Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME 51

Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 51

David Galens
Project Editor

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *PC* volume.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature,* (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism,* vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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Contents

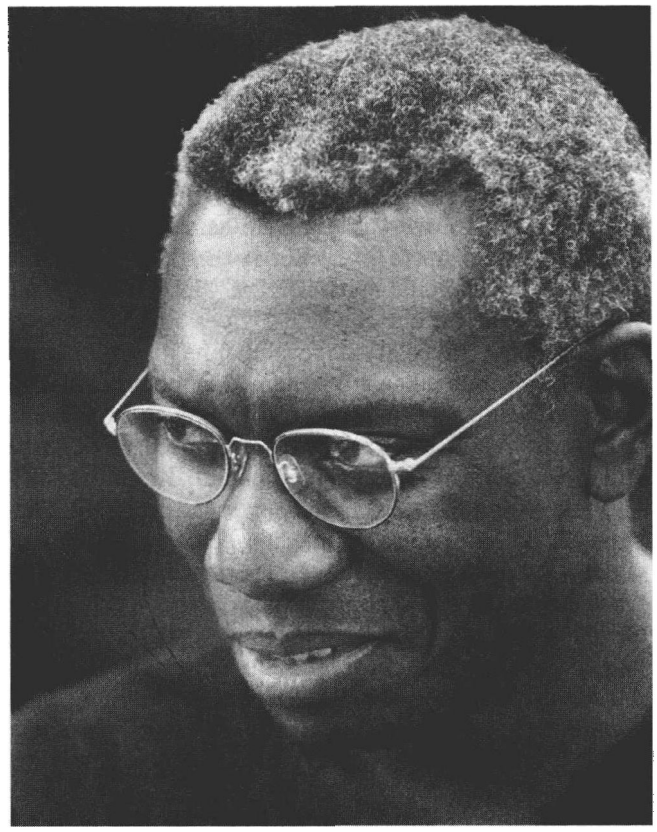
Yusef Komunyakaa
1947-

American poet and author of essays, interviews, and commentaries.

The following entry presents information from 1990 through 2001 on the life and career of Komunyakaa.

INTRODUCTION

Yusef Komunyakaa (pronounced "koh-mun-yah-kuh") gained widespread recognition when he received the 1994 Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his volume *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* (1993). Komunyakaa's style shows the influence of jazz music, Beat poetry, and surrealism. He draws from both his childhood in Louisiana and his experiences in the Vietnam War as the subject matter of his poetry. *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), his volume of poetry about the Vietnam War, has been highly praised both as an expression of the experiences of African-American soldiers in Vietnam and as a work that acknowledges the common humanity shared by white and black soldiers as well as the Vietnamese people. *Magic City* (1992) chronicles Komunyakaa's childhood in Louisiana, addressing the racial tensions and the legacy of slavery in the South, as well as his childhood memories and personal family history.



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Komunyakaa was born on April 29, 1947, in Bogalusa, Louisiana, where his father was a carpenter. In 1965, soon after graduating from high school, Komunyakaa entered the army, serving in Vietnam as editor of the military newspaper *Southern Cross* and as an information specialist. After returning from Vietnam in 1967, Komunyakaa graduated with a B.A. from the University of Colorado in 1975. He subsequently earned two Master's degrees, from Colorado State University, in 1979, and from the University of California at Irvine, in 1980. Komunyakaa has taught English literature, composition, African-American studies, and creative writing in several universities throughout the United States, including University of New Orleans, Colorado State University, University of California at Irvine and at Berkeley, and Indiana University at Bloomington.

Komunyakaa is married to fiction writer Mandy Sayer. He currently holds a position as Humanities Professor of Creative Writing at Princeton University.

