

ANALYSIS

Going after Cacciato (1979)



Tim O'Brien

(1946-)

Going after Cacciato is arguably the best literary novel to come out of the Vietnam War, with an effectively versatile style and the most complex structure of any American novel since William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936. The chapters are divided into those about reality, and those that are an extended fantasy of the protagonist Paul Berlin, who is divided within himself about the war and whose name refers to the old Berlin Wall that divided Germany. His fantasy is archetypal, experienced by most soldiers, the desperate longing to escape the horror, to run away like Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage*, to flee for his life like Frederick Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*--to go AWOL (a wall). Paul does not "go over the wall." Vicariously, he runs away by going after Cacciato in his fantasy--all the way to Paris, where the real peace talks were being held that could end the war. Some chapters are set at the Observation Post, a tower near the sea, where Paul escapes the war through his fantasizing and also tries to get himself together by thinking about his experiences objectively.

CHAPTERS

- | | | |
|----|---------|---|
| 1 | REAL | Going after Cacciato |
| 2 | OP | |
| 3 | fantasy | The Road to Paris |
| 4 | REAL | How They Were Organized |
| 5 | OP | |
| 6 | fantasy | Detours on the Road to Paris |
| 7 | fantasy | Riding the Road to Paris |
| 8 | OP | |
| 9 | REAL | How Bernie Lynn Died after Frenchie Tucker |
| 10 | fantasy | A Hole in the Road to Paris |
| 11 | REAL | Fire in the Hole |
| 12 | OP | |
| 13 | fantasy | Falling through a Hole in the Road to Paris |
| 14 | REAL | Upon Almost Winning the Silver Star |

15	fantasy	Tunneling toward Paris
16	REAL	Pickup Games
17	fantasy	Light at the End of the Tunnel to Paris
18	fantasy	Prayers on the Road to Paris
19	OP	
20	REAL	Landing Zone Bravo
21	fantasy	The Railroad to Paris
22	REAL	Who They Were, or Claimed To Be
23	fantasy	Asylum on the Road to Paris
24	REAL	Calling Home
25	REAL	The Way It Mostly Was
26	fantasy	Repose on the Road to Paris
27	fantasy	Flights of Imagination
28	OP	
29	fantasy	Atrocities on the Road to Paris
30	OP	
31	REAL	Night March
32	OP	
33	fantasy	Outlawed on the Road to Paris
34	REAL	Lake Country
35	REAL	World's Greatest Lake Country
36	fantasy	Flights of Imagination
37	REAL	How the Land Was
38	fantasy	On the Lam to Paris
39	REAL	The Things They Didn't Know
40	fantasy	By a Stretch of the Imagination
41	REAL	Getting Shot
42	OP	
43	fantasy	The Peace of Paris
44	fantasy	The End of the Road to Paris
45	OP	
46	fantasy/REAL	Going after Cacciato (return to beginning)

Two excerpts won awards as short stories: “The Things They Carried” is Realism emphasizing the burdens of the war on those who fought it; a platoon leader named Cross has much to bear. “Landing Zone Bravo” condenses the Vietnam War into one super intense metaphorical event, a spectacular example of Expressionism, powerful and ironic. In style and technique *Going after Cacciato* is Modernist, combining Realism, Impressionism, Naturalism and Expressionism. On the other hand, the vision is Postmodernist in being self-centered escapist fantasy, politically correct in its anti-war implications while reacting against anti-war Feminists and other radicals back home.

“Landing Zone Bravo”

During the Vietnam War (1965-73) helicopters airlifted troops from U.S. bases and delivered them close to the enemy invading from the North and hiding in the jungle—the Communist Viet Cong. Their mission was to “search and destroy.” These missions became a principal means of waging the war and were routine for years. The mission dramatized by Tim O’Brien in “Landing Zone Bravo” represents them all and is a metaphor of the entire Vietnam War as a national mission.

O’Brien served in the Vietnam War himself as a reluctant draftee. He felt divided over the war and named his hero Paul Berlin, the first name after a saint and the last after the city of Berlin, which at that time was divided by the infamous Wall constructed by the Communists of East Berlin to keep their people from running away. Many were shot there. Running away is the theme of O’Brien’s anti-war novel *Going after Cacciato* (1979). “Landing Zone Bravo” is Chapter 20 of the novel and has the integrity of a short story. The title refers to a helicopter landing site, identified by the letter B—the military term Bravo. The designation “bravo” becomes intensely, bitterly, shockingly ironic at the end of the story.

