Review – Time Is A Mother

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MARTIN DUFFY, SEP 22 2022

Time Is A Mother
By Ocean Vuong
Penguin Press, 2022

This writer believes personal narratives are among the most prescient sources of inspiration in International Relations. While interviewing a Belfast psychiatrist about the "Irish Troubles", my old penchant for quantification came into play. I had the revelation that a sizeable number of Belfast teenagers carry with them the stigmata of PTSD which is not even second-generational, but in some cases third- and even fourth-generational, and acutely debilitating. It struck me that the "troubles" share with the Vietnam War, and kindred conflicts, a potentially transmittable, psychological toxicity. As I absorbed their deceptively friendly chit-chat, tinged with bizarre symptoms of neurosis, I started thinking, if on a random day, a handful of young clients wait to see the doctor, how many remain undiagnosed?

This is a very truncated way to recommend that IR students read Ocean Vuong's new collection of poetry,*Time is a Mother*. Written in the shadow of his dear mother's passing, it is a book juxtaposing extinction and brutal mortality. There is so much in this book which will inspire reflection on International Relations, not least diarising Vietnam's dark legacy, and the PTSD which haunted Vuong's family long after their new life in Connecticut. He also raises intimate subjects of personal awakening and conceptual maturation, which predicably hit our first-year college students in what seems like a wave of desperation. It is usually followed by a brief period of international activism before subsuming into depression. "International Relations is no subject for softies," I remember one of my old professors telling us. He lived to be ninety-eight, scarred by World War Two. He had experienced the "business end" of IR, narrowly evading death in combat. Vuong reminds us that a family's lived trauma protrudes agonisingly unto its very hearthstone.

For these compelling reasons, I encourage IR students to take a dip into a poetry which is going to leave you with the sort of cerebral-trauma, so vital in confronting the primeval brutality of international affairs. Ocean Vuong is in the wars and predisposed to armed conflict of the soul. His poetry cuts deep into the human affinity of consciousness like a steam burn from an angry kettle, seeping and searing into the brain. As in previous fieldwork, Vuong takes us through his journey of grief survival and the lurid resonance of "Nam" for the extended family, who are its emotional casualties, but also its proud survivors. There just is not space here to do justice to the myriad of questions which Vuong's poetry provokes for international affairs students, the theme most fixating our readers. Inside a deceptively cosy Connecticut tapestry, the air whirls with Huey helicopters and flashes with the toxicity of Napalm, in a conflict zone of the heart and soul.

New England's "Dark Side"

Vuong's domesticity travails of New England remind me of Dirk Bogarde's rendition of *A Year in Provence* – a hugely different, nastier France. I spent a semester teaching in Vermont and was ill-prepared for its pharmaceutical anarchy. Peer beneath the lace curtains and painted fences of the seemingly innocuous, and there often lurks unspeakable depravity, and betrayal. Vuong's universe is not a happy place – not for the faint-hearted. That is precisely why I recommend it as shock-testing for people contemplating an international career. It is the veritable 'tonic for the

troops'. It is the propylitic 'reality medicine' that can never be taught in college. It separates the plastic anatomical skeleton from the grisly cadavers of the real morgue. It might make the international civil servant think twice about abandoning his East River desk for the mad house of the field. No training manual can genuinely prepare you for the cacophony of sounds, smells and threats that hit you full on in a peacekeeping zone, like a hurricane inside the head. If you have never thought about dying before, get ready to interrogate that subject every day.

Time is a Mother is penned, as Kadish Morris beautifully describes it, with "audacious energy", as if ritually in vivid bloodstains on sheets honouring his mother's funeral. His words ache unintentionally, like a friend's clumsy cigarette burns against the skin, at the same time horrifying and yet somehow hypnotic. There are freckles of atonement and submission, death acceptance and yearning for rejuvenation. A light flickers at the end of the dark tunnel of grief, loss, abandonment, opioid dependence, and reckless anomie. It would be pre-emptive, if not promiscuously optimistic, to assume it is hope.

