

2010

Lacan 's Linguistic Masculinity and the Metaphysical Female in *The Things They Carried*

Jamie Marie Wagner
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wagner, Jamie Marie (2010) "Lacan 's Linguistic Masculinity and the Metaphysical Female in *The Things They Carried*," *Articulāte*: Vol. 15 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol15/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Lacan's Linguistic Masculinity and the Metaphysical Female in The Things They Carried

Jamie Marie Wagner '10

The American war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s differed enormously from wars fought by American soldiers in the 200 years before, and its consequences for the American ideology and way of life were monumental to the history of Western development. Whereas men of previous wars were notably united behind coherent patriotic goals and identifiable moral motives, the soldiers sent to Vietnam were young, unwilling to fight, unclear of the purpose of their occupation, and doomed to a slow, humiliating failure. Whereas Joe L. Dubbert, in his book *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition*, synthesizes the hegemonic masculinity – or “manliness” – in the historical and sociological context of the Civil War with a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson – “Nothing could be more manly than actually going into combat to fight for high principles” (57) – Tim O'Brien, in his 1990 composite novel, *The Things They Carried*, finds it impossible to identify a unified motivating principle in the American soldiers with whom he fought in Vietnam: “Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment” (21). As a result, it seems that the fundamental fear and uncertainty of the war in Vietnam was itself an intensely emasculating force in the lives of the men who served there.

Elsewhere in the 1970s, while attempting to develop an understanding of what defines the archetypal woman – or rather to trace the process of how she becomes a woman – a number of prominent French philosophers focused their critical attention as much on linguistic theory as on psychoanalysis. While Sigmund Freud, in a 1933 lecture on “Femininity,” had drawn attention to what he referred to as the “enigma” of the woman, his psychoanalysis was reexamined in the 1960s and 70s by Jacques Lacan, who attempted to give an explanation of that which Freud had left undecided. Feminist theorist Luce Irigaray, on the other hand, rejected psychoanalytic theory completely, insisting that the “enigma” of the woman as evidenced by Freud does not come from a default – or even from a lack – in the nature of the woman which renders her incomprehensible, but rather from a fault in the discourse itself, as Freud tries to describe the woman with an essentially masculine discourse that does not correspond to reality. Even so, a close examination of Lacan's theory may lend insight into the writing of Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*, as his particular discourse may continue to employ the masculine biases implemented by Lacan and evidenced by Irigaray. In many ways, it seems that the very act of story-

telling in O'Brien's novel is a means by which men attempt to reassert their masculinities, by reorganizing and reexamining the realities of their experiences to search for coherence in their themes.

In her 1974 article, "Blind Spot on an Old Dream of Symmetry," Irigaray takes on a careful critical reading of Freud's "Femininity." To begin his lecture, she finds that Freud speaks more about biology than psychoanalysis, asserting that the "enigma" of the woman arises when her social and psychological characteristics do not correspond to the passivity expected of her generally as a result of the passive role of the woman in the process of reproduction. According to Freud, the "psychological character" must follow the model of sexual relations: "In coitus, the man and the woman mimic the type of relationship between the spermatozoa and the ovule: the male pursues the female that suits him" (Irigaray 12; translation is my own). Freud goes on by asserting, "we thus reduce, in the psychological point of view, the character of masculinity to the sole factor of aggression," and we can conclude that the character of femininity reduces similarly to the factor of passivity. As a result, Freud claims, "it is the mother, in all that concerns human sexuality, who serves as the paradigm of femininity in the debate on the relation between the masculine/feminine and active/passive couplings" (13). He notes particularly that, while the woman must remain passive according to her function in the sexual act, the process of lactation – the production of milk for a child – represents an example of a "productive activity" and is thus "a challenge to the phallic power."

Irigaray critiques the discourse of Freud by emphasizing how he approaches sexuality and reproduction in terms of an economy, where the phallus, as a producer, gives all power to the man, "the woman being only the receptacle which passively receives his product" (16). In Irigaray's analogy, "the uterus" represents the "farmland, factory, bank in which he will deposit his semen-capital in order that it might germinate, multiply, and fructify" (16). Importantly, as well, the woman in this economic system has no "claim" to "the property or the product," since she is "only 'passively' subjected to reproduction" (16). In this case, it is not that the woman naturally inhabits the passive position described by Freud, but that the linguistic system employed by psychoanalysis affords her no choice otherwise.

To search for an alternative to the economic discourse of Freud, which valorizes the phallus, we turn to the linguistic theosophy of Jacques Lacan, who begins with the central establishment of *jouissance* – a French word meaning enjoyment with a marked sexual connotation. "Thought is *jouissance*," Lacan asserts in a series of seminars from 1972-3. "This is what carries analytic discourse" (66; translation is my own). Essentially, he goes on to say, to speak is to express, by a system of signs, the unconscious mind. By speaking, we give voice to the unconscious, we manifest it and we understand it. What's more, since, according to Freud, unconscious thought is primarily occupied with desire, Lacan asserts that to speak is to manifest

desire, to speak is to manifest sexual pleasure. While there is, of course, in the theosophy of Lacan, the *jouissance* of the phallus which allows man to understand himself, to express his desires and to thereby manifest his unconscious character, the woman, lacking a phallus proper to herself, is incapable of exercising phallic *jouissance*. The result, according to Lacan, is that the woman cannot express herself and thus that man cannot understand her.

