

Obscenity, Disgust and Embarrassment
Moral Sensibility in Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried

"We train young men to drop fire on people, but their commanders won't allow them to write 'fuck' on their airplane, because it's obscene!" — Colonel Kurtz, Apocalypse Now

Disgust is a phenomenon well-studied in the social sciences and is described as “a cross-culturally recognized emotion that invokes feelings of nausea and revulsion when individuals are exposed to repulsive stimuli” (Terrizzi et al. 587). It is thought that this emotion initially evolved as part of a “behavioural immune system” to protect human beings from rotting food, dead bodies, and otherwise threatening objects that could compromise health, though the feeling clearly has assumed cultural dimensions such that disgust can be felt in response to social situations as well (Brenner and Inbar 27, Feinberg et al. 513, Terrizzi et al. 587). In other words, disgust is not only about health, but it is also about moral sensibility. In *The Things They Carried*, author (and narrator) Tim O'Brien uses the word “obscenity” only twice, and the adjectival root “obscene” not at all. And yet, with this spare usage, he carefully constructs a web of connection in his book between obscenity, disgust and embarrassment in the framework of the morality of the Vietnam War, and the United States of America more generally. He equates the obscene with the truth, mingling all of the layered associations that the truth has in *The Things They Carried* with disgust and embarrassment, laying bare the farce of morality in war and those who support it.

The chapter entitled “How to Tell a True War Story” is especially important in *The Things They Carried* because it reflects on and inflects the rest of the book, which is full of war stories. (It is not entirely clear which stories O'Brien considers war stories and which ones he considers love stories, or if indeed he judges them by different criteria.) It is crucial then to note exactly what is said about truth in this chapter in order to further understand the other chapters,

all of which have concerns about truth operating implicitly, if not explicitly. When O'Brien is trying to justify, or at least explain, Rat Kiley's "dumb cooze" epithet directed towards Curt Lemon's sister, he essentially argues that it is the truth, because "you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (O'Brien 65-6). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "obscenity" means:

1. The character or quality of being offensively indecent, lewdness; an instance of this, esp. an obscene expression. [or]
2. The character or quality of being horrible, offensive, or morally repugnant, etc. Also (as a count noun): an extremely offensive or objectionable gesture, statement, event, etc.

Here it can be seen that obscenity can be used to describe just about anything, especially human actions and speech. This broadness is problematic, and yet it is also vital. It is problematic because it allows for trivializing horrific things and magnification of trivial things, as is perfectly encapsulated in the ironic epigraph of this paper from *Apocalypse Now*: napalming villages is conduct befitting American soldiers, but vulgar airplane graffiti is beyond the pale. O'Brien is sensitive to this reality, as will be shown later. The reason the broadness of obscenity is vital is precisely because it allows someone like O'Brien to expose the spinning moral compass used to justify the Vietnam project, and US imperialism more generally.

Definitionally, the obscene includes that which is "morally repugnant". This is substantiated by the aforementioned social scientific research, which shows strong correlations between how easily people are disgusted and what values they hold—especially what they find immoral. So when O'Brien writes that "you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil," it is clear that he is linking the truth of war to what people generally find to be morally repugnant (if "evil" was not clue enough). This may seem trivial; of course the truth of war is disturbing, revolting even. Yet it is crucial to note that O'Brien does not leave a way out, an asterisk, any kind of qualification. He is not writing about

World War II, where “a nation was justified in using military force...to stop a Hitler” (42). He is writing about Vietnam, begrudgingly, because “a draft board did not let you choose your war” (42). By creating an “allegiance”—a militaristic and nationalistic term, it is worth noting—between the truth of Vietnam and “obscenity and evil,” O’Brien is indicating that there is nothing worth salvaging, no justification, no possibility for building a post-hoc moral structure on the events; a moral structure cannot be built on immoral foundations. And the foundations were such because “you don’t make war without knowing why,” which is exactly what O’Brien feels America did (38).

