American interference: A political-cultural reading of Graham Greene's Vietnam novel, *The quiet American*

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RESUMO

Em dias de aventura militar americana, é esclarecedor revisitar um dos primeiros romances de Graham Greene sobre o Vietnã, *O americano tranqüilo* (1955), um trabalho que nem sempre teve seu devido mérito reconhecido pelos críticos no que diz respeito a seus significados e implicações ideológicos. Neste estudo, as personagens são vistas como representativas das nações envolvidas no conflito, e o dilema enfrentado pelo narrador, um jornalista que tenta se manter neutro, é analisado em seus aspectos políticos. Também são discutidos como relevantes o modelo histórico do personagem principal e a reputação antiamericanista do autor.

Palavras-chave: Literatura da Guerra do Vietnã. Aventura militar. Anticomunismo.

A interferência americana: uma leitura político-cultural do romance de Graham Greene sobre o Vietnã – *O americano tranqüilo*

ABSTRACT

In these days of American military adventurism, it is instructive to reread Graham Greene's novel, *The Quiet American* (1955), a work whose political meanings and ideological implications have not always been recognized by critics. In this study, the characters of the novel are seen as representatives of the nations involved in the conflict, and the moral dilemma faced by the narrator, a journalist who tries to remain neutral, is analyzed in its political aspects. The historical model of the main character and the anti-American reputation of the author are also discussed as relevant to such a reading.

Key words: Literature of the Vietnam War. Military adventurism. Anti-Communism.

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The American military presence in Iraq has generated a great deal of suffering and anxiety in that country, the region, and at home. An ill-advised military adventure, it is being called in the national press the most disastrous foreign policy decision in American history. Not that Mr. Bush and his right-wing advisors had no precedents for embarking upon a military and political disaster of that dimension. The Vietnam War, not half a century before, could have served as an example of unwanted American interference in foreign countries that would spin out of control until, it seemed, no one could stop it. The United States did not send combat troops to Vietnam—the so-called "Americanization" phase of the war—until 1965, but Americans were supporting the French colonial effort, despite President Roosevelt's expressed intention not to, as early as the 1950s: by 1954, American military aid to France constituted 80%, or 1.33 billion of the French military expenditures in Vietnam (SULLIVAN, 1978, p.52-55).

When the first important novel in English about Vietnam was written, *Quiet American* (1955), by the British writer Graham Greene, the United States had not yet arrived there in force. It is instructive to read Greene's novel again in the present context. Political readings have generally been less important in the vast critical literature that has accumulated about the novel than might be expected. According to Neilson, who has analyzed the critical reception of the novel over four decades, readings of the novel have moved "from a defense against charges that Greene was anti-American and a focus of existential and Christian themes to a recognition of Greene's prescience and an interest in his race and gender constructions" (NEILSON, 1998, p.87). These thematic emphases, according to Neilson, have obscured the important political meanings of the American drive for dominance. Although the question of Greene's anti-Americanism will be taken up below, since it is relevant to ideological responses to the novel, the focus of this study will be on the politics of the war as reflected in the novel.

Decades after its publications, the novel has continued to amaze readers with its prophetic vision of the disruptive American presence in Vietnam, which would only gradually be recorded in fiction and non-fiction by American writers. The narrator's description of what the French were up against in the north, for example, sounds very much like what the Americans would later encounter in the south: "A war of jungle and mountain and marsh, paddy fields where you wade shoulder-high and the enemy simply disappear, bury their arms, put on peasant dress" (GREENE, 1962, p.23). Civilian casualties and the omissions and false reports of the press, which kept the American public in ignorance about the real progress of the war later on, are also a part of the conflict represented in the novel. At one point, an American correspondent candidly admits what reporting the war in northern Vietnam is like, a routine in which perceptions are carefully controlled by the French military:

> I fly to Hanoi airport. They give us a car to the Press Camp. They lay on a flight over the two towns they've recaptured and show the tricolour flying. It might be any darned flag at that height. Then we have a Press Conference and a colonel explains to us what we've been looking at. Then we file our cables with the censor. Then we have drinks. (GREENE, 1962, p.34)

Another important aspect, not only of the Vietnam War but of any war, is how the novel shows that the "truth" about what actually happens depends upon who controls the interpretation. When the narrator asks the French lieutenant in command of the Foreign Legion unit to which he attaches himself how much longer the battle will last, the lieutenant replies: "This is just a diversion. If we can hold out with no more help than we got two days ago, it is, one may say, a victory" (GREENE, 1962, p.54).

