

ENTROPY IN *MEDITATIONS IN GREEN*

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Rich in layers of meaning and skillfully constructed, *Meditations in Green* is possibly the most complete novel to come out of the Vietnam War. Although the Vietnam experience is at the core of the novel, the work, both in setting and in significance extends well beyond the physical limits of its Asian setting, moving to encompass American life in the 1980's. The War, however, provides the initial sparkle, the central metaphor from which everything else radiates.

In *Meditations in Green*, two interwoven narratives recount the experiences, both in Vietnam and back in America, of Griffin, an «image interpreter» whose duty in Vietnam is to read out film to find enemy positions and supply routes. Chapters dealing with Griffin's life in America alternate with those that are set in Vietnam. This is done in such a way that what happens in the latter set of chapters illuminates the meaning of the events that take place in the former ones, those set in America. Given this organization of the novel, we cannot speak of a linear development in the narrated action. But, as the work progresses, it becomes evident that in the two parallel narratives there *is*, indeed, a development that is both chronological and internal. Life in Vietnam becomes more and more chaotic, disorganized and meaningless, until the actions of the characters border the grotesque and life on the military base, the central setting of that part of the narrative, becomes farcical and absurd. We notice that the mind of the protagonist, through which the entire happening is viewed, undergoes a process of desintegration which ties in with and culminates with the base being overridden and presumably destroyed by enemy forces.

The second narrative (or the first one since a chapter dealing with it opens the novel), which portrays Griffin's life in the United States, equally shows a chronological development and an internal one in which the protagonist advances along a path of progressive physical and psychological isolation. Only two people penetrate that isolation. One is a young social worker Griffin befriends. The second is Trips, a friend from Vietnam, constantly on drugs and fairly deranged, who is engaged in a quest for the sergeant who ordered his dog killed in Vietnam. Like

the narrative dealing with his experiences in Vietnam, this second one ends in a scene of violence and bloodshed. Here, Griffin's attempted and almost achieved isolation is shattered by the intrusion of life in the form of Trips.

A third element that makes up the structure of the novel is a series of fifteen «meditations in green», short, poem-like meditations on aspects of the vegetable world. These meditations add to the already rich complexity of the novel and they appear in both of the narrative strands. Stephen Wright himself has said: «the big struggle was how to give the book any coherence at all. Then the plant imagery came to me, and I saw how it related to the jungles, to the herbicide mission and also to the dope. It seemed to be the kind of thing that pulled the whole experience together...»¹. Since I shall be addressing the question of the plant imagery throughout this paper, it should suffice now to point out that Wright's words evidence to what extent the Vietnam episodes are at the root of his novel. The use of plant imagery not only gives *Meditations in Green* unity and coherence, but is, I believe, the clue to its deepest and furthest meaning.

What serves as the linking element among the disparate geographical and temporal material of the novel is a vision of the world in which the operation of entropy is visible at all levels. Images of decay and decline, of chaos and death, permeate *Meditations in Green*, and there is in it a relentless march towards violent destruction which the protagonist unsuccessfully tries to counteract in ways that only add to the process of entropy.

Even though the term «entropy» is a crucial one in the analysis of many contemporary American novels, it might be useful, at this point, to give a dictionary definition of it, for absolute clarity. «Entropy», then, is:

The irreversible tendency of a system, including the universe, toward increasing disorder and inertness; also the final state predictable from this tendency.

Tony Tanner takes this definition, in its broadest sense, to mean «the increasing disorder of energy moving at random within a closed system, finally arriving at total inertia... (the term) seems particularly appropriate to those works which foretell the doom of a present civilization or society»². Such words are particularly illuminating when applied to an analysis of the universe as it appears in *Meditations in Green*. «Disorder of energy» and «inertia» are, of course, the key elements in the above definition, and, although they are opposed to one another, they are also complementary, and this is crucial to an understanding of the process of entropy. In turn, these two elements of entropy pair up with two concepts that will be vital in this discussion of the work. They are «fluidity» and «control», again antagonistic and complementary. And, at the root of any entropic process is the concept of energy, but a random energy, which as the *American Standard College Dictionary* says under the heading for «Entropy» is «unavailable for conversion into work».