The use of a military idea of alliances, allegiance, could be interpreted as indicting everyone: all the war supporters—be they civilians at home, US intelligence agencies, US generals, US soldiers, South Vietnamese, North Vietnamese—all are allies and accomplices in the horrible truth of the Vietnam War. This is substantiated by O’Brien when he talks about the voters at home:

You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don’t care for obscenity, you don’t care for the truth; if you don’t care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty. (66)

Here is the second and final use of the word “obscenity” in the book, but this time it is referring to, on the surface, lewd statements, like “dumb cooze”. But notice how it is immediately made synonymous with truth; if you do not care for it, then you do not care for the truth, because obscenity and the truth are one and the same, they have allegiance. And those at home who cannot stand obscene language can therefore not stand the truth about the war of which they may have (indirectly) voted in favour, making them part of the obscene truth allegiance. While O’Brien could be seen as speaking generally about whatever people voted for the war and might happen to not like lewd language, it is interesting to note that studies have repeatedly found

strong correlations between social conservatism and high sensitivity to disgust (Brenner and Inbar, Feinberg et al., Navarrete et al., Smith et al. and Terrizzi et al.). Those who have socially conservative morality “display similar attention to harm avoidance and fairness [as politically left individuals,] but demonstrate additional concerns for purity, in-group/loyalty, and authority/structure” (Smith et al. 2). Terrizzi et al. specifically identified Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)—“a combination of submission to authority, aggression toward outgroups, and conventionalism”—in addition to social conservatism and religious fundamentalism (588). The concern for purity makes such individuals prone to consider feelings of disgust as morally informative, and therefore view speech and actions of and interactions with outgroup people (especially sexual minorities like homosexuals, and foreigners, particularly immigrants) as disgusting, immoral contaminants (Terrizzi et al. 589, Brenner and Inbar 35). It could be argued then, that the same kind of people who are the most nationalistic, who say the Pledge of **Allegiance** loudest, who are the most likely to consider foreigners and the “disease” of Communism as nausea-inducing contaminants, who are most likely to vote for leaders who will destroy the “enemies” of the USA, are also those most likely to be disgusted by obscene language. Even if O’Brien is not aware of the social scientific research that demonstrates this web of correlation, he certainly demonstrates a kind of intuition about it.

O’Brien reveals his own conservatism and—more vitally—his own human frailties when he is drafted into the Vietnam war in “On the Rainy River”. In this chapter, he calls his Minnesota hometown “a conservative little spot on the prairie, a place where tradition counted” (42-3). Already, there are indicators pointing to the kind of people who he feels got him into the war, both politically in how they voted, and personally, in that it was embarrassment and shame about how these folk would view him that convinced him to stay and accept the draft. They are

conservative and traditional, and he “was a liberal, for Christ sake: If they needed fresh bodies, why not draft some back-to-the-stone-age hawk? Or some dumb jingo in his hard hat and Bomb Hanoi button?” (40). These characterizations of the kind of person who should fight the war might be stereotypes, but they are stereotypes of some of the kind of RWAs discussed in the social scientific literature. He goes into further detail when describing his anger with them:

I detested their blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all, their simple-minded patriotism, their prideful ignorance, their love-it-or-leave-it platitudes, how they were sending me off to fight a war they didn't understand and didn't want to understand. I held them responsible. By God, yes, I *did*. All of them—I held them personally and individually responsible—the polyestered Kiwanis boys, the merchants and farmers, the pious churchgoers, the chatty housewives, the PTA and the Lions club and the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the fine upstanding gentry out at the country club. They didn't know Bao Dai from the man in the moon. They didn't know history. They didn't know the first thing about Diem's tyranny, or the nature of Vietnamese nationalism, or the long colonialism of the French—this was all too damned complicated, it required some reading—but no matter, it was a war to stop the Communists, plain and simple, which was how they liked things, and you were a treasonous pussy if you had second thoughts about killing or dying for plain and simple reasons. (43)