“They sat in two facing rows.” We are in a combat helicopter descending toward its landing zone. Seven of the nearest troops are introduced quickly—time is running out—and are characterized by what they are doing. From the outset the style is plain, terse and vivid, the short clipped sentences evoking breathless excitement, anticipation and suspense—dynamic with verbs: “sweating,” “clicking his teeth,” and “moved his neck as if loosening up for a race.” Two are sharing a Coke and one smiles, nervously. Sharing is a theme here as these men are members of a combat unit whose lives depend on one another. The first paragraph ends with Jim Pederson, who will single himself out as the protagonist. He is nauseous and holding his stomach. “Flying scared him more than the war.”

“There was a long floating feeling as the Chinook fell.” The Chinook is a large helicopter for carrying troops, an Indian word meaning a strong warm wind. The style here is objective Realism in the manner of Hemingway, a clear and acknowledged influence on O’Brien. Above all, both writers evoke feelings through sentence rhythms, authentic details, and the “objective correlative”—T. S. Eliot’s term for the exact combination of situation, action and style that will elicit the appropriate emotion. Hemingway and O’Brien want above all to give the reader a vicarious experience of what something felt like—the truth—the primary value of all Realists. This story is brilliant in style, especially in the control of rhythms through varying sentence lengths, repetition, ironies, motifs, symbolism, and resonance.

The helicopter “dropped a hundred feet, rose, bounced, and cold air shot through the open tail section.” This dropping of the chopper is like being in an elevator that drops too fast—*for a hundred feet!* We feel this familiar sensation vicariously as the “objective correlative” for the anxiety of the troops as they approach landing zone bravo, where bravery and perhaps death will be required. Cold becomes a motif connoting fear and holding back—Pederson and Berlin are both hugging themselves—in contrast to the incessant attack by the fierce hot chopper machine guns firing down into the jungle to keep the enemy back until the troops can be landed. The dynamic of cold versus hot intensifies with the firing.

The words *firing*, *fired*, and *fire* occur 48 times in the 7+ pages of the story, increasing in frequency as the attack proceeds, repetition that is O’Brien’s most effective technique in unifying and intensifying the action. U.S. commanders in Vietnam believed that they could win the war with superior technology and overwhelming firepower, evoked here by incessant firing with increasing intensity. The blind faith in firepower is imaged in the door gunners “blind behind their sunglasses.” The more they fire the better in defense of the troops about to land, but “the door gunners did not have faces.” They are dehumanized. Cogs in the national war machine, they fire anonymously, indiscriminately, without accountability: “the gunners went mad with the firing, firing at everything”; “The gunners went berserk with their firing”; “firing with the steady sweeping motions of a machine.”

Another unifying device that adds to suspense is the steady measured countdown by the crew chief, holding up his fingers. He represents military authority as the troops experience it—absolute, inescapable, callous, and detached. A sergeant, he is more capable than the officer present, as was usually the case (speaking as a former lieutenant). The lieutenant, usually inexperienced, is sitting down on the floor attending to his weapon, as if confiding to it rather than to his men. To the crew chief this mission is so routine that he is preoccupied reading a copy of *Newsweek* until the wind snatches it away. He cares more about his magazine than he does about Pederson when he throws him out of the helicopter into the mud. The crew chief illustrates the bizarre uniqueness of the Vietnam War, in which troops were abruptly transported from civilization into the jungle, from the comforts of a large base camp into the desperate savagery of jungle warfare.

Oscar Johnson lights a marijuana joint and passes it around in a bonding moment before the battle. Although drug use in combat was a court martial offense and would have been unthinkable in previous wars, it was routine in Vietnam. The lieutenant does not interfere. Discipline was breaking down in the military as well as in society during the 1960s. During the war, in 1970 alone there were over 220 reported incidents of “fraggings,” in which troops at platoon level determined to survive resorted to killing their own officers—usually inexperienced lieutenants—often by rolling a fragmentation grenade into their tents at night. Most of the many fraggings went unreported.

