruit, an old folk rhyme, or a vegetable. . . . Suddenly everything had become so precious, and your heart was flooded with love. (152)

Both Võ Phiến and Vũ Bằng were caught up in this “return to the source” movement, and at least one reason for their turning to the *tùy bút* form was that it was considered a suitable vehicle for the expression of nostalgia.

The second feature of the *tùy bút* essay is closely linked to the first. Writers of *tùy bút* essays are connoisseurs: they appreciate the finer things of life. It is the passing away of these finer things—good tea, good wine, reciting poetry at a songstress house—that makes them nostalgic. “To choose to write a *tùy bút*,” says Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, “is to choose to see life as something of a connoisseur” (1996, 110). Nguyễn Tuân was the consummate connoisseur, a writer so fascinated with the aesthetic quality of things and actions that he looked for beauty even in the shadier aspects of life. “Art,” he argued, “is not related to the moral reasoning of the times. A robber becomes extremely beautiful when he picks people’s pockets very neatly and quickly” (quoted by Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh 1982, 11–12). Nguyễn Tuân’s tendency in *Echoes of a Former Time* to give a higher value to art than to the solving of social problems has troubled Marxist critics, but it probably made this work appealing to Võ Phiến, a writer who, as we have seen, wanted to separate literature from politics.

A third feature of the *tùy bút* essay is its subjective quality. According to Nam Chi “Subjectivism is the essence of *tùy bút*” (“On the Tùy Bút Genre” 1987, 29). It is significant that in the term *tùy bút* the word *luận*—which means to reason or argue, but can be conveniently translated as “scholarly”—does not appear. Texts in collections called *tạp luận* (*tạp* means “miscellaneous”) or *tiểu luận* (*tiểu* means “short”) tend to be scholarly essays based on research that argue points in a rational manner. *Tùy bút* essays, on the other hand, are, to use the words Võ Phiến himself applies to this form, “more casual, instinctive, generalized, and anti-rational.” “In

a *tùy bút* essay one finds truth, facts, and evidence,” Võ Phiến says, but “its value does not rest on these features; they are not the distinguishing marks of the genre” (*Literature in South Vietnam*, 181). This is why Võ Phiến objects to calling essays like those by Nguyễn Tuân “*bút ký*,” which is what a literary historian named Vũ Ngọc Phan calls them (1941, 467). “Since *ký* means to take note, to record,” Võ Phiến says, “*bút ký* is not appropriate because to record is not what is important here” (181).

A fourth feature of the *tùy bút* essay is that it may be digressive. The principle of organization may be associative rather than logical. This feature is suggested by the literal meaning of *tùy* (following) and *bút* (pen or writing brush): writers of *tùy bút* essays may follow where their pens lead them. They can pursue sudden bursts of inspiration. Nguyễn Tuân’s “Earthenware Teapots,” for example, is loosely structured. It contains several anecdotes that are only very weakly related. They are all about tea but beyond that it is very difficult to determine any other important connection. No doubt digressions in a *tùy bút* essay are often contrived, in other words, they are planned, not accidental, but the point is this form allowed a writer to move more freely, less logically, than did the scholarly essay forms that Vietnamese call “*tạp luận*” (miscellaneous scholarly essays) or “*tiểu luận*” (short scholarly essays).

In a recent article on Nguyễn Tuân, Thụy Khuê offers a useful definition of the *tùy bút* form, one that stresses the last two features I have identified:

Tùy bút essays are completely different from stories and works in which one records facts because in them when something comes to mind you write it. If there is reasoning (*luận*) then it is idle (*phiếm*) reasoning with no evidence supplied (Võ Phiến).⁵⁵ *Tùy bút* essays usually do not have a main topic, or, more correctly, if they have a main a topic it is just

⁵⁵Thụy Khuê cites Võ Phiến who discusses the “idle” (*phiếm*) quality of *tùy bút* essays in *Literature in South Vietnam*, 181.

for show because the author is always digressing from it. The fundamental quality of a *tùy bút* essay is a looseness, a scattered-ness that borders on loss of the subject. (2004, 8)

These four features seem clear. Problems arise, however, because some texts by Võ Phiến that have these four features and that Võ Phiến and others label *tùy bút* seem indistinguishable from texts by Võ Phiến that he and others call short stories. In introducing Võ Phiến's *tùy bút* writing I will first discuss what I will call "*tùy bút* essays" — texts that though they may contain characters and some narration of incidents, seem to be non-fiction essays. In them the reader feels fairly confident that the narrator, the "I" of the text, is Võ Phiến himself.

Next I will discuss texts that are more difficult to classify. These seem to be more story than essay. Some are narrated in the first person but one can never be certain whether the "I" refers to Võ Phiến or a fictional persona. Some appear to be autobiographical, or at least semi-autobiographical: they describe events in Võ Phiến's life and relatives and villagers that we know from other sources to be real events and real people. Others appear to be mostly fictional accounts. I will call these texts "*tùy bút* narrative essays."

Võ Phiến's '*Tùy Bút* Essays'

To illustrate this type of *tùy bút* I will present an essay written in 1972 entitled "Bubbles in Tea" (*Hạt Bọt Trà*). This essay was published in *Country and Homeland* in 1973, a collection with the subtitle "*tùy bút*"; when Võ Phiến republished it in 1986, he put it in *Tùy Bút I*; and it appears in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc's "Works by Võ Phiến" under the heading "*Tùy Bút*." Thus there seems to be general agreement that this is a *tùy bút* essay.

The first two words in the Vietnamese title for this essay, "*hạt bọt*," can be translated as "bubbles"; the last word, "*trà*," as "tea." Though this title suggests that the essay that follows will be about bubbles in *trà*, actually it is about bub-

bles in *chè*. If you look up *trà* and *chè* in a Vietnamese-English dictionary, both will be defined as “tea.” This is because *trà* and *chè* are made from the same plant. But in Vietnamese culture there is a world of difference between these two beverages. *Trà* is associated with the upper classes. In most cases, at least in Bình Định Province, *trà* would not be grown locally, but would be brought in from a tea-growing region in Vietnam or from China. The most prized varieties come from China. When one buys *trà* one buys dried leaves, not fresh green leaves. One drinks fine *trà* to enjoy the taste and also to demonstrate that one is a cultured person, a connoisseur. Drinking *trà* is an aesthetic and, to a certain extent, a religious experience.

Drinking *chè*, on the other hand, is associated with the lower and middle classes. It is the drink of common people, not aristocrats. Usually *chè* is grown locally. Sellers pick it daily and sell it by the bunch with fresh green leaves still clinging to small branches. To prepare fresh *chè* (*chè tươi*) one puts the fresh leaves in the kettle. To make dry *chè* (*chè khô*), the kind Võ Phiến explains how to make in his essay, one uses dry leaves. Unlike the drinking of *trà*, drinking *chè* is not normally considered to be an aesthetic or religious experience. One drinks it because it tastes good and relieves one’s thirst. People who like to drink *chè* are not considered to be connoisseurs.

Another difference between *trà* and *chè* is important. In the minds of all Vietnamese but especially those from central Vietnam, *trà* is associated with a feudal past and with a Sinicized elite that ruled the country before the French conquest. When the Nguyễn dynasty unified the country in 1802 and moved the capital from Hanoi to Huế, the new capital became an imperial city modeled on the Chinese capital in Peking. The Vietnamese elite became Sinicized in the process of studying for the Chinese-style civil service examinations which were based on the Confucian classics. These exams deepened the gulf between rulers and the people they ruled:

The Vietnamese bureaucrat looked Chinese; the Vietnamese peasant looked Southeast Asian. The bureaucrat had to write Chinese, wear Chinese-style gowns, live in a Chinese-style house, ride in a Chinese-style sedan chair, and even follow Chinese-style idiosyncrasies of conspicuous consumption, like keeping a goldfish pond in his Southeast Asian garden. (Woodside 1971, 199)

And, Woodside could have added, drinking fine *trà*. Woodside is talking about the first half of the nineteenth century. The French conquest led to the fall of the Nguyễn dynasty and the replacement of the Chinese-style exams by a new Franco-Vietnamese education system. When Võ Phiến wrote “Bubbles in Tea,” those who had passed the old exams, like Võ Phiến’s relative, Mr. Degree-holder Tư Lâm, were living reminders of a vanished time. Mr. Degree-holder prefers fine *trà* but in Võ Phiến’s novel *Men* he is reduced to drinking coffee. This is one reason why Lê slept with him: she feels sorry for him for being so destitute he can’t even enjoy this refined but relatively inexpensive pleasure. “Mr. Degree-holder Tư Lâm looked like he needed some intimacy,” she tells herself the next morning as she tries to understand what she has done. “He suddenly realized he didn’t have anything. Not even a Chinese earthenware tea [*trà*] kettle to drink *trà* with. Even this pleasure of his—drinking *trà*—was lost, replaced by his habit of drinking coffee” (90).

By extolling the virtues of *chè*, a drink of the common people, in a form, the *tùy bút* essay, used by predecessors—Phạm Đình Hồ and Nguyễn Tuân, for example—to talk about Chinese *trà* (and other pleasures of the nobility), Võ Phiến does something significant: he suggests that non-Sinicized, Southeast Asian aspects of Vietnamese culture are as artistic as Sinicized aspects. I will return to this point below in my section called “An Aesthetics of the Common,” but first we need to look more closely at Võ Phiến’s essay. Since style is important to the *tùy bút* form, I will quote extensively so you can at least get a feel for how it is written. In my translation

and comments on this essay “tea” refers to what Võ Phiến calls “trà.”

The essay begins with a line from a Chinese poem about bubbles in tea that was composed over fifteen centuries ago. After commenting that bubbles have not been important for centuries to tea drinking in China or Japan, Võ Phiến brings the reader back to Vietnam—to his home village in central Vietnam. (Võ Phiến uses three asterisks to mark sections of his essay.)

In any event a bubble of tea clinging to a line of Chinese poetry drifting around for more than a thousand years doesn't have enough strength to support reflection in a heavy mind. I began to meditate about these things because of some bubbles that not long ago still clung to the mustache of an old man from my village.

* * *

Rural people in the countryside of the central region call it *chè* not tea [trà]. Drinking Chinese tea is the pleasure of the well off; common people drink *Huế chè*.

Chinese tea is brewed in the Chinese way. *Huế* tea is prepared in the *Huế* style. The *Huế* style is not the same as that used to prepare fresh *chè* or dry *chè* in the North. From *Huế* down to the provinces in the southern part of Central Vietnam, the method of preparation certainly changes a little. Places that sell *chè* by the side of the road in *Huế* usually have a bottle of concentrated *chè* on hand, something you don't find in Nam Ngãi Bình Phú [the provinces of Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định, and Phú Yên].

In the kitchen of each family in the central region there are two pottery containers used to heat water: an *ấm* and an *ôm*. The *ấm* is used for tea; the *ôm* is used for *Huế chè*.

The *ôm* is shaped like a large fruit from the myrtle tree: it is very round and its mouth is bell-shaped (like the tip of the myrtle fruit). Because the *ôm* doesn't have a handle like a teapot, a cooking pot, a kettle, saucepan, a wok, etc., you can't use kitchen chopsticks to pick it up: you have to use pincers.

Pincers for an om are made from a strip of bamboo bark about as long as an arm. The strip is bent in two and then the bent part is attached tightly to the narrow section near the om's mouth.

An om, some pincers—that's enough. Put a handful of dry chè in the om, then add water and light the fire. When the water boils and is about to overflow, immediately add a little cold water to keep the water down. When it boils up again, add a little more cold water. Do this three or four times. It's important to be patient: the fire shouldn't be too high and you shouldn't add too much water, just a little each time. Only in this way can you make sure that the chè will have bubbles when it's put in the drinking bowl.

Having prepared the chè it's time to mix it with the water. Take a drinking bowl from the kitchen and pour cold water into it until it is about six or seven tenths full. Then, using the pincers, pick up the om and pour the chè into the drinking bowl until it's full.

Pouring the water involves some artistry: lower the om too much and the drinking bowl has few bubbles; hold it too high and the bubbles are too big. If the drinking bowl lacks bubbles you have to accept the fact that you've failed. And if the bubbles get big that's clumsy, a result that any self-respecting housekeeper should avoid. A person who prepares the water expertly; who knows the right height to fill the om; who knows to pour in just the right amount of water; who avoids pouring at the wrong angle or too strongly, which will prevent the bubbles from uniting; who knows how to move the mouth of the om to distribute the bubbles evenly; who knows how to pick up the stream of liquid so as to pour a little more here, a little over there, adding bubbles to the empty, unattractive places [in the surface of the bowl] in a timely fashion, etc.—when everything is finished, that person tips the mouth of the om up once, expressing his satisfaction in this final gesture. A bowl of delicious chè must have a lot of bubbles, must be full of bubbles, bubbles covering almost the entire surface of the liquid, soft and pliable bubbles, small in size.

After you've brewed a pleasing bowl of chè, it can be very aggravating to give it to a youngster who doesn't carry it carefully. In carrying a full bowl from the kitchen to the main house to give to a guest one has to be careful not to let the bubbles spill over the side,

or the surface of the liquid oscillate so much the bubbles get broken. The carrier must not do anything to suggest a lack of gratitude for the labor of the person who prepared the chè.

At this point it's clear: a lot of painstaking labor is devoted to achieving one objective: "a pearl of a bubble."

* * *

The guest receives his bowl of chè, lifts it in his hand, looks at the plentiful bubbles, and can't restrain his feelings. The bright shining bubbles reflect the face of the guest, reproducing many times over the brightness that appears in his eyes. He can't resist their provocative bustling. He bends his head and, choosing a suitable place, purses his lips and blows lightly to push the bubbles away, clearing a space just big enough to place his lips. (Naturally no one would want to gobble up that bunch of bubbles!)

Pushed away, the bubbles move quickly. But as soon as the guest dips his lips downward all those bubbles immediately rush up and cling tightly around the corner of his mouth. The lower the level of the chè goes the more they come, pushing and shoving, breaking and crackling on the guest's lips and around the corner of his mouth.

Perhaps the guest isn't aware of what's happening to the bubbles: he's on a roll. The pleasure of drinking Huế chè lies in that roll.

[Next comes some paragraphs comparing chè to tea, including these lines:]

The taste of Chinese tea is the delicate taste of the refined and noble class, a formal and sophisticated taste—a touch of flavor on the tip of the tongue, a little fragrance passing the nose, etc. The taste of Huế chè is rougher, more common, but it is a strong taste, appropriate to the nature of farmers and laborers.

Chinese tea is drunk in small sips; it is a tea for dreamy reflection. No one, however, drinks Huế chè in small sips. Having begun to gulp it down one keeps advancing with noisy determination until it's gone.

* * *

[In the next section Vĩ Phiến becomes more personal. He talks about men in his village who drank *chè* regularly, some in large amounts. He mentions Brother Three Crab Claw, Mr. Tư, and Mr. Tam Khoang, villagers whom he has talked about in his semi-autobiographical short story “Returning to a Country Village.” We learn that Mr. Tam Khoang is the villager mentioned earlier on whose mustache Vĩ Phiến has recently seen some bubbles of *chè*—the event that prompted the reflections recorded in his essay.]

In the farthest reaches of my memory, he [Mr. Tam Khoang] has two tufts of a mustache. Today, more than seventy years old, both his mustache and beard are white.

*When I was small each time he came to the house I would usually volunteer to take *chè* to him so I could watch him drink it. He was leisurely and proper in manner, never giving off the air of someone who was thirsty. When he picked up a bowl, he would always stop and inspect it a little to judge its worth. If women were sitting nearby, he wouldn't forget to offer some brief evaluative comments. Then he would begin. Slowly, without a hint of haste, he would drink all of one bowl, then calmly wait, then drink all of another. When Mr. Tam Khoang raised his head the second time there would be many white bubbles sticking to the two parts of his mustache. They pleased me and I would point them out. He would smile kindly and wipe them off with his sleeve. Then with two fingers—his thumb and index finger—he would smooth out his mustache.*

*I'm sure that he never drank *chè* without having his mustache pestered by these *chè* bubbles; and there was also never a time when his response to them wasn't a kind and gentle gesture.*

*In my young eyes a person who could drink two big bowls of *chè*, and do so in a manner that was dignified and respectable but also simple and modest, had a special beauty. I dreamed of the day when I could learn how to be this kind of extraordinary man—courteous, self-effacing, tolerant—so I could impress my friends,*

inspiring in their hearts a mixture of fear and admiration. Today I'm one hundred per cent sure that there's no way in my life that I could achieve that strange power; meanwhile Mr. Tam Khoang still repeats his extraordinary feat three or four times a day.

Knowing these things about Mr. Tam Khoang I understand something about Mrs. Tư. She had an outstanding husband: Mr. Tư could drink in one breath two bowls of chè. But faced with Mr. Tam Khoang's demeanor Mrs. Tư could not hold back her emotions. For thirty years people in the village often would meet Mr. Tam Khoang coming to relax in the home of Mr. Tư. After host and guest each had drunk two bowls of chè, looking satisfied and radiant, they would quietly and slowly stroke their respective mustaches. Of course, this was not a contest of mustaches. This was a meeting between two men who were the objects of affection of one woman.

Relatives and villagers didn't have any serious criticism of this three-way love relationship; they only giggled, finding it a little ridiculous. This relationship continued through three or four political regimes, through thirty or forty years of unrest.

[Võ Phiến then explains that three years ago something happened to endanger this relationship: Mr. Tam Khoang decided to leave the village and come to the provincial seat but Mr. Tư remained in the village. This was a tragedy, Võ Phiến says, "but later people saw clearly that the heart can still conquer adversity."

Though the security condition made it very dangerous, Mr. Tam Khoang would find reasons to return to the village. On these visits he would openly drink chè with Mr. Tư and less openly, more "discretely," give some gifts to Mrs. Tư—some silk taffeta cloth, some American satin trousers. These visits went on for a year and then Mr. Tư also decided to come to the provincial seat.

The two men now live in the city, Võ Phiến explains, which he doesn't name but is presumably Saigon. Võ Phiến has recently learned that Mr. Tam Khoang still makes two visits a day to Mr. Tư's home. Apparently Mr. Tam Khoang's earthenware *om* was broken and only brass chè pots were available at the market. But, of course, there was no way someone who

had drunk Huế chè for over half a century was going to brew it in a brass *om*. “Therefore,” says Võ Phiến, with a wink at the reader, “he (Mr. Tam Khoang) had a legitimate reason for his regular visits to Mr. Tu’s house.”

In the last section of the essay Võ Phiến laments the vanishing of *chè*, citing the fact that earthenware *chè* pots are no longer available and Pepsi or Coca Cola is becoming the drink of choice even for those whose job is to promote national culture. Then he mentions a Japanese writer who had made fun of a Chinese instructor in classical studies who had to confess he didn’t know what a Chinese tea called *tiễn* (trà tiễn) was. If people are forgetting a tea like *tiễn*, which had a clear use, he asks, then what are the chances of them remembering a “bubble tea” like the one referred to in the obscure line of Chinese poetry quoted at the start of this essay? And what are the chances of them remembering *chè*?]

It’s true: an om, pincers, and especially chè bubbles could very well become a disaster for instructors of classical studies in our country in the future. If forty or fifty years later someone talks about the pleasure that a bowl of chè full of bubbles used to give him, how are they going to understand? Scholars will be dumbfounded.

Tiến tea has an obvious use, but what are chè bubbles good for? You can’t drink them, can’t smell them, can’t taste them, etc. They will become a mystery, a challenge for researchers. Do drinkers love chè bubbles for their bubbles? Could it be like “Art for art’s sake”?

For these reasons, we should record a few bubble and duckweed [bọt bèo: common, humble]⁵⁶ stories before chè bubbles break up and vanish completely.

It is clear why no one has trouble classifying “Bubbles in Tea” as a *tùy bút* essay because it has all the features we discussed. Võ Phiến’s tone is nostalgic. Though *chè* has not vanished yet, he notes the coming of Pepsi and Coca Cola and fears its days are numbered. Certainly it shows Võ Phiến

⁵⁶The Vietnamese phrase “bubble and duckweed” is roughly equivalent to the English phrase “flotsam and jetsam.”

to be a connoisseur. Would anyone but a connoisseur have the patience to explain how to make *chè* in such painstaking detail? It is also significant that Võ Phiến focuses on bubbles, which are not even drunk. Only a connoisseur would concentrate on something so impractical and seemingly insignificant as bubbles. “Could it be ‘Art for art’s sake’?” Võ Phiến asks. Indeed, for Võ Phiến, it could.

In “Bubbles in Tea” Võ Phiến is subjective in the sense that he presents information in an informal style and feels no need to cite sources or include a great deal of evidence. One of the trademarks of Võ Phiến’s style is playfulness or whimsy—a quality Vietnamese critics highlight when they call him “hóm hình” (cute, playful). “Bubbles in Tea” is typical in this sense. Readers know he is smiling and smile with him when he describes the three-way love relationship of Mr. Tam Khoang and Mr. and Mrs. Tư. It is often difficult, especially for a non-native speaker of Vietnamese but for native-speakers as well, to decide how seriously Võ Phiến wishes readers to take him. We will return to this problem when we consider his *tùy bút* essays on aspects of American life. Võ Phiến is playful because he wants to entertain, of course, but also because he wants to appear modest, to avoid giving the impression—in his *tùy bút* essays—that he thinks he is a serious scholar writing a *tiểu luận* (a more scholarly essay). I’m just a writer of *tùy bút* essays, his playfulness suggests, a teller of “bọt bèo” (bubble and duckweed) stories like “Bubbles in Tea,” which is literally about bubbles! But does Võ Phiến really believe that the things he talks about in “Bubbles in Tea” are inconsequential? I don’t think so. I’m convinced Võ Phiến wants it both ways: he wants readers to appreciate his playfulness but he also wants to be taken seriously.

Finally, “Bubbles in Tea” is a *tùy bút* essay because it is digressive: first Võ Phiến discusses the line from the Chinese poem, then comes the long section on how to make *chè*, then we hear about the villagers Mr. Tam Khoang and Mr. Tư, and then Võ Phiến expresses his worries that making *chè* will become a lost art. It is more loosely structured than most short stories or most formal essays. While Võ Phiến does talk about

bubbles in all these sections, the transitions are more associative than logical. This and other Võ Phiến's *tùy bút* texts, both his essays and his narrative essays, are structured around a Proustian moment: Võ Phiến is in Saigon and something has impinged on his senses and reminded him of his village and people he knew there as a child. In “Ế ỉ” it is the sound—used as the story's title—of a woman hawking her wares in the old traditional style. In “Following in the Footsteps of a Dish” it is Võ Phiến's reading of a story about a soup from Huế. Here in “Bubbles in Tea” the Proustian moment is his recent sighting of bubbles on Mr. Tam Khoang's mustache.⁵⁷

These moments mark a time in the present or very recent past and from them Võ Phiến reaches back to a more distant past, then moves again to the present. Usually most attention is paid to life in his home village either before, during, or after the war with the French or during the escalation of the second Indochina war in the '60s. But typically Võ Phiến sets a larger time frame. Note that he begins “Bubbles in Tea” by talking about tea drinking in China over fifteen centuries ago. In “Ế ỉ” he describes the hawker's cry as a relic of medieval times, a relic that is more precious than some rusty sword or dress of a princess in a museum because it is still alive. “Truly this is not just a vestige of past life,” Võ Phiến writes. “This is actually an intact element of that life that continues to live in the heart of the present” (165).

Võ Phiến is very interested in such elements. According to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, they are the major interest of Võ Phiến, the *tùy bút* writer. Võ Phiến is not a connoisseur, Nguyễn Hưng Quốc argues. Nguyễn Tuân was a connoisseur but not Võ Phiến: “In contrast [to Nguyễn Tuân] Võ Phiến never in a *tùy bút* essay proves that he is an expert in eating and drinking or in enjoying leisure activities” (1996, 110). Võ Phiến, says Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, is more interested in the “fact/event” (sự kiện) than the “thing” (sự vật) itself by which

⁵⁷Võ Phiến also structures some short stories around a Proustian moment. In “Birds and Snakes,” for example, a small drop of bird excrement on the leaf of an orchid—a surprising event in Saigon, a city with few wild birds—reminds him of a woman in his village who used to catch wild birds and give them to him.

he means he is more interested in what the thing —bubbles in tea, a hawker's cry, Huế soup, etc.— can tell us about the history and culture of a region or the whole country than he is in celebrating the beautiful qualities of the thing being examined. The things examined, says Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, become occasions for reflection about historical and cultural change. They are the means not the end point of his analysis. In *Literature in South Vietnam* Võ Phiến acknowledges that his *tùy bút* essays reflect his interest in the affairs of the world and differ in this respect from essays by his predecessors Nguyễn Tuân and Vũ Bằng. These writers, he says may be less interested in historical events because they established their writing styles before the war whereas he is a “post-1954 writer,” a writer who matured in a more tumultuous time (184).

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc's point that Võ Phiến is more historian than connoisseur is probably correct. It is significant that the springboard for Võ Phiến's reflections in “Bubbles in Tea” are bubbles, things that, because they are not eaten or drunk, cannot be praised for their good taste! (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc calls Võ Phiến a “historian of bubbles and duckweed” [1996, 113]). But Võ Phiến *does* seem interested in Huế *chè* and devotes considerable space to a detailed account of how to make it. In making his case that Võ Phiến is not a connoisseur Nguyễn Hưng Quốc calls “Bubbles in Tea” along with four other *tùy bút* essays atypical. Of all the *tùy bút* texts reprinted in 1986 in *Tùy Bút I* (generally those I call *tùy bút* essays), Nguyễn Hưng Quốc says that only these five contain the kind of detailed descriptions that one finds in his short stories and novels (106).

According to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, “Following in the Footsteps of a Dish” is a more typical *tùy bút* essay. The dish is *bún bò* (literally: rice noodle-beef), a soup from Huế made of meat (usually beef or pork) and rice noodles. Võ Phiến wrote this essay in the early '70s when he lived in Saigon, and so his perspective is that of a central Vietnamese, someone who lived in Huế as a student but now lives in Saigon. The Proustian moment for this essay is Võ Phiến's recent reading of a story about a boy from central Vietnam who before treat-

ing his Saigon girl friend to a bowl of Huế soup warns her to be careful: *bún bò* is very hot. Võ Phiến explains that until recently *bún bò* and other Huế dishes were hard to get in Saigon: only a few restaurants served them. That is why the boy had to warn his southern girl friend about *bún bò*. Now, however, Võ Phiến says, Huế dishes, especially *bún bò*, are found all over Saigon and street vendors have taken to carrying pots of this Huế soup on their shoulder instead of *cháo vịt* and *hủ tiếu*, two southern soups. “What caused Huế *bún bò* to be widely accepted by people in Saigon, to become an enticing and favored dish? Who can define love, including the love of *bún bò*?” Võ Phiến asks, jokingly paraphrasing the opening line of a famous pre-war romantic poem.⁵⁸ What makes people love *bún bò*, he says, is the same thing that makes them cry when they eat it: the strong spices, including the red pepper, it contains. On a cold day, he says, there’s nothing like eating this hot soup—hot both in temperature and seasoning. Huế cooks lack the bountiful food supplies found in the South, so they use their famed artistic talent to create a masterpiece with spices and some rather simple ingredients.

Then Võ Phiến turns, as he typically does somewhere in his *tùy bút* essays, to an historical explanation. “So Huế *bún bò* is artistic,” he says. “But why did it suddenly spread into the South?” The story of *bún bò*, he explains, is similar to the story of *phở*, the northern soup made with rice noodles and beef. Refugees who poured into the South in 1954 brought *phở* with them. The popularity of Huế *bún bò* in Saigon is linked to more recent traumatic events: the Tết Offensive of 1968 and the fighting during the summer of 1972, the offensive Americans call the spring or Easter offensive. Refugees from Huế fleeing these attacks poured into Saigon, bringing their *bún bò* with them. And so, he concludes, we can investigate the history of a people “on the tips of people’s tongues. Who’s to say it is not as good a method as any other?” (88).

Readers may find nothing remarkable in the above excerpts and summaries of several Võ Phiến essays. The

⁵⁸The line Võ Phiến paraphrases, *Làm sao cắt nghĩa được tình yêu!*, (How can you define love?) is from a poem called “Vì Sao” (Why?) by Xuân Diệu.

key to writing a successful *tùy bút* essay is style, an element that an English summary or translation cannot capture. It is, however, perhaps the element of a Võ Phiến essay that Vietnamese readers most appreciate. One certainly does not read a Võ Phiến essay simply to obtain information. Vietnamese readers call Võ Phiến's style fresh, subtle, witty, lively, and relaxed. It is a style that Võ Phiến apparently worked hard to develop. A key part of his training was his exposure to southern writers after he came to Saigon in 1959. Võ Phiến immediately embraced the southern style of writing, a style which he believed was closely related to southern speech, a dialect that delighted him. When he and his central Vietnamese friends moved to the south, here's how, Võ Phiến says, they expressed this delight: "Oh, my heavens, how smoothly people talk here! It is like pouring oil into a bottle, like continually pushing the beads of an abacus, like spinning marbles on a tray! This way of speaking brings to mind an old tune, one that goes on and on, but briskly, sweetly." Southern writers write as they speak, Võ Phiến says. He admires them for their "naturalness, warmth, and intimacy; for their nimbleness and briskness, for their easy fluency" (*Literature in South Vietnam*, 77–78).

Võ Phiến admires southern writers not only for their relaxed, colloquial sentences but also for their skill in deploying these sentences in order to establish an intimate relationship with the reader. When we read their prose, including their writing on scholarly topics, he says, "it is as if we're meeting a cheerful, easy-going person who is willing to discuss things openly and freely, often a little haphazardly, not orderly, not formally" (78). "Easy-going" (*xuề xòa*), the adjective Võ Phiến uses to describe this southern style, is a word critics apply to Võ Phiến's style as well (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1996, 33, 111). In fact, Võ Phiến's style is said to have all the "southern" virtues that he enumerates, perhaps especially the ability to convince readers he is just having a friendly chat with them. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc says that what he likes most about Võ Phiến is that "when he reads him he does not feel as if he is reading; he feels as if he is listening to someone talk";

and he praises him for “creating a close, intimate feeling between the writer and the reader” (32). Quỳnh Giao, who lives in Virginia, also praises Võ Phiến for his ability to draw the reader into the conversation, and for some other stylistic virtues as well:

If you take a *tùy bút* essay by Võ Phiến and read it out loud, you immediately feel as though a story is being told. The exclamation points, the question marks, the colons, the parentheses, the quotation marks appear everywhere and force the reader to reply, to reflect, to put the book down and smile happily or become sad and pensive. Võ Phiến writes a *tùy bút* essay like a skillful storyteller; he is good at making readers laugh at a witty observation but then, after you think about it a bit more, you want to cry. (1998, 111)

For a variety of reasons, including the slow dissemination of the romanized writing system (Quốc ngữ), prose writing developed late in Vietnam. It has taken awhile for writers to struggle free of a poeticized style characterized by elaborate parallelism and antitheses and more formal rhythms, features that distanced the writer from the reader. Võ Phiến, with the help of southern writers, has contributed greatly to the creation of a more familiar, and more modern and readable, prose style.

Võ Phiến's 'Tùy Bút Narrative Essays'

Besides the *tùy bút* essays discussed above Võ Phiến also wrote what I will call “*tùy bút* narrative essays.” Unlike *tùy bút* essays, which Võ Phiến and his publishers and critics have consistently tagged with the *tùy bút* label, these *tùy bút* narrative essays have proven more difficult to classify as their publishing histories indicate. The *tùy bút* narrative essays that I will discuss next—“Again, a Letter from Home” and “Drops of Coffee”—make good examples. “Again, a Letter from Home” was published in 1962 in a collection called *A Letter from Home: Tùy Bút Essays by Võ Phiến*, but Võ Phiến

has said the subtitle bothered him. “When *A Letter from Home* was published, I had some misgivings when I saw not stories but *tùy bút* on the cover. A critic with informed views said *A Letter from Home* could also be called a collection of stories because the borders around the story genre had widened a great deal” (“Talking with *Encyclopedic*,” 394). In other words, Võ Phiến seems to regret not calling this a collection of stories. Reviewers have also had trouble deciding what kind of texts this collection contains: “*A Letter from Home* is truly a hard work to classify,” says Đặng Tiến in a review published in 1963, “especially if readers aren’t happy with the term ‘*tùy bút*’ which seems a little too easy [because most any text could be called a *tùy bút*]” (52).

The second *tùy bút* narrative essay I will discuss, “Drops of Coffee,” has also proven difficult to classify. It was published in *Illusion: Short Pieces of Literature* in 1967. Võ Phiến has explained the reason for the vague subtitle: “It was hard for me to call this a collection of stories, so I wrote short pieces of literature (đoản văn) on the cover” (“Talking with *Encyclopedic*,” 394). Why didn’t Võ Phiến call *Illusion* a collection of *tùy bút*? Probably because at least some of the texts in it are very story-like. Significantly, when he republished the texts in *Illusion*, he put two of them—“The Unusual Husband” and “Paying Attention”—in *Short Stories II*; the rest he published in his *tùy bút* collections, one in *Tùy Bút I* and the rest, including “Drops of Coffee,” in *Tùy Bút II*.

‘Again, a Letter from Home’

Let us now look at two of these *tùy bút* narrative essays, starting with “Again, a Letter from Home,” one of Võ Phiến’s most famous works, a work that some readers say is one of his finest,⁵⁹ a work that Nguyễn Hữu Nghĩa says “typifies the literary career of Võ Phiến” (1988, 13). The title refers to a letter, included in the text, that is sent to Võ Phiến in Saigon by his brother who lives in Qui Nhon. The letter reports on conditions in their home village. In the collection in which it

⁵⁹See Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996, 123); Quỳnh Giao 1998, 113; and Nguyễn Vy Khanh 1998, 93.

was published,⁶⁰ “Again, a Letter from Home” appears after “A Letter from Home”; hence the title of this narrative essay. Like the *tùy bút* essay “Bubbles in Tea,” this work begins with some poetry and then moves to a description of a local product, which, in this case, is a pungent sauce made from field crabs. The poetry is a folk song about this dish that Võ Phiến says was sung in his home region:

Ahh Ahh . . . the wind took Mr. Sergeant⁶¹ to China,
Mrs. Sergeant remained and caught crabs at the marsh,
Caught crabs to make sauce that was sour,
To send to Mr. Sergeant so he would save money.

Võ Phiến says he couldn’t find this folk song in a collection of folk songs compiled by a well-known scholar; nor could he locate any comments about sour crab sauce in the works of Tản Đà, who describes famous dishes from all over the country. But sour crab sauce, he says, is a typical dish, one that is cherished by poor people in his local area. He explains how it is made:

People catch the crabs, then bring them home and wash them. Then they pound them, squeeze out the water, and put them in a jar to which they add some salt. Then they put this jar next to the stove for three days and nights. That’s it. Now it can be sent to China [like Mrs. Sergeant planned to do in the folk song]. But sad to say, I’m afraid you can send it only by airplane. If you send it by water or land I’m afraid it won’t arrive in China in time to be used. Sour crab sauce prepared in the way described above, no matter how careful one is, still has to be used quickly: leave it for a long time and it will stink. This would have caused troubles for the thrifty Mrs. Sergeant. I don’t know

⁶⁰This collection is titled *A Letter from Home* and was published in 1962.

⁶¹It is difficult to translate “Ông Đội.” “Ông” is “mister” and “Đội” was a rank in the military in earlier times, so I’ve translated it as “Mr. Sergeant.” In traditional Vietnam one called wives by their husband’s title. Hence the title “Mrs. Sergeant.”

if back then she was aware of these technical problems. (57–58)

Though “Again, a Letter from Home” opens like the *tùy bút* essay “Bubbles in Tea”—with a poem, then a recipe for a local dish—it is clearly a different kind of work. In this text Võ Phiến⁶² does not simply discuss the dish, praise its virtues, relate it to some historical event, and wrap things up in three or four pages. In “Again, a Letter from Home” the crab sauce is a prelude to a longer story, one that goes for over sixty pages, a story about a man villagers called Anh Bốn Thôi (Brother Four No More) and his six wives, about Võ Phiến’s grandmother, about common country people who are struggling with their own problems when the war with the French comes and piles more problems on top of the old.

The crab sauce links the key characters of the story: Brother Four No More, Võ Phiến’s grandmother, and Brother Four No More’s second wife, Sister Lộc. Võ Phiến’s grandmother is an expert at making this sauce and so is Sister Lộc. At the proper time each year they prepare it together. Sister Lộc is a very attractive young woman. Võ Phiến’s grandmother thinks that Sister Lộc is as beautiful as the brides of royalty at the time of the Lê dynasty. Võ Phiến says he doesn’t want to compare her to other women, but

I am sure that a person like her would bring happiness to any man that she was close to. Looking at her well-developed body, each curve full and round and graceful, put the mind at ease. Her chest was ample and full, but a person gazing at it felt not excitement but a calm and restful pleasure. Her tone of voice and the way she lifted up her face, slowly, but not haltingly, conveyed an attitude of good-natured patience and stability. (71–72)

⁶²I identify the narrator as Võ Phiến because “Again, a Letter from Home” seems in general to be an autobiographical account, but it also contains, as I will point out, fictional elements.

In background and manner, Brother Four No More is a less attractive candidate for marriage. He is an orphan who was raised by his uncle and aunt, and he is also considered to be a bit odd. His first wife, a nineteen year old, runs away from him after only ten months of marriage, an event that causes him to be the butt of jokes in the village. Depressed, he spends his spare time in the rice fields watching fireflies. He is able to have his uncle arrange for him to marry the attractive Sister Lộc only because she has been victimized by a lecherous married man, a mandarin's orderly who cohabits with Sister Lộc's mother when he visits the village. As the story develops, it becomes clear that Brother Four No More is impotent, but Sister Lộc treats him kindly and Brother Four No More basks in the pleasure of her attention. Before Brother Four No More married Sister Lộc he would sit off by himself and absent-mindedly pull hairs out of his nose. Sister Lộc is the only one who can get him to stop:

After he married his second wife [Sister Lộc], on those frequent occasions when he would be making a face and plucking out a nose hair, suddenly his eyes would meet Sister Lộc's. She would look at him and in her eyes would appear a considerate, gently teasing, warm, and forgiving expression; and then she would smile softly. Brother Four No More would drop his hand immediately. Of course his face would redden a little, but he would be overcome with happiness. He was like a person about to bid life good-bye and enter the world of the dead who suddenly hears a voice calling him and so returns to the bustling world of the living. Sister Lộc didn't say anything at all, but her understanding, kind and sympathetic look saved him from loneliness and gave him a reason for living. (73-74)

At night Sister Lộc puts salve on Brother Four No More's feet that are cracked and sore from spending hours in the rice fields. Unfortunately, after they have been married for three years, Sister Lộc dies from a disease that begins with

a boil on her nose. To remember her, Brother Four No More brings home a chunk of clay that has her footprint in it, along with that of an egret and a field crab.

It was only after Sister Lộc died that Brother Four No More got his name. The "Brother Four" reflects the custom, explained in the Introduction, of using kin numeratives, always prefaced by the appropriate kinship term-pronoun, to refer to relatives and fellow villagers. As for the origin of the "No More," Võ Phiến explains in "Again, a Letter from Home" that it was the custom in his village to call a father and mother by the name of their first born child. Brother Four No More's first nickname was "Nữa" (More). Villagers waited patiently for Brother Four No More to get married and have a child so they could assign him a new name. After Sister Lộc died, however, realizing he was already thirty years old, and seeing how severely Sister Lộc's death had affected him, they figured he would never remarry and have children. Given his circumstances, to call him "Nữa" was a bit unkind (since it looked like there would be no "more" wives, and therefore no children), so they called him "Thôi" (No More). "People in the countryside," Võ Phiến explains, "have a gift for humor and are also kind, so, to avoid rudeness, they erased the name 'Nữa' and called him by the name 'Thôi,' smiling as they did so. Although this new name they gave him was a more refined one, by using it people around him were making public the fact that they had lost all faith in his love life" (82).

They should have had more faith. Brother Four No More does marry again. But unlike Sister Lộc, Brother Four No More's next three wives, unable to accept him, leave after short stays. His sixth wife, who had been married twice before, is "not pretty but not ugly either." Though youthful looking, she is careless in her dress and is described as "dirty and ragged." She walks around the village wearing a shirt with missing buttons, leaving her stomach exposed. Her primary passion in life is food: she loves to snack throughout the day. During the resistance war, markets in Võ Phiến's village were held at night because people feared they might be bombed if they gathered during the day. Returning from the market one

moonlit night, she meets a villager named Hài who is fishing in a pond for frogs. The wiley Hài, who knows well her weakness, seduces her by engaging her in a discussion of how to prepare and cook frog legs, and by promising her she can have the four frogs he has already caught. Because this scene, which could be titled "Frog Meat or Nirvana," nicely demonstrates the attention Võ Phiến lavished on minor characters and also his understanding and tolerance of human weakness, I will quote it in full:

She [Brother Four No More's sixth wife] came back from the market late one night in March. During the Resistance it was held late at night to avoid the bombing. People going to market took with them a lamp made by cutting a bottle in two. Members of the people's army guarded the area and didn't let anyone in till twilight. Then people lit their lamps and the buying and selling began and it continued till dawn. Whenever an airplane came, a signal was given and everyone had to snuff out their lamps and run out into the field to take cover.

On this moonlit night in March Brother Four No More's sixth wife was coming home from the market. The moon cast enough light for her to see the trail so she put out her light to save oil. A white mist was settling over the field.

As she came near a pond at the edge of the village, which people believed was the footprint of a giant, she suddenly saw something moving in the brush along the bank. A light flickered in some bushes and then the white shape of a person popped into view. Surprised, she clasped her chest in fright, but then, after looking more carefully, laughed out loud.

"Darn! You scared the daylights out of me!"

The man waved his arms angrily but couldn't get her to stop laughing.

"What's so funny," he grumbled at her, "that you have to laugh that loud? Now there's nothing to do but abandon this place. No use fishing here anymore."

As he spoke the man raised his rod up. He had been sitting there fishing for frogs and was upset because the noise had scared

them off. He looked at the woman, disgust on his face. She grinned good-naturedly.

"Well, what are you fishing for that makes you sit here like you're waiting to ambush somebody? It's late. Why choose this place to fish?"

The man quickly changed his expression, smiled softly, and looked directly at the woman. Something she had just said must have given him an idea. Realizing she had said something wrong, the woman was worried and started to walk away.

The man, whose name was Hải, was head of the hamlet, someone she had been acquainted with for a long time. But he had never looked at her "mischievously"⁶³ like that before. When she turned to go, he said:

"So you're going! You come here and disturb someone, then just up and leave. Is that it?"

She didn't say anything so he kept talking:

"Want some meat to eat for fun?"

She turned quickly. He held a net up in front of her face and swung it back and forth. Then he grabbed the net half way up. Several frogs at the bottom of the net jumped up, extending their black bodies. The man didn't say anything, apparently thinking his gesture was sufficiently eloquent and enticing. But the woman only glanced briefly at the frogs and turned to go. He spoke up quickly:

"So you don't eat frog meat. How stupid is that!"

"Yeh, stupid," she said.

When she started to leave, he called after her:

"You worship Buddha, eh?⁶⁴ How long you been doing that?

She laughed easily.

"I've been in a monastery for a long time."

Seeing she was about to leave, he called out to her.

"Hey!"

"What?"

