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The Labyrinth Of The Mind: The Psychology Of War Stories In Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*

"But this too is true: stories can save us."

"Fiction is the lie that helps us understand the truth."

-Tim O'Brien

Stories serve different purposes; they can inform, teach, or entertain, but they can also serve a personal purpose in order to construct meaning, to create order, or to cope with a stressful or devastating experience. Soldiers and veterans of war often use stories to understand and portray the extreme emotions and fears that they experienced during their deployments and to process what they saw, felt, and did during their military service. Stories allow the soldiers to create meaning when they are unable to find it in the midst of chaos and disjointed events, especially in war when there is so much that cannot be explained, only felt. When they return home from war, soldiers are expected to explain what they experienced with words, which is all but impossible. Many soldiers returning from war are so traumatized that they "are unwilling, or unable, to talk about their experiences" (Russell 94). They have to decide how much to tell based on who asks—some want stories like the movies, full of action, while some want to know about the pain. Either way, their stories don't always have to be real because sometimes fiction is

easier to tell than the truth and sometimes the battle scars are not always visible or physical. Experiencing trauma in war changes a person, and it is often difficult to explain that change with someone who has never experienced war, and they can often only “talk about that with someone else who has been in that same place, emotionally and physically” (Russell 94).

Tim O’Brien, a Vietnam War veteran and author of numerous semi-autobiographical novels about his time fighting in the Vietnam War, writes to show the extreme mental toll that war has on a soldier both during the tour of service and after returning home. All of his novels deal with war in some way, and he explained, “It was traumatic, and I still carry the memories and the ghosts and the horrors along with me, and I suppose my subconscious has pushed my stories in that direction” (J. Smith 3). Experiencing something as distressing as war weighs heavy on a person even years after the deployment has ended, and like O’Brien, many war veterans have turned to writing to find release and understanding of the experience by focusing on the truth and reality of life for a soldier. O’Brien explains that, “It’s not full of bombs and bullets and macho stuff. The object is to try to display in fiction what I felt as a soldier all those years ago—how futile it was, and how destructive” (Fehrman 1). O’Brien wrote *Going After Cacciato* in part to explore and deal with the guilt he feels from his time in the Vietnam War after “being grouped by association with the Americans who perpetrated the massacre at My Lai,” (P. Smith 63) which was a massacre “during which US troops slaughtered more than 500 civilians in Quang Ngai Province” (Turse 1). Soldiers attempting to see and understand the Vietnam War “are doomed to failure, for war is exposed for what it

is—organized murder” (Hedges 21). This war, in particular, took an incredible toll on the men drafted to fight, and it greatly affected their mental state because so much did not make sense to the soldiers. O’Brien’s novels and stories focus on the feelings, thoughts, and emotions that plague soldiers on a daily basis, some of which are simple while others are extremely complicated.

While reading Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*, the readers find themselves trapped in a labyrinth of stories both real and imagined where they are forced to decipher what is true and what is invented. The protagonist Paul Berlin imagines that his squad follows a deserter on a journey to Paris away from the war, and Paul Berlin’s mental exploration is used to investigate the war and “how the human imagination, capable of manifold transformations, deals with it, spins it, or provides emotional release from it” (J. Smith 2). The book is divided into three separate storylines intermixed throughout the book, which brings about the question of time and reality because they are “simultaneously realistic and surreal, objective and impressionistic” (P. Smith 63). To Paul Berlin the “facts were separate and haphazard and random, even as they happened, episodic, broken, no smooth transitions, no sense of events unfolding from prior events” (*Cacciato* 206). The book is set up in the same way that Paul Berlin’s mind is processing the events—seemingly completely unordered “and skewed by his war experience” (P. Smith, 63). The chapters occurring in the present are entitled “The Observation Post” and take place in Quang Nai between midnight and the morning of November 20, 1968 when Paul Berlin spends his guard duty remembering what has happened since he arrived in Vietnam and imagining what might have been, which makes up the rest of the

chapters in the novel. The sections chasing after Cacciato in his quest for Paris span from October 1968 through April 1969 as the ragtag squad follows their escaped AWOL comrade and make their way Westward. The remaining chapters recount the stories of the fallen as well as Paul Berlin's time in the war thus far, which encompass the months between his arrival in Vietnam on June 3, 1968 and just before the present moment in October of 1968. All three sections of the book—the remembered past, the thoughtful present, and the imagined journey—are at first treated with the same level of realism, and it isn't until about a third of the way through the book that it becomes clear that the journey to Paris chasing after Cacciato is actually fiction rather than reality, which echoes the uncertainty of “real” for Paul Berlin.