Paul Berlin is shivering from “the awful cold” as the crew chief shouts “Going in... She’s hot, kiddies. Everybody off fast, no dilly-dally shit.” Cold to hot. Another such counterpoint is between their cold fear of death and the warm smiling and giggling of some troops (they are high). The lieutenant is supposed to be on his feet leading the men but he is “still wiping his rifle, leaning close to it and whispering” as if praying to his gun instead of to God. None of the troops gives any evidence of religious faith, which is unrealistic but politically correct. “Landing Zone Bravo” is Postmodernist in being (1) Atheistic; (2) without transcendence except through group “sharing” and drug use; (3) disrespectful of authority; (4) anti-military; (5) anti-American “imperialism”; (6) yet *for* violence in revenge for “victimization”; and (7) for idealizing the violent rebel victim.

Harold Murphy gets hit by shots coming up from the jungle through the bottom of the helicopter, severely enough that he cannot get up, yet he keeps trying—and keeps smiling. Transcending severe pain and bad luck, he is a model soldier. He sets up a counterpoint with Pederson, who has an upset tummy and disobeys orders and will not get out of the chopper. Pederson forces the chopper to hover, at risk of getting blown up by the enemy at any moment. The crew chief has to drag and throw him out into the mud. By military standards Pederson is a coward who betrays his fellows and endangers their lives and jeopardizes the whole mission. By the anarchistic countercultural standards of Postmodernism the crew chief violated the right of Pederson to opt out of the mission at the last minute.

As implied by the name Berlin, the author wants to present a divided perspective. “Pederson paused a moment, as if searching for balance in the muck, then he began wading with his eyes closed.” Similarly, O’Brien tries to balance military and countercultural values (puritan and pastoral, head and heart), but like Pederson he loses his balance. The reader is inclined to sympathize with the underdog—the individual against the war machine—especially when impelled to do so by the rhetoric, symbolism, and ironic power of O’Brien’s ending. “The Chinook’s shadow passed right over him.” The shadow is a traditional image of negative traits, in this case the overbearing American military machine. At the end Paul Berlin can still hear the guns of the chopper firing in the distance. O’Brien is sentimental in celebrating the defiant violence of the 1960s antiwar rebel, whereas Melville is tragic in his depiction of Billy Budd.

The crew chief warned against any “dilly-dally shit.” Pederson will not even move. Thrown out, he loses his helmet and blunders around “with his eyes closed.” He dilly-dallies so long on the landing zone he gets shot in the covering fire from the chopper. Getting shot is his own fault. The door gunners did not shoot him on purpose, their firing is standard defensive procedure—as he knows. Pederson deliberately shoots at the chopper and may have killed men who meant him no harm, duplicating the moral evil of the indiscriminate American war machine. His gunfire could have brought down the chopper, killing the whole crew—much worse than a fragging. The platoon will be better off without him.

About 58,000 Americans died in combat in the Vietnam War. Estimates put the number of suicides at between 26,000 and 100,000. The war produced about 30,000 heroin addicts. Many of the platoon leaders who got fragged were fresh young lieutenants out of West Point. They tried to lead by the book, as when they sent men into Viet Cong tunnels to clear them out, often a near suicidal activity. As depicted in the movie *Apocalypse Now*, the Vietnam War was a nightmare unlike any other.

Going after Cacciato is cerebral and pacifist for a war novel. Tim O’Brien was a reluctant liberal draftee and his vision is more fantasy than real. He never even fires his gun. For authentic action in the Vietnam War outstanding examples are *Dispatches* (1977) by war correspondent Michael Herr; *A Rumor of War* (1977), an autobiographical non-fiction novel with moral analysis by Philip Caputo, an officer in the Marine Corps; and *In Pharaoh’s Army: Memories of the Lost War* (1994) by Tobias Wolff. There are many literary novels about the tragedy in Vietnam. For the most part, as would be expected, the most authentic, realistic and morally complex novels are by combat veterans. Two of the most highly regarded are *The 13th Valley* (1982) by John Del Vecchio and *Matterhorn* by Karl Malantes (2010).

