

Critical Reception of Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*

Part 1: Annotated Bibliography

Christopher, Renny. *The Vietnam War/The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1995.

In her scholarly book published by a university press, Renny Christopher provides a history of Asian stereotyping in Western literature from the nineteenth century forward. She argues, more specifically, that the canon of Vietnam War literature, consisting mostly of works by white male combat veterans, depicts stereotypical and dismissive portraits of Vietnamese. Tim O'Brien, she adds, is no exception. She reads the character of Sarkin Aung Wan in the novel as simply a male fantasy. Finally, Christopher argues for the inclusion of "bi-cultural" accounts of the war that include a Vietnamese perspective, such as the autobiographical work, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, by Le Ly Hayslip.

Couser, G. Thomas. "Going After Cacciato: The Romance and the Real War." *Journal of Narrative Technique* 13 (1983): 1-10.

This scholarly article by Thomas G. Couser examines *Cacciato* as one of the first fictional treatments of the Vietnam War—earlier books had consisted mostly of personal memoir. As such, the novel focuses specifically on how best to communicate wartime atrocity. According to Couser, the book "expresses radical skepticism about both the nature and the narratability of war; indeed, it suggests that war is both unintelligible and inexpressible" (2). Despite this, the novel succeeds in capturing two essential experiences of war: the

disruption of a coherent sense of time and the unsettling inability to distinguish between dream and reality.

Farrell, Susan. "The Labyrinth of Myth and Gender in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*." *Thirty Years After: New Essays on Vietnam War Literature, Film, and Art*. Ed. Mark Heberle. Newcastle, England: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009. 53-64.

This article, appearing in a collection of scholarly articles about representations of the Vietnam War, examines the classical myth of Theseus and Ariadne in relation to the underground tunnel system depicted in *Cacciato*. The essay argues that the novel's protagonist, Paul Berlin, tries on the role of the Greek hero Theseus in order to test out traditional models of masculinity and courage. But in the end, Berlin fails to heed the advice of Sarkin Aung Wan, the Ariadne figure, and remains trapped in traditional views of gender, which limit his ability to imagine his way out of war.

Herzog, Toby. "Going After Cacciato: The Soldier-Author-Character Seeking Control." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 24 (1983): 88-96.

In this scholarly article, Herzog argues that the Vietnam War, with its "fragmentation, complexity, and illogic" (88), posed special problems for writers attempting to write about it and order the chaos in a meaningful way. This difficulty for writers mirrors the problems American soldiers had in trying to understand and orient themselves within their confusing experiences of a war that had "no center, no decisive battles" (88). According to Herzog, *Going After Cacciato* explores this attempt to make sense of the war, or to create order out of chaos, by having the soldier transform into the author of his own experiences.

McWilliams, Dean. "Time in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 29.4 (Summer 1988): 245-255.

Dean McWilliams, in his scholarly article, attempts to sort out for readers the complicated timeline of *Cacciato*. He proposes that the book consists mostly of three major times: 1) the past, which involves Paul Berlin's previous six months at the war; 2) the present, which involves the six hours that Paul Berlin spends on watch in an observation tower on a November night in 1968; and 3) the future, which involves Berlin's imagined pursuit after a deserting comrade named Cacciato. McWilliams includes illustrations that chart the events of the novel in both narrative and chronological sequence, which are not the same. He argues, as well, that readers are intended to see Berlin's return to the war at the end of the book as a failure since he lacks courage to make his dreams a reality.

Raymond, Michael W. "Imagined Responses to Vietnam: Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 24 (1983): 97-104.

This article appeared in an edition of the scholarly journal *Critique: Studies in Contemporary American Fiction* that was entirely devoted to Vietnam War literature. In it, Michael W. Raymond argues against the critical consensus that the present time in the novel takes place during Paul Berlin's long night on the observation post in late November of 1968. Instead, Raymond reads the observation post as simply a figment of Berlin's imagination—a case of wishful thinking, a product of his desire for a safe place away from the war. The entire novel focuses on how imagination shapes actual experience.