The last chapter at The Observation Post sets the record straight of exactly where the line between fact and fiction sits, when the squad “surrounded the hill . . . waited through the night . . . shot the sky full of flares and then they moved in” with the shout of “Go!” For Paul Berlin “That was the end of it. The last known fact” (*Cacciato* 323). Everything beyond that all the way to Paris “were possibilities” and if Paul Berlin had “courage it might have been done” (*Cacciato* 323) and with courage “he might even have joined in” (*Cacciato* 23). Paul Berlin sits atop the Observation Post at night, which serves “as a metaphorical vantage point from which he views and controls the novel's intertwined stories, of the ‘possibility’ that his dreams might become reality” (P. Smith 66). At this point in the book, Paul Berlin is halfway through his 12-month tour and imagining the squad following Cacciato all the way to Paris is “a splendid idea” (*Cacciato* 26).

For soldiers in a war, especially in a war of insufficiently trained draftees rather than skilled volunteers, creating order of known facts is necessary in attempting to maintain one's sanity. During the Vietnam War "the president and a group of advisers insisted on running things from Washington with no clear military objectives to pursue," and many of these goals did not line up with the beliefs and opinions of the soldiers drafted to fight (Marlantes 119). When these goals for the war "are out of line with individual values, the individual, who is usually trapped in the system, can either get hurt or survive by lying" (Marlantes 119). The soldiers don't have any real particular ties to the war because they don't understand or believe in the cause, yet they are still on the frontlines. This is a major reason why soldiers and veterans from the Vietnam War choose to write; they need to justify what they have done because they don't always feel as though what they did was right. Because of their lack of passion for the war, the draftees have less of a sense of purpose and motive and thus are more vulnerable to the mental effects. Like Paul Berlin, "A more vulnerable individual may suffer more severe CSR [Combat Stress Reaction] and more severe PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder]" (van der Kolk et al. 108). Paul Berlin, whose purpose motives for his presence in the war are "as shapeless as water" (*Cacciato* 226) is extremely vulnerable to the effects of PTSD, which lead to his rapid flashbacks and daydreams. He needs to preserve order to ensure that he maintains a line for himself between fact and fiction, although that line is often blurred as he floats and snaps back and forth between fantasy and reality.

The famous war novel, *Johnny Got His Gun* portrays the post-war thoughts of Joe Bonham, an American soldier who wakes up in a hospital and slowly begins to realize that something is not right. He has lost his arms, legs, ears, and face in an artillery explosion, which leaves him completely unable to move, hear, or see. Because his mind is still fully functioning, he is trapped, a prisoner of war in his own body. When Joe realizes that something is missing, he thinks to himself, "Write it down. Put it on a piece of paper. I can read all right. But I can't hear. Put it down on a piece of paper and hand the paper to my right arm because I have no left arm" (Trumbo 28). He needs to mentally write down the body parts and senses that are missing in order to understand and comprehend everything that he has lost. In the same way, Paul Berlin frequently tries to make lists and maintain an order of events as well as causes and effects until it becomes "merely a matter of following the facts to where they ended" (*Cacciato* 220). *Going After Cacciato* begins with a roll call of the dead, the men whose fate is later told through flashback stories during Paul Berlin's night at the Observation Post. The opening lines of the book list what is known:

It was a bad time. Billy Boy Watkins was dead, and so was Frenchie Tucker. Billy Boy had died of fright, scared to death on the field of battle, and Frenchie Tucker had been shot through the nose. Bernie Lynn and Lieutenant Sidney Martin had died in the tunnels. Pederson was dead and Rudy Chassler was dead. Buff was dead. Ready Mix was dead. They were all among the dead (*Cacciato* 1).