The historical context of *The Quiet American* is Saigon in the final years of French colonial rule in Indochina before the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu. The events of the novel evidently take place in 1951-1952, since at one point the narrator, a British newspaper correspondent, observes that any news he might report will go unnoticed as everyone now wants to read about Korea (GREENE, 1962, p.34). There is also a reference to "de Lattre" (p.114), or Commanding General Jean de Lattre Tassigny, who died of cancer in January 1952, after a trip to the US to plead for an increase of American aid. Fowler at one point watches American bombers being unloaded on the Saigon dock. Characters in the novel are constantly aware that large areas of the country, including even the other side of the river in Saigon after dark, are controlled by the Communist guerrilla organization, the Vietminh, whose clandestine organization seems to have ubiquitous eyes and ears but closed mouths. With reference to the Viet Minh agent whom Fowler meets, for example, "everybody here knew all about Mr Muoi, but the police had no key which would unlock their confidence" (GREENE, 1962, p.142).

Although a number of critics and commentators have assumed that Lt. Colonel Edward Landsdale, an Air Force officer working as a CIA operative in Vietnam, was the model for Greene's title character, the novel offers a fictional portrayal of a far less flamboyant early American adventurer, Alden Pyle, who does not resemble Landsdale in many ways. The long-running, back-and-forth controversy over a positive identification of Landsdale as Pyle is perhaps best illustrated by the critic and novelist John Clark Pratt, who, in an early commentary on Vietnam War fiction, wrote that Landsdale was "unmistakably modelled on Landsdale," who was also the model for "a major character" in at least two other novels (PRATT, 1987, p.126).

In his Introduction to a more recent, critical edition of Greene's novel, however, Pratt points out that the historical context of the novel, the years 1951-1952, predates Landsdale's actual arrival in Vietnam (PRATT, 1996, p.xv). If the Landsdale-Pyle mystery will never be completely solved, it is likely that its origins have arisen from the legendary character of Landsdale's "exploits in the Philippines and Vietnam after World War II [which] have provided not only historians but also journalists, novelists and filmmakers with material for their countless stories and myths," including, one might add, the exploits of a notorious historical character, Lt. Colonel Oliver North, of the Iran-Contra fiasco (PRATT, 1996, p.313). That is to say, Landsdale's exploits, not the man himself, may have served as any number of fictional models. Pratt neatly sums up both the inconclusiveness of the evidence and its ultimate insignificance when he comments that "given the outcome of the American presence in Vietnam, perhaps

Landsdale *should* have been the model after all" (PRATT, 1996, p.xv, his emphasis)—a recognition of Landsdale's mythical, even metonymical, presence in Vietnam for the Americans who came later.

The principal narrative voice, as well as the moral conscience of the novel, is a middle-aged English press correspondent named Thomas Fowler. Somewhat burned out from disappointments in his past, Fowler has left his ex-wife, his lover, and England for the east, where he finds contentment in Saigon with a young, beautiful Vietnamese mistress, Phuong, and the nightly opium pipes that she prepares for him. Disenchanted rather than cynical, Fowler is a basically decent man who feels at home in the country (he frequently explains the "situation" there to foreign visitors) but chooses to think of himself as an uninvolved, apolitical observer of the war, a mere "reporter." He has no desire for imminent promotion to an editorship in England, where he might have to produce "opinion," or to leave Vietnam. '"I'm not involved. Not involved,' I repeated. It had been an article of my creed" (GREENE, 1962, p.27). His eventual rejection of this creed of non-involvement and the choice to get involved becomes the moral and political crux of the novel.