¹ William Goldstein, «Three Splendid First Novels Examine the Vietnam War»; *Publisher's Weekly*, October 21, 1983, Vol. 224, p. 39.

² Tony Tanner, *City of Words*. Harper and Row: New York, 1971, p. 142.

Since *Meditations in Green* has as its central experience that of the Vietnam War, it might be useful to start by relating the War to the meaning of the novel. The war portrayed in the work is that part of it that ran between 1969 and 1970. As it was experienced by the author. Those were the years of the winding down of the conflict, when a sense of aimlessness pervaded the mind of the soldiers. In Stephen Wright's words, «We thought, no matter what you did or had accomplished, what did it matter in the end?»³. But, the fact is that what is taking place is a massive release of power, aimed at the destruction of everything animate. Griffin's task is the reading of aerial photographs, after the forest has been defoliated. He marks the spots that will be the target of subsequent bombings. Images of destructive machines naturally dominate the narrative that takes place in Vietnam: the ubiquitous airplane, the helicopter, the guns and the rockets. It is certainly an enormous, accelerating release of nonconstructive power that could be interpreted in the context of the novel as the motor force of the entropic process. Least we be lulled into believing that his destructive power is restricted to Vietnam and the War, Wright will make it abundantly clear that it also dominates civilian life. Besides the view given on modern urban life, to be discussed later, he explicitly refers to it in a dialogue between Kraft, the intelligence officer, and a young soldier, eager to kill, who wants a job with the C.I.A. so as to be able to continue killing, Kraft asks:

- «Why not stay in the army?»
- «The war ain't gonna last forever».
- «Kraft chuckled, —«But the civilian killing never ends, right?»⁴

In fact, the two final chapters of the novel show the culmination of the release of destructive energy. While one of them takes place in Southeast Asia, the other is set in an American city. Both worlds are thus shown as permeated by the same destructive energy that moves the entropic process, manifested in the form of random, uncontrolled violence. The young soldier simply wants to kill, and Griffin makes clear that the War makes no sense to him, and what is more, that such a lack of sense does not matter any more. This is clear when the protagonist stops Mueller's explanation of the historical reasons that led to the conflict:

But why torture yourself? I mean, we're already here. Ferreting out obscure facts ain't gonna help us now, because this whole grand pageant of idiocy simply condenses down to you and me trying to make it through another day. (129)

At the level of the narrative dealing with city life, Trips, speaking of his proposed murder of sergeant Austin, says:

This will be a modern event without apparent motive, cause or origin... Millard R. Austin, U.S. Army retired, victim of random urban crime. (116)

³ Goldstein, p. 39.

⁴ Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green*. Scribner's: New York, 1983, p. 54. (All further references to this work appear in the text).

The question of accelerating power that in many cases manifests itself in instance of random violence, leads us to the consideration of another aspect of the modern American novel, closely connected with the entropic process. It is the all important problem of fluidity and control, antagonistic concepts that present as they are in *Meditations in Green*, provide the novel with a tension that is crucial to the understanding of the process of entropy. Tony Tanner, in the work already quoted, notes how the questions of fluidity and fixity are all important for the modern American writer. It is really a question that goes all the way back to the Transcendentalists, but here we will limit our study of it to the contemporary American novel and more explicitly to *Meditations in Green*. The problem is that, as Tanner says, the American writer knows that «there can be no identity without contour», but contour implies the risk of rigidity and eventually «rigor mortis». On the other hand, its opposite, fluidity, may result in the loss of identity.