MAJOR WORKS

Komunyakaa's poetry is generally divided into two categories, poems focused on his experiences in the Vietnam War and those focused on his childhood in Louisiana. His poems are characterized by short lines, powerful imagery, and vernacular speech patterns. Drawing from both his African-American and his Euro-American cultural heritage, Komunyakaa makes use of an array of intertextual references to literature, music, folk culture, and the mass media. His poetry collections that focus on his childhood and adolescence in Louisiana include *Copacetic* (1984), *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* (1986), and *Magic City*. The subject matter of these poems is drawn from African-American folk culture, jazz music, the legacy of slavery in the

Deep South, and Komunyakaa's personal family history. These poems cover a broad range of subjects, from neighborhood basketball games in "Slam, Dunk, and Hook," to a child's mediation on his parents' fractured marriage in "My Father's Love Letters," to the presence of the Ku Klux Klan in "Knights of the White Camellia and Deacons of Defense." Much of Komunyakaa's poetry in *Copacetic* and *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* is inflected with the rhythms of jazz music. A number of these poems, such as "Copacetic Mingus," include references to such jazz legends as Charles Mingus, Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Thelonius Monk, and Ray Charles. Komunyakaa commented in an interview with Robert Kelly, "For me, the poem doesn't have to have an overt jazz theme as such in order to have a relationship to jazz. But it should embrace the whole improvisational spirit of jazz." He further noted, "jazz has been the one thing that gives some symmetry to my poetry, gives it shape and tonal equilibrium." Many of Komunyakaa's Vietnam War poems are collected in *Dien Cai Dau. Dien Cai Dau* is an expression, meaning "crazy," that the Vietnamese used to describe American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. Komunyakaa's Vietnam War poems are usually narrated from the first-person, and sometimes in the first-person plural "we," which expresses the collective experience of soldiers in the war. His fleeting, concentrated imagery juxtaposes the natural landscape of Vietnam with the brutality of war. These poems chronicle the experiences of an African-American soldier in Vietnam, examining both the unique experiences of African-Americans in the war and the shared humanity of white and black soldiers with the Vietnamese people. "Tu do Street" describes the experience of an African American soldier entering a bar in Vietnam that serves only white soldiers. "Hanoi Hanna" presents the radio monologue of a Vietnamese woman pleading with African-American soldiers to stop fighting for an America that does not represent their interests. In several poems, such as "2527th Birthday of the Buddha" and "Camouflaging the Chimera," Komunyakaa utilizes surrealist literary techniques to explore the psychological terrain of the Vietnam War. As Vincente F. Gotera noted, the surrealism of Komunyakaa's Vietnam War poetry functions to express "the internal psychic state" of the soldier in combat. Other poems in *Dien Cai Dau* express the difficulties of the Vietnam vet upon returning home from war. "At the Screen Door" expresses a returning vet's hesitation to enter his home after the horrors he has experienced in the war. "Facing It" and "The Wall" are set at the Vietnam Veteran's memorial wall in Washington, D.C., and express the feelings of a Vietnam vet upon contemplating the names of those who did not survive the war. Komunyakaa's more recent poetry volumes include collections of both his Louisiana poetry and his Vietnam War poetry. Among these later volumes are *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems, Thieves of Paradise* (1998), *Talking Dirty to the Gods: Poems* (2000), and *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems* (2001).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Komunyakaa has been widely celebrated and critically acclaimed for his striking, original, and well-crafted poetry. Many critics have favorably evaluated his Vietnam War poetry in comparison with other poetry that emerged from the American experience in Vietnam. Vincente F. Gotera commented, "*Dien Cai Dau* is a breathtakingly original work of art because of the believable, down-to-earth language which speaks the thoughts and feelings of authentic characters, filtered through Komunyakaa's atypical vision." Several have observed that Komunyakaa's war poetry offers hope for redemption in the aftermath of war, while painting an unflinching, sometimes-journalistic picture of the brutality and moral quagmire of combat. Critics further praise Komunyakaa's portrayal of a collective African-American experience in Vietnam, as well as in the American South, while broadening his scope to include universal concerns common to humanity.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Dedications and Other Dark Horses: Poems 1977
Lost in the Bonewheel Factory: Poems 1979
Copacetic 1984
I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head 1986
Toys in a Field 1986
Dien Cai Dau 1988
February in Sydney 1989
Magic City 1992
Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems 1993
Thieves of Paradise 1998
Talking Dirty to the Gods: Poems 2000
Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems 2001

Other Major Works

The Jazz Poetry Anthology [editor; with Sascha Feinstein] (poems) 1991
The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology, Volume 2 [editor; with Sascha Feinstein] (poems) 1996
Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries [edited by Radiclani Clytus] (prose) 2000

CRITICISM

Vincente F. Gotera (essay date 1990)

SOURCE: Gotera, Vincente F. "'Depending on the Light': Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau.*" In *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War,* edited by Owen W. Gilman, Jr., and Lorrie Smith, pp. 282-300. New York: Garland Publishing, 1990.