⁶³Every time Võ Phiến uses the word "gian" (mischievous, dishonest, tricky, deceitful) to describe the frog fisherman, he encloses it in quotation marks.

⁶⁴Many Vietnamese are particularly reluctant to kill frogs because when they are dying they assume a position that makes it appear as if they are bowing to Buddha (*lạy phật*).

"You? In a monastery? You got to be kidding! How come you don't eat frog meat?"

"Who would prepare it for me? I wouldn't dare to clean a frog if you paid me. You cut off its head but it still keeps wiggling its hands and legs. It's disgusting."

The man laughed.

"Ah, so that's it. I thought you didn't like the meat. Come here, I'll show you how to prepare frog meat."

At first the woman was suspicious, but finally she returned, smiling. When she had gotten close, the man reached out and pinched her plump cheek. His fingers were strong and quick and smelled like tobacco smoke.

After he had pinched her he continued the business of preparing the frog meat. He told her that when you finish cutting off the frog's head you have to hold it down and push a toothpick along its spine. This softens the frog and makes it lie still.

The woman wasn't clear about this so he stuck his hand in the net and took out a frog. Giving her the net to hold, he pressed the frog down and showed her where to cut the head off and where to insert the toothpick. The woman couldn't stop giggling.

He gave her another very "mischievous" glance. She knew she had just done something wrong again, but before she could stop giggling, the man, with a frog in his hand, reached out and wiped the shoulder of her shirt. She dodged, but he again pulled at her shoulder and she fell on him. The towel around the man's neck smelled of tobacco. Mixed with the cold night mist the scent was strong. She was about to get angry at his behavior when he asked her:

So now how many babies do you want? . . . I mean baby frogs?

She raised up the net and counted:

"One, two, three . . . Altogether there's only four."

"Four frogs and you think that's not enough for a full meal, huh? Cook them with turmeric, really lots of turmeric, pour in quite a bit of water. Mix in some rice noodles and eat several bowls and see for yourself. The broth is really sweet. Have you ever eaten frog?"

"Never."

"Sakes alive! I thought you'd eat anything, even dog meat."

He turned the conversation to food and drink, a subject on which he appeared to be an expert. The two sides were in agreement on many issues. He agreed with her that eating and drinking were important things in life. He helped her find a cord on which to thread the four frogs and, when that was done, he held the string in front of her, waving it back and forth. She almost keeled over with laughter. He jumped close to her and she breathed in the scent of tobacco smoke, strong and cold because it was mixed with evening mist.

At one point the man said,

"Pray that everyone in the world joins a monastery and abstains from frog meat."

He asked her:

"Do you want to reach nirvana or stay here and . . . eat frog meat?"

"I've joined a monastery."

"Oh, sure," he said laughing. "You're in a monastery but when the scent of meat's in the air your mouth fills with saliva."

She didn't hear what he said and kept explaining, adding a touch of mystery.

"I'm not in a monastery but it's as if I were."

The man abruptly stopped laughing and turned toward her, suspicious of something.

"Is that true?"

Quick as a whip he understood, and the woman sensed that he understood, understood everything. The secret in the love life of Four No More, a secret shared by six women, was now revealed.

She knew she had made another mistake. And this time it was too late: no time was left to repair the damage. He looked at her very "mischievously," daringly, hungrily, fiercely—like a tiger!

"Too late! It's already too late," the woman thought to herself. Then, when her concern had reached its highest point, she suddenly, for no apparent reason, smiled calmly, gently, expectantly.

The next morning she quietly took the frogs out to prepare them. She used a toothpick and pushed it along the spine. When

the frog let his legs droop and stopped wiggling, she threw it down, then turned it over with her finger. It didn't move at all. She smiled happily. "That guy," she thought, "is really an expert when it comes to eating!"

Her smile gradually became gentle, discreet, and vague like a faintly shining light.

After that the woman wasn't afraid of frogs anymore. Having eaten four frogs that first time, she naturally felt there was no reason to spurn the fifth, the sixth, and so on.

In January of the next year she gave birth to a baby boy.
(91–95)

As a result of her trysts with the frog fisherman, Brother Four No More's wife produces a series of children, who are warmly welcomed by Brother Four No More. He becomes less agitated—not happy exactly, but more content: in his spare time, instead of pulling at his nose hairs he watches his children play.

Soon after Brother Four No More's first child is born, his contentment and that of all the villagers is disrupted by the arrival of French paratroopers only seven kilometers away. The villagers evacuate to a safer village near the mountains. Võ Phiến returns alone three days later to the deserted village to check on the family house and while napping in his grandmother's bed, he is surprised by the sound of someone taking jars of sour crab sauce from his grandmother's shelf. It turns out to be Brother Four No More who tells him he is getting the sauce for the hungry (Việt Minh) soldiers. Security in the province continues to deteriorate and there are several more evacuations which take their toll on Võ Phiến's grandmother. She becomes weaker and weaker and then dies, but not before rising from her death bed to help her daughter-in-law who is struggling to prepare sour crab sauce. As for Brother Four No More, Võ Phiến gets news of him several years later after he has gone to Saigon and Brother Four No More's and Võ Phiến's home village has come under the nominal control of the Saigon government. Võ Phiến learns that Brother Four No More, who had become a member of the Citizen Protec-

tion Unit, was wounded in the thigh in an altercation with an enemy (Việt Minh) soldier.

This *tùy bút* narrative essay ends with the new year arriving and with Võ Phiến in a very pessimistic mood as he thinks about his grandmother, Sister Lộc, Brother Four No More and others from his village. Of Sister Lộc, he says, “She acted as if there were nothing sad about her sad life. Today, far as I am from the village in time and space, her calm, gentle, and submissive attitude strikes me as characteristic of my entire native region” (115). Of Brother Four No More, recently wounded, Võ Phiến says:

He couldn’t find peace. For nearly twenty years, he had to carry a weapon most of the time. He avoided bullets from one side, dodged bullets from the other side. And he fought back also, with an expression always sad and cold, like someone removed from events. . . . His actions were within the context of a controversy between beautiful and grandiose theories. Unfortunately grandiose controversies often unavoidably affect the lives of humble people. These small means are utilized to realize grandiose things. (114, 115)

‘Drops of Coffee’

“Drops of Coffee,” written five years after “Again, a Letter from Home,” describes another villager who, like Brother Four No More, gets caught up in this clash of grandiose theories. Unlike “Bubbles in Tea,” “Following in the Footsteps of a Dish,” and “Again, a Letter from Home,” this *tùy bút* text is told in the third not the first person. And unlike these other texts it doesn’t begin immediately with a Proustian moment or a description of a dish. These come later. And the dish that sends the main character back to his village is not a local dish from central Vietnam but a cup of modern coffee that he drinks in the Thu Hương Cafe in Saigon.

But like “Bubbles in Tea” and “Again, a Letter from Home” this text also begins with some poetry, in this case some lines from *Lục Vân Tiên*, a nineteenth-century verse nar-

native. Võ Phiến writes the lines in the original and rather unorthodox way that a villager, Uncle Seven (Cậu Bảy), recited them at gatherings at his home, events that the main character, the person whose inner thoughts the narrator⁶⁵ presumes to know, remembers fondly. After these evenings of poetry he would spend the night at Uncle Seven's and rise at dawn to the singing of a black cuckoo bird. Uncle Seven lived the life of an artist: "He had lots of friends, relaxed a great deal, did little work. He had lovers early and a wife and children late in life. That sums it up" (172). But his life, the narrator explains, and that of the main character, and the lives of other former villagers that he (the main character) meets in Saigon are not what they once were. They have been broken into too many sections. Patching them into a whole is not easy:

In this time of turmoil, a person's life is a cloth of many patches, like a Buddhist monk's robe of a hundred colors. If patched together you can continue to live, then you're lucky. Everyday here and there how many lives have been destroyed unjustly. To run into this situation, then that one, as he had, and still be alive is more than enough. One shouldn't ask for more. Especially you shouldn't demand that the different parts of your life be connected in a rational manner. (173)

At the Thu Hương Cafe the slow dripping of coffee from the small individual filter into a cup provides the proper atmosphere for reflection and encourages the main character to remember Uncle Seven. According to philosophers, the narrator says, the creator put a curtain between the present and the past, so people would prepare for the future. This curtain was not supposed to be opened until one was about to die, but the philosophers must have forgotten, the narrator says, about the power of coffee to set one's mind wandering.

⁶⁵I say "narrator" not "Võ Phiến" because one can't assume Võ Phiến is the narrator. The spokesperson for Võ Phiến's views and feelings would appear to be the main character, referred to as the "young man" (chàng).

The coffee wasn't in a hurry to fall. Oh no. A self-respecting drop of coffee is never in a hurry. Even in the rushed and disorderly setting of the civilized city of today a genuine drop of coffee still appears calm and relaxed, still hesitates, dawdles leisurely, thinks awhile, and only when it is ready does it let itself drop into the cup. In terms of careful demeanor, the coffee drops of this generation can stand up to those of four or five centuries ago.

That the coffee fell slowly was a good thing. If it fell at a different speed, then on that evening at twilight he wouldn't have had a reason to remember the sound of the black cuckoo bird singing in the garden of Uncle Seven's house. These were the sounds of a black cuckoo bird fifteen years ago. Now Uncle Seven has no garden and no house either. (174–175)

Uncle Seven, the reader soon learns, has lost more than his house and garden. Heavy fighting has destroyed his entire village and scattered its former residents. Some have fled into the mountains, aligning themselves with the revolutionary forces, others have gone to the district office to become refugees, wards of the Saigon government. Uncle Seven went to the mountains. The area surrounding Uncle Seven and the main character's village has become a battleground between opposing forces. Americans are flying over the area in helicopters looking for suspicious people. If they spot any, they swoop down and snatch them up,⁶⁶ like a hawk catching a chicken, the narrator says, and take them to district headquarters for interrogation.

Uncle Seven and his young son, his only son, get snatched up, and since it is common knowledge that Uncle Seven has thrown his lot with the anti-government forces in the mountains, this is a disaster for him. The main character and some other villagers happen to be present at the district

⁶⁶The villagers, the narrator explains, used the Vietnamese word *gắp* to describe the action of the helicopters picking up people. *Gắp* means to pick up food with chopsticks or something like a piece of hot charcoal with sticks.

headquarters when Uncle Seven and his son are brought in. The main character sees Uncle Seven, who is holding his son by the hand, running to keep up with his muscular, much longer-legged American captors. Knowing his fate, Uncle Seven's face is pale. Another helicopter arrives, the wind from its propeller blades wrapping Uncle Seven and his son's clothes around them.

At that moment Uncle Seven saw him [the main character] and other people he knew standing outside the guard station of the airport. Immediately he stiffened, his face hardened, became stern. He almost forgot to keep his hand on his head to keep his hat from being blown away by the wind from the helicopter.

He understood what Uncle Seven was thinking, and he wanted to turn away to lessen Uncle's embarrassment. Uncle didn't want anyone to see him dejected. He was protecting the dignity of the revolution. He understood that. Uncle was a very proud man. Uncle's clothes were flapping in the wind, both father and son looked pitiful, but still he tried to look strong for the sake of the revolution. In life there are scenes that one doesn't want to lay one's eyes on, that one hopes one will never have the bad luck to witness: someone who has lost his job asking to borrow money for the first time, a clumsy old man who is frustrated when he can't perform when a woman gives herself to him, a person devoted to hunting down imperialist invaders getting snatched up by those imperialists, etc. (182)

But he turns away too late and Uncle Seven sees him, a meeting of the eyes that has tortured him over the years. Now, drinking his coffee, he wonders what happened to Uncle Seven. He wonders what he was doing that day he and his son were picked up. Surely he is in prison, but his son should have been freed. "Who's taking care of him? What's he doing now to get food to eat? Is he shining shoes? Selling

newspapers? Washing vehicles for the Americans? Stealing things from the Americans? Bringing them girls?" (183).

"Drops of Coffee" has some surreal, dream-like scenes. Coffee tends to push one's thought toward the surreal, the narrator says (185). One such scene takes place in a small restaurant selling *phở* (noodle soup) that is owned by a man from his village. After the electricity goes off, the main character imagines that he sees a man at a nearby table take his chopsticks and snatch (gắp) the ear of another man. This scene precedes the account of how the Americans snatched up (gắp) Uncle Seven and his son. The most surreal scene, however, is the one that ends this account. The main character is lying in his grave and water is dripping down on his coffin. The way this dripping is described reminds the reader of the earlier passage about coffee slowly dripping from the little filter into the main character's cup.

The rain soaks into the earth, trickling quietly through many layers of dirt, as if it were passing through a gigantic filter. Finally coming to the surface of the coffin, it stops a moment, hesitates, looks around. But the coffin has rotted, so it can keep going. Several small drops fall: one drop on the right, one drop on the left, one drop . . . There! One drop falls right on the spot where his heart used to be. (187)

As the water drops into his coffin, the main character remembers Uncle Seven and those wonderful dawns at his house when he would awaken to the singing of the black cuckoo. "In some other dark graveyard," he thinks, "Uncle Seven is reassessing his life, thinking about those happy evenings of music, about his manner during those moments when he met with misfortune. He was sure that Uncle Seven was content" (187).

How do these two *tùy bút* narrative essays—"Again, a Letter from Home" and "Drops of Coffee"—differ from the *tùy bút* essays—"Bubbles in Tea" and "Following in the Footsteps of a Dish"? Clearly they are more story-like. The

primary focus is on people—on characters. Yes, things—sour crab sauce and coffee—are described but these items are in secondary focus, serving primarily as lead-ins to stories about people. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc agrees. Though, as we have seen, he believes that even in what I call *tùy bút* essays Võ Phiến talks about things only as a prelude to talking about something else—usually some historical event—he points out that for the texts reprinted in *Tùy Bút II* (where the texts I call *tùy bút* narrative essays have been reprinted) that “something else” is not a historical fact (*sự kiện*) but relations (*quan hệ*) between people (1996, 123). He also observes that the texts in *Tùy Bút II* “have a clear narrative quality. Each is written like a short story. There is dialogue. There is a proper plot structure” (131).

In fact, *tùy bút* narrative essays do not seem to differ much from texts that Võ Phiến has always called short stories. In terms of technique, they exhibit the four features evident in Võ Phiến’s early fiction that we discussed in chapter III. An emphasis on character development, careful description of physical features and gestures, a preference for framed narratives, and a passion for detail—all these features can be found in his *tùy bút* narrative essays. Võ Phiến also makes his *tùy bút* narrative essays resemble short stories by including in them fictional episodes, something not found in his *tùy bút* essays. Although “Again, a Letter from Home” appears to be primarily an autobiographical essay, a short memoir, it includes descriptions of encounters between people complete with dialogue that Võ Phiến did not witness. When the frog fisherman seduces Brother Four No More’s sixth wife we get a full report of what went on, including exactly what the fisherman and the woman said to each other. Võ Phiến certainly made up the dialogue and the details; maybe he made up the entire scene. Though probably intended to be understood as a vision induced by caffeine, the scene in “Drops of Coffee” in which the main character lies rotting in his grave is clearly imagined.

Tùy bút narrative essays do differ slightly from texts Võ Phiến has always called short stories. They are less tightly

structured. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc says Võ Phiến's *tùy bút* narrative essays have a "proper plot structure," but he says this to distinguish them from his *tùy bút* essays. In comparison to "Bubbles in Tea," which has no discernable plot, "Again, a Letter from Home" could perhaps be said to have a "proper" plot, but it is much more loosely structured than Võ Phiến's early short stories—"The Prisoner," "Night Rain at Year's End," and "Telling a Story Late at Night," for example. Though his novels *Saying Good-by* and *Alone* have rambling plots these early short stories are carefully structured. In comparison "Again, a Letter from Home" is much more loosely organized. Besides the long opening segment on sour crab sauce, it includes information on Võ Phiến's grandmother and her stories of the past; accounts of the various vicissitudes of his home village during the resistance; portraits of certain minor characters—the ubiquitous Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm, for example;⁶⁷ and some editorializing about the suffering of poor people caught in the clash of "grandiose theories."

In interviews in the late '60s and in *Literature and South Vietnam*, Võ Phiến explains that in the early '60s he wished to break out of the mold of the classic European short story and also the traditional Vietnamese *tùy bút*. Understanding these desires helps us understand Võ Phiến's intentions in the texts I call *tùy bút* narrative essays. After observing that since "Drops of Coffee" (1967) he has been writing a different kind of story, an interviewer in 1967 asked Võ Phiến why he was "so determined to distance himself from the orthodox short story." In his reply Võ Phiến mentions recent developments in the West:

The crisis related to the story form in the West and the movement fifteen years ago there to search for a new form naturally sowed some doubt in our minds. When I looked again at the orthodox short story, with its perfectly round and tight structure, with its all too familiar rules, I suddenly felt

⁶⁷Mr. Degree-holder appears in "Returning to a Country Village," *Men*, and "Again, a Letter from Home."

there was something artificial about it. I no longer had the “heart” to continue constructing stories according to these strictures. (“Talking with *Encyclopedic*,” 395)

The movement in the West that Võ Phiến refers to is the *nouveau-roman* or “new novel,” movement in France discussed in the previous chapter. Võ Phiến argues for the influence of the *nouveau-roman* movement in a section of *Literature in South Vietnam* titled “The Novel” (Tiểu Thuyết), not in a section titled “Tùy Bút.” When he gives examples of his own works that reflect the influence of this movement, however, he mentions *A Letter From Home* (1962), in which “Again, a Letter from Home” appeared; *Illusion* (1967), in which “Drops of Coffee” appeared; and *Changing World* (1969)—all collections that contain many *tùy bút* narrative essays. Here is how Võ Phiến describes the texts in these collections:

A number of works by Võ Phiến [Võ Phiến refers to himself in the third person] in the later phase such as “Cái Còn Lại” (Remnants), “Xem Sách” (Reading) in the *Áo Ảnh* (Illusion) collection, or “Một Ngày Để Tùy Nghi” (A Day to Dispose of) in the *Phù thế* (Changing World) collection at once could be and could not be viewed as “stories.” As fiction, they have characters, and they contain a variety of searches for and discoveries of different aspects of the human soul. But, again, they contain no plot, no story line that would progress in a certain way. Their structures are not those of a story. They are pervaded with a mood that has more in common with poems in prose than with traditional fiction. The emphasis is on a certain mood, a certain harmonious rhythm, rather than on facts and events in the story. (Even works written much earlier, such as “Lại Thư Nhà” (Again, a Letter from Home), “Ngày Xuân Êm Đềm” (Sweet Days of Spring) in the collection entitled *Thư nhà* (A Letter from Home) have moved away from the traditional mold. (169–170)

The reference to these texts being like poems is significant. Poetry is the first love of many Vietnamese, including Võ Phiến. In a 1988 interview published in *Village of Literature* (Làng Văn), Võ Phiến says: "That is my weakness, I love poetry, and throughout my life I've occasionally returned to it" ("Talking with *Village of Literature*," 21). The early '60s, when he moved from the short story to the *tùy bút* form, was one of those occasions: "Exactly because of that weakness [his love of poetry] while writing short stories I gradually began to lean toward *tùy bút*" (21). It wasn't a difficult movement because, as Đặng Tiến has pointed out, "In truth, all that Võ Phiến has ever published may be seen as having more or less the peculiar traits of the *tùy bút* . . . [H]e pushes his stories to a certain limit, past which a so-called 'short story' ceases to be a short story."⁶⁸ Note that Võ Phiến says he moved "gradually" toward the *tùy bút* form, which explains why some of his early *tùy bút* texts—"Again, a Letter from Home," for example—were very story-like. One could also argue that Võ Phiến's *tùy bút* narrative essays are a result of his pushing the *tùy bút* form toward the story. In *Literature in South Vietnam* he comments that as we move from Vũ Bằng to Võ Phiến we see that "the boundaries [of the *tùy bút* form] have been opened up more than before and have begun to encroach on the territory of the poem and the story" (104). But since Võ Phiến wrote short stories first, the movement in his own literary career was from story to *tùy bút*, not from *tùy bút* to story.

Why was the looser, more poetic *tùy bút* form so appealing to Võ Phiến at this particular juncture in his life—in the early and mid-'60s? Partly it was the influence of the *nouveau-roman* movement. His own economic condition at the time was also a factor. Along with the escalation of the war came inflation which made it difficult to live on a civil servant's salary. To make a living he was writing for newspapers and for the journal *Encyclopedic*, the journal that he wrote for

⁶⁸In a 1988 interview, Võ Phiến more or less accepts this appraisal of Đặng Tiến's—that he has always taken a *tùy bút* approach to his stories ("Talking with *Village of Literature*," 21). Doãn Quốc Sỹ also argues that Võ Phiến's stories resemble *tùy bút* texts: "Almost all his short stories are in a form that is one-half *tùy bút*, one-half short story" (1974, 18).

regularly and on whose editorial board he served. "During that busy time," he says in his 1988 interview with Đào Huy Dần, "I didn't have enough time for the painstaking work of structuring short stories, or long stories" ("Talking with *Village of Literature*," 24).

But it seems clear that Võ Phiến also moved toward the *tùy bút* form because he had some things he wanted to say and this form allowed him more freedom to say them. Võ Phiến admits as much in that 1988 interview when he says "a person who writes a story can't easily mix in his own sentiments" (21). He explains this point further: "In poetry, in *tùy bút*, one's own individualism, one's own subjectivity can emerge as it pleases. But in a story, one has to be more objective, one has to hide one's face, yield the floor to one's characters who have their own individualism, their own good and bad qualities, their own habits, etc. (22).

An Aesthetics of the Common

What did he want to say in these early *tùy bút* texts? He wanted to talk about many things, including the coldness of life in modern semi-industrialized or fully industrialized cities, a topic that would also occupy him in many works written in the U.S. But in these early *tùy bút* texts written in Vietnam what he most wanted to express was his appreciation for the culture and lives of country people that he knew as a young man growing up in central Vietnam.

Though he could and did express this appreciation in short stories, both *tùy bút* forms—the essay and narrative essay—gave him more freedom to say what he wanted to say. These forms freed him from the burden of "obeying" his characters that he says he felt so strongly when he wrote short stories. They allowed him, particularly the *tùy bút* essay, to be an ethnographer or a folklorist, a role he seems eager to play. He wanted to record details of cultural life before they were forgotten—to explain how Huế *chè* was made, for example, before people switched to Pepsi and Coca Cola; to praise a sweet pudding, coincidentally also called *chè*, before people abandoned it in favor of the canned fruit brought into

Vietnam by American soldiers ("Pudding and Civilization," 42). Võ Phiến does less ethnographic recording in his *tùy bút* narrative essays, but this form allowed him to include autobiographical information, like the lengthy tributes to his grandmother, for example, in "Again, a Letter from Home," and also to editorialize occasionally on behalf of peasant farmers caught in a vicious war, as he does in both "Again, a Letter from Home" and "Drops of Coffee."

A major difference between his *tùy bút* texts and those of his predecessors—Phạm Đình Hồ, Nguyễn Tuân, and Tản Đà, for example—is that he writes about common dishes enjoyed by common people, not about dishes enjoyed by the upper classes. He extols the fine qualities not of Chinese tea but of *chè*, a local drink favored by farmers. He describes sour crab sauce, a dish that most city people would find much too crude for their taste. In little insignificant things like these, in the "bubble and duckweed" of country life, he found beauty and was able to get people to look at these things in a new way.

The people Võ Phiến describes in his *tùy bút* texts are as inelegant as these country dishes, characters like Brother Four No More with his habit of picking his nose hairs, and Brother Four No More's sixth wife with her sloppy dress and passion for frog legs. Võ Phiến's achievement is that he was able to find beauty in the lives of country people like these and communicate that beauty to his readers. Everyone agreed that drinking fine Chinese tea in a tiny cup was elegant, but not drinking Huế *chè* from a bowl. But Võ Phiến felt differently. "In my young eyes," Võ Phiến says, "a person who could drink two big bowls of *chè*, and do so in a manner that was dignified and respectable but also simple and modest, had a special beauty" ("Bubbles in Tea," 165). Võ Phiến's description of Mr. Tam Khoang carefully wiping away the bubbles from his mustache after drinking a bowl of *chè*; his description of the forgiving smile that Sister Lộc, Brother Four No More's second wife, used to get her husband to stop pulling out his nose hairs; his portrait of Uncle Seven, "snatched" up by a U.S. helicopter but able to "preserve the dignity of the

revolution"—these portraits and others like them persuaded readers to see common ordinary people not as backward and shameful but as lovable—even, at times, heroic—characters.

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc puts Võ Phiến's success with country characters in a historical perspective. In the nineteenth century and earlier, he says, Vietnamese liked supernatural stories, stories like that of *Lục Vân Tiên* whose blindness is cured by a fairy who visits him in a dream.⁶⁹ In the twentieth century, ordinary characters appeared but they were either "poeticized" or "politicized." Those doing the poeticizing were Nhất Linh and other members of the Self-strength Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn) who romanticized country people, "blew over the ordinary and the common excessive amounts of sweet fragrance, turning the life of rough rural country people into an elegant poem" (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1996, 124). They depicted city girls admiring the muscles of uncouth fishermen, or progressive, but condescending, land-owners building homes for their working-class tenants. Those doing the politicizing of common people were the communist writers who, following the dictates of socialist realism, exaggerated their virtues, turning them into flawless heroes. In the South during the period 1954–75 while most other writers overlooked these common, country characters, Võ Phiến focused on them, working hard "to normalize the ordinary, to make the ordinary in life the ordinary in literature" (125). His project was "to raise up the common and turn it into an aesthetic category" (124). Nguyễn Hưng Quốc suggests that success in this project accounts for the popularity of both his early short stories and *tùy bút* narrative essays like "Again, a Letter from Home."

Võ Phiến's success in getting people to appreciate his rural characters, to accept them as they were, warts and all, is especially remarkable because he was writing about central

⁶⁹*Lục Vân Tiên* (ca. 1860) is my example not Nguyễn Hưng Quốc's. Prior to the nineteenth century strange or marvelous stories (truyện kỳ) figured prominently in the literary life of Vietnam. The following collections are well-known: *Spiritual Powers in the Viet Realm* (fourteenth century) (Việt Điện U Linh Tập), *Selected Tales of Extraordinary Beings in Lĩnh Nam* (fifteenth century) (Lĩnh Nam Trích Quái) and *Giant Anthology of Strange Tales* (sixteenth century) (Truyện Kỳ Mạn Lục).

Vietnamese. Understanding the place of central Vietnam in recent literary history helps us appreciate Võ Phiến's accomplishment. During the period of French domination, southern Vietnam was the colony of Cochinchina and central Vietnam (Annam) and northern Vietnam (Tonkin) were protectorates. Huế in central Vietnam was the home of the emperor, had some famous schools, and was in some respects a center of culture and learning, but Saigon and Hanoi had much larger populations and were much more influential, particularly after the royal family lost its power, surviving only as a symbol of vanished glory. During colonial times, central Vietnam tended to be considered together with Tonkin, the other protectorate, and so central Vietnamese had difficulty establishing a separate literary identity.⁷⁰ Writers from central Vietnam who wished to stress regional settings and characters faced some obstacles in gaining wider recognition, obstacles that remained when Võ Phiến began to publish his stories in the '50s. Võ Phiến might have had an easier time if he had written about the more sophisticated residents of Huế, but instead he focused on country people from small villages in Bình Định Province.

What made his success all the more remarkable is that he focused not just on villagers but on the most unsophisticated and uneducated villagers, people whose crude and humorous names identified them immediately as "quê mùa" (boorish, rustic)—People like Brother Four No More, Sister Four Lime Pot Stick, Brother Broken Tea Kettle Spout, Brother Three Crab Claw, Brother Two Broken Beak, Uncle Four Wilted Lily, and Uncle Five Bowlegged. Especially readers in other regions of the country, but even readers from the central cities of Huế and Đà Nẵng found these characters to be unusual. In a reply to a letter in which I mentioned, among other things, how struck I was by the characters Brother Four No More and Sister Four Lime Stick, Võ Phiến says that both these characters are:

⁷⁰ "[A]t the time of the Protectorate when the French dominated, the central region became lumped in with the northern region and in terms of literary tendency leaned toward the north to gain acceptance" (Tạ Chí Đại Trường, 1998, 106).

rustic country people from remote hamlets. They are simple and unaffected, uneducated, very poor, awkward. Even Vietnamese readers in cities like Saigon, Huế, and Đà Nẵng were unfamiliar with characters like these. As for people in Cần Thơ, Gia Định, Biên Hoà [towns in the South]—they found them even more unfamiliar, because these characters' personalities reflected so strongly characteristics of the local region. (April 29, 2004)

In the 1930s and 1940s some left-leaning writers from the north, most of them later communist party members, wrote stories featuring northern peasants who suffered under the colonial regime. Some of their characters—Mrs. Dậu from Ngô Tất Tố's novel *When the Light's Put Out* (Tắt Đèn, 1939) and Chí Phèo from Nam Cao's short story "Chí Phèo" (1946), for example—soon became sharply etched in the minds of readers.⁷¹ Beginning in 1912 and continuing into the 1950s a popular southern writer named Hồ Biểu Chánh wrote over sixty novels peopled with rural characters from the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam (see Cao Thị Như-Quỳnh and John C. Schafer, 1988). Following Hồ Biểu Chánh, two other southern writers, Bình Nguyên Lộc and Sơn Nam, have written stories featuring rural characters from southern Vietnam. In other words, Võ Phiến was not the first or the only writer to "raise up the common and turn it into an aesthetic category," but he was the first to do so for central Vietnamese peasants.

Several critics identify Võ Phiến's ability to get readers from other regions to accept his Bình Định characters as a major accomplishment. There were well known writers with Bình Định connections, Tạ Chí Đại Trường says, like the poets Chế Lan Viên and Xuân Diệu,⁷² who wrote about Bình Định but not as persistently as Võ Phiến. How could he write about

⁷¹Both *When the Lights Put Out* and "Chí Phèo" have been translated by the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Hanoi. See "Works Cited" on p. 338 for complete citations.

⁷²Chế Lan Viên studied and taught in Bình Định but was from Quảng Trị. Xuân Diệu was born in Bình Định but his father was from Hà Tĩnh in north Vietnam. His father married a woman from Bình Định whom he met while teaching there.

people from Bình Định, Tạ Chí Đại Trường asks, and avoid making his characters appear like “hayseeds”? How could he “get people from other places not only to accept them but to welcome them as well?” (107). Tạ Chí Đại Trường does not answer his rhetorical question, but he implies that it took considerable talent. Cao Huy Khanh says that by putting Bình Định on the literary map of Vietnam Võ Phiến raised the prestige of the entire central region: “The village of An Quý, the city of Qui Nhơn—this was a region that belonged to the central region,” he says, “so obviously when [Võ Phiến] used his works to praise this region he was at the same time also highlighting the local literary color of the entire central region, and he did so more than other writers from his region (Vũ Hạnh, Võ Hồng, Phan Du)” (1974, 14).

Few exile readers fail to praise Võ Phiến for his ability to see beauty in the common. Their comments are poignant, expressing a mixture of pleasure and an excruciating homesickness. Some exile readers confess they did not read Võ Phiến in Vietnam, or if they read him they did not like him much. Only when they became exiles did they begin to appreciate him. Trần Long Hồ, for example, says though he tried he could not read Võ Phiến when he was growing up in Vietnam. “I lacked the patience,” he says, “and I wasn’t interested in stories of a greedy eater who fights for each morsel of food on the table or of a young man who trembles at the sight of a girl washing her feet” (1998, 124).⁷³

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, who eventually became so intrigued with Võ Phiến that he wrote a book about him, also did not read him until he became an exile. As a young man in Vietnam he had seen Võ Phiến’s name in journals published in Saigon and had encountered passages written by him in high school textbooks containing models of writing for students to emulate, but he did not read him for pleasure:

⁷³Võ Phiến describes a greedy eater in the short story “Dung” (the name of the main character). I am not sure what story Trần Long Hồ has in mind when he refers to the young man and the girl washing her feet. Võ Phiến’s male characters are often flustered in the presence of women.

It seems that in my heart I realized that those passages were excellent, truly excellent, but there was something ancient and distant about them, like literature from the time of the Self-Strength Group [popular in the 1930s] that I had already read and was already tired of. It seems that at that time I grouped him with the “classical” [cổ điển] authors, with those authoritative writers that we used to mention to prove we were well-educated but actually never read. (1998a, 15)

Võ Phiến was not a flashy writer and he did not chase after the latest literary fashions. In Saigon in the 1960s there were writers and songwriters who did that, many of them associated with a group called Creation (Sáng Tạo).⁷⁴ Some members of this group favored sentimental works. Songs and poems with international references were popular. Võ Phiến, however, kept writing about farmers from Bình Định.

When young people were singing “The Autumn Sky in Paris Separates Us for a Lifetime,” by Cung Trầm Tưởng, or reciting “Let Me Cry with Your Tears” or “Love Affairs in Budapest” by Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Võ Phiến kept on portraying common farmers, characters who when they thought of their loved one while out in the fields “Tapped fingers against the handle of a hoe” [Võ Phiến’s description of Brother Four No More in “Again, a Letter from Home,” 61]. (Thụy Khuê, 1990, 90)

Younger readers like Trần Long Hồ and Nguyễn Hưng Quốc preferred more contemporary, less “classical” works when they were in Vietnam, but as exiles they have come to appreciate Võ Phiến. Here, for example, is what Trần Long Hồ, the exile, thinks of Võ Phiến:

⁷⁴Some writers associated with this group were Mai Thảo, Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Đoàn Quốc Sỹ, Nguyễn Sa, and Dương Nghiễm Mậu (see *Literature in South Vietnam*, 116).

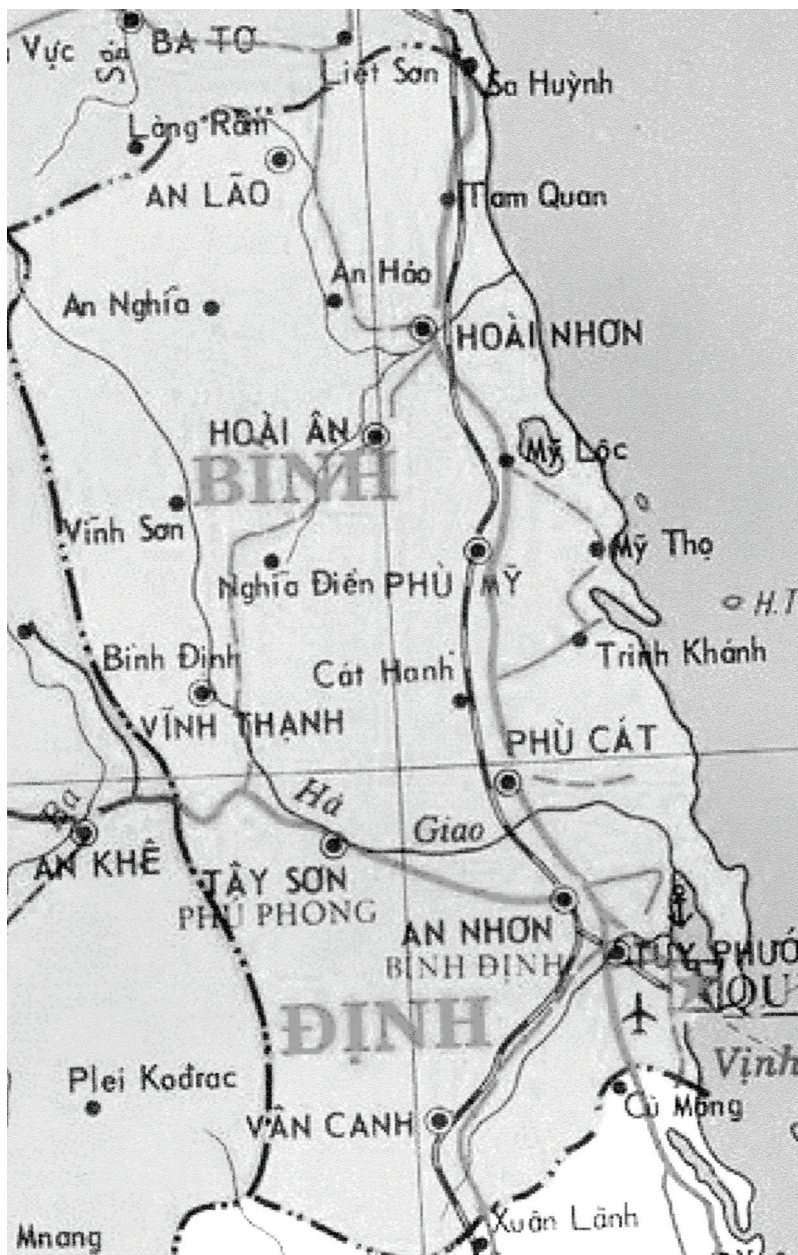
[In his works] we find that the smallest and most ordinary aspects of life become extremely important. He describes and makes clear and brings to life those things that we thought were simple, those feelings that we thought were submerged in the bustle of everyday life. His keenness and his care have had profound effects. When readers enter the world of his literature it is like returning to a region of memory lost in the past and finding again the shadow of a former time. Readers feel as if they are looking again at a pure Vietnamese person, that they are seeing their homeland again, the place where they lived a long time ago. (1998, 131)

Võ Phiến writes about different things, says Quỳnh Giao, a singer and writer who now lives abroad: "About sauce and fish, about how to taste fish sauce or brew Huế tea, about highland minority people and the six-eight poetry of the Chams, about the swallows of Phan Thiết and the rice pancakes of Bình Định. If we loved our native land when we were in Vietnam, it was partly thanks to Võ Phiến. Reading him again [abroad] makes us unbearably homesick" (1998, 112).

Many of Võ Phiến's country characters are eccentric. They are not the kind of people who would achieve great success even if their homeland was not wracked by war. Already a little confused and frustrated by personal problems, they become more lost and disoriented when war disrupts their native region. Exile readers appreciate these characters in part, it seems, because their sadness reminds them of their own. "When we remember [Võ Phiến's characters], we remember ourselves" says Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, who lives in Australia (1996, 136). "The hidden sadness that Mr. Four Refugee, Sister Four Lime Stick, and Mr. Three Thê At-the-Same-Time evoke in readers," says Thụy Khuê, who lives in France, "is the sense of loss Vietnamese feel when they can no longer cling to those jars of sour crab sauce, or the crowing of a rooster in the Chinese guava bush, or the human footprints mixed with the tracks of birds on a well-worn path. Only

now do we see those losses, only now do we know how precious those things were" (1990, 91). Nguyễn Vy Khanh, who lives in Montreal, also sees a connection between Võ Phiến's rural characters and Vietnamese of the diaspora:

[Võ Phiến's] coarse peasant farmers are beginning to appear in different guises in Vietnamese literature, and in life; they are becoming citified with their TV's, music, home appliances, and clothes. But their souls? In the exile situation of many Vietnamese today . . . reading a Võ Phiến story about peasant farmers is even more painful, the pain mixed with powerlessness, like a past that has slipped from one's hands. (1998, 101)



Map showing Binh Định Province. On this map the town of Bồng Sơn is called Hoài Nhơn.

AN EXILE IN HIS OWN COUNTRY

*This afternoon I opened the door and looked out; I didn't see my village anywhere, all I saw was my heart.*⁷⁵

—Yến Lan

Võ Phiến was an exile in his own country before he was an exile in America. He was separated first from his home village, his “quê hương” or native region; then he was separated from his country. Because Võ Phiến has been affected by these two separations, the Vietnamese word *ly hương*, which means either separation (ly) from one’s native region (hương) or separation from one’s country, describes Võ Phiến’s predicament better than the English word exile. Võ Phiến uses the term in both ways: when characters, like the narrator in “Cousins,” return to their native village after a long period away, they are eager to catch up on events since their “ngày ly hương” (day they left the village) (160); the suffering of Vietnamese refugees in the United States is described by Võ Phiến and Lê Tất Điều in their book *Ly Hương*. The term *ly hương* brings together the two parts of Võ Phiến’s life, uniting under one heading his time in Vietnam and his time in the United States. In some important ways Võ Phiến sees his second separation, his exile in the United States, as a continuation in more intense form of his separation from his native region. Therefore it is useful to consider his attitudes toward his first separation before we move in the next chapter to his experience in the United States.

Like many Vietnamese (and young people the world over), Võ Phiến left his village as a young man to further his education. He was thirteen when in 1938 he came to Qui

⁷⁵Võ Phiến quotes these lines by the poet Yến Lan in “Remembering My Village,” 1972, 10.

Nhon, the capital of Bình Định Province, to study and later he studied in Huế and Hanoi. In 1959, while working as head of the Information Office in Qui Nhon, he requested to be transferred to Saigon primarily to further his literary career. Few Vietnamese who leave their villages to seek fame and fortune intend to cut themselves off permanently from village life. That certainly was not Võ Phiến's intention. After the family the village has been throughout Vietnam's history the most important social unit. Though Vietnamese may move to the city, the village is where, in most cases, many close relatives and childhood friends still live, where their family's records are kept, and where the graves of their ancestors are located. Most Vietnamese living in cities feel obligated to maintain relations with their villages. They accomplish this by welcoming villagers who come to the city on business or for a family event—the anniversary of the death of a family member, for example—and by visiting their village when time and circumstance allow. Though Vietnamese may regard the maintaining of relations with one's village as a social duty, fulfilling this duty gives them a sense of satisfaction: it enhances their sense of belonging to a social unit larger than their immediate family. Because one's own identity is bound up with one's association with one's natal village, breaking this association can leave one feeling insecure, rootless, and alone. "For a Vietnamese," says Nguyễn Văn Huyền, author of *The Ancient Civilization of Vietnam*, "it is always honourable to have a village of origin in a province. Otherwise one will be labeled by a rather derogatory term, in the eyes of the villagers, *người tứ xứ*, or people of the four corners of the world" (1995, 70).

Võ Phiến's attitude toward village life is complicated. As we have seen, he does not romanticize the people he knew in Bình Định. His portraits of Bái Công and Assistant Village Chief Biên in "Returning to a Country Village," for example, are light and humorous but also condescending and just a little cruel. Mr. Three Thê At-The-Same-Time in *Saying Good-by* is also presented as a humorous character but also one who is morally suspect: he puts his daughter in the compromising

situation of having to solicit money from his male friends. At the end of this novel, the narrator, who shouldn't be identified with Võ Phiến but who probably resembles him, is more than ready to say good-bye to Bình Định. In his stories, Nguyễn Hưng Quốc says, Võ Phiến "loves the close and warm human relationships in rural areas, but he also sees the poverty, the feeling of being cooped up, the decline, the confusion, the pettiness, and the sadness" (1996, 163). Although Võ Phiến doesn't romanticize people from his village, he also doesn't judge them too harshly. He more often appears amused than alarmed by their foibles. "We often speak of Võ Phiến's habit of ridiculing people," says Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, "but it seems that, in his stories, he never ridicules weakness" (166). Though Võ Phiến may be tolerant of human weakness, his tolerance is not automatic or universal: he extends more tolerance to some villagers than others. Given the violent history of his home region, it would be easy to hand out a blanket amnesty, to blame every weakness, every unattractive personal trait, every moral lapse on the wars that rocked his homeland from 1945 until 1975. But Võ Phiến does not do this.