Before he can begin his journey of memory and imagination, Paul Berlin must first lay an anchor of facts, which for him is the names, or nicknames rather, of his fellow grunts that have died in the war. O'Brien also begins the final short story in his book *The Things They Carried* with "But this too is true: stories can save us" followed by a list of the dead. He then writes, "But in a story, which is kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world" (*Carried* 213). O'Brien uses this tactic of storytelling in *Going After Cacciato* because if Paul Berlin is able to recount the stories of the soldiers that have died, then he can allow them to live on even if it's only in his mind.

Going After Cacciato is made up of "various quests for control: author O'Brien's command of his own novel, American soldiers' control of a chaotic war, soldier Berlin's domination of his fears and his memory, and storyteller Berlin's direction of his tale of an 8,600-mile journey to Paris" (Herzog, *Control* 82-83). Paul Berlin and his fellow soldiers feel "powerless in a war environment where they gamble with their lives and become mere extensions of a military machine" (Herzog, *Control* 85). Soldiers often feel as though they are lost in the machine, but writing allows soldiers to regain a feeling of control to cope with what they have experienced. Gaining an understanding of what happened and what caused it to happen is necessary for dealing with memories and coping with the consequences of the time spent in battle. It requires introspection and as Paul Berlin reminds himself, "Concentration—that was the answer—remember the details, store them up for future understanding" (*Cacciato* 187). Many author-veterans discuss the importance of remembering now and processing later. The processing and

understanding cannot be ignored because it could lead to a detrimental mental break down the road. Ron Capps, who founded the Veterans Writing Project in Washington, D.C. spent 25 years in the military, including tours in Rwanda, Darfur, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and understands the importance of processing and how helpful writing and storytelling can be for veterans of war. After going through therapy and taking prescribed medication, his memories still caused extreme trauma that led to a suicide attempt. Finally he found something that worked—writing. He began putting down his stories, and he said, “Writing helped me get control of my mind” (Hames 1). Those in the program are familiar with the saying, “Either own your story or it owns you,” and the instructors urge veterans to tell their stories because “by sharing and reliving traumatic events, a person is taking charge of what happened and acknowledging that he has moved on” (Hames 1). Many author-veterans find comfort in turning their true stories into fiction because it allows them to take charge and own their stories.

In his short story “How to Tell a True War Story” in the novel *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien writes, “In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen...The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*” (*Carried* 67-68). Because stories are used as a coping mechanism to process, understand, and share what that experience was like for the soldiers, the line of reality is sometimes unclear because the mind often does play tricks in high stress situations. Those who are affected by

post-war PTSD often experience dissociation, which means that the “perceptual, affective, memory, and identity functions are altered” (Schacter 155). In *Going After Cacciato* the real and the imagined get jumbled, and the line between the two is difficult to locate because “for Paul Berlin, the dreamer, it’s all real” (*Cacciato* 292). Paul Berlin often finds himself sliding back and forth between reality and his imagination because middle-hour guard “was the time of night that created the distortions” (*Cacciato* 45). When he’s on the road to Paris he sometimes feels “an incomplete sense of being high in the tower by the sea. It was a queasy feeling, a movement of consciousness in and out” (*Cacciato* 85). Much of his time at the Observation Post is spent analyzing and rethinking what has happened in an effort to find order in the chaos. He tells himself to “Focus on the order of things, sort of the flow of events so as to understand how one thing led to another, search for that point at which what happened had been extended into a vision of what might have happened” (*Cacciato* 206). Paul Berlin replays in his mind the events and situations that led to the deaths of his comrades in an effort to reestablish the order and the reason. He also creates a world where the squad really did follow Cacciato, where they really did make it to Paris. While he’s at the Observation Post he tries to maintain the line between fact and fiction by asking himself, “Where was the fulcrum? Where did it tilt from fact to imagination?” (*Cacciato* 206). The fulcrum of the teeter-totter of his war stories is placed at the Observation Post chapters. Those are the moments that are present and real, and the rest of his mind tilts back and forth between the memory of the past and the imagination of the journey away from the war on the road to Paris.

