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The Profane and Reverent in *The Things They Carried*

Tamara Pace Thomson

In *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, Paul Woodruff examines the concept of reverence in a secular, political, and civic context rather than merely a strictly religious one. Although reverence is a word commonly used in our modern vocabulary, it is mostly misunderstood and widely ignored. Ancient civilizations often prized reverence as a virtue—a concept that Woodruff claims is wholly missing from “secular discussions of ethics or political theory” (4). Woodruff devotes an entire book to defining what reverence is and how it can be implemented in modern life. Although the use of profanity, an act “expressive of a disregard or contempt for sacred things” (“profane”), may not seem to be the most reverent use of language, when it is used to tell a story in the most truthful manner, it can become a reverent act. Tim O’Brien refers to the Vietnam War as immoral and his novel, *The Things They Carried*, deals with the profane and irreverent aspects of the war while attempting to restore reverence to the lives behind Vietnam’s stories of psychological and physical waste.

Woodruff’s entire book is an attempt to define reverence, but his most distilled explanation of the virtue says, “Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we

believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all” (3). Woodruff believes that reverence is a virtue and virtues are the capacity “to have certain feelings and emotions” which feelings and emotions lead a person to do “the right thing” (61-62). Although rational, analytical decision making is highly regarded in the modern world, humans base most actions and decisions on emotions and feelings. So, a virtue provides people with an emotional response to situations that will, in turn, lead them to right actions. A war zone is a place of moral confusion where fear, anger, anxiety, terror, and doubt haunt the feelings and actions of those in the war. O’Brien illustrates in his stories the emotional complexity inherent in combat, the difficulty of maintaining a virtue like reverence within the emotional confusion, and how sometimes the best way to deal with the emotions triggered by the terror of war is to deny or bury the intensity of those emotions in vulgar humor or profanity.

In the story of Ted Lavender’s death, O’Brien’s narrator justifies the harsh language and vulgar jokes the soldiers of Alpha Company make when their comrade is shot and killed while returning from relieving himself in the jungle. He says,

They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. Greased they say. Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping. It wasn’t cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn’t quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. They kicked corpses. They cut off thumbs. They talked grunt lingo. They told stories about Ted Lavender’s supply of tranquilizers, how the poor guy didn’t feel a thing, how incredibly tranquil he was. (19).

The “softness” the men are trying to escape is the vulnerability of terror, sadness, grief, and pain that is mitigated by hard words and jokes. If they refuse to acknowledge the magnitude of death by demeaning it, they can “encyst” the pain, contain it in a benign form, encapsulate the terror and sorrow in a barrage of epithets and irreverent jokes to protect themselves from the overwhelming reality of death. Language keeps the devastation of their friend’s death at a surreal distance from themselves, which helps to keep the truth of their own mortality far enough away to prevent them from being paralyzed by fear. Language

has the power to frame perception, altering reality to conform to the needs of the speakers, and profanity is often used to subvert authority, whether that authority is real or imagined. Profanity is a harsh, rebellious, tough-minded, and an irreverent rejection of tradition and authority which provides the men with a feeling of bravery. The “hard” language of O’Brien’s soldiers is a means of undermining and confusing the power play of war, death, and self-preservation. Profanity and joking disguise the potency of fear and shame that, during hours of crises, cannot be allayed in any other way.

In an essay on the psychology of profanity, G.T.W. Patrick says, “Profanity is a primitive and instinctive form of reaction to a situation which threatens in some way the well-being of the individual, standing next to that of actual combat. Like all instinctive reaction it does not generate emotion but allays it” (126). The emotions of fear, terror, disgust, horror, grief, and sorrow that follow the death of their comrade cannot be expressed or even acknowledged but need some means of being allayed; swearing and mocking death smothers the intensity of negative emotions, allowing the men to divorce themselves from the emotional pain. Patrick goes on to say, “We are thus able to account for the catharsis phenomena of profanity. It seems to serve as a vent for emotion and to relieve it” (126). The relief that the soldiers feel from profanity is not sufficient relief for a long period of time, but it does enable the men to continue to function in the short term so that “each morning, despite the unknowns, they [could make] their legs move. They endured” (O’Brien 20).