Therefore, the American writer moves between these two concepts: the non-identity of pure fluidity and the risk of fixity involved in the application of control⁵. The problem is that for the modern American writer both fluidity and fixity imply entropy, fluidity because of the possible loss of identity and distinctiveness, and its opposite, fixity, because of its outcome, a deadly patterning of life.

Meditations in Green is in fact dominated by the concern with these opposite and antagonistic, but equally destructive possibilities. If the entropic process lies at the root of the view of the universe presented in the novel, fluidity and control are the two opposite but equally active forces of that process. Everything else in the work moves around these ideas: the plot, the settings, the imagery, one by one will be analyzed under this light. Tanner, in words that are perfectly applicable to *Meditations in Green*, sees as the central concern for the American hero: «can he find a freedom which is not a jelly and can he establish an identity which is not a prison?»⁶

In *Meditations in Green* images of fluidity, of the blurring of contours, of a universe in a constant state of movement, are counterpointed by others that evidence a desire for and are an effort to achieve stability. The plant imagery is superbly used to express either state and Wright opposes the double settings of the two narratives to underline the two opposite states of fluidity and fixity. The characters in the novel spend most of their time on drugs, a state in which, in Griffin's words «the imagery has become self-generating. The mind's gone organic. There is no control». (145) In the city, «the day couldn't really begin until the light had died and all the edges were gone... What mattered was rapid movement between points, traversing vast distances, intersecting possibilities». (184) Here is a universe in which the pulsations of life are felt in everything. It is one in which images of chaos and of organicism gone berserk become bountiful, menacing and voracious. Lights vibrate, walls throb, inanimate objects change shape and the jungle is alive, omnivorous and terrifying. At one point, Griffin tells his psychiatrist: «everything's fuzzy. Everything looks like there's mold growing on it». (240) And, in another instance, he affirms that «there was rot under everything». (224)

⁵ Tanner, pp. 17-18.

⁶ Tanner, p. 19.

Griffin tries to counteract this disintegrating process by seeking form at all costs. Two images that appear through the novel combine the element of formlessness/form and they are expressed through the device of film making. Griffin's task in Vietnam was, as we have said, the interpretation of aerial photography. Wright himself says of this task which he also performed during his tour, how he read the film and «... then you'd feed the stuff into a computer and we didn't know what happened to it»⁷. Griffin is in the same situation. He has no control over the outcome of what he does in his little office. Hours are spent going over miles of apparently senseless photographs through which runs the clear shape of the Ho-Chi-Minh trail. The second image, also related to film making and its connotations of fixidity/fluidity, is that of Wendell, the deranged photographer who is making a movie of the American experience in Vietnam. Griffin watches parts of it, and in words that are also a commentary on the war, he complains: «I don't know, maybe it's me, but I couldn't make any sense out of it at all. I mean, there is no beginning, no middle, no end, there's no coherence...». (266) Wendell, however, «photographed indiscriminately, confident that form, like invisible writing exposed to a flame, would reveal itself beneath the heat of his talent». (164) Griffin will seek form in a more active way, trying to achieve the opposite but equally destructive state: the stillness of vegetable and eventually of *mineral* life.

Stephen Wright masterfully uses the setting in which the action of the novel takes place to express the two antagonistic principles of fixity and fluidity and his vision of a world in the throes of entropy. As Tony Tanner has said of Pynchon's *V*, in *Meditations in Green* we can say that «instead of the characters living in their environment, environment lives *through* the characters, who thereby tend to become figures illustrating a process»⁸. In almost expressionistic fashion, the environment in the novel is distorted by the mind through which we perceive it, while the environment itself, caught in the process of entropy, dwarfs and dominates the character.

There are, as we have said, two narratives in *Meditations in Green*. In turn, they are developed in four settings that work in pairs to symbolize the concepts of fluidity/fixity, although occasionally the boundaries between the two are not strictly established. The war narrative takes place inside the base perimeter with occasional incursions into the surrounding jungle, while the second narrative takes place mostly in Griffin's apartment with occasional exits into the city. Basically, jungle and city will represent fluidity, while the perimeter and the apartment are the escape from that fluidity into a *relative* control. But, especially in the case of the perimeter, fixity and control are not absolute. And, of course, all through the novel run the «meditations in green», the efforts made by Griffin to establish some kind of control over his life and universe by concentrating on the characteristics of vegetable life.