Nevertheless, to go further in his study of the woman, Lacan proposes that there is, in fact, a "supplementary *jouissance*" – a pleasure which is "not phallic" by which the woman may manifest her unconscious – although "maybe she herself knows nothing of it" (68-9). Principle to identifying the nature of the female *jouissance*, it is necessary to understand that, in the theosophy of Lacan, language precedes man. "The person," he writes, "is always the discourse of the master" (65). Essentially – and among other things – he means that all personal identity comes from the unconscious and manifests itself by language. However, a contradiction arises when we apply the same theory to the woman: although Lacan insists that she cannot explain herself with language because she is incapable of phallic *jouissance*, the woman is markedly manifested in the world as a woman. If all that exists begins with language, how can there exist something which language cannot explain? In response to this contradiction, Lacan proposes the existence of a *jouissance* which is not phallic. Because it does not come from the conventional masculine discourse – that which explains man – Lacan believes his other *jouissance* is in fact a *jouissance* of the "Other" – that is to say, of God, of a mystical force outside material comprehension. Where Freud had found his discourse insufficient to understand the woman, Lacan concludes that there exists something spiritual, mysterious and inaccessible outside the discourse of man which may be able to explain her.

In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien explores the often frightening and confusing possibility of a loss of language, which renders a man incapable of understanding others, of being understood by others and of understanding himself. In his piece, "How to Tell a True War Story," Mitchell Sanders recounts an incident where several American men on an all-night listening-post operation are haunted by the mysterious sounds of a "big swank gook cocktail party somewhere out there in the fog" (74). Importantly, what frightens the men is their inability to identify the source or the meaning of the sounds: "All these different voices. Not human voices, though. Because it's the mountains... the rock, it's *talking*. And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses. Everything talks... the whole country... Nam – it truly *talks*. The guys can't cope. They lose it" (74). In "The Ghost Soldiers," O'Brien describes "what terror was" in terms of a loss of human identity: "You slip out of your own skin, like molting, shedding your own history and your own future, leaving behind everything you ever were or wanted or believed in" (211). According to Lacan, this whole

understanding of personal identity is that which we manifest through language and thereby comprehend. As a result, as O'Brien finds, a man loses himself when he loses his ability to speak, when "all [he] can do is whimper and wait" (211).

What's more, O'Brien relates the terrifying possibility of lost language directly to a mystical quality in Mary Anne in "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." As Mark Fosse and his friends approach the Special Forces area after Mary Anne has been seen returning with the Greenies, they hear a mysterious music – "a chaotic, almost unmusical sound, without rhythm or form or progression, like the noise of nature" – accompanied by "a woman's voice... half singing, half chanting, but the lyrics seemed to be in a foreign tongue" (108). What's more, when Fosse finally confronts Mary Anne inside the tent, he finds that "at the girl's throat was a necklace of human tongues... elongated and narrow... one overlapping the next, the tips curling upwards as if caught in a final shrill syllable" (110). In this way, Fosse's complete inability to understand the change in Mary Anne is likened directly to both the absence of masculine language and a mythical, inaccessible language belonging only to women: "In the darkness there was that weird tribal music, which seemed to come from the Earth itself, from the deep rain forest, and a woman's voice rising up in a language beyond translation" (112). Mary Anne herself expresses the impossibility of Fosse's comprehension with her first words to him in the tent: "There's no sense talking" (111).

Throughout *The Things They Carried*, there are a number of other women whom O'Brien characterizes by both silence and mystery. In the story "Style," for example, the men come upon a young Vietnamese girl whose family lies inside the house, "dead and badly burned" (135). As the men drag the family out, "the girl danced with her eyes half closed, her feet bare... sometimes making a slow twirl, sometimes smiling to herself." O'Brien notes that "she put the palms of her hands against her ears, which must've meant something," and Azar becomes obsessed with the girl, frequently asking, "Why's she dancing?" reiterating, "I don't get it," and concluding, "Probably some weird ritual" (136). Importantly, as the mystery of the girl becomes more disturbing to the men, O'Brien's description of her becomes more mythical: "The girl went up on her toes and made a slow turn and danced through the smoke. Her face had a dreamy look, quiet and composed." Mary Anne, as well, as she becomes more infatuated with the war, begins to take "crazy, death-wish chances – things that even the Greenies balked at" (115). In this way, the stranger and more distant she seems to the men, the more terrifying and even ethereal she becomes:

On occasion, when they were taken under fire, Mary Anne would stand quietly and watch the tracer rounds snap by, a little smile at her lips, intent on some private transaction with the war. Other times she would simply vanish altogether – for hours, for days... If you believe the

Greenies, Rat said, Mary Anne was still somewhere out there in the dark. Odd movements, odd shapes... and a couple of times they saw her sliding through the shadows. Not quite, but almost. She had crossed to the other side. (116)