The hard language enables the men of Alpha Company to disguise their fear and repress their pain so that they do not have to stop and mourn the loss of their friend while they are still actors in the war. However, this emotional separation from their grief prevents them from feeling awe and reverence for death which becomes callousness toward death and the dead. The narrator describes the desecration of a teenage boy’s body when “Norman Bowker, otherwise a very gentle person, carried a thumb that had been presented to him as a gift by Mitchell Sanders” (12). The reality that an “otherwise . . . gentle person” would carry such a souvenir is a physical enactment of the profane language that separates the men from their terror and grief. Fighting to defend their lives, and watching as their friends are killed and blown into pieces, alters the men of Alpha Company. Where gentleness and reverence for life may have been the norm before the war, the brutality of combat unearths parts of the men that would otherwise have remained buried in their civilian lives; both for good and bad. Although the narrator acknowledges that the dangers of combat

have the capacity to bind soldiers together in a sense of camaraderie and loyalty, he laments the change within himself when he becomes consumed with vengeance for Bobby Jorgenson who fails to treat the narrator properly when he is injured. He says, “Something had gone wrong . . . I’d turned mean inside. Even a little cruel at times. For all my education, all my fine liberal values, I now felt a deep coldness inside me, something beyond reason. It’s a hard thing to admit, even to myself, but I was capable of evil” (191). The narrator recognizes his failed sensitivity, he feels shame that his “high, civilized trappings had somehow been crushed under the weight of the simple daily realities” (190). The simple daily realities include death, killing, swearing, and irreverence for the dead, as well as a growing callousness toward the gruesome reality of fighting a war.

But for all the gruesome brutality of the daily realities of war, there is an inexplicable beauty and “awful majesty [in] combat” (O’Brien 77). Illuminated tracer rounds, troops moving in symmetry, harmonies of sound and shape and proportions are all astonishing to the beholder and have an “aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference” (77). The narrator’s account of such “powerful, implacable beauty” (77) sounds like an encounter with the sublime, and encountering the sublime is to be in awe of something beyond human vulnerabilities. And yet, this truth about war “is ugly” at the same time that it is aesthetically pure (77). In the same way, the truth about being near death in battle is that the “proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life” (77). Something beautiful and reverential is unearthed from the same brutality that, at times, unearths cruelty in the men. The narrator describes it as becoming aware of “your truest self, the human being you want to be . . . in the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted” (77). The reality of death reveals to the men what is most valuable and precious about being alive. The world’s beauty is seen in sharper relief against the possibility of it being lost. War is ambiguity and contradiction, right and wrong get upended and confused, truth cannot be discerned from lies, reverence germinates in profanity, and ugliness is beautiful; and nothing in a true war story is ever absolutely true (78).

Despite the impossibility of absolute truth in a war story, the narrator of *The Things They Carried* relates the profanity and irreverence of its characters as a means of getting at the truth of a war story. He says, “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).

War leads men to “talk dirty” in order to cope with the mutilations to body and psyche that Vietnam represents, and in a fascinating reversal, it is the truthful representation of their profanity that provides the narrator with a means out of emotional paralysis: “Telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat. Partly catharsis, partly communication, it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what had happened to me . . . all the mistakes I’d made, all the terrible things I had seen and done” (151-52). Language, through profanity and through callous humor, disconnects the soldiers from the emotional trauma of death, which is necessary for emotional survival in the moment of crises. However, remaining disconnected can cause emotional paralysis, and it is through storytelling that the narrator reconnects emotionally in order to deal with his own trauma and to ultimately revive a sense of reverence for the death he witnesses.

