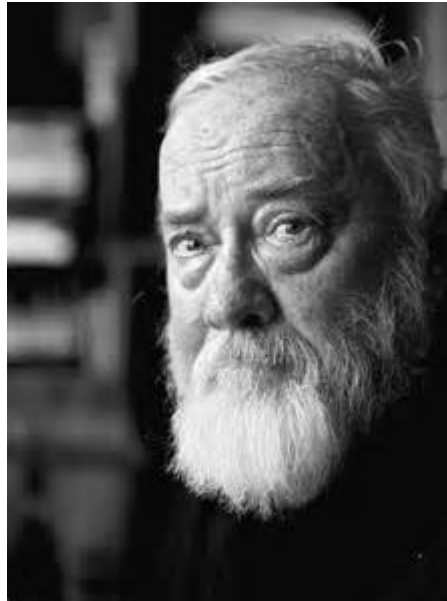


## ANALYSIS

*Dog Soldiers* (1974)



Robert Stone

(1937- )

“In *Dog Soldiers* (1974), Stone needed a metaphor for the Vietnam War, some emblem or central image which would carry over into civilian life what American soldiers experienced in Vietnam. In that sense, this is a war novel, not a frontal assault on war, as in Mailer, but war carried into our larger imagination. Stone’s key metaphor is the struggle over a three-kilo package of scag, or heroin. His three main characters are John Converse, a journalist; Brenda, his wife, the daughter of a newspaper owner and left-winger; and their courier, Hicks, whose sensibility assumes the center of the novel. Since no character calls for sympathy or empathy from the reader, Stone has had to locate his novel not in characters but in their mission: the transporting of the heroin from Vietnam to Brenda, who will then dispose of it, enriching everyone along the way. While the transfer of the heroin is an actual event, its chief import is symbolic. We must comprehend the characters at the level of what the war has done to them, as evidenced by the effect the heroin has on them.

In one way or another, they are all ‘users.’ Converse needs the excitement of the transaction to give his life some meaning—he is close to being a zombie; Brenda starts to pick up a habit, after experimenting with pills; and Hicks has a taste for the stuff—he also needs the experience to provide some thrills. Hicks reads Nietzsche, who ‘had overwhelmed him’—the Nietzsche of nihilism, not renewal. Hicks keeps repeating his own formula, which he has derived chiefly from the German: ‘Form is not different from nothingness. Nothingness is not different from form. They are the same.’ Hicks has imagined a triangle in his future, and he uses the idea of the triangle—a form for enclosing vast space, a means of journeying into various sides of experience—as his way of bringing space under control. His head is a vast arena of anti-systems—the heroin transaction becomes for him a way of moving among them—but he still needs the triangle as a form to hold back the nothingness.

One key element involved in the transaction is the establishment of loyalties. Loyalties centering on heroin are the equivalent of bonds formed by men in Vietnam. Once again, Stone’s problem...was to find in civilian life or some marginal transaction the way the men had banded together during the war; how they

survived what was a descent into nothingness. The epigraph for the novel comes, appropriately, from *Heart of Darkness*, to the effect that Marlowe saw the 'devil of violence and the devil of greed and the devil of hot desire,' but even more, would 'become acquainted with a flabby, pretending weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly.'

Nevertheless, loyalties, however significant, are not all. What is also needed is the activation of a marginal group doomed by their position and definition. These are the dog soldiers. In American Indian tribes, there were male braves who were marginal to the general practices of the tribe; such males might be homosexual and live as married couples, or be deviant in other ways. They were permitted their deviance because they were dog soldiers: braves who were ready to sacrifice themselves in the most daring exploits. They were, in the eyes of the tribe, men who were already dead, therefore especially useful in war. They led the charge.

In Stone's terms, people unfitted for leadership in normal terms have qualities that can be called upon under special circumstances. They are not pleasant, for Converse, nor Brenda, nor Hicks. But if the right transaction or common experience can be found, they have qualities that float to the surface: their ability to work along the boundaries of nothingness, greed, descent. To experience fear and to survive it is part of their mental equipment, although they approach it in different ways. Brenda fears for her small daughter, who is moved along from one person to another during the reign of terror perpetrated by the corrupt narcs; Converse is tortured and threatened by the same group, who move him from one place to another; and Hicks gradually takes the heat as he tries to hold on to the heroin.

In one sense, heroin does to the characters, those who have it as well as those who want it, what ivory in *Heart of Darkness* does to the agents and, most of all, to Kurtz. As Stone's version of Kurtz, Hicks has memories mainly of horrors, nightmares, 'apocalypse now.' He thinks of punitive patrols when his squad is wiped out, or of acts that pass beyond even Nietzschean formulations of human degradation. He has touched bottom, as has Kurtz, and so the heroin for him is simply another journey into blackness: Kurtz's final mission, which will bring together nothingness and form.

Badly wounded by narcs, pursued by the relentless Antheil and a Mexican agent, Hicks allows Converse and Brenda to escape, and tries to wind his way back so that they can pick him up. But his blood ebbs out, his attempt foredoomed to failure. He slows up, makes the rendezvous, but dies before Converse arrives. The latter, having the opportunity to escape with the heroin, chooses to leave it, to attempt something that will make Brenda and him other than dog soldiers. Antheil and the Mexican agent come upon Hicks, and decide to keep the heroin for themselves, precisely what they had intended all along. The fight for the totem goes on, now white snow, as ivory was white gold; purity perverted.

Like ivory in the Conrad novella, smack has its own qualities of purity: the greater the purity, the more it can be diluted on the streets; the greater the purity, the more intense its effects. When Hicks is driven to near-madness, he injects a deadly load into a man's thigh, a man who wanted to go along on a heroin joyride for the experience so as to write about it. Hicks will not permit scag to be trivialized. All the black deceit and corruption that lie around the acquisition of heroin are at odds with its pure appearance, its simplicity. Whiteness mocks the intentions of those who attempt to grapple with it.

What remains is the cycle of corruption. Once Hicks is dead and the Converse have fled, Antheil and the Mexican hold the ground. Converse has attempted to work out the contradictions of his name, which imply, on one hand, connection, intercourse; on the other, an adversary role, a contrary presence. His name suggests still another possibility: Converse may be converted, may exchange one state or condition for another. This, too, is possible; as the dog soldier may reenter his tribe after several brushes with death, Converse will not be a solid citizen, nor will Brenda, but in their abandonment of heroin they have indicated something of a conversion. The field is left to the corrupt, the narcs who will profit from a resale of the smack. The cycle will not end. The war will, simply, continue on new grounds; in other terms, a Nietzschean-Spenglerian cycle of doom."

Frederick R. Karl  
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