O'Brien feels as though he can expunge himself of guilt by pinning the war and his role in it on them. And to some extent, he can. But there is also the fact that he could have gone to Canada, but decided not to (even if that decision felt coerced). There is the fact that he did (and did not) kill a man. And there is also the fact that O'Brien is not totally separate from these war mongers, for “The sight of blood made [him] queasy” (39). He too is sensitive to disgust, the threat of contamination from blood that makes many people feel nauseous. This sensitivity to disgust, though it may not be as strong as social conservatives, is present in him and connects him to them. He might be a liberal, but he is still from the conservative spot on the prairie, and he only ever really connects with his enemy in the battlefield when he sees himself in him; is he as liberal and open-minded as he thinks? In the end, political orientation, moral frameworks and psychological dispositions all fail to matter in Vietnam, because everything is obscene,

everything is evil; even the most resilient to disgust must have their stomach turned by the truth in Vietnam, and so become conservative in a way (with the notable exception of the clearly psychopathic Azar, who only expresses disgust at O'Brien's failure to be as psychotic as he is—evidence that one can be too liberal, in a sense (206)). The soldiers want to go back to where everything made sense, to conserve the past.

Speaking of stomachs turning, O'Brien does not just link the truth with obscenity (and therefore indirectly with disgust), but also directly with the feeling of disgust using the locus of the stomach. As narrator, he argues that "True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis" (74). He continues on to say that the old truism "war is hell" "seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, [he] can't believe it with [his] stomach. Nothing turns inside. It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (74). Although O'Brien is talking about the fact that the trueness of a war story comes down to how it makes the audience feel the experience of the teller, he is also fairly directly saying that the truth of a Vietnam War story is that it makes your stomach turn. If something does not turn your stomach—make you feel disgust—then it is not true, because everything about that war is obscene, worthy of disgust. More than the mind or the heart, as might be expected, O'Brien places emotional and moral sensibility in the stomach—which makes sense when considering the evidence that the essence of many moral issues can be distilled to feelings of disgust and purity, which are tied to nausea, among other symptomatic responses. When the company find a dead Vietnamese boy early in the book, Mitchell Sanders claims that "there's a definite moral here," and then "He put his hand on the dead boy's wrist. He was quiet for a time, as if counting a pulse, then he patted the stomach, almost affectionately, and used Kiowa's hunting hatchet to remove the thumb" (12-3). It is as though Sanders is listening to

the heart to find the moral (interestingly, the heart actually slows down when one is disgusted), but he finds nothing (Smith et al. 4). Once he pats the boys stomach, he realizes what to do: commit an act of obscenity, desecrate a corpse. In the moral wasteland of Vietnam, obscene logic is the only kind that exists, and the stomach guides the way.

In addition to being the locus of the truth and (im)morals of Vietnam, the stomach is the incubator of all the negative feelings of shame and embarrassment that derive from these truths and morals. Early in the novel, Jimmy Cross “felt shame” and realized that the guilt of Ted Lavender’s death “was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war” (16). Shame is a driving force of almost all the characters in this book. It is shame and embarrassment that convinced O’Brien to not dodge the draft; it is embarrassment that true war stories cause (along with disgust); and yet, nearly as embarrassing is silence. After Mitch Sanders admits that he made up parts of the Listening Patrol story in “How To Tell A True War Story,” and that the moral was not necessarily “listen to your enemy,” “he was quiet, looking away, and the silence kept stretching out until it was almost embarrassing. Then he shrugged and gave me a stare that lasted all day. ‘Hear that quiet, man?’ he said. ‘That quiet—just listen. There’s your moral’” (73-4). The silence is as embarrassing as a true war story because it is the sound of complicity, the lack of response, what Maria Bonn calls the “moral dislocation” of their experience in the jungle (9). Embarrassment is the reason the men go to war, but it is also a necessary by-product of being a part of the obscenity of the war; there is no way to avoid it, and so it too is carried in the stomach, heavier than the bandoliers of ammunition in their pockets.

Another truth of the Vietnam War is boredom, “the kind of boredom that caused stomach disorders” (O’Brien 33). The stomach is turned by obscenity, which is the truth, and the truth is that the actions taken in Vietnam were immoral, and so was the inaction: just presence in the

country where American soldiers did not belong, boredom despite all that is happening, is also disgusting enough to make the stomach turn. Elsewhere, Jimmy Cross feels a “new hardness in his stomach. He loved [Martha] but he hated her” (23). Love and hatred simultaneously settle in the stomach in the war—no wonder it turns in revulsion. Cross is projecting his own feeling of culpability onto his not-girlfriend Martha back home, and as he loves her and himself, he hates her and himself, and that is just what Vietnam puts in your stomach, how it makes you feel: full of shame, disgust, rage, hatred, love and boredom.