[*In the following essay, Gotera asserts that, unlike much of the poetry that emerged from the Vietnam War, Komunyakaa's poems collected in* Dien Cai Dau *offer some hope of solace and self-renewal for the Vietnam veteran. Gotera further comments on Komunyakaa's use of surrealist technique to express the experiences of American soldiers in the Vietnam War.*]

One of the dominant impulses informing war literature is the documentary urge: the drive to make the horrors, the senselessness of war concrete to the uninitiated. Not surprisingly, in the course of this documentation, the writer often discovers the self, grappling with the realities of war; Jeffrey Walsh has pointed to "uniquely American visions of self-renewal and discovery through the exigencies of warfare, and [how] most of them draw upon the literary reworking of the writer's own experience" (5). Typical examples are Whitman, Dos Passos, cummings, Mailer, Jarrell—writers who were close to the fighting, if not literally combat veterans themselves.

American involvement in Vietnam, however, has fostered a consciousness of war which is radically different from our visions of earlier wars, especially because the Vietnam War has dramatized the moral ambivalence of American military power and the shortcomings of military technology. The use by the military of what writers on Vietnam have called the "jargon stream"—such terms as "pacification," "kill ratio," and "defoliation"—has become a specific challenge to the writer, since this use of semantics is a deliberate obfuscation. In addition, the cultural and geographical remoteness of Vietnam (as brought home by television), the public backlash and national controversy, the rejection of the returning soldier—all these have contributed to what Philip Caputo has labelled the "ethical wilderness" of the Vietnam War. A wilderness in which the soldier-poet is lost.

Traditionally, poetry has been a source of solace to the beleaguered poet. The *locus classicus,* of course, is the elegy; we do not doubt that Shelley, for example, in writing "Adonais," sought and found surcease for his sorrow at Keats' death. The important question here is whether the "self-renewal" to which Walsh points in war literature implies that the Vietnam-veteran poet finds solace in lyric poetry. Since the anthologies of the early 1970s, veteran poets—Receveur, Paquet, Casey, Berry, Ehrhart, Weigl, among others—have been assiduously documenting the war: depicting the strangeness of Vietnam, recording the language of that war, and reporting the alienation of the returning soldier. The optimist would suggest that these poems result not only in personal growth but also in the opportunity for national renewal. In a 1987 essay, however, W. D. Ehrhart (one of the most outspoken veteran poets) writes:

> [O]ne might venture to say that the act of writing these poems—even the worst of them—is an act of cleansing. One would like to think that the soul of the nation might somehow be cleansed thereby, but that is hardly likely. More realistically, one hopes that in writing these poems, the poets might at least have begun to cleanse their own souls of the torment that was and is Vietnam.
>
> ("Soldier-Poets" 265)

Clearly, Ehrhart's language reveals his reluctance to believe that the Vietnam-veteran poet has been consoled by his own lyric impulse and the writing of poetry. I propose that Yusef Komunyakaa's ***Dien Cai Dau,*** through its devotion to a lyric rapaciousness, through its insistence on human connections, offers hope for such consolation.

* * *

Literary critics have cited the difficulty of depicting Vietnam and the war in poetry; Jeffrey Walsh, for example, has echoed John Felstiner in arguing that "poetry of a traditional kind has proved inappropriate to communicate the character of the Vietnam war, its remoteness, its jargonised recapitulations, its seeming imperviousness to aesthetics" (Walsh 204). As the Vietnam War wound down, the first poems to be published by veterans relied on violent imagery coupled with the absurdity of Vietnam in the eyes of youthful Americans. Don Receveur's "night fear" is typical:

> i heard my meatless bones
> clunk together
> saw the ants drink
> from my eyes
> like red ponies
> at brown pools of water
> and the worms in my belly
> moved sluggishly
> delighted.
>
> (*Winning Hearts & Minds* 15)

This poem teeters on the verge of triteness and overstatement, but what rescues it is the projection in the reader's mind of the *actual* experience which

certainly lies behind this poem, prompted by Receveur's insistent concreteness. One critic has noted that in Receveur's work "the war seem[s] actualized, made urgent through its particularity" (Walsh 204).

