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Michael Casey's *Obscenities* A Critique of Workaday Brutality

Introduction & Background

In 1972, as the American ground war in Viet Nam was winding down—and the air war was escalating in North Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos—a unique volume of poetry, Michael Casey's *Obscenities*, was published by Yale University Press as part of its Yale Younger Poets series. Casey's book was significant because it was the first major single-author volume published by a veteran of the war in Viet Nam. While most contemporary and subsequent works by veterans of the war focused on the harrowing experience of combat—including the veteran poetry anthology *Winning Hearts and Minds* (1972) and the short story collection *Free Fire Zone* (1973)—Casey's *Obscenities* is based on the author's experience in-country as a noncombatant, a military policeman at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri and near Chu Lai, in South Viet Nam.

In *Obscenities*, Michael Casey creates what Stanley Kunitz calls an “anti-poetry” (Casey ix) that is modeled on the verbal discourse of the Viet Nam-era military. The free-verse poems that comprise the text lack not only traditionally “poetic” formal elements, such as regular meter or rhyme, but also even the rudiments of figurative language: metaphor, simile, and symbol rarely if ever appear in the book's 68 pages. Instead, *Obscenities* relies for affect on the seeming authenticity and genuineness of its language, its seeming closeness to how real people think and talk. The book itself is structured as a collection of dramatic monologues spoken in the voices and dialects of various Viet Nam-era soldiers, from military policemen and bored company clerks to ambulance drivers and graves registration workers. Each short,

coarse, even “obscene” monologue that makes up the text then acts as a snippet of overheard or transcribed “testimony” by those who worked as REMFs (Rear-Echelon Mother Fuckers; noncombatant soldiers) during the war. The confluence of the volume’s two primary strategies—the anthologizing of diverse speakers and the use of intentionally non-poetic or quotidian language—gives the text the feel of an oral history, much like Studs Terkel’s landmark study of World War II, *The Good War*,¹ or Mark Baker’s seminal *Nam*, or any of the countless of volumes like them, books that tell the personal stories of a community experiencing and creating history.

While borrowing the feel, and perhaps the documentary ethos of a transcribed oral history, *Obscenities* is nonetheless a work of fiction, however obscured the hand and voice of the poet might be within each poem.¹ As such a work of fiction, *Obscenities* does not strive for “balance” or “objectivity” when evoking the competing discourses of the war in Viet Nam and its participants. In *Obscenities*, Michael Casey highlights and implicitly protests the stunningly casual relationship with violence and brutality fostered by life in the military by depicting it as an everyday occurrence, simply part of a “job.” The text showcases, as Robert Langbaum writes in *The Poetry of Experience*, the “facts from within” (Langbaum 78) of characters that are unwilling or unable to understand human tragedy or who are actively complicit in its perpetuation. A banal, unthinking evil, to borrow from Hannah Arendt, numbs Casey’s speakers into accepting that death and suffering are simply a part of “business as usual” in the Viet Nam-era military. By showing speaker after speaker uncritically doing his job, registering no shock or outrage or sense of tragedy over institutionalized racism, overt and arbitrary police brutality, or even the wanton loss of human life, Casey’s portrait of the culture of the American military is an unpleasant one, a gallery of confessions—however unwitting or unwilling—that forces Americans to actively confront the things done or let happen in their name.

Voice and *Obscenities*

The critics who have examined *Obscenities* have focused overwhelmingly on the novelty of Casey’s use of language, his “revolutionary idiom” for representing the war, or rather his “anti-poetic” sensibility and approach to writing.² In focusing so heavily on this aspect of Casey’s work, however, these writers have for the most part overlooked the complex politics of the volume, in particular its sensitive critique of American cultural attitudes toward violence, the Vietnamese, and the war itself. Likewise, these critics have underplayed the fact that *Obscenities* is conceived not simply as a collection of individual lyrics, but as a coherent volume of monologues, a sustained work that must be read holistically for the fullest range of meanings to

emerge. In his foreword to the text, Stanley Kunitz even goes so far as to suggest such a reading:

I recommend reading this book straight through, from first to last, as though it were a novel or a play, in order to follow the implicit development of the action, a progress of awareness, and to make the acquaintance of a sterling cast of recurring characters . . . (Casey xii)

Taken in isolation, the poems are simply novel representations of some element of the war. When examined as a cycle, however, as a sequence of related dramatic monologues, a far more complicated and coherent pattern of social critique emerges, one that is made in an innovative “anti-poetic” language reflective of the oral discourse of the war. As a volume, *Obscenities* offers an oblique, ironic critique of the *culture* of the American war in Indochina, dissecting the complex weave of social roles, conflicts, and occupational situations with which the vast majority of veterans—perhaps 90% of participants—were faced.³ Casey formally, linguistically, and thematically analyzes the “system” that the American presence in Viet Nam created and sustained, and the effects of that system, both moral and psychological, of those embroiled in it. Casey pursues this critique through a complex sampling of the American voices in the theatre of war, of which his authorial voice is only one. The amalgamation of languages and moral perspectives on the war that comprises *Obscenities* forces the reader to confront actively the discourses of the war and the cultural attitudes those discourses represent.

Through creating an anthology of these fictional voices, Casey is free to explore critically a cross-section of opinions on life in the military and in the ‘Nam. Each of Casey’s unique cast of characters presents his own view, blunt and unvarnished, on some element of his experience, in a language as common and coarse and obscene as war itself. The overall effect of this technique is that the volume has the feel and tone of an oral history similar to Mark Baker’s *Nam* or Wallace Terry’s *Bloods*.⁴ Evoking the ethos of transcribed interviews or overheard conversation, the fictionalized dramatic monologues that comprise *Obscenities* continually efface the evidence of their own construction as lyric or even “literary” constructions; as readers, we are immersed in what we see and hear as the “authentic” stories and unvarnished languages of those who participated in the war.⁵ This masking of the authorial presence reinforces the polyphony and dialogism of the texts: the characters’ monologues, resisting “poetic” or “lyrical” expression, are not structured by the artifice of formal poetry but rather by the verbal discourse in which people

like them engage every day. Casey's fidelity to the aural contours of such language strengthens the illusion of his removal or peripheral involvement in the text. As an author, of course his vision is the controlling one; his command over the language, however, in his best poems makes that hard to detect.

