

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 Phố, 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 Trường 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.



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

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”

(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 Dịch, 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 Dịch" 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 Dịch 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 "mỗi 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 Trú. 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 Fountainsbleau 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).

Lón 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 Phố, 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 Nhơn 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 loudspeaker, 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)

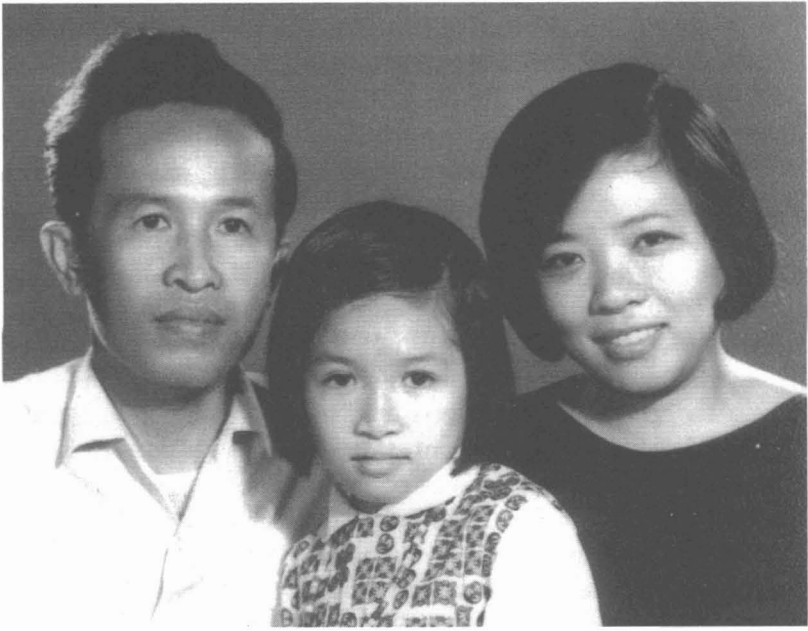
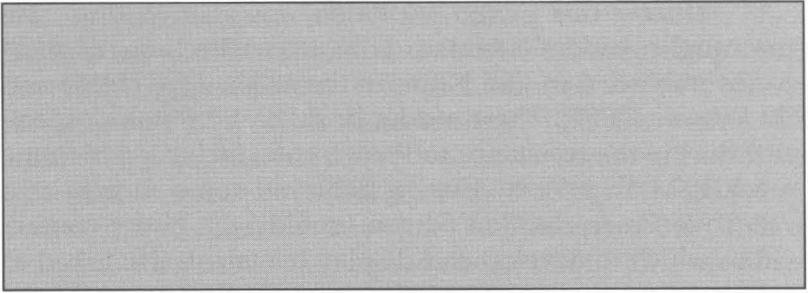
¹⁹Võ Phiến explained what working in the field of information in the late '50s involved in a letter to me (April 15, 2004).

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.

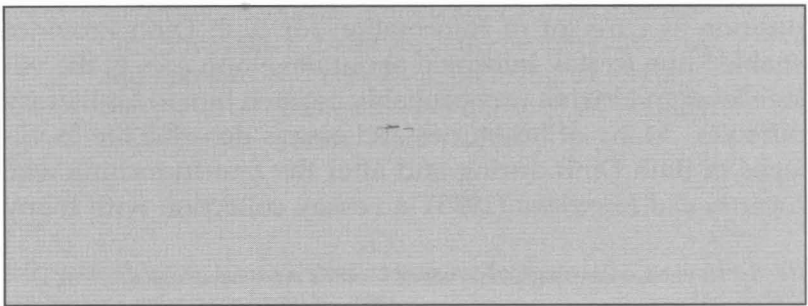
Because Võ Phiến has not said much about his work as a civil servant in Vietnam, one can only speculate about how he felt about it and how it affected his work. He certainly paints a bleak picture of office work in his novel *Alone* (see chapter II). In essays and stories published in the mid and late '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.