The most profound example in the book of a story that ultimately links profanity, storytelling, truth, and reverence, is the story of Kiowa’s death in a field used as a “village toilet” (161). Kiowa’s death, and the guilt associated with it, paralyzes Norman Bowker when he returns home from the war. He drives endlessly around a lake in his hometown, reliving the night that Kiowa died and fantasizing about telling the story to anyone who will listen. Bowker writes to the narrator and begs him to write the story of Kiowa. He says, “I’d write it myself except I can’t ever find any words, if you know what I mean, and I can’t figure out what exactly to say. Something about the field that night. The way Kiowa just disappeared into the crud. You were there—you can tell it” (151). Bowker remains emotionally paralyzed, for he lacks the words that can relieve his guilt. “I sort of sank down into the sewage with [Kiowa],” he says, “Feels like I’m still in deep shit” (150). Unlike Bowker, the narrator writes—he tells stories about the war “virtually nonstop” (151). The narrator makes it clear that writing a moral war story that is true is impossible. He says, “If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a 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. There is no rectitude whatsoever” (65). And yet, he continues to write war stories. If nothing is salvageable from the stories, he would cease to write them. Just as Bowker realizes that the story of Kiowa’s death in a field of excrement needs to be told, the narrator tells the story to salvage something, to rectify his guilt or to “make good” (154) on Bowker’s silence, or simply to “speak directly” and to “tell the full and precise truth about [their] night in the shit field” (153). To leave out the

profanity would mean compromising the truth, because the only way to tell if a war story is true is “by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil” (66). Telling the truth about the war, about death, and about guilt becomes its own rectitude.

David Jarraway, in an essay on *The Things They Carried*, takes the narrator literally when he dismisses the possibility of rectitude in war stories. He says that O’Brien effectively “eradicates all possibility for responsive uplift . . . by reducing even the metaphorical import of waste. As the measure of atrocious acts and imbecile events, waste’s claim on all concerned, accordingly, is seen to be absolutely literal” (696). However, the metaphorical import of “human waste” does not lose its meaning, even when the waste is also literal. In fact, contrary to Jarraway’s claim, the metaphorical import haunts the characters as much as the literal. In the twenty years between Kiowa’s death and the narrator’s return to Vietnam, the field “embodied all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror” (O’Brien 176). The narrator finds it essential to tell the truth about the vulgarity and horror for both its metaphoric and literal import. In discussing truth, Woodruff says: “Reverence sets a higher value on the truth than on any human product that is supposed to have captured truth” (*Reverence* 39). The act of telling the “story-truth,” that O’Brien distinguishes from factual or “happening-truth” (O’Brien 171), is an act of reverence, and it helps to “clarify and explain” (O’Brien 152) the emotional reality of the stories. Telling stories becomes a “reverence that moderates war in all times and cultures” and counteracts the “irreverence that urges [war] on to brutality” (*Reverence* 14). Telling the truth about the field, about the waste that filled their nostrils and tried to suck them down, is the narrator’s attempt at salvaging something from the waste, and the truth he privileges elevates the story of a field of human excrement, and its “nauseous vacuity and repulsive futility” (Jarraway 696), to a story of reverence.

Kiowa’s sinking into a mess of human sewage may seem to be a strange story to choose as an illustration of reverence, but returning to Woodruff’s definition, reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations. Bowker felt that he had the opportunity to save Kiowa’s life, but when he tries to pull him out of the water and muck, “the shit was in his nose and eyes. There were flares and mortar rounds, and the stink was everywhere—it was inside him, in his lungs—and he could no longer tolerate it. Not here, he thought. Not like this. He released Kiowa’s boot and watched it slide away” (O’Brien 143). Bowker wants to live, or at least he doesn’t want to die in the village toilet. He becomes

paralyzed by a sense of guilt, shame, and responsibility for Kiowa's death. In the telling of Bowker's story of guilt, the narrator acknowledges the human limitations in all the men of Alpha Company. Recognizing human limitations is an essential aspect of Woodruff's definition of reverence, which he also writes about in his book, *The Ajax Dilemma*. In *Ajax* Woodruff says, "Reverence leads us to feel the weakness of human beings in contrast to the majesty of the divine. For this reason, reverence is the foundation of compassion, which grows from a felt sense of shared human weakness" (136). Compassion grows out of the narrator's profound understanding of his own capacity for weakness and evil, and for the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of his comrades, and this compassion is a vital movement toward reverence.