Surprisingly, perhaps the most direct literary forerunner to this volume is not so much Owen or Sassoon or previous war writing, but rather works such as Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), the fictional poetic survey of lives in a Midwestern turn-of-the-century town. Like a post-mortem oral history, each entry in *Spoon River Anthology* is in the voice of a deceased resident of the town, and illuminative of a certain unspoken or "subterranean" element of life in Spoon River. As all of Masters' speakers are dead, "all sleeping, sleeping on the hill," according to the "Introduction," they are free to depict their lives honestly, according to their own understanding, without fear of social consequences or sanction. Each townspeople can, through the democratizing condition of death, express her version of "truth." "Minerva Jones" is a prime example, a short and tragic narrative of a poet who becomes pregnant, possibly after being raped:

I AM Minerva, the village poetess,
Hooted at, jeered at by the Yahoos of the street
For my heavy body, cock-eye, and rolling walk,
And all the more when "Butch" Weldy
Captured me after a brutal hunt.
He left me to my fate with Doctor Meyers;
And I sank into death, growing numb from the feet up,
Like one stepping deeper and deeper into a stream of ice.
Will some one go to the village newspaper,
And gather into a book the verses I wrote?--
I thirsted so for love
I hungered so for life! (Masters 108)

Likewise, "John M. Church" is in the voice of a dead lawyer, who seems not to understand the ironic contrast between his "honored" and "successful" life "beat[ing] the claims / Of the crippled, the widow and orphan," (Masters 171) and the ignominy of his death and decomposition:

I WAS attorney for the "Q"
And the Indemnity Company which insured

The owners of the mine.
I pulled the wires with judge and jury,
And the upper courts, to beat the claims
Of the crippled, the widow and orphan,
And made a fortune thereat.
The bar association sang my praises
In a high-flown resolution.
And the floral tributes were many—
But the rats devoured my heart
And a snake made a nest in my skull! (Masters 171)

John E. Hallwas, editor of *Spoon River Anthology: An Annotated Edition* (1992) suggests that while Masters was not the first American author to expose the harsh conditions of modern life and ugly truths that reside within the typical American soul, “he was the first to create ‘a whole community civically and ecologically related and intertwined,’ in which such hidden factors were exposed” (Masters 13). *Spoon River Anthology* as a volume, then, serves as a chilling exposé of not only the “soul secrets, diseases, faults and tragedies” in the “hidden hearts of human beings,” but also the social environment, the “jungle of life” (Whitney, qtd. in Masters 18) in which “biological, economic, political, religious, and social forces . . . limit human freedom and sometimes destroy individuals” (Masters 18). The fragmentary meta-narrative that emerges from reading *Spoon River Anthology* evokes a stark American landscape defined by lust, prejudice, zealotry, and hypocrisy, a systematic deconstruction of the myth of what John Narveson calls the “American Arcadia” (Narveson 53). The lyrics that comprise *Spoon River Anthology* are, in isolation, unremarkable; when viewed as a collection, however, Masters’ work is a chilling portrait of the complex “secret life” of an archetypal American community.

William March’s World War I novel *Company K* (1933)⁶ deploys a similar strategy, albeit in prose, in depicting the lives and experiences of an American rifle company before, during, and after the Great War. March’s novel is written as a series of 123 short, interconnected narratives, each in the voice of a soldier in the title company. The narratives, tied together conceptually but not sequentially, span the course of the war and its immediate aftermath and explore the traumas of combat and its effects on the soldiers who experienced it, both living and dead. Each short chapter of the novel operates in much the same way as the sardonic epitaphs spoken by the residents of Spoon River, revealing personal and often unflattering truths about their narrator’s experience—and conduct—during the war.

Often offering differing, if not outright contradictory, versions of the same events, March's multiple narrators situate *Company K* as a truly dialogic novel, fraught with, even defined by the colloquy of competing subjectivities and interpretations of the American experience in the Great War. The war itself, as subject of this discourse, is a site of conflict and instability—no one voice can claim authority over any but a tiny fraction of the “story” of the war. This, however, seems to be March's aim, leaving violently unresolved questions of fact and morality in the text; as the discourse evolves, no authoritative account, no controlling heroic voice directs our experience of the text. In the end, we know, by design, only a small part of some of the many stories that comprise the narrative of the war. One of the crucial events in the novel is the story of soldiers ordered by their (grossly incompetent) captain to execute prisoners of war. Here the event is told, and interpreted, by two participants; one who refused to carry out the execution, and one who participated. The story told by “Private Walter Drury,” a soldier who deserts rather than execute innocents, is a revelatory meditation on the common condition of all soldiers as “prisoners” to political and military authority. After observing the prisoners, “mostly young boys with fine yellow fuzz on their faces,” “huddled together in the center of the pit,” Drury makes this connection:

Then suddenly my own knees got weak. “No,” I said; “no—I won't do it . . .” Corporal Foster was getting the prisoners lined up in single file, swearing angrily and waving his hands about . . . “Why don't I refuse to do this?” I thought. “Why don't all of us refuse? If enough of us refuse, what can they do about it? . . .” Then I saw the truth clearly: “We're prisoners too: We're all prisoners . . . No!” I said. “I won't do it!” (March 84).

After his refusal, Drury runs off into the woods, knowing the eventually he will be picked up by the military police and tried, possibly executed, as a deserter. The narrative ends abruptly with Drury's hope that he will “maybe get off with twenty years.—Twenty years isn't such as long time” (March 85).

A contrasting view of the same incident is presented in the subsequent chapter, from the perspective of “Private Charles Gordon.” Unlike Drury, Gordon carries out his orders, though he shows a measure of empathy and regret, both during and after:

Suddenly the blue-eyed man [in the pit] looked at me and smiled, and before I knew what I was doing, I smiled back at him. Then Sergeant

Pelton gave the signal to fire and the rifles began cracking and spraying bullets from side to side. I took steady aim at the blue-eyed man. For some reason I wanted him to be killed instantly. He bent double, clutched his belly with his hands and said “Oh! . . . Oh!” like a boy who had eaten green plums. Then he raised his hands in the air, and I saw that most of his fingers were shot away and were leaking blood like water running out of a leaky faucet. “Oh! . . . Oh!” he kept saying in an amazed voice . . . “Oh! Oh! Oh!” (March 86)

March underscores such a graphic depiction of cold-blooded killing—a war crime, by today’s standards—with an odd moment of revelation, similar to the one that Drury has:

I stood there spraying bullets from side to side in accordance with instructions . . . “Everything I was ever taught to believe about mercy, justice and virtue is a lie,” I thought . . . “But the biggest lie of all are the words that ‘God is Love.’ That is really the most terrible lie that man ever thought of.” (March 86)

It is through the concatenation of these seemingly honest and often horrifying narrative “snapshots” of the war that March conveys his own sense of “truth” about the war: it is an ugly, violent business in which individuals struggle to maintain a sense of their own humanity—some succeed, some fail. While March’s novel on the whole may be anti-war, showcasing the horrible traumas physical, psychological, and moral on those who fought it, many discrete voices in the text are not: some are unrepentant killers, petty bureaucrats, sadists, or hawkish, chickenshit officers. March’s novel, then, embodies both formally and thematically the complexity and conflict of discourse itself on the war: *Company K* presents the competing voices on the war *en masse*, and forces the reader to confront them both individually and holistically, enacting what Mikhail Bakhtin called in “Discourse in the Novel” a *heteroglossia*,⁷ a truly multi-voiced text that enacts the dialogic clash of disparate personas and perspectives that defines, at least in part, modernity. Dispelling the myth of the noble American doughboy fighting overseas to make the world safe for democracy, March’s novel shows the community of soldiers as alternatively frightened, noble, and vicious, a community continually in conflict with itself and with the war.