AN EXILE IN HIS OWN COUNTRY

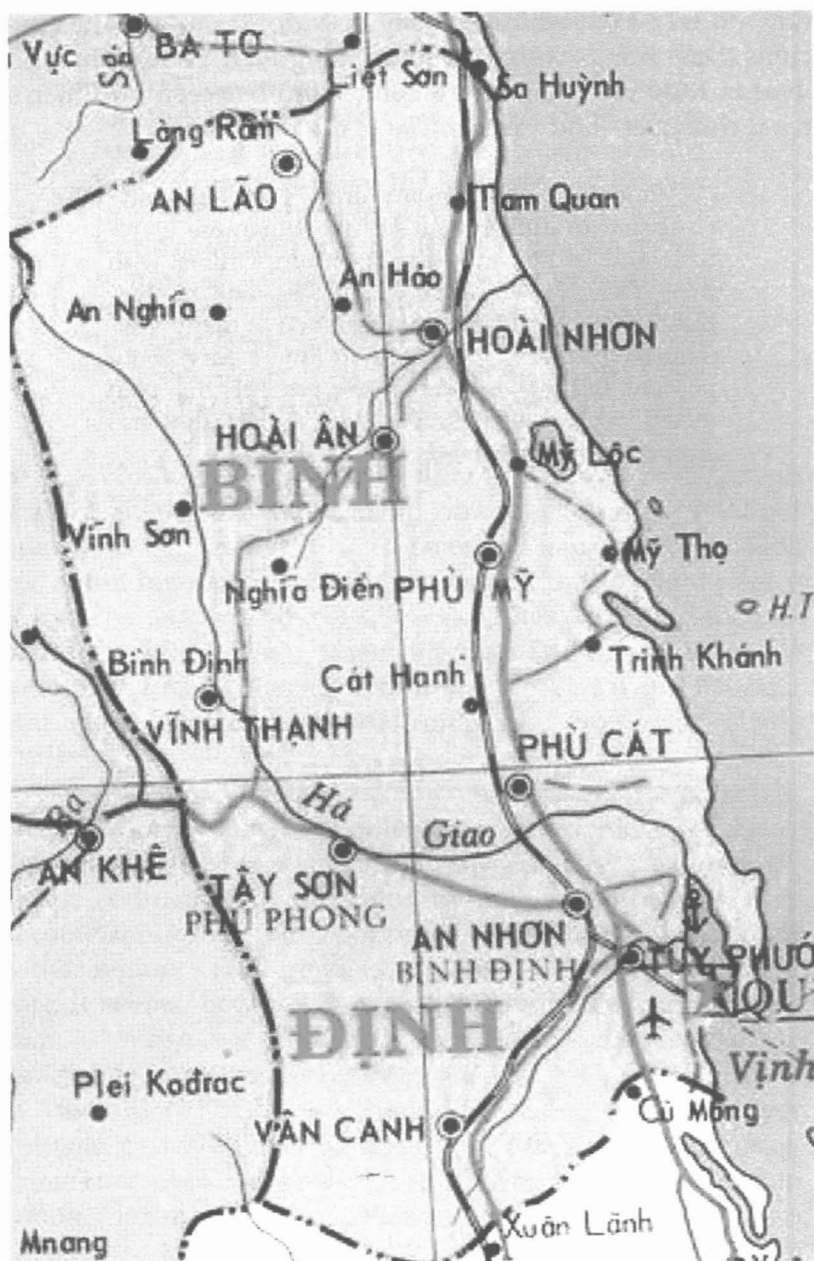
*This afternoon I opened the door and looked out; I didn't see my village anywhere, all I saw was my heart.*⁷⁵

—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.



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

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 Nhơn 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 (1996, 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 Sơn arrived. Here is how Laurence describes the situation of the Kim Sơn 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 Hué, 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 Huê, whom villagers called Uncle Four Wilted Lily because although "Huê" means "Lily" and suggests something beautiful, Uncle Four Huê 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 Bướm 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 Bướm—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 Bướm, 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 Stiek 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 Bướm and Ba Thiên, the leader of the liberation faction in the village who was married to Bướm's older sister. Given Võ Phiến's own political views, it is not surprising that the most unforgivable acts are committed by this trio. Bướm 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 Bướm 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 unequaled. . . . [that] Bróm 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 Tiển, 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 care-less 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” (10).

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. (10–11)

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 a

FOE ATTACKS TOWN ON VIETNAM COAST
 By FOX BUTTERFIELD Special to The New York Times
 New York Times (1857-Carver file; Jan 5, 1972; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2001)
 Pg. 1

FOE ATTACKSTOWN ON VIETNAM COAST

60 Enemy Reported Killed in Assault, Which May Signal New Drive in Binh Dinh

By FOX BUTTERFIELD
 Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Monday, June 5 — North Vietnamese troops attacked a district capital in populous Binh Dinh Province on the central coast yesterday, according to reports from the field.

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 22d 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 Quihon, 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.

Heavy rain and thick clouds, brought in from the South China Sea by a tropical storm, hampered American air strikes in South Vietnam for the fifth day. There were 162 raids by

Continued on Page 11, Column 1

FOE STRIKES TOWN ON CENTRAL COAST

Continued From Page 1, Col. 3

United States fighter-bombers in the South yesterday, the American command said, the lowest since the first week of the Communist offensive in early April.

But American Air Force, Navy and Marine jets flew 250 strikes against North Vietnam, a military spokesman said, about average for the last two weeks.

The United States command said that its warplanes in the North destroyed 16 bridges, 3 oil storage tanks, 16 trucks, 59



The New York Times June 5, 1972
 Bombing in the north (1) went on. Around Hue (2) scattered clashes were reported. The Communists attacked Phoumy (3) and blew up a bridge near the city of Rachgia (4).

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June 5, 1972 *New York Times* article describing the battle of Phù Mỹ (spelled "Phoumy" in this account).

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 Nhơn 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 Sút). 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 đâu], 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, droppings 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. Tu 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 “*É i*” and “A Truly Quiet Place.” *Đỗ*, the main character in “*É i*,” 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. “*Hé ê i i i!*” 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 “*É i*” 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. *Hé'*. . . *é'*. . . . Yes, you can find a *hé'* anywhere. But the *í í*. . . , 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 Vĩ 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 Đổ 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 "dái 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 *dái 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 quỳn) is significant. It is an allusion to a story about a man named Tu Yu (Vietnamese: Đồ 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.