Fowler befriends the newcomer Alden Pyle, an earnest son of a professor from strait-laced Boston, young, eager, naïve, and idealistic, a young man of good intentions but little understanding. Pyle's All-American boyishness seems to Fowler out of place in the Euro-Asiatic culture of Saigon, once known as the "Paris of the Orient." Rather, he "belonged to the skyscraper and the express elevator, the ice-cream and the dry Martinis, milk at lunch and the chicken sandwiches on the Merchant limited" (GREENE, 1962, p.19). Although Pyle insists in his polite, well-meaning manner that he has learned a lot from Fowler, Fowler believes the young man has his own priorities, moral and political, which no contrary knowledge may be allowed to disturb: "I had suffered from his lectures on the Far East," Fowler complains, "which he had known for as many months as I had years" (GREENE, 1962, p.10). Nor is Pyle, who seems to think in grand abstractions, much of a listener. "He didn't even hear what I said: he was absorbed already in the dilemmas of Democracy and the responsibilities of the West: he was determined…to do good, not to any individual person, but to a country, a continent, a world" (GREENE, 1962, p.17). Even after some harrowing experiences in the country, Pyle remains "impregnably armoured by his good intentions and his ignorance" (GREENE, 1962, p.162).

Pyle's manner and appearance, however, are deceptive. He pretends to work for a medical mission but is actually a CIA operative in charge of covert operations, and therefore far less innocent than Fowler imagines. The title of the novel, in one sense, refers to his need for secrecy. Phuong is the first one to call him a "quiet American," although evidently in a literal sense. With Pyle's lack of French and her lack of English, he is unable to talk to her, but his quietness takes on a more sinister aspect when the reader later discovers that Pyle speaks fluent Vietnamese. Fowler personally likes Pyle for his quiet, respectful manner, so different from his loud and boorish compatriots like the correspondent Granger, who gets stumbling drunk in public and sees Vietnamese

women as "a piece of tail." A more sympathetic character, Vigot, the French policeman who reads Pascal, says of Pyle after his death that he was "a very quiet American," with the implication that his silence was tactical rather than personal. With Fowler, however, Pyle is tediously loquacious, especially when expounding his political theories. He will become "quiet" only when terminally silenced by the Vietminh, with the collaboration of Fowler himself.

Many commentators have noted that Pyle and Fowler thematically represent the classic dichotomy of innocence and experience. The two men immediately find themselves in competition for the affection of the lovely Phuong, who is guided ("managed" is perhaps a more appropriate word) by her older sister, who, in the face of an uncertain future, wants her to have the financial security of a stable relationship with a foreigner. Before she met Fowler, Phuong worked as a hostess in a respectable dance-hall, and the threat of eventually slipping down into the desperate prostitution of the House of Five-Hundred Women, which survives on the trade of French soldiers, is a possibility recognized by Pyle, who claims that he wants to protect her. Angry at Pyle's presumption, Fowler tells him that Phuong needs no protection because he is aware that her serene behavior does not disguise a hard-headed approach to her future prospects, including leaving him for Pyle. Her name, which means "Phoenix," suggests that she will survive.

The problem for Fowler is that he can offer Phuong real affection and conversation (they speak French together) but only temporary security. His English wife will not grant him a divorce, and his newspaper may recall him to England. In these circumstances, a future with Phuong is doubly uncertain. Pyle, who falls in love with Phuong at first sight and is championed by the scheming older sister, thinks he can provide what Fowler lacks: youth, marriage, children, and a safe and stable future in the US. Comically, however, because of the language difficulty his courtship of the lady depends on his rival. In his boy-scout-like ethical code, he feels that he must make his suit in a thoroughly above-board fashion, doing nothing behind Fowler's back, which even includes asking Fowler to translate when he asks Phuong to leave Fowler for himself.