The more one understands what happened to the people of Bình Định the more one appreciates the temptations of a blanket amnesty. As explained in chapter I, during the first Indochina war Bình Định was controlled by the Việt Minh, and therefore subject to French paratroop raids and also the occasional large operation, like one called Operation Atlante in the spring of 1954. In this operation a large Franco-Vietnamese force tried to drive the Việt Minh from the coastal area between Nha Trang and Qui Nhon. After six weeks of fighting, this area remained in Việt Minh hands. When the American War heated up in the mid-'60s, pro-communist sentiment remained widespread in Bình Định. According to one estimate, in early 1965 "the Vietcong controlled ninety per cent of the provincial area [in Bình Định] and about seventy per cent of its nearly one million population" (Shaplen 1966, 326). Like the French before them, the Americans, working with Saigon government troops, tried to wrest this key coastal province out of Việt Cộng hands. In *The Lost Revolution*, Rob-

ert Shaplen describes the “Battle of Bình Định,” a struggle for control of major roadways that occurred in February, 1965. Having taken advantage of a Tết, or Lunar New Year, truce to move into position, communist troops seized control of both Route 1, the key north-south highway, and also Route 19, which connected Qui Nhon with Pleiku in the central highlands. (See map of Bình Định on p. 170.) Saigon government troops, with American air support, eventually gained temporary control of these major arteries, but only after heavy fighting (1966, 338).

To drive communist forces from Bình Định and the other central coastal provinces, the Americans devised a variety of strategies. Some areas were declared “free-fire zones,” meaning that anything there that moved could be bombed. The importing of more helicopters led to what were called “Eagle Flights,” sudden attacks by airlifted troops who would descend quickly on a village after it was first strafed by Sky-raidiers and attacked by rocket-carrying helicopter gunships. Robert Shaplen went on one of these Eagle Flights in early 1965. The objective was a village somewhere in the vicinity of Phù Cát, a town about fifteen miles south of Võ Phiến’s village. According to Shaplen, after the three dozen government soldiers and their American advisor disembarked from their choppers, this is what occurred:

There was little sign of life, the inhabitants apparently having fled, but eight bodies were found in the adjacent ditches and alongside the many fox-holes that had been dug. After carefully searching the twenty houses in the village, the troops set fire to all of them. Then, deploying through the fields, they found seven women and children cowering in or around the canals, and took them as prisoners. The operation, as is customary with Eagle Flights, lasted a little less than an hour, after which the helicopters, which had been circling nearby, landed again, picked up the troops, and returned to Phù Cát, with their fuel tanks almost empty. The prisoners, who were frightened and weeping, were

immediately questioned by Vietnamese interrogators, who sought information about the men of the village and the movements of the Vietcong contingents in the area. Afterward, I was told, the seven would be set free and sent to one of the government-held villages. (326)

Attacks such as these Eagle Flights uprooted large numbers of people. By August 1965, an estimated 85,000 people, roughly ten per cent of the population of the province, had already fled their homes (Sheehan 1988, 541).

In January 1966, the American forces launched an operation in Bình Định that would generate more refugees. Called Operation Masher, it focused on the plains and river valleys near Bồng Sơn (now called Hoài Nhơn), a town about twenty miles north of Võ Phiến's home district of Phù Mỹ. This offensive, which involved more than 20,000 American, Saigon, and South Korean troops, was the largest operation on Vietnam's central coast since France's Operation Atlante in 1954. The bulk of the fighting in Operation Masher was done by the Third Brigade of the First Cavalry Division, which was led by Colonel Harold G. Moore, the hero of the battles in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965 (and the subject of the movie *We Were Soldiers* starring Mel Gibson as Moore). The communist troops retreated into the mountains leaving behind several hundred dead, but neither of the two regiments involved, one composed of Việt Cộng regulars, the other of North Vietnamese army soldiers, was hurt badly enough to keep it out of action for long. Nevertheless, says Neil Sheehan in *Bright Shining Lie*, "the operation was appropriately named: the peasants got mashed" (582).

Just how badly they were mashed is made clear in *The Cat from Huế* by John Laurence who covered this operation for CBS News. In a series called "A Pacification Debacle," Laurence and his crew chronicled the misfortunes of some villagers from Kim Sơn, a village in Hoài Ân District about fifteen miles north of Võ Phiến's district of Phù Mỹ. The villagers told Laurence's Vietnamese colleague that while they were working in the fields the day before (12 February 1966),

bombs exploded in their village sending them to their shelters. "Then helicopters came over the houses," the villagers said, "and we heard machine guns and rockets. So much noise and smoke. The animals became wild and tried to run away. All of us were very frightened. Then there was the noise of many helicopters. Americans soldiers came into the hamlet running and shouting and shooting" (2002, 343).

The district chief of Hoài Ân, Captain Hai, informed the villagers that their village was going to be used as a field command post for the American Second Brigade of the First Cavalry Division, so they had to leave. The Americans would fly them to the district headquarters in Hoài Ân, he said, about ten miles away where they would be given medical attention. Unfortunately all the brigade choppers were busy with the operation and the villagers had to walk to Hoài Ân, a journey that took them two days. Laurence and his crew found them there. Since this operation drove six thousand refugees out of their homes in the An Lão Valley, the Hoài Ân refugee camp was already overcrowded when the villagers from Kim Son arrived. Here is how Laurence describes the situation of the Kim Son villagers in this camp, their new home:

They were sitting in hot airless barrack rooms with no windows. The camp appeared to date from the French Indochina War almost fifteen years earlier when villagers were systematically driven off their land for the same reasons. In this camp, about thirty people shared each room. The insides of the buildings smelled of stale food and urine and wood smoke from cooking fires burning indoors in the heat. Many of the people were sick. Some had wounds from shrapnel and bullets. The sickest and most seriously injured lay on their backs on straw mats on the dirt floor looking with weak laconic eyes at the ceiling as if waiting to die. Children cried. There were no toilets. The stench was so strong it stayed in our noses when we left the building. Outside, on an arid piece of sand-covered soil, small individual piles of human excrement were arranged on the ground in near even rows decom-

posing in the sun, fertilizer for some future crop.
There was not enough food. (349)

Despite all that happened to the people of Bình Định, in most stories and essays Võ Phiến portrays them not simply as victims but as individuals whose fate is determined primarily by their character and only secondarily by political and military events. In *Saying Good-by* the narrator pokes fun at Mr. Three Thê and his wife for blaming his lack of work on “the times” instead of on his love of leisure and the easy life:

To explain the life of the family, both wife and husband spoke of “the times.” For those who might demand precision it should be noted that “the times” referred to a quarter of a century and included feudal regimes, colonialism, French domination, the Japanese occupation, communism, republicanism, etc. Many regimes working together harmoniously, all sharing responsibility for Mr. Three Thê’s lack of employment. And as far as he was concerned, “the times” could happily continue for another quarter of a century. (24–25)

This passage suggests that Mr. Three Thê is basically lazy and averse to work and that even if he lived in more normal “times” he probably would still be unemployed, still chasing after his “se a-mi” (chers amis) for handouts. As the war intensified and showed no signs of ending, however, I believe Võ Phiến began to worry that people, even hard-working, capable people, would not be able to survive materially or psychologically. He became afraid that he might lose his village not only because it was being physically destroyed and was being abandoned but also because the spirit of villagers was being crushed. We get hints of these fears in earlier essays and stories and then they become more evident in later works, particularly in “Birds and Snakes,” a semi-autobiographical story written in 1967, and in “Homeland,” a *tùy bút* essay written during the Spring or Easter Offensive of 1972.

In "Again, a Letter from Home," Võ Phiến talks about changes in his village that he notices on trips home for weddings and funerals. On these trips he finds the festival area shrunk in size and the vegetation surrounding it sparse and dying. A descendent of a former canton chief now sells pork at the market, his head wrapped in a dirty cloth. Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm, the Confucian scholar, is extremely weak and ill. He bundles himself in an overcoat, wears socks pulled up to his knees, but still trembles when the wind blows. All these sad sights, Võ Phiến writes in 1962, "made my native village not the attractive place it was during the time when grandmother still lived" (107). On these trips home, he says, "I felt like a person who travels by train to a distant village on a moonlit night, watching the strange and mysterious scenery on both sides of the tracks, but then morning comes and I descend from the train at a run-down local station and see around me only dried up rice fields and burnt grass" (107–108).

Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm also appears in Võ Phiến's novel *Men* (1966). In this work he has become an even more pathetic character. The bad security in the village has forced him to come to Saigon where, as we saw in chapter II, he must ask Lê to take him in when his nephew loses his house after being arrested for draft-dodging. Mr. Degree-holder is a perfect example of a character whose troubles are largely of his own making, but "the times" have hurt him as well: he suffers because he fears he has lost his village forever, not just its physical structures but its "psychology" as well. Late one night he pours out his heart to Lê and her boyfriend Nghĩa, who is originally from north Vietnam:

Who of us is certain about being able to return and die in our village? You [Nghĩa] have come here from the North and have no hope of returning. Lê and I have come to the city from the country and now can't return because of the security situation. But suppose we could return—you, Nghĩa, to your home, I to mine—the old places wouldn't be there anymore. The necessities of war, of construction,

have removed them, moved this village, that house, built this hamlet, etc. But even if by some stroke of luck our village stood as before, we would still find a different psychology: this political movement following on that political movement, this massacre following this battle, . . . How many things can suddenly divide people. Even if we returned to the old scenery, we wouldn't find the old spirit, the old psychological situation. (81)

Vietnamese like Mr. Degree-holder who are forced out of their villages are separated not simply from a familiar physical landscape and from relatives and friends: they are also cut off from the past. Mr. Degree-holder is a special case, of course: he passed the old style mandarin exams based on Confucian texts at the last session held in Huế, i.e., at a time when the mandarin system and Confucianism were rapidly becoming passé. He survives as a living anachronism, a reminder of a time that is no more. Other characters also suffer from being cut off from the past, but he suffers more, and so he speaks with special authority. He doesn't blame the war alone for his loss of the past. He also blames his wandering ways. "Don't you see we really need to have a past," he tells Lê and her boyfriend. "But there's no way we can have a past when we lead a wandering life. We can't hold our past in the two pockets of a shirt, or carry it with us in a small brief case" (79–80). But Mr. Degree-holder knows the war is the major problem:

[T]he upheavals that have taken place in our society for the past ten years or so—they've pushed society away from the old ways of life. This society has been pushed away from the past, pushed into a wandering existence . . . Those who use the word "tradition" now, who cry out about tradition, they're liars. They're only blowing smoke. Words like that don't have any meaning any more. People use them because they sound good. (83)

‘Birds and Snakes’

Võ Phiến addresses the psychological effects of war on character more directly in “Birds and Snakes.” This story helps us understand why Võ Phiến felt he was losing the village he knew as a young man; it is also one of his best works and features perhaps his best-known female character. In an interview with the journal *Encyclopedic*, Võ Phiến says that this story was heavily censored. The pages came back from the office of censorship with many sentences and passages crossed out (1969, 408). Despite these constraints Võ Phiến was able to craft a powerful tale.

The story begins with the narrator considering, in a light and whimsical tone, this question: Why do people hate reptiles and love birds? Do people hate snakes because they are poisonous? This makes no sense. Lions are dangerous too but we admire their beauty. Do people prefer birds because of their soft feathers? Maybe, but why are people repulsed by the soft and cool skin of a gecko? The narrator considers the possibility that people hate reptiles because of Eve’s experience in the Garden of Eden, but finally settles on a more secular explanation, one based on our evolutionary history: People hate reptiles, the narrator suggests, because they are descended from them. Reptiles were the first “revolutionaries,” the first creatures to crawl out of the water and live on dry land where they not only survived but developed into dinosaurs and became lords of their new domain. If mammals, including people, hate them it could be because they are afflicted by something like an Oedipus complex, because they are rebelling against their powerful ancestors.

These thoughts come to the narrator when he remembers a woman from his village who was known as Sister Four Lime Stick (Chị Bốn Chìa Vôi), often shortened to “Chị Bốn” (Sister Four). No longer young, the narrator lives now in “the city” which he does not name. One morning he steps out on the porch of his home and notices a small drop of bird excrement on the leaf of an orchid, a surprising discovery because there are few birds in the city. This evidence that a bird lives nearby reminds him of Sister Four Lime Stick because many

years ago in his village she used to catch wild birds and give them to him. From birds his mind jumps to reptiles because unlike most people, particularly women, Sister Four Lime Stick was not afraid of snakes. A practical joker, sometimes she would put a snake in her pocket, close it with a pin, and then let it out when she was sitting close to some of her friends. She also liked to tell dirty jokes to her female friends while they were planting rice seedlings, and one time, the narrator remembers, she got a little too inspired and talked about events in her own bedroom and was beaten badly by her husband when he found out.

This tendency of Sister Four Lime Stick's to speak recklessly led to her unusual nickname. "Sister Four" reflects the custom, explained in the Introduction, of using kinship terms and kin numeratives in addressing people. She is called "Lime Stick" for more complicated reasons. A lime stick is a stick used to put lime on a betel leaf before one chews it with an areca nut. Chewing this mixture is an ancient custom in Vietnam (and China), one that leaves a pleasant taste in the mouth and colors the lips red. The lime used for betel chewing is kept in a container called a "*bình vôi*"—a lime pot. Sister Four's name when she was small was "*Bình*," which can mean "pot" or "vase" as in "*bình vôi*" but can also mean "calm" and "peaceful" as in the compound words "*hoà bình*" (peace) and "*bình tĩnh*" (calm, unruffled). Because when she grew up Sister Four turned into such a wild and vulgar talker, villagers felt that "*bình*," due to its suggestion of peace and calm, was an inappropriate way to address their rambunctious fellow villager. Her name (*Bình*) reminded them of a lime pot so they called her "*Chị Bốn Chìa Vôi*"—Sister Four Lime Stick.

Because she broke what the narrator calls "taboos" related to snakes and dirty jokes, many people, including people in the narrator's family, looked down on Sister Four Lime Stick, even though she insisted that she was related to them. People in the family could not figure out how she was related to them, but they treated her like a relative anyway. She visited them for Tết gatherings and anniversaries of deaths of

ancestors and helped out around the house when she had time. But clearly those in the narrator's family considered her beneath them socially, and the narrator admits to sharing this view, though, he says, he always marveled at her ability to catch wild birds. At first he thought that she was just lucky to find herself at the right spot at the right time—when someone plowing a field would stun a magpie with a stick while it was eating worms in a furrow, for example, or when a crane got caught in a thicket of bamboo after a wind and rain storm. Later he realized that more than luck was involved:

Actually, it wasn't true that there was no explanation for why Sister Four Lime Stick was always catching birds. You knew just by looking at her. Three out of five buttons on her shirt were missing, exposing her stomach and chest. Her head was messy, with hair colored reddish by the sun and strands sticking out behind in a disorderly ponytail. All day from the early morning to the dark of night she would run here and there exposed to the elements, gathering firewood, searching for field crabs, and picking up snails at the edge of ponds and streams and in the forest and hills. If there was something about the [security] situation that should be noticed, she was the first to notice it; if there was something that should be seen, she was the first to see it. Did Uncle Five Bowlegged have a rendezvous at the river with his brother's wife? Did the boys watching cows steal manioc roots from Mr. Tu's manioc patch and roast them on the hill? Was the bamboo that year full of flowers? Did the field mice meet a west wind and lie dead in the caves? Was the fruit of the *trâm* tree behind the village hall ripe yet? There was nothing Sister Four Lime Stick didn't know. So she often caught not only birds but also wild chickens sitting on eggs and would pick up the entire nest and eggs. And she would see male and female snakes rolling around together and return to the village and tell everyone about them and about how she once found some bats in

the tip of a banana tree, saw two foxes biting each other, etc. (302)

After musing about birds and reptiles and introducing Sister Four Lime Stick, the narrator describes what happened to her when security in their village deteriorated. It is a complicated tale, one that conveys the agony of a war that divided friends and family members. When the security situation worsens, the narrator's family decides to leave the village and move to the provincial seat. Unable to conceive of living in a city, Sister Four Lime Stick stays in the village. She promises to look after a house and livestock belonging to the narrator's family. Three months later one village chief is kidnapped by communist forces and taken to the mountains. He is replaced by Uncle Four Huệ, whom villagers called Uncle Four Wilted Lily because although "Huệ" means "Lily" and suggests something beautiful, Uncle Four Huệ had a twisted smile that reminded villagers of a wilting lily petal. After serving only a brief time, Uncle Four Wilted Lily flees to the district headquarters and the village is taken over by an administrative committee of the liberation forces. From the district headquarters Uncle Four mounts raids on the village with soldiers belonging to regional forces fighting for the Nationalist government.

Struggling to survive and feed her family in this confused political situation, Sister Four Lime Stick cuts a deal with Uncle Four Wilted Lily, the village chief (in exile). She agrees to pay him if he will let her use his rice fields. This agreement gets her in trouble with cadre belonging to the liberation movement. Her deal especially bothers Sister Four's niece, Sáu Ty, who has joined the revolution: she accuses her of taking land that belongs to the people. Sáu Ty's mother died when she was young and Sister Four used to help take care of her by giving her baths and washing his clothes. Sáu Ty's hatred for her puzzles Sister Four. "She couldn't understand the political reasoning behind it," the narrator explains (307). The day after Sáu Ty accuses Sister Four, the village

administration takes the land that Sister Four was tilling and gives it to another villager.

This is just the beginning of Sister Four's troubles. Her seventeen-year-old son joins the liberation forces. Then her husband is killed, "cut exactly in half," when the village is bombed by an airplane belonging to the Nationalist forces. Then Sáu Ty, her niece, is killed, not in the bombing raid but by villagers—it is not made clear which villagers—because they decide "she owed the people for too many debts, and she had to pay" (311). When Sister Four goes to help bury her, a grenade planted under her niece's neck goes off. She picks up the pieces and washes and clothes her niece's now headless body just as she washed a healthy Sáu Ty when she was a young girl. When Nationalist forces return and camp in the village, a liberation soldier named Buóm asks to marry Sister Four's daughter before he leaves for the mountains, but Sister Four refuses. Later her daughter decides to marry a non-commissioned officer in the Nationalist army. At her wedding someone—Sister Four later tells the narrator it was Buóm—throws a grenade into the wedding party. Sister Four's daughter is not injured but her future husband is killed instantly, and Sister Four loses half of one leg and suffers shrapnel wounds all over her body. More than half of her house is destroyed. Sister Four spends some time in the hospital at the provincial seat and then returns on crutches to the village.

Three months later reports reach the narrator that Sister Four now "stood with the side determined to make those responsible pay for what they had done." She had become fierce, "like a tiger with a clubfoot" (313). Rumors circulate implicating her in her niece Sáu Ty's death and in two attacks on Buóm, the unsuccessful seeker of her daughter's hand whom she blames for the grenade attack. The narrator describes how war changed Sister Four and people like her:

A quarter of a century before one saw in people like Sister Four Lime Stick only cunning, callousness, and crudeness of speech. These aren't

noble and desirable characteristics, but a quarter century later one noticed in Sister Four Lime Stick something very worrisome. Did she really have a hand in killing Sáu Ty? I don't dare to believe completely the rumors spread by many people. But when Sister Four Lime Stick ended her account of the death of Sáu Ty by saying "I loved her, I loved her a lot," there was something scary in her facial expression and tone of voice. Did she or didn't she kill someone, did she or didn't she "demand that debts be paid"? There was no proof, no way of knowing anything for certain in that chaotic place. But in her soul clearly a new element now existed, and it altered her way of talking and changed her demeanor in a frightening way. (315)

The narrator blames the war's length for causing these changes in Sister Four Lime Stick. If the killing lasted for a hundred hours, or two hundred hours, one could recover, but "if the killing lasts for a quarter of a century, could it become a habit," he asks, "a way of life, that causes psychological damage?" (316). Clearly he thinks it could, and so he does not blame Sister Four: "How could she prevent," he asks, "influence from a context of violence from infecting her soul?" (316).

The narrator suggests, however, that all souls are not equal. He describes Sister Four and presents the key events in her life from a particular perspective—that of a member of the landowning class. Though they are from the same village, Sister Four and the narrator are not economic or social equals. Probably Sister Four owns no land; certainly she belongs to the working class. When the harvests failed one year, Sister Four's family could not survive and she moved in with the narrator's family, bringing her two youngest children with her. The narrator's family could help Sister Four because they owned livestock and land, wealth which the communists later "liberated" and shared with the people, including Sister Four who got one of the family's cows and two sections of land.

But it is not simply that Sister Four is a member of the working class and is poor, illiterate, and uneducated. Many

people in the narrator's village fit this description. Sister Four is considerably rougher than the average poor villager, more willing to challenge "taboos" like those against reptiles and vulgar speech. In one section of "Birds and Snakes" the narrator, using a tongue-in-cheek style and ironic tone, attempts to "find a revolutionary meaning in her attitude" (300). Marxist researchers, he says, argue that in feudal times when the proletariat uttered profanities they were "throwing those profanities into the faces of the rich intellectuals" (299). But many belong to the working class, he says, so one has to ask "how a spirit of rebellion could be kindled in the mind of a person who is wretchedly poor and lives in a rundown house, a woman who is sloppy and untidy and has sagging breasts. Isn't that a special honor for Sister Four Lime Stick?" (301).

But the narrator is only half serious. Sister Four is not a real revolutionary. If she were, he would not admire her as much as he does. The real revolutionaries are people like Sáu Ty and Buồm and Ba Thiên, the leader of the liberation faction in the village who was married to Buồm's older sister. Given Võ Phiến's own political views, it is not surprising that the most unforgivable acts are committed by this trio. Buồm throws the grenade into the wedding party. Sáu Ty deprives Sister Four, who cared for her as a child, of her livelihood. Also, according to Sister Four, Sáu Ty slept with both Buồm and Ba Thiên! (She told the narrator's aunt that she saw Sáu Ty's wet, presumably semen-stained, underpants.) No, Sister Four is not a political revolutionary. She told dirty stories not to make a political statement, but to entertain her friends. "I never saw Sister Four Lime Stick throw profanities at rulers," the narrator says. "I only saw her speak crudely when she was chatting while working" in the rice paddies (299). The narrator suggests that "political reasoning," which her niece Sáu Ty was fully capable of, was beyond Sister Four Lime Stick (307).

The narrator's own class background and his attitude toward the working class are revealed in a passage near the end of the story: "Is a hatred of reptiles," he asks, "a psychological vestige of prehistoric life? Setting that careless story

aside, one can still think that a tendency to oppose taboos emerges from the way of life of the working class. If we're not lucky and this situation of mutual destruction continues for a long time, it will again leave a mark on the soul" (316). In this passage the narrator seems to be suggesting that if exposed to prolonged violence, members of the working class will more easily set aside taboos against killing other human beings than will members of higher classes. In other words, he fears that people like Sister Four will drop the taboo against killing one's own kind just as she has disregarded taboos against fearing reptiles and avoiding vulgar speech. Why would working class members be so willing to drop taboos? Earlier in his account, the narrator suggests it is because they are more logical, more reasonable: "People fear kind and harmless animals, fear them in an illogical way; but Sister Four Lime Stick wasn't illogical" (297). Being uneducated can, in one sense, be a blessing because education, at least traditional education, encourages illogical taboos: "Learned scholars are always at the top of the list of those who fear snakes and house lizards and vulgar speech," the narrator says (300). Apparently the narrator fears that years of war may encourage the working class to see other taboos, even those that hold society together, like the one against killing other people, as equally illogical.

What the narrator doesn't consider is that certain practices related to land distribution may be just as illogical as taboos against snakes and vulgarity and some people may consider it more important to challenge them than harmless taboos against snakes and dirty jokes. The narrator admires Sister Four Lime Stick because for her, unlike her niece Sáu Ty, family loyalties and human relationships are more important than politics. In this sense she resembles Võ Phiến, her creator. But Võ Phiến's narrator may also remember Sister Four Lime Stick fondly because unlike Sáu Ty's revolution, her "revolution"—against fearing reptiles, against polite speech—does not threaten his own economic situation.

After speculating about the effects of prolonged violence on Sister Four Lime Stick's soul, the narrator, apparently fearing he is getting much too serious, says that "while he wor-

ries about Sister Four Lime Stick he also realizes that reflections that originate from a trace of excrement tend to be pessimistic" (317). And then he follows that apparent disclaimer with an embarrassing admission. On his desk he discovers some droppings from a house lizard that are identical to those he found on the orchid leaf. "Oh, dear," he says, "to confuse birds with reptiles. It's an unforgivable mistake. At the end of the year, I record one more sloppy and unfortunate error" (317). Though this is Võ Phiến's narrator speaking, he sounds like Võ Phiến the writer. Similar oscillations between seriousness and playfulness occur in many essays. Pulling back from a bold assertion, returning to playfulness and self-deprecation after some serious talk, is a characteristic of Võ Phiến's style.

But, as is often the case, this is not playfulness solely for the sake of playfulness. In "Birds and Snakes" the narrator does not receive first hand or verifiable information about Sister Four Lime Stick. Everything is hearsay, rumors: "[P]eople said that now she was like a club-footed tiger. That her ferocity was unequalled. . . . [that] Bướm was attacked twice based on information she supplied (313). . . . Did she really have a hand in killing Sáu Ty? I don't dare to believe completely the rumors spread by many people. . . . Did she or didn't she kill someone, did she or didn't she 'demand that debts be paid'? There was no proof, no way of knowing anything for certain in that chaotic place" (315). Even when one examines something with one's own eyes—bird droppings on a leaf, for example—one could be wrong. Mistakes are possible. "Birds and snakes," says Đặng Tiến, expresses the author's "relativist attitude": "The good and the bad, the right and the wrong, the truth and the falsehood—at times they are also like 'a white spot on the leaf of an orchid'" (1993, 165).

Some of Võ Phiến's characters—Sister Lộc in "Again, a Letter from Home," for example, and Sister Four Lime Stick in "Birds and Snakes"—have an autochthonous quality: they are so attached to the land and depend on it so heavily for their livelihood that they seem to have emerged from it, or to at least be inseparable from it, as close to it as the animals—the

field crabs, snails, and birds—that live with them in the fields and hills. For them, as for indigenous plants and animals, their village is their native land. Because Sister Lộc has this relationship to the land, Brother Four No More’s memorial for her—a chunk of clay that has her footprint in it next to that of an egret and a field crab—is perfectly appropriate. Sister Four catches birds and sees animals everywhere because she is, like them, a part of the landscape. Though at the end of “Birds and Snakes” the narrator asks the reader to set aside his careless account of evolution, Võ Phiến included it for a reason. Though he does not say Sister Four Lime Stick emerges from the earth like the first reptiles emerged from the sea, he wants us to compare her struggles to adapt to a harsh environment with those of our ancestors. Very possibly Sister Four Lime Stick gets along well with reptiles because she can empathize with their struggle better than those who have lived easier lives. Võ Phiến also opens his story with this evolutionary tale because he wants us to consider whether endless war may be causing changes in the psyches of villagers like Sister Four Lime Stick that are comparable to changes that have occurred in the evolution of human consciousness. Though he gets playful in the end, “Birds and Snakes” is a pessimistic tale. In it Võ Phiến expresses his despair about what has happened to his village. If war has poisoned the mind of Sister Four Lime Stick, someone who personifies the spirit of his village, then, Võ Phiến fears, it has taken his village from him.

‘Remembering My Village’

Five years after he wrote “Birds and Snakes,” Võ Phiến is in even deeper despair about the future of his village. He opens a *tùy bút* essay, “Remembering My Village,” published in 1972, with these lines from a poem by Yến Lan, a poet from Bình Định slightly older than Võ Phiến:

Here where the sun has just began to soften;
A tall coconut palm, a winding branch of the Chinaberry tree,
A trail perched high in the hills;
I go with my shadow my only companion.

Võ Phiến appreciates these lines because they remind him of his home village. But now—June 1972—the lines by Yến Lan that move him are those that I have made the epigraph for this chapter because now, he says, “Truly, I no longer have a village” (122).

What led him to that conclusion were reports in early June of ferocious fighting in his home district of Phù Mỹ. Not just in his home district. In his home village! “Where is my village?” he asks:

My village is exactly at that location that military reports on the radio have mentioned twenty times a day at the beginning of this month, reports that have appeared also on the front pages of newspapers issued each afternoon in countries everywhere. Exactly at that place two or three kilometers southwest of the Phù Mỹ district seat. The place where the other side’s 3rd NVA “Yellow Star” Division and this side’s 41st Regiment and 22nd Division have fought hard night and day under the watchful eye of international news agencies. The place that John Paul Vann said North Vietnamese authorities were determined to invade in order to achieve a political victory as they did by taking the provincial capital of Quảng Trị . . . The place also where a Phantom was shot down while providing air support. (122)

Võ Phiến is right: his district *was* prominently featured in the international press. Reports in *The New York Times*, for example, like the one by Fox Butterfield for the June 5 edition reproduced on p. 191, describe the attack on Phù Mỹ, which South Vietnam troops with U.S. air support apparently repulsed. A report by Joseph Treaster that appeared on June 6 describes “encounters ranging from a half mile to about three miles from the town [of Phù Mỹ],” a radius that would include Võ Phiến’s village. Treaster also mentions the crash of the Phantom: “One of the American planes supporting the Government troops at Phumy [Phù Mỹ]—a marine F-4 Phantom—crashed, and the pilot and navigator were killed.” In

From an article written by Fox Butterfield for the *New York Times* on June 5, 1972 titled "Foe Attacks Town on Vietnam Coast: 60 Enemy Reported Killed in Assault, Which May Signal New Drive in Binh Dinh":

North Vietnamese troops attacked a district capital in populous Binh Dinh Province on the central coast yesterday... The attack on the town of Phoumy was repulsed after air strikes reportedly killed 60 enemy soldiers, but it appeared that the North Vietnamese might now be renewing their drive to seize the Government held areas of Binh Dinh. A month ago they took control of half of the province.

Lull Continues

The South Vietnamese defenders, remnants of the battered 22nd Division are considered by experienced military observers to be shaky. There were fears among officers in Saigon that the enemy might push on toward the port city of Quinhon, 25 miles to the south, where the vital highway to the Central Highlands begins. The lull in the fighting on the three major fronts – at Hue in the north, Kontum on the Central Highlands and Anloc north of Saigon – continued with no major attacks reported by either side...

a dispatch that appeared in *The New York Times* on June 7, Malcolm W. Browne reports that on June 6 the town of Phù Mỹ was “briefly occupied by enemy troops,” so apparently attacks continued after Butterfield and Treaster filed their reports.

The fighting in Võ Phiến’s village was part of the Easter Offensive, the largest engagement of the Vietnam War. The Americans call it the Easter Offensive because it began with attacks across the DMZ on 30 March 1972, three days before Easter. The North Vietnamese call it the Nguyễn Huệ campaign after a national hero who in 1789 defeated Chinese troops near Hanoi. Because key battles were fought during the summer, South Vietnamese often refer to it as the “fiery red summer.”⁷⁶ Attacks occurred in three regions: in Quảng Trị Province near the DMZ in northern South Vietnam; in Bình Định and Pleiku provinces in central South Vietnam; and in Binh Long Province seventy-five miles north of Saigon.

These were perilous times for the Saigon regime. Nixon’s Vietnamization strategy that had Vietnamese government forces doing the fighting aided by U.S. advisors and air support was being put to the test. The legendary John Paul Vann, the Americans’ most famous advisor, though technically a civilian, was trying to orchestrate the South Vietnamese opposition to the communist offensive in Kontum and Bình Định in his capacity as director of the Second Regional Assistance Command. Quảng Trị fell in early May; An Lộc, the capital of Binh Long Province, was under siege as was Kontum in the central highlands; and in Bình Định communist forces in late April and early May had captured most of the northern half of the province, the area fought over in Operation Masher six years before, and the region that Vann had boasted of pacifying in a memorandum he sent to friends and reporters on April 12, 1972 (Sheehan 1988, 759). The communist offensive ultimately stagnated. Although coastal Bình Định was never pacified, Quảng Trị was eventually retaken and Kontum and An Lộc never fell. Most historians ascribe the South Viet-

⁷⁶This was the title of a popular account of these battles by a South Vietnamese war correspondent named Phan Nhật Nam. See Schafer 1999.

namese success⁷⁷ to a combination of courageous fighting by some South Vietnamese units and close air support provided by the U.S. military, air support like that being supplied by the American Phantom before it was shot down in Phù Mỹ (Andradé 1995 and Lâm Quang Thi 1986).

"Remembering My Village" is a rambling essay, associative in structure—a typical *tùy bút* essay in this sense. The newspaper articles Võ Phiến sees in Saigon, the "Proustian moment" for this essay, remind him of a visit to Qui Nhon he had made the year before. On this visit he meets a fellow villager, one who appears in several Võ Phiến stories, the person known as Brother Broken Tea Kettle Spout (Anh Ấm Sứt). He got this name when he learned from an elder in the village that one of his paternal ancestors had a royal title and so if he paid the village a small amount of money he could inherit the privilege of not having to do corvée labor. Since the name for this privilege, *ấm*, and the word for tea pot, also *ấm*, were homonyms, the villagers called him Brother Broken Tea Kettle Spout, to let him know that while they didn't begrudge him his privilege, they didn't want him to get a swelled head about it either ("Birds and Snakes," 298).

Because they have not met for seven or eight years, Brother Ấm catches Võ Phiến up on some key events in his life—how in 1966 he was taken from the village by liberation forces and forced to carry their wounded, how he escaped during a battle, and how he got his present job—working for the Americans on construction projects.

Brother Ấm tells Võ Phiến about a man from a village near theirs, an assistant village chief named Brother Five Hà, a man people are talking about because he had recently shot many people in his village, including some who were younger than seventeen. Võ Phiến tells Brother Five Hà's life story, how despite being unattractive physically—sunken cheeks,

⁷⁷The other side also claims success. According to an account released by the People's Army Publishing House in Hanoi, the Nguyễn Huệ campaign forced Nixon to "re-Americanize" the war—to bring advisors back into action at the regimental level and to provide extensive air and naval support for the "puppet army." In other words, the offensive thwarted Nixon's "Vietnamization strategy" (War Experiences Recapitulation Committee, 1980/1982, 148).

short and skinny—and bothered by a speech impediment, he managed to marry an attractive wife. After his marriage he threw himself into the resistance against the French until he discovered his wife sleeping with the head of a company of liberation troops who was boarding in his house. After the first Indochina war ended, he was pressed into service for the Nationalist government, the side he was on when he shot the villagers. Võ Phiến presents Brother Five Hà as another example of how war has poisoned the mind of villagers. He tells how Brother Five Hà survived a grenade attack, how he was caught once by liberation forces but escaped, losing his arm in the process. Võ Phiến suggests that Brother Five Hà eventually snapped: his wife's infidelity and years of violence eventually pushed him over the edge.

In "Remembering My Village" Võ Phiến expresses his amazement and sadness that his small little village, this modest place with its poor villagers, could become the focal point of the war. He wonders where that phantom jet fell:

Did it fall near that pond where late at night Brother
Four No More's wife met the dirty frog fisherman?
Or on the root of the *mu* tree where Sister Four
Lime Stick once found that nest of starlings? Or
on the soapberry tree behind the house of Bái Công
where each evening the old man, skinny as a stick,
tended a flickering fire to cook mash for his pigs?
Who would have guessed that such places as these
would have a chance to greet a jet from the United
States! (11–12)

In expressing the pain he feels about what is happening in his village, Võ Phiến contrasts lines from Yến Lan's peaceful poem about his village, which I quoted earlier, with the same poet's mournful lines that are the epigraph for this chapter:

After days like this, what could be left of my vil-
lage? Of those gentle villages with "a tall coconut
palm, a winding branch of the chinaberry tree"! . . .
After these terrifying days at the beginning of June,

I think about my village, about how distant and mysterious it has become. I can only remember it, "I can't see it" [không thấy làng đầu], nor do I have any hope of understanding it. (13, 30)

The Coldness of the City

In 1962 Võ Phiến wrote a ghost story. Titled "Until the Ghost Dies," it is about a very frustrated ghost who tries to do a decent job of haunting a traveling medicine salesman. He fails, however, managing only some very inferior haunting, like sending some mice to pester the salesman. The man the ghost tries to haunt is a very modern medicine man. He drives a Peugeot and uses a loudspeaker and a phonograph with a battery-operated amplifier to hawk his wares as he travels from village to village. The ghost follows him to Saigon where the man, who also sells used cars, becomes a whirlwind of activity, relying heavily on his watch and a daily schedule book to keep his appointments. The ghost realizes that to haunt this fast-moving salesman properly he would have to adopt his frenetic pace, start recording the man's activities in a notebook of his own, and do other things that he is simply not up to doing. Though the ghost fails, he captures the sympathy of the reader, who is encouraged to share the ghost's fears that the modern city with its fast pace, bright lights and busy streets threatens not only life but death as well.

In this story Võ Phiến attacks urban life in a humorous manner. In other stories and essays his attacks become much more serious. The loneliness of city life is a major theme of his novel *Alone*, written in 1963, and he returns to this theme in many stories and essays written during the years 1965–1975. To show how Võ Phiến treated urban life before he came to the United States, we will return briefly to some works already discussed — *Alone*, for example — but we will be looking mostly at some stories and *tùy bút* narrative essays not yet discussed that appeared in *Illusion* (1967) and *Changing World* (1969). Though he doesn't always make it a major theme, Võ Phiến explores the deleterious effect of city life in almost every selection in these two collections. In that 1968

interview referred to in chapter II, Võ Phiến says that *Alone*, *Men*, and *Illusion* were written after he escaped his obsession with politics ("Talking with *Literature*," 371). *Changing World* was published in 1969. All four works, but especially *Alone*, *Illusion*, and *Changing World*, suggest that Võ Phiến's new obsession was the coldness of life in a crowded, ugly, noisy, and busy city like Saigon.

Võ Phiến felt exiled in Saigon before he became an exile in America in part because, as we have seen, he felt that he had lost his village. It had been physically destroyed and the psyches of those who had lived there, both of those who stayed in the village and those who had become refugees elsewhere, had been de-stabilized and so there was no village left for him to visit. He therefore felt permanently exiled from it. But he also felt exiled in Saigon because he did not like city life. The sadness of his in-country exile could have been greatly reduced if the city were not such a cold and lonely place.

We can summarize Võ Phiến's view of city life by looking at oppositions that he constructs in essays and stories. The primary opposition is between village and city, but this overarching opposition can be broken down as follows:

Village	City
Slow-paced but interesting	Fast-paced but boring, enervating
Quiet	Noisy
Open, sparsely settled, roomy	Confining, crowded, claustrophobic
Warm, emotional, communal	Cold, rational (logic of market place predominates), lonely
Beautiful, natural, fragrant	Ugly, manufactured, bad-smelling
Past	Present
Youth	Middle-age, adulthood

Both poles of the opposition are not developed in every essay or story. In some works about city life the contrast with village life may be only implied. More commonly, however, Võ Phiến or one of his main characters is struggling with city life and something—bubbles on a mustache, drop-pings on a leaf, a hawker's cry—reminds him of people in

Bình Định and events that occurred there. Võ Phiến does not set up all seven of these oppositions in a single essay or story. Usually he emphasizes only one or two in each work. In *Alone*, for example, Võ Phiến stresses, as the title indicates, the loneliness of city life and the problems of middle-age—loss of vitality, self-confidence, an interest in life. Hữu and his fellow workers are locked in their own worlds. They talk to each other but it is desultory talk that does not bring them together in any meaningful way. Their jobs are boring, enervating. Several times, using similar language and imagery, Võ Phiến describes Hữu and his fellow workers walking up stairs to their offices like automatons, casting shadows on the wall that “pull each other like soldiers on the face of a toy lamp” (109, 175–76, 247, 305).

Hữu sees his mid-life crisis as brought on partly by a change in the way human transactions are conducted. He remembers that when he was a young man in Nha Trang he could communicate with gestures: “[A] light tap of his hand on the dry palm-leaf roof of Hồng’s [his girlfriend] home would set her heart racing and bring excitement to noontime.” But now “the only relations he still had with the outside world and people around him were commercial, practical, and essential” (275). Hữu struggles to make his relationship with the prostitute Nga something more than a commercial relationship, but only partially succeeds. Perhaps Hữu’s problem is that Hữu has adopted the American style of love that in a 1965 essay, “The Way of Love Today,” Võ Phiến describes as quick and focused on sex—on getting quickly to the “thực chất” (real thing). Loving in such a direct and practical way, Võ Phiến says, is not only dissatisfying, it is inartistic because “art involves slow, useless gestures that are peripheral to the real thing. An artist tries to live in a way that prolongs time, postpones the engagement with the real thing until it is difficult to know what is primary and what is secondary” (268).

In several stories and essays Võ Phiến or his main character meets other villagers in the city, refugees from the fighting. Sometimes these are people who have come from the main character’s village, sometimes they come from some

other village. Often they are scarred, if not physically then certainly emotionally, by the war. In "Again, a Letter from Home" Võ Phiến meets the former orderly who had abused Sister Lộc, Brother Four No More's second wife. An old man now, he is lost in the city and remains in Saigon only because as a former assistant village chief for the Saigon regime he is afraid he will be killed by Việt Cộng agents if he returns to Bình Định. He lies for hours under a hot tin roof in a sister's house, and finally, as Tết approaches, homesickness becomes stronger than his fear of death, and he decides to return to the village. In Võ Phiến's novella *Men*, Mr. Degree-holder is lost and homesick for village life when Lê takes him in.

In "Drops of Coffee" the main character meets men he knew in his home province, men struggling as he is to stitch the different "patches" of their lives together to make a whole. They do not seem to be succeeding. A barber, a man the main character knew in the resistance, now talks in an obsequious and unnatural way. The main character wonders what has happened to him to alter his personality so drastically. The cafe where the main character eats beef noodle soup and drinks coffee is a strange place. It is owned by a former head of a police unit known by the main character in his home province. The owner has lost one leg. On the surface the cafe looks normal, but when the main character peaks through a window into a back room, he hears people crying and old people talking incessantly and sees a couple sneaking up the back stairs. "The more he visited this cafe the more he felt that beneath the surface of the owner's life there lay great misery and deep troubles" (180).

It is difficult for troubled people like the barber and the cafe owner to seek help and comfort because "in the city it's not easy," the main character in "Drops of Coffee" observes, "to intrude in the lives of others; even though you meet regularly, each life remains separate" (180).

In a *tùy bút* essay called "The Coldness of the City" Võ Phiến describes a neighbor of his in Saigon, an old man who was about to move with his family to another district in the city. Though this man has lived across the street from Võ

Phiến for over ten years, he says good-by to only two people. Many days passed before most people in the neighborhood knew the family had moved. In this same essay he mentions reading a letter in a newspaper in which a woman offers a reward to anyone who can find her dog Phi Phi. The woman, who is childless, is beside herself with grief for her pet; she cries all the time and feels as if she has lost a child. If this woman lived in the village, Võ Phiến says, neighborly spirit would fill the void caused by the loss of her dog. "The life of people in the city, how small, how anonymous it is," Võ Phiến concludes; "how weak and indifferent the feeling between people" (1973, 45).

Võ Phiến presents a paradoxical situation: in the city people have become close in a physical sense but remain distant emotionally. In "The Way of Loving Today" Võ Phiến says the American way of love is coming to Vietnam's cities in large part because city dwellers are hemmed in by concrete and cooped up in small rooms. In the city there is electricity, ice cream, and movies, conveniences not available in the countryside, but in the city:

all year long people don't have any contact with nature. Around them there's only steel, cement, asphalt, and the smell of gasoline. People are crowded like ants, packed together tightly on the streets and in neighborhoods, but they don't have any relatives nearby. Though they live side by side, separated only by a wall, people treat each other coldly, rarely showing affection or a desire to help each other. Each person is an anonymous unit, lost in the rush of the uncaring crowd; each person proceeds alone, abandoned, orphaned.