At a first glance the military base would seem the epitome of fixity, limited, enclosed and isolated as it is. Griffin describes it and his feeling in the following words:

⁷ Goldstein, p. 39.

⁸ Tanner, p. 158.

The entire area occupied by the 1069 Military Intelligence Unit was no larger than one fair size city block. Griffin hadn't set foot outside this area except to visit the PX, a dull warehouse well within the protective confines of the base... This must be what a convict feels, he imagined, with his cell, his daily work space, the shuffle to chow and back again, the slow turns around a sandy yard, beyond the wire and guard towers, the hostile population that kept you locked in... (250-51)

The feeling is not one of security, but rather of claustrophobia, of isolation, not voluntary but imposed by the hostile population. It is a picture of almost death in the rigid monotony of the daily tasks. But it *is* contour, fixity, the alternative to the jungle.

And yet a sense of instability also permeates this little enclosed world. Images of decay abound, both at the physical and the moral/psychological levels. An image which reappears several times is that of the decrepit sign outside the orderly room: «The wind flew and the sign creaked back and forth, creak, creak, in the damp wind!» (42) No one had touched or painted that sign for ages, until a new captain appears and futilely attempts to put order into the collapsing base, by painting the sign. The army is pictured in a state of decay; as the narrator says «Erosion was general. The war had gone on too long, a joke without a punch line. Da Nang resembled a hippie ghetto». (91) Racial tensions abound, officers are fraged and orders ignored; it is of course the war Stephen Wright has experienced and which he has described in the following words:

I was there at the tag end of the Vietnam War, or at a time when all you could see was army in decline, an army wondering how it was going to get out. Dope grew to epidemic proportions at the time, friction between blacks and whites became extreme... This was a different war from what people saw early on⁹.

In *Meditations in Green* Wright has conveyed the absurdity of war through expressionism and black humor, describing the world as seen through the drugged eyes of the characters. Eventually, even the apparently fixed world of the base becomes unreal, too absurd to be believed. Trips, contemplating their isolated, American made world surrounded by jungle, muses:

It is all a grotesque hoax..., concocted for economic purposes. There is no war, there is no Vietnam. We're sitting inside a secret sound stage somewhere in southern Arizona. (31)

Trip stresses the artificiality of their world, a world whose symbol may be the bulletin board «a monstrous collage of news clippings, paperback book covers, army manual pages, C-ration boxes, record albums, letters, photographs and food labels from cans and boxes sent from home». (120) That is, all the debris from our civilization, in its normal, chaotic form, opposed to the regimented life of the base where the men lose touch with reality. The soldiers go to the PX, not even to buy, only to touch «as if these various goods and appliances were the last

⁹ Goldstein, p. 39.

relics of a distant age of faith, whose remaining magic, dim and uncertain, lingered about the few surviving objects of its worship. (124)

Of course, one way to escape the rigidity of routine is through drugs, but even Griffin is aware of the danger that poses, of the need for some kind of restraint, symbolized by the archetypal image of routine and regimentation: the uniform. After one for the dope smoking sessions, «his self seemed to sit easier inside his body, his body to fit more comfortably inside the uniform as though certain restraints had been lifted, certain straps loosened. Sometimes now he even forgot there was a uniform, although those rare occasions still managed to frighten him; he preferred a more orderly madness....». (167)

Although the base implies rigidity, unreality in its detachment from life, and in spite of the fact that it is almost the perfect example of the claustrophobic «closed system» in which the entropic process takes place, the alternative is terrifying. Griffin is dimly aware of it as evidenced in the words quoted above. The possibility of stepping out of the system, of the base, entails horrible dangers.