The line between fact and fiction is difficult to place in *Going After Cacciato* because the line is difficult to place for Paul Berlin in his internal struggle in the war. “If you can imagine it, he tells himself, it’s always real. Even peace, even Paris—sure, it’s *real*” (*Cacciato* 291). Paul Berlin isn’t always sure what really happened and what he imagined so at times everything feels, seems, and is real to him. In all actuality, it really doesn’t matter what is fact and what is fiction because everything serves a purpose for Paul Berlin in his story. The squad meets Captain Fahyi Rhallon when they are arrested in Tehran, and the captain enters into a conversation with Doc Peret and explains “that after a battle each soldier will have different stories to tell, vastly different stories, and that when the war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers” (*Cacciato* 96). When he says this he means that every soldier will experience the same event in a different way, with different feelings and emotions, and that each soldier will be affected individually by the experience. Stories about the same war often differ because it’s all a matter of perspective and every soldier “has a different war. Even if it is the same war, it is a different war” (*Cacciato* 196).

Paul Berlin imagines Cacciato’s successful escape and their pursuit all the way to Paris because it is preferable to the actual outcome of death. In the edition of *Going After Cacciato* printed in 1980, Paul Berlin goes through another roll call of the dead toward the end of the book to reorder everything that has happened after it becomes clear that everything between Cacciato’s hill and Paris was imagined. The 1980 version contains another roll call of the dead as “he tried again to order the known facts,” but this time after he names off Pederson, he doesn’t end there.

He names Cacciato at the end of the list (O'Brien 1980, 248). In this original version, Paul Berlin's reason for imagining an alternate reality in which Cacciato escapes is extremely clear. Cacciato is dead. He never made it past their rendezvous on Cacciato's hill. Paul Berlin has to imagine that they follow him all the way to Paris because in that version of reality, Cacciato is alive, whereas in the actual reality, he is not. Because having Cacciato's name listed among the dead is far too clear and literature is more meaningful when it's ambiguous, the more recently printed book ends this roll call section of where Berlin tries to "order the known facts" with Pederson, not Cacciato (*Cacciato* 206). Cacciato's fate is left up to the imagination. Maybe he made it all the way to Paris, and maybe not. There's really no way of knowing for sure.

Because of his uncertainty and remorse, Paul Berlin creates an alternate reality in which he knows for sure that Cacciato survived and escaped because he doesn't want to believe that Cacciato is dead. Instead of accepting the grim reality of death, Paul Berlin "tried to imagine a proper ending" for the story of Cacciato's desertion and the squads retrieval mission (*Cacciato* 23). The flashback chapters are all seemingly random in order, whereas the Road to Paris chapters of the imagined quest follow a chronological order. By imagining an alternate reality Paul Berlin "views the war from a new viewpoint and attempts to transform the chaos into logical, ordered, and understandable events. To accomplish this feat, he becomes an author creating his own piece of fiction, an extended daydream" (Herzog article 91). Paul Berlin asks himself, "Had it ended there on Cacciato's grassy hill, flares coloring the morning sky? Had it ended in tragedy? . . . Or had it

ended farther along the trail west? Had it ever ended?" (*Cacciato* 27). Paul Berlin is in control of the situation and knows that he's making these decisions about what happened to Cacciato to alter and recreate what might have actually happened with a different ending and from a different angle to create an outcome. Many author-soldiers who write fictional stories about their time in the war do so because it allows them to view what they have experienced from a different angle. By having a fictional character experience similar battles, trauma, and deaths, the author-soldier is able to process the emotions in a more understandable and manageable way.