Both *Company K* and *Spoon River Anthology*, though fundamentally different texts, have as their core aim the creation of a community of voices that capture the sense—flaws and all—of a community living, working, and dying in a specific time and place. Michael Casey's *Obscenities* employs a similar method of narration, toward a similar end, in depicting life as a noncombatant soldier during the war in Viet Nam. Unlike the vast majority of texts, both in poetry and in prose, that deal with the American war in Viet Nam, Michael Casey's *Obscenities* is not primarily a chronicle of the traumas and horrors of combat; instead, the volume invites its reader into the world of the soldiers who served in support functions, or, as combat soldiers might refer to them, as "REMFs" (Rear-Echelon Mother Fuckers), "housecats," or "POGs" ("Persons Other than Grunts). *Obscenities* is one of the only texts to give voice to this element of the Viet Nam veteran experience, despite the fact that the majority of U.S. soldiers who served in Southeast Asia served in non-combat or support roles.

And it is *community* that is at the center of Casey's project in *Obscenities*, but not the romanticized brotherhood of soldiers that sits at the center of the war-writing tradition, the "band of brothers" that endures hardship and atrocity not for some grand cause but for one another. As true as that depiction may in some cases be, Casey's agenda in *Obscenities* is to showcase, and criticize, something much larger: the bureaucratized, mechanistic, deadening "work culture" of the American military presence in Viet Nam. Using perhaps the most ironic of modern forms—the dramatic monologue—Casey undertakes a wide survey of the ordinary participants in the American war effort: bored company clerks, drill instructors, lazy officers, ambulance drivers, even graves registration workers, Casey evokes the heteroglossia central to discourse—even intra-military discourse—on the war, the wild clashing of perspectives and languages that made the war in Viet Nam one of America's most controversial.

Obscenities, Brutality, and Tragic Vision

The poem that opens *Obscenities*, the intentionally clumsily titled "The Company Physical Combat Proficiency Average," frames the collection as intimately concerned with the bureaucratic elements of military life, and how individual soldiers fit into (or fail to fit into) those systems. Surprisingly, the poem is *not* on the surface what one might expect: a poem that protests the dehumanization and "quantification" of the value of soldiers. Instead, the poem is a casual complaint about the minor injustices of military life:

The company averag'd be higher
 But Ramos there
 He went into the mile run
 With a near four hundred
 Burnt smoke for the first three laps
 An then he got sick
 Ana committee group sergeant there
 Another Puerto Rican fella
 Told him ta quit ta leave
 An so he got a zero on the whole test
 An that brought the company average
 Down a point ana half
 In my opinion
 Ramos got fucked
 He could've lowcrawled his ass
 The rest a the way
 An still got a four fifty
 If I'd a seed that sergeant
 I'm not ascairt a nobody
 I'd a beat the shit out a him
 But don't feel bad, Ramos
 What's done is did
 That's all right, son
 Ya git another chance tomorrer
 Though that don't help
 The company average none (3)

The voice of this poem is not that of Casey the poet, but rather that of an unnamed soldier commenting on the failure of one of his comrades in a training assessment. Addressed to a group of soldiers (who here serve as the dramatic monologue's auditors), the poem's language is, as Casey's critics rightly note, "anti-poetic," the gruff slang of an uneducated man—an "average" man in the company—genuinely griping to his friends about the annoyances of getting "fucked" by the "committee group sergeant" and having the "company average" brought down "a point ana half" (3). Further than the surface complaint, however, is a subterranean violence: the speaker brags that he "[would] a beat the shit out a" the sergeant if he was treated as Ramos had been. The speaker's raw idiolect, and his seemingly genuine—and

uncritical—indignation and anger, introduce him as the first in a long catalogue of speakers in the book whose points of view on military life are uniquely their own, perhaps diverging wildly from the poet's own perspective.⁸

Obscenities depicts the casual relationship with violence that is hinted at in “The Company Physical Combat Proficiency Average” more centrally in “Transcribed Proof of Denial for Arthur Dore.” Written in a similar “anti-poetic” idiom, this poem evokes a different voice, this one even more enthralled with violence than the speaker in the first poem:

Mah man Blake
Yo days is numbered
They's gonna open up
An envelope
At yo house
Someday raht soon
An they jus gonna be
A lil piece of yo sorry hide
In ther an yo girl
Gonna say whas this hier
An Ahm gonna be ther too
To console er
With mah rod of salvation
Yo dam raht (4)

This poem is a mixture of masculine posturing and genuine threat, an angry, hyperbolic rant against “Blake” in which the speaker promises to rip him to pieces and mail him home, and then to “console” his girlfriend with his “rod of salvation.” It is not the speaker's cavalier attitude toward violence (seriously conceived or not) that makes this poem important in the context of the volume, however. As the poem concludes, the speaker surprisingly turns his attention to Casey the author, who, acting as an auditor or bystander, was supposedly documenting and validating the threat on Blake's life:

Morro's you last day on earth
Fo sho
Cuz mah man Casey's
Gonna remahn me

So as Ah won' firget
Ain' that raht, Casey
Casey?
Sheeit
Yo been sleepin
An ain' heerd a word
Ah been sayin
Don' deny it now
Ah ain' even gonna believe ya (5)

Here Casey presents himself—or an imagined version thereof—as a passive witness to the culture of brutality of military life, quietly documenting the conflicts between soldiers in his unit. His poem is literally that document, acting as a “transcription” of the threat that Arthur Dore delivers to Blake—a threat that Dore “ain’ even gonna believe” that Casey heard.

“Bagley” presents Casey in a similar way. Here, the author reveals himself as the subject of the poem in the last few lines, as viewed through the eyes of one of his colleagues in the military police. Hovering on the edge of the book’s actions, Casey is a bit player, one of many cogs in a large machine:

I was talking
To one of the
Chu Lai pigs
At the gate there
An he said
Some of the
Bayonet pigs
Caught him
In a skivvy girl house
Last night
An he accused
One of us
Of pointing
A weapon at him
I asked him
What did the due look like?
And he said

I don't know
Sort of big
Soft of doofus looking
An I knew right away
It was you, Casey (55)

Poems like “Arthur Dore” and “Bagley,” establish “Casey” as a character within the community that he is describing, an ordinary participant in the occupational culture of the war, subject to the same pressures and experiencing the same things as any other actor in the text. By casting himself, or rather a fictionalized version of himself, as the audience—or overhearer—of these monologues, Casey builds the sense that he is simply replaying conversations that he has heard. The resultant fiction is that Casey’s place as author in the narrative of *Obscenities*, like ours as readers, is on the periphery, looking in on the more central (and often more violent) speakers rather than an overt, controlling voice. “Casey’s” primary actions, like pointing his weapon at one of the “Chu Lai pigs,” happen primarily out of frame—and his voice is merely one in the (very vocal) crowd. In this sense, Casey in *Obscenities* undermines his own credibility as a narrator of events—very much like the fictionalized narrator “Tim O’Brien” does in *The Things They Carried*.