Since O’Brien has linked obscenity and the truth, it is worth considering the distortion of perspective that accompanies this allegiance for the soldiers living in it, the writer remembering it, and the readers bearing witness to it. The breadth of what may be found obscene is virtually limitless, and in a theatre of war where everything can be described as such, it is possible to trivialize horrific things and magnify trivial things. The soldiers themselves demonstrate this distortion best; they give high fives to dead corpses, make lewd jokes about their recently killed comrades, and yet they annihilate villages in response to a single friend’s death. Simultaneously, Jimmy Cross spends countless hours pondering the virginity of his unrequited love; Curt Lemon can take the combat, but not the embarrassment of fainting at the army dentist; Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen get into a seemingly life-or-death struggle over a stolen jackknife. There is clearly a distortion in perspective here, and it is a necessary function of operating in an obscene, disgusting reality. The trivial act of thinking too much about Martha leads Jim Cross to feel responsible for Ted Lavender’s death, even though there is likely nothing he could have done to prevent it. But in the murky fog of Vietnam where “what seems to happen becomes its own happening,” everyone has their own version of causation, and everyone is guilty (67). The narrator Tim O’Brien seems more resistant to this distortion. He cannot bring himself to high

five the dead body, and most of his concerns seem roughly proportional to what one might expect of a young man in war—the fear of death, the guilt and sense of loss losing friends, the desire to go home. But of course, part of this seeming disparity between O’Brien and the others has to do with the fact that readers are inhabiting his mind, not the others’ minds. They all likely think much the same things as him, but their actions focus on the trivial in order to distract them from what their real concerns “should” be. Looking at the words of the real life Tim O’Brien, it is clear where some of the distortion *has* taken place. In his interview with Steven Kaplan, he notes that the Air Cavalry attack at “Charlie’s Point” in *Apocalypse Now* “didn’t seem very horrible to” him (103). He found “the killing of the calf” more horrific than the scene where Colonel Kilgore lays playing cards on the dead bodies of Vietnamese villagers. After surviving the wasteland of Vietnam, and thinking about the truth of that war as obscenity, O’Brien’s perhaps skewed weighting of animal torture over the destruction of human villages (both in *Apocalypse Now* and his own book) makes some sense. Considering senseless annihilation of people is almost too much to comprehend—it becomes abstract, which is what O’Brien is trying to avoid as an author; “The only way that the horror of war can mean anything to us is through small detailed vignettes or episodes of evil” (O’Brien and Kaplan 102). By presenting this perspective on Vietnam that is skewed towards small obscenities rather than village-wide destruction (which is mentioned only ever in passing in *The Things They Carried*), O’Brien is forcing the perspective of the reader to be similarly skewed. In so doing, he actually is able to make the war more palpable, to help the reader feel what he and his fellow soldiers felt.

The larger classification of the novel as some strange collaboration between fiction, non-fiction and metafiction, also serves to acquaint the reader with the feeling of Vietnam. In an interview with Patrick Hicks, O’Brien says that “Fiction is simply there for the purpose of story.

And by story [he doesn't] mean just plot. [He] mean[s] human beings behaving in a world of situational ethics" (89). As indicated on the title page and later in the short chapter "Good Form," *The Things They Carried* is a work of fiction. It is a place for O'Brien to see how characters react in a world of situational ethics. And yet, the reader is—or at least I was—constantly taken in by this work of fiction such that it is believed to be true, at least until O'Brien brings the illusion crashing down with metafictional admissions of fakery. This is part of his mission "not to solve mysteries, but to expand them...to ultimately make readers think of their lives in terms of ambiguity" (Hicks 90). In other words, O'Brien is attempting to make us, the readers, feel the confusion he and his fellow soldiers felt in Vietnam: "No one knew the first thing about anything except that everybody was dying" (Hicks 90). So, by blurring the lines between autobiography and fiction, fiction and metafiction, O'Brien is enacting the mystery of Vietnam, and therefore the truth of Vietnam. The war *was* a world of situational ethics where whatever morals one believed one had while back in the USA were changed; "What was once wrong—killing people—now becomes sanctioned murder. Civility and savagery change places. All your values go upside down, and what you were certain about on the prairies of southern Minnesota changes when you get into this heart of darkness called Vietnam" (Hicks 90-1). Because the war stories in the book make our stomach turn—the baby water buffalo slowly shot to death, Mary Anne with her necklace of tongues, the young man with the star-shaped hole for an eye—the book is true. The obscenity is convincing. The way the characters are morally adrift, unable to find any firm ground to stand on, is convincing. And so, by "extraordinary standards," the characters of *The Things They Carried* and the events that take place therein are real, and always will be ("The Magic Show," 177). At the level of the construction of the book, especially insofar as it is metafictional, the idea that the truth of the Vietnam War is obscene, uniformly disgusting, and