Beyond the love triangle, the three main characters may also be read as representations of their respective cultures. Phuong, an oriental sexual fantasy for western white men (she is beautiful, quiet, and unobtrusive—"One always spoke of her like that in the third person as if she were not there" (GREENE, 1962, p.44)—as well as sensual and pliant), she also represents the Vietnamese prize for competing western political projects. Fowler, in this interpretation, would be European colonialism, which wants to maintain possession. In one of their many arguments over the correct behaviour of foreign powers in Vietnam, Fowler defends the French on the basis that they are "dying every day" in their colonial war, which at least removes empty abstractions from their policy: "I'd rather be an exploiter who fights for what he exploits, and dies with it" (GREENE, 1962, p.94), Fowler says. He tells Pyle about the harm that the British did to their allies in Burma with "phony liberalism" and the concern

for maintaining a good conscience. In a dialogue that suggests Phuong's symbolic role, Pyle says he has Phuong's own "best interests" at heart, which irritates Fowler with its egotism and naiveté: "I don't care about her interests…I'd rather ruin her and sleep with her than…look after her damned interests…If it's only her interests you care about, for God's sake leave Phuong alone" (GREENE, 1962, p.58). The Old World colonialist only wishes to use Phuong—the country and its resources—for his own benefit. The New World moralist wants to save her from herself.

In this geo-political reading, Pyle represents the United States, newest player in the Indochina game for control over a small, obscure country, which will be blown out of proportion in the following quarter of a century into a major center of world conflict. He is inspired and guided by the writings of one York Harding, the author of several earnest works of political analysis, with titles like *The Advance of Red China*, *The Challenge to Democracy*, *The Role of the West*. Pyle believes fervently in the "Third Force" that Harding champions: a national party or popular group that is neither colonialist nor Communist and that will be willing to fight the Viet Minh to ensure an American-style democracy in a united Vietnam. Harding's character may be based on a professor of political science at Michigan State University, Wesley Fischel, who was a friend of Diem and Landsdale, a scholar who proposed in several books and articles political and economic strategies for the "modernization" (i.e. Americanization) of Vietnam in order to combat Communist influence there. One of his widely read articles, with an oxymoronic title, "Vietnam's Democratic One-Man Rule," was seriously discussed in academic journals (PRATT, 1996, p.315-316).

Pyle, the disciple of the Cold War intellectual Harding, is now in the field in Southeast Asia to implement the master's theories, based on the Domino Theory, the belief (first expressed in a speech by President Eisenhower) that the fall of Indochina to Communism would bring about the immediate collapse of other neighboring nations. The theory is alluded to in a reference that shows that the argument was hardly new in the Fifties and that there were already skeptics about its relevance. In an argument with Pyle about what the Vietnamese people really want, Fowler claims that they only want food, peace, and no white men around telling them what to do. Pyle, the idealist, insists that what they do not want is Communism:

> "If Indo-China goes…"
>
> "I know that record. Siam goes. Malaya goes. Indonesia goes. What does 'go' mean?" (GREENE, 1962, p.93)

After the perceived "loss" of China to Mao's Communists in 1949, US policymakers were determined to prevent any further such losses in the global competition for dominance. Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, the cold warrior *par excellence*, was convinced that Ho was "an instrument of international Communism," even though the Vietnamese revolution, contrary to continued American

belief, was a genuine nationalist movement not controlled by Moscow or Beijing (HERRING, 1986, p.25). The official position of the US regarding Indochina was NSC 64 (April 1950), which declared the war "one phase of anticipated plans to seize all of Southeast Asia." The paper recommended taking all practicable measures to prevent further Communist expansion (SCHULZINGER, 1997, p.46).

Where Pyle, and by implication the American leadership and political pundits, went wrong is in their assumption that while the French in Vietnam had failed by trying to perpetuate colonialism, the Americans would succeed in providing a Third Force, "a viable, non-Communist alternative to the Vietminh" (HERRING, 1986, p.42). What Fowler comes to believe in the course of the novel may be summed up by Fitzgerald:

> What was not so well appreciated by the Americans as by the French who had fought the war was that the new Vietnamese government [of Ho Chi Minh] had a stronger claim to legitimacy than did most governments in Southeast Asia, for it was the government that had mobilized the entire population, both urban elites and rural peasantry, to fight the war of national liberation. (FITZGERALD, 1970, p.64-65)