Indeed, even “Casey’s” voice is so submerged in the text that we only directly hear from him—at least in a definitive sense—once. In “Hoa Binh,” the penultimate poem in the volume, Casey reports his encounter with “Stanley,” one of the Vietnamese girls who work for the Americans at his base:

August thirty-first
Stanley was all excited
She just made eighteen
And got to vote
For the first time
There were sixteen slates
To vote for
In Vietnam that year
And every slate’s poster
Said that
That slate
Wanted Hoa Binh?
From voting

She came back to me
All excited
Casee
I vote for Hoa Binh
That's nice, Stanley
I did too
Back in Hoa Ky¹⁰
I hope your vote counts. (61)

This poem is exceedingly simple, containing little commentary by “Casey” the narrator, and even less by Casey the author. The emotion, however, that pervades the poem, is one of skeptical hope. “Casee” sees in Stanley the naïveté and idealism that perhaps he once had about democracy, and the hope for “hoa binh,” (peace), but obviously no longer has. The wistfulness here, compounded with both Casey and Stanley’s status as subject to the decisions of faraway American policy makers (her vote might not count in “Hoa Ky,” the U.S.), gives the poem a sense of resignation and agnosticism. The narrator does not know what will happen, but he is obviously not optimistic for a quick resolution of the war.

The majority of voices in *Obscenities*, however, are not nearly as self-aware as “Casey” is in “Hoa Binh.” Casey presents us in *Obscenities* speakers that are often completely enmeshed in their own situations, uncritically accepting the violence and brutality that inform their lives in the military. Violence—mostly toward other soldiers, not toward an external “enemy”—is simply part of their occupation, and approached with the same matter-of-factness as any mundane task might be. Deadened or numbed by the occupational machinery of the military, Casey’s speakers often present violence and death as a fact of life, or even as something to laugh at. “Sierra Tango” is an excellent example of this perspective on violence. The poem, framed in part as a military policeman’s incident report, shifts from a sterile, impersonal document of a soldier being arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct, to an almost giddy discussion of that soldier’s brutalization at the hands of the police:

Wild Irish Rose Wine
Quart bottle half full
Was found unsecured
In subject’s vehicle
Subject became belligerent

And directed profanity
Towards Mike Papa¹¹ Armen
Such reprehensible conduct
Merited subject ride
To Provost Marshal's Office
Where subject was cited
And released to unit
On department of defense
Form six-two-niner
Subject's vehicle was secured
At scene by Mike Papas
Did they ever whip
His sorry ass
Lots of stick time there (15)

Most of the report here depicts a routine stop and arrest for a minor infraction. The commentary at the end, however, reveals, with a palpable *absence* of revulsion, that the subject has indeed endured a brutal Rodney King-style beating, having “[h]is sorry ass” whipped for an extended period of “stick time” (i.e., the time that he was beaten with police clubs). The poem’s title, “Sierra Tango,” reveals that the “stick time” is the real concern here—“sierra” and “tango” refer to “S” (stick) and “T” (time) in the phonetic radio alphabet. Titling the poem in this way indicates literally an encoded acceptance of violence and arbitrary brutality; as casually as the speaker refers to “Mike Papas,” so does he implicitly accept the “Sierra Tango” that his victim endures, for an offense as minor as “direct[ing] profanity towards Mike Papa Armen.”

A similar approach to violence as an accepted part of a military “job” is present in “The Box Riot, Ft. Leonard Wood Stockade, July 26th, 1969.” Essentially a short narrative about a military policeman’s participation in shutting down a prison riot, the speaker takes a strikingly casual attitude toward the brutality he witnesses and in which he participates:

One of the engineers
They think is dead
Ya could see inside his head
Only Africa and Wilkerson
An me was there

They started biffin us with
Two by fours
I grabbed a two by four
An started biffin them back
Christ almighty
They not cutting me any slack
I'm not cutting them any (17)

The speaker's actions are governed by a simple logic of retribution: since he gets "no slack," the rioting prisoners deserve none. There is little anger here, despite the fact that "one of the engineers / they think is dead" and they could "see inside his head." The speaker is merely doing his job, without thinking too much about it: he's simply "biffin them back." Simple, terse language, here punctuated by both soft and hard end-rhymes ("almighty" and "any"; "dead" and "head"; "back" and "slack") gives the poem a deadening and detached tone, mirroring its speaker's nearly rote approach to what he is doing.

While poems like "Sierra Tango" and "The Box Riot," show their speakers involved in a casual, unthinking violence, the later poems in *Obscenities*, many taking place in Viet Nam itself, show a deeper, more narcissistic detachment from the violence and death that their speakers deal with each day, an inward-turning detachment directly related to their conceptualization of violence as an occupational expectation. Because they are part of an organization built on the proliferation and support of violence, they accept its effects unthinkingly, especially when it happens to someone else. Instead of confronting the trauma of war or mourning its victims, the most shocking poems in *Obscenities* focus rather on the sense of inconvenience, boredom, disgust, frustration, resentment, or embarrassment the speaker feels after seeing or dealing with others' suffering; these speakers, to borrow from T.S. Eliot in "The Dry Salvages," "had the experience but missed the meaning" (Eliot 133). In many of these poems, the most real or substantive tragedies in war are portrayed as secondary or tangential to the speaker's often emotionally inappropriate *reaction* to them. This depiction is, of course, intentional; through its ironic depictions of morally insensitive characters, *Obscenities* subtly and obliquely comments on the moral inadequacy of many Americans' response to that suffering. We are thus asked by the most powerful poems in Casey's book to confront not only the horror of war but also our particularly American numbness to it.

"27th Surgical Hospital" provides an excellent example of this dual analysis. In this poem, the speaker is a soldier, most likely an ambulance driver, delivering

an injured Vietnamese to a field hospital. The poem reads as a complaint about a professional annoyance, in this case having to drive an accident victim to a hospital farther away that will treat him:

The honcho nurse there
Hates dinks
This head nurse
Always hassles me
When I bring one in
The first thing
She asks me is
Is he a combat casualty?
Hell no, lady
This dink just
Got hit by a truck
An American truck
That beat feet after hitting him
An he bleeding
All over my spit shine
Take him to the Vietnamese hospital in An Tan
The woman don't realize
That it's far away
That her hospital's closer
That blood makes me sick (42)

Here, the actual fact of the Vietnamese victim's condition is of marginal importance to the speaker. The focus of the poem is really on the inconvenience that the speaker must overcome in dealing with the "honcho nurse" who "hates dinks." While he acknowledges that Americans have responsibility for injuring the Vietnamese—it was "An American truck" that hit him—the injustice or tragedy of the situation in terms of the potential loss of a valuable human life escapes his notice. We might expect that, given the driver's almost angry objection to being "hassled," that the poem is going to be about the humanitarian righteousness of the speaker; he is, after all, taking an injured man to a hospital. When he is instructed to "Take him to the Vietnamese hospital in An Tan," however, the tone becomes dour, even bleak, but not because of the fate of the Vietnamese: he decries the idea that "The woman don't realize / That it's far away / That her hospital is closer / That

blood makes me sick" (42). The three parallel repetitions of the strong "That[s] . . ." remains, surprisingly, focused on the "hassle" he has to go through in order to relieve himself of the injured Vietnamese: he is "bleeding / all over [his] spit shine"; the other hospital is "far away," and "that blood makes [him] sick." His spit-shined shoes and nausea are more important, evidently, than the innocent Vietnamese hit by "An American truck." The poem's "anti-poetic" lineation and lack of punctuation and stanza divisions both heightens and calls attention to the speaker's sense of uneasiness, continually challenging the reader to reconcile the unconventional aural and visual features of the poem with the expected grammatical structures of the language.