Even when an early Vietnam-veteran poem is more cerebral, there is still a strong flavor of the unbelievability of Vietnam. A good example is Basil T. Paquet's "They Do Not Go Gentle":

> The half-dead comatose
> Paw the air like cats do when they dream,
> They perform isometrics tirelessly.
> They flail the air with a vengeance
> You know they cannot have.
> After all, their multiplication tables,
> Memories of momma, and half their id
> Lies in some shell hole
> Or plop! splatter! on your jungle boots.
> It must be some atavistic angst
> Of their muscle and bones,
> Some ancient ritual of their sea water self,
> Some blood stream monsoon,
> Some sinew storm that makes
> Their bodies rage on tastelessly
> Without their shattered brains.
>
> (*Winning Hearts & Minds* 3)

Of course, the title is a reference to Dylan Thomas' famous exhortation affirming life and the pursuit of it. In Paquet's Vietnam, however, this primal urge is reduced to the body's momentary life after a shell hits, mere corporeal inertia. Diction here implies an intellectualized rationality: "comatose," "isometrics," "id," "atavistic angst." But the lasting impression is of "multiplication tables, / Memories of Momma" smeared "pop! splatter!"—American intangibles concretized by onomatopoeia. The point is that Paquet, whom Ehrhart has called "[l]iterate without being literary" ("Soldier-Poets" 248), sets up a tension between the quotidian realities of "the world" (everywhere outside Vietnam) with the incredible commonplaces of "the Nam."

Another preoccupation of Vietnam-veteran poetry has been language—both the jargonized as well as the colloquial. Michael Casey, whose collection *Obscenities* won the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1972, "works exclusively with the truncated matter-of-fact speech rhythms [of the] Vietnamese grunt[s]" or infantrymen, as Ehrhart has noted ("Soldier-Poets" 248). Casey's "The LZ Gator Body Collector" is a revelatory example:

> See
> Her back is arched
> Like something's under it
> That's why I thought
> It was booby trapped
> But it's not
> It just must have been
> Over this rock here
> And somebody moved it
> After corpus morta stiffened it
> I didn't know it was
> A woman at first
> I couldn't tell
> But then I grabbed
> Down there
> It's a woman or was
> It's all right
> I didn't mind
> I had gloves on then
>
> (56)

According to Casey's book, the "language is so simple and open, so plausible, that one scarcely notices the artfulness of the compression, the understatement" (xii). Gracefully ensconced within the clipped language of this poem is a parody of romance *and* pornography: "Her back is arched," "stiffened," "I grabbed / Down there"; the neologism "corpus morta" not only replaces "rigor mortis" but also emphasizes the connotations of *body* here. John Felstiner asserts that Casey, in "merely reassuring us that his death encounter was sanitary, . . . lets the war's full insanity come in on us with everything he does not say" (11). Such artful omission is what allows Casey's delimited language, finally, to carry a charged eloquence.

D. C. Berry, whose *saigon cemetery* was also published in 1972, creatively uses the unique military language of the Vietnam War. Casey uses Army slang for plausibility, to make his characters' speech sound genuine. Berry, in contrast, orchestrates language to oppose the "jargon stream" which Walsh suggests "can hide the reality of moral outrage" (206). Felstiner proposes that "Washington's need was to sanitize reality and quarantine the fact from the word—precisely what much poetry avoids" (10); Berry's poetry is an deliberate act against such linguistic conditioning. Note Berry's meticulous attention to language in this untitled poem:

> The way popcorn pops is
> the way punji sticks snap
> into your skin and stab
> pricking urine
> into cardiovascular
> systems and apparatus
> apparently
> unorganizing then demonstrating
> it.
>
> then you die
> either from the spike,
> the p,
> or the

sun gone to grain
expanding

in your eye.