Familial Tensions

The tensions in the mother-child bonding in Vuong's latest collection are palpable, at the same time deeply loving and potentially hateful. As an Irishman, I know we will never love anyone as much as one's mother who brought us screaming and blood-soaked into the world. No sweetheart or nuclear family will ever match the painful vulnerability of childhood, so potent its residue carries into adulthood. Grey-haired with all the weight of achievement, you find yourself still a kid in your mother's parlour.

This aesthetic, heart-wrenching collection is peppered with full-blown war, traumatic episodes transported from previous work and then some more; and the casualties pile up by the roadside, poem by poem. It begins gently enough with a sense of animalistic power exhibited in "The Bull". We envision the poet quintessentially strumming air guitar, dishevelled wedding dress akimbo, as seen in "Beautiful Short Loser", or hitting "rock-bottom in my fast car going nowhere" in "The Last Prom Queen in Antarctica". That dress theme is intrinsic to Vuong's vehicular assembly of metaphors, as we re-live both his mom's Vietnamese obsession with "fire-proofing" and the poet's personal wardrobe experimentation. The 1990s war of New England of mass opioids awakes in "Rise & Shine", where he deftly touches on drug addiction, "Scraped the last $8.48 … Enough for one hit". Poems like "American Legend" remind us of a Johnny Cash lyric, "cutting oneself because we cannot feel any pain". Here, a real car-crash injects bizarre family intimacy, physically and emotionally, perhaps a sense of the author's own complex familial estrangement.

However hard he surveys grief, abandonment, trauma and war, his vision, rather than being nihilistic, is resilient, as in "The Last Dinosaur". The characters are not even deceptively ruthless as we follow the poet's comedic stepping of tragedy and release; whispering to Rose, "as they zipped my mother in her body bag" (from "Not Even This"). Vietnam is a familiar terrain for International Relations scholars and somehow, with Vuong, we are caught in a time-warp between a Napalm screaming Phan Thi Kim Phuc on Highway One, and the shocking revelation of Nguyen Van Lem's execution. He gifts us a kaleidoscope of history, securing his work a timeless quality. This will be appreciated in IR, as we surely live as much in the international past as present. In writing, which oftentimes evokes a sense of finality, the poet's words are much more a force of resilience, as if Vuong is willing his mother to live on. That she does – in poetry, which is astonishingly candid, and priceless!

The Poetic Imagination

Emily Dickinson's death-contemplation haunts the poet's imagination – that one doubtful asset that makes us uniquely human – the conceptualization of our mortality. "Death and taxes" as one of Vuong's bit-players from "Old Glory" might have said. Vuong has actually composed in Dickinson's study. Poem by poem, each verse punches the air as slivers of raw humour offer only a momentary respite from the agonising mimetic endurance the poet alchemizes into a virulent half-life. Sometimes we are in the land of the Zombie undead, and Vietnam is never too far away. This old UN worker has seen a lot of death and destruction, and for that reason in the classroom I feel we ought to issue our students a good old holler of a health alert. IR is a painful subject, full of fragmented peace, crimes against humanity, the loss of innocence, and corpses dumped in the ditch of a municipality that is suddenly a war

zone. Just as they haunted us from Vietnam, they are now back, alive or dead on our screens from Ukraine.

Our students typically fancy careers with large international organisations or smaller, cosy well-meaning NGOs, and I honestly worry we give them no preparation at all for the shockwaves of a less than humanitarian front. Let Ocean Vuong's powerful wordplay be a warning to you about international events, real people, horrific death, and boundless grief that we cannot control. At times he seems best friends with a Yeatsian image of *A Terrible Beauty is Born* as he percolates the finest poetry moves of his genre, in a sojourn dance. It is a terrain splattered with the metaphors and corpses of the *Dead Poets Society*, and betwixt grief and endurance, this work is also a loving commemoration and celebration of his late mother. Vuong tells us, "The only place I can control is the page", but there is a volatility to this poetry which is the opposite of control. "Time is a mother fucker … and life can be a son of a bitch"; there is a contemplation of death which is very natural given the sudden loss in succession of grandmother, uncle, mother and so many lovers and friends. He returns to the toxic masculinity which scarred his childhood, and that sense of temporality is enhanced by his mother's clock factory job, just as Vuong confronts the irony of his uncle's suicide, "Can you believe my uncle worked at the Colt factory for fifteen years only to use a belt at the end?" (from "Beautiful Short Loser").