At its core, the poem's purpose, at least as far as the speaker is concerned, is to relay *his* problems to the audience, not those of the accident victim. The speaker registers an implicit refusal to acknowledge the injustice of the situation in a context beyond the immediate, a central failure of many of Casey's characters. While not overtly hostile to those around them, speakers like the ambulance driver maintain a certain level of innocence or detachment, willful or not, from the situations in which they find themselves. In "27th Surgical Hospital," we as readers hear nothing of the tragedy of this situation, of the possibility of the speaker learning anything from this experience. It could be said that Casey's speakers lack what Richard Sewall calls a "tragic vision" (Sewall 3) that enables some form of transcendent understanding of "the blight that man was born for," of the permanence and the mystery of human suffering" (Sewall 4). Instead of seeing the loss of life as a moral wrong, or as a means to a greater understanding of the nature of the world—like Oedipus does after his final revelation or Job at the apex of his suffering, Casey's speakers are unable or unwilling to make the pain they witness *mean* anything, electing instead to remain innocent in the worst possible sense of the word, isolating themselves in an amoral vacuum.

Many of the characters that populate *Obscenities* seem to suffer this failure to imagine; they lack the vision, for whatever reason, to see the results of war as anything but an isolated event, as something that simply "is." There is no sense of an enabling narrative context here, nothing learned, nothing mourned. Casey further develops this idea in subsequent poems in the collection. "The LZ Gator Body Collector," one of Casey's most famous poems, shows the same refusal or inability to see the tragedy of a situation:

See
Her back is arched

Like something's under it
That's why I thought
It was booby trapped
But it's not
It just might have been
Over this rock here
And somebody moved it
After corpus morta stiffened it
I didn't know it was
A woman at first
I couldn't tell
But then I grabbed
Down there
It's a woman or was
It's all right
I didn't mind
I had gloves on then (56)

As in “27th Surgical Hospital,” the speaker is an individual who deals with death and suffering every day—he is the “body collector” for LZ Gator, a functionary who has drawn the assignment of clearing dead bodies from the landing zone. The encounter here is extraordinarily grotesque: the speaker is moving the mutilated corpse of a dead woman, mangled to such an extent that its gender is at first undetectable. The speaker only discovers that “it’s a woman or was” when he “grabbed / Down there.” The poem seems to take almost a cataclysmic turn at this point; the experience of touching the remnants of the woman’s genitalia—of realizing that he has touched “Down there” (emphasized, contained as a line by itself) makes the speaker sense that something wrong has happened, that something unjust has taken place. As readers we might expect a statement decrying the loss of innocent life, or a protest on the horrors of how war destroys life and identity, but we never get it. Instead, the speaker returns abruptly to himself, and to his reaction to the aesthetic impulse of the moment—the fact that while unpleasant, touching her was not unbearable. Anticipating his audience’s shock or horror from his audience, the speaker seeks, mistakenly, to diffuse it: “It’s all right / I didn’t mind / I had gloves on then.” Morally, the actual fact of the woman’s death is represented as incidental to the speaker’s experience of that death; it is unpleasant

for him because it the task of removing her body physically disgusting, not because he is emotionally affected by it.

Echoing “27th Surgical Hospital” in both content and form, “LZ Gator Body Collector,” grossly dehumanizes the Vietnamese victim of atrocity here. She becomes “it” throughout most of the poem; perhaps more importantly, however, the fact that this woman has died in a particularly horrible way does not seem important in the least to the speaker. Instead, the poem becomes an articulation of the unpleasantness of the experience for him, assuming both that that is the important idea and that that is what would interest his audience. The speaker does not seem to take any type of moral stance on this experience; the blunt, casual language and matter-of-fact tone of the poem suggest that this is just another boring task for the body collector. Here, the idea of “retriev[ing] our casualties, not abandoning them to the coyotes,” the most basic of human promises and essential of human rituals, according to Joan Didion’s *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, (Didion 158) becomes only slightly more disturbing than an office worker making photocopies.

This radical understatement of emotion follows through many of the poems in *Obscenities*. While the speakers cannot choose but to witness the things they witness, they exhibit a pronounced lack of empathy for the suffering subjects. Instead of decrying the conditions (war) in which this suffering takes place, they more often than not prefer to remain on the surface of the experience, relaying the experience to the reader in social or moral platitudes. In “On Death,” an unnamed soldier, perhaps an avatar of Casey himself, describes seeing a mangled corpse, but regards it primarily in aesthetic, not moral terms. The poem’s language reflects more a bit more trauma than “LZ Gator Body Collector” and “27th Surgical Hospital,” but the overall reaction remains the same:

Flies all over
It like made of wax
No jaw
Intestines poured
Out of the stomach
The penis in the air
It won’t matter then to me but now
I don’t want in death to be a
Public obscenity like this (53)

The use of the aesthetic language here is important—“it” (again a dehumanized, objectified image) becomes not so much a figure for all that is wrong in war, but more a visual stimulus that is unpleasant for the speaker to experience. It is almost as if he is looking at an offensive picture, not a person. In the first part of the poem, Casey makes an issue of the visual horror of the corpse:

School children walk by
Some stare
Some keep on walking
Some adults stare too
With handkerchiefs over their nose (53)

This scene is “obscene,” a spectacle that is unpleasant for all to experience. The speaker’s reaction to this again remains distanced: he does not say that he wants to stop the chaos of war or alleviate the suffering of the Vietnamese; he merely does not want to become a public spectacle after he dies. It is the public experience of death that scares the speaker, not the experience / fear of death itself. Death, it would seem, would be an embarrassment that the speaker could not bear.

The most disturbing thing about Casey’s book is its forthright examination of this failure to empathize with the outside world. These speakers cannot or will not “feel with” with those around them: it is almost as if they exist only as abstract providers of aesthetic impulses, not as real human beings, existing within a real, historical world, who have (or had) real feelings, thoughts, and experiences. For the ambulance driver in “27th Surgical Hospital” or “The LZ Gator Body Collector,” establishing a tangible emotional or imaginative connection with the suffering / dead—or even a simple historical contextualization of the experience—would either establish a sense of agonizing responsibility to those suffering (27th) or result in an overwhelming feeling of intolerable contamination (LZ Gator).