(41)

Berry uses sound adroitly in this poem: the onomatopoeic "pop" and the labial explosion of the plosive consonant "p." And the "p" sounds are not only initial or terminal (as in "snap"), but also medial ("apparatus," "spike," and "expanding"). In fact, Berry is even more clever when he uses the letter "p" separated from the rest of the line by white space rather than the slang "pee" which a poet more concerned with reportage might have used. The "jargon-stream"-like lines—"cardiovascular / systems and apparatus / apparently / unorganizing then demonstrating"—are deflated by the next line, a hard monosyllable, "it." As does Paquet, Berry contrasts "the Nam" and "the world" in this poem through the conflict between militaristic jargon and basic Anglo-Saxon language.

A third focus of this body of poetry has been the veteran's return to America, dramatizing political activism and personal commitment within the poems themselves. W. D. Ehrhart's 1984 volume *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired,* as Lorrie Smith has pointed out, "traces one representative veteran's growth from naiveté to disillusionment, anger, and political activism" (24). The title poem dramatizes the interlacing of Vietnam with myriad political and humanitarian issues:

After the streets fall silent
After the bruises and the tear-gassed eyes are healed
After the consensus has returned
After the memories of Kent and My Lai and Hiroshima
lose their power
and their connections with each other
and the sweaters labeled Made in Taiwan
After the last American dies in Canada
and the last Korean in prison
and the last Indian at Pine Ridge
After the last whale is emptied from the sea
and the last leopard emptied from its skin
and the last drop of blood refined by Exxon
After the last iron door clangs shut
behind the last conscience
and the last loaf of bread is hammered into bullets
and the bullets
scattered among the hungry

What answers will you find
What armor will protect you
when your children ask you
Why?

(*Carrying the Darkness* 97-98)

Again the ubiquitous contrast of America and Vietnam, but here it has come home to roost *in* the home, in the child's question "Why?" Ultimately, Vietnam becomes only one of many fronts for the political activist: American aggression, the environment, animal rights, the depatriation of Native Americans, and more. And the discovery of this range of political issues is both mirrored and complemented by the poet's own recovery of self; "Ehrhart," asserts Smith, "connects two converging continuums: his personal coming of age and the destructive flow of history" (24).

For Bruce Weigl, the commitment is not so much to historical or political concerns as to personal responsibility; the poems in his 1985 collection *The Monkey Wars* chart a private rather than a public landscape. It is this personal testimony, however, that gives these poems their immediacy and, in our inevitable identification and participation, their social and collective force. The book opens with "Amnesia," an unrhymed sonnet whose octave and sestet contrast Vietnam and America:

If there was a world more disturbing than this
Where black clouds bowed down and swallowed you whole
And overgrown tropical plants
Rotted, effervescent in the muggy twilight and monkeys
Screamed something
That came to sound like words to each other
Across the triple-canopy jungle you shared,
You don't remember it.

You tell yourself no and cry a thousand days.
You imagine the crows calling autumn into place
Are your brothers and you could
If only the strength and will were there
Fly up to them to be black
And useful to the wind.

(*Carrying the Darkness* 274-75)

In this poem, Vietnam is depicted concretely but not with explicit violence; instead, a paralyzing ambivalence dramatizes the speaker's wish to forget. But at the same time, there is a drive to remember, to become "useful to the wind," and *The Monkey Wars* is Weigl's heroic attempt to gather "strength and will," in order to resurrect and finally confront Vietnam, that "world more disturbing."

In these six poets, the documentary urge comes to encompass more than mere telling; the last three poems are set in second person, reflecting the polemical bent of much Vietnam-veteran poetry. Using "you" as the voice of a poem, however, also enforces the immediate and personal participation of the audience. Clearly, the implication, especially in a poem such as Weigl's

"Amnesia," is that Vietnam can only be understood and appreciated by the civilian through a direct, if only imagined, taking part. But this device does not enjoin the "self-renewal" of the poet. In Weigl's "Amnesia," the speaker is enervated—he wants to transcend Vietnam, but "strength and will" are only imagined, not actual at the moment. Smith has argued that, in the work of Ehrhart and Weigl, "the lyric imagination utterly fails to ameliorate or transform the memory of Vietnam" (17). I propose that Yusef Komunyakaa's welding of an idiosyncratic ferocity to what we usually envision as "lyric imagination" in ***Dien Cai Dau*** affords the opportunity for such transformation and eventual amelioration.