morally confusing is confirmed. Of course, there are moments of humour and other positive emotions in the novel. In fact, the ending almost feels uplifting.

In the final chapter of *The Things They Carried*, “The Lives of the Dead”, O’Brien realizes that he can make the dead alive by telling stories, that “stories can save us” (213). Is there indeed redemption to be recovered from the obscenity of Vietnam? As noted by Robin Silbergleid, O’Brien’s first attempt at fictionalizing the night of the shit field does the opposite of “save us”:

Upon reading the narrative, Bowker asks, "Where's Kiowa? Where's the shit?" [citation omitted]. "Eight months later," the narrator reveals in the next sentence, "he hanged himself." The juxtaposition of these lines intimates O'Brien, narrator if not biographical author, feels responsible for Bowker's death. To put it bluntly, telling a story incorrectly exacerbates rather than heals trauma. (Silbergleid 142)

A narrative, if it does not capture the truth, can kill—if not a physical person, at least the memory of them, for if they are not ‘truly’ embodied in fiction after they are gone, they are not embodied anywhere. Kiowa was left out of the initial telling of the shit field story, and so O’Brien had killed him as much as Bowker. The question still remains then: is there redemption in *The Things They Carried* if it at least contains the truth of Vietnam, or is there no “moral” to the story, as Mitch Sanders might say? Robin Blyn argues that “The idea of stories as a curative force is attractive, particularly because it suggests that...[*The Things They Carried*] performs the narrative cure it prescribes, redeeming the reader and the writer at once” (189).

And yet, in the final sentence of the novel, Tim is “trying” to “save Timmy’s life” (his younger, more innocent self) by telling stories, not necessarily succeeding (O’Brien 233). It is also important to remember one of the first things O’Brien tells the reader about true war stories: “If at the end of the war story, you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and

terrible lie” (65). If the redemption of the war story from its obscene moral wasteland is taken to be the “moral” of this book, then we as readers are lying to ourselves. As Blyn illuminates, the “loops and spins” of Timmy on the skating rink on the final page call back to suicidal Norman Bowker endlessly driving loops around the lake of his hometown, and even further back to the chapter entitled “Spin,” where “the unending repetitions of the memory ‘loop’ function as a check against the falsifications of the war story and its conventional ‘spins’”—including O’Brien’s own spin (Blyn 190). There is no easy way to redemption here, for the reader or writer. In fact, by convincingly teasing the possibility of redemption without really intending to offer it, O’Brien takes himself and the reader even deeper into the shit field, the mire of Vietnam. There is no moral redemption in obscenity, and that is the truth of Vietnam as encapsulated in this book

If, as is often suggested in *The Things They Carried*, the ideal audience for a Vietnam veteran is one that does nothing but listen, then we have in some sense done our job by coming to feel the truth of Vietnam, and perhaps reality more generally, as obscenity fuelling disgust and embarrassment. We understand why the soldiers, including O’Brien himself, did repulsive things: because in a war without moral purpose, no moral action is possible. They did wrong because they could do no right, and also, because that is what humans do. We do not need to strive for redemption, beg that the author provide us closure—or even worse, give him advice with how to cope. We just need to have the courage to listen, to read, and to allow our stomachs to turn in disgust. Only then can we feel why a war story is really a love story—because it is an attempt to preserve what is loved, even though each act of preservation, of re-membering, is doomed to result in yet another stone in the stomach, weighing you down. Yet the author does it anyway. And now we feel what Tim O’Brien will always feel.

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