For Paul Berlin, his imagined story *Westward* is a way for him to find something good and positive in a frightening situation. On his last night on the Des Moines River, his father told him, "You'll see some terrible stuff, I guess. That's how it goes. But try to look for the good things, too. That'll be there if you look. So watch for them" (*Cacciato* 63). Paul Berlin takes this quite literally in his storytelling because he uses his imagined quest to Paris following Cacciato to find the good in the war. He believes that thinking about what might have happened "was a way of looking for the very best of all possible outcomes" (*Cacciato* 64). Whenever he finds himself in an uncomfortable or scary time in the war, Paul Berlin "tried to think better thoughts" to escape (*Cacciato* 127). Some of his flashbacks and his journey to Paris serve as his happy thoughts and his escape. When he remembered the deaths of his fellow soldiers, Paul Berlin "pretended he was deep in a green pool in summertime," (*Cacciato* 280) and likewise, he imagines himself on the road to Paris away from danger as a means of escape from the stress of the war.

Many Veterans tell stories not only to find good in the situation, but to escape the bad. In the short story “Bodies,” which is included in Phil Klay’s *Redeployment* series of fictional stories about the war and coming home, he writes, “There are two ways to tell the story. Funny or sad. Guys like it funny, with lots of gore and a grin on your face when you get to the end. Girls like it sad, with a thousand-yard stare out to the distance as you gaze upon the horrors of war they can’t quite see” (Klay 53). Sometimes soldiers tell stories because they’re expected to explain what it was like. They get home and realize that they can’t possibly express the reality of what happened, so they rely on stories catered to the audience because that’s easier than telling the truth. To the person hearing the story and to the veteran as well it really doesn’t matter if the story is fact or fiction because “even if it had happened, more or less, it was still total bullshit” (Klay 54). They just want a story, and it doesn’t matter what kind.

Going After Cacciato straddles the line of fact and fiction as Paul Berlin explores what might have been. He has spent his entire life living “almosts,” and even in his imaginations he often finds himself unable to completely accomplish much on his own. There are so many times throughout his real experiences and his imaginings that he has the potential to accomplish something, but even in his imagination he falls short of success. He often gets hung up on his inabilities because he proclaims that he “can’t see the forest for the trees” (*Cacciato* 42). When he’s on the road to Paris with the beautiful refugee Sarkin Aung Wan, they’re together in the Mandalay hotel and “they almost made love” (*Cacciato* 115), and then later in Delhi when they would play cards in the lobby and kiss in his room, “He

pretended they made love” (*Cacciato* 170). It’s in his imagination, so he should be in control of what happens, and the only person keeping him from turning his “almosts” into actions is himself. This inability to take action and control over his relationship with Sarkin Aung Wan stems from when he was in high school and “Louise Wierstma had almost been his girlfriend” and when “he had pretended to kiss her” (*Cacciato* 180). In his real life he is unable to follow through with women, and he can’t even do so in his fantasies. Paul Berlin is a man of “almosts” who is afraid of doing great things in the war that would earn him the Silver Star that he had hoped to achieve. He’s a coward, and he realizes his lack of bravery on multiple occasions. The journey in his imagination would be an opportune time for him to imagine himself as a brave and capable soldier, but instead he continues to be afraid. Sarkin Aung Wan reminds him of his fears by saying, “Think and think and think! You are afraid to *do* . . . All your fine dreams and thinking and pretending . . . now you can do something” (*Cacciato* 297).

By the time Paul Berlin is at the Observation Post daydreaming during his night watch, he has been in Vietnam for about five months and hasn’t had any real moments of bravery and courage. When the squad needed someone to volunteer to clear the tunnel and “Paul Berlin stood alone. He felt the walls tight against him. He was careful not to look at anyone” (*Cacciato* 90). When he was in his “one big battle of the war” he let his fear take over and “he could only lie there, twitching, holding his breath in messy gobs, fingers twitching, legs pulled around his stomach like a shell” (*Cacciato* 177). Rather than fighting the war, he hid out and curled up into the fetal position like a scared child. Paul Berlin had imagined that he would go to war