Slay, Jack Jr. "A Rumor of War: Another Look at the Observation Post in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*." *Critique: Studies in American Fiction* 41.1 (1999): 79-85.

Jack Slay, in this scholarly article, builds on Michael Raymond's view that the observation post in *Cacciato* is not to be taken as the real present-time of the novel, but exists only as a fantasy in Paul Berlin's mind. Slay, however, takes the argument further, arguing that the actual present time of the novel takes place in a few, traumatic seconds within Berlin's mind. The novel, then, shares much in common with Ambrose Bierce's famous short story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."

Tal, Kali. "The Mind at War: Images of Women in Vietnam Novels by Combat Veterans." *Contemporary Literature* 31.1 (Spring 1990): 76-96.

In her scholarly article, Kali Tal argues that, in a warrior culture, male combat veterans have to renounce empathy in order to survive. This leads to alienation, which the soldier then projects onto his female characters. Asian women especially, in the American literature of the Vietnam War, "compose the most extreme category of objectified images" (77). Tal reads Paul Berlin's creation of Sarkin Aung Wan in this same vein. She argues that, in the end, "the division between men and women in this novel is unbreachable, and it is the male half which must triumph" (78), even though this triumph is destructive for both men and women alike.

Vannatta, Dennis. "Theme and Structure in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 28 (1982): 242-246.

In this early scholarly article, Vannatta argues that *Cacciato* is not simply a novel about war, it is also about "the struggle and eventual failure to impose order on the flux of

experience” (244). Paul Berlin’s first goal, of being a hero, is deflated because he learns that heroes die horribly on the field of battle. Berlin’s second goal, then, becomes flight. But his flight simply brings him back to the war. Vannatta argues that the “seemingly vanquished goal of heroism, of fighting for God, country, and family, has an obstinate resiliency” (245-46). Because the idea of heroism is not “buried under an avalanche of cynicism (246), *Cacciato* is not an anti-war novel.

Womack, Anne-Marie. “‘Just a Creature of His Own Making’: Metafiction, Identification, and Gender in *Going After Cacciato*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 59.4 (Winter 2013): 811-832.

Womack examines the character of Sarkin Aung Wan in this scholarly article in order to argue that the novel challenges traditional gender identities associated with war. She argues that, in inventing Sarkin Aung Wan, Paul Berlin engages with feminine conventions from various genres including the western, the romance, and the war story. In addition, Berlin imagines Wan as a version of the real-life Vietnamese peace negotiator, Nguyen Thi Binh. By drawing attention to these different versions of femininity, O’Brien shows us the socially constructed nature of gender categories.

Part 2: Major Trends in the Criticism

Tim O’Brien published a Vietnam memoir in 1973, and his first novel, *Northern Lights*, in 1975. But it wasn’t until *Going After Cacciato* won the 1979 National Book Award that O’Brien’s work began to receive serious critical attention. The initial criticism of *Cacciato*, emerging in the early 1980s, appeared largely in books and articles that examined the novel alongside other examples of Vietnam War literature or more broadly, of American war literature in general. Yet

the decade of the 80s did see at least ten critical articles that focused exclusively on the novel itself. O'Brien scholarship increased significantly after that, with at least thirty-five journal articles and three books about O'Brien published in the 1990s and six books and close to fifty journal articles in the 2000s. However, it appears that, during this period, critical attention largely shifted to O'Brien's 1990 collection, *The Things They Carried*. Only a handful of articles focusing specifically on *Cacciato* have appeared since the year 2000. While *Cacciato* is not the most-written-about O'Brien work, nevertheless, the body of criticism on it is rich and varied. In discussing the work, critics have focused heavily on untangling its complicated structure. They have also debated how to interpret the end of the novel. More recently, critics have examined O'Brien's treatment of gender, especially in regard to the refugee character Sarkin Aung Wan.