Michael Hollister (2015)

“Cacciato—in Italian, ‘hunted one’—derives in idea from Heller’s Yossarian. Cacciato’s plan parallels Yossarian’s escape to Sweden; he will escape the Vietnam War by going to Paris. One day, he packs his gear in an AWOL bag and leaves camp, walking away, destination Paris, the city of magic, life, a form of

salvation. For those in Vietnam, Paris is comparable to Eden for those in America. A squad, with Paul Berlin, Tech 4, and an old lieutenant regular, takes off after Cacciato, whom they corner in a mountain, on a small greasy hill. They surround the spot and send up flares in the dawn, certain they have trapped their prey. They expect his surrender and encounter his escape. That is the last known fact. The rest is fantasy, the fantasy of Cacciato's run for Paris, across Asia and Europe until he is home safe, in the 'capital of the world.'

O'Brien's ingenious and convincing book concerns the fantastic journey of the squad chasing Cacciato until it, too, reaches Paris. At each stage in their journey, they catch glimpses of the 'hunted one,' who even seems to help them, certainly when the Shah's SAVAK is about to execute them. The squad comes alive as Paris becomes a realizable dream; fantasy takes on shape. Along the way, they pick up a Chinese girl named Sarkin Aung Wen, whose two old aunts die and leave her as an adoptee of the squad and of Paul, in particular. Sarkin represents 'reality' within the fantasy, for she herself hopes to create a real life out of the escape, to break from the army. She pulls ever harder at Paul to desert, in a sense suggesting that if the fantasy is to become real, Paul must indeed seek Paris. When he refuses, she runs off with the lieutenant, who is rejuvenated.

The main thrust of the novel is that fantasy journey to the fount of vitality and magic, Paris. Crossing the journey at several points, ten in all, are holding actions, comprising the 'observation post.' These brief sections, pages rather than chapters, recall the Promenades in John Horne Burns's *The Gallery*. Facing toward journey aspects, yet static, they hold the action back in the real world of Paul's first day in combat. The 'observation post' is a four-hour watch Paul stands, which stretches to six, and it provides commentary on his dreams and sense of things.... The idea is ingenious, in that its static element—the post never moves, of course—works with and against the fantasy journey... Playing against the 'post' and the journey is a third element, the description of Paul's first day in combat. Thus, the interplay of these elements gives us a three-part frame: the present of the journey, the present of the observation post; and the present of the combat experience, from which he had run only in his imagination. Little is future, or past; all is now. [Inaccurate, as Paul recounts many events that have happened in the past.]

Vietnam War novels and nonfiction (*A Rumor of War* and *Dispatches*, for example) are, in a sense, removed from history, roving outside time and space. The writers who turn to the war—O'Brien here, Robert Stone, Michael Herr, Philip Caputo—have converted it into a present disconnected from past or future. By handling it in this way, they make the war more nightmarish: that is, so removed from anything familiar in time or space that it hangs there, itself a fantasy life of sorts. What distinguishes fiction about the Vietnam War from that about World War II is its disembodied quality; it is unassociated with anything occurring back home or even back on the base. The men enter a surreal area when they fight a battle—jungle, sky, mud, whirling copters, a phantasmal enemy, loss of distinction between friend and foe.

The lack of differentiation, the sense that the world has receded, the recognition that individual sacrifice is worth nothing, all make the men hang together in the presentness of Now. What remains is escape, to Paris, to Mandalay (another magical name), even to Teheran. Cacciato, the hunted, is the sole one to make sense: desertion and escape into space, that old replay of American forms of salvation. A third influence on O'Brien's novel is *The Naked and the Dead*, the narrative structuring based on a squad heading out into enemy territory, like a posse or band of cowboys (or bandits) on their own... The squad in *Going After Cacciato* achieves a coherence and unity denied to the larger body of men, who are at the mercy of whatever the enemy throws their way...

Verbally, *Cacciato* establishes its own style, a mixture of realism and fantasy at the level of language. But it owes a great deal, once more, to *Catch-22*... When Paul reminisces, he thinks of his father taking him to a Wisconsin camp, to hunt and to see Indians; experiences we recall from Hemingway stories, from Nick Adams, who Paul resembles.... [O'Brien cited Hemingway as a major influence.] Part of the triumph of *Going After Cacciato* is that it establishes a dimension to the war novel only hinted at before: the fantasy of removal juxtaposed to combat itself, with an intervening 'observation post' of interfacial matter which mediates, judges, serves as choral effect. The result is an opening up of dimensions of the present, an absorption of rather sophisticated Modernist time sequencing into a genre not known for its experimental nature."

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