and be courageous, and when he returned home on the train “he would step off boldly, boldly, and he would shake his father’s hand and look him in the eye. ‘I did okay,’ he would say. ‘I won some medals.’ And his father would nod” (*Cacciato* 47). He believed that this would be the outcome of his war, but instead his war consisted of many moments where he could have been brave but instead he remained a coward who couldn’t take control of the war. In his other book *The Things They Carried* O’Brien also writes about a veteran who “Almost, but not quite” won a Silver Star (*Carried* 135). This soldier talks to his father about how his other medals are for “routine, daily stuff” whereas the Silver Star is for “uncommon valor” and “that he could not bring himself to be uncommonly brave” (*Carried* 135). During his time in Vietnam, Paul Berlin has never done anything that would be deemed uncommonly brave, or even commonly brave. It’s clear from the start of his time in Vietnam that Paul Berlin “wanted to live” (*Cacciato* 37), and seeing the deaths of Bernie Lynn and Frenchie Tucker causes him to be even more afraid and “reinforce[s] his determination to stay at the rear of the marching line and to do as little as possible” (P. Smith 67). In order to win a Silver Star, a soldier must put himself selflessly and bravely at risk, which is something that Paul Berlin would never be able to do.

By dreaming of an escape that could actually be possible, even if it’s *Cacciato* taking the lead and not himself, Paul Berlin is able to finally take some control over his life in the war and do something uncommon and even brave. The issue of courage is brought up throughout the book, mostly Paul Berlin’s lack of courage. His goal for the war was to win a medal to show his father to make him proud, and he

focuses so much on “the time he almost won the Silver Star for valor” (*Cacciato* 81). He had the potential, but “the real issue was courage” because he never really showed any. At the Observation Post when he imagines the journey to Paris, Paul Berlin “felt brave. Tonight, anything was possible” (*Cacciato* 63). By creating an adventure that would require an extreme amount of bravery, Paul Berlin was able to feel courage and potential. He was “Excited by the possibilities, but still in control. That was the important part—he was in control” (*Cacciato* 63). In the midst of a chaotic war, maintaining control helps a soldier feel less helpless, and storytelling allows for this sense of control. When someone is telling a story, like Paul Berlin, he is in control of what happens to the characters, which is the complete opposite situation of a grunt in a war. Paul Berlin has a difficult time being content with the reality of war, so creating stories eases that for him. During one of their marches “Paul Berlin was the first to feel uneasy. He couldn’t quite place it . . . He didn’t understand it but he felt it. He wondered how it would end, and the wondering made him nervous” (*Cacciato* 102). He struggles with the uncertainty of his reality in war because he has no real control over his fate, but when he is creating the story, he is in complete control and feels empowered.

Throughout the novel, Paul Berlin continually tells himself, “with courage, it might have been done.” He doesn’t feel as though he belongs in the war, and he struggles with the desire to leave but the duty to stay. Paul Berlin’s “imaginative escape to Paris is a way of mentally escaping the facts of war that he cannot confront” (Bonn 9). His imagining of this story could be viewed as a cowardly act, a mental desertion, but “the journey is also a way of arriving back at the war, but this

time with a greater degree of moral comprehension and a clear definition of courage” (Bonn 9). The issue of courage threads its way through the entire novel and becomes a major dilemma for Paul Berlin because it seems as though he has no real courage. He’s full of fear, but it is “Berlin’s decision to continue, to persevere in spite of his fears” that shows courage (Slay 84). Throughout his time in Vietnam, Paul Berlin has had numerous occasions of cowardly behavior, but “in the midst of his deepest humiliation, an embarrassment caused directly by his cowardice, Berlin steps back into the line of duty and fire and dismisses the occasion to desert in Cacciato’s fading footsteps” (Slay 85). He could have followed Cacciato all the way to Paris, and at the start of the novel he thinks to himself, “with courage . . . he might even have joined in” (*Cacciato* 23). This, however, is not the case. He doesn’t follow Cacciato to Paris, but not because he lacks the bravery to do so. He stays in the war and continues his duty and his purpose *because* he has more bravery than he ever realized. “What remained were possibilities” (*Cacciato* 323), but the possibility he chose was to continue his war, and that “is his ultimate act of courage; *that*, indeed, is Paul Berlin’s bravest moment” (Slay 85).

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