The perimeter, the artificial, organized world created by man (one that becomes more and more chaotic and disorganized, as the novel advances) is surrounded by a fluid, menacing universe: the jungle. The soldiers inside the base see the jungle as something living, encroaching on them. It is nature gone berserk, full of hostile energies, ready to swallow and obliterate the men. Examples of this view of nature as an invading, hostile force abound in the work. One of the pilots, to cite a case, tells Griffin about the trees:

... they aren't dumb, despite what you might think, they're clever enough to take only an inch or two at a time. The movement is slow but inexorable, irresistible, maybe finally unstoppable. ... and one day we'll look up and there they'll be, branches reaching in, jamming our M-60's, curling around our waists. (132)

Claypool, examining the tree line remarks: «It looked as if it never slept. Behind his glasses the jungle looked sinister and alive. A florist's nightmare. (154)

When Griffin has a vision of what will become of the military base once the Americans are gone, what comes to his mind is an image of the chaotic, menacing forces of the universe in the form of vegetation, taking over the little order man ever tried to impose:

There is growth everywhere. Plants have taken over the compound. Elephant grass in the motor pool. Plantain in the mess hall. Lotus in the latrine. Shapes are losing outline, character. ... the loss of geometry. Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. (146)

This vision explicitly conveys fear of the organic forces of nature at work, destroying control, form, identity. And yet there seems to be in the novel the acceptance of that world as one where, in fluidity, choices can at least be made. It is for that reason that Griffin volunteers for a dangerous mission in the jungle, outside the stifling, deadly rigidity of the base. As the narrator tells us:

He wanted to experience some portion of this madness as his own, not as accident or bad luck or whim of his superiors, but as choice, freely made. The consequences freely accepted... (275)

But, the plunging into the jungle proves to be a terrifying psychological, as well as a physical, experience for Griffin. The tropical forest is alive, devouring entity, one that threatens the individual's self with total dissolution, absorption of the self. Wright tells us:

The bush was a stifling enclosure... Collapse and regeneration occurred at the same moment. Buckling walls and decaying furniture were repaired automatically here in the home of the future where matter itself was perpetually pregnant... He realized that were he to die in here among these botanical springs and gears, a green machine larger and more efficient than any human bureaucracy or mechanical invention would promptly initiate the indifferent process of converting flesh and dreams into plant food. (277)

Just as in the descriptions of the man-made world where images of nature appear, the jungle is here described with the terminology of the machines. The suggestion is given that neither world can really be totally isolated from the other.

Griffin's solution to the devouring power of the tropical forest is its destruction through man-made machinery. He concludes that «the whole forest should have been sprayed long ago, hosed down, drenched in orange, leaves blackened, branches denuded, undergrowth dried into brittle paper». (278) Destruction of one kind counteracted with destruction of another. There seems to be no solution to the destructive process in the war narrative that is *Meditations in Green*. The man-made world of the base, orderly but rigid, is claustrophobic and deadly: rules, orderly but rigid that stifle the self and are opposed through the escape provided by drugs, through insubordination, and violence. The alternative is the fluid world of the jungle, where there is no control but where the self is equally threatened by a devouring nature. The jungle encroaches on the base, and the characters know that its forces will win out. Almost at the end of the Vietnam narrative, when Griffin is on the verge of psychological collapse, he is put on guard duty and experiences an almost paranoid vision in which «he could feel the jungle, huge and silent, move right up to the wire and lean its warm, dark presence against his skin». (298) As control and order are fast cracking up within the base, the jungle, like a huge, devouring animal, approaches and awaits its chance. Eventually the base is overrun by Sappers and practically destroyed: in this narrative there seems to be no possibility of escape from the entropic process.

