

# Going after cacciato

War, Vietnam War



Waking up from the American Dream in Going after Cacciato (Tim O'Brien)

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle? Only the monstrous anger of the guns. Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle Can patter out their hasty orisons. (from Anthem for Doomed Youth, Wilfred Owen) Sassoon's epitaph "All Soldiers are dreamers" at the beginning of the novel functions as a signpost signaling the shape the novel will take. It does not merely deal with brutal horror, it is imagination. Reality and dream, fact and imagination are interwoven.

The choice of Siegfried Sassoon suggests the Great War, the English experience of war, which can be compared to the American Vietnam experience, for it had the same impact: total disorientation and national trauma because of lost values. This novel then deals, in story and structure, with the war experience, but also with the US society's influence on that war through the ordinary soldier. The common grunt raised the question how to act properly in this horrible situation, in which he even did not know whether his presence was morally justified or not.

Yet he concluded that, although he knew this war was just as insane as any other war, he should not run away from his duty. He stayed in the war, because of his personal obligations to society. Not out of idealism, but merely because his people expected him to. In novels dealing with Vietnam we often see veterans coming back into the American society (like in Caputo's Indian Country), but here we are confronted with the country itself. The novel Going after Cacciato deals with the journey to Paris an American soldier fantasizes about.

It is November 1968 and Spec. Four Paul Berlin is in his observation tower in Quang Ngai, Vietnam, by the South China Sea, performing his tour of duty, which lasts 365 days for the common grunt, the foot soldier he is. He feels he has come to Nam in another way than soldiers had gone to the Second World War and to Korea. His lieutenant, Lt Corson had been in Korea, and he was looking back to it with nostalgia: " In Korea, by God, the people liked us. Know what I mean? They liked us. Respect, that's what it was. And it was a decent war (... The trouble's this: Nobody likes nobody. (p. 134) New were the blindness of war, the inertia, drugs were taking over, the creation of the new word " fragging", i. e. killing a superior officer It all illustrated this war was supposed to be different from those wars in which Paul Berlin's ancestors had fought, with in their mind the American dream. However, Vietnam was not different at all. Soldiers who enthusiastically started their participation in Vietnam, were as quickly traumatized by the killings, as any other soldiers. A war like any other war.

Stories that began and ended without transition. No developing drama or tension or direction. No order. (p. 255) When Paul realizes this, the main question for him is how to determine his own place in it. As he does not know an answer, the possibility, or rather the necessity of dreaming something else in the face of horror, is brought to Vietnam. He starts to think about Cacciato. This bloke fishes in the world's Great Lake Country where everybody says there is no fish. He dutifully goes through all the motions and all of a sudden he gets out, and Paul is intrigued.

Paul's squad is sent to go after Cacciato. They are following the unmarked character and find him more and more almost a holy character, less defined

as they go along. Finding him a friendly leader almost, they follow him. From soldier among soldiers, he develops into a friendly symbolical figure pointing the way. The seductiveness of Cacciato leads them on. He sheds his war implements. He is that annoying, different, separate chap who bounces the ball, who nobody can trace and think of, who does not really exist, he has not even got a first name!

Cacciato, that just fulfills. Going after Cacciato means "going after a dream", following that dream, but it can also mean "going after to actually get that dream". Time and time again there is this ambiguity of going on the hunt after Cacciato, or following the Italian on desertion; there is the choice between reality and dream for Paul. Cacciato, who nobody has actually seen, has hit upon an idea which his indeterminance made possible, and it speaks to the imagination. Paul goes after him, catches him, thus completing his mission, but lets Cacciato escape.

Cacciato then leads them through the beautiful high country, through orderly Mandalay, normal Delhi, to a beheading in gruesome Tehran, all the way via Athens to Paris; the change of scenery symbolizes the hope Paul first feels, gradually turning into despair and total confusion. His experiences on the way show Paul that he cannot actually leave the war behind. "Can't get away from it," Doc mumbled. "You try, you run like hell, but you just can't get away." "It's the truth." (p. 178) Arrived in Paris and having hugged, outbursts of rain and thunder presage the forthcoming difficulties.

Reality soon makes the squad go and hunt down Cacciato again. Oscar, the streetwise Detroit black, insists on the Real Politik of getting Cacciato to save their own skins from punishment for desertion. They have to arrest Cacciato

and abandon their dream, because society expects them to do so. " Oscar's right," Doc said, and sighed. " You can't get away with this shit. the realities always catch you. " " But maybe. " " No maybes. Reality doesn't work that way. " (p. 275) Paul Berlin is not ready yet to stop Cacciato and lets him escape again. Choosing reality and turning his back on the dream are, however, close at hand.