As a counterpoint to the most unthinking, narcissistic, or morally limited perspectives in *Obscenities*, Casey also offers speakers who seem to struggle genuinely—if imperfectly—with the violence and brutality of their experiences in Viet Nam. “Ruins” is a short narrative poem about a speaker caring for a wounded child:

This little girlsan
From Nuoc Mau
Was playing on the ruins

Of Gator
And stepped on a mine
It blew her leg off
Below the knee
It wasn't too nice
I brought her to the medic's
From the Nuoc Mau aid station
And I brought her back home later
Hieu led the way
He drew his forty-five
Locked and loaded it too
This was the town closest to Bayonet
So this on Hieu's part
Surprised me
I locked and loaded
My M-sixteen though
Which was hard
My carrying the little girl
This little girlsan
From Nuoc Mau (60)

Despite the subject matter—an almost prototypical scene of an American soldier “doing the right thing” and helping an innocent—the poem’s (and speaker’s) emotional response is muted at best: the girlsan losing her leg “wasn’t too nice” rather than horrible, tragic, or shocking. Indeed, the only surprise that the speaker registers is that over his Vietnamese partner drawing his pistol in the “town closest to Bayonet” and the only emotion that he expresses is that it “was hard” locking and loading his weapon while “carrying the little girl / this little girlsan / From Nuoc Mau” (60).

Similarly, the speaker of the much-anthologized “A Bummer,” even while literally acknowledging that living in Vietnam during the war was equivalent to living in hell, can only muster enough outrage to depict the destruction of a peasant’s livelihood as an inconvenience, or a “bummer.”

We were going single file
Through his rice paddies
And the farmer

Started hitting the lead track
 With a rake
 He wouldn't stop
 The TC went to talk to him
 And the farmer
 Tried to hit him too
 So the tracks went sideways
 Side by side
 Through the guy's fields
 Instead of single file
 Hard On, Proud Mary
 Bummer, Wallace, Rosemary's Baby
 The Rutgers Road Runner
 And
 Go Get Em—Done Got Em
 Went side by side
 Through the fields
 If you have a farm in Vietnam
 And a house in hell
 Sell the farm
 And go home (56)

As in "Sierra Tango" and "The Fort Leonard Wood Box Riot," the brutality depicted in this poem is casual and matter-of-fact, a disproportionate response to an insult: the track commander (TC) decides to move "sideways / Side by side / Through the guy's fields / Instead of single file" in retaliation for the farmer harmlessly "hitting the lead track / With a rake" and "[trying] to hit him too" (56). The final lines of the poem are ambiguous, able to be read both as a moral complaint declaiming the conditions in the war-torn country—it would be an improvement to "sell the farm / and go home [to hell]"—or as a sardonic kiss-off, telling the Vietnamese essentially to "go to hell" because those with power in the country (The Americans) care nothing for them or their well-being.

A less-qualified empathy is at work in "Learning." The speaker's quiet meditation on his own education and appreciation for literature and language leads him in this poem to a troubling agnosticism about the future of Viet Nam and its people:

I like learning useless things

Like Latin
I really enjoyed Latin
Caesar and the Gallic Wars
Enjoyed his fighting
The Helvetians and Germans
And Gauls
I enjoyed Vietnamese too
The language
Its five intonations
Its no conjugations
A good language to learn
Vietnam is divided in
Three parts too
It makes me wonder
Who will write their book (56)

The speaker—perhaps even Casey himself, as Stanley Kunitz has suggested (Casey xiii)—seems genuine in his attempt to connect the fractured nation of Viet Nam (divided by the French into the three regions of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina) with his own larger sense of western history, via his imagination of the Roman empire. The poem's tone, though, is one of resignation: like the dead language (Latin) and dead Roman history that he has "enjoyed," the Vietnamese language that the speaker has learned and "enjoyed," is, according to the poem's logic, "useless," an academic pursuit that does not have a pragmatic effect on the outside world: it merely enriches and expands his own experience. Note that the speaker never mentions *using* his knowledge of Vietnamese to connect with others; no Vietnamese are present or even mentioned in the poem. The speaker cannot, as merely an individual existing in a war zone, despite his knowledge, *do* anything: he cannot "write their book" any more than he—or any other single American, empathetic as they might be—could stop the war and the suffering that it brings.

Such a question of "writing [a people's] book," obviously, is problematized when a reader is in fact holding a book in his or her hands. Stanley Kunitz writes in the Introduction to *Obscenities*, commenting on "Learning," that "Michael Casey, with his first volume of poems, has already written at least one chapter of that book" (xiv). The problem with this assertion is that *Obscenities*, as perceptive as it is about human attitudes toward brutality and violence, is not really about Viet Nam or the Vietnamese, or even about the effects of the war on America or Viet Nam itself. The

book is about, primarily, the *culture* of the Viet Nam-era American military, and, by extension, the Americans who make up that culture. Casey's subjects are for the most part ordinary people, police officers and draftees and bureaucrats and laborers and clerks, who find themselves enveloped—and sometimes overwhelmed—by their situations, be it participating in violently quelling a prison riot or clearing a mangled corpse from a helicopter landing zone. The characters that populate *Obscenities* represent a complex cross-section of the working-class of the Viet Nam-era American military, guys “doing their jobs,” which often require an acceptance of violence or brutality. In depicting clearly his characters' range of perspectives on the violence that structures their military experience (regardless of the object of that violence)—from infatuation to uncritical acceptance to dour resignation, Casey's book is a text intentionally in conflict with itself. By appropriating the numerous conflicting voices and perspectives of the Viet Nam-era soldiers, Casey's text embodies the irresolution, turmoil, and struggles—moral and otherwise—that structured and continue to structure American memory and imagination of the war and the soldiers that fought it.

But to simply represent the conflicting voices of the war, the heteroglossia of languages and perspectives of those who participated, and were sometimes consumed by the war, is not Casey's aim in *Obscenities*. Despite the submergence of his authorial voice in the sea of other competing voices in the text—we only hear directly from the poet (or a persona close to the poet's) in a scant few instances—Casey's depiction of the military establishment and its effects on individuals is clearly a critical one. In monologue after monologue in *Obscenities*, readers hear the stories of individuals emotionally deadened and conditioned to callousness by their military “jobs,” and complicit with, or incapable or unwilling to resist the system in which they find themselves, a system that encourages and proliferates violence. These monologues, in their bluntness, honesty, and coarseness—even in their obscene moral offensiveness—are clearly meant to elicit outrage, uneasiness, and even occasional pity in the reader. In this sense, the reader's emotional response, generated by the experience of the monologues, serves as a counterpoint for the failures in understanding and empathy that Casey's speakers evince; what does not happen in these characters can, and should, happen through our response to them.

In this sense, Casey's collection is the most oblique and indirect of anti-war volumes: instead of actively protesting the horrors of war through bitter invective, *Obscenities* makes its criticism of the American presence in Viet Nam only implicitly, evoking the complex of personalities, narratives, languages, and perspectives, with all their imperfections, that made up the *culture* of the 1960s American military

in Southeast Asia. Casey's volume, then, serves in many ways as a fictionalized oral history: like Mark Baker's *Nam*, Al Santoli's *Everything We Had*, or Wallace Terry's *Bloods*, *Obscenities* presents the war as a series of individual stories and experiences, in the unvarnished, coarse, "overheard" language of ordinary soldiers. But *Obscenities*, however, unlike oral histories, is *not* history, and does not strive for objectivity or a "balanced" view of the war. The "concatenation of exempla"—the layering of example upon example that is, according to Paul Budra, central to the evocation in oral histories of the heteroglossia of the war, the fact that histories like *Nam* "cannot articulate a single viewpoint and yet they stand as a community" (Budra 60)—in *Obscenities* is tilted to Casey's anti-war agenda. By showing its readers, repeatedly, and in what seems to be their own words, characters consumed and morally deadened by their military jobs, jobs that make brutality an everyday occurrence, *Obscenities* asks its readers to both recognize and resist not only the ugliness of war and combat, but also of the vast and complex systems that support and perpetuate it.