In the second narrative the entropic process is more clearly expressed and the two worlds of rigidity/fluidity, represented respectively by Griffin's apartment and the city outside, more clearly separated. In a way, they are similar in their meaning to the two worlds in Pynchon's short story «Entropy». But, in *Meditations in Green* we follow the progressively isolating process undertaken by Griffin in his effort to impose order away from the chaos of life, of gaining control over the disorder of his mind. He more and more retreats into his apartment and into his mind, vainly trying to fend off the encroachment of life as represented by Trips.

The city is the urban equivalent of the jungle in the war narrative. It surrounds Griffin's apartment, the key setting of this narrative, from which the hero ventures forth to exercise his wounded leg and to mingle «anonymously with the resi-

dents of the say world». (4) The urban landscape of *Meditations in Green* is in a state of decay and chaos, populated by anonymous, scurrying characters, a maze of trash cans, dilapidated buildings and throbbing lights through which Griffin briefly wanders, mostly at night. At times, our protagonist goes out into the city, seeking in this fluidity an escape from the oppression of his apartment. He tells us:

I never went out before dusk. The day couldn't really begin until the light had died and all the edges were gone. (184)

In a car, rolling along the interstate, we are told that: «Destination was unimportant. What mattered was rapid movement». (184) Griffin achieves a symbiosis with the surrounding world, a world of machines, concrete and man-made noise.

The tires, working the road outside, pick up a rhythm from the radio, drum a rhythm onto the pavement, roll a rhythm through the body, lock a rhythm into the wheels of the head, and ba,! blood explodes in the piston chambers, axles rotate along the spine, gears mesh, transmission achieved. Interstate consciousness. (185)

He is driving «swift and loose», on «interstate possibilities», crossing boundaries. Described in terms of modern, urban life in a man-made world, what Griffin is experiencing amounts to a contemporary version of the Transcendental experience with its almost total annihilation of the self.

Even in this urban landscape, plant imagery and the vegetable world appear occasionally. The city lights are referred to as «flora» and Griffin drives «the petrified coils of the interstate». (184) One of his most meaningful experiences takes place in the Botanical Gardens, where he hides in the middle of the foliage, and there, among a pulsating greenery, he tells us:

I could feel myself slowly emptying, the rushes, the bubbles, the shakes, until I was as blank as a stone Buddha, weather stained, liana lassoed, sinking into the jungle depths of some forgotten temple. The void at the heart of fertility. (19)

It is interesting to note the existence of this isolated patch of nature in the middle of the city where Griffin again lets himself melt into a consciousness outside his own self. What Griffin is trying to do is to escape from his memories, but as he says on emerging from the above experience: «the interludes in my consciousness were intolerably brief». (2) Since the letting go of the self, the melting with fluidity, will not work, he will try another way. Griffin's apartment comes eventually to symbolize the control he is trying to impose over his mind and his life. A mirror of his consciousness, they undergo parallel developments. The apartment is of course the epitome of the closed system in which the entropic process takes place, and it is in that Griffin's progressive process of isolation takes place. He sees it at the beginning as the ideal escape from the city, but its first view is terrifying, a scene of chaos and destruction, a mirror of Griffin's mind. From the initial sentence, «In the middle of the floor stood a cairn of cascading rubbish, monumental in size and odor». (71), the description of a mad landscape of filth, graffiti and human debris runs on for two pages. Here, Griffin locks the door, unplugs the telephone and begins a progressive process of isolation that would

end in eventual deshumanization. He paints the walls white and «on sunny afternoons, it was like living inside a cloud, wandering lonely with angels and harps. (73) He is away from life. At the beginning, after his return from Vietnam, «there were periods when things (lampshades, door knobs, bathroom mirrors) began to move with unusual velocity». (184)

At this stage, Griffin undergoes therapy under the direction of Arden, who follows a peculiar method of treatment. The narrator informs the reader that «Each sufferer was given a personal flower or flower image to concentrate upon, these images selected to coincide with selected traits». (87)

The «meditations in green» scattered between the chapters are the reflections of Griffin's therapy. It is, of course, a way to achieve control over a mind «gone organic», but no solution to the entropic, desintegrating process, since they imply a deshumanization which is equally deadly.