To avoid loneliness city people, men and women, search out each other, but not in a context of gentle breezes and soft moonlight, when they are relaxed and their hearts are at ease, but in the midst of the noise, dust, meanness and hurry of city life. The meetings are urgent, not relaxed. It's no longer about appreciating love but about escaping the sense that one has been abandoned; it's about

escaping from an indifferent technology. (1966, 279–80)

Physical closeness leads to emotional distance. This is one paradox of city life. In “When One Stops Resting,” Võ Phiến’s main character encounters another. He discovers that the only way to rest in the city is to stop trying to rest, to give up on the idea of sleeping and instead look out and contemplate the moon. He has to turn to “cold and indifferent nature” for peace because social life has become overwhelming, because “people are being smothered by people” (205). In primitive times, he thinks, people felt lost in the natural world and thirsted for companionship. Now the situation is different. Now we shy away from human contact. The main character remembers an incident that he had just witnessed at noontime. It involved a school girl who, after trying unsuccessfully to get a seat on a crowded “xe Lam” (a three-wheeled Lambretta taxi), returned to the edge of the road where she held her hand over her mouth and coughed softly, a gesture that, the main character thinks, indicated not sickness but her distaste at having the other passengers pay attention to her. “People don’t have to do much,” he concludes. “Just by looking they make us feel insecure. Society everyday is getting more crowded; everyday meetings, contacts, and encounters with our fellow humans are becoming more numerous and closer. Everyone is always insecure” (204).

Insecure and also exhausted. When they get to the city, Võ Phiến’s characters are overcome with a physical weariness that is associated with a weariness of the soul. After a night of singing at Uncle Seven’s home in the village, the main character in “Drops of Coffee” did not feel tired, but now that he is “in the city, and older, late night partying and singing usually leave him feeling physically exhausted the next morning, and this feeling spreads to his soul” (177). It is partly age, Võ Phiến’s city characters are not young anymore, but their busy work schedules are part of the problem. Tù in “A Day to Dispose of” is frustrated because he is as busy as that ghost in Võ Phiến’s ghost story. “Not one day belonged

to him, just for him to dispose of. Making a living was robbing him of his life" (23). In this story Tu plans exactly how he would "dispose of " a free day if he got one. He would go to the renovated folk theater, eat some fish soup at the Old Market, then come home and read a Chinese novel and play his guitar. Then he would go to bed and when he woke up a dawn he would leisurely make love to his wife if she were in the mood. But given his busy schedule, all this is wishful thinking.

Probably Võ Phiến's exhausted characters reflect his own situation while he was writing the stories and essays in *Illusion* and *Changing World*. The title of this second collection is fitting: Võ Phiến's world *was* changing. In his 1988 interview with Đào Huy Đán he says he began writing in the *tùy bút* form in the late '60s because he did not have enough time to write fiction. His duties related to the journal *Encyclopedic* took a lot of his time. "Then came the hard economic years," he continues. "Prices were rising making it difficult for civil servants on fixed incomes to support themselves" ("Talking with *Village of Literature*," 23). A civil servant himself, Võ Phiến had to write articles to supplement his income. Inflation was only one of the crises affecting South Vietnamese in the late 60s. Võ Phiến provides a long list of other crises and distractions in "When One Stops Resting": "From early in the morning when you open your eyes until late at night when you close them your mind can't escape news about society: fighting, robbery, stories about loving and killing, inflation, heart surgery, starvation, strikes, protests, jealousy, coup d'etat's, etc." (201).

Võ Phiến's sees Western influence as contributing to the general exhaustion. In "Leisure and Elegance" (1973) he worries that if this influence continues Vietnamese will not slow down even if they are lucky enough to get some leisure time. In this essay Võ Phiến laments the fact that Vietnamese are setting aside traditional forms of leisure, which are slower, less frenetic, and therefore more elegant (carefully tending a potted plant, for example) for modern fast-paced and less elegant forms imported from the West (tennis, soccer,

jumping around on the dance floor). Võ Phiến is convinced that “speed in the life of industrial societies has left its mark on the soul of Westerners,” and he fears it was now leaving its mark on the Vietnamese soul as well (51).

The noise of the city is opposed to the quiet of the countryside in “*Ế ị*” and “A Truly Quiet Place.” *Đỗ*, the main character in “*Ế ị*,” has a low tolerance for noise and so he has suffered ever since he moved to Saigon where, we learn, even late at night the decibel level surpasses fifty, and that is when no military vehicles or jets are passing by. We soon learn, however, that all sounds are not equal. One morning *Đỗ* is sitting on his rooftop terrace trying to enjoy a quiet cup of coffee. It is a bit of a struggle because the traffic passing by on the street below is noisy and a neighbor is burning old papers and ash is falling on his table and hair. But he “forgives” these annoyances, and just as he does the cry of a woman hawking her wares drifts up to him from the streets below. “*Hế ê ị ị ị!*” cries this woman whom he cannot see. This sound, not of a noisy modern machine but of the human voice—this sound he can appreciate because it is a human sound and because it connects him to the past, especially to village life:

That was an unusual sound. He felt that it was lost in the city. It also wasn’t of this century. He didn’t know what she was hawking. The accent was that of a blind street singer, very pure. But was this person selling food? Offering to tell a person’s fortune? Selling chicken feather brooms? Several times he tried to find out. He ran down to the street below but the seller would turn into an alley and vanish. But it didn’t matter what she was selling. What was important was her cry. It rose in this part of the city like a skylark in the field. Both made the sky more blue, the sun brighter, and the silver clouds drift higher. (164–165)

In “*Ế ị*” Võ Phiến demonstrates his typical passion for detail by having his narrator break the hawker’s cry down

into its individual sounds. This fine analysis is necessary to reveal why this cry reminds the main character of village life:

He just connected this hawker's cry with the countryside. Truly there was a connection. *Hế*. . . *ê*. . . Yes, you can find a *hế* anywhere. But the *ị ị*. . . , the long tail of that sound was not of the city. Here a vendor's cry couldn't be so prolonged, so leisurely, so calm, so inviting while at the same time pleased with each of its small vibrations. This was a vendor's cry full of self-confidence, a dignified cry, and in the villages and hamlets, in peaceful gardens behind bamboo hedges, there would always be ears waiting to hear it, to follow its long series of vibrations. It wouldn't disintegrate uselessly in the indifferent noise and heat as it does here. (165)

Đỗ forgets the vendor's cry but then one day he comes upon an accident at an intersection. A "GMC," the Vietnamese term for truck (because many trucks the Americans brought to Vietnam were made by the General Motors Corporation and had the letters "GMC" on them), has struck the baskets of a street vendor, baskets that she had been carrying in the traditional way—by attaching one to each end of a pole that she balanced on one shoulder. The woman's bowls are broken in the collision and her seasonings—fish sauce, salt, pepper, etc.—lie scattered in the road. Đỗ believes it is the same vendor that he had heard before in his neighborhood. He arrives at that conclusion because she is Chinese and he has always imagined the vendor as being Chinese; and because in asking the Vietnamese driver for payment for her losses she acts in a manner that is as old as that cry he heard from his rooftop. "In her dignified and patient reaction," Đỗ thinks, "there is a lateness of at least several centuries" (170).

Then comes an important question, one that Võ Phiến makes sure we pay attention to by indenting it and making it a single-sentence paragraph. In his previous description of the accident, the narrator did not mention what goods the woman was selling, so before readers get to this question they

do not know what was in those bowls that now lie broken and scattered in the road. In his question, the narrator suggests one possibility: "Could it be," he asks, "that 'Ế ị' was what was just spilled there?" The question appears to be rhetorical. It seems clear that Võ Phiến wants readers to conclude that yes, that vendor's cry is exactly what the big truck from America smashed. And because this cry is several centuries old, a living relic of a former time, what has been smashed is not just a cry but a link to the past, not only to village life before the recent wars, but to a more distant past that Vietnamese share with the Chinese and other peoples of East and Southeast Asia who have also been influenced by Chinese culture. This collision between a modern truck, the new way of transporting goods, and the vendor's shoulder-carried baskets, the traditional way of bringing things to market, is therefore an important collision, one that represents the death of one world and the dawn of another.

"Ế ị" ends with Đỗ trying to figure out why on sunny and pleasant mornings, despite the noise and the drifting ash, he could still feel happy and hopeful. It was because, he decides, "he was waiting for that vendor's long cry," a waiting that, he thinks, is "like caressing an illusion of peace" (170). Võ Phiến called the collection in which "Ế ị" appeared "Illusion," and this narrative essay helps us understand that in 1967 Võ Phiến recognized that wars and the rapid changes they had brought to his country had changed it forever.

"A Truly Quiet Place" is, as its title indicates, also about quietness but other contrasts are presented in this narrative essay, especially one between the beauty of nature and the ugliness of the city.

The "quiet place" is on a hill not far from the main character's village. As one walks to it one becomes increasingly removed from the world of humans and more and more enveloped by the world of nature. One sees domesticated animals—cattle and goats—but also wild creatures: hawks, moor hens, button quails, wild chickens, teals, squirrels, chameleons, and snakes. Tall trees cast long shadows and keep the wind out. Finally one arrives at the "truly quiet place": a

large field of grass with a small forested area at one end. At the edge of the small forest is a *miếu*, a small shrine. (Võ Phiến doesn't describe this shrine, but typically a *miếu* was small, only about a foot and a half square, and used to worship local spirits or deities.)

This would be a good place, the main character thinks, to sit and meditate until birds came and built nests in his hair (a reference to Buddha),⁷⁸ but "he didn't come there to sit and meditate" (208). Later we learn why he did come to this truly quiet spot, or at least one of the reasons: to be with Chi, a girl that he fell for the first time he saw her. She was sitting with her friends and he couldn't take his eyes off her "very white neck, some strands of hair falling on her cheek, her black eyes, deep and opened wide." Gazing at her he thought she looked "intelligent and strangely passionate" (209).

Later he brings Chi to this quiet spot on the hill near the village. It is not clear whether he and Chi make love there but certainly they are intimate. This story contains a great deal of sexual imagery. At this spot, the main character and Chi talk about trivial things—how Chi's grandmother accidentally bruised her thumb with a hammer, for example—but some exchanges, like the following, are more suggestive:

Main character: Come over here. There's ants . . .

Chi: Let them alone and let me watch them. If you don't move they won't bite. See, this one's been crawling on my leg for a long time but it hasn't bitten me.

Main character: It's not stupid. It wants to crawl up higher .

Chi: Stop it. Now you're talking dirty. (211)

There are also frequent references, like the one in the following passage, to mahogany trees that Vietnamese call "đái ngựa" (genitals of a horse) because their fruit resembles the

⁷⁸In his search for the meaning of life, Buddha tried fasting and subjecting himself to extreme hardships. According to stories, during this period birds made nests in his matted hair.

sex organs of a male horse: “And the fruit of the mahogany tree cast a long shadow producing a strange image. The fruit of the mahogany tree is longer than an arm. It was awful. At times on the road home he thought he was being mocked” (212).⁷⁹

Important human interactions occur in this deserted corner of the natural world, and they aren’t all free of pain. Chi cries one day. It is not clear why. The narrator fears it is something he has done. As she cries birds and animals keep a respectful distance and prove to be consoling:

Teals continued to eat the fruit falling behind the shrine, a green snake continued its long and indifferent hissing, a squirrel still jumped quickly from branch to branch, a chameleon poked its head out and then retreated. All of them seemed to be encouraging, to be saying “Act naturally. Please go ahead and act naturally. Please, people, make yourselves at home!”

And Chi felt better. And the tears on her eyelashes gradually dried up. (213)

The story ends with the main character in the city thinking about those tears shed so long ago. The closing paragraphs may be about a fictional character, but they capture nicely the pain of Võ Phiến’s in-country exile, pain caused both by the destruction of his village and by the coldness of the city.

Those tears of Chi’s have been dry for over a quarter of a century. During that time fighting has raged continuously. Sixty per cent of houses in the village have been lost. Eighty per cent of the villagers have been scattered here and there. Trees and brush have taken over the hill and covered up the shrine.

⁷⁹I’ve translated *dải ngựa* as mahogany because my Vietnamese dictionary says the scientific name for this tree is *Swietenia macrophylla*, which is commonly known as mahogany. See Lê Văn Đức and Lê Ngọc Trụ, *Vietnam Dictionary* (Việt Nam Tự Điển), vol. 2 (Saigon: Khai Tri, 1970), 346.

As for him, he now ran here and there on the asphalt roads of the city, smelling motor oil and garbage, returning home each evening with his face covered with a layer of dust. Now he ran in and out of various offices, dejectedly climbed stairs, applied himself to disheartening tasks.

Each night, with mosquitos buzzing outside his net, he listened to his life withering away.

But life is not content to wither away. It can't accept it. When he woke up in the middle of the night, from deep in his soul there would emerge a sound, a promising, anxious sound, like the sound a moor hen makes in the dark sunlight at end of day, like the sound of a waterjar bird remembering the royal palace. It called for a quiet place, a truly quiet place. (213–214)

The reference to the waterjar bird (đồ quên) is significant. It is an allusion to a story about a man named Tu Yu (Vietnamese: Đỗ Vũ) who as Emperor Wang-ti ruled Shu (in modern Szechwan) at the time of the Three Kingdoms (221–263 A.D.). Emperor Wang-ti fell in love with the wife of one of his ministers. When his affair was discovered, he surrendered his kingdom and fled alone to the mountains to live a life of seclusion. When he died he turned into a waterjar bird whose mournful cry is believed to express Tu Yu's sadness at losing both his royal palace and his love. Since then the waterjar bird has become a symbol of homesickness. Hearing its cry is supposed to "sew in the hearts of travelers boundless nostalgia for their native land" (Trịnh Văn Thanh 1967, 288).⁸⁰ This cry sounds like the Vietnamese word for country (quốc) and one of several Vietnamese names for this bird is *chim quốc* ("chim" means "bird"), another reason why this bird symbolizes homesickness.

Many Vietnamese readers would also know a nineteenth-century poem by Nguyễn Thị Hinh entitled "Inspired

⁸⁰Nguyễn Du, author of *The Tale of Kiều*, also alludes to this story about the Emperor of Shu and the waterjar bird. See *The Tale of Kiều: A Bilingual Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 165. See also a note by the translator (Huỳnh Sanh Thông) on p. 207.

by Scenery While Crossing the Ngang Pass" (Qua Đèo Ngang Tức Cảnh) which contains the line: "Missing my country terribly when the waterjar bird cries" (Nhớ nước đau lòng con quốc-quốc). Nguyễn Thị Hinh was known as Madame District Chief of Thanh Quan (Bà Huyện Thanh Quan) because her husband was a district chief. She was born and raised in Hanoi, home of the former Lê Dynasty. During the reign of Emperor Tự Đức (1848–1883) of the Nguyễn Dynasty she was summoned to Huế to become a tutor in the royal harem (Jamieson 1990, 17). The Ngang Pass is in the Annamite Cordillera and lies on the border between Hà Tĩnh and Quảng Bình Provinces. Before the country was unified at the end of the eighteenth century, lords (chúa) of the Trịnh family, who were the real power behind the Lê throne, controlled the area north of this border; lords of the Nguyễn family, previously exiled to the south by the Trịnh, controlled the territory south of it. Two separate principalities existed each with separate armies. When the Nguyễn refused to show allegiance to the Trịnh, war broke out and continued for about fifty years, from 1627 to 1672. When Nguyễn Thị Hinh crossed the Ngang Pass, the country was unified under the Nguyễn, but many members of the northern elite who served the Nguyễn Dynasty in Huế remained loyal in their hearts to the Lê Dynasty and missed their beloved Hanoi. Nguyễn Thị Hinh was about to become an exile, like the Chinese Emperor Wang-ti before her, and so the sound of the waterjar bird moves her deeply.

The fact that the main character in "A Truly Quiet Place" can still hear the cry of the waterjar bird in his heart means that all hope is not lost. It means that his village survives though perhaps only in the memory of those who once lived there. "A Truly Quiet Place" and other works in *Illusion* and *Changing World* suggest that by the late '60s Võ Phiến, exiled in Saigon, already felt his village was only a memory. What he may not have anticipated was exile to a land that he would find much colder than Saigon, a land where it would be even harder to hear that promising, anxious cry of the waterjar bird.



Võ Phiến and his wife and daughter bundle up for a chilly walk in a Minneapolis suburb, where the family first settled after leaving a refugee camp in Pennsylvania in 1976.

VI

AN EXILE IN AMERICA

*Unfortunately the cow has taken refuge in the stable of the horse.*⁸¹
—Võ Phiến

Võ Phiến left Vietnam on the American Challenger and reached American territory, the island of Guam, at about 3:00 a.m. on 7 May 1975. He describes his arrival in *Letters to a Friend*, a collection of *tùy bút* essays published in 1976. From the deck of the ship, Võ Phiến and some of the other refugees could see the dignitaries lined up to meet them—military personnel, local government officials, representatives of the Red Cross and religious figures, including an elderly Catholic bishop. The neatly dressed officials contrast sharply with the ragtag group of refugees beginning to pass in front of them. Some are clutching a baby under one arm and leading an old man with the other; some are grasping the four corners of a blanket that holds all their possessions; some are carrying only a mat and a blanket; some men are wearing only boxer shorts. Võ Phiến watches from the deck as these first refugees pass in review of the assembled dignitaries and then proceed—still worried and anxious, still awed by the ceremony, by the significance of the steps they are taking—directly to an outdoor shower. He watches some old men and boys quickly strip off their clothes and wash themselves. “The scheduling of a hurried washing at that time,” Võ Phiến writes, “following so closely after the solemnity [of the arrival procession], made me feel lost. So in this country hygiene is linked to the most noble humane feeling. How interesting!” (*Letters to A Friend*, 27).

This showering scene in Guam, like so many scenes Võ Phiến describes in his essays on America, reminds him of

⁸¹Again, *Letters to a Friend*, 28.

home, in this case of a tradition called *tẩy trần* (literally, “wipe clean”)—a feast in honor of someone returning from a long trip. At this feast the traveler is served liquor to wash off the metaphorical dust accumulated on his journey. “So on that first anxious day,” Võ Phiến writes, “I thought about the tradition in our country of washing dust off with liquor and about the busy scene taking place before my eyes, the washing off of dust with soap and jets of plain water, and I became worried about the differences in the way of life of our two peoples” (27). Võ Phiến never ceases to worry about these differences; they come up repeatedly in all three of his essay collections that describe his first years in the United States: *Letters to a Friend* (1976), *Exile* (1977), and *Again, Letters to a Friend* (1979).

In his first two collections, however, Võ Phiến spends a great deal of time discussing differences in weather and in flora and fauna, only occasionally taking up cultural differences between Vietnamese and Americans. Perhaps he adopts this naturalist perspective because the weather in Minnesota, where he first settled after leaving a refugee camp in Pennsylvania, was so dramatically different from what he was used to in Vietnam that he felt compelled to discuss it. Or perhaps, still shaken by having to abandon his homeland, he wanted to write first about a less painful topic. In *Exile* he says he found nature easier to write about than cultural differences: “Birds and trees, the color of clouds, the look of mountains, the surface of the water, the color of the sky—though these things aren’t exactly alike, the differences aren’t so heart-rending as differences that relate directly to people” (41). Perhaps, too, he first talks about weather and flora and fauna because similarities and differences in these areas are more obvious and more easily investigated, requiring no high-level skills in the English language. He is comforted, for example, by the discovery that birds in North America do not sing in English (*Exile*, 41)!

Letters to a Friend is a collection of letters addressed to a fellow exile who sometimes writes Võ Phiến with questions or complaints about life in America. Võ Phiến responds to issues raised by his friend or discusses other topics of mutual

interest. *Exile* contains essays by Võ Phiến and another exile writer, Lê Tất Điều. As their titles indicate, four of Võ Phiến's five essays in this collection focus on the different seasons: "A Spring of Quiet and Peace," "Saying Good-by to Summer," "One Autumn," and "Cold." In his fifth essay in *Exile*, "Grass Tossed in the Wind," Võ Phiến remembers fondly and misses deeply meetings with friends in Vietnam, especially their humorous and idle gossip about mutual acquaintances.

Though the other seasons are discussed, winter preoccupies Võ Phiến in *Letters to a Friend* and *Exile*. After first going to a refugee camp in Pennsylvania, he and his wife and daughter move to chilly Minnesota, where, as he notes, it sometimes snows in summer (*Exile*, 54)! As Võ Phiến explains, before Vietnamese came to the United States, they had never seen snow, but they had read about it in poems, many of them translations or adaptations of Chinese works. In these texts snow is associated with romantic scenes and moods—with dreams, and beauty, and love. Võ Phiến mentions this couplet from Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiều*, Vietnam's most loved poem based on a story from a Ming novel: "She'd hug a breeze of flowers, she'd watch snow / half hide the shades or moonlight spread around."⁸² "I don't know about Nguyễn Du's . . . experience with snow," Võ Phiến says, "but it seems to me that when the shades are half hidden by snow, love making becomes uncertain and difficult." Love that remains forever closed up in a room isn't healthy, but here when you walk down the street in winter all you see are moving piles of clothes of no determinable gender. When you reach out to hold hands, you touch only wool as rough as a gunnysack. And then there's the problem of runny noses. Even Kim Trọng and Thúy Kiều (the hero and heroine in *The Tale of Kiều*) wouldn't look good with snot running out of their noses (*Letters to a Friend*, 110).

Võ Phiến can be humorous about snow, which was at first an object of delight for him and his fellow refugees, a phenomenon immediately discussed in excited phone calls.

⁸²These lines (1241–1242) are from Huỳnh Sanh Thông's translation of *The Tale of Kiều* (1983, 64).

Later, however, it became an object of misery, an obstacle that greatly increased their loneliness and feeling of isolation. Vietnamese, who had never walked on snowy and icy roads, would fall down when they ventured out, spraining limbs and bruising faces in the process. So they stayed home, confined to their houses. Living in shut-up houses was hard for Vietnamese refugees who were accustomed to houses that opened up to life outside:

In the northern city [Minneapolis] where I reside, the climate is cold and life gathers itself in behind walls. There are no street vendors, no open air cafes, people don't walk leisurely to enjoy the fresh air. No one goes into the garden to play a flute or stands aimlessly in front of the gate to their house whistling and watching people pass by. So there are Vietnamese families who live next to each other but don't meet, don't know each other. (*Letters to a Friend*, 9)

His first snowfall becomes an opportunity for Võ Phiến to emphasize that the cold and snowy weather, though intimidating to people used to the tropics, was only the outer manifestation of a deeper problem that he and his fellow refugees faced: the feeling of being lost, of not knowing where their lives were going. After his first snowfall in Minnesota, these lines from a Chinese poem keep running through Võ Phiến's mind:

The Ch'in mountains are shrouded in clouds:
where is my home?
Snow fills the Southern Pass, my horse cannot
make a step forward.

Thinking of that traveler in the Chinese verse, Võ Phiến comments that "at least he had a direction he meant to follow, a goal to look forward to. . . . In our case, we do not

even have a direction, we have no idea which way we can turn. That, I dare say, is the extreme of loneliness" (50).⁸³

Võ Phiến finds the other seasons easier to take than winter and is occasionally surprised by the beauty of nature in Minnesota, particularly when the sun is shining. "Sunshine," he says, "is a kind of native land for people from the tropics" (*Exile*, 37). In summer he occasionally enjoys boating on one of Minnesota's pretty lakes and in autumn he walks along the Mississippi River, appreciating the cottonwood leaves—"as gold as a ripe silk worm"—and the various hues of maple leaves. When spring comes, he is impressed by the johnny-jump-ups, the lilacs, and the spirea, and by the peacefulness of the countryside. After thirty years of strife and turmoil in Vietnam, after a difficult year struggling to adapt to the United States, he is overcome by the tranquility of his first American spring. From now on, he asks, am I going to know only springs like this, "springs of quiet and peace"? Yes, he concludes, and the prospect doesn't console him:

I'll know quiet and peace, but I'll be smarting and hurting. As all this dawns on you, life abruptly turns into a yawning void. A dreadful, horrible void. Suddenly there is nothing left that your eyes can look forward to: you stand utterly outside the circle of all cares and concerns. Good God, the quiet and peace of lives without a future. ("Spring of Quiet and Peace," 9; *Exile*, 22)

Võ Phiến is hurt by the realization that while his life in America is a "yawning void," others are accomplishing things in Vietnam, making significant contributions to the nation's cultural life. In *Letters to a Friend* Võ Phiến mentions receiving two books, one on Vietnamese ethnology and one on Vietnamese linguistics, from a friend in Paris. He notes the linguistics book was published in August 1975 while he and his friends were leading boring, uneventful and useless lives

⁸³This letter on winter has been translated by Nguyễn Ngọc Bích, and I've used his translation for the passages that I have quoted. He gives it the title "Wrapping Clouds and Blocking Snow." See list of translated works on p. 329.

in a Pennsylvania refugee camp. He expresses his sorrow: "Even those with the highest opinion of themselves would never consider themselves indispensable to the nation. But to think that in our small, poor land people are busily constructing the country and that we can't participate is to suddenly be overwhelmed with a heart-rending sadness" (88).

The family sponsoring Võ Phiến in Minneapolis was a working class family. The husband worked in a car wash facility. When he asked Võ Phiến what he did for a living in Vietnam, Võ Phiến, who was tired of being a civil servant, did not mention his job with the Ministry of Information. Instead he said that he "worked for a newspaper." Võ Phiến's sponsor was delighted. "The Reverend Billy Graham has a big newspaper here," he told him. "There are lots of jobs to do there." And so Võ Phiến's first job was sorting bundles of Billy Graham's newspaper *Decision* by postal code as they came tumbling off a conveyer belt.⁸⁴

In his introduction to *Letters to a Friend*, Võ Phiến makes clear that he never harbored any illusion that he would be able to make a living as a writer in this country. He mentions that the potential audience of Vietnamese readers is small, only a few thousand Vietnamese refugees scattered around the world, and he worries about the future of the Vietnamese language in exile communities. "We can lead [the Vietnamese language] along, try to take care of it," Võ Phiến says, "but we'll be keeping it as one keeps an embalmed corpse" (*Letters to a Friend*, 13). In explaining why he writes at all, he talks about a gift he had received from a friend: a package containing a bottle of tea from Bảo Lộc, a town in the central highlands well-known for tea production, and a bottle of Vietnamese medicine oil. He says the familiar picture of a dove with a leafy branch in its mouth on the package of tea and the image of a fat Buddha on the oil strongly affected him, comforted him greatly. "I believe," he continues, "that an author, from the same country, if he's lucky, can have that same effect.

⁸⁴This account of Võ Phiến's first job in America comes from a letter Võ Phiến wrote to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc on 21 August 1995. See *Võ Phiến*, 1996, 210–11, note 11.

Reading a Vietnamese book and meeting a familiar author is like seeing, on a traditional product, that label with the dove or the fat Buddha. You feel as if something of your native land still remains with you. And so you feel less lost in a strange land" (16).

In these collections of essays about America we see Võ Phiến trying to apply his descriptive powers, honed in Vietnam, to local scenes and culture in the United States. It is not easy for him. In Vietnam he was the insider, reporting on things he knew well, like the sour crab sauce his grandmother made. In the United States he is an outsider, trying to understand a strange land inhabited by a people whose language he barely speaks. In Vietnam Võ Phiến wrote often about food, but American food apparently does not interest him as he avoids this topic. When he moves to topics that do interest him, like the flowers and trees he sees on his walks, he is frequently frustrated by the inability of Americans to answer his questions. One day in the refugee camp in Pennsylvania, he brought back a bunch of flowers he had picked on a walk and asked a young American couple, volunteers helping the refugees, what their names were. The only one they could name was the daisy. "They're all wildflowers," they tell him. Võ Phiến thinks about this, then rattles off a long list of Vietnamese plants that grew in his grandmother's garden. They were wild, too, he says, but not so wild that no one knew their name (*Letters to a Friend*, 59).

In Minneapolis Võ Phiến brought a leaf from the most common tree in the city to a man who was waiting in a car to pick up his wife who worked at Mount Sinai Hospital. "Excuse me," he asked the man, "could you please tell me the name of the tree this leaf comes from?" The man couldn't come up with the name but talked at great length, mentioning often a word that Võ Phiến at first did not recognize but finally figured out was "nature." When his wife arrived and started to get in the car, her husband held up the leaf and asked her to identify it. "Elm," she said. Then "the man, a little embarrassed, got in the car and drove off. Leaves crackled noisily under the tires and flew about in the air around

the car. It was as if 'nature' was chasing the man, joking with him" (60).

After the couple drove off, Võ Phiến realized that an elm tree must be what the Vietnamese call "*cây du*," and if so then he has met an old friend because he has read about the *cây du* in the works of the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu (369–286 B.C.). In Minneapolis he also discovers another "old friend," the maple tree, which he knows from the poetry of Li Po (701–762); from the *Romance of the Western Chamber*, a famous Chinese drama written by Wang Shifu at the time of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368); and from Vietnam's own *The Tale of Kiều* (ca. 1800) by Nguyễn Du. Realizing that he has encountered these trees before, even though only in books, comforts Võ Phiến. "[T]hanks to Wang Shifu, thanks to these Eastern poets, this wanderer isn't completely lost when faced with the troublesome 'nature' of a strange land" (63).

But Eastern poets provide only limited help because other forces besides uninformed Americans prevent Võ Phiến from enjoying the natural scenery. In "Saying Good-by to Summer" there is a very lyrical passage about Lake Isles and Lake Harriet in Minnesota. Võ Phiến describes a reddish moon rising over the trees and wild geese circling above a cluster of sail boats. But then he remembers a friend suffering in Vietnam and another refugee who has just learned that his mother has died in Vietnam. Thoughts of Vietnam interrupt the peaceful mood instilled in him by beautiful scenes like this one (*Exile*, 41). Although he is pleased to be able to relate Minnesota maple trees to those he knew in works by Eastern writers, when he remembers the following lines from *The Romance of the Red Chamber*, he immediately thinks of the events of April 1975:

Who has dyed bright red the maple forest?
 Could it be the tears of those who are separated?
 What use the length of the long tender willow,
 It can't hold the hoofs of horses galloping far.

"In this old excerpt," Võ Phiến says, "'the separated' are only a young man and a woman, but still their tears mixed with blood are sufficient to dye the entire maple forest red. During the recent events of 4-75 [the fall of the Saigon regime in April 1975] there were more than one hundred thousand people 'separated,' forced to leave and abandon their country. If that proud literary genius were still alive he could dye red the water in all the five oceans" (62).

One of the most moving letters in *Letters to a Friend* is about a man whom Võ Phiến met in the showers in Guam. The man, who was in his mid-fifties, was overcome with grief for having left his ninety-three-year-old father in Vietnam. The old man was too weak to travel, so he and his brothers and sisters left gold and other valuables in a locked wardrobe which the old man could use to pay a neighbor or friend to take care of him. In the confusion of the hasty evacuation, however, the man had forgotten to leave the key with his father. He found it in his pocket at the airport later. "How many refugees are there," asks Võ Phiến, "who have been able to leave without carrying a 'key' like this man's?" (*Letters to a Friend*, 35; "The Key," 1985, 18–19).⁸⁵

Võ Phiến encounters other difficulties in trying to express an aesthetic appreciation of American scenery. As I mentioned in chapter IV, in the *tùy bút* essays that he wrote in Vietnam Võ Phiến was always more interested in the history surrounding that thing than in the thing itself. He was interested in the human events and human feeling associated with the material object. The objects he discussed—a local tea called *chè*, his grandmother's crab fish sauce, a bowl of *bún bò* soup from Huế, the *áo dài*, or long dresses, worn by Vietnamese women—all these things were for him richly evocative of history and feeling. But in America the scenes he encounters, including those he finds amazingly beautiful, evoke in him no pleasant associations. When he walks along the upper Mississippi River, he thinks of Mark Twain and how much he loved this river—so much so that he took his pen name

⁸⁵Phan Phan has translated (and condensed) this account. It is called "The Key" and appears in two anthologies. See list of translations on p. 329.

from a boatman's cry. The Mississippi, however, has no sweet associations for him. But the cry of a boatman on the Perfume River in Huế? That would be a different story. In Vietnam, he says, "we had scenery but also feeling, the bright present but also memories of the past." But in America, when we stand "in this field, on that hillside, or beside that river, we don't yet have any memories at all. We have the scenery, but not the feeling" (*Exile*, 56).

Part of the trouble, however, is that in his physical and mental wanderings in Pennsylvania and Minnesota, Võ Phiến is searching not for America but for Vietnam—for things that will remind him of home. He is overjoyed when he finds a plant or tree or bird that resembles a Vietnamese variety. "When you're in a strange land and meet an old friend, who would not be moved?" Võ Phiến exclaims (*Letters to a Friend*, 60). Usually the U.S. variety is not quite the same as its Vietnamese counterpart. That tamarind bush growing near the wall at the Fort Indiantown Gap refugee camp resembles the one he knew in his home village, its leaves have the same sour taste, but it is not exactly the same tamarind that his grandmother mixed with shrimp to make soup. Another bush in Pennsylvania resembles a popular Vietnamese herb but no one has tried it to see if it is really *rau răm* (56).⁸⁶ The American rhododendron is similar but not identical to a flower the Vietnamese call *hoa vằng*, etc. (20). Though the match is rarely certain, these discoveries of similar flora and fauna give him pleasure. They reassure him that though he is far from home he has not left the planet Earth. These discoveries of similarities in nature, however, send him not forward into his future in America but backward to his past in Vietnam. One day he hears the familiar chirp of a sparrow (not a Vietnamese sparrow but close enough). He has been walking along a lonely street in Minneapolis, one of those quiet streets with no people—everyone shut up inside behind locked doors—that so depressed his spirit.

⁸⁶The herb *rau răm* belongs to the genus *polygonum*. It has small pointed green leaves with brown veins. Vietnamese usually eat the leaves raw in salads, in noodle dishes, or as a garnish for soups.

Confused and mystified [after hearing the sparrow's chirp], I thought I was standing in my native village, standing in a corner of the garden. It was a quiet afternoon. My grandmother was bent over near the hedge trimming some sticks of firewood with a long knife, or busy picking *rau má*.⁸⁷ And my grandfather was sitting on the bed under the porch roof, mumbling as he read *On Cold-Induced Bodily Injuries*, a book by Trọng Cảnh.⁸⁸ Some hens were pecking around a pile of straw. In the rice fields nearby, several people were working quietly, their conical hats appearing now and then in the bright sun.

What afternoon was this, what year, what month? How could I remember such an uneventful point in time? A time in the afternoon, a nameless, ageless afternoon, an ordinary afternoon like countless other afternoons . . .

I didn't need to remember anything. That afternoon scene suddenly and miraculously appeared before me—a bird chirped and it was like the loose tile that moved when stepped on, like the piece of cake dipped in a cup of tea in that great book by Marcel Proust. Suddenly a whole world returned. One chirp and it was as if my distant homeland were in my hand, as if the past of thirty or forty years stood before my eyes. (And in the corner of one eye appeared, I don't know when, a tear.) (*Letters to a Friend*, 65)

Võ Phiến doesn't want to repress these Proustian travels back to his homeland, even though he knows that by deflecting his attention away from the present they delay his adaptation to America; even though he knows they make it difficult for him to express a sincere appreciation for the aes-

⁸⁷*Rau má*, or pennywort, is a green vegetable (*Centella asiatica*).

⁸⁸The author's full name was Trương Trọng Cảnh (Chinese: Zhang Zhongjing, or Zhang Ji) who lived from 142 to 220 A.D. In Chinese the book is called *Shanghan lun*; in Sino-Vietnamese, *Thương Hàn Luận*. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this book for helping me identify this work.

thetics of American natural scenery. What Võ Phiến fears most is the day when the sparrow's chirp has lost its power to make him remember his native land: "I think of the future, when we have joined life in this country to the point that we aren't continually reminded of our native land. Will that day come? Just considering the possibility fills me with pain" (*Exile*, 57).

The Complicated, the Savage, the Unfaithful, etc. Americans

Why the thought of adapting to America pains Võ Phiến so much becomes clearer in his third collection, *Again, Letters to a Friend*, in which he leaves physical nature behind and concentrates on a more painful topic: cultural differences between Americans and Vietnamese.

Võ Phiến discusses these differences in ten chapters: "The Complicated Americans," "The Savage Americans," "The Wandering (i.e., running around, always active) Americans," "The Lonely Americans," "The Formal Americans," "The Talkative Americans," "The Unfaithful Americans," "The Clear-cut Americans," "The Colorful Older Americans," and "The Vietnamese Americans." Though only two of these titles—"The Savage Americans" and "The Unfaithful Americans"—are obviously pejorative, Võ Phiến finds fault with Americans in all ten chapters. In other words, *Again, Letters to a Friend*, is not a dispassionate discussion of strengths and weaknesses of the two cultures. Though some criticism is whimsical and intended to be humorous, it is true nevertheless that Võ Phiến has nothing good to say about Americans in *Again, Letters to a Friend*. First I will summarize his views and then provide some background information on Võ Phiến's situation and the Vietnamese literary and rhetorical tradition that I believe will deepen our understanding of these essays.

We can start with his more gentle criticism. When Vietnamese refugees arrived, churches in many towns encouraged their members to help them get settled. In "The Complicated Americans" Võ Phiến talks about a refugee who was visited in his home by a church member. She walked in the door and then immediately turned around and walked out. Though the refugee himself did not smoke, a friend of his who had

dropped by to visit did, and the tobacco smell bothered the woman from the church. Experiences like these caused Vietnamese to "grumble" about the "austerity" of the Americans. "Was coming to America like joining a monastery?" they wondered (12).

They were confused because when they "were about to complain about the austere life, they noticed something else that was new to them: steam baths, bookstores reserved for 'adults,' movie houses for 'adults,' nightclubs, etc." (12). These recreations existed in Saigon, Võ Phiến says, but there they were reserved for the bourgeoisie; here in America they have been "democratized" and are available to all classes. Toward the end of the essay he mentions coming across an article in the paper describing a section of the Mississippi River where people swam in the nude and one couple was discovered having sex. "My friend," Võ Phiến says, referring to the friend that he talks to in these essays, "the love expressed along that river bank did not require a rich standard of living; it was rather a matter of point of view, of character, personal preference." Võ Phiến ends this section of the chapter in a somewhat joking manner: "Naturally," he says, "a knowledgeable Vietnamese resident such as myself no longer grumbles about the austerity of American life" (14).

In "The Clear-cut Americans," Võ Phiến contrasts what he sees as an American preference for distinct boundaries with the Vietnamese preference for blurred boundaries. In this chapter he is bothered by two clear-cut American distinctions: one between house and yard and one between work and play. American houses, he says, are always closed while Vietnamese houses are open, and it is not just the result of differing climate: psychological differences are involved. Even in the summer Americans enter the house and close the door in a clear-cut manner, as if they wish to close themselves off from nature. Some houses have beautiful gardens but you rarely see Americans walking in them. When they go outside they do so with a specific purpose: to play basketball, go swimming, suntan, etc. In this way they clearly distinguish inside and outside. Vietnamese, however, blur the inside-

outside distinction by doing the same things—husking beans, bathing, pounding rice, washing clothes—sometimes inside and sometimes outside.

The distinction between inside and outside is related to the work-play distinction. According to Võ Phiến, Americans work hard and play hard, sharply separating the two activities in an unnatural and cruel way. When a fish or a bird is looking for food, or when a butterfly is searching for pollen, is it working or playing? It is hard to say. Like the fish, the birds, and the butterflies, Vietnamese don't sharply distinguish work from play: tilling the rice fields, harvesting crops, rowing a boat—these are occasions for singing and flirting as well as for work. For Võ Phiến, the lack of a clear boundary between work and other activities explains a familiar scene in Vietnamese offices. "In public offices," he says, "you still encounter men and women sitting in front of a desk in such a way that they could be said to be working but if you said they were resting you wouldn't be wrong either" (67).

This is pretty tame criticism. It gets harsher in other chapters. Especially in "The Lonely Americans" and "The Unfaithful Americans" but in other essays as well Võ Phiến discusses what turns out to be his major problem with Americans: they are, he says, an unfeeling people who express little warmth in their interpersonal relationships. He addresses this topic directly in "The Unfaithful Americans" in order to respond to some complaints from his friend (the recipient of his letters). His friend has complained about how his ex-girlfriend reacted when he met her one week after they had broken up. She was, he said, "almost indifferent, clear-cut." They [American girls] are like that," he said, but "if you get involved with a Vietnamese girl they hang on to you and it takes a long time to extricate yourself" (51). His friend has also complained that when he first arrived, his church sponsors and his fellow workers were full of sweet words but when he left no one saw him off and he received not a single letter from them at his new residence. "Feeling in this country is really short-lived," Võ Phiến's friend tells him.

Võ Phiến agrees and tries to help his friend understand why Americans behave the way they do. He offers, half-seriously one suspects, this explanation, one based on nature not nurture:

My friend, regarding the poor Americans, I have this theory. They are a new people and I respectfully suggest that they arrived in this world too late, after God had already distributed human feelings to other peoples. Because compassion is precious, the older peoples coveted it and pestered God with requests. Being tolerant, God gave in. Then he gathered up what human feeling remained and gave it to the Americans, but not much was left. As a result, Americans are "handicapped from birth" in their capacity for human feeling. They love each other for a little bit, and then they're exhausted. So intense feeling is fleeting. (57)

But he doesn't pursue this theory, preferring instead a series of explanations all based on nurture—on social and cultural conditioning. Part of the problem is the love Americans have for clear-cut boundaries that we discussed earlier. According to Võ Phiến, in addition to keeping clear boundaries between house and yard and work and play Americans also like to separate the private from the social. Americans guard this private-social boundary carefully, he argues, whereas Vietnamese easily cross it, letting others intrude on their private lives. Because they revere this boundary, Americans are "easy to become acquainted with but hard to get close to" (52). When they first meet you, they greet you enthusiastically, but after you become acquainted, the relationship does not become any warmer. Americans have this "psychological characteristic," Võ Phiến says: "They don't like to form attachments" (34). Unable to form close relationships, they lead lonely lives and many suffer from mental illness.

Part of the problem, he says, may be small families, two and one-half per household. Võ Phiến credits Harold M. Visotsky, a researcher from Northwestern University who

writes about mental health issues in Illinois, for this insight.⁸⁹ Võ Phiến mentions some letters to a local paper in which people complain about various family problems: one wife complains that her husband sleeps curled up and takes up the whole bed, another that her husband won't wash the dishes; a daughter complains that her mother won't take a bath, etc. "How lonely the situation must be," Võ Phiến says, "when a woman chooses to write a letter to a newspaper to complain of such things as a husband taking up too much room in the bed" (32). If people had more family members—more brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles—then, says Võ Phiến, they wouldn't need to write a newspaper for help. As relatives helped each other, everyone would get more practice in getting close to other people.

But even Americans who have friends and relatives do not seek them out in times of trouble. Instead they go to a private or government agency or to a professional counselor. If they are short of money, they go to a bank. If they feel sad, they see a psychoanalyst. If there is a conflict in the family, they contact an agency dealing with family matters. While in the refugee camp in Pennsylvania, a couple in the room next to Võ Phiến was having difficulties within their family. The women living around the couple talked to the wife and the husband sought out the men nearby and asked their advice. The problem was solved and attachments were made in the process (34). Võ Phiến suggests that if placed in a similar situation Americans would hesitate to intervene because they would not want to invade the private space of the couple, and so they would miss an opportunity to make friends. In communist countries, Võ Phiến explains, all aspects of life—love and marriage, work, family affairs—are discussed by the group or organization—within the cell. "Many people," says Võ Phiến, "would say that this usurps individual freedom, but not everyone considers individual freedom to be important" (34).

