Going After Cacciato

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Fictional forms of the past, such as morality plays, made their moral points explicitly, sometimes even stating, the moral of this story is… Literary critic Ian Watt said that, in contrast, the central task of the novel is to make its moral point implicitly, while preserving a semblance of verisimilitude.

This critical idea is of immense help in interpreting Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*. This 1975 novel won the National Book Award and is regarded as one of the most important pieces of Vietnam war literature. As with any good novel, there are many avenues to explore. Here I focus on the most obvious one—the narrative sequence, and in particular, the relationship between that sequence and the moral point of the novel.

There are three separate time frames in the story. There is the narrative present, which is Paul Berlin in the observation post on the beach, staying up all night to reminisce. Second, there is the narrative past, which consists of the war stories Berlin remembers about his months in Vietnam. Third, there is the fictional future story of the chase after Cacciato, which ostensibly begins about one month in the actual past, and continues for eight months into the future.

Instead of waking one of his buddies to relieve him when his lookout shift is over, Berlin decides to let them sleep and stays up all night with his thoughts. These thoughts constitute the remembered war stories and the imagined chase. The question here is, why does O’Brien structure the story this way? In an excellent 2008 essay, critic Dean McWilliams of Ohio University puts forward the thesis that Berlin has been through a grievous moral failure that he has not yet faced. Because he has not faced up to it, his memories—the war stories—are all jumbled up in his mind. In fact, a lot of the details in the stories such as who dies when are inconsistent because of Berlin’s confusion. Central in the stories is the one story that is not told—when Lt Sidney Martin is killed, fragged that is, while he is in a tunnel. We know this happens because the men make a pact to do it, each of them touching the grenade that will be used to murder him. They do it in mutiny against Martin’s repeated orders to put themselves at great risk to physically inspect the tunnels before blowing them up. When the men finally all refuse, Martin goes down himself. He never appears again in the stories but is reported dead. But his actual fragging is never recounted in the novel.

McWilliams holds that this is the moral failure Berlin must come to grips with. He does so by the dual means of retelling the war stories to himself, and inventing a fictional escape from Vietnam in the fantasy about chasing Cacciato. Berlin constantly withdraws into his imagination to escape the horrid reality of the war around him. The chase is simply the most extended of these inventions.

There are many elements in the chase itself that indicate it is pure fantasy. Perhaps the most obvious is when they crash through the roof of a tunnel system and encounter the crazy old guy who has been trapped down and the control board for years without being able to find a way out. Another is the crazy escape from Tehran in a 1964 Impala.

The point of all this is Berlin’s failure to reckon with his moral complicity in the murder of Lt Martin. The chases sequence comes to its close with Berlin entering the house in Paris where Cacciato is supposed to be, rifle blazing. Immediately Berlin is in the past, remembering an unpleasant scene in which he pissed himself while firing his rifle. We never do return to Berlin in the narrative present, but McWilliams wraps up his theory with the following conclusion: “Berlin has made progress: he has managed, during the course of his long night in the observation post, partially to order the events of the recent past. But the bad faith in his discourse to Sarkin Aung Wan suggests that he has not fully understood these acts nor accepted responsibility for them. Until he does these things, his soul will remain, even after the war, caught in Quang Nai.”