But, this process of deshumanization is no simple one. Griffin complains to his friend Huey about the tensions that his flight provoke. «My botanical life has become a shade unruly. Things grow wheter I want them or not. I try to pretend not to notice. They keep growing... Motley faces floating off the wall, broad green fingers reaching out...». (180-81) At the beginning of his therapy, the word «garden» conveys to him images of the carnivorous hothouse jungle in *Suddenly Last Summer*, until eventually he manages to tame vegetation, to control it. He isolates himself completely, and, in an image almost identical to that of Pynchon's «Entropy», he turns his apartment into a hothouse. He fills it with boxes in which plants grow and, as he says, «I rarely left the room anymore. Tha plants required attention, I required attention». (311) The dehumanizing process has progressed to such an extent that Griffin has practically become a plant. His identification with his flowers is evident in the above quotation from the text, but he adds: «I would see myself stripped of skin, lying in a box of my own, swollen root burrowing into the ground. Blossoming all over». (311) The protagonist has passed from feeling as if he were «having a meltdown». A state in which «everything is frizzy» (240), and where, his identity lost, his name down to a *G*, this equally destructive, entropic situation. But Griffin does not stop here. Like the girl in Pynchon's *V*, he yearns to become a rock, the ultimate stage in fixity and in the life of the universe. Griffin sings the advantages of being a rock, the praise of a mineral state versus even vegetable life.

Mass. Density. Permanence... Termination. Rock. No loss of focus there.
...Maybe plants are to creepy, swaying between worlds, mind/no mind... Now,
a rock's something that has weathered the crisis. A rock's a survivor... No growth,
no decay, no streaming fluids. (264)

A rock is, of course, death. This is the ultimate, not quite achieved state of the hero in the second narrative: stillness, control, rigidity, rigor mortis. Locked in his apartment, Griffin is fast becoming dehumanized, the entropic process achieving culmination.

As a contrast, in the war narrative, a loss of shape, of control, overcomes both the setting of the narrative (the base) and Griffin's mind. While strange things begin to happen at the base, Griffin, on guard duty, experiences a curious yearning:

... to unwrap, to go natural, you could feel the adhesive coming loose in the humidity... the exhilarating fear of how easy it would be simply to keep on, past the regs, across the laws, over the code, boundaries bursting like ribbon...». (238)

Ironically, just when Major Holly has achieved his vision of having the base spruced up and under (apparent) control, it is overrun by the enemy. The scene is nightmarish and, like the rest of the novel, superbly written. Griffin, wounded, is sent home.

In the second narrative, life bursts into Griffin's isolation in the form of Trips, the deranged fellow veteran who spends his time chasing the shadow of the sergeant who killed his dog in Vietnam. Trips drags Griffin into the street, out of his isolation and into chaos. Involved in a firefight, Trips is wounded and a caring Griffin rides with him in the ambulance. In one narrative, Vietnam, a final measure of control is achieved: Griffin is in the plane going home, out of the chaos of Southeast Asia. In the other narrative, the process of dehumanization that leads to absolute control and eventually to death, is stopped by Trips. But the ending is not so clear. The last «meditation in green» deals with opium smoke, a form of escape and of loosening boundaries. And the epilogue chapter begins with (we assume) Griffin speaking of his return home: images of the States, of the hospital, that dissolve into plant imagery after the meaningful question: «Here's the room and here's the street. Where do you want to hide?» (341)

Within the context of the novel, either answer implies destruction: the room is rigidity, the street fluidity. The choice is between rigor mortis or loss of identity. Following the unanswered question the hero seems to fuse into a plant, but a peculiar one, marijuana, the ubiquitous weed of the Vietnam War. It combines the control and stillness of vegetable life and the loosening, fluidity and possibility of escape of the drugs.