When confronted with deeper metaphysical mysteries, O'Brien has a tendency to manifest his struggle to comprehend in feminized bodies, even those belonging to male characters. In "The Man I Killed," for example, O'Brien expresses his painful regret and fear of death by imagining the background of a young, dead Vietnamese man: "His eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman's, and at school the boys sometimes teased him about how pretty he was, the arched eyebrows and long shapely fingers, and on the playground they mimicked a woman's walk and made fun of his smooth skin" (127). In the story "Church," where the American men consider the sanctity of a Batangan temple and the virtues of spiritual life, O'Brien introduces two old Vietnamese monks, both exhibiting arguably feminine characteristics and actions: "Each morning the two monks brought us buckets of water. They giggled when we stripped down to bathe; they smiled happily when we soaped up and splashed one another" (119).

Of course, O'Brien's tendency to examine mysterious, painful, and spiritual topics as embodied in female characters began when he was nine years old, as he notes in the final story of his book, "The Lives of the Dead." Here, O'Brien describes a fantasy encounter he had in grade school after the death of a girl in his class: "It was a dream, I suppose, or a daydream, but I made it happen. I saw her coming down the middle of Main Street, all alone... A nine-year-old girl, just a kid, and yet there was something ageless in her eyes – not a child, not an adult – just a bright ongoing everness" (238). Importantly, however, although the metaphysical description of women in O'Brien's writing may be suggestive of the higher comprehension made possible by the preternatural feminine language as described by Lacan, it is clear that O'Brien's ideology is very much rooted in the one fundamental supposition so criticized by Irigaray: that language – the conventional masculine language employed by patriarchal society – should have the power to disclose the full meaning of everything.

O'Brien explains his writing process in *The Things They Carried*:

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain. (158)

In this way, O'Brien writes and rewrites the same stories – as "Speaking of Courage," "Notes," "In the Field" and "Field Trip" each examine the death of Kiowa and its meaning to the men who were there – in order to reorganize

his reality, in an attempt to understand it. "What stories can do," he explains later, "is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God" (180). Rat Kiley, in fact, does the same thing: "Whenever he told the story, Rat had a tendency to stop now and then, interrupting the flow, inserting little clarifications or bits of analysis and personal opinion... Rat Kiley couldn't help it. He wanted to bracket the full range of meaning" (106). So much does O'Brien believe in the ability of language and story-telling to sort out the truth in human experience, he attributes Norman Bowker's suicide to his inability to articulate his thoughts after the war: "What you should do, Tim," Bowker writes in "Notes," "is write a story about a guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole... This guy wants to talk about it, but he *can't*... 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*" (157). O'Brien's story "Speaking of Courage" is entirely dedicated to Bowker's desire to explain his experience in Vietnam and the complete impotence he feels as a result of his inability. In this way, according to O'Brien, being at a loss for words is not only being at a loss for understanding but also at a loss for masculinity.

Notably, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is not a linear novel recounting an explicit struggle and a victory in war. Instead, his collection of stories is circular and emotional, the on-going attempt of one man to reorganize his entire personal history in order to understand the meaning of its broadest themes: love, death, violence and friendship among them. While this circular logic is often regarded as an Eastern process of thought, and really a more feminine, cyclical ideology – in comparison with the straight-forward, linear thinking more commonly recognized as Western and masculine – in light of Luce Irigaray's critique of conventional understanding as closed and phallo-centric, as well as Jacques Lacan's hypothesis of the unspoken, metaphysical nature of woman, it is well possible to assert that O'Brien's circular writing is less the employment of a feminine form than an attempt to reestablish his masculinity by searching for a conclusive understanding of his emasculating experiences in Vietnam. In "How to Tell a True War Story" – where O'Brien recounts Rat Kiley's frustrated attack on a young water buffalo after the death of his best friend – the author explains,

Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually it's an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain that as a rule she hates war stories; she can't understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore... What I should do, she'll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell.

I won't say it but I'll think it.

I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think *You dumb cooze*...

All you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth... You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it. (84-5)

In this instance we can see conclusively that O'Brien refuses to put his experiences behind him, refuses to find solace in anything but constantly repeating his stories in the attempt to reach some coherent understanding. According to Lacan and Irigaray, this insistence on the complete truth of established language is a flaw in masculine thought, one that leads to contradictions like Freud's "enigma" of the woman. His interjection, then – "*You dumb cooze*" – is not only his nostalgic nod to the characteristic slang of an old friend, but the breaking through of his own frustration. Unable to fulfill his desire to make sense of his emasculating war experiences through story-telling, O'Brien falls back on a time-honored technique of reasserting masculinity: the degradation of the female.

Works Cited

- Dubbert, Joe L. "The Civil War: Manliness Through Combat." *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979. 55-79.
- Irigaray, Luce. "La Tache aveugle d'un vieux rêve de symétrie." *Speculum: De l'Autre Femme*. Éditions de Minuit, 1974.
- Lacan, Jacques. "Encore: 1972-1973." *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1975.
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.