⁸⁹Võ Phiến does not mention any specific work by this researcher.

So a love for privacy, small families, and a dependence on social welfare cause Americans to be cold. Võ Phiến also places a great deal of blame on a business-oriented society that makes profit making and efficiency more important goals than developing and preserving warm social relationships. Võ Phiến tells the story of an acquaintance of his who was originally from North Vietnam. Before he came to the South, he had been a servant of a Chinese merchant for many years. When the revolution of 1945 took place, the servant was visiting his village and so he lost contact with the merchant. Many years later, after he had fled to the western part of South Vietnam in 1954, he told his son who was studying in Saigon to look up his old master. The merchant was so overjoyed to see the son of his former servant that he took him in and supported him until he graduated from the university. Võ Phiến offers this anecdote as evidence that Vietnamese and Chinese are motivated by loyalty and affection not profit and efficiency. We (Chinese and Vietnamese) “Respect righteousness, despise riches,” Võ Phiến says, citing the Sino-Vietnamese expression, *Trọng nghĩa khinh tài*, commonly used to refer to Confucian virtues exhibited by the superior man (quân tử) (*Again, Letters to a Friend*, 54).

A letter from an American woman that Võ Phiến has just read in a local newspaper, presumably to an advice columnist, is what has gotten him thinking about loyalty between workers and employers. The woman’s husband had just gotten a higher-paying job in another city and she is lamenting the fact that she and her children will have to leave their nice house, a town they like, friends they have made, etc. Instead of sympathizing with the woman, the newspaper criticizes her—tells her that she should wipe her tears and immediately prepare to adjust and help her husband adjust to a new situation. As for friends, she can make new ones in her new city. This exchange prompts these reflections on America’s “mobile way of life”:

America is a big country and commercial and industrial firms have systems everywhere that

link them tightly together. Americans either voluntarily or because they are transferred run here and there to seek out promising opportunities in all the fifty states. A person who doesn't do this, who hangs tight to a job, who stays at home in the old village, is a loser, a person who resembles no one. Americans love to move and it's become a distinguishing feature of their character.

In this busy, mobile way of life each tie is inconvenient, each emotional incident is a disadvantage. The law of life forces Americans to avoid deep emotional attachments. (59)

According to Võ Phiến, Americans are afflicted with mobility because industrialization, which brought with it the need for a mobile work force, came to the United States too early—before people had been farmers long enough to develop the communal attitudes encouraged by rural agricultural life (62).

In "The Savage Americans" and "The Formal Americans" Võ Phiến talks about violence in American society, especially the problem of rape. He says Vietnamese in his refugee camp were so worried about violence they were afraid to leave Fort Indiantown Gap. Not without cause, says Võ Phiến. America is a violent society. He is aware of the irony of a Vietnamese, whose people have been at war for thirty years, lecturing Americans about violence, but, he says, war is an aberration, a fit of craziness. "You have to assess people when they're sober, not when they're drunk" is the way he puts it (*Again, Letters to a Friend*, 18). In normal times, Vietnamese are gentle, which is why the violent Americans terrify them so much. The terror Vietnamese feel, according to Võ Phiến, is caused not only by the level of savagery—the high number of homicides, rapes, etc.—but also by the unpredictable and sudden way the savagery is manifested. Americans are polite, even formal (hence his chapter title) in most situations. On the job and during work breaks they never get boisterous. And in contrast to Vietnam, in America you do not see parents, wide-eyed and angry, chasing their kids with a whip,

scolding them noisily all the while. But Americans, who are generally calm and reserved, may suddenly explode into violence (20).

Rape is a much-talked about problem in the United States, and with reason, says Võ Phiến. He includes statistics—six women are raped every hour, out of one hundred thousand women, fifty-one will be raped, etc. “It seems,” he says, “that American men are seized by an extremely powerful force that attracts them toward females, one so powerful and so sudden that they can’t control themselves” (39). Võ Phiến’s explanation for rape and other forms of violence in America is vaguely Freudian, a combination of repression and insufficient sublimation of desire, though he does not use these terms. Because their formality prevents Americans from expressing violence in words, they express it in violent physical action. Instead of scolding their children noisily and arguing loudly with each other, as Vietnamese do, Americans repress their anger and hostility until it finally explodes—with devastating results. Vietnamese altercations, on the other hand, are noisy but harmless, harmless because they are noisy.

In offering a theory of why rape is prevalent in the United States, Võ Phiến brings together themes that run through his short stories and his essays. In his short stories and novels, as we saw in chapter II, love is often conveyed and pledges sealed not with a kiss, not even with a touch, and not with words, but with a glance or a smile. In praising glancing in *Again, Letters to a Friend* he mentions a famous poem by Phan Khôi called “Old Love” (41). Written in 1932, this poem helped launch the “New Poetry” (thơ mới) movement—a new, freer, and more romantic approach to poetry that soon replaced more traditional, more structured approaches. In “Old Love” the poet describes two lovers whom the custom of arranged marriages prevented from marrying but who, twenty-four years later, still remember their love. What interests Võ Phiến about the poem is the way in which the two lovers, when they meet after twenty-four years, communicate their shared memory of their past love:

Twenty-four years later . . .
 A chance encounter far away . . .
 Both heads had turned to silver;
 Had they not known each other well,
 Might they not have passed unknown?
 An old affair was recalled, no more.
 It was just a glance in passing!
 . . . There still are corners to the eyes.⁹⁰

Võ Phiến has always been fascinated with the subtleties of love, in particular with the glance, which he says is not just a means of signaling love, it is love itself: "Glancing at each other is like caressing or kissing each other: a caress, a kiss with the eyes" (41).

So what does all this have to do with rape and Võ Phiến's views of life in America? Not surprisingly, Võ Phiến finds the American way of love lacks subtlety. Americans rarely if ever glance, they talk too much, and they move too quickly to the physical. Instead of glancing, they "stand there next to a woman or girl, acting as if they couldn't be bothered to look at her. Then all of a sudden they jump on the beautiful creature. And the journalists write about it, and the community gets upset, and statistics are recorded, etc" (40). This discussion of glancing is done partly with tongue in cheek. He admits that some Americans still may exchange glances of love, that at some point earlier in their history they certainly did. I need to find a learned scholar of glancing to check this out, he says. It is always dangerous to take Võ Phiến too seriously—or too lightly. But he sounds serious when he asks whether "in a society where people weren't so respectful of rules of politeness [as in United States], and where daily life was more easy going and open, where there were occasionally chances to speak a bit crudely and exchange looks to one's satisfaction, would violence related to sex be reduced?" (40–41).

Buried in Võ Phiến's question is what appears to be a compliment—Americans are polite. Since it is not unusual

⁹⁰This is Neil Jamison's translation from *Understanding Vietnam* (110). He also describes Phan Khôi and the New Poetry movement (108–111 and *passim*).

for foreign observers to find Americans to be rather crude and aggressively informal, this and other comments by Võ Phiến about their excessive formality and politeness come as a bit of a surprise. Before Americans start to feel complimented about being called polite, however, they should realize that he is saying their politeness leads to rape! Though partially tongue in cheek, Võ Phiến's comments suggest he envisions a continuum of approaches to male-female relations, with the subtle Vietnamese glance at one end and the violent—and typically American—rape at the other. In his short stories "Night Rain at Year's End," "Telling a Story Late at Night," and "All Finished" and in his only novel written in the United States, *Intact*, Võ Phiến suggests that becoming too preoccupied with the glance (and other "bitter attractions" of love) also has its dangers—though not as dangerous, of course, as the American habit of skipping the glancing stage altogether. In his essays, however, Võ Phiến champions the art of glancing in unqualified terms.

After learning Võ Phiến's views of Americans and American culture, it is not difficult to understand his sadness: added to the pain of being separated *from* the native land he loves is the pain of being exiled in a land where he believes it is impossible to form warm personal relationships. Võ Phiến describes a former navy officer, who, while sitting in front of the Red Cross office in their refugee camp, suddenly sings out in a mournful voice: "Please let me accept this place as my native land, though it's so hard to love!" (*Letters to a Friend*, 10). Võ Phiến clearly approves of only the last clause of this officer's plea, the part about America being so hard to love. Loving his own country so much and finding America so hard to love, he would never dream of accepting the United States as his native land. In "The Wandering Americans" Võ Phiến compares Americans, who, Võ Phiến says, believe that you lie down only when you are sick, to horses; and Vietnamese, who like to take a siesta, to cows. "Unfortunately," he says, "the cow has taken refuge in the stable of the horse" (28). Võ Phiến is in a whimsical mood, but clearly his sadness stems in large part from his perception that the cultural divide separat-

ing Vietnamese and Americans is too large to be bridged, that he has been exiled in a place with a system of values directly opposed to his Vietnamese system.

Understanding Võ Phiến's Rhetorical Approach

We will now look at several aspects of the rhetorical approach that Võ Phiến uses in his three collections of essays on America, concentrating on those aspects that may strike non-Vietnamese readers as unusual: the almost total absence of any personal portraits of individual Americans or Vietnamese; his reliance on items in newspapers, usually from their advice columns, for information on American customs and behavior—what I call his “Dear Abby” approach; and his one-sided picture of American life, his tendency always to criticize, never to praise.

All of Võ Phiến's “American” essays are strangely depersonalized. There is not one extended portrait of an American in any of them. Nor are there any extended portraits of Vietnamese. We learn a bit about the “dear friend” whom Võ Phiến addresses in *Letters to a Friend* and *Again, Letters to a Friend*, but not much: he seems to be a composite character, a kind of generic Vietnamese refugee who has typical refugee problems and questions. He is simply a literary device: Võ Phiến has him bring up a problem or ask a question so he can discuss it. The only portrait of an individual Vietnamese in these essays, and it is not a very full one, is Võ Phiến's description of the refugee who, when he left for the United States, forgot to leave his ninety-three-year-old father the key to a wardrobe containing gold (*Letters to a Friend*, 29–36). This essay is one of the seven Võ Phiến essays that have been translated and it has appeared in at least two English-language collections (see p. 329). It seems likely that Võ Phiến's individualization of the man in this account is one of the features that make it appealing to English-language readers.

Related to this lack of individual portraits is Võ Phiến's avoidance of any references to members of his family. In all three essay collections I can locate only two passing references, both brief and inconsequential, to his own wife and

daughter, though they both accompanied him on his voyage to America. Of his three sons who later joined him in America we hear not a word. As explained in chapter I, Võ Phiến's three sons did not come to the United States until the early 1990s, and so that is why there is nothing about their adaptation to the United States in these essay collections published in the 1970s. It is interesting, however, that his sons are never mentioned in any of his essays.

Since we know from other sources that his wife often assisted him in his literary career, his failure to mention her in his essays is a little puzzling. In interviews Võ Phiến always becomes uncomfortable when the conversations strays from his work to his personal life, but he did acknowledge his wife's assistance in a 1965 interview with Lê Phương Chi: "My wife helps me now a great deal. If she didn't, how could I, with no hired help, both work as a civil servant and also write, publish books, edit manuscripts, and take books to be sold" (*Realizations* 134). Trần Long Hồ, who spent three days with Võ Phiến and his wife in 1995, suggests this help has continued during Võ Phiến's years of exile. "In those three days," he says, "I saw clearly that Võ Phiến's wife contributed greatly to his literary career. . . . She shares his pain and his happiness, she truly lives her life for him. It seems as if she doesn't have a part of her life that is only hers" (127).

Many of Võ Phiến's essays on America appear to be inspired not by people he knew but by incidents and people he has read about in an advice column in a local paper. A wife writes and complains that her husband does not brush his teeth and a daughter says her mother does not shower enough. These items then become evidence for the loneliness of Americans and the bleakness of their family life (*Again, Letters to a Friend*, 32). This reliance on advice columns seems a bit unfair. Those who request help from columnists like Abigail Van Buren may be real people with real problems, but how many people around the world would want their country to be judged primarily on information found in advice columns of local newspapers?

Võ Phiến turns to advice columns for help with form as well as content. The essays in his first two collections of essays on America, *Letters to a Friend* and *Again, Letters to a Friend*, are structured like the exchanges between a letter writer and an advice giver that one finds in an advice column. His friend is puzzled by the behavior of his American girlfriend. Võ Phiến tries to help him. His friend worries about violence in American society. Võ Phiến tries to help him understand its causes. His friend wonders why Americans that he thought were his close friends never said good-bye to him when he left for another town and have never written or called. Võ Phiến offers various explanations for this strange behavior. Võ Phiến's answers, however, are much longer, than those provided by a Dear Abby or an Ann Landers. Usually they take up from six to eight pages. And Võ Phiến summarizes his friend's questions and requests for advice; he does not print them in toto. Võ Phiến also rarely recommends a specific course of action to deal with his friend's problems, preferring instead to provide background information on American culture. Despite these differences Võ Phiến's letters to his friend do read like an advice column—like a "Dear Abby" column for Vietnamese refugees.

Despite his apparent fondness for advice columns, Võ Phiến himself appears to have some doubts about Dear Abby. In his essay "The Old Americans of Many Colors," in which he discusses the sexual escapades of older Americans, Võ Phiến takes umbrage at a reply of Abby's to a Vietnamese exile from Cleveland who wrote her asking for information on American attitudes to old people. The exile from Cleveland was prompted to ask because by observing from his window and talking to a friend he had determined that a seventy-five-year-old neighbor had two girl friends, one of them over eighty. "In our country," writes the Vietnamese man, "we respect old people, who are very deserving of respect." In her reply, Abby tells the writer that older Americans have a right to their private lives. In commenting on this exchange, Võ Phiến says that if "the exile from Cleveland were told [by Abby] that the old man was not deserving of respect, he would

be shocked. But wouldn't Dear Abby be surprised if she were told that only scum don't respect old people?" (*Again, Letters to a Friend*, 72). This is a complex passage. Note that while Abby talks only about the importance of privacy (thereby confirming Võ Phiến's belief that this is an American obsession), Võ Phiến apparently understands her to be implying that the exile from Cleveland lacks respect for the old American man with the two girl friends. This implication is insulting because in Vietnam only scum do not respect the elderly. Though I may not have understood exactly Võ Phiến's objections to Abby's comments, what seems clear is that for Võ Phiến Dear Abby columns are a less attractive source when Vietnamese customs are injected into the discussion.

How can we account for the de-personalized quality of Võ Phiến's essays on America? It seems clear that he did not include extended portraits of Americans because he did not know any Americans, or very few Americans. When in my written interview I asked Võ Phiến if he had any American friends, he said he had only two: James Banerian, who translated his short story "Love Cherished for a Thousand Years" and his novel *Intact*, and a man named Bill whom Võ Phiến called "Old Bill" (Gĩa Bill). Bill was retired, Võ Phiến explained, but worked a couple of months a year for the County of Los Angeles in the same retirement section where Võ Phiến worked. After he retired himself in 1994, he lost contact with Bill. Võ Phiến's own life in America would seem to be evidence that, as he argued in his essays, Americans are hard to get close to, but in his interview with me he blames himself:

I'm bad at social relations. Even among Vietnamese, people from my own country, I don't have many friends. Before 1975 many young writers and artists liked to meet in cafes (during the day) and at tea houses where music was performed [nightclubs] (at night). I belong to a rare group: I lived in Saigon for fifteen years and never went to the La Pagode [a popular café and nightclub] with its Pink Night dance hall.

So it stands to reason that in the United States I have few American friends. I deserve that fate! (April 25, 2003)

The lack of individual portraits is also related to genre. Since he arrived in America, Võ Phiến has not written many stories, preferring to concentrate on *tùy bút* essays, dialogues, and literary criticism. In a 1996 interview with Minh Nguyệt, a journalist in Australia, Võ Phiến explains that he stopped writing stories because he was cut off from Vietnam and excluded from American life. "To write creatively requires participation," he says. "Only then can one feel emotion and write a great deal. If one lives on the outskirts [of society], one's creative work becomes impoverished. So I write things that aren't stories" ("Writing Outside the Country," 119).

Võ Phiến does not give his collections of essays on America a subtitle indicating that they are *tùy bút* essays or some other kind of text, but he reprints those essays that were originally published in *Exile* and *Letters to a Friend* in *Tùy Bút I* and *Tùy Bút II* respectively. He includes essays that originally appeared in *Again, Letters to a Friend*—"The Savage Americans," "The Unfaithful Americans," etc.—in *tạp luận*, which can be translated as "a miscellaneous collection of essays." These decisions related to reprinting suggest that he considered the texts in all three collections essays; and none of these essays were what I have called *tùy bút* narrative essays. Võ Phiến occasionally includes a brief anecdote to illustrate a point, but there is no extended narration like that found in the narrative essays "Again, a Letter from Home" and "Drops of Coffee" discussed in chapter IV. In short, if Võ Phiến had chosen to write stories, he might have included extended portraits of individuals, but he was writing essays.

He was not writing autobiography either, a fact that explains the almost total blackout of all personal information. In my interview with him, Võ Phiến says that "it's a characteristic of mine that I don't like to put my private life in books. If they [his family members] appear, they have been changed a lot or a little and so become indistinguishable from imagi-

nary characters." Not only Võ Phiến but many Vietnamese writers feel uncomfortable with autobiography. There are cultural, linguistic, and political reasons for this discomfort. As children Vietnamese are taught to think of themselves as tightly connected to a collective—to their immediate family, to their extended or "great family" (đại gia đình) of aunts, uncles, cousins, etc., and to their village, region and country. As adults therefore they do not feel comfortable working within a genre that encourages them to adopt an individual perspective, a genre that forces them to extricate themselves from the collective and tell the story of their own lives.

The Vietnamese pronoun system reinforces this sense that Vietnamese have of not standing alone but of being enmeshed within a web of social relations. As explained in the Introduction, in Vietnamese kinship terms (uncle, aunt, grandfather, etc.) are used as pronouns. The kinship term one uses to refer to oneself varies depending on one's relationship to the person one is speaking to. It could be "child" (con) in speaking to one's father, "niece" (cháu) in speaking to one's uncle, etc. Because these same kinship pronouns are used also for fictitious relatives—people whom the speaker knows but is not related to—a Vietnamese who rarely met strangers, and strangers were rare in small Vietnamese villages, would have few occasions to use the pronoun "tôi" [I], one of a small set of pronouns that is not also a kinship term.

Writers, however, who write for people they do not know do need to use a pronoun like *tôi*, i.e., a first-person pronoun that does not put them in a kinship relationship with their readers. There were problems, however, with *tôi*. In traditional Vietnam, until at least the 1930s, *tôi* placed the speaker or writer in an inferior position vis-a-vis an addressee. David Marr (2000), summarizing the views of Alexandre de Rhodes, the writer of a famous Vietnamese dictionary,⁹¹ says that *tôi* was a form Vietnamese used in speaking to anyone above them with whom they did not have a real or "quasi-familial"

⁹¹*Dictionarium Annamiticum, Lusitanium, et Latinum* (Rome: Sacred Congregation, 1651). This work has been photo-reproduced and published as *Từ Điển Annam-Lusitan-Latinh* (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1991). See Marr 2000, 775, n. 13.

relationship; it conveyed the humility and inferior status of the speaker. Though it did not suggest a literal servant-master relationship, figuratively it placed the speaker in the position of a servant.

Vietnamese writers did have another first-person pronoun they could use, *ta*, but the problem with it was directly opposite to the problem posed by *tôi*: *ta* placed the writer in a superior position vis-a-vis the reader. “Ta” was, Cooke explains, “an arrogant term formerly used by strong men such as generals, champions, etc., glorifying the self and depreciating one’s opponents” (1968, 112). Writing in 1930, the poet Phan Khôi summarizes the first-person pronoun problem facing writers:

There are people who have written books who refer to themselves as *ta*. They do not use *tôi*, arguing that *tôi* is the way slaves address themselves. This [using *ta* not *tôi*] is a bold reform and those people with rather enlightened opinions will not object. Most people, however, probably will not approve because for a long time it has been the custom that only people who consider themselves in a superior role refer to themselves as *ta*. (13)

Eventually, however, *tôi* lost its association with humility and inferiority and became available to writers. It was transformed from a “vertical,” “hierarchical,” and “passive” first-person pronoun into a “horizontal,” “egalitarian” and “active” one (Lockhart, 1996, 6–8). It was “promoted to the equivalent of *moi* or *je* in French, designed to give identity to the self without reference to the ‘the other,’ whether high or low, kin or non-kin, male or female” (Marr, 2000, 786–787). Lockhart, who has studied and translated (with his wife, Monique Lockhart) some Vietnamese reportage and an autobiography written in the 1930s, relates these changes in *tôi* to the destruction of the Vietnamese monarchy and the rise of a new sense of class. Partly as a result of a post-First World War investment boom, there were jobs in the cities and people drifted to them. “[T]he old Confucian Scholar, Peas-

ant, Artisan, and Merchant categories of the population (sĩ, nông, công, and thương) tended to be superseded by modern colonial bourgeois and working classes" (1996, 9). Removed from their village environment, workers in the city needed an egalitarian first-person pronoun that did not suggest a kinship relationship. Lockhart argues that the "autobiographical 'I'" and autobiography as a genre (tự truyện) emerged in the 1930s as a by-product of these political and social changes. Nguyễn Hồng's *Days of Childhood*, Lockhart says, "the first fully-fledged modern 'autobiography,'" appeared in 1938 (2).

Though autobiography began to be written in Vietnam many years before Võ Phiến wrote his essays on America, I would argue that many Vietnamese writers still feel uncomfortable with this genre. In communist Vietnam this discomfort has been aggravated by fears of being accused of succumbing to bourgeois individualism, but even in South Vietnam before 1975 few autobiographies were published, and only a few have been published by Vietnamese of the diaspora.⁹² Most of these have been by generals or well-known public figures; some are more memoir than autobiography. Works of reportage, which Vietnamese call "phóng sự" or "ký," were written in South Vietnam between 1954–1975. In fact, Võ Phiến says "ký" was the "true specialty of Southern literature" during this period (*Literature in South Vietnam*, 206). This reportage often contained autobiographical elements and often fictional elements as well. One sees this mixing of genres in two works published in 1969: Nhã Ca's *A Mourning Cloth for Huế* (Giải Khăn Sô cho Huế), an account of the Tết Offensive in Huế; and Phan Lạc Tiếp's *Rotten Leaves on the River Bank* (Bờ Sông Lá Mùc), an account of river patrols conducted by the Vietnamese navy in the Delta.

If cultural and linguistic constraints were not enough to discourage Vietnamese writers from choosing autobiog-

⁹²Quite a few English-language autobiographies by Vietnamese living in the United States have been published: Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn's *The Will of Heaven* (1982), Huỳnh Quang Nhung's *The Land I Lost: Adventures of a Boy in Vietnam* (1982), Lê Lý Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989), Nguyễn Quý Đức's *Where the Ashes Are: The Odyssey of a Vietnamese Family* (1994), and Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Madala* (1999), for example.

raphy, they still might shy away from this genre for fear it would get themselves or their friends or relatives in trouble. Like writers in many countries where freedom of speech is not protected, Vietnamese have learned that it is safer to avoid genres, including autobiography, that purport to be truthful, finding it safer to present their views in works of fiction. In his study of how Vietnamese peasants fared under the French, Ngô Vĩnh Long points out that an essay by Hoàng Đạo, a fairly moderate report on peasant life, was immediately banned when it appeared in 1938, but two novels published in the same year—Ngô Tất Tố's *When the Light's Put Out* and Nguyễn Công Hoan's *Dead End*—which attacked the colonial system in a much more radical manner, were allowed to circulate (1991, xxvii). In communist-controlled areas it has always taken a brave writer to criticize the regime in fiction or non-fiction, and few have, but writers working within communist countries can run afoul of the authorities, even if they do not criticize them, by letting too much “bourgeois individualism” creep into their writing.

By the time Võ Phiến became a serious writer, he lived in non-communist South Vietnam, but writers were far from free in the South. Võ Phiến was an anti-communist writer, but in the politically charged atmosphere of wartime Saigon even he had to be careful. In November 1968, he provoked the censors when he argued that pressures from South Vietnam's allies to seek peace could lead to its defeat.⁹³ In 1969 he was re-assigned to a lower position within the Ministry of Information after he joined one hundred writers and signed a letter opposing the government's censorship of publishing houses.⁹⁴ Like all writers in South Vietnam, Võ Phiến knew he had to be careful in what he said. It was not a time when people wanted information about their personal lives printed in journals. Writing an autobiography or a memoir about his

⁹³Võ Phiến made this prophetic announcement in “Tiếng Cú” (The Sound of the Owl), which is reprinted in *Miscellaneous Essays*, 57–68. See also Hoàng Khởi Phong 1994, 57.

⁹⁴Using the pen name Thu Thủy, Võ Phiến (1969) describes this incident in “Current Art News: Career Troubles for the Writer Võ Phiến,” an article he wrote for the journal *Encyclopedic*.

friends and relatives in Bình Định when this province was hotly contested territory, when assassination squads from both sides were weeding out political opponents—this would not be wise. An innocent remark about a villager or his family background could be misconstrued and put someone in danger. Much better to cast one's reflections as fictions or as *tùy bút* essays, *tùy bút* being a genre the distinguishing marks of which are *not* "truth, facts, and evidence" (*Literature in South Vietnam*, 181).

In the United States Võ Phiến faced a very different situation but one that was in some ways no less tense politically than wartime Saigon. Though Võ Phiến's anti-communist credentials were good, they were not good enough to satisfy some conservative members of the Vietnamese literary community in the United States and Canada. These conservatives objected to Võ Phiến's association with Nguyễn Mộng Giác, a younger writer who like Võ Phiến was from Bình Định. In their view, *Undertows* (Những Đợt Sóng Ngầm), the first volume of Nguyễn Mộng Giác's series called *Season of Rough Seas* (Mùa Biển Động), was not sufficiently anti-communist. Võ Phiến, Lê Tất Điều (co-author with Võ Phiến of *Exile*), and Nguyễn Mộng Giác had been publishing the journal *Literary Studies and Art* (Văn Học Nghệ Thuật) for about a year. To avoid further controversy, in 1986 Võ Phiến and Lê Tất Điều asked Nguyễn Mộng Giác to resign from the editorial board. This and other controversies have frequently divided the Vietnamese overseas literary community.⁹⁵

In considering why Võ Phiến avoided autobiography, why he kept his writing impersonal, one must also remember that Võ Phiến was proud of being a man from Bình Định, a section of the country where, he argues, people are cautious and discreet. Three well-known northern writers of *tùy bút*—Phạm Đình Hồ, Nguyễn Tuân, and Vũ Bằng—"talk about their families and their own lives more [than Võ Phiến]," says

⁹⁵For information on these controversies, including the one involving Nguyễn Mộng Giác, see Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn (1995). Nguyễn Mộng Giác describes the circumstances surrounding his resignation from *Literary Studies and Art* in "Looking Back on a Stretch of Road" (1989).

Nam Chi. “Võ Phiến occasionally reveals a little feeling, but regarding his private life we don’t see anything at all” (“On the *Tùy Bút* Genre,” 1987, 29). Vũ Bằng, a northerner, may pour out his love for his wife in a *tùy bút* essay (see chapter IV), but not Võ Phiến. He makes his pen name echo the name of his wife and lets people arrive at their own conclusions.

An Aesthetics of the Small

If they could read Võ Phiến’s essays on America, many Americans, perhaps especially those church members who helped Võ Phiến and his family get settled in Minneapolis, would be troubled by other aspects of his rhetorical approach: for example, by his seeming inability to find any good things to say about them or their culture and his failure to express gratitude for the assistance provided his family and many other Vietnamese families by the U.S. government.

Võ Phiến is unrelenting in his criticism. He finds fault with everything American. In any comparison, an American trait or custom always turns out to be inferior to the corresponding Vietnamese one. Even American swallows are too fat and awkward—inferior to their Vietnamese counterparts (*Letters to a Friend*, 20).⁹⁶ Would it not be more effective, even a reader sympathetic to his views might ask, to balance criticism with some praise? Would this not convey the impression that he was a more objective observer?

Võ Phiến’s approach becomes less puzzling if we understand how Võ Phiến viewed his life in the United States and if we are familiar with his vision of where Vietnamese and Vietnam stand vis-a-vis other peoples and countries of the world. First of all, it is important to understand that Võ Phiến and many other Vietnamese who came here after the collapse of the Saigon regime in 1975 did not come intend-

⁹⁶Võ Phiến was very fond of swallows when he was in Vietnam and once wrote an entire essay about them. He describes, among other things, how they have comforted him with their cheerful and familiar song when he has traveled to other Vietnamese towns on business. Vietnamese and Chinese also prize swallow’s nest soup, a delicacy made from the saliva that cliff swallows use in nest building. No doubt these fond associations with Vietnamese swallows make it hard for him to appreciate our American variety. See “Spring and the Swallow,” 73–78.

ing to stay. "We abandoned our country and came here to find a place to live in freedom," Võ Phiến says, "a temporary place where we could wait safely for an opportunity to return. None of us came here to become Americans!" (*Again, Letters to a Friend*, 82).

When they were still in Vietnam, Võ Phiến and others who shared his views, felt caught in the middle: on one side were the fanatical communists, who were intolerant of individual freedom; on the other were the Americans whose massive presence was radically altering Vietnamese life. Once in the United States they felt trapped: they could not return to Vietnam and were forced to adapt to a culture that they found strange and, in some respects, terrifying. When they first arrived, some exiles nourished the hope of returning to Vietnam. In *Letters to a Friend* Võ Phiến says that while he does not nourish this hope, he respects those that do. This hope of returning, he says, is built on myths and dreams, but who can make fun of these dreams? "If you believe in them," he tells his friend in *Letters to a Friend*, "go ahead and believe. I envy you your faith" (104).

We should remember also that *Letters to a Friend* was written in 1976, and that *Exile*, published in 1977, contains essays written in 1976 and 1977. In other words, Võ Phiến wrote these essays when he had only been in the United States for a short time. He and his family and friends had just suffered a traumatic disruption in their lives and were still recovering. They were fearful about whether they could adjust and survive in a new land. *Again, Letters to a Friend*, which contains his most stinging attacks on Americans, was published a few years later—in 1979—but Võ Phiến wrote it in 1977 and 1978, i.e., when he was still a relative newcomer in the United States (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996, 97). In these collections he is writing so he and his "friendly reader" will "feel less lost in a strange land," and so his bitter, sad mood and his expressions of affection for things Vietnamese are understandable.

Did Võ Phiến later express more positive views of Americans? If so, that would support the view that American

essays expressed only his initial concerns, not his studied conclusions, about Americans. Võ Phiến has reprinted these essays in three collections—*Tùy Bút I* (1986), *Tùy Bút II* (1987), and *Tạp Luận* (1987)—where they appear with no preface updating his views. Few Vietnamese critics discuss his American essays, but those that do praise them. “In this distant part of the earth [U.S.],” says Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, “Võ Phiến’s keen powers of observation have been thoroughly manifested. He investigates the way Americans live, work, and socialize in order to discover their personality” (1996, 97). Quí-Phiệt Trần says that Võ Phiến’s views of American culture were shared by other exile writers (1989, 105-106). In addition, several essays, though not those in which he strongly criticizes Americans, were translated into English and published. Therefore he probably felt no need to explain or update his views.

Võ Phiến is remarkably consistent in his views, a trait noted by Nguyễn Hưng Quốc (1996, 51). As we saw in chapter V, one reason Võ Phiến felt exiled in his own country was because it was being inundated by American culture. In “The Way of Loving Today,” published in 1965, he says love in American novels is “abrupt, rude, blunt, and savage” (284). Võ Phiến is talking about characters in novels—he mentions the James Bond series, works by William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Henry Miller, and Erskine Caldwell—not actual Americans, but one wonders if in Võ Phiến’s mind the two are clearly distinguished. These same characteristics appear in chapter titles in *Again, Letters to a Friend*, a book in which he is talking about flesh and blood Americans, not literary motifs or characters in a novel. In other places, however, Võ Phiến praises American writers, including Faulkner and Hemingway. See, for example, *The Contemporary Novel* (1963) and his 1969 interview with the journal he helped to publish, *Encyclopedic*. In this interview Võ Phiến mentions that he especially liked Hemingway’s short story “A Clean Well-lighted Place.” “Reading it filled me with so much pleasure I couldn’t stand it,” he says (396).

Võ Phiến is full of contradictions, one reason he is an interesting figure, a point I return to in my final chapter. It

hardly needs to be said, also, that most people who grow up in other countries have conflicted views of America: they love some aspects of American culture and dislike others. People who live in the United States for an extended period, as Võ Phiến now has, may remain conflicted about their adopted home, but usually they discover that America and Americans are more complex than they previously thought. Võ Phiến experienced this process of discovery. Although he never retracts what he says in his American essays, he suggests, in a 1999 conversation with Vĩnh Phúc, that when he first arrived in the United States he reacted in a “haphazard” and “impulsive” manner to American culture.

[Vĩnh Phúc] Have you changed your views regarding American society and culture in the last six years?

[Võ Phiến] At first, during roughly the first five years, when I still knew little about the country of America, I talked carelessly, expressed opinions in a haphazard manner about this and that. . . . But having lived here longer, we’ve gotten used to those things, so we don’t dare talk carelessly anymore. We realize that it’s not easy. Actually, the life of any people has a depth to it.

[Vĩnh Phúc] As one lives there longer one looks at them [Americans] with more sympathetic eyes. Isn’t that true?

[Võ Phiến] Yes. They have their good points and bad points that are beyond our comprehension. Realizing we were impulsive before, now we hold back, not daring to express ourselves. Better that we think things over, keep our thoughts to ourselves, for truly the life of any country is multifaceted, complicated. It’s not easy to arrive at conclusions. (“Võ Phiến,” 2001, 199–200)

Another way of accounting for Võ Phiến’s criticisms of American society is to say that he is not really serious, that he is simply being whimsical—poking fun at Americans in the same way he poked fun at his fellow villagers in stories like

“Returning to a Country Village.” This is how Võ Phiến himself describes his intentions in his written interview with me. I asked him about how he intended his essays to be taken, as whimsy, which I translated as *hóm hỉnh*, or as serious criticism. Here is what he said:

The word “*hóm hỉnh*” [bemused, cute, whimsical] that you used very correctly describes my way of looking at people. I wish only to joke. My joking is really directed more at people from my homeland, at Vietnamese, than it is at Americans. I joke about them and about myself—about our bewilderment when faced with new things in a new land. When they first arrived, Vietnamese immigrants were surprised by everything, not just by people (Americans): the weather, birds, fish, bushes and trees, wind and rain, customs, love, the way people cared for each other, etc.—all these things were strange. Vietnamese immigrants reacted with admiration and astonishment, like children when faced with an unexpected situation. Of course, I exaggerate our naivete in order to have some fun teasing my dear readers. I’m in harmony with them, I share their mood.

As for American society, American culture, I have never intended to explore these things in a serious way. I don’t think I have specialized understanding regarding any field so I don’t dare reason in an adventurous way. Occasionally I voice an opinion about something—either in the form of a *tùy bút* essay or a miscellaneous essay (*tạp luận*), or in the form of a biographical sketch. In all these forms I always intend to poke fun in a gentle way, to avoid quick judgments. (April 25, 2003)

Võ Phiến’s attitude toward people is, as we have seen, often one of bemused tolerance. In describing his work, critics talk about his smile. “The personality of Võ Phiến,” fellow writer and exile Đoàn Quốc Sỹ emphasizes, “is a whimsical and profound smile, a smile I liken to the smile of an old man watching younger people caught up in the hassles of their

ephemeral lives" (1974, 18). Is Võ Phiến really just joking in his American essays? Certainly sometimes he is. A distinguishing characteristic of the *tùy bút* form, Võ Phiến says, is "phiếm"—aimless, idle, wandering around a subject (*Literature in South Vietnam*, 181)—and he reprints *Exile* and *Letters to a Friend* in *Tùy Bút I* and *Tùy Bút II* respectively, suggesting he is engaged in "phiếm" in these essays. However, he reprints the essays in *Again, Letters to a Friend*, which contain his harshest criticism of American society, in *Tạp Luận* (Miscellaneous Essays). In *Literature in Vietnam*, Võ Phiến says we should associate the label "luận" with works of "utmost seriousness," works "concerned with deep and thorough investigating," works that head "straight to the truth" (181).

Võ Phiến frequently makes a serious assertion and then undercuts it with a joking comment. It is, as we have pointed out, in some ways his signature gesture, one found in both his short stories ("Birds and Snakes," for example) and his *tùy bút* essays ("Bubbles in Tea," for example). Some readers praise Võ Phiến for the way he mixes the serious and the comic, seeing this mixing as his way of attacking pretensions and illusions of grander, both his own and those of other people. "The fact that his comic spirit," says Doãn Quốc Sỹ, "is presented and then his words become serious in an unaffected way emphasizes the pitifulness of human beings who are prisoners of prejudices and of their own illusions. In his world, in the glory of that smile, everything is absolved—the loud boasting, the fanatical beliefs" (1974, 18). Other readers suggest that Võ Phiến smiles so he will not cry. "Võ Phiến's whimsical tone," argues Nam Chi, "hides his mood of heart-rending pain, sadness, and shock" ("Brother from Bình Định," 1987, 28). While there is truth in both these views, I also believe that Võ Phiến's whimsy can become a way for him to avoid taking full responsibility for his assertions. In Vietnamese there is an expression, "If you throw a spear you have to follow it" (Phóng lao thì phải theo lao). Instead of following his spear, Võ Phiến often reels it in with a bit of whimsy. In some stories and particularly in his essays

on American society, Võ Phiến seems to be hiding behind his famous smile.

While culture shock and Võ Phiến's love of whimsy, the joy he takes in poking fun at everyone—at Vietnamese, at himself, and at Americans—are no doubt contributing factors, I do not believe they alone explain why Võ Phiến was so persistently critical of American society in these three collections of essays. To understand Võ Phiến's essays on America we should look more closely at one letter written in 1976 that is included in *Letters to a Friend*. Võ Phiến is talking about patriotism, the love of one's own country and one's people, and he is comparing small countries like Vietnam to large countries like France and the United States. He mentions surveys in France indicating that young people's concern for the prestige of the nation had declined during the past ten years. Making a living, income, the cost of goods—these were more important concerns. Turning to the United States, he reminds his readers that during the war young Americans burned their draft cards and set their country's flag on fire; and scholars were only a little more restrained in their attacks on their mother country:

Burning the flag is very extreme. In America, many others don't act in this extreme fashion, but they do rudely scorn and criticize, even slander, the American way of life, America's technical civilization, etc. Authors who speak harshly of their native land are considered progressive, and their books sell very well.

Henry Miller, a famous writer, has written a book [*The Colossus of Maroussi*, 1941] in which he enthusiastically praises Greece, but when he meets a Greek doctor who praises the United States, he immediately becomes angry, scornful (!); and when he meets a French person who brags about France, he doesn't like it. How strange! (90)

"Is our country better than any other? Is our country more sacred?" he asks. "You don't need to know much to know that

our land can't be the most fragrant in the world. . . . The difference is that we worry about keeping our fragrance while many scholars in the United States, for example, insist their land stinks and aren't afraid to insult the pride of their own people" (91).

But that is as it should be, Võ Phiến argues. It is dangerous for people from large countries to love themselves too much and for small countries to have too low an opinion of themselves. It could upset the "equilibrium," lead to small countries like Greece, Israel, and Vietnam being swallowed up by the major powers. In admitting that there is some injustice in allowing only people from small countries to express their patriotism, Võ Phiến makes a surprising comparison: "[W]hen Vietnamese brag about being the children of the dragon and the fairy,⁹⁷ people don't believe them but they smile tolerantly; on the other hand, when Nazi Germany boasts about the Aryan race, everyone talks of a narrow racist mentality" (92). Then two paragraphs later comes this passage which, I believe, explains better than any other the motivation that moves Võ Phiến in his essays on America. The reference to returning to Vietnam should be understood in the context of Võ Phiến's discussion of the hope some refugees had of being able to return to Vietnam in a few years. As explained above, Võ Phiến didn't share that hope and urged refugees to make practical plans for a future in the land of exile.

Americans who come to Vietnam and turn up their noses at the unfamiliar smell of fish sauce, or Russian political refugees in the U.S. who make fun of the American hotdog—they are going to be considered narrow nationalists. But I feel that Vietnamese who come to America as refugees have the right to criticize recklessly, the right to insist stubbornly on returning no matter what the cost to the paradise of Vietnam. If we're not careful, I suspect we'll be praised for feeling this way.

⁹⁷Vietnamese refer to themselves as the "children of the dragon and the fairy" (con rồng cháu tiên) because according to their creation story they are descended from a dragon king named Lạc Long and a fairy named Âu Cơ.

I desire that praise, I value the intensity of that feeling [love of country]. I believe it is true and that one shouldn't ridicule it. (92)

There is at least a touch of irony in Võ Phiến's use of the word "paradise" in the above passage. It is ironic, he is suggesting, that we Vietnamese exiles in a highly developed country like the United States consider our small, poor, and technically backward country a paradise. In talking of the Vietnamese habit of cursing—abusing each other verbally—and of their mastery of the glance Võ Phiến uses the Vietnamese word for civilization—*văn minh*—in the same partially ironic way. In "The Savage Americans" he mentions some philosopher's opinion that civilization took a giant stride forward when people began to argue with words instead of with sticks and stones. "I welcome that wise thought," Võ Phiến says, "one which puts our people high up on the ladder of civilization" (*Again, Letters to a Friend*, 19). The irony here is only partial because Võ Phiến does consider Vietnam to be more civilized, as he defines civilized, i.e. not in terms of economic wealth or technological superiority but in terms of the gentler, less violent behavior of its people. But a trace of irony surrounds the phrase because Vietnamese know that in the opinion of many people in the world Vietnam is less civilized than the United States.

In advising his "American friends" to study the Vietnamese art of glancing as an antidote to their violent approach to sex, Võ Phiến again uses the word "*văn minh*" ironically, but in this case in reference to the United States:

The people of the United States live in an extremely civilized country with an extremely advanced technological foundation. So we suggest this: That after they reach the absolute apex of advanced civilization, after they grasp in their hands sufficient research results, including meticulous and exact statistics, after they have conquered the universe of heaven and earth, then American men and women should find the time to practice

the happy art of glancing. (*Again, Letters to a Friend*, 42)

Võ Phiến is being whimsical again, but he is at the same time carefully pointing out that there are different ways to define “civilized.” “Civilization” or “văn minh” is a term with great resonance in Vietnamese political and cultural history.⁹⁸ French colonialists insisted they were in Vietnam on a *mission civilisatrice* and their collaborators, pointing to Vietnam’s technological inferiority, were convinced Vietnam needed Western help to become more “văn minh.” By referring to *văn minh*, Võ Phiến ties his discussion to a long-standing debate about Vietnam’s relationship to the West.