In the novel, the unlikely local candidate for implementing this alternative Third Force is the renegade General Thé (his real name), the former Chief of Staff for the Cao Dai religious sect, which has a small army and has taken to the hills. Fowler tells Pyle that General Thé is "only a bandit with a few thousand men: he's not a national democracy" (GREENE, 1962, p.156); rather, Thé is what is now called a terrorist. In the novel's climactic scene, his men bomb a café during the daytime in the center of Saigon. The bomb kills over fifty people, including a number of women and children, who are always present in town at that particular time of day. This act of provocation was planned by Pyle, and was intended to put the blame on the Communists in order to discredit them. By this time, Fowler has become sickened by all the violence he has witnessed in the war: "I know myself and I know the depth of my selfishness. I cannot be at ease (and to be at ease is my chief wish) if someone else is in pain, visibly or audibly or tactually" (GREENE, 1962, p.113), a statement that shows the moral basis of Fowler's decision to act against Pyle. The three final adverbs of the last sentence are to the point, for it is Fowler's antipathy to senseless killing and his pity for the victims of acts that he has personally witnessed that make him morally different from Pyle, a man who is indifferent to his victims because they are simply abstractions who have got in the way of his master plan. When he sees their blood on his shoes, he cannot even recognize it for what it is:

> "Blood, I said, 'Haven't you ever seen it before?'"
>
> He said, "I must get them cleaned before I see the Minister". (GREENE, 1962, p.161)

Pyle can only express regret that the explosion was not postponed once the scheduled parade was called off, at which Fowler remonstrates:

> Do you expect General Thé to lose his demonstration? This is better than a parade. Women and children are news, and soldiers aren't, in a war. This will hit the world's Press. You've put General Thé on the map all right, Pyle. You've got the Third Force and National Democracy all over your right shoe". (GREENE, 1962, p.162)

Pyle confesses that he has not even dismissed Thé as number one American protégé after this incident, only reprimanded him for his mistake in not postponing the bombing. If Thé came to power with American help, he could be relied on, Pyle explains, implying that the important thing is Thé's anti-Communist stance, not his heinous acts. For Pyle, the master plan takes precedence over the imperfect individuals chosen to execute it, just as the repressive and unpopular President Ngo Dinh Diem would be regarded as the only hope for US planners a few years later. Outraged by Pyle's part in the bombing and his inability to feel any moral responsibility, Fowler makes his existentialist choice to embrace commitment, reversing his earlier conviction of the need to stay uninvolved. Somewhat reluctantly, since his choice after all amounts to the betrayal of a friend, he agrees to set up Pyle for execution. "Sooner or later," his contact Mr. Muoi reminds him, "one has to take sides if one is to remain human" (GREENE, 1962, p.172)—an echo, although from the opposite side of the ideological fence, of the advice given Fowler by the French pilot, Captain Trouin.

The author shows that such choices are never morally simple, as seen by the several ironies that evolve from Fowler's decision and its consequences: Fowler must betray Pyle, who once saved his life, and he is motivated to do so by a sense of decency and a desire to prevent more violence. In a further irony, just as Fowler is about to lose everything, his life dramatically improves, as if he were being rewarded for his act: he is allowed by his newspaper to stay in Vietnam to cover the news now that Vietnam has heated up, and he can marry Phuong now that his wife has changed her mind and granted him a divorce.

As a character, Pyle is an aggregation of some negative qualities that Greene evidently thinks is characteristic of American culture. One presumed national trait is Pyle's lack of any sense of irony, which often makes for comic misunderstandings between him and the ironic Fowler. Another is Pyle's preference for mythical history. Talking to Fowler about his first dog, "Prince," Pyle tells him that he named the creature after the Black Prince,

> "You know, the fellow who…"
>
> "Massacred all the women and children in Limoges."

> "I don't remember that."
>
> "The history books gloss it over". (GREENE, 1962, p.72)

In the context of the climactic bombing episode, this allusion makes a moral as well as a historical point.

Another trait, Pyle's political naiveté (he is not, as often described by critics, "innocent," since that implies freedom from moral culpability), leads him to put hope in the Cao Dai sect, even though Fowler warns him that the French do not trust them. Pyle's reply, that a "man becomes trustworthy when you trust him," makes Fowler think that the reply itself "sounded like a Caodaist maxim." Greene evidently intends for his novel to expose the dangers of so-called "American innocence" and the national preference for myth over history. Successful intervention in a foreign civil war depends on knowledge, as opposed to mere "intelligence." In this context, the lack of knowledge, "innocence" (to quote Fowler) "becomes a kind of insanity" (GREENE, 1962, p.162). In this sense, Greene's novel seems to be more of an indictment of American cultural ignorance and political shortsightedness that often result in dangerous national policies, than simply a negative portrait of a well-meaning but misguided individual.