Dien Cai Dau is Komunyakaa's fourth book of poems. In his earlier three books, he has not included a single poem on Vietnam, because he has been waiting for emotional distance—objective and journalistic-from his 1969-70 Army tour there. George Garrett, in his introduction to Berry's *saigon cemetery,* proposes that "ordinary judgment [of Berry's poems] must be suspended. We are too close, and the wounds and scars, literal and metaphorical, are too fresh" (viii). It is just such a suspension of judgment that Komunyakaa does *not* want; he wishes his work to be tested with the full rigor applied to all serious poetry.

The fact that Komunyakaa has waited almost two decades to publish poems on Vietnam differentiates his work significantly from that of other veteran poets, especially those who published in the early 70s. The difference is not so much that he has achieved a distance from his Vietnam experience but rather that the development of his craft has not been inextricably bound up with Vietnam, as Ehrhart's, for example, has been. Komunyakaa comes to the material with an academic grounding in modernist and contemporary poetics as well as classic surrealism, and his work registers an esthetic advance not only of poetry about the Vietnam War but also of war literature in general.

From his first chapbook, ***Dedications and Other Darkhorses*** (1977), through his most recent book, ***I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head*** (1986), Komunyakaa's forte has been the counterbalancing of seeming oppositions and incongruities. Critics of Surrealism have pointed to "The poet Isidore Ducasse, the 'comte de Lautréamont,' who . . . had provided the classic example in writing of 'the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table'" (Rubin 19), a serendipitous yoking in whose interstices an immanent, wholly startling signification can well. Komunyakaa has inherited this mode of juxtaposition from the Surrealists, specifically through the poet Aimé Cesaire. A typical example is **"2527th Birthday of the Buddha"**:

> When the motorcade rolled to a halt, Quang Duc
> climbed out & sat down in the street.
> He crossed his legs,
> & the other monks & nuns grew around him like petals.
> He challenged the morning sun,
> debating with the air
> he leafed through-visions brought down to earth.
> Could his eyes burn the devil out of men?
> A breath of peppermint oil
> soothed someone's cry. Beyond terror made flesh-
> he burned like a bundle of black joss sticks.
> A high wind that started in California
> fanned flames, turned each blue page,
> leaving only his heart intact.
> Waves of saffron robes bowed to the gasoline can.
>
> (18)

This poem takes as its base a kind of journalistic language, and of course the seed of the piece is the rumor that the heart of a self-immolated monk literally had not burned, a rumor perhaps gleaned from an actual news story. But the poem quickly moves into the contrapuntal surrealistic plane with "the other monks & nuns . . . like petals," setting up a group of images: petals, leaves, and finally pages, reminding us of Holy Writ. (And the phrase "terror made flesh" of course vibrates for Christian readers.) But the Komunyakaa wrinkle here is how the political situation is mystically manifested—American collusion made evident by the "high wind that started in California." The astonishing final image juxtaposes "saffron robes" with "the gasoline can," succinctly summing up the Vietnam War which arises from this volatile situation: "the gasoline can," a harbinger of technology which emblemizes violence and death, becomes a new deity, and all the saffron robes will be ultimately consumed.

Komunyakaa's surrealism varies from that of the other veteran poets because he does not depict Vietnam itself or the Vietnam experience as *literally* surreal, as do many of the other poets. Surrealism has been defined as "the attempt to actualize *le merveilleux,* the wonderland of revelation and dream, and by so doing to permit chance to run rampant in a wasteland of bleak reality" (Gershman 1); in other words, the exploration of the strange, through fortuitous juxtaposition, allows revelation to occur in the midst of the real. Through surrealism, Komunyakaa *discovers*—or perhaps more appropriately, *reveals*—Vietnam and does not only document its apparent surreality for an incredulous audience. **"Camouflaging the Chimera"** enacts this process of revelation:

> We tied branches to our helmets.
> We painted our faces & rifles
> with mud from a riverbank,
>
> blades of grass hung from the pockets
> of our tiger suits. We wove

ourselves into the terrain,
content to be a hummingbird's target.

