

# Action, in theory

Ideas overwhelm in French bohemia

**TANJIL RASHID**

**THE COMMITTED**  
**VIET THANH NGUYEN**

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**W**HAT DOES IT MEAN for the Vietnamese-American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen to be “committed”? It could mean that he’s in a serious relationship. Or that he’s been checked in to a mental health clinic. Both senses are indeed employed in Nguyen’s new novel. But his title alludes to an altogether different kind of commitment.

“Committed” is the usual translation for *engagé*, the writerly ideal promoted by Jean-Paul Sartre. Rejecting the creed of *l’art pour l’art* (having dismissed Flaubert as a “talented coupon clipper”), Sartre asserted that literature must take a stand, that “words are action”. In a similar vein, Nguyen defines storytelling as “an act of justice”: his most recent op-ed for the *New York Times* mocked “craft”-minded authors for “writing about flowers and moons”.

Set largely in the salons of 1980s Paris, *The Committed* brims with Sartrean references and concludes with a note in which Nguyen confirms the influence of Sartre and his ideological bedfellows Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Althusser, Frantz Fanon and others. Significantly, Nguyen also cites Theodor Adorno’s essay “Commitment” (1962), the philosopher’s response to Sartre’s espousal of “the committed writer”. Commitment, in this sense, emerges as the main criterion by which Nguyen’s novel should be judged.

*The Committed* is a hybrid of narrative and theory. It continues the story of “the man of two faces” first encountered in Nguyen’s Pulitzer Prize-winning Vietnam War novel, *The Sympathizer* (2015). There he was called “the Captain”. He was a Communist double agent, embedded with anti-Communist forces, leftist in conviction yet sensitive enough to the other side to pass as an anti-Communist to his colleagues and best friend. Eventually even his Viet Cong handlers were fooled; they repaid his service with torture.

In *The Committed*, the Captain - now exiled to Paris - becomes Vo Danh: Vietnamese for “No man”, a name that evokes the placeless, paperless flux of migrant life. Via a well-connected “Aunt” (really another Communist spy), Danh is thrust into French bohemia, peopled with characters such as “Maoist PhD” and “BFD” (like “BHL” - the philosopher Bernard Henri-Lévy - but with a whiff of “DSK”, the salacious economist and politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn). The hypocrisy of the French intelligentsia, from its racially prejudiced anti-imperialists to its sexually exploitative feminists, is exposed, though Nguyen evidently remains devoted to their theories all the same. Adding a little grit to this ideas-

driven novel, Danh becomes a drug dealer for his boho friends, and makes new ones in the Paris underworld among fellow ex-colonials.

Salon life provides the foil for Nguyen’s discourses on empire and race. Theorists are cited on every other page, mostly *soixante-huitards* and mostly, apart from Fanon and Aimé Césaire, white - which is odd, given Nguyen’s theme and stance. There is a crude monotony to Nguyen’s rhetoric: “colonisation is paedophilia”; colonialism “rapes and molests”; France “raped our country”; to be colonized is “to be abused”. One may agree with this and still feel rather like the character who at one point says, “I don’t want to hear another lecture”.

At the conclusion of *The Committed*, Nguyen - a professor at the University of Southern California - describes the book as an opportunity “to revisit many of the thinkers who have influenced me over the years”. But the end product amounts, essentially, to a series of creative footnotes, which seem designed to cater largely to a cloistered audience of the author’s peer reviewers: hardly the words of action Sartre had in mind, and much closer to the solipsistic coupon-clipping he scorned.

If there is anything here that will rouse one to action, it is the novel’s beautifully rendered prologue: three theory-free pages narrating the ordeal of the so-called “boat people” who fled Vietnam by sea. The controlled, formal style here mimics the refugees’ futile efforts to maintain dignity in the grimmet of circumstances (“But even eating so little, we still left our human traces all over the deck”). The conflict Nguyen feels between craft and commitment ultimately proves false. For, in the end, it is only through convincing and well-crafted sentences that any commitment can enduringly be expressed. ■



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