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Notes

1. Allen Sinfield, in *Dramatic Monologue* (Critical Idiom Series, Routledge, 1977) argues that dramatic monologues, poems written in fictional voices, force their readers to be aware of both the character speaking and the influence of the poet's controlling intent (Sinfield 30). Glynis Byron's gloss on Sinfield's work in her *Dramatic Monologue* (New Critical Idiom, Routledge, 2003) is even more telling:

At the most basic level, this pressure is often felt through the poem's form, which repeatedly draws attention to its condition as text. The speech of Browning's duke, with its hesitations, interjections, questions, and disclaimers, may show various signs of oral discourse; the gruff speakers of Tennyson's 'Northern Farmer' poems may present themselves in an even more colloquial and naturalistic way through the rough dialect of Lincolnshire. Nevertheless, with both the duke and the farmers, we remain aware they are speaking in rhyming couplets, a clear signal of the artificiality of the speech act and the guiding hand of the poet. In fact, as a number of critics have observed, the more 'naturalistic' the monologue, the more obtrusive the shaping hand of the poet becomes, since the more our attention is drawn to those signs which do point to the poem's condition as text. (Byron 15).

Casey's work, in rejecting much of the aural signifiers of its own artificiality, the "poetic" elements that might draw readers' attention to its "condition as text." The poet's controlling consciousness, as evident in form, is actively submerged in the free-verse, dialect-driven monologues in *Obscenities*, which helps to give the poems the feel of overheard, accidentally captured snippets of conversation.

2. In his discerning foreword to the first edition of *Obscenities* (the 1972 Yale Younger Poets Volume), Stanley Kunitz celebrates the rawness of Casey's work, its unyielding fidelity to the utter coarseness—indeed the "obscenity" of the discourse of the war—and calls it the "kind of anti-poetry that befits a war empty of any kind of glory" (Casey vii). Seeing that Casey has intentionally abandoned the artifice and conventions of what traditionally has constituted "poetry," Kunitz acknowledges that *Obscenities* is a wholly new form of poetic discourse, appropriate to represent a war as fraught with moral and political ambiguities as the one fought by Americans in Viet Nam. Kunitz praises the volume's innovative use of form and language while at the same time lamenting the fact that American poetry took several years to even attempt to deal adequately with the quagmire of involvement in Viet Nam:

Michael Casey's *Obscenities* is, to my knowledge, the first significant book of poems written by an American to spring from the war in Viet Nam, though for more than seven years, since the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the American experience—and, in particular American youth—has been radically transformed by that ill-starred adventure (Casey vii).

According to Kunitz, this “radical transformation” that the war in Viet Nam forced America to experience unfortunately is not manifest in much contemporary literature of the war. Most of the poetry on the war fails to devise a “new” mode of poetic expression up to the task of responding to the experience of America’s involvement in Viet Nam. Previous literary attempts at dealing with Viet Nam, according to Kunitz, have “foundered in declamatory indignation or bored us with their redundancy” (Casey vii). Even poetic modes borrowed from the other wars of this century seem inadequate to interrogate the cultural traumas wrought by the war in Indochina: “We can no longer respond,” Kunitz writes, “to rhetorical flourishes and sentiments borrowed from the poets who fought—and too often died—in the other wars of this century” (Casey vii). The “poetic” language of Owen, Sassoon, Jarrell, and Douglas, the language that defines modern “war poetry,” according to Kunitz, simply does not convey feelings appropriate to the war in Viet Nam.

Stephen Spender, writing in *The New York Review of Books* on *Obscenities*, while agreeing for the most part with Kunitz’s assessment of the book’s importance, takes issue with the terming of Casey’s work as “anti-poetry.” Instead, Spender calls Casey and other Viet Nam war poets “anti-poets,” writers who, in contrast to Owen, Sassoon, Jarrell, and other poets of the world wars, seemed only marginally concerned with or self-conscious of their roles as poets. Whereas, according to Spender, Owen and Sassoon “carried their poems with them into the trenches and loaded their kit-bags with the Romantics or classics,” (Spender 1), Casey and his compatriots worked from a much less “literary” mindset in terms of intent or subject matter. “While demonstrably interested in language” (Spender 1), Casey makes very little use of his poetic (and more specifically “war-poetic”) “inheritance.”

Spender argues that Casey’s poems use the antithesis of traditionally “literary” language; metaphor, imagery, and, above all the presence of the writer himself as “poet” felt in his poem, are rejected in favor of a more common, even intentionally “obscene” idiom. They are therefore difficult, by the standards of most poetry, to judge as poems (Spender 1). The power of this work, and consequently its value, thus comes not from its literary skill but from a “commitment to a phase of the fighting already superseded, to a place already nearly wiped off the face of the earth, and to a society transformed by neocolonialism” (Spender 1). As an “anti-poet,” in Spender’s estimation, Casey “seems to care for nothing except giving voice to a particularly infinite agony packed into a transitional moment” (Spender 1). What makes Spender’s analysis of Casey valuable is his willingness to acknowledge the conflicted status *Obscenities* has as literature: it is “poetry” that is not “poetic,” a literary representation of an unspeakable reality that refuses to be literary. As an early reviewer, Spender’s assertion that this work is in some substantial, new way “poetic” —not anti-poetic—serves to validate the essential point that Kunitz makes in his Introduction to *Obscenities*: that Viet Nam, in all its complexity and moral catastrophe demands a non-conventional, revolutionary form of poetic expression. Of course, though, this assertion is nothing new; emergent moral problems and cultural events always demand—or seem to demand—a new mode of discourse and representation.

Philip Beidler, in his landmark study *American Literature and the Experience of Viet Nam*, argues that Casey represents a synthesis or reconciliation of the “predictable division” that plagues much of the early writing of the war (c. 1958-70, according to Beidler): the distinction between what he calls “dogged concreteness—an attempt to render the experience of the war in all its brute sensory plenitude” and the structuring of “notes toward a new mythic iconography, attempts to devise new images for new experiences . . . images fierce and unsettling in their bitter originality of imaginative invention” (Beidler 75). Casey’s work in *Obscenities*, he argues, achieves a unique type of “organic mediating perspective” a productive economy of exchange “between the quotidian and the aesthetic” (Beidler 77). According to Beidler, Casey’s best poems, such as “A Bummer” and “Hoa Binh” (the Vietnamese word for “peace”) exhibit an “inevitability of poetic statement,” when the juxtaposition of the simplistic, detail-driven concreteness and the elusive symbols produce a moment of lucidity for poem, poet, and reader.