We hugged grass & leaned
against a breeze off the river,
slowdragging with ghosts

from Saigon to Bangkok,
with women left in doorways
reaching in from America.
We aimed at dark-hearted songbirds.

In our way station of shadows
rock apes tried to blow our cover,
throwing stones at the sunset. Chameleons

crawled our spines, changing from day
to night: green to gold,
gold to black. But we waited
till the moon touched metal,

till something almost broke
inside us. VC struggled
with the hillside, like black silk

wrestling iron through grass.
We weren't there. The river ran
through our bones. Small animals took refuge
against our bodies: we held our breath,

ready to spring the L-shaped
ambush, as a world revolved
under each man's eyelid.

(3-4)

Surrealism in this poem does not function to present Vietnam to the reader as exotica, but rather to underline the existential reality of ambush: the internal psychic state of each combatant. The wish-fulfillment of camouflage involves *becoming* the landscape, abdicating one's memories and anything else which might disrupt the illusion. The angst of the situation, the impending firefight, is focused by "a world revolved / under each man's eyelid," a revamping of the cliché "my life passed before my eyes." Of course, the phrase also refers to "the world" or everything not Vietnam, delineating each soldier's acute realization that he does not *belong* in this place, that his death here would be literally senseless. The dramatic situation of this poem also acts certainly as a signifier for the entire war, and thus the word "Chimera" in the title serves as a political statement.

The poem **"'You and I Are Disappearing'"** (a quote from Björn Håkansson) is a bravura performance highlighting Komunyakaa's technique of juxtaposed images:

The cry I bring down from the hills
belongs to a girl still burning
inside my head. At daybreak
she burns like a piece of paper.
She burns like foxfire
in a thigh-shaped valley.
A skirt of flames
dances around her
at dusk.
We stand with our hands
hanging at our sides,
while she burns
like a sack of dry ice.
She burns like oil on water.
She burns like a cattail torch
dipped in gasoline.
She glows like the fat tip
of a banker's cigar,
silent as quicksilver.
A tiger under a rainbow
at nightfall.
She burns like a shot glass of vodka.
She burns like a field of poppies
at the edge of a rain forest.
She rises like dragonsmoke
to my nostrils.
She burns like a burning bush
driven by a godawful wind.

(17)

In this poem, Komunyakaa is performing "the kind of intellectual wrestling that moves and weaves us through human language," as he told me in an interview. According to Komunyakaa, "language is what can liberate or imprison the human psyche," and this poem dramatizes a speaker who is simultaneously liberated and imprisoned. The speaker here is at a loss to describe this scene fittingly. The charged language grapples with a view that is both unimaginably beautiful and incredibly horrible, all at the same time. The speaker, again and again, tries to find a metaphor that will convey both the beauty and the horror—the dilemma of speaking the Sublime, in Edmund Burke's terms. And the speaker comes enticingly, asymptotically close without finding the ideal phrase. Finally, he simply has to stop. And the final image points a biblical finger: the girl will always burn in the speaker's mind in the same way that the burning bush could have burned forever unconsumed. What really nails this image is the phrase "godawful wind" which puns on "awful God," straight out of the Old Testament, while it resurrects the root meaning full of awe, or more properly here, filling with awe.

"'You and I Are Disappearing'" also demonstrates Komunyakaa's poetic ancestry in English, specifically William Carlos Williams and his use of the image. Just as Komunyakaa has been influenced by the Surrealists, Williams has been influenced by Cubist art; Marjorie Perloff notes that Williams' "*Spring and All* lyrics . . . provide verbal analogues of . . . Cubist fragmentation and superposition of ambiguously located planes" (182). In many of these poems, Williams' "images do not carry symbolic weight; they point to no external sphere of