The poet's Vietnamese heritage shields like Teflon, as he searches successfully to rescue an ointment from the brutal pain of real life. All days are a battlefield of the mind, and these twenty-seven poems reckon frankness with the perennial themes of loss and impermanence. Vuong is a brutally honest poet – even his romance exudes ethereal, conjugal indignities by the bundle. However, hints at a Monty Pythonesque "bright side of life" ending in "Snow Theory" refresh us, as he ponders, "How else do we return to ourselves but to Fold … The page so it points to the good part". And yet he never forgets "Another country burning on TV", or as in "Beautiful Short Loser" he confesses, "I imagine Van Gogh singing Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' into his cut ear and feeling peace". And yet as he also concedes, "inside my head the war is everywhere", and somehow in "Old Glory" he conjures up, "It was like Nam down there". In "Dear Sara", "the true soldier" prepares us for the horrors of "The Last Dinosaur": "Hospice in flames … As my relatives melted". While in "The Last Prom Queen in Antarctica" he concedes, "I too am ready for war".

The Other America

We also see the inequality of modern America from the perspective of the immigrant where we get the sarcastic attribution, "Everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American letters, turns to gold … Our sorrow Midas touched. Napalm with a rainbow afterglow" (from "Not Even This"). As Vuong shows it in the search for normality, "It's been proven difficult to dance to machine-gun fire … Still, my people made a rhythm this way … My people, so still in the photographs as corpses … My failure was that I got used to it. I looked at us mangled under the Time photographer's shadow, and stopped thinking, get up, get up" (from "Not Even This"). It is an intensely militarized lexicon and yet very delicate.

With echoes again of Emily Dickinson, he reminds us, "Lest we forget, a morgue is also a community centre" (from "Not Even This") while in "Nothing" he introduces themes of World War Two and holocaust. In "Künstlerroman", "The tanks roll out of Iraq, the women backing away from their dead, rags over their mouths" and he feels "Almost like a soldier with a missing ear". In "Tell Me Something Good", the poet is "Standing in the minefield again", while in "Almost Human" he summons "more assault rifles. Did I tell you I come from a people of sculptors whose masterpiece was rubble". In "Dear Rose" he evokes maternal love, "I know Ma you can't read … Napalm fallen on your … Schoolhouse at six". Here too we get a sense of the social ostracization of the émigré – banished, yet only begrudgingly accepted next door down:

Your father was a white soldier

I had amber hair you said they called me traitor called me ghost

Girl, they smeared my face with cow shit

At the market to make me brown …

To be the only one hated, the only one the white enemy of your own country

Conclusions

Ocean Vuong is generous to his hosts in not dwelling on the insults and overt discrimination he and his family experienced in the USA. His dear mother knew virtually no English, but her soothing manner with customers became legendary. This writer (happily) serving the UN, has been at times called “Laowai” (in Vietnam), “Gweilo,” (in Hong Kong), “Farang,” (in Thailand and the former Siam Kingdom) and “Matt Salleh” (in Malaysia)? In China we sometimes got epithets far worse, like “Yang guizi” (literally, western devils) despite or because of our blue helmet. From Rwanda to Tigray, I have always tried my best to serve, and not make things worse, something which humanitarian first-responders are quite capable of doing. Vuong (perhaps) unwittingly crafts a highly weaponized vocabulary to describe his own idiosyncratic ‘War of the Worlds’. The flotilla of images crystallizing, moment by moment, poem by poem, seems to have been drenched from the Anthropocene. Students of International Relations will marvel at the enduring, poisonous legacy of the Vietnam war in his narratives, not unlike the PTSD-smitten teenagers of Belfast. Read this volume with care, and take it on your first expedition to the aid front. There you will abruptly find humanity fiendishly scarce. You will soon abandon Training 101 and concentrate on the far more important tasks of the aid worker, instinctively helping and hatching into a decent human being. This poetry collection will not be a comfort in the emotional trenches, but it will encourage a reality-check. Ocean Vuong offers us all an emotion incarnate which is as viable in the war-zones of domesticity as in any calamitic, or indeed contemporary, international conflict.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.