Upon publication of his novel, Greene was widely accused of being anti-American. In one hysterical editorial, for example, the middle-brow *Saturday Evening Post*, characterized the novel as "Hate-America Propaganda," and even the respected journalist A.J. Liebling, reviewing the novel in the sophisticated *New Yorker* took Greene to task for America-bashing (PRATT, 1996, p.347-355). Greene was accused by a number of people of believing that "America is the symbol of all that has gone wrong: materialism, godlessness, adult innocence, neutrality (ATKINS, 1966, p.232). And yet Greene, whose anti-Americanism (as is being argued here) was political, need not be confused with his character Fowler, who finds certain aspects of American mainstream culture vacuous, a critique that American writers and cultural critics (including such luminaries as Mark Twain, Henry D. Thoreau, Henry James, Ambrose Bierce, and Edith Wharton) have been making about their country since the nineteenth century.

> Is confidence based on a rate of exchange? We used to speak of sterling qualities. Have we got to talk now about a dollar love? A dollar love would, of course, include marriage and Junior and Mother's Day, even though later it might include Reno or the Virgin Islands or wherever they go nowadays for their divorces. A dollar love had good intentions, a clear conscience, and to hell with everybody. (GREENE, 1962, p.62)

The petulance in this passage is Fowler's, but the final sentence, with its suggestion of an independent foreign policy whose moral certainties disregarded the opinion of the rest of the world, was precisely how the US proceeded when it became involved in

Vietnam. It should also be noted that Fowler is aware of his anti-American sentiments and their connection with his jealousy of his rival. In talking to Phuong, he confesses:

> I began—almost unconsciously—to run down everything that was American. My conversation was full of the poverty of American literature, the scandals of American politics, the beastliness of American children. It was as though she were being taken away from me by a nation rather than by a man. Nothing that America could do was right. I became a bore on the subject of America, even with my French friends, who were ready enough to share my antipathies. (GREENE, 1962, p.138-139)

In another episode, however, Fowler's antipathy is ill conceived. At a Press Conference in Hanoi, "a too beautiful" French colonel is briefing the correspondents, weaving "his web of evasion," but the loutish American correspondent Granger wants to know why the colonel refuses to give out the number of French casualties: "Is the colonel seriously telling us…that he's had time to count the enemy dead and not his own?" (GREENE, 1962, p.63). As the persistent Granger presses his questions, the colonel gradually loses his patience even to the point of accusing the Americans of not sending more material aid (the gist of General de Lattre's complaint to Truman and Acheson when he visited the US shortly before his death). Fowler ironizes Granger's "bullying voice" and behavior as aggressive and inappropriate, believing that Granger resented the colonel for not looking like "a man's man," as if the colonel's good looks and the correspondent's vulgarity are more relevant than their arguments. Granger's personality aside, a more critical and aggressive American press corps early in the war might well have made it more embarrassing for US officials to weave their own web of evasion.

Pratt (1996, p.xiii) argues that accusations of Greene's anti-Americanism must be tempered by the favorable critical comment on the novel in a number of American periodicals. In the decade following publication the novel was widely read and accepted by the American public, which by that time had a more realistic understanding of the American commitment. A more serious accusation was a factual one: the attack on Greene's novel for being defamatory, specifically with respect to American responsibility for the explosion in the center of Saigon, in which, it is claimed, the US was never proven to be involved (SCHULZINGER, 1997, p.70). Greene, however, in his introduction to the 1973 edition of the novel, cites several hushed up incidents that implicate American Foreign Service personnel in terrorist acts (GREENE, 1973, p.xviii-xix).

One of the novel's epigraphs is taken from Byron's *Don Juan*, every line of which is relevant to the American presence in Vietnam:

> This is the patent age of new inventions
>
> For killing bodies and for saving souls,
>
> All propagated with the best intentions.