Vince Gotera's expansive study of the poetry of the Viet Nam war, *Radical Visions*, situates Casey's work within the scheme of what he calls GI Resistance poetry. Gotera believes that a central thrust of much early war writing, Casey's included, is resistance to what he (via Michael Herr's brilliant neologism) terms "the jargon stream," the doublespeak and tautological reasoning endemic to "official" discourse on the war. Gotera makes extensive use of the theories of Thomas Merton and George Orwell in exploring the relationship of language to warfare, in both Viet Nam and other modern wars. Orwell, in "Politics and the English Language," discusses how language suffers when used for political and "war-making" purposes—any language of war must "consist largely of euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness" ("Politics," qtd. Gotera 96). Expanding on this idea, Merton argues that the language surrounding the war was permeated by:

double talk, tautology, ambiguous cliché, self-righteous and doctrinaire pomposity and pseudoscientific jargon that mask[s] a total callousness and moral insensitivity, indeed a basic contempt for man. (Merton 117)

This type of linguistic evasion requires a response in a "revolutionary idiom," (Gotera 97) which is by definition "racy, insolent, direct, profane, iconoclastic, and earthy" (Merton 117), but also a "language of power" and "self-enclosed finality" (118). Any "new" language, Merton seems to indicate, while necessary to describe the "world" that is Viet Nam, still contains remnants—ideological and ontological—of its antecedents. It must be "powerful" and "final," while maintaining a moral and social sensitivity about its subject, embracing stability and directness where previous modes of discourse embraced ambiguity.

Developing his analysis through the framework established by Orwell and Merton, Gotera shows that the sparseness of Casey's language in *Obscenities*, the "anti-poetic" quality that numerous critics note, is ideological as well as aesthetic: the "language of power," that, in Merton's terms, is required to resist the ideology of the American war machine is in essence the opposite of the traditionally "poetic" impulse. The artifice and ambiguity inherent in language—that poetry exploits for aesthetic and rhetorical purposes—is also what, in many critics' estimation, makes justifiable what cannot be justified. Casey's grunt-language, blunt and direct, lacking for the most part metaphor, symbol, or ambiguity, resists manipulation and constrains meaning, depicting atrocity and moral failure in the starkest terms possible. Like "a tape recorder . . . playing back a conversation overheard" (Gotera 103), Gotera argues, Casey's work resists the morally compromised "official" languages of war.

3. Historical accounts of the actual ratio of combat to non-combat troops in Viet Nam, from 1963-1972 vary. James Westheider, in *Vietnam War* (Greenwood Press, 2007) offers an excellent summary of the current estimates, which range from William Westmoreland's estimate that support troops made up only 40-45% of troops in the field at any one time, to criticisms from Henry Kissinger and others, that support troops made up 80% of the 2.5 million Americans who served in Viet Nam. Philip Beidler, in "Viet Pulp," suggests that much of the popularized narratives of the war—what he calls "Viet Pulp" works—greatly exaggerate the proportion of veterans involved in combat and "special operations." If the distribution of the 350,000 veterans who did see combat matched the distribution of "pulp" Viet Nam combat narratives like *Inside the LRRPs*, *Six Silent Men*, and *One Shot-One Kill* present in popular chain bookstores, the veteran experience would be something like this:

It is estimated that 3.5 million Americans served in-country during the Vietnamese war. Of these, by my calculations (as opposed to those of others, which run as high as ¾ million) a maximum of 350,000 probably had any extended combat experience in the field with a line infantry, armor, or artillery unit. If the percentage of interest categories here were applied, let's say, to my numbers, just for the sake of illustration, 50,000 would have been snipers, 50,000 would have been SEALs, 50,000 would have been Special Forces, 50,000 would have been Marine Force Recon, and 50,000 would have been Army LRRPs. The 100,000 left over would all have been either marines or members of the First Cavalry and/or 101st Airborne Divisions, except for maybe two helicopter pilots and a medic (Beidler 246).

4. The oral history has become one of the most dominant forms of representation of war—and other conflicts—in the twentieth century. Dozens of volumes on Depression-era labor conflicts, World War II, and the American War in Viet Nam have appeared since 1950, the most prominent being Studs Terkel's *The Good War*.⁹ Others include Terkel's *Hard Times*, Al Santoli's *Everything We Had*, and Wallace Terry's *Bloods*.

5. Alan Sinfield argues that the dramatic monologue, as a form, "lurks provocatively" between the first-person lyrical poem and the third-person narrative; such formal liminality combines the strengths of both modes in creating the illusion of a fictional character—one tied, perhaps ironically to the poet's view—speaking in his own plane of reality. Sinfield writes: "The title, perhaps and other hints as we go along that the speaker is not the poet and hence has something to do with fiction; but the first-person mode makes an opposing claim for the real-life existence of the speaker on the reader's plane of reality" (Sinfield 24). Acting as at once pure detached fiction and seeming personal lyric expression is, according to Sinfield, the "essential feature of the form" (Sinfield 24).

6. Perhaps here would be an appropriate place to survey the major works of fiction and poetry that make use of multiple narration—I need to differentiate between more localized multi-personed narratives like *As I Lay Dying* with efforts that disperse multi-layered narration in an attempt to portray a community or a system of social conditions / circumstances: "The Waste Land," for example, is evocative (and critical?) of modern media-mediated social anxiety and confusion, while mysteries and shift-of-perspective stories have a far smaller-scale agenda: more about the instability of narrative and storytelling than about a large-scale social critique.

7. Bakhtin's area of concentration in "Discourse in the Novel" and in other essays in which he addresses polyphonic texts, was, of course, the modern novel, as imagined primarily through Dostoevsky. My contention here is that the striations of language and the "freedom" of characters such as exist in *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Crime and Punishment* exist in *extremis* in poetry collections like *Spoon River Anthology* and *Obscenities*. Enacting what Earl Miner calls in his essay in *Poems in Their Place* (University of North Carolina Press, 1986) an "unplotted narrative," poetic collections, especially collections of persona poems or dramatic monologues can be profitably considered holistic narratives, depending on "[s]equential continuousness (that is not redundant)," "continuances (as opposed to *the* continuousness," "progression, recurrence, and various relation between the units of a collection" (Miner 40). Whereas little "plot" happens in *Obscenities* and *Spoon River Anthology*, the lyrics contained therein are definitely bound by recurring elements, characters, and themes, not to mention unities of time and place. Thus, the characters within these dramatic monologues can be said to be engaging in implicitly dialogic acts with others in the "unplotted narrative" of the collection. Bakhtin's concept of polyphony is here illustrated by the speakers speaking *without* the contrivances of explicit plot events: each speaker's monologue comes in its own diegetic space that is distinct from, yet related to in a tangible way, the others in the collection. The language and "consciousness" of the voice is thus freed from plot, existing primarily in the moment of its own expression.

8. Casey's subsequent collections, *Millrat* and *The Million Dollar Hole* also use multiple speakers (and perspectives) to explore the web of social relations and clash of perspectives between workers at a mill and in other workplaces.

9. "Hoa Binh" is Vietnamese for "peace."

10. "Hoa Ky" is Vietnamese for "United States."

11. Mike Papa: M and P in the phonetic radio alphabet (Casey's note); this stands for "Military Policeman."

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