reality outside themselves," writes Perloff. "Rather, items are related along the axis of contiguity. . . . In a larger sense, the whole book constitutes just such a field of contiguities. Williams' recurrent images—wind, flower, star, white, dark—are perfectly ordinary, but it is their *relationships* that matter" (186-87). If we ignore for a moment that the signified is "she"—a human being—Komunyakaa's images here are similarly ordinary: "a piece of paper," "oil on water," a "cigar," "a shot glass of vodka," "a field of poppies"; others are lexically more interesting but still reasonably innocent: "foxfire," "a sack of dry ice," "a rainbow," "dragon-smoke." What drives this poem is the anaphoric repetition of "she burns"—the accretion of which underlines the intrinsic horror of the poem and, by extension, the war itself. The ultimate focus is on humanity and on humaneness.

Many of the poems in ***Dien Cai Dau*** deal with human response and connection in combat. **"Nude Pictures"** begins at the end, only implying the story which comes before:

> I slapped him a third time.
> The song caught in his throat
> for a second, & the morning
> came back together like after
> a stone has been dropped
> through a man's reflection
> hiding in a river. I slapped him
> again, but he wouldn't stop
>
> laughing. As we searched
> for the squad, he drew us
> to him like a marsh loon
> tied to its half-gone song
> echoing over rice fields
> & through wet elephant grass
> smelling of gunpowder & fear.
> I slapped him once more.
>
> Booby-trapped pages floated
> through dust. His laughter
> broke off into a silence
> early insects touched
> with a tinge of lost music.
> He grabbed my hand & wouldn't
> let go. Lifted by a breeze,
> a face danced in the treetops.
>
> (25)

In **"2527th Birthday of the Buddha,"** the typical Komunyakaa opposition is the documentary vs. the figurative; here the conflict is between nature and human intrusion. The morning shattered by a firefight "came back together like after / a stone has been dropped through a man's reflection / hiding in a river." The "stone," a semaphore for gunfire, intrudes upon the harmony between humans and nature—here, the squad and the morning. Now the hysterical soldier intrudes upon the reassembled morning, "like a marsh loon / tied to its half- gone song" (i.e., nature gone mad).

The final human intrusion occurs in the arresting close: "Lifted by a breeze, / a face danced in the treetops." Literally, of course, this is a wafting scrap of girlie magazine, with the face coincidentally framed. On a figurative level, however, the image finally rescues humanity: the lexical territory of "Lifted" and "danced" argues for an upbeat ending here. Just as the speaker and the sole surviving soldier hold hands ("only connect," as Forster tells us) so too are humans and nature harmoniously reunited, if only metaphorically.

Komunyakaa's devotion to a highly textured language is clearly evident in the poems already discussed. There are arresting turns of phrase throughout ***Dien Cai Dau***: a tunnel rat moves "Through silver / lice, shit, maggots, & vapor of pestilence" (5); the Viet Cong are "lords over loneliness / winding like coralvine through / sandalwood & lotus" (8); conspirators plan a fragging, "their bowed heads / filled with splintered starlight" (16); an armored personnel carrier is "droning like a constellation / of locusts eating through bamboo" (19). For the most part, however, the language of ***Dien Cai Dau*** is a spoken language, in the Wordsworthian sense—it is the extraordinary way in which these everyday words are combined which makes the poems significant.

As Casey does in *Obscenities,* Komunyakaa uses the "grunt's" language and speech for credibility. In **"Hanoi Hannah,"** however, he places the argot in the mouth of the enemy, to demonstrate the ambivalent ambience of Vietnam:

> *Ray Charles!* His voice
> calls from waist-high grass,
> & we duck behind gray sandbags.
> "Hello, Soul Brothers. Yeah,
> Georgia's also on my mind."
> Flares bloom over the trees.
> "Here's Hannah again.
> Let's see if we can't
> light her goddamn fuse
> this time." Artillery
> shells carve a white arc
> against dusk. Her voice rises
> from a hedgerow on our left.
> "It's Saturday night in the States.
> Guess what your woman's doing tonight.
> I think I'll let Tina Turner
> tell you, you homesick GIs."
> Howitzers buck like a herd
> of horses behind concertina.
> "You know you're dead men
> don't you? You're dead
> as King today in Memphis.
> Boys, you're surrounded by
> General Tran Do's division."