In the promotion scene Paul remembered himself answering questions to a committee that scared the living daylights out of him. " Why do we fight the war? " they asked him, but at the same time the committee told him the answer: " to win". Very afraid, he repeated this and got the job. Paul then realizes society urges him to do as he is told, and not to think for himself, as society will do that for him. He has to conform and shut up. He knows this cannot be right, but on the other hand his fantasized run for Paris would have been an equally unhappy experience to him in reality.

For fantasy it had been all along. His dream of going after the freedom and peace Cacciato led him to, had all been a dream within a dream. The latter dream was dreamt in order to avoid having to solve the dilemma of staying in or running away from the war. He finally woke up from that dream, for now he had found the answer: he had to go through it; trying to escape and fleeing from social obligations was not according to his background, his personality and his beliefs. " I fear what might be thought of me by those I love. I fear the loss of their respect.

I fear the loss of my own reputation. Reputation, as read in the eyes of my father and mother, the people in my hometown, my friends. I fear being an outcast. " (p. 286) The novel is structured round three elements that are in

accordance with the three different activities of Paul Berlin's conscience: reflection, imagination and memories; he is wondering how people die in the war, he thinks about going to Paris and he stands on guard. The killings of war and their stories are told non-chronologically, as if they happen at this very moment.

Paul Berlin tries to get things straight, tries to get a chronological list of the men killed. He needs order, wants to keep it straight, but he has problems with this. The structure of the novel reflects the structure of any war: it is confusing and without order, sometimes a mess and going in different directions. The hero solves this problem by making up a story himself. It is a story in the third person, told as a reality, told almost as observed by an omniscient observer, who has no involvement; but at the same time we know they are Paul Berlin's imaginations.

All of a sudden this woman comes up in the he-country of Vietnam; only in imagination a beautiful girl is possible there. By the end of the novel the reader knows that the squad never went after Cacciato any further than the hill, and that Paris only denoted the illusion of seeking the Far West. In reality they had always been in the Far East. The unlimited possibilities of the Imagination, as that of the United States and its American Dream as well, fail in the reality of the Vietnam War.

Berlin, whose name points to the American commitment to safeguard freedom (by setting up the airbridge to the city of Berlin under siege of the Soviets in 1948) finds himself in a situation in which the values, ideals and intentions of the United States no longer have the absolute meaning they seemed to have in previous wars. In Paris, the heart of Western civilization,  
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Paul Berlin lacked the courage to free himself, even in his dreams, and reality took over: No question, it was all crazy from the start. None of the roads led to Paris. p. 203) He has to accept that he and his comrades would be the very deserters, who would flee from the original idea of the American Dream, that told them that the only way if you really wanted to overcome all problems is to keep on trying. Only Cacciato, who with his childish simplicity and innocence, with his optimism and his individual power embodies the mythical American loner, he frees himself from the society that tells him what to do. He is, however, lost, together with these values, in the Vietnam War.

The American Dream had led young Americans into a place where they had no right to go. They were supposed to fight and defeat the Viet Cong to serve the American nation, but in this war, just like in any other, confusion and death were the real victors; the war served no American purpose at all. The lesson Paul learned from the Vietnam War was far from significant: "Don' never get shot". " There it is," said Eddie Lazzutti. " Never. Don' never get shot. " (p. 254) He might have learned that back home in the US as well.

So in Vietnam this trail West was a fake one. In Fort Dodge you could build good solid houses, in the wilds of Wisconsin you fraternized with your father who told you, back there, to look for positive things in the war. In Nam, however, there is only the squad, and all of a sudden this " boom", like in Billy Boy Watkins' story, the case of the grunt dying of fright. It is the ultimate war story, the story of Vietnam. So Paul starts dreaming his own dream, he rejects the American dream. He nevertheless does not reject reality.

Like Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, he does not want to give in to the code of society, but does not want to be lured into the moral wilderness either. He wants to stay part of that society, although he knows its claims are based on air. "... it is this social power, the threat of social consequences, that stops me from making a full and complete break. " (p. 286) However nasty the war may be, it is better to take part than to be isolated, so Paul Berlin ends his dream, in order to face reality.

## **Bibliography**

1. Going after Cacciato (Tim O'Brien) *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (Thomas Myers)