In these passages about differing attitudes toward patriotism and civilization in small and large countries, and in other places where he focuses on the small details of life, on the simple and ordinary aspects of existence, Võ Phiến appears to be striving to develop what might be called an aesthetics of smallness. He is looking for beauty not in large countries but in small ones, not in grandiose events and highfalutin theories, but in the small and humble acts of ordinary life. When Brother Four No More’s second wife, Sister Lộc, smiles forgivingly at her husband to make him stop his nervous habit, she commits not an act of heroism—the word heroism belongs to another aesthetic system—but an act of beauty. Võ Phiến worked hard, as we saw in chapter IV, to turn the common into an aesthetic category. Here we are talking about an aesthetics not of the common but of the small but for Võ Phiến the small and the common are related, as when, for example, he returns to his village alone to check on his grandmother’s house after French troops have landed and forced villagers to seek safer ground. He sleeps in his grandmother’s bed and finds near

⁹⁸The concept of “văn minh” resonated greatly, for example, in 1915 when a northern journalist named Phạm Duy Tồn wrote an article entitled “Văn Minh Giả” (False Civilization) for a southern newspaper in which he argued that Vietnamese were attracted to the superficial aspects of modern civilization—Western clothes, for example—ignoring the fact that fundamental changes in attitude had to take place before the country could become truly civilized. The article generated heated debate largely because southerners interpreted the article as criticism of southern society by a northerner. See Schafer 1994, 107.

it a collection of little things—a fan, pills, matches, candles, a little broom to chase mosquitoes: “trifling things, detailed little arrangements, long-lasting intimate habits, displayed and concentrated in miscellaneous actions! My grandmother paid more attention to these things than to any military attack” (“Again, a Letter from Home,” 101). We have already seen in chapters II and III the tremendous importance that Võ Phiến attached to small things. In standing up for the little things of life, one makes a political as well as an artistic statement: one registers one’s opposition to large countries and grandiose political theories that threaten the well-being of ordinary people. As Nguyễn Mộng Giác observes, the people in Võ Phiến’s stories who stand up for small things “become dangerous to the regime” (1987, 76).

Võ Phiến suggests that given Vietnam’s history and culture an aesthetics of smallness may be the only artistic project that Vietnamese artists can pursue with some hope of success. When Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng interviewed Võ Phiến in 1968, he asked him about his reputation for detailed description, for “splitting a hair to make four.” Võ Phiến replies: “I’m sorry I can’t split it into eight. People in our country are of average stature and can only do average things. We don’t have grandiose and imposing undertakings and we also don’t handle precise discriminations adequately. It seems as if we don’t have the energy to take our positions to the end” (375). In *Literature in South Vietnam* Võ Phiến returns to this idea that Vietnamese are only average and he wonders whether this explains the lack of grandiosity in Vietnamese literature:

In our own small country, there is no excess, no extreme; everything is somewhere in the middle. There is poverty, surely, but no one is poor enough to run off and live in the woods like a wild animal; our kings and lords certainly possessed fortunes but by the world’s standards, they must have been rather frugal. . . . Would all this explain the why’s and how’s of what seem to be the major characteristics of our artworks: simplicity and the commonplace? (176–77)

Võ Phiến clearly thinks so. If, however, one is poised midway between the large/grandiose/imposing and the small/common/modest, presumably both poles are in equal reach. Võ Phiến, however, embraces the latter. In doing so, he may reveal his Bình Định origins—people from Bình Định are supposed to be modest and discreet—but he suggests that all Vietnamese “are not usually given to colorful flourishes: even the most magnificent act of sacrifice takes place quietly, without anyone knowing about it, or is cloaked under a simple, modest appearance” (176).

It is these quiet, simple, modest acts that Võ Phiến wanted to highlight in his stories. Even in stories, like “Returning to a Country Village” in which, as we have seen (chapter II), he pokes fun at villagers, Võ Phiến’s deep appreciation for their quiet and difficult lives is revealed. In this semi-autobiographical story the narrator says his village had no heroes. Only two villagers achieved any notoriety, he says, and for the wrong reasons—primarily by acting comically not heroically. The narrator is amused when lofty titles are bestowed on these two and on other humble villagers, first by the communists then by the Nationalists. One senses, however, that when he wrote this story Võ Phiến was smiling so he would not cry, something Nam Chi suggests Võ Phiến did often (“Brother from Bình Định,” 1987, 28). Certainly the last paragraph of “Returning to a Country Village,” which is set off from the rest of the story by a wide space, making it appear more like a postscript than a real ending, makes clear that Võ Phiến was deeply moved by the sad lives of country people:

I have wanted to tell stories about the misfortunes of my village. But really my village is ordinary, it’s not a sacred place, and so its misfortunes are also ordinary and uninteresting, not worth mentioning. You just hear a never ending sadness that goes on and on like rain in a storm, drop after drop. It’s been over ten years. How come it hasn’t stopped? (22)

In Võ Phiến's view Vietnamese literature, art, and architecture all lack grandeur. "Some Russian and Chinese novels, he says in *Literature in South Vietnam*, "have given me an impression of a vast panorama, a vision of great complexity and grandeur, something that is all too rare in Vietnamese fiction" (176). Vietnamese painting and sculpture also lack grandeur: "We have no large paintings or big statues. In the olden days, our ancestors created charming little rhymes, not long heroic songs." Vietnamese architecture is equally unimposing: "Throughout our long history of thousands of years, we have never had any truly great architectural wonders—no immense cathedrals or large pagodas, no fortifications like the Great Wall in China, no fortresses like those of the Shoguns in Japan, no temples like Angkor Wat in Cambodia" (177). Clearly Võ Phiến can be as critical of Vietnamese culture as he is of American! Toward the end of "Birds and Snakes," however, Võ Phiến's narrator finds something that Vietnamese can and do boast about:

People still criticize our culture, saying we lack imposing achievements: [He mentions here what Vietnam does not have—no Great Wall, no Angkor Wat, etc.] Today we can hold up our heads and ask: How about our quarter-of-a-century long war? Isn't that imposing?

Surely no one would dare say it isn't. Fighting in the second half of the twentieth century is not fun and games. Consider the number of bombs that have fallen on the land of Vietnam, then figure out the amount per person, calculate the number of shells, large and small, fired in one battle in Vietnam. Right away we have an impressive sum, worthy of comparison to any accomplishment in any international war, from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean. And this large and imposing war is taking place in our country. It's our war.

On formal occasions demanding eloquence, in addresses and declarations, etc., rarely do politicians forget to mention our more than twenty years of war, our quarter of a century of suffering, etc. In

literary works, writers also talk incessantly about a quarter century of suffering, about more than twenty years of war. The bigger the number, the greater the emotional impact. "A quarter century . . . the suffering of our people." Listen to these words carefully. In the tone of those who talk about this imposing war there hovers something that resembles pride. Isn't this so? (314–315)

Though they have this "imposing war" Vietnamese have not been able, Võ Phiến says, to write imposing works about it: "The tremendous upheavals and cruel wars that have taken place on our land have provided an extraordinary source for topics. It would be hard to find another place or time that could compete. Regrettably, however, we do not yet have a work of fiction that is worthy of our special circumstances" (*Literature in South Vietnam*, 179). Võ Phiến offers some other reasons, besides their inability to handle grandeur, for the failure of Vietnamese to write a "grand and imposing" (hùng vĩ bao la) work about the war. A problem for writers in South Vietnam, he points out, was that they were not where the action was, so they did not experience the war first-hand. Many, like Võ Phiến, had fled to the cities to escape the violence of the countryside. He mentions the unusual case of Nhã Ca whose semi-autobiographical novel *A Mourning Cloth for Huế* received a great deal of attention in the late '60s. Nhã Ca was from Huế but was living in Saigon. In 1968 she returned to Huế to celebrate Tết and was caught there when the Tết Offensive began and communist forces seized the city. She endured a horrifying experience, Võ Phiến says, but it led to some moving works.

Võ Phiến compares the situation writers in the South found themselves in to that of writers from North Vietnam. The latter, Võ Phiến says, did go where the action was. They "were encouraged, even ordered, to go to observe 'real life' up close (đi thực tế) but they were not given the freedom to write as they wished, while in the South their colleagues were free to do as they pleased but few took the trouble to go where 'real life' was" (177–78). Besides being removed from

the action, writers in the South were, Võ Phiến says, also overwhelmed by the confusion and disorder of the times and by economic difficulties. They had no time to “conceive a work of grandeur” (179).

In arguing for the value of Vietnamese exile literature, Thụy Khuê, an exile critic living in France, invokes an aesthetics of smallness similar to Võ Phiến’s. “Why don’t Vietnamese refugees have a great work about their experience as boat people?” she asks. “About being imprisoned in reeducation camps? About establishing exile communities?” They do, she says, but one must understand that Vietnamese don’t define “great” in the usual way. Vietnamese understand that “many little things make a great whole.” Vietnamese exile writers, she says, have torn up their pain in little pieces and scattered it around in many genres—diaries, personal letters, memoirs, *tùy bút* essays, short stories, etc. “But if one had the courage,” Thụy Khuê says, “to survey all these works written by Vietnamese in the past twenty-five years, they would be able to put together a great puzzle about Vietnamese history, society, and politics” (2000, 44). According to Thụy Khuê and many other exiles, Võ Phiến has contributed some very significant pieces to the puzzle.

Võ Phiến’s desire to develop an aesthetics of smallness helps us understand his fervent praise of little Vietnam, his failure to mention positive aspects of gigantic America, and his failure to express gratitude to the United States for accepting him and his family. There are some other factors related to Võ Phiến’s rhetorical situation that help us understand his American essays. Regarding his failure to praise America, one must remember that his audience for these essays consists of Vietnamese exiles most of whom were living in or near large American cities, or equally modern cities in Australia, Canada, France or some other Western country. Võ Phiến’s readers know that the United States is a rich country. They know that Americans have miles of well-paved roads, buildings that scrape the sky, cat and dog clinics better equipped than a Vietnamese hospital, universities that attract students from around the world, and acres of malls with stores stocked

with every conceivable consumer item. All this is understood, “given” information that, as linguists point out, is usually left unmentioned when people with similar backgrounds and large amounts of shared knowledge communicate with each other. Võ Phiến’s readers know the glories of America. If Võ Phiến went on about them, it would be like an American husband telling his wife where the refrigerator was.

In an essay that introduces *Exile*, Lê Tất Điều, Võ Phiến’s co-author for this collection, explains why Vietnamese refugees do not praise America or thank the American people. Although probably only a few Vietnamese-reading Westerners have read it, this essay, “If You Meet a Refugee Who Is Sad,” is addressed to Americans (or Australians or Europeans) who might encounter a Vietnamese refugee and be puzzled by their behavior—by a female refugee’s tendency to cry for no apparent reason, for example, or by a male refugee’s reluctance to take a higher paying job. The explanation for this behavior, Lê Tất Điều says, is that Vietnamese exiles live in two worlds, the real world of the present in America and the dream world of their past in Vietnam. On those occasions when their dream world intrudes on their real world, they are overcome by an unbearable sadness, which leads to tears and affects ambition. Then Lê Tất Điều takes up this matter of why Vietnamese refugee’s do not praise or thank Americans. Lê Tất Điều is a northerner. He came to South Vietnam in 1954 and then to the United States in 1975. He is, at least in this essay, less analytical and more emotional than Võ Phiến, and more given to self-pity: his heart is close to his sleeve. One suspects that while Võ Phiến might question Lê Tất Điều’s tone, he would agree completely with Lê Tất Điều’s message:

My friend, you might meet refugees who don’t praise America or thank Americans.

Those people know that America is rich, strong, and immense; that they are now living in a land which enjoys many favors from god. But until those people had to abandon their country with broken hearts, they never dreamed of living

anywhere, in any paradise, other than their native land. They didn't come to America hoping for an easy and comfortable life; they came because they were escaping death and a dictatorial regime. They are thankful to their new land for taking them in, but they always like to remember their small, poor native land. Their native land is the best. It can't compare to America in many ways. They know that. But it's still the best.

They have survived. Americans have supported them. Their life is bearable and a few people are happy. But it is the strange happiness of people who have survived a shipwreck.

They are delighted to survive, and are grateful for the help. But is anyone crazy enough to hope for a shipwreck so they can experience this kind of happiness?

My friend, you say they are lucky. I completely agree. I only pray that no one else living in the free world ever has to depend on that kind of luck. (10–11)

There is one more thing to understand about Võ Phiến's essays on America, something that will become clearer after we have looked at his novel *Intact* and some other works he wrote in the early '90s, *To Write*, for example, and *Really Short Stories*, but it was already hinted at in works he wrote before he set foot in America. It is important to realize that the object of Võ Phiến's target in these essays is not Americans in particular but modern industrial society in general. He was, as we saw in chapter V, disturbed by the coldness of Saigon before he suffered from the coldness of American society. In the next chapter we will see that what Võ Phiến missed, what he felt exiled from, was not only a country but a way of life.



When Võ Phiến worked for the county in downtown Los Angeles, California, he liked to eat lunch in nearby Chinatown, where he is seen here.

VII

COPING WITH THE PACE OF LIFE AND THE DEATH OF LITERATURE

*She had to admit she didn't like Nghĩa's blunt, almost crude manner. She herself was reserved and discreet, more suited to a slower, deliberate kind of love.*⁹⁹

—Võ Phiến

*That square-faced enemy [television] is an enemy to be greatly feared.*¹⁰⁰

—Võ Phiến

Võ Phiến did not like the fast pace of modern life. He complained about it before he came to the United States—in his ghost story “Until the Ghost Dies” and in several essays discussed in chapter V—“Leisure and Elegance,” “A Day to Dispose of,” and “The Way of Love Today,” for example. When he first came to the United States, Võ Phiến was overwhelmed by American culture and so in some works—his American essays discussed in the last chapter, for example—he speaks less often of modern life in general, focusing more on the particularities of modern life in America. In his novel *Intact* (Nguyễn Vẹn) (1978), however, and in interviews, essays, and dialogues published in the '90s, he begins to speak more generally about problems with modern life. Two problems especially concern him: the pace of modern life and the death of literature, or at least of literature as we have known it. Since Võ Phiến believes that literature is threatened by the

⁹⁹*Intact*, 155.

¹⁰⁰*To Write*, 118.

speed of modern life, that people are so rushed they have no time to read, his two concerns are related. We take up these two inter-related concerns in this chapter.

Võ Phiến's novel *Intact*, the only novel he has written abroad, explores how war has quickened the lives of many Vietnamese, particularly Vietnamese refugees. In his essays Võ Phiến sometimes appears one-sided, oblivious to complexities, too quick to jump to broad generalizations based on scant evidence. In his fiction, however, he treats issues in a more balanced, more nuanced way. His novel *Intact* is a case in point: in it he presents a more balanced view of American life than he does in his essays collected in *Letters to a Friend*, *Exile*, and *Again, Letters to a Friend*. In *Intact* Võ Phiến describes how different individuals deal with exile and with the problems of modern life, including its speed, and in the process he reveals a wider range of options and positions. While this novel presents a sad view of exile, it suggests that some Vietnamese might enjoy the challenges America offers. It also includes one or two brief but fairly sympathetic portraits of individual Americans.

The novel describes how war and exile affect a young woman named Dung (pronounced Yoom) who at the start of the story lives in Saigon with her mother. Her father, a colonel in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, is stationed in another southern town, Long Xuyên, and has remarried. Dung is in love with Triệu, a graduate of the School of National Administration, and they plan to get married. When the story begins, it is a year before the collapse of the Saigon regime. In an early scene, Dung and Triệu spend a day together in her house. This is the first time Triệu has been invited to visit for a day. When her mother goes to another room for her noon siesta, Dung arranges a hammock in the living room for Triệu and she lies in a couch near him. Neither Dung nor Triệu sleep and time seems to stand still during this peaceful Saigon afternoon. They don't embrace or kiss; Triệu only squeezes her hand briefly. "If they were more intimate, freer with each

other, they might kiss. But one passionate kiss might destroy this delightful, suspended feeling that was now" (21).¹⁰¹

After this siesta in Saigon when time seems suspended, the war intrudes and time speeds up. Dung's brother, Thu, who is in the navy, is wounded when his boat is attacked. Friends of Dung's mother arrive from Đà Lạt with tales about the fall of Buôn Ma Thuột, Huế, Đà Nẵng. Then Xuân Lộc falls and as communist troops advance on Saigon, Dung and Triệu and Thu's fiancé, Nguyễn, frantically try to arrange passage on a boat to leave the country. Because Dung's mother and Nguyễn want to wait for Thu, Dung ends up coming to America alone, but she is united later in Minnesota with her mother and brother and Nguyễn, but never with Triệu, who is unable to leave Vietnam. Through Triệu's cousin in Germany, who had received a letter from Triệu's mother, she learns that Triệu desires that she "not be troubled about the past." He wants her "to find happiness soon so she can be at peace" (157). Dung cannot find peace, however. She misses Triệu too much, misses those languid afternoons in Vietnam when there was yet no necessity to hurry, when her life seemed to be unwinding slowly just as she wished it to. In Dung's mind her homeland and Triệu, homesickness and lovesickness, combine and leave her with an overwhelming feeling of loss: "All around her there were many refugees, all in pain because of their lost home. Yet she had lost not only her home, but also her first love. For a girl, that first love is something of a home—a home of the heart" (175).

In the passage quoted above the narrator sounds like Võ Phiến in his essays on America. The narrator expresses the same sad pain of exile, the only difference being the added element of romance. But *Intact* is a story and in his stories Võ Phiến typically complicates the situation. If fictional characters lead unfulfilled lives, war and exile are often the primary but never the only causes: the personality of the character is also a factor. Dung is a proper girl. Though she lives in the South where relations between the sexes are freer and more

¹⁰¹Page references are to James Banerian's English translation. All passages quoted from this novel have been translated by Banerian.

spontaneous, Dung is cautious, perhaps because her parents are from central Vietnam. In the South she is surrounded by examples of bolder approaches to love. Returning from a trip to visit an aunt who lives in Phú Vinh, she is stunned but also fascinated by the boldness of a soldier who flirts with a cute girl selling lottery tickets at the Vàm Cống ferry. When her brother, Thu, is wounded in Cà Mau, his fiancé, Nguyễn, visits him. When she returns to Saigon, she reports angrily to Dung that an unsophisticated southern girl named Mai is infatuated with Thu and was flirting with him openly. Nguyễn describes Mai's family as "undisciplined and too easy in their way of life" (84). Though Dung could never be so bold as this girl from Cà Mau, during her hectic pre-departure time in Saigon, when she realizes she and Triệu could be separated for a long time, she invites Triệu to her house with the hope of being able to consummate their relationship, but they never get a chance in the crowded household. When it develops that they could become separated forever, that she might never belong to him "completely," she contemplates the "painful but romantic" possibility that she will live out her life without him: "No matter where I am I will be yours. For all time. I will never belong to someone else. I will belong to—loneliness and heartache. I will belong to the past. Later, far away, whenever you think of me, it will be like turning back to a stale, musty past—That is enough" (100).

Võ Phiến does not suggest it is not enough; at least he never rejects or ridicules this painful but romantic path that Dung foresees herself taking. Probably no Vietnamese writer, at least one of Võ Phiến's generation, could ridicule it: it is a route too well-traveled and too hallowed within the Vietnamese literary tradition. But he does undercut it slightly by presenting other characters who are more hopeful, less cautious, and more fast-moving than Dung—characters like Nghĩa, whom she spends a lot of time with at the refugee camp at Fort Indiantown Gap. Dung had known Nghĩa when they were both students at the Faculty of Letters in Saigon. He is bolder and much happier than Dung. She suspects that Nghĩa is the man she once overheard flirting with an Amer-

ican volunteer. Dung calls Nghĩa, who is looking forward to studying in America, happy-go-lucky, and tells him: "No one can call you the victim of a lost war. In fact, it is just the opposite. The war brought you a golden opportunity" (150). The sad romantic route holds no charm for him. On a walk in the woods near their refugee camp, Dung begins reciting a famous poem: "Every waterway is a pain, every river another year." When she asks him if he knows the rest, he has no idea what she is talking about (152).

Nghĩa is not insensitive, however, and is not presented as an unsympathetic character. Though he did not know that verse Dung recited, he writes poetry; and a decision to study literature instead of something more practical (economics, medicine) had cost him a chance to study abroad. Dung decides that "he knew and appreciated subtle gestures, even though performing them was not one of his strong points" (156). Other characters in *Intact* are like Nghĩa in that they refuse to weep about the past and insist instead on marching boldly into the future. The most remarkable of these more optimistic characters is a one-armed sixty-year old man who, though he lacked a formal education, had been a successful businessman in Saigon. In the refugee camp he diligently studies English and confidently plans to succeed in business in the United States, starting first as a street vendor and working up from there.

When the novel ends, it is not clear whether Nghĩa and Dung will get together. Given that she is different from Nghĩa, "more reserved and discreet, more suited to a slower, deliberate kind of love" (155), it seems unlikely that they will. Some people, Võ Phiến's novel suggests, are by nature or upbringing more willing than others to let go of the past and to love and work at the fast rate that modern life requires. These people will adapt more readily to America, so readily in fact that they may not even be aware of what they have lost. But not Võ Phiến. He will always be aware of what he has lost. For him as for Dung "old memories remain intact," as the poet Nguyễn Đình Toàn says in the lines that gave Võ Phiến the title for his novel. Loss is Võ Phiến's special province, a

topic on which he is an expert, as his admirers are aware. "I read [Võ Phiến] primarily because he is the person who has dug deeply and knows extremely well the meaning of loss," says the exile writer and artist Võ Đình (1991, 49).

Coping with the Death of Literature

Until recently the loss that Võ Phiến has expressed has been the loss of a village, of a way of life, of a period of history. Beginning in the 1990s, however, he has focused on a different kind of loss: the loss of literature.¹⁰² In a short story published in 1991 called "I'm Here" (Em Đây) a poet named Trà Sơn is pestered by a muse who keeps appearing, reminding him of poems he has started, snatches of verse he has forgotten. "I'm here," she says, to announce her presence. The story ends with the poet wondering why he has been writing for all these years, why he has let this muse cling to him for so long: "For what? In a few more decades will there be anyone left who will look at a book? Will the novel genre still exist? Will anyone still read poetry? Will there still be something called literature?" (38–39).

The situation that has provoked the poet Trà Sơn's questions is the topic of a remarkable series of exchanges between Võ Phiến and a fellow exile writer Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng that took place from February to August, 1993. Originally appearing in the exile journal *21st Century* (Thế Kỷ 21), all nine exchanges are reprinted in *To Write* (Viết) where they are given the title "A Conversation with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng: A New Environment for Artistic Creation." This is an extraordinary exchange. Interviews with prominent writers have appeared for years in Vietnamese journals but usually they focus on the writer's life and current work and seldom take up more than ten pages. The speakers in this conversation, however, never discuss their own work but focus instead, with only minor digressions, on several intellectual questions related to literature; and they continue for one hundred and

¹⁰²Võ Phiến foreshadows this concern in "Night Rain at Year's End" when he has the main character, the Việt Minh cadre named Lung, overhear his technology-obsessed captor predict that writers will soon be obsolete (20).

forty-four pages, making their exchange “perhaps the longest in Vietnamese literature” (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1996, 179).

Võ Phiến does most of the talking in this conversation: Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng’s role is to keep the discussion on track. He does a good job: the discussion appears to proceed naturally and spontaneously but yet there is an overall structure to it. In the first four exchanges, the two exile writers attempt to characterize the “new environment” that exists for writers; in the next four they discuss how this new environment affects both the processing (reading, viewing) and production of artistic works. In the final exchange, “Beginning, Ending,” they refuse to predict the future but offer some tentative conclusions.

In this conversation Võ Phiến returns to an old theme of his—the speed of modern life. In an early exchange, one given the title “Hurry, Hurry,” Võ Phiến finally finds some American food worth talking about—espresso coffee and other forms of fast food. Not that he likes them, of course; they are mentioned as signs of a speeded up life. “Eating fast food, drinking espresso—these are the hurries of the age, markers that express the Western view of life” (156). Particularly the American view. He notes that Americans who purchase \$40,000 European cars are upset when they don’t come with a place to set their coffee cup and pizza slice so they can save time by eating while they drive (157).

All this speed would be bad enough if it affected only eating, but it affects all aspects of life, including literature. The first problem is that people do not read much anymore. Võ Phiến admits that, at least in the United States, the number of books being published each year is increasing and that writers are writing more than ever. These developments do not make Võ Phiến optimistic about the future of literature, however. Writers are churning out too much material, he says, and because of computers, desktop publishing, and other advances in printing technology, their publications are rolling off the presses too quickly and flooding readers. From a magazine that reaches him from Vietnam, he learns that even his native province of Bình Định has modern print-

ing facilities that can do off-set printing, photocopying, etc. Reading material is available but it is not read. The problem again is the fast pace of modern life. With their lives in perpetual overdrive, most people do not have the time or energy to read. So they watch TV, which in American homes is on for an average of seven hours a day. The “couch potato” has replaced the “bookworm,” says Võ Phiến, using the English terms and thereby revealing his growing familiarity with the American idiom (135).

TV, which Võ Phiến refers to as “that square-faced fellow” (gã mặt vuông), threatens the future of literature not only because watching it takes up time that could be spent reading but also because it develops in viewers habitual ways of processing stories that differ sharply from those needed in reading. In an exchange labeled “Image to Concept, Concept to Image,” Võ Phiến explains that a TV drama presents images that viewers learn to convert to concepts. They become good at and comfortable with this conversion process, so comfortable that when they are presented with a work of literature that demands that they imagine, i.e., use their minds to produce images, they feel uncomfortable and dissatisfied. “Gradually they become lazy, only skim the surface. They become bad readers” (135). TV also changes the psychology of writers. In writing for TV writers worry that the audience won’t “stretch to the right concept, so they search for ways to evoke the concept; in fiction, however, where there is only literary language, only signs, writers worry that readers will not visualize the correct object, so they search for the most concrete way to express it” (216). Literature will change as writers seek ways to move audiences not from concept to image but from image to concept.

When people do move away from their TVs and pick up a book, they read too quickly, and when they read quickly what do they skip over? The most important part, the small details, like the blue bottle fly buzzing against the window at the death of Phillip’s uncle in W. Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* (177). Writers slave over their drafts, trying to come up with telling details, but fast readers consider details

a nuisance and ignore them. The result is that while writers “write one book,” readers “read one thousand books” as they make their own way through the text. Individual words are as important as details, and not just in poems but in novels as well. When you “read one word” you can “get a hundred feelings” but you have to savor the word, give it time to release its mystery. You must, says Võ Phiến: “Take it leisurely. Let each sound slowly release all its emotional content. If you take a chicken bone and suck it once, it has no flavor, and so you throw it away. The patient person bites it open and sucks out the marrow” (198).

In this conversation with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng, Võ Phiến brings together some of his favorite themes—the importance of small details in literature and the value of a leisurely approach to life, for example. Another favorite theme also reemerges in this conversation, one that we haven’t yet discussed: changes in literacy, changes in the way writers write and readers read. In a series of essays eventually collected in *Looking at Ourselves through Our Literature* (Chúng Ta Qua Cách Viết) (1972),¹⁰³ Võ Phiến charts various stages in the relation of literature to the spoken language. Looking briefly at these earlier “literacy essays” will help us understand how he arrived at his current views as expressed in his 1993 conversation with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng. In *Looking at Ourselves through Our Literature*, Võ Phiến says that first there was spoken language and an oral tradition of folk poetry and stories. When writers began to write literature, they at first produced works that were meant to be read aloud, works Võ Phiến calls “literature for the ear.” Vietnam’s famous nineteenth-century verse narratives, for example, *The Tale of Kiều* and *Lục Vân Tiên*, are examples of literature for the ear. Though composed in the demotic script (Chinese characters modified for the Vietnamese language), they were written to be heard and were in fact commonly transmitted orally, sometimes by blind minstrels in public places but also in family readings in homes. A family

¹⁰³ Apparently Võ Phiến considered the essays in this collection to be *tùy bút* essays: “*tùy bút*” appears on the title page. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, however, lists this work under the heading “tiểu luận,” or scholarly essays (Võ Phiến, 1996, 200).

member who could read, or who had memorized the poem, would *nói* (chant) *Lục Vân Tiên*, for example, and the rest of the extended family would listen. In Võ Phiến's "Drops of Coffee," discussed in chapter IV, the narrator fondly remembers one of these family events, which featured his Uncle Bảy chanting *Lục Vân Tiên* in his own inimitable style. On the other end of the political spectrum from Võ Phiến, Nguyễn thị Định, Deputy Commander of the National Liberation Front Armed Forces, describes a similar family reading that took place in her family home in Bến Tre:

[I]n the evenings [when *Lục Vân Tiên* was recited in our home], as soon as my brother or I began to read, the neighbors would all come. Sometimes, when I reached the part of the story where Nguyệt Nga, Vân Tiên and his young valet were harmed by the wicked people, I wept and the neighbors also wept. Once in a while my father nodded his head in approval and commented: "This story teaches people all the virtues they must have in life: humanity, kindness, filial piety, courage, determination and loyalty." (1968/1976, 25)

But no one, Võ Phiến points out, writes verse narratives like *Lục Vân Tiên* anymore. More recently writers have begun to produce a "literature for the eye," works written not to be read aloud (*đọc to, bình văn*), not even to be read with some subvocalizing (*đọc ngầm*), but works designed to be processed completely visually—a literature "to see" (*xem*) (*Looking at Ourselves*, 127–53). In explaining this movement from a literature for the ear to a literature for the eye, Võ Phiến recalls the novelist Nhất Linh's observation that when he was growing up he and his friends would pool their money and rent a Chinese story (translated into Vietnamese). (Small commercial "libraries" were common in the market areas of Vietnamese towns.) One youngster would read it aloud and everyone would listen. But Nhất Linh shudders at the thought of what the reaction would be if one of his own

novels, which he crafted to be seen not heard, should be performed orally (135).

More recently, beginning around 1963, there was a new development: spoken language returned and “invaded” literary works. After Ngô Đình Diệm was assassinated, the new regime in Saigon eased some restrictions on newspapers, causing their number to grow quickly. These newspapers hired novelists to write *feuilletons*, or pulp fiction that was serialized in daily papers. These stories, which were written quickly and often carelessly, contained a great deal of dialogue and generally avoided literary language, featuring instead the colloquial language of everyday life, a language more likely to appeal to a wider and less-educated readership.¹⁰⁴

Võ Phiến has mixed feelings about both the movement toward a literature for the eyes and what he sees as a reaction to it, the recent invasion of literature by colloquial language. He accepts these changes fairly philosophically but not without a trace of regret. As a result of the death of the verse narrative, he laments, no one now produces works that all Vietnamese can enjoy no matter what their social class or level of literacy (“The Death of a Genre,” 273). As for the *feuilleton* phenomenon and the growing popularization of literature, including the heavy use of colloquial language, Võ Phiến appears torn: he agrees that literary language had become too distanced from ordinary speech and needed to be re-invigorated by colloquial language. He is aware that similar changes have occurred throughout history and provides a brief survey, mentioning, for example, the movement in medieval Europe to replace Latin with the vernacular languages (Italian, French, English, etc.); and the May 4th Movement in China (1917–21) whose leaders advocated the use of colloquial language in literature (see *Looking at Ourselves*, 123–25). He worries, however, that writers who churn out stories for the dailies are sacrificing literary quality in order to put money in their pockets. As someone who cares about the craft of writing, he regrets the lack of attention to polish and the tendency

¹⁰⁴Võ Phiến discusses the *feuilleton* phenomenon in *Looking at Ourselves* (11–18) and in *Literature in South Vietnam* (141–43).

of some *feuilleton* writers to resort to sex and crude language to get readers' attention.

In these early essays on changes in literacy Võ Phiến doesn't attack TV or other modern technology: he is primarily concerned with changes in textual literacy. In his 1993 conversation with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng, however, the transformation that concerns him is the movement from textual literacy to an electronic literacy dominated by TV and film. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, who is familiar with current European and American critical approaches, notes this current interest of Võ Phiến's and says it reveals him to be "the first Vietnamese writer to realize deeply and fully the pressures of postmodern culture" (1996, 64). Nguyễn Hưng Quốc identifies the following postmodern aspects in Võ Phiến's conversation with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng: his concern with contemporary life; his belief that contemporary life is controlled by electronic technologies of information and communication; and his conviction that these technologies will profoundly affect the way we think, feel, and organize society (185–86).

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc is not suggesting that Võ Phiến has read postmodern critics like Gillès Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Jurgen Habermas: the influence of postmodern ideas has been indirect, he suggests—filtered through journalistic accounts. He also stops short of claiming that Võ Phiến is a complete postmodernist, noting his commitment to meaning, to the word (as opposed to the image), and to the linear presentation of ideas and events. This summarizing statement by Nguyễn Hưng Quốc concerning Võ Phiến's relation to postmodernism seems accurate:

He examines, he analyzes, and he explains postmodern society from the perspective of someone who was educated in and who matured within an atmosphere of modernist culture. I believe this is normal. It is not easy to abandon an old way of thinking and feeling. What needs to be noted and respected about Võ Phiến is this: he opened a new way of searching, a new way of presenting a prob-

lem, and, to a slightly lesser degree, a new way of writing. (190)

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc decides finally that Võ Phiến is more of this century than the next. "His successes and failures are the typical successes and failures of Vietnamese writers of this [the twentieth] century. If we have to find a label for Võ Phiến, we could call him the writer of the century, the twentieth century" (191). Võ Phiến would be the first to agree with Nguyễn Hưng Quốc's assessment, at least as it applies to Võ Phiến, the literary critic. In a recent interview, Võ Phiến readily admits there is nothing new about his approach to criticism. "In comparison with new trends," he says, "my view of criticism is nearly a century old." Why doesn't he adopt new approaches? He laughs at this suggestion:

Me, enter the cross-country race in the critical field? People like Đặng Tiễn and Nguyễn Hưng Quốc would roll over in laughter. I have become accustomed to and have absorbed a past period; my heart and mind are attached to my generation's way of appreciating literature. It's not possible for me to change now. . . . You do what your learning allows you to do; you proceed in the direction set by the period in which you live. One shouldn't imitate carelessly. As for waiting for myself to slowly change and then begin to work, there's no time for that. Anyway the new work will be done by new people. What's there to worry about? ("An Interview with the Writer Võ Phiến . . .," 2000, 19)

Puzzling over whether Võ Phiến is a postmodernist yields some insights. In understanding his work on changes in reading and writing, however, it is more useful to relate him not to the postmodern literary theorists that Nguyễn Hưng Quốc mentions but to researchers belonging to the Toronto School—Harold Innis, Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan, and

Walter Ong.¹⁰⁵ If one uses Nguyễn Hưng Quốc's criteria, these researchers could perhaps be considered postmodernists, but their focus on different "technological transformations of the word" (Ong, 1977, 9)—writing, the printing press, electronic media—and on how these inventions affect human consciousness sets them apart from the researchers that Nguyễn Hưng Quốc assembles. But not from Võ Phiến. Võ Phiến mentions McLuhan occasionally and probably owes some of his insights to him; he may have read works by some of the other scholars mentioned above as well. Although his debt to the Toronto School is not clear, he obviously shares many of the concerns of the scholars associated with it.

By looking briefly at Havelock and Ong we can put Võ Phiến's analysis of the Vietnamese literacy situation in a wider context. Havelock is a classical scholar well-known for explaining why Plato kicked poets out of his *Republic*. Plato was not, Havelock argues, attacking their poetry but their use of poetry for didactic purposes—to help pre-literate people remember important civic and social traditions (1963, 47). Filled with formulaic devices and highly redundant, the poetry that Plato knew—Homer's epics, for example, which were originally compositions of primary orality—were inadequate for conducting the kind of intellectual exploration that he was advocating. But in a move that reveals his ambiguous relationship to orality, Plato also argued against writing, faulting it for destroying memory, for being unresponsive, etc. Havelock points out, however, that Plato could marshal this argument against writing only because he could write. Havelock stresses that Greek literacy changed not only the means of communication, but also the shape of Greek consciousness (1986, 98–116). Both he and Ong maintain that "Plato's philosophically analytic thought, . . . including his critique of writing, was possible only because of the effects that writing was beginning to have on mental processes" (Ong, 1982, 80).

¹⁰⁵The Toronto School gets its name from the fact that all these researchers were associated in various ways with the University of Toronto. Havelock doesn't consider himself a member of this school (1986, 17).

Ong builds on Havelock's insights and continues the story to the present day: he describes not only the invention of writing but also more recent "technological transformations of the word" and how they have resulted in different stages in the "evolution of consciousness" (1977, 9). Ong outlines four stages. The first stage, primary orality, is "the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print" (11). The second stage, residual orality, exists when people have a writing system but are still influenced by preliterate modes of thought (1971, 23–47). The third stage, literacy, is represented by modern literate cultures before the advent of radio, television, and other electronic devices. The final stage, secondary orality, emerges as electronic devices transform the old culture of the written word. Ong calls this last stage secondary orality because speech—the human voice—becomes important again in radio, TV, and film and also because he believes our contemporary secondarily oral culture resembles primary (preliterate) oral cultures: "Our sense of togetherness, for example, matches in surprising detail that of early man before the development of individualism fostered by writing and print" (1971, 20). As an example of togetherness fostered by television, Ong mentions the TV show *Roots* that united Americans by enabling them to share a common viewing experience (1977, 317).

Havelock and Ong's terms and categories help us pinpoint Võ Phiến's concerns and insights. When he discusses the movement in Vietnam from a literature for the ear to a literature for the eye, Võ Phiến is observing that a residual orality may remain in a literate society. When he describes how TV and film have replaced books, he is documenting a move from literacy to secondary orality. When he emphasizes that "electronic devices do not only change our way of life, they also change the way we feel and think" (*To Write*, 211), he is echoing Havelock and Ong's insistence that changing technologies of the word affect the human mind and result in an evolution of consciousness. And when he compares Americans who gather around the TV to watch "Dallas" or "Murphy Brown" to Vietnamese of previous generations who gathered to hear

someone chant *The Tale of Kiều* or *Lục Vân Tiên* (*To Write*, 227), he is echoing Ong's point that secondary orality, like primary orality, can be less alienating and more communal than print literacy.

In his conversation with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng, Võ Phiến expresses considerable enthusiasm for the "orality" aspects of secondary orality—so much so, in fact, that parts of this conversation may get readers wondering whether he is turning optimistic in his old age, abandoning his role as a chronicler of loss. He seems particularly enthusiastic about new developments in poetry. In a magazine he learns that in January 1993, there were one hundred poetry readings in the Los Angeles area—at universities, in laundries, and once a month on the Blue Line Bus in Long Beach. "If poetry is blocked," Võ Phiến says, "it's blocked on paper: no one buys poetry printed in a book. But it's moved to a new front: it's charging right at people so they can't avoid it (*poetry in the face*); it has abandoned the printed page and leapt onto the stage (*from the page to the stage*). Performance poetry has become an important subject and has attracted the attention of researchers" (*To Write*, 235).¹⁰⁶

Võ Phiến appears anxious to refute any charge that he is being unjustifiably pessimistic. When Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng wonders whether their conversation about the death of books will sound like the whining of resentful old men, Võ Phiến objects to the characterization. It is normal to regret the passing of a period, he says. "We're saying only that a new way of life is killing the old art works," he continues. "We're not daring to predict that it will weaken people's intelligence or cause culture to regress" (209). Võ Phiến may be only slightly familiar with the Toronto School, but he has read his Plato, and knows that people now are amused by Socrates' criticisms of writing (in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*). Võ Phiến tells Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng that the change that Socrates was find-

¹⁰⁶Ong observes that "happenings" like the performance poetry events that Võ Phiến discusses are both similar to and different from comparable events in preliterate cultures. Both are oral, communal, and participatory, but modern "happenings" don't spontaneously occur: they are planned (1971, 284–85).

ing difficult to accept—the move from orality to literacy—was less “profound and abrupt” than the change they are facing—from literacy to electronic means of communication. So if we whine a little, Võ Phiến, says, we’re still “tougher than Socrates” (210).

Besides its occasional note of optimism, rarely heard in Võ Phiến’s earlier writing, this conversation has another new feature. In essays written both before he came to the United States and soon after his arrival here, when he used the Vietnamese inclusive plural first-person pronoun “chúng ta” (we), Võ Phiến was referring to both himself and his readers, i.e. to Vietnamese, as in sentences like this one from *Again, Letters to a Friend*: “And in normal times we [chúng ta] are a peaceful people which is why we [chúng ta] worry about the savage Americans” (19). In essays written in the ‘90s, however, Võ Phiến gives the pronoun *chúng ta* a more ambiguous reference, and at times appears to use it to refer to both Vietnamese and Americans, as in this sentence from his conversation with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng which introduces a discussion of espresso coffee and fast food: “This time I suggest talking about how quickly we [chúng ta] eat these days” (*To Write*, 155). This change in pronoun suggests that Võ Phiến is realizing that his worst fears are coming true: he and his fellow refugees are becoming assimilated Americans. It also indicates a broadening of his target: in his recent writing Võ Phiến attacks not Americans in particular, but what careful study of his life and work reveals to have always been his real target: modern technological culture in general. Faced with the onslaught of technology, Võ Phiến seems to be saying, we are all becoming victims; we are all in danger of becoming less “civilized.”

In his 1996 interview in Australia with Minh Nguyệt, Võ Phiến talks about a story he learned from a Vietnamese exile living in San Francisco. This man received a Buddhist monk from Vietnam who commented on how quickly another monk, who had come to America earlier, now moved—much more quickly than he did in Vietnam, this later-arriving monk observed; now he doesn’t carry himself at all like a religious

person. Then a third monk arrived from Vietnam. When he meets the second monk he notices that he moves more like a cross-country runner than a Buddhist monk! Võ Phiến is struck by this San Franciscan's story, by the impression he gives of Vietnamese monks whirling at increasingly faster speeds, robes flying like the blades of a fan controlled by someone with his hand stuck on the "fast" button. The point of Võ Phiến's story would appear to be this: if religious figures, products of rigorous training in non-Western thinking, are not immune to the speed of the West, what hope is there for ordinary Vietnamese? Not much, apparently. Võ Phiến himself admits to having caught the disease. When a friend sends him a copy of *La pitié dangereuse* by Stéfán Zweig, an author whom Võ Phiến used to appreciate (and translate), he finds the book difficult to read—too slow-paced, so slow in fact that Võ Phiến finds himself wanting to skip passages. "Conditions change, the rhythm of life changes, and so has the rhythm of my own emotions," Võ Phiến says. "When I look at the page of an old book, I see that my soul is different from before" (*To Write*, 1993, 164–65).

In his conversation with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng, Võ Phiến mentions a Mr. Đỗ, a fellow exile who argues that if Vietnamese parents want to raise their children to be good Vietnamese, then they will have to turn off the TV during meal times. Võ Phiến agrees, but says this won't be easy. He refers to a 1991 survey revealing that 50 percent of Americans watch TV during the evening meal. Then Võ Phiến presents an interesting comparison: "TV has conquered one-half, and Mr. Đỗ's side has the other half," he says. "So it's a standoff at the Bến Hải River [which used to separate communist North Vietnam from South Vietnam]. If we don't resist skillfully, I'm afraid we'll be pushed to the tip of Cà Mau [southern end of Vietnam peninsula], and then we evacuate. Who has the heart to say Mr. Đỗ's too aggressive in his plan to save territory?" (222). In this passage, TV, "that square-faced fellow," is compared to communist troops storming across the demilitarized zone. The enemy now is not communism but television. And it threatens all Americans—including Vietnamese-Americans

and every other kind of American. In Võ Phiến's metaphor, Vietnamese are forced to exile themselves from Vietnam to escape TV's advance, leaving open the question of where they might be safe from this aggressive intruder. Certainly not in the United States, the square-faced fellow's homeland. There may be no safe place, Võ Phiến suggests, for exiles fleeing the effects of the new electronic literacy.