Several articles published in the early 1980s by critics such as Dennis Vanatta, Tobey Herzog, Michael Raymond, and Thomas Couser discuss the novel's structure by analyzing its self-reflective nature, often reading the book as an example of metafiction: fiction that explores the very process of fiction-making itself. These early critics note that what is unique about *Cacciato* is that the medium becomes as important as the message. Couser, for instance, argues that the novel focuses on "the appropriate method of communicating the experience and significance of the war" as fully as it looks at the war itself (5). These early articles generally spend some time as well untangling for readers the complicated structure of the novel, the critics generally agreeing that there are three main types of chapters: 1) war memory chapters, which make up the past; 2) chapters containing the imagined pursuit of Cacciato; and finally, 3) chapters that take place on an observation post by the sea while Paul Berlin contemplates his own storytelling processes.

Interestingly, despite this general consensus, there is some disagreement about the

observation post chapters. Vanatta, Herzog, and Couser all suggest that these chapters represent the real, present time of the novel, the six long hours that Paul Berlin spends on watch one night while he spins out in his mind the long, elaborate tale of the search for Cacciato and tries to suppress his troubling war memories. This is the reading that remains dominant in later criticism of the novel. Michael Raymond, however, disagrees with this view. For Raymond, the observation post is not intended to be real, but is to be read as a fantasy invented by Paul Berlin, a wish for a safe place out of the war. Later, in a 1999 article, Jack Slay will pick up on this reading and carry it even further, suggesting that the main action of *Cacciato*, not unlike Ambrose Bierce's famous short story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," takes place all within the protagonist's mind in a few brief, traumatic seconds.

The question of how to interpret the ending of the novel was an issue raised by its earliest critics, who tend to disagree about whether Berlin's choice not to desert the war is courageous or cowardly. Tobey Herzog believes that Berlin makes the correct decision at the end, citing O'Brien's own comment that "Berlin's fantasized run for Paris would have been an unhappy experience—it wasn't compatible with his background, personality, his beliefs" (98). Dennis Vanatta agrees with this view, arguing that the novel's dream of heroism in war contains an "obstinate resiliency" (245) that justifies Berlin's decision to stay. Yet, nearly as many critics take an opposing view. Dean McWilliams sees Berlin's refusal to step into his imagination and flee the war as an act of cowardice. He condemns Berlin's final decision, saying its implications are "deterministic" (253). Kali Tal agrees, arguing that Berlin's choice to stay at the war represents a failure to connect to his feminine side; instead he falls back on the "hypermasculine stance" of a stereotypical soldier (88). A third set of

critics takes more of a middle ground about the end of the novel, several suggesting that Berlin's decision to keep fighting is "understandable," though it does not provide a happy conclusion.

A final trend in *Cacciato* criticism arose out of a new interest in Vietnam War literature on the part of feminist scholars who tend to disagree about whether O'Brien reinforces or undermines traditional gender stereotypes in the novel. Kali Tal, in a 1990 article that looked at images of women in Vietnam novels written by combat veterans, argues that, in *Cacciato*, the "division between men and women . . . is unbreachable"; Paul Berlin succumbs in the end to "traditional myths of male romance" and Sarkin Aung Wan, who represents Berlin's own feminine impulses, vanishes from the book (78). Tal sees O'Brien's depiction of gender as problematic, on a par with a slew of Vietnam War novels in which women characters have no real life of their own and conveniently fade out of existence by the novel's end. In 1995, critic Renny Christopher also critiqued the figure of Sarkin Aung Wan, pointing out that she never develops into "anything more than [Paul] Berlin's imagining, a projection the book acknowledges but does not critique" (231). Christopher adds that this character embodies "all the American clichés about Asian women" (232). However, more recent articles have questioned these early assumptions. Susan Farrell, for instance, looks to classical myth to argue that O'Brien self-consciously rejects traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity in the novel. Anne-Marie Womack adds that Sarkin Aung Wan tests out models of femininity by trying on several distinct roles: "the damsel in distress in the western, the native guide in the colonial contact narrative, the homemaker in the domestic narrative, the leading lady in the Paris romance, and the first female peace negotiator in the diplomacy narrative" (812). In Womack's view, O'Brien complicates rather than reinforces traditional gender hierarchies.