The morning after Kiowa's death, his comrades search in the rain and sewage for his body. After hours of searching, they locate the body but are unable to move it. In the typical way of dealing with trauma, Azar jokes about Kiowa's death: "eating shit . . . wasted in the waste. A shit field. You got to admit, it's pure world-class irony" (158). For Bowker, the remorse is too overpowering to be repressed through profanity. He tells Azar to quit the vulgar jokes, and even Azar begins to sense the need for reverence. While working to release Kiowa from the mud, the group of soldiers stop: "The men stood quietly for a few seconds. There was a feeling of awe" (167). In the midst of a literal field of excrement, amid the random carnage and waste of war, the men of Alpha Company feel awe in the face of death. Woodruff describes the reverence and awe that come to soldiers at such times: "Together, they will be conscious of the fragility of their own lives, and perhaps they will feel a sense of awe . . . at the immensity of the reality that does not conform to human wishes, the reality of death" (*Reverence* 51). The immensity of what has happened to their "intelligent . . . gentle . . . quiet-spoken . . . brave . . . decent" friend confronts the men (O'Brien 157), and they feel awe for what is beyond their control. Kiowa's foul and vulgar death provides them with a more profound capacity for respect for their fellow human beings, and they feel reverence amidst the gore and helplessness of war.

In the chapter "Field Trip," the narrator returns to Vietnam twenty years after Kiowa's death. He revisits the field where Kiowa died, and in a deliberate act of reverence, releases Kiowa's moccasins into the river. The act is both an imaginative gesture toward the dead and a literal gesture toward reverence—reverence for the life and death of Kiowa. It is also a symbolic closure to the madness of the war—the carnage, trauma, and evil of fighting, killing,

and dying in a war seemingly without meaning or purpose. Like the stories that O'Brien tells, the symbolic act in a Vietnamese field cannot rectify the loss or lift the war out of its own moral degradation, but as an act of reverence it elevates the grief and pain to something that is beyond the power of human beings to change—something transcendent. Just as telling stories that get at the truth of the war are acts of reverence, the custom of treating the dead with ceremony is a type of custom that Woodruff says belongs to reverence, a custom “by which human beings distinguish themselves most importantly from beasts of prey” (*Reverence* 97). Although Kiowa died like an animal in the most repulsive of manners, through ceremony and the truthful telling of his story, his death is granted honor and reverence.

O'Brien's detailed telling of “story-truth” elevates the metaphysical importance behind the war and invites a sense of reverence to the narrative. Just as the reiteration of every concrete, tangible object that the men carry lends weight to the symbolic and metaphysical things they carry, a story with gruesome details of the brutality of war lends weight to the symbolic and metaphysical meanings beneath the concrete facts. Tina Chen in her essay “‘Unraveling the Deeper Meaning:’ Exile and the Embodied Poetics of Displacement in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*” says: “The close attention to the death and transformation of the body lays bare the paradox that characterizes any recounting of the war, emphasizing the very real horror of death even while elevating it into an aesthetic moment” (89). The elevation of horror to an aesthetic moment is an act itself of reverence, and it also provides the transcendent truth of beauty and the sublime as another thing to be in awe of, and to feel reverence for.

The language of storytelling accesses the transcendent truth of beauty and the sublime as it creates an attitude of reverence toward its subject. In W.T. Fitzgerald's essay, “Speakable Reverence: Human Language and the Scene of Prayer,” he says: “the conditions for manifesting an attitude of reverence are basic to our experience with language” (156). While the stories that O'Brien tells may be profane and irreverent in content, it is the act of using language to attain truth through storytelling that provides reverence for the lives wasted by the Vietnam War. Through stories, O'Brien “can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God” (172). Through his stories of Vietnam, the reader has an experience with reverence and feels awe inspired both by the brutality and the final humanity of the stories. As O'Brien says, “It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (74).

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