What can a writer like Võ Phiến, someone in whom print literacy is as ingrained as one's life's blood, do to make his works readable in an age when reading is going out of style? In his conversation with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng, Võ Phiến makes clear that he is not predicting the death of literature, only its death in the form we know it now, leaving open the possibility that new forms will evolve. These new forms, he suggests, would have to accommodate the new ways of processing texts that have been inculcated in potential readers by television and film (224). One cannot revive an old form—Võ Phiến mentions failed attempts to revive the verse narrative, for example—because you cannot “maintain or save or restore forms of art that aren't suitable to the context of life around us.” New forms, Võ Phiến says, will “gradually take shape on their own through the searching and experiments of creators not on the desks of debaters, certainly not on the lips of so-called ‘expert’ debaters like ourselves” (250). In his work done in the United States, one sees Võ Phiến doing this “searching”; his recent works are “experiments,” attempts to find a form that is suitable for an age in which electronic media are creating a new consciousness within consumers.

Võ Phiến has written little fiction since coming to the United States, a decision prompted by his feeling that to create or imagine a story one needed to participate in life, and in America he saw himself as a spectator observing life from the outskirts. In America Võ Phiến has produced mostly *tùy bút* essays, dialogues and conversations, and a literary history of South Vietnam from 1954–1975. But he did write one novel, *Intact*, and in 1991 he produced a collection of short fiction.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷A second edition was published in 1995. My references are to that edition.

In this latter work, Võ Phiến tries to adapt his style to make it suitable for an audience that reads rarely and rapidly. His strategy is to make his stories “really short,” hence the title of his collection: *Really Short Stories* (Truyện Thật Ngắn). “In regard to technique,” Võ Phiến said in 1996, “the thing that people have noticed is that [recently] I have written really short stories. That originates from life around us: life has speeded up, each day it speeds up more, and so stories speed up in response” (“Writing Outside the Country,” 121).

Though shorter than his stories written in Vietnam, stories in this collection are not terribly short. Most take up around ten pages of a pocket book; one is only five pages long and one, the last in the collection “All Finished” (Xong Cả), goes for forty-one pages. Stories in this collection vary considerably in theme and narrative style. In some Võ Phiến departs from realism, blurring the boundary between illusion and real life. I have already mentioned the story “I’m Here” in which the poet Trà Sơn is pestered by a muse-like spirit. In “I Am Many People” (Tôi Nhiều Đứa), an old friend of the narrator named Quảng claims to encounter different projections of himself. Quảng comes to the narrator’s house in Saigon after the communist takeover and claims he has seen himself in the form of a captain in the north Vietnamese army. Later Quảng tells the narrator that he knows he (Quảng) is buried in Chợ Thương, killed by American bombing in 1968. Then he reports that he has been sighted in a reeducation camp in the North. After both Quảng and the narrator escape Vietnam, they meet in Garden Grove, California, where Quảng tells him that someone returning to Vietnam has seen his wife, who is with him in Garden Grove, at the Trương Minh Giảng market in Saigon. How do we explain these strange projections? During the resistance period Quảng had fallen madly in love with Xuân Thảo, a girl from the north who had come south before 1954, but returned with her brothers to the north after the Geneva Agreement. When she left, Quảng felt “as if he had been torn in two: to a certain extent in his mind, in his projection, he was the husband of Xuân Thảo” (59). Quảng’s fantastic projections appear to be caused partly by

this unhappy love affair, partly by traumas induced by war, that most divisive of forces that separates people from their homes and loved ones and tears them apart spiritually even if it leaves their bodies in one piece.

In "All Finished" we encounter more victims of the war and its aftermath. Tổ Nga, with whom the narrator was once in love, is apparently raped by a pirate while fleeing Vietnam by boat with her husband. When the narrator visits the couple in San Jose, he finds that they are both suffering. Tổ Nga is skinny and looks tired. Phụng is haunted by dreams in which he becomes a woodpecker; he raps continually on the table, a habit that is driving his wife to distraction and ruining her health. All the characters in *Really Short Stories* are tortured in one way or another by the war or their exile situation. In his comments on this collection, Nguyễn Hưng Quốc points out that normal healthy people are not overcome with illusions; the fact that many characters in Võ Phiến's *Really Short Stories* cannot distinguish truth from illusion indicates that they are deeply troubled (1996, 175).

In *Really Short Stories* Võ Phiến shortens his fiction to make it more appealing to today's impatient readers. He also changes his non-fiction, but with it he adopts a different approach, one that probably reflects other needs besides the desire to accommodate impatient readers. After he arrives in the United States, Võ Phiến makes his non-fiction more dialogical. His "Letter" collections—*Letters to a Friend* and *Again, Letters to a Friend*—are presented as letters, but Võ Phiến's style is so close to a speaking voice that the effect is like that of a dramatic monologue in which we overhear a person talking to someone who is not present. Only Võ Phiến speaks, thus his letters technically remain monologues, but by embedding questions and comments by his "Dear Friend" in his monologues, he gives them a dialogic quality. The following example reveals how this is done:

Dear friend,

You tell me the story of your three dreams.

On the first night, you dream that you returned to

the island of Guam; on the second night you dream that you returned to Subic Bay. Only one step more and you'll reach Saigon. You're overjoyed. On the third night, you go to bed real early, and . . . you sleep soundly and don't dream of anything at all.

You tell me these things and ask me to "reply with an appropriate story"!

How am I supposed to know what is appropriate? And you've messed up. In your story there are only two dreams, not three. You've left out dream three, the most important one. (*Letters to a Friend*, 45)

More recently, as we have seen in his long exchange with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng, Võ Phiến has adopted the dialogue form to discuss threats to print literacy. The same year this exchange was published (1993), Võ Phiến also published *Dialogues* (Đối Thoại), a collection of exchanges on other topics—the atom bomb's role in the fall of communism, why some Vietnamese appreciate dog meat (and why it is taboo for Americans and Europeans), issues related to the translation of poetry, and other topics. In *Dialogues* Võ Phiến's conversation partner is not identified, he is referred to only as "my friend" as in the "Letters to a Friend" collections, but the exchanges in *Dialogues* are real dialogues, not dramatic monologues, with Võ Phiến and his partner's comments printed like actors' lines in a drama. In 2003 Võ Phiến collected his exchange with Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng from *To Write*, his dialogic essays from *Dialogues*, and some recent interviews and letters that had appeared in various journals and published all these works in a single volume which he called *Conversations* (Đàm Thoại).

Why this urge to converse in the writing he has done in the U.S? Why, asks Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, does Võ Phiến "talk" so much these days? (1996, 41). In some ways, moving to dramatic monologue and dialogue is a logical development: Võ Phiến has been interested in "vernacularizing" his style ever since he moved from central Vietnam to the South and became enamored of the southern style, a way of writing which, as we have seen, fully exploited the resources of

everyday speech. Võ Phiến has in several places expressed his belief that literature's life blood, its vitality, comes from the daily language of ordinary people, and as an exile writer he greatly feared being cut off from that rich source.¹⁰⁸ In the Fort Indiantown Gap refugee camp, he notes a newly created idiomatic expression used by two youths playing chess, and worries that when they are scattered around the globe Vietnamese refugees will never be able to establish the kind of communities that will make that kind of linguistic invention possible. "We love the language of our ancestors," he says, "and we carry it with us each step of our exile; but we won't be able to strengthen and nourish it. We'll make it wither in a foreign land" (*Letters to a Friend*, 13). Võ Phiến's dramatic monologues and dialogues are ways of slowing up that withering, of revealing to fellow exiles that there is still life left in the language.

But these literary conversations function in a more personal way for Võ Phiến. I agree with Nguyễn Hưng Quốc when he suggests that Võ Phiến "talks" in his recent work to combat loneliness. "For Võ Phiến the need to converse and to exchange feelings was very strong," he says (1996, 42). Scattered around the world and usually living among non-Vietnamese, all Vietnamese exiles of Võ Phiến's generation greatly miss the informal conversations with neighbors and fellow workers that were so much a part of daily life at home. When they first arrived, before they fully realized the cost, they would run up tremendous phone bills talking to relatives and friends in the United States, Australia, France, and other countries. Though writing is inevitably a solitary occupation, there were communal aspects to Võ Phiến's literary life in Saigon. He worked with other writers for the literary journal *Encyclopedic* and established a publishing house (Thời Mới). After he came to the United States he eventually became involved with exile journals and publishing ventures, but when he first arrived, particularly when he was in Minnesota, he had no group of friends to rely on for emotional support.

¹⁰⁸*Letters to a Friend*, 9–14; *Looking at Ourselves through Our Literature*, 126; letter to Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, September 9, 1995 (excerpted in *Võ Phiến*, 1996, 41–42).

One of the saddest passages about the effects of exile is one in which he expresses how much he misses his casual conversations with friends—the off-color jokes, the gossip about secret love affairs, the idle talk about the bread cart in the alley, about the kids who climbed up on the tin roof to fly their kites.

All those meaningless conversations at some point . . . suddenly become important, as if they were the soul of life, or at least the soul of several decades of life in the homeland.

In a strange land, among strangers, we suddenly realize that we won't meet those people anymore, and we feel as if we've lost the past.

A winter night becomes not ten hours long, but twelve or fourteen. The days are no longer twelve hours: at four p.m. it's already dark, and the world is sad. As winter turns to spring, instead of waiting for the sparrow we listen to a lonesome nighthawk crying all night somewhere in the empty sky. None of the people we knew are around us anymore, so the old memories are fading. The talk and laughter are gone.

People who have lived on the earth for half a century suddenly no longer have a past, suddenly are as lost as new-born children: a situation so strange it's impossible to imagine. (*Exile*, 90)

It is possible that Võ Phiến's more recent dialogues are efforts to accommodate busy readers in the age of TV, but I believe he started "talking" more when he arrived in the United States in an effort to recreate in print a community that he could not experience in real life. Võ Phiến's literary conversations with his friends are substitutes for the real conversations he so sorely missed. As he tells his "kind friend" in his introduction to *Letters to a Friend*, he is not writing, and he knows his friend is not reading, for literary reasons. "I don't think we are searching each other out for art," Võ Phiến says. "We are primarily searching to hear someone from the same situation. You are a friend met on the road, a friend in the same group, same boat, same region, same country, a friend. Just a friend" (9).



**Võ Phiến and his wife, Võ Thị Viễn Phố, in 1998
in Highland Park, California.**

VIII

CONTRADICTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

*Not every person has, or has the ability to obtain, an ideal. Most people find happiness by accepting an extremely common reason for living [lẽ sống].*¹⁰⁹

—Đặng Tiến

*Võ Phiến considered opposing and destroying the revolution as a reason for living [lẽ sống].*¹¹⁰

—Vũ Hạnh

Võ Phiến's life and work are full of contradictions. He loves the past but follows new literary developments carefully, experimenting constantly with new ways of writing; he struggles to escape an obsession with politics but is considered by some to be the leading anti-communist writer in the exile community; he constructs moving and memorable portraits of country villagers but also ridicules them on occasion and chooses to focus on what would appear to be the least attractive among them—on lonely and forlorn figures who are victims of the war and their own inadequacies. These contradictions (along with some others) have been mentioned in previous chapters, but I return to them in this final chapter because they must be considered in evaluating Võ Phiến's achievements and in predicting who will read his works in the future and for what reasons.

Contradictions

In "Mr. Five Chéo" (Ông Năm Chéo), one of Võ Phiến's *Really Short Stories* (1991), Võ Phiến invokes Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's nineteenth-century verse narrative *Lục Vân Tiên*

¹⁰⁹"Võ Phiến's Dialogue about Dog Meat," 1993, 159.

¹¹⁰"Võ Phiến," 1980, 40.

(ca. 1860), the same poem that Uncle Seven recites in “Drops of Coffee,” the *tùy bút* narrative essay discussed in chapter IV. Mr. Five Chéo’s real name, in fact, is Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. The story takes place in Chợ Lớn, the Chinese section of Saigon, before 1975. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu was blind and Mr. Five Chéo resembles his namesake in this respect: he has almost completely lost his sight and wears dark glasses. He used to love to read, but cannot do so now. The radio, which only talks about the present, is no comfort to him. He prefers the past to the present and shares his namesake’s devotion to the old moral principles—loyalty, filial piety, and chastity. Though he seems to be a pitiful character, the narrator, a younger man who studied in the United States for a year, envies him and members of his generation, envies them for not having to make choices. Everything was clearly laid out for them, the narrator says: all they had to do was be loyal, pious, and chaste. But now “with each step comes a choice and it’s bewildering” (135). At the end of this story the narrator complains that this confusion about purpose and goals affects art as well as life; in fact, it affects even this “really short” story that the reader is reading: “Today, even a little story, a really short one, is also awkward, like the cane of a blind man that doesn’t know which way to go, doesn’t know how to end. Lots of hesitating and suffering appear” (137).

Võ Phiến also invokes *Lục Vân Tiên* in *Literature in South Vietnam*:

Nguyệt Nga and Thúy Kiều not only wept and wailed: they jumped into the river to drown themselves. But even if they had died, the moral and spiritual values of their era would have remained intact; loyalty and filial piety and chastity would still be firmly established values: “Men take loyalty-filial piety as your rule, / Women take chastity as the word to improve yourselves.” After the upheavals in our land from 1945 to 1955, however, a generation became so shaken that they couldn’t speak their miseries. They could only smile silently, a smile that meant “life offers nothing more.” (185)

Nguyệt Nga is the heroine of *Lục Vân Tiên* and Thúy Kiều is the heroine of Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiều* (ca. 1800). The two lines about loyalty-filial piety and chastity are from the opening of *Lục Vân Tiên*: they announce the moral of this tale which preaches traditional Confucian virtues in a straightforward and strait-laced manner.

These tributes to Nguyễn Đình Chiểu are a bit surprising. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu was adamantly anti-French and is admired by all Vietnamese for his patriotism. He wrote poems glorifying heroes who resisted the French, and when colonial officials offered him land to curry his favor, he turned them away. But by the middle of the twentieth century this blind nineteenth-century poet had come to represent an old-fashioned and rigid Confucianism that many people considered quaint but out of step with the modern world. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc argues, in fact, that Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's Confucianism was already outdated when he wrote his famous verse narrative (1998b, 79).¹¹¹ In a well-known scene in *Lục Vân Tiên* the hero saves Nguyệt Nga by driving off some brigands who are trying to kidnap her. After boldly rescuing this lovely young woman, the hero is very cautious and correct in his first meeting with her. Conscious of the Vietnamese proverb "Boys and girls should never touch" (Nam nữ thọ thọ bất thân), he carefully refuses to come near her carriage. "Wait! Wait!" he says, "Sit there and don't come out, / A woman and a man should keep their proper distance." Many Vietnamese laugh at Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's view of male-female relations encapsulated in the lines quoted above and regard him somewhat the way Americans regard their Puritan and Victorian ancestors.

¹¹¹Not everyone agrees. This article by Nguyễn Hưng Quốc sparked a spirited debate about Nguyễn Đình Chiểu in *Literary Studies* (Văn Học), an exile journal, during the early months of 1998. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc described some bawdy *ca dao* (folk poetry) parodies of lines from *Lục Vân Tiên*, hence the title of his article, and also suggested that Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's contributions were overrated. Other exile writers responded, most of them supporting Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. Besides the Tết (January/February, 1998) issue, see also numbers 143 (March), 146 (June), 148 (August), and 149 (September).

Võ Phiến's invocation of this uncompromising moralist reveals how deeply he was affected by events occurring from 1945 to 1955. It suggests the intensity of his longing for a simpler, less fractious, less violent past. By nature conservative, Võ Phiến had to cope with rapid social change. Colonialism and the wars associated with it changed forever the traditional life he knew as a boy growing up in Bình Định. Educated in Franco-Vietnamese schools during colonial times, influenced by teachers well-versed in the French language and culture, he wanted to produce modern works similar to the works by Western writers he encountered as a student, but he also felt the pull of tradition. Though he knew his uncle, the Confucian scholar (Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm), was out of date, he admired the stubborn way he clung to the past, to his T'ang poetry and his earthenware teapot. Võ Phiến is always "looking back," says Đặng Tiến. "He is a writer of the past, of memory" (1963, 57).

But the present, the realities of modern life kept intruding, demanding attention. Journals arriving from Europe advocated a *nouveau roman*. Coca Cola and canned fruit brought by U.S. troops were replacing Huế chè (the tea) and traditional pudding. Referring to Võ Phiến's objections, expressed in "Loving and Eating," to the modern way of pursuing these activities—with too much haste and too little art—Thụy Khuê says that Võ Phiến reacted to the "starkness of a consumer society." She suggests that he was dragged into these issues against his will. "Võ Phiến doesn't follow the times, doesn't worry about 'today.' He has wanted to be a person who recognized the face of today but did not become involved. Despite his wishes, however, he was carried away and became submerged in a reality that was very 'today'" (1990, 104). Võ Phiến's story "Mr. Five Chéo" embodies this tension between the old and the new. In form this story reflects Võ Phiến's attempt to adjust to social change: he makes it a "really short story" to attract busy readers who prefer to watch television in their spare time. Its message, however, is about the attractions of the past, of a simpler world free of agonizing moral and career choices. This contradiction

explains why, as the narrator says, his story proceeds like a blind man's cane—awkwardly and with “lots of hesitating and suffering.”

Another contradiction arises from Võ Phiến's internal struggle to escape an obsession with politics. Early in his career Võ Phiến concluded that an excess of political passion, in others and within himself, could destroy the two things that, after his family, he loved more than anything else—his village and his art—and so he struggled to beat this passion back. He never completely succeeded. The war went on too long, too many terrible things happened, and so, like Sister Four Lime Stick in “Birds and Snakes,” he too was a victim of the war, he too was forced to act against his better instincts. This internal struggle manifests itself in what Thụy Khuê sees as a clash between the “person” and the “pen”:

In interviews with Võ Phiến we see his manner of living and writing, get to know clearly his ‘life history,’ the circumstances that led him to his political position and his life and death struggle with the communist regime. Võ Phiến is open about his thoughts and anxieties. The reader [of published interviews] vaguely remembers a simple and gentle—very ‘thần hậu’ [discreet, cautious]—Võ Phiến, very different from the sarcastic and cruel pen of Võ Phiến, the writer. The person and the pen sometimes aren't the same—a discovery that is both surprising and intriguing.” (1990, 102)

The person and the pen are not so easily separated, however, particularly when interviews are recorded and later published. In interviews Võ Phiến can also be cruel and sarcastic, as he is in one that Thụy Khuê herself cites in her article. “Not only overseas Vietnamese,” Võ Phiến tells Đào Huy Đán, “but outsiders, people from different countries in Europe, are upset when they see socialist Vietnam determined to become the poorest country in the world” (“Talking with *Village of Literature*,” 1988, 25). Angered by the corruption of communist officials, he says, the people in the south have

altered a communist slogan, adding a word, so that “[Our] leaders live forever in the masses” (Lãnh tụ mãi mãi sống trong quần chúng) becomes “[Our] leaders live forever in our pants” (Lãnh tụ mãi mãi sống trong quần chúng ta (26). Then Võ Phiến tells a story of a Party member who felt a pain in his chest and so went to see a doctor. The doctor was surprised to find that the man had no heart. In its place, where there used to be a tattoo of Uncle Hồ, the doctor found a coin.

Đào Huy Đán, the interviewer, pressured Võ Phiến to talk about the political situation in his country, and Võ Phiến seems to regret that he agreed to do so. At the end of the interview, he says writers should not let their own hatreds and passions lead them into talking about things outside their area of expertise. It is also true that corruption is a major problem in Vietnam today, one that Party officials have themselves recognized. Nevertheless, in these attacks Võ Phiến reveals a level of passion that seems at odds with his description of people from Bình Định who, he says, are “thần hậu”—cautious and discreet. They make him sound like one of those political zealots that he says inhabit “Xứ Quảng,” those provinces to the north reputed to be a breeding ground for political activists. This passion also seems at odds with many of Võ Phiến’s stories which, as we have seen, argue for the value of the ordinary—for family and for interpersonal relationships—and argue against political zealotry, which Võ Phiến suggests is the cause of Vietnam’s (and the world’s) woes. By appearing more sarcastic and cruel in this interview than he is in his stories Võ Phiến appears to complicate the Person vs. Pen dichotomy that Thụy Khuê sets up.

He complicates it further in a conversation with Phan Lạc Tiếp at a get-together at another writer’s home in 1994. They are talking about Võ Phiến’s seven-volume series *Literature in South Vietnam: 1954–1975*, which consists of six anthologies of works by other writers (and some of his own), which he collected and introduces, and one critical overview, which he wrote himself. “Now ‘that gang’ [the communists in Vietnam] has closed our mouths,” Võ Phiến says, “but the works that we present in concrete fashion—who can argue

with them? Not just twenty or thirty years from now but a whole century later learned people will do additional research based on them" (Phan Lạc Tiếp, 1995, 31). No one can argue with Võ Phiến's wish to preserve his own and others' work for posterity (and he does put "that gang" in shudder quotes), but his comment reveals that political motivation drives this literary project. This motivation is further confirmed by his unenthusiastic appraisals of writers sympathetic to the communists whose work, to his credit, he nevertheless does include in his seven-volume series. Clearly Võ Phiến found it difficult to live always by his conviction that literature has different "duties" from politics (see his "Talking with *Literature*," 374).

This contradiction related to politics is best seen not as a clash between person and pen but as something deeper that underlies Võ Phiến's life and work, a conclusion that Thụy Khuê also seems to favor in another part of her article:

In his personal life, Võ Phiến avoids disparaging talk and doesn't get involved in arguments. His approach is to distance himself from any scramble for position or privilege, to renounce this world in the manner of [the Taoist philosopher] Lao Tzu. To sum up, on the one hand, in his works and in his life, Võ Phiến reveals an Eastern skepticism like that of Chuang Tze [another Taoist philosopher], which is not too different from the Western skepticism of Gide, Sartre, Camus. On the other hand, Võ Phiến still retains: a political position of opposing communism absolutely; and a Nationalist, conservative view.

These two views mentioned above [the skepticism and the anti-communism/conservatism], which are scattered throughout Võ Phiến's works, usually parallel each other, and at first glance they seem very similar and reasonable but when you look at them more carefully they emerge as a deep contradiction in Võ Phiến's thinking. (1990, 94)

Comments about communists like those Võ Phiến makes in his interview with Đào Huy Đán make it easier for

authorities in Vietnam to label Võ Phiến a “literary special agent” (biệt kích văn nghệ) of neo-imperialism. This label angers some critics in the exile community who feel that it makes some people reject Võ Phiến’s work because they think it is too political and others to read it for the wrong reasons—simply to find support for their anti-communist views. “They [communist critics] insult him in a crude and inaccurate way, and so unintentionally provide an advertisement for Võ Phiến; they turn him into the leading anti-communist” (Đặng Tiến, 1993, 160).

To correct this view Đặng Tiến goes back to a story Võ Phiến wrote in 1958 called “A Reason for Living” (Lẽ Sống). In this story, which takes place during the first Indochina war, an old man comes to Bình Định to escape the fighting in his home province of Quảng Nam. The narrator’s family takes him in and nurses him back to health. Since they do not know his name they call him Mr. Four Refugee (Ông Bốn Tản). The old man is not very clear about his past. Though he was apparently married in Quảng Nam, he has no children, no relatives of any kind, and no home. He spends his time in Bình Định looking for a relative. When a Việt Minh soldier from Quảng Nam comes to the village, if he mentions a village in Quảng Nam, or the name of someone the old man knows, then Mr. Four Refugee decides he must be his nephew. “In chasing after these imaginary nieces and nephews,” the narrator says, “Mr. Four Refugee was attempting to hold on to traditional beliefs and habits that were retreating in the face of new ways of life” (310). After living six years with the narrator’s family, Mr. Four Refugee leaves to live with a soldier from Quảng Nam whom he calls his nephew. The narrator’s aunt thinks the “nephew” just wants a servant to look after his pretty new wife.

After the war ends the narrator and his family move to the provincial seat. One day they discover that Mr. Four Refugee is living nearby, staying in a house with a thirty-eight-year-old prostitute, a friendly woman whom her neighbors have come to like. Mr. Four Refugee watches her house when she is gone and guards the door when she is entertaining a

customer. Then the prostitute gets arrested and Mr. Four Refugee disappears. One day a bus crashes at a bridge near the village. Mr. Four Refugee, it turns out, was on that bus and dies in the crash. In a bag that he was carrying, the narrator finds a pair of panties and a brassiere that belonged to the prostitute.

For communist critic Vũ Hạnh, Mr. Four Refugee is another one of Võ Phiến's simple and lonely characters, further proof of his creator's lack of respect for rural peasants (1980, 26–27). But for Đặng Tiễn, Mr. Four Refugee's life and his death have a different meaning:

Here we notice Võ Phiến's skepticism regarding moral ideals and grandiose and impractical politics. There are people who die because of loyalty and patriotism, because of a position, a political opinion, but there are also people who die next to, with, because of "some underwear of an old prostitute" and their "Reason for Living" stops there. . . . "Some underwear of an old prostitute" is a symbol. It is coarse and cruel because it is an answer to a coarse and crude society, to a coarse and cruel period of history, to a dictatorial ideology that oppresses and represses people with ideals, positions, views. Not all people are patriotic; so I'll make you patriotic, not in a natural way, not all together, but based on class position, on this view, that directive, this resolution. Võ Phiến raises the question of human freedom in the face of any dogmatism, not that of the communists alone. Communists feel attacked and hurt the most because in their view communism is the only cult. (1993, 159–60)

Another possible contradiction relates to Võ Phiến's preference for characters like Mr. Four Refugee, Brother Four No More, Mr. Three *Thê At-the-Same Time*, etc. At least at first glance it is puzzling why someone who clearly loves country villagers would concentrate on such lonely and eccentric characters as these. Though Võ Phiến usually treats

these characters sympathetically, and he succeeds, as we have argued, in getting many readers to see beauty in them, his portraits are nevertheless unflattering. Though I believe this contradiction is more apparent than real, considering it leads to insights regarding Võ Phiến's aims. First, it is important to realize that Võ Phiến's eccentric and physically unattractive characters appear in his short stories, novels, and *tùy bút* narrative essays, not in his *tùy bút* or scholarly essays. Novelists, Võ Phiến says, "love people, not beautiful people" ("Characters in Novels," 212): the fact that he chooses to concentrate on discontented and physically unattractive people like Brother Four No More does not mean he does not love them. He saw beauty in their trials and suffering and in their devotion to family and strove to get other people to see this beauty.

But are there other reasons, besides the fact that these characters are interesting and lovable, that attracted Võ Phiến to them? Vietnamese critics frequently use the words "discontented" (*bất mãn*) and "powerless" or "impotent" (*bất lực*) to describe characters like Brother Four No More and Mr. Four Refugee, and they use these same words to describe Võ Phiến himself (Thụy Khuê 1990, 104; Nguyễn Vy Khanh 1998, 100). As we saw in chapter III, Vũ Hạnh, the communist critic who sees Võ Phiến as a special agent on the literary front, believes Võ Phiến's characters have "negative and defeatist personalities" because Võ Phiến himself belonged to a class, a "small-scale village landowner group," that was defeated by the progressive forces of the revolution (1980, 31). Certainly Võ Phiến was discontented. No one denies this. "Võ Phiến typifies the discontented person," says Nguyễn Vy Khanh, "discontented with cruel members of the resistance, discontented in his own life; in short, he was discontented with reality" (1998, 100).

One cause of his discontent was his inability to stop the war. He saw what decades of violence had done to his village and to the whole country and felt powerless to stop it. He felt impotent, "*bất lực*." Probably this is why he was interested in "defeatist" characters who lacked power in both a sexual and political sense—characters who were sexually impotent

like Brother Four No More, or sexually inadequate like Mr. Degree-holder Từ Lâm, or childless like Mr. Four Refugee. He was drawn to these characters because he understood their frustrations. He preferred these characters to those who were more potent and aggressive, both in a sexual and a political/military sense.

Sexual aggressiveness and a passion for violence are, I believe, linked in Võ Phiến's mind. Võ Phiến blames the communists for insisting on total victory no matter how many Vietnamese had to die to achieve it. This political and military aggression is mirrored in the aggressive sexual behavior of communist cadres in Võ Phiến's essays and stories. In "Birds and Snakes" Sáu Ty sleeps with two fellow revolutionaries. In "Drops of Coffee" Võ Phiến describes a communist cadre who seduces a village girl, one of a group of villagers who have been pressed into service making punji sticks. In "Remembering My Village," Brother Five Hà's descent toward violence begins when he catches his wife making love to a Việt Minh soldier.

Clearly Võ Phiến's life experiences—the destruction of his village, his exile—contributed to his discontent and his pessimism and helped make him a chronicler of loss and powerlessness, not of fulfillment and potency. But his discontent seems to come from some deep source, to be a part of his essential nature. Võ Phiến suggests this is so when in a 1968 interview he replies to a question about some "signs of bitterness" that readers have detected in his current work: "Only recently there are 'signs' of this?" Võ Phiến says. "I don't think so. From my first stories I have been aware of my bitter and sarcastic tone. I don't like it. Later, little by little, I tried to abandon it, but I have never been able to abandon it completely. Maybe it's because deep in my soul I'm discontented" ("Talking with *Literature*," 377).

It is a mistake to narrow Võ Phiến's targets—to assume, for example, that when he attacks political zealotry he has only communists in mind, or when he pokes fun at the foibles of country villagers he thinks only people in rural areas have amusing weaknesses, or when he expresses frus-

tration with American culture he believes only Americans have a complex and confusing culture. Võ Phiến always, I believe, has had broader targets in mind. Though he focused on the concrete particulars of Vietnamese life he has striven to give his works universal meanings. Exile critics suggest that Võ Phiến's discontent has deep roots and that his amused smile is directed at the whole human race, himself included. "Võ Phiến is a witness of his time who mocks, with a quiet smile, both the time he lives in and his own role as a witness," says Đặng Tiến. "Beyond that smile life offers nothing more" (1974, 62). "Living abroad after 1975," says Nguyễn Vy Khanh, "Võ Phiến's pessimism, which in Vietnam was sometimes weak, sometimes strong, became a heart-rending pessimism: he joked at fate, and it seems he himself was also the object of that joking" (1998, 101). Whether Võ Phiến will continue to attract readers in Vietnam and in the West will depend in part on whether people recognize his attempts to speak to universal issues that affect people in different places and times. In the next section, we explore other factors that will determine who will read Võ Phiến in the future and for what reasons.

Possibilities

Võ Phiến's most likely readers are Vietnamese in the diaspora, Vietnamese readers in Vietnam, and—provided more works are translated—English-language (or French-language, etc.) speakers who have a special interest in Asian and Asian American history, literature and culture. The first and third groups overlap because the third group includes Vietnamese in the diaspora who cannot read Vietnamese. I discuss these three categories of possible readers below.

Vietnamese in the Diaspora

According to estimates, there are approximately 2.7 million Vietnamese in the diaspora.¹¹² They are scattered in around ninety countries and territories but the largest pop-

¹¹²This estimate comes from the Web page of the Vietnamese Embassy in the United States. See "VN Embassy: News," <http://www.vietnamembassy-usa.org>

ulations are in the United States (950,000), France (400,000), Australia (160,000), Canada (150,000), and the People's Republic of China (300,000) (Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn, 1997, 58–59). Most readers of Vietnamese exile literature have been adults living in the first four countries in this list. It is the presence of these readers that has allowed an active publishing scene to develop in the Vietnamese diaspora.

Võ Phiến's article "Acknowledging Some Aspects of Exile Literature," an assessment of the status of this scene in 1987, contains some good news and bad news. The good news is that things are better than they were ten years ago. Võ Phiến mentions several recently published anthologies of exile writing, pointing out that more than one hundred writers are represented in them. Roughly a third of them are writers who picked up their pens after they came to the United States, a healthy development, he says, because it suggests a smooth transition from one generation to the next. Though most Vietnamese have learned English and can read English-language works, Vietnamese-language books, magazines, and journals continue to be published in fairly large quantities. In Saigon before 1975 publishers printed on average 5,000 copies of a new book; in the U.S. publishers of exile works print 1,000—not bad, Võ Phiến says, when one considers there were twenty million people in South Vietnam and there are only roughly one million Vietnamese exiles in the U.S. (313).

Seventeen years after Võ Phiến's article was published, Vietnamese-language publications—newspapers, magazines, journals, and books—continue to appear. An amazing variety of them can be found in newsstands and bookstores in Orange Country and San Jose, California and in Washington, D.C., Montreal, Paris, and Melbourne—wherever there is a fairly large Vietnamese community.

But in that 1987 article Võ Phiến also delivers some bad news which, like his good news, is as relevant today as it was in 1987: "There is no long term future for this [exile] literature" (318). Most exile writers, Võ Phiến points out,

attended universities in Vietnam and learned to write there. Even the newer exile writers, those who began to publish only after 1975, picked up their writing skills in Vietnam. The younger generation will be fluent in English, not Vietnamese. “Old bamboo is replaced by new shoots” (Tre già măng mọc) was the rule in Vietnam but this will not happen in exile communities abroad (313). Võ Phiến is talking about writers not readers but of course the two are inseparable: no one writes if there are no readers. The avid readers of Võ Phiến and other exile writers that I have quoted here—Đặng Tiến, Nguyễn Mộng Giác, Thụy Khuê, Nguyễn Vy Khanh, for example—are all in their fifties or sixties. Their children and those of other exiles their age have been educated in schools where English (or French or German) is the medium of instruction, not Vietnamese, and so while they may speak Vietnamese, most are not literate enough to appreciate literature in Vietnamese. For younger Vietnamese in the diaspora to become avid readers of Võ Phiến one of two things has to happen: either they will have to learn Vietnamese, or improve their proficiency—develop advanced reading skills; or more of his works will have to be translated into a language they know. I will consider these possibilities after discussing another category of potential readers: Vietnamese in Vietnam.

Vietnamese in Vietnam

In the Introduction I mentioned that Võ Phiến and his friend, exile writer Mai Thảo, believed it was “us to us only,” that they had little hope of attracting American readers. But as exile critic Thụy Khuê points out, Mai Thảo and Võ Phiến’s complaint only begins to describe the extent of the Vietnamese exile writer’s isolation because unfortunately another “they,” people in Vietnam, also don’t read “us.” And “we” (Vietnamese exiles) don’t read “them” (2000, 45). Why don’t readers in Vietnam read exile literature? The answer is fairly simple: because most works by exile writers have been banned in Vietnam. In Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn’s *Culture and Art Serving American Neo-Imperialism in South Vietnam: 1954–1975*, there is a list of books not allowed to circulate. For some exile

writers not all their books are banned but next to Võ Phiến's name is the phrase "All works not allowed to circulate" (cấm lưu hành toàn bộ) (1990, 687).

Renovation (Đổi Mới) in 1986, Vietnam's glasnost, led to a move toward a market economy and to a loosening of restrictions on writers and on what works could be circulated. Soon after Renovation began some writers in Vietnam were able to publish works that they could not have published previously, works that dared to criticize communist officials and to portray the personal losses caused by the war. Soon after authorities loosened the strings, however, they tightened them again. Reformist factions in the Party, who had advocated letting writers express some pent-up frustration, were replaced by conservatives. The Tian An Men incident in China in 1989 and the turmoil in Eastern Europe led to fears that similar rebellions against communism could occur in Vietnam. Circulation of some of the bolder works published immediately after restrictions were eased was later forbidden, but not before copies were smuggled out of the country and published abroad. Some of these authors were criticized or harassed or worse. Dương Thu Hương, author of *Paradise of the Blind*, for example, was expelled from the communist party in 1989 and imprisoned without trial for seven months in 1991. Many of the works by Vietnamese that have been translated into English were written during this brief period of increased freedom for writers that followed Renovation—*Paradise of the Blind*, Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, Lê Lựu's *A Time Far Past*, for example.

The government monopoly on publishing in Vietnam explains why Vietnamese in Vietnam have trouble finding works by exiles to read. As a result of Renovation readers in Vietnam could obtain some books hard to come by before: romantic novels first published in the thirties, for example, by writers belonging to the Self-Strength Literary Group. And for the first time it could read works that criticized the Party, though some of these quickly became unavailable. But even during the high point of Renovation, readers in Vietnam could not read works by Vietnamese exiles. Linh Dinh,

an exile writer who came to the United States when he was eleven, lived there for twenty-four years, and then in 1999 returned to Saigon to live, says that “there have been exactly two books written by emigre published inside the country: Nguyễn Mộng Giác’s *Season of Rough Seas* (Mùa Biển Động) and a travelogue by Đỗ Kh” (2002). Though more works than these two have been published (see below), works by exile writers are scarce items in the bookstores of Vietnam.

How easy is it for Vietnamese exiles to find works by Vietnamese living in Vietnam to read? If there is going to be an exchange, one could argue, books should move in both directions. Until recently Vietnamese exiles have not had easy access to works written in Vietnam after 1975, with the exception of works by writers judged to be “dissident” (phản kháng)—works like the ones mentioned above that have been translated into English. Conservative elements in the Vietnamese exile community have strongly opposed even the publication of these works, arguing that their authors are not true dissidents. If they were, conservatives argue, they would not be allowed to continue to write and travel to international conferences.

When Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn was head of the Vietnam Pen Club (Văn Bút Việt Nam Hải Ngoại), he wanted to put together a *Who’s Who* listing all Vietnamese exile writers. Though Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn himself opposed the circulation of works by dissidents, he intended to include all exile writers in his *Who’s Who*, including writers such as Nhật Tiến who strongly favored circulation of these works. He could never finish his project. Intensely anti-communist exile writers told him, “If that guy or that woman [i.e., anyone in Nhật Tiến’s group] is going to be listed in your book, then don’t put my name in there”; or “I don’t want to be listed with those Viet-cong lackeys” (1995, 168).

The rigid attitudes that motivate comments like these and the equally rigid attitudes of hardliners in Vietnam have isolated Vietnamese exile writers. Linh Dinh says exile writers, unlike writers in Vietnam, are free of “Big Brother’s shadow” but pay a price for this freedom: “An overseas Viet-

nameless writer is someone working in isolation. He's cut off from what should be his main audience: the reading public in Vietnam" (2000). Thụy Khuê, who favors cooperation with progressive writers in Vietnam, says that exile literature has an insular quality that makes innovation difficult. Because they do not have access to works from Vietnam, exile writers read each other and write to please each other, and as a result exile literature has "conservative features" that make it resemble official literature in Vietnam (2000, 45).

One problem has been the terms used in both Vietnam and the diaspora to classify writers. In Vietnam until recently "revolutionary literature" (văn chương cách mạng) has been contrasted with "neo-imperialist literature" (văn chương thực dân mới); in the diaspora "Nationalist literature" (văn chương Quốc gia) has been contrasted with "Vietcong literature" (văn chương Việt Cộng). Because all works judged not to fit neatly into the positive category have been rejected, works that lie somewhere between these extremes, works that might break down barriers and build bridges, have not reached readers.

The situation is improving, however, and bridges are being built. Phạm Thị Hoài, whose *The Crystal Messenger* (Thiên Sứ) was published in Vietnam in 1988 and then banned, explains that in what she calls "post-Renovation" Vietnam the rule is "Do anything you want to do as long as it's not political" (2004, 5). The difficulty is in knowing what is political and what is not. In this uncertain but somewhat more lenient climate some editors and publishers in Vietnam have felt that they could safely publish some works by exiles—even works by Võ Phiến. "The Formal Americans," the fifth letter in *Again, Letters to a Friend*, was included in *Prose and Poetry by Vietnamese Living in Foreign Countries: 1975–1990* (Thơ Văn Người Việt Nam ở Nước Ngoài: 1975–1990), a collection edited by Nguyễn Phúc (1990). "A Spring of Quiet and Peace" (Buổi Chiều Tịch Mịch) from *Exile* and another essay, "The Chinese Guava" (Ổi Tàu), were published in *Homeland* (Quê Hương), a magazine published by the Central Office for Overseas Vietnamese. They appeared in an issue (No. 8, 1993) devoted to writing by Vietnamese living abroad (Nguyễn Huệ Chi, 1994,

34). The Women's Publishing House has also published a collection of stories, *A Patch of Sky Left Behind: Short Stories by Women from Abroad* (Khung Trời Bỏ Lại: Truyện Ngắn Nữ Hải Ngoại) (2001).

In "The Formal Americans" Võ Phiến compares subtle Vietnamese glancing to more aggressive behavior by American males (see chapter VI). In the essays reprinted in *Homeland* Võ Phiến expresses nostalgia for his native land. "A Spring of Quiet and Peace" is Võ Phiến's chapter on spring from *Exile* that I discussed in chapter VI. In this essay Võ Phiến describes how, after a harsh winter, a "truly glorious spring"—his first spring in exile—arrived in Minnesota with a profusion of Johnny-jump-ups, lilacs, and spirea. Though he appreciates the quiet and the peace—no more offensives and counteroffensives to worry about—he fears that his future as an exile will be "a yawning void" (9). In the other essay, "The Chinese Guava," a guava tree prominently displayed in the courtyard of a Salt Lake City hotel transports Võ Phiến back to his village where this tree was common. Many of the authors of stories in *A Patch of Sky Left Behind* describe problems encountered in their exile countries and express nostalgia for their native land. Editors at the state agencies that published these essays and stories no doubt decided that their themes—oddities of American culture, nostalgia, problems of exile—qualified them for the "not political" category. This is not to say politics is not involved. From the point of view of authorities in Vietnam, expressions of frustration and homesickness by Vietnamese living in the developed countries of the West are politically useful: they encourage people in Vietnam to be content with their lives.

An encouraging development has been the emergence of *Convergence* (Hợp Lưu), a journal published in Westminster, California. In its first issue, the Editorial Board announced that *Convergence* was based on the belief that "the most profound wish of all writers and artists is to send their creative work to all Vietnamese with no distinction made between those in and those out of the country." To make that wish come true requires, said the Board, that "we face the truth

courageously, turn our gaze toward the road ahead, place the future of our literature above the resentments of the past, and proceed on the road of convergence" ("Letter from the Editorial Board," 1991, 2, 3). Led by a hard-working editor named Khánh Trường, *Convergence* has become a forum where in-country and exile writers can exchange views. Phan Huy Đường, who received a Rockefeller Fellowship to research the Vietnamese diaspora, describes the impact of this journal:

Convergence has attracted almost all the notable writers in Vietnam, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Eastern and Western Europe, and has had a very significant effect on the literary environment in Vietnam. Many authors inside the country have sent manuscripts to *Convergence* even though doing so is prohibited by the state. Works written abroad and printed in *Convergence* have been reprinted in Vietnam. (2004, 28–29)

"Convergence" is now occurring in other forums besides the journal by that name. The journal *Poetry* (Thơ), edited by the exile poet Khế Iêm and published in California, features poetry by poets in and outside the country. Writers in Vietnam who are afraid or unable to publish at home are now sending books—not just a single essay, story, or poem—abroad to be published. Linh Dinh argues that these developments have made Little Saigon in Westminster, California the "epi-center of Vietnamese literature"—in other words, more important than Hanoi or Saigon! (2002). While Linh Dinh exaggerates, clearly some barriers are coming down and the potential for invigorating cultural exchange is great.

Will Võ Phiến and his works be involved in this exchange? Probably not to any great extent in the near future. In 1995 the exile writer Phan Lạc Tiếp returned to Vietnam. In Hanoi he met some old friends well-versed in issues related to literature and art. He asked them if his friend Võ Phiến should try to return for a visit. "They smiled kindly," Phan Lạc Tiếp reports, "bowed their heads, then said: 'Not yet. That can't happen yet.' Then they continued: 'Here people evalu-

ate Võ Phiến very “heavily” (nặng). They consider him one of several leaders of South Vietnamese literature before [1975] and now overseas’ “ (1995, 27). Perhaps because of his anti-communist reputation, communist critics in Vietnam would appear to judge Võ Phiến’s post-1975 works more “heavily” than seems justified. Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn, for example, finds an underlying wish for revenge in Võ Phiến and Lê Tất Điều’s *Exile* and in Võ Phiến’s *Letters to a Friend*, a quality which he says makes them “typical” of works written by exiles soon after 1975 (1997, 300). Võ Phiến may have this wish, but it is difficult to detect in Võ Phiến’s essays in these collections.

Võ Phiến himself is not enthusiastic about the chances of his work being published in Vietnam. In 2002 in a radio interview with Thụy Khuê that was later reprinted in *Convergence*, a literary critic in Hanoi named Phan Cự Đệ announced that he wanted to consider writing by Vietnamese overseas in a two-volume study of Vietnamese writing in the twentieth century that he was helping to edit (“Talking with Phan Cự Đệ,” 2002). He asked exile writers and scholars to send him materials—original works, critical commentaries, etc.—that would help him and his group of writer-editors prepare the section on overseas literature. In my written interview, I asked Võ Phiến whether he would be sending his works to Phan Cự Đệ, “My works haven’t been allowed to circulate in Vietnam for twenty-eight years,” he told me. “Not all Vietnamese writers abroad have been treated in this way. As for Mrs. Thụy Khuê and Mr. Phan Cự Đệ’s conversation, I don’t think I was included in it! Also, when an editor/scholar plans to research a topic, then that person should search for materials; he shouldn’t wait for materials to come to him” (April 25, 2003).

Võ Phiến is considered a leading anti-communist writer. Phan Cự Đệ is a doctrinaire Marxist critic who for years has advocated socialist realism. Phan Cự Đệ did indicate in his call for materials that the book he was working on would reflect a variety of critical approaches; and he seemed pleased that he had managed to obtain a copy of Võ Phiến’s literary history, *Literature in South Vietnam*. Still, it is not easy

for men with such different backgrounds and views to communicate and cooperate with each other.

When political passions have had more time to cool, however, it seems certain that more of Võ Phiến's works will be available to readers in Vietnam. Probably first to appear will be more essays like those already published that express the sadness of exile; then perhaps some *tùy bút* essays about local dishes and customs; then some essays and stories, like those in *Illusion* and *Changing World*, in which Võ Phiến complains about city life; and finally his short stories and fiction about people in Bình Định during the Resistance and the American War. Thụy Khuê, who has worked to bring people like Phan Cự Đệ and Võ Phiến together, hopes for a day when both sides will "accept their mutual excesses as a fact of history and begin to discover the real literary and intellectual value of each writer" (2000, 45). When that day comes, Võ Phiến's contributions will be noticed. Readers in Vietnam like those in the diaspora will appreciate him for the qualities highlighted in previous chapters—his unforgettable characters, his fluent and intimate essay style, his insatiable curiosity, his wit and humor, his deep learning, and his ability to make little things interesting and ordinary people beautiful.

English-Language Readers

If more of his works were translated, readers who cannot read Vietnamese, a group that may include young Vietnamese in the diaspora as well as non-Vietnamese, would—I feel confident—appreciate Võ Phiến for the same qualities mentioned in the preceding paragraph and for reasons mentioned in my Introduction—because he is an eloquent witness to important events of the twentieth century, because he provides a fresh and unusual perspective on those events, and because he conveys in a sometimes humorous and often moving way the sadness of exile.

Will more works by Võ Phiến and other exile writers be translated and published? One hopes so but there are obstacles. I touched on some of them in the Introduction where I pointed out that publishers have been more interested in

works by writers in Vietnam than in works by Vietnamese exiles. This interest, I suggested, has been fueled by a fascination with the other side—with the people that Americans fought against—and by a felt need for reconciliation. In 1988 the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, began inviting writers from Vietnam, many of them veterans of what they refer to as the American War, to Boston to meet with American writers, many of them also veterans. Friendships developed from these meetings and soon publishing projects were launched.

In 1993 Wayne Karlin, a writer and Vietnam war veteran, attended a meeting sponsored by the Joiner Center. There he met Lê Minh Khuê, a woman who during the war cleared bombs from the Hồ Chí Minh Trail as a member of a North Vietnamese Army Brigade. Later she became a journalist and fiction writer and currently is an editor for the Vietnam Writer's Association Publishing House in Hanoi. From their meetings emerged the idea to publish an anthology of works by Vietnamese and Americans. "What we wanted, we decided," says Karlin, "was a work of reconciliation that came from a mutual recognition of pain and loss; what we wanted was to open in our readers' hearts the recognition that had opened in our own" (1995, xiii). Later Karlin met Trương Vũ, a Vietnamese exile writer, and the three of them—Karlin, Lê Minh Khuê and Trương Vũ—edited *The Other Side of Heaven: Post-War Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers* which was published by Curbstone Press in 1995.

Other works have emerged from exchanges facilitated by the Joiner Center, some of them published by the University of Massachusetts Press and some by Curbstone Press, "a non-profit publishing house dedicated to literature that reflects a commitment to social change" (from final page of *The Other Side of Heaven*). In 1997 Kevin Bowen, director of the Joiner Center, and Bruce Weigl, a veteran and poet, edited *Writing Between the Lines*, a collection of writing by Vietnamese and Americans. In that same year Karlin edited *The Stars, the Earth, the River*, a collection of short stories by Lê Minh

Khuê. And in 2003 Karlin and Hồ Anh Thái, a writer from Hanoi, edited *Love After War* (2003), a 641-page anthology of works by Vietnamese living in Vietnam.

Few works by Vietnamese exiles are included in these anthologies. Only seven out of thirty-eight selections in *The Other Side of Heaven*, only three of the over one hundred selections in *Writing Between the Lines*, and none of the fifty selections in *Love After War* are written by Vietnamese exiles. These anthologies reflect the belief that reconciliation with the other side is more urgent than understanding the people Americans fought with. In his introduction to *Love After War*, however, Karlin hints at other causes for not including works by exiles. Here is a curious footnote from that introduction:

In terms of this anthology, “modern Vietnamese literature” refers to literature being published in Vietnamese, in Vietnam, following the end of the Vietnamese-American War, though some of the writers began publishing long before then. It is a definition that unfortunately doesn’t include the literature produced by writers who were connected to the Vietnamese side that lost the war, nor from the Vietnamese community in exile. That rich and growing body of literature deserves an anthology by itself, and I look forward to the day when the war is truly over and all Vietnamese literature can be included in a collection such as this one. (note 1, xi)

I find this note curious because in it Karlin announces a restrictive definition of modern Vietnamese literature, one that excludes “a rich and growing body of literature,” and then immediately regrets his limiting definition. One wonders why exile literature was not included in *Love After War*, particularly since its editor feels so badly about leaving it out. Karlin suggests it is because the war is not yet “truly over.”

Not over for whom? For Karlin, Bowen, and other veterans who regret their involvement in the war and wish to make amends by publishing works by the side they fought?

Perhaps, but Karlin's comment about looking forward to a day when "all Vietnamese literature" can be included in a single volume hints at other reasons for leaving exile literature out of *Love After War*. Unlike this more recent collection, which contains only works by writers associated with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *The Other Side of Heaven* contains a few works by Vietnamese exile writers though most works are by Americans or by Vietnamese writers living in Vietnam. When Karlin and the other co-editors toured the United States to promote their book, they encountered demonstrations by anti-communist Vietnamese. Perhaps Vietnamese exile writers were not willing to be included in *Love After War* because they feared similar protests. Perhaps these protestors are the people for whom the war is not truly over.

That this is so is suggested by the reaction to a new program administered by the Joiner Center that has been funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Under this program Vietnamese exiles and Vietnamese from Vietnam come to the Joiner Center to "study various aspects of the theme '(Re)Constructing Identity and Place in the Vietnamese Diaspora'" (William Joiner Center 2002). When the Joiner Center invited two scholars from Hanoi, however, some members of the Vietnamese exile community rose up in protest. Though they believed it was appropriate to do research on the Vietnamese diaspora, they objected to the two Hanoi scholars who were given fellowships: Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, a well-respected literary critic, and Nguyễn Huệ Chi, an expert on Vietnamese classical and pre-modern literature who in recent years has also taken an interest in overseas Vietnamese literature. What do these researchers know about being a refugee, the protestors asked. "Using members of the Vietnamese Communist Party from Hanoi to conduct research and to study about Vietnamese refugees is similar to using members of the Nazi Storm Troopers to study the life of the Jews in concentration camps," said the Vietnamese Immigration Community of Massachusetts in an open letter sent to the Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts, the Joiner Center, and the Rockefeller Foundation (2000).

I believe, however, that in explaining why so few works by Vietnamese exile writers have been translated one has to consider other causes besides resentments left over from the war. I've already discussed another contributing factor in my Introduction: the difficulty of classifying writers like Võ Phiến. Consider how Karlin defines modern Vietnamese literature in his introduction to *Love After War*: works published in Vietnamese in Vietnam after 1975. This definition (which Karlin admits is limiting) neatly excludes a writer like Võ Phiến. The "after 1975" means Võ Phiến's early works cannot be included; the "published in Vietnam" criterion rules out the works he published in the United States. By Karlin's definition, Võ Phiến is not a modern Vietnamese writer. Is he then a modern Asian American writer? The short answer is no, but he might possibly become one if Asian American studies continues to denationalize and the border between Asian studies and Asian American studies becomes increasingly permeable.

In the 1970s and '80s, scholars in the field, if they were aware of Võ Phiến at all, would not have considered him an Asian American writer, not only because he wrote in Vietnamese but because he had the wrong "sensibility" — was too devoted to the ancestral homeland, too little concerned with claiming America for Asian Americans. As I explained in my Introduction, in the 1970s Asian American literature was a "cultural nationalist project" led by the Aiiieeeee! group and dominated by monolingual English speakers of East Asian ancestry (Wong 1995, 4). Elaine H. Kim explains well how she and her colleagues saw Asian American studies in the '70s. When most Americans considered all Asians, "regardless of ancestry or nativity," to be alike, it was important for Asian Americans to band together and insist on a "unitary identity" in order to oppose marginalization. "This strategically constructed unitary identity, a closed essence sharply dividing 'Asian American' from 'Asian,' was a way to conjure up and inscribe our faces on the blank pages and screens of America's hegemonic culture" (1992, xi–xii). Given the agenda that Kim describes, it is understandable why Asian Americanists have

not been much interested in Võ Phiến, a writer who writes in Vietnamese, who has always looked with longing toward his homeland in Asia, and who has stubbornly insisted on being a Vietnamese—an Asian—not an Asian American. Because Võ Phiến has not been considered to be either a modern Asian writer or a modern Asian American writer, his works have fallen between the cracks.

As the border between Asian studies and Asian American studies becomes more permeable and a diasporic perspective more accepted, will more works by Võ Phiến be translated and his contributions become more appreciated? This seems likely but by no means certain: the movement toward border permeability could stall or be reversed. Sau-Ling C. Wong, who explains so well how Asian American studies is becoming de-nationalized, is not herself in favor of the trend. She sees “a fundamental tension between Asian American studies with its history of resistance and advocacy, and diaspora studies of specific groups by origin” (1995, 18). Others argue that this tension between transnational/diasporic perspectives versus domestic (American) perspectives can be resolved by situating “Asian American communities in a transnational framework when such an approach is relevant” and setting it aside when it is not (Okamura 2003, 180).

Though Asian Americanists may debate whether it’s good or bad, one sees signs of border permeability everywhere. One sees it, for example, in UCLA’s search, described by Okamura (2003), for a “specialist in Vietnam and Vietnamese American Studies who should be fluent in Vietnamese and teach and conduct research in Asian American Studies and Southeast Asian Studies and in the potential link between them” (183). The movement toward permeability is driven by what Anthony Reid, former director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at UCLA, calls “a diasporic clientele” by which he means the growing number of Asian American students in U.S. universities. At both UCLA and UC Berkeley they make up more than 35 percent of the total student body. This clientele, says Reid, will continue to grow, “first at the undergraduate level; then at post-graduate, and finally as

Faculty" (quoted by Okamura 2003, 184). Some universities in the California State and University of California systems offer special courses in Vietnamese to help students who have only a speaking knowledge of their parents' language expand their Vietnamese proficiency. It seems likely that these developments will heighten interest in Võ Phiến, a writer who, as we have seen, straddles the fields of Asian and Asian American studies and provides links between them.

If they could read Võ Phiến's works, either in Vietnamese or English, I believe younger exile readers would appreciate them. His stories and essays would help them understand what their parents have gone through both in Vietnam during the war and when they first arrived in their country of exile. His essays on local dishes and customs would deepen their understanding of aspects of Vietnamese culture. In addition, Võ Phiến's stories contain unforgettable characters and are moving accounts of how people cope with war and exile.

One other feature of Võ Phiến's writing increases the chances that his works would be appreciated by younger exile readers. Though he can be nostalgic and sentimental about his native land, especially in some *tùy bút* essays written in America, his style, as we have seen, is usually more analytical than emotional. He sees the good and the bad of life in Vietnam. After Renovation (Đổi Mới), Vietnam's glasnost, restrictions on travel to Vietnam were eased and many Vietnamese have returned to visit relatives. Renovation has lessened the appeal of works full of sentimental longing for the homeland. "When we had just left," says Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn, the song 'Bidding Saigon Good-by Forever' (Sài Gòn Vĩnh Biệt) made us terribly sad. Now it stirs our memories, not our emotions" (1995, 212). Since Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn made this observation, it has become even easier for Vietnamese to travel to Vietnam and many have done so. For Andrew Q. Lam, a young Vietnamese American writer who has rela-

tives on three continents, "Paris, Bangkok, and Saigon are no longer fantasies, but a matter of scheduling."¹¹³

Though Võ Phiến is less sentimental than some exile writers, the story he tells is one of loss and broken dreams and this story may not appeal to younger readers, particularly to those in America where people are encouraged to look to the future, not the past. When Vietnamese, no matter where they live, look to the past they see war and suffering. A special problem for Vietnamese in the diaspora is that when other people look at them that is also what they see. Vietnam and war are tightly linked in the popular consciousness, making it difficult for some people to see Vietnamese as individuals. Younger Vietnamese in the diaspora, however, do not want to be defined by war alone. In "Shrapnel Shards on Blue Water," the poet and novelist Lê Thị Diễm Thúy, who was born in Phan Thiết and now lives in Massachusetts, tells her sister that:

we are fragmented shards
 blown here by a war no one wants to remember
 in a foreign land
 with an aching familiar wound
 our survival is dependent upon
 never forgetting that vietnam is not
 a word
 a world
 a love
 a family
 a fear
 to bury
 let people know
 VIETNAM IS NOT A WAR

let people know
 VIETNAM IS NOT A WAR

let people know
 VIETNAM IS NOT A WAR

¹¹³"Introduction," *My Journey Home*, <http://www.pbs.org/weta/myjourneyhome/andrew/> (accessed May 19, 2004).

but a piece
us,
sister
and
we are
so much

more (1997, 112)

Lê Thị Diễm Thúy and other young Vietnamese writers who came to the United States as children or who were born here, have begun to produce a fascinating body of work in English.¹¹⁴ Their works, which differ drastically in tone and style from Võ Phiến's, offer some clues to the concerns and tastes of the younger generation. I have discussed Võ Phiến's stories based on tales his grandmother told him. Andrew Q. Lam, whose father was a general in the Saigon army, tells a different kind of grandmother tale. In his short story "Grandma's Tales"¹¹⁵ a bisexual narrator and his sister throw the body of their grandmother in a freezer. When the narrator and his boyfriend check on her later, she has come back to life. When she peels off the Saran Wrap, she has lost forty years and gained a new attitude. She insists on joining the narrator and his boyfriend at an "artsy fartsy party" where she meets and runs off with a famous Columbian novelist. The grandmother in this bizarre and manic story, however, is not completely different from the one we hear about in Võ Phiến's *Again, a Letter from Home*. At that artsy fartsy party, she regales the guests with sad stories about marrying young and raising eight children during the Việt Minh uprising. She talks about "the fate of Vietnamese women who must marry and see their husbands and sons go to war and never come back" (150). But then she runs off with the novelist.

¹¹⁴Samples can be found in collections edited by Tran De, Andrew Q. Lam, and Hai Dai Nguyen (1995); Duffy (1997); and Barbara Tran, Monique T.D. Truong, and Luu Truong Khoi (1998). See also Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) and Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003).

¹¹⁵This story appears in Duffy (1997, 113–18) and Barbara Tran et al. (1998, 145–50). My references are to Barbara Tran et al.

At the end of "Grandma's Tales" the narrator is a bit bewildered. He knows the traditional Vietnamese script, the one Võ Phiến favors: "And wasn't epic loss what made us tell our stories?" he asks. But events in his story, especially his grandma's triumphant emergence from the freezer, depart drastically from the traditional Vietnamese script. "She's [grandma] done away with the easy plot for tragedy," the narrator says, "and life after her wasn't going to be so simple anymore" (150). How does a Vietnamese write in America where epic loss is not a favorite theme? That's the question posed by Andrew Q. Lam's "Grandma's Tales." He and Lê Thị Diễm Thúy, Linh Dinh, Nguyễn Quý Đức, Lan Cao, Andrew X. Pham, Monique Truong and other younger writers are trying to come up with answers.

One answer may involve what Renny Christopher calls "bi-culturality," a dual focus on both Vietnam and America, a feature which, she argues, distinguishes Vietnamese-American literature from traditional Asian-American literature. "Vietnamese exile authors," she says, "while becoming 'American,' insist on remaining Vietnamese at the same time, whether or not they intend to return to Vietnam" (1995a, 30). Christopher finds this bi-culturality in works by older exile writers, all first generation immigrants. In her book she doesn't discuss works by younger Vietnamese American authors—Andrew Q. Lam, Andrew X. Pham, Nguyễn Quý Đức, Monique Truong, etc.—which were just appearing or had not yet appeared when she wrote her book in 1995. In a talk given in that same year, however, Christopher discussed Nguyễn Quý Đức's *Where the Ashes Are* and Jade Ngọc Quang Huỳnh's *South Wind Changing* and found that like works by older exile writers these two autobiographies also exhibited a dual focus on both Vietnam and the United States (1995b). It is not so surprising that older exile writers who spent most of their adult lives in Vietnam should focus on their homeland as well as on America; the fact that writers of generation 1.5, those born in Vietnam who came to the United States as young children, also have this dual focus on Vietnam and America is more striking. Christopher sees *Where the Ashes Are* and *South*

Wind Changing as representing “a transitional period in Vietnamese American literature, poised between exile literature and immigrant literature” (1995b, n.p.).

Christopher discusses nine Vietnamese exile narratives, including Võ Phiến’s *Intact*, which is the only one of the nine that was not written originally in English. The other eight are Minh Đức Hoài Trinh’s *This Side . . . The Other Side* (1980), Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn’s *The Will of Heaven* (1982), Huỳnh Quang Nhuông’s *The Land I Lost* (1982), Trần Văn Dĩnh’s *Blue Dragon, White Tiger* (1983), Trương Như Tảng’s *A Vietcong Memoir* (1985), Lê Lý Hayslip’s *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1993), and Nguyễn Thị Thu-Lâm’s *Fallen Leaves* (1989). This is a mixed collection of works—some fiction, some autobiography, one children’s book (*The Land I Lost*).

Not all of these narratives seem focused to any great extent on America: Trương Như Tảng, for example, has never lived in America and adopts an internationalist perspective. Huỳnh Quang Nhuông focuses almost exclusively on his boyhood in Vietnam. Christopher’s focus is on war narratives and she compares narratives written by Vietnamese to those written by Euro-Americans. In comparison to the latter, which she finds to be focused almost exclusively on America and to say little about the Vietnamese people and culture, some of these Vietnamese exile narratives that Christopher considers may appear more bi-cultural than they really are. Võ Phiến’s *Intact*, however, does have this bi-cultural focus: Dung looks backward and mourns for the past. Hers is the traditional Vietnamese exile story of loss. But Nghĩa and other characters look to the future and are excited by the opportunities available to them in the United States. Võ Phiến presents both orientations as honorable. The younger generation of Vietnamese exiles may appreciate the bi-cultural focus of works Võ Phiến wrote in the United States—his attempts to grapple with the differences between Vietnamese and American culture.

Other readers, not just Vietnamese Americans, would enjoy reading Võ Phiến and could learn a lot from him. It is

true that he is a chronicler of loss and broken dreams. After 11 September 2001, however, America has changed and Võ Phiến can help all Americans, and people in other countries, understand the new world in which they live. As Mary Pipher says in *The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter The American Community*:

After September 11, we are all refugees from what was once our America. We have been exiled from a country that felt safe and calm and now we live in a new country filled with fear. We can learn from the refugees among us how to deal with our fears and sorrows. Our newcomers have experienced panic, loss, disruption, and vulnerability. They have learned to cope with catastrophes, and they can teach us how to survive these things. They can help us learn to live in the world with broken hearts. (2002, xii)

But Võ Phiến is not only a chronicler of loss. His most enduring achievement may be his ability to remind us that love and beauty exist in small countries as well as large and can be expressed by the simple gestures of very humble people. After reading Võ Phiến what stays in the mind are these very human gestures: Lê's surrender to the clumsy advances of a lost and homesick old man in *Men*; Sister Lộc's forgiving smile that soothes the heart of Brother Four No More in "Again, a Letter from Home"; Uncle Seven's determination not to reveal his fears and grief—to "preserve the dignity of the revolution"—as he is being whisked away by an American helicopter in "Drops of Coffee." One can read this last scene politically—see Võ Phiến as intending to show the Revolution in a moment of defeat—and that may be one of the emotions that motivates this scene. But what stands out for me is a love and understanding that is deeper than the political choices that Uncle Seven has made, that Võ Phiến's narrator has made, and that Võ Phiến himself has made. When resentments left from the war are gone, I believe that more readers will choose to read this scene and others like it in this way.

WORKS BY VÕ PHIẾN¹¹⁶

Novels

1. *Saying Good-by* (Giã Từ). Saigon: Bách Khoa, 1962.
2. *Alone* (Một Mình). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1965.
3. *Men* (Đàn Ông). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1966.
4. *Intact* (Nguyên Vẹn). Des Moines, IA: Người Việt, 1978.

Collections of Short Stories

1. *Love* (Chữ Tình). Qui Nhon, Vietnam: Bình Minh, 1956.
2. *The Prisoner* (Người Tù). Qui Nhon, Vietnam: Bình Minh, 1957.
3. *Night Rain at Year's End* (Mưa Đêm Cuối Năm). Saigon: Tự Do, 1958.
4. *A Moonlit Night in Spring* (Đêm Xuân Trăng Sáng). Saigon: Nguyễn Đình Vượng, 1961.
5. *Returning to a Country Village* (Về Một Xóm Quê). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1965.
6. *Love Cherished for a Thousand Years* (Thương Hoài Ngàn Năm). Saigon: Bút Nghiên, 1962.
7. *Really Short Stories* (Truyện Thật Ngắn). Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1991. Reprinted in 1995 with some additional works added.

Collections of Informal Reflective Essays (*Tùy Bút*)

1. *A Letter from Home* (Thư Nhà). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1962.
2. *Illusion* (Ảo Ảnh). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1967. Contains some texts that Võ Phiến later reprinted in *Short Stories II*.
3. *Changing World* (Phù Thế). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1969. Contains some texts that Võ Phiến later reprinted in *Short Stories I* and *Short Stories II*.

¹¹⁶This list of works by Võ Phiến is based on a list that Nguyễn Hưng Quốc includes in *Võ Phiến*, a critical study of the writer (1996, 199–201). I have provided the English translations of the titles and also have added works that have appeared after *Võ Phiến* was published.

4. *Country and Homeland* (Đất Nước Quê Hương). Saigon: Lửa Thiêng, 1973.
5. *Letters to a Friend* (Thư Gửi Bạn). Des Moines, Iowa: Người Việt, 1976.
6. *Exile* (Ly Hương). Contains essays by Võ Phiến and Lê Tất Điều. Des Moines, Iowa: Người Việt, 1977.
7. *Again, Letters to a Friend* (Lại Thư Gửi Bạn). Des Moines, Iowa: Người Việt, 1979. Note: Võ Phiến later reprinted the essays in this collection in *Miscellaneous Essays*.
8. *Homeland* (Quê). Westminister, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1992.
9. *Collected Writings* (Tuyển Tập). Los Angeles, CA: Văn Mới, 2001.

Critical Studies, Scholarly Essays, Dialogues

1. *The Contemporary Novel* (Tiểu Thuyết Hiện Đại). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1963. For this first edition of *The Contemporary Novel* Võ Phiến used another pen name: Tràng Thiên.¹¹⁷
2. *Contemporary Russian Literature* (Văn Học Nga Xô Hiện Đại). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1965. Author listed is Tràng Thiên, another pen name.
3. *Essays on Literary Topics 1* (Tập Bút 1). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1965.
4. *Essays on Literary Topics 2* (Tập Bút 2). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1965.
5. *Essays on Literary Topics 3* (Tập Bút 3). Saigon: Thời Mới, 1966.
6. *Miscellaneous Essays* (Tập Luận). Saigon: Trí Đăng, 1973.
7. *Looking at Ourselves through Our Literature* (Chúng Ta Qua Cách Viết). Saigon: Giao Điểm, 1972.¹¹⁸
8. *To Write* (Viết). Westminister, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1993.
9. *Dialogues* (Đối Thoại). Westminister, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1993.

¹¹⁷Before 1963, the pen name Tràng Thiên was used by various members of the editorial board of the journal *Encyclopedic*, including Võ Phiến, when they wrote a column devoted to book reviews. In 1964 when Võ Phiến began using this same pen name for articles he wrote on literary topics and also for a column called "Life," the editorial office decided to reserve this pen name solely for Võ Phiến. See "Life and Works of Võ Phiến," *Literature* (Văn) (July/August 1974): 1.

¹¹⁸Nguyễn Hưng Quốc lists the date of publication as 1973, but my copy was published in 1972.

10. *To Live and to Write* (Sống và Viết). Gardena, CA: Văn Mới, 1996.
11. *Realizations* (Cảm Nhận). Gardena, CA: Văn Mới, 1999.
12. *Conversations* (Đàm Thoại). Gardena, CA: Văn Mới, 2002.

Poetry

1. *Wandering* (Thơ Thần). Paris: An Tiêm, 1997.

Translations

Võ Phiến used the pen name Tràng Thiên for the following translations:

1. Zweig, Stéfán. *Twenty-four Hours in a Woman's Life* (Hăm Bốn Giờ Một Người Đàn Bà).¹¹⁹ Saigon: Thời Mới, 1963.
2. Maurois, André. "Les grands courants de la pensée contemporaine" (Các Trào Lưu Lớn của Tư Tưởng Hiện Đại). Saigon: Thời Mới.
3. *Interesting Stories from Different Countries, Volume 1* (Truyện Hay Các Nước, Tập 1). Co-translated with Nguyễn Minh Hoàng. Saigon: Thời Mới, 1965.
4. *Interesting Stories from Different Countries, Volume 2* (Truyện Hay Các Nước, Tập 2). Co-translated with Nguyễn Minh Hoàng. Saigon: Thời Mới, 1965.
5. Dostoyevski, Fyodor. *The Eternal Husband* (Ông Chồng Muôn Thuở). Serialized in *Front Lines* (Tiền Tuyến), a daily newspaper published in Saigon, 1973. Võ Phiến's translation was never printed as a book.

The Series on Literature in South Vietnam

Works in this series are all published by Văn Nghệ Publications in Westminister, California. Võ Phiến is the author of the first volume, *Literature in South Vietnam: An Overview*; he is the compiler and editor of the other six volumes. He also includes, however, short introductions to most of the over one-hundred writers represented in the six anthologies. Most of these introductions were previously published elsewhere.

¹¹⁹For an English translation, see Stephan Zweig, *Stories and Legends*, 1–67, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (London: Cassell, 1955).

Some of the materials in the anthologies (books numbered 2 through 7 below) appeared in shorter pocket-sized editions that were published during the years 1991–95. In his foreword to *Literature in South Vietnam: An Overview*, the first volume in this series, Võ Phiến promised that anthologies devoted to different genres would later be published. The project took him longer than he intended: he had trouble finding some manuscripts and was slowed by two serious heart operations. Worried that readers were tired of waiting, and fearing he might never complete the project if he waited to gather more texts, he published the shorter pocket-sized editions first. Finally he was able to complete the project and publish the fuller works listed here.¹²⁰

1. *Literature in South Vietnam: An Overview* (Văn Học Miền Nam, Tổng Quan). 1986. Reprinted in 1988 and 2000.
2. *Literature in South Vietnam: Fiction I* (Văn Học Miền Nam: Truyện I). 1999.
3. *Literature in South Vietnam: Fiction II* (Văn Học Miền Nam: Truyện II). 1999.
4. *Literature in South Vietnam: Fiction III* (Văn Học Miền Nam: Truyện III). 1999.
5. *Literature in South Vietnam: Poetry* (Văn Học Miền Nam: Thơ). 1999.
6. *Literature in South Vietnam: Drama and the Informal Reflective Essay* (Văn Học Miền Nam: Kịch, Tùy Bút). 1999.
7. *Literature in South Vietnam: Reportage/Memoirs* (Văn Học Miền Nam: Ký). 1999.

¹²⁰Võ Phiến explains the publishing history of this series in “An Interview with the Writer Võ Phiến Regarding the Series Literature in South Vietnam” [Phòng văn nhà văn Võ Phiến về bộ sách Văn Học Miền Nam], *Văn Học* [Literary Studies] 169 (May, 2000), 3–20.

COLLECTIONS CONTAINING REPRINTS OF WORKS BY VÕ PHIẾN

Here is a list of books that contain reprints of previously published works by Võ Phiến. Works one through nine were published by Văn Nghệ (Literature and Art) Publishing Company in Westminster, California. The tenth work, *Selected Works*, was published by Văn Mới (New Literature). The last work, also titled Võ Phiến: *Selected Works*, was published by Người Việt (Vietnamese Publishing).

1. *Miscellaneous Essays* (Tập Luận), 1987
2. *Essays on Literary Topics* (Tập Bút), 1989
3. *Essays* (Tiểu Luận), 1988
4. *Novels I* (Tiểu Thuyết I), 1993
5. *Novels II* (Tiểu Thuyết II), 1988¹²¹
6. *Short Stories I* (Truyện Ngắn I), 1987
7. *Short Stories II* (Truyện Ngắn II), 1989
8. *Informal Reflective Essays I* (Tùy Bút I), 1986
9. *Informal Reflective Essays II* (Tùy Bút II), 1987
10. *Võ Phiến: Selected Works* (Tuyển Tập), 2001.
11. *Võ Phiến: Selected Works* (Tuyển Tập), 2006.

¹²¹The publisher explains that for reasons relating to the ease of gathering manuscripts *Tiểu Thuyết II* was printed before *Tiểu Thuyết I*. See *Tiểu Thuyết II*, p. 7.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF WORKS BY VÕ PHIẾN

- “Unsettled” (Băn khoăn). [1957] 2002. Translated by Bac Hoai Tran and Courtney Norris. In *Virtual Lotus: Modern Fiction of Southeast Asia*, edited by Teri Shaffer Yamada. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 284–298. Originally appeared in *Night Rain at Year’s End* (Mưa Đêm Cuối Năm).
- “Love Cherished for a Thousand Years” (Thương Hoài Ngàn Năm). [1962] 1986. Translated by James Banerian. In *Vietnamese Short Stories: An Introduction*, ed. James Banerian. Phoenix, AZ: Sphinx Publishing. 70–98. Originally appeared in collection with same title: *Love Cherished for a Thousand Years*.
- “A Day to Dispose of” (Một Ngày Để Tùy Nghi). [1969] 1985. Translated by Võ Đình Mai. In *Landscape and Exile*, edited by Marguerite Guzman Bouvard. Boston: Rowan Tree Press. 20–30. Same translation appears in *War and Exile: A Vietnamese Anthology*, edited by Nguyễn Ngọc Bích. Springfield, VA: Vietnamese PEN Abroad, 1989. 31–41. Originally appeared in *Changing World* (Phù Thế).
- “A Dream of Mars.” [1976] 1989. Translated by Nguyễn Ngọc Bích. In *War and Exile: A Vietnamese Anthology*, edited by Nguyễn Ngọc Bích. Springfield, VA: Vietnamese PEN Abroad. 239–44. The editor does not indicate where the original Vietnamese version of this essay appeared.
- “A Freedom Wall.” [1976] 1989. Translated by Nguyễn Ngọc Bích. In *War and Exile: A Vietnamese Anthology*, edited by Nguyễn Ngọc Bích. 244–51. The editor does not indicate where the original Vietnamese version of this essay appeared.
- “The Key” (Cái Chìa Khóa). [1976] 1985. Translated by Phan Phan. In *Landscape and Exile*, edited by Marguerite

- Guzman Bouvard. Boston: Rowan Tree Press. 11–19. Same translation appears in *The Other Side of Heaven: Post-War Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers*, edited by Wayne Karlin, Lê Minh Khuê, and Trương Vũ. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1995. 252–57. Originally appeared in *Letters to a Friend* (Thư Gửi Bạn).
- “Wrapping Clouds and Blocking Snow.” [1976] 1989. Translated by Nguyễn Ngọc Bích. In *War and Exile: A Vietnamese Anthology*. Springfield, VA: Vietnamese PEN Abroad. 229–37. Originally appeared in *Letters to a Friend* (Thư Gửi Bạn).
- “Spring of Quiet and Peace” (Một Mùa Xuân An Lành). [1977] 1983. Translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông. In *Vietnam Forum 1* (Winter-Spring): 93–98. Same translation appears in *Landscape and Exile*, edited by Marguerite Guzman Bouvard. Boston: Rowan Tree Press, 1985. 1–10. Originally appeared in *Exile* (Ly Hương).
- Intact*. [1978] 1990. Translated by James Banerian. Victoria, Australia: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications.
- “Vietnamese Americans” (Người Mỹ Gốc Việt). [1979] 1997. Translated by Trần Quý Phiệt. In *Not a War: American Vietnamese Fiction, Poetry and Essays*, edited by Dan Duffy. *Viet Nam Forum* 16. New Haven, CT: Yale University Council on Southeast Asia Studies. 68–74. Originally appeared in *Again, Letters to a Friend* (Lại Thư Gửi Bạn).
- Literature of South Vietnam: 1954–1975* (Văn Học Miền Nam, Tổng Quan.) [1986] 1992. Translated by Võ Đình Mai. Melbourne, Australia: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications.

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APPENDIX:

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION ON WRITERS AND SCHOLARS

This is a partial list of the writers and scholars that I cite in this book. Some people are included because I quote and cite them often and thus feel it is important for you to know who they are. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc fits into this category. Others are included because their backgrounds enable them to speak about Võ Phiến from an interesting perspective, one that I feel needs some explaining. Vũ Hạnh, Võ Phiến's former colleague in Saigon who calls Võ Phiến a special agent of the neo-imperialist Americans, fits into this category. In short, this is a representative list, a sampling of some of the people whose words and ideas you will encounter in this book.

Unless otherwise indicated, the information in these sketches comes from Võ Phiến's *Literature in South Vietnam: An Overview* (2000, 453–96) and from an online list, “Vietnamese Poets and Writers Abroad,” compiled by Luân Hoán.¹²²

The list is in alphabetical order.

Đặng Tiến

Born in Quảng Nam in 1940, Đặng Tiến has lived in France since 1966 where he is an instructor of Classical Vietnamese Literature at the University of Denis Diderot. He received a BA in Vietnamese literature from the University of Saigon and has done graduate work at the University of Aix-en-Provence. His articles on Vietnamese literature appear regularly in many different exile journals. For some articles, including several on Võ Phiến cited in this book, Đặng Tiến uses the pen name Nam Chi.

¹²²“Vietnamese Poets and Writers Abroad,” http://www.thewriterspost.net/writers_listing.htm (accessed April 25, 2004).

Lê Tất Điều

Born in Hà Đông (northern Vietnam) in 1942, Lê Tất Điều, came south as a refugee in 1954. In Vietnam he was a teacher and military officer as well as a writer before he came to the United States in 1975. He worked with Võ Phiến on the staff of *Encyclopedic* in Vietnam, and they cooperated again in California to publish *Literary Studies and Art* (Văn Học Nghệ Thuật), the first Vietnamese literary journal to appear overseas. Though primarily a poet and fiction writer, he also writes essays. He wrote some of the essays in *Exile* (1970), the collection in which Võ Phiến expresses his reaction to the harsh climate of Minnesota.

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc

This younger (born in 1957 in Quảng Nam Province) researcher and critic left Vietnam as a boat person in 1986, spent some time in France, and then took a teaching job in Australia where he is a lecturer in Vietnamese language and literature at the Victoria University of Technology. Familiar with modern critical approaches, he has written *Vietnamese Literature from a (Post-) Modern Perspective* (Văn Học Việt Nam Từ Điểm Nhìn H(ậu h)iện Đại),¹²³ at least six other books, and many articles. One of his books is *Võ Phiến* (1996), an informative and extremely useful study of Võ Phiến's life and work.

Nguyễn Mộng Giác

Born in 1940 in Bình Định, Võ Phiến's home province, Nguyễn Mộng Giác came to the United States in 1982. He and Võ Phiến have been associates and friends for many years, working together on a variety of projects. In the early '80s they published the exile journal *Literary Studies and Art* (Văn Học Nghệ Thuật). (Võ Phiến was the publisher, Nguyễn Mộng Giác was secretary of the editorial board.) He later

¹²³Nguyễn Hưng Quốc's unusual use of the parentheses is purposeful. Like other postmodern critics, he brackets letters to suggest the instability of meaning. "Hậu" (post-) and "Hiện Đại" (modern) with the parentheses added can be read either as "Hiện Đại" (modern) or "Hậu Hiện Đại" (postmodern). The spelling conveys the idea that modern and postmodern views are mixed, not completely separate points of view. See Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 2000, 17.

edited *Literary Studies* (Văn Học), the successor to *Literary Studies and Art*. He published widely on a variety of topics but is best known for his series *Season of Rough Seas* (Mùa Biển Động), a long (four volumes) historical novel covering the years 1963–1980. He passed away in 2012.

Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn

Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn was born in north Vietnam in 1946 and came to south Vietnam after the Geneva Accords in 1954. An officer in the army of the Saigon regime, he was in re-education camps from 1975 until 1978. In 1979 he left as a boat person and later settled in Canada. Though he has been a prolific writer and his works have sold fairly well, they have not garnered much critical acclaim. Most critics consider them light entertainment, not serious fiction. Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn was president of the Vietnam Pen Club (Văn Bút Việt Nam Hải Ngoại) in the early '90s, an organization known for its hardline anti-communism. Recently he has taken up a new career as a master of ceremonies for a series of music videos called *Paris by Night*. His *Looking Back on a Decade* (1995) (Nhìn Lại Một Thập Niên) helps one understand the political divisions that fragment the overseas Vietnamese community.

Nguyễn Vy Khanh

Born in 1951 in Vietnam, Nguyễn Vy Khanh received an MA in Western Philosophy from Saigon University in 1975 and an MA in Library Science from the University of Montreal in 1978. He lives in Montreal where he writes poetry, fiction, literary history, and criticism. He also serves on the editorial board of several exile journals.

Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng

Though he appears in this book as an interviewer and conversation partner for Võ Phiến, Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng was also a creative writer, journalist, and editor. Born in the seaside town of Nha Trang in 1940, he was the managing editor of the journal *Literature* (Văn) in Saigon and was editor-in-

chief of a journal by the same name that was later published in San Jose, California.

He was also involved in various capacities with the exile journals *Literary Studies* (Văn Học) and *21st Century* (Thế Kỷ 21). An editor of newspapers as well as literary journals, he was editor-in-chief of *Việt Mercury*, a Vietnamese-language edition of the *San Jose Mercury News*. He passed away in 2014.

Phan Lạc Tiếp

Born in 1933 in north Vietnam, he settled in south Vietnam in 1954. He served as a naval officer for the Saigon regime. He came to the United States in 1975 and now lives in San Diego. He is best known for *Rotten Leaves on the River Bank* (1969) (*Bờ Sông Lá Mực*), an account of river patrols conducted by the Vietnamese navy in the Mekong Delta.

Tạ Chí Đại Trường

Tạ Chí Đại Trường is from Bình Định, Võ Phiến's home province, and is a cousin of Tạ Chí Diệp, a classmate of Võ Phiến's in Qui Nhon. (Both Tạ Chí Diệp and Võ Phiến were arrested by the Việt Minh in 1952; see chapter I.) Tạ Chí Đại Trường earned an MA in history from the University of Saigon in 1964 and taught history in Vietnam before joining the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. After spending some time in a reeducation camp following the fall of the Saigon regime in 1975, he came to the United States in 1994. He died March 24, 2016 in Ho Chi Minh City.

Thụy Khuê

Thụy Khuê, whose real name is Vũ Thị Tuệ, is a reporter for Radio France Internationale (RFI) and a well-known literary critic in the exile community. Born in Nam Định (north Vietnam) in 1944, she has lived in France for many years. Along with Đặng Tiến (see above), she was one of twenty members of the editorial board of the journal *Convergence* (Hợp Lưu) when it was founded in 1991. This journal has striven to open up communication between writers and

readers in Vietnam and those in the diaspora. See chapter VIII.

Trần Long Hồ

A medical doctor in Vietnam, Trần Long Hồ (real name: Trần Trúc Quang) began writing in 1972 in Vietnam but stopped after 1975, then resumed writing in 1989. He was the chairperson of the Eastern section of Vietnam Pen Club from 1991 to 1992. He writes fiction.

Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn

This researcher and critic, born in 1936, is a specialist in Vietnam on “neo-imperialist literature” (văn chương chủ nghĩa thực dân mới). He is associated with the Institute for Social Science Research in Ho Chi Minh City. His major work is *Culture and Art Serving American Neo-Imperialism in South Vietnam: 1954-1975* (Văn Hóa, Văn Nghệ Phục Vụ Chủ Nghĩa Thực Dân Mới Mỹ Tại Nam Việt Nam 1954-1975), an 854-page tome that contains a long list of all neo-imperialist works, including Võ Phiến’s, that are forbidden to circulate in Vietnam. It was published in 1990.

Vũ Hạnh

A contemporary of Võ Phiến’s, Vũ Hạnh was born in Quảng Nam in 1926. Though their political positions were completely different, Võ Phiến and Vũ Hạnh were colleagues for a while when they both worked on the journal *Encyclopedic* (Bách Khoa) in Saigon. Vũ Hạnh later wrote for *Literary News* (Tin Văn), a journal edited by Nguyễn Văn Bổng, a known communist sympathizer, according to Võ Phiến (*Literature in Vietnam*, 120). Vũ Hạnh was arrested by the Saigon regime several times and is generally considered to have been an underground agent for the liberation movement. In 1980 he wrote a scathing attack on Võ Phiến that appeared in *Special Agents of Neo-imperialism on the Culture and Thought Front* (Những Tên Biệt Kích của Chủ Nghĩa Thực Dân Mới Trên Mặt Trận Văn Hóa Tưởng). He is better known for his critical works though he has written fiction.

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