THE SUBVERSION OF AUTHORITY IN TIM O'BRIEN'S GOING AFTER CACCIATO: A STUDY OF STORY AND DISCOURSE

by

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ABSTRACT

Tim O'Brien's Going After Cacciato is acclaimed as one of the most significant novels to emerge from the American experience in the Vietnam War. It is noted for its blend of realism and fantasy, and for its complex narrative structure that creates textual uncertainty and ambiguity. This study examines the different ways in which the novel undermines the cultural ideology of authority and considers how the questioning of authority is related to the American intervention in Vietnam.

Part One discusses the subversion of authority in the text's narrative content or what structuralists refer to as the level of "story." On this level, Going After Cacciato tends to revolve around two central events that represent a serious challenge to military authority: the desertion of the soldier Cacciato, and the "fragging" of an unpopular officer. By extension, these incidents also represent a challenge to the cultural assumptions which led America into the war. Part One explores how the portrayal of these events subverts authority by its dramatizing the conflict between cultural expectations associated with wartime military obligation and the rights of the individual to personal dignity and security, and by

questioning the moral legitimacy of the American presence in Vietnam.

Part Two discusses how the novel undercuts narrative authority on the level of "discourse," that is, the expression plane or the way the narrative content is communicated. Narrative authority is subverted by a structural design that employs various techniques such as fragmentation and chronological disordering to generate interpretive uncertainty. Cacciato also problematizes "truth" through metafictional self-reflexivity and the dynamics of storytelling that systematically erode distinctions between "reality" and fantasy, memory and imagination. The text's preoccupation with storytelling draws attention to the textualization of knowledge and demonstrates how the communication of experience is tentative and provisional.

But the subversion of authority in Going After Cacciato is never complete. In both story and discourse, the novel is characterized by a paradoxical postmodern double movement that both establishes and undercuts authority. The thesis discusses the operation of this phenomenon and considers how it relates to our comprehension of the Vietnam War.

In conclusion, Cacciato is seen as an equivocal novel that oscillates between authority and resistance, fact and fiction. This undecidability is expressed in the final

scene of the novel that leaves Cacciato's fate indefinite and open to conjecture. While the deliberate ambiguities of Going After Cacciato seem to evade the very real political issue of America's guilt in Vietnam, the novel's foregrounding of the operation of power systems and power relations in society exposes the domination cultural ideology has over the individual.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant developments in contemporary American literature has been the profusion of writing derived from the Vietnam War. The American experience in Vietnam, roughly encompassing the years 1961-75, has provided a generation of American writers with the background and raw material for well over two hundred novels. Among these, Tim O'Brien's Going After Cacciato has attracted both popular acclaim and substantial critical attention.

Much of the novel's appeal is a result of its multiplicity: its controversial historical context, its systematic generation of ambiguity and interpretive uncertainty, its complex structural configuration around distinct yet interpenetrating narrative levels, and the complex relationship of the novel's story and discourse. Structuralists refer to story as "the content or chain of events" in a narrative, and to discourse as "the expression, the means by which the content is communicated ... the story is the what in a narrative that is depicted, the discourse the how" (Chatman 1978, 19). Throughout the thesis, I will use these terms with this distinction in mind.

In his discussion of the semiotics of literature, Robert Scholes argues that we can recognize a given discourse as "literary" when an act of communication "loses its simplicity" (1982, 21); when, for example, the message or text which passes between an author and a reader is "encoded" in "terms of conventions or devices" that point to a meaning beyond the surface reality of existence (1982, 23-4). Scholes goes on to note that "literary coding of discourse is a formal strategy, a means of structuring that enables the maker of discourse to communicate certain kinds of meaning" (1982, 34). In Cacciato, the coding of discourse is equivocal. The novel's dazzling blend of realism and fantasy, its almost playful self-reflexivity and self-conscious story telling, and its complex narrative structure send mixed signals. The text seems designed to resist conclusive inter pretation and encourage instead a response capable of entertaining multiple interpretations and the coexistence of many possible textual meanings. The reader's desire to reach a finalized understanding of the novel is thwarted by a narrative strategy which continually works against the traditional conventions of logic and sequence, of closure or the sense of completion.

In Going After Cacciato, Tim O'Brien creates an open text that expresses a postmodernist urge to question and subvert the legitimacy of authority. This subversion of

authority occurs both on the level of story and of discourse. As one critic has observed, although with a different emphasis, "the structure of the novel ... is so integrally related to theme that we can hardly discuss one without describing the other" (Vannatta 1982, 242). In Cacciato, story and discourse are mutually supportive in making problematic, on the one hand, the cultural ideology of authority related to social conformity and subservience to the state, and on the other hand, in creating a postmodern text which resists forms of narrative authority associated with chronology, verisimilitude, closure, and interpretive resolution. But rather than effect a complete overthrow of authority, the novel is marked by a paradoxical double movement characteristic of postmodern texts. Linda Hutcheon has made an extensive study of this practice in A Poetics of Postmodernism, and the thesis will frequently have recourse to the vocabulary and theoretical concepts she discusses. Hutcheon argues that "postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (1988b, 3). This "doubling" process operates in Cacciato in a way that both constructs and undercuts the prevailing ideology of authority in order to provoke a challenging of traditional assumptions of American culture.

The thesis will examine the ways Going After Cacciato

subverts authority and consider how, in the historical context of the Vietnam War, that activity may relate to the American experience in Vietnam. Part One considers how cultural expectations and the ideology of authority are undermined on the level of story. Part Two focuses on discourse and how the text's subversion of narrative authority "problematizes" our knowledge of the war and raises questions about the communication of experience.

In terms of suspicion of authority, it is no coincidence that Cacciato is set in 1968 during the months following the Tet offensive when domestic support for the war plummetted and opposition to the policy-makers responsible for it was near its peak. For several years the American public had been deceived by a steady stream of misinformation, half-truths, and outright lies by successive governments and military bureaucrats. The population had been led to believe that America was winning the war and that victory was imminent. The sudden shock of the massive Tet offensive during which Vietnamese Communists simultaneously attacked over a hundred cities, including the southern capital of Saigon where they directly assaulted and temporarily occupied the United States embassy, shattered this illusion and revealed that, despite their overwhelming military superiority, American forces in Vietnam had actually made very little progress

toward winning the war and were bogged down in what was essentially a stalemate (Kolko 1985, 303-37; Karnow 1983, 523-66). For many disillusioned U.S. soldiers in the jungles of Vietnam, the frustration of the Tet offensive contributed to the conviction that, despite the importance of America's "noble crusade", the individual's primary task was survival. As commitment to the war ebbed and willingness to submit to the orders of superior officers diminished, orders that were increasingly perceived as pointless, the Vietnam warrior tended to demand more control over his situation in order to increase his chances of survival. That control could only come at the expense of military authority and the cultural ideology which supported it.

On the level of story, Going After Cacciato is preoccupied with characters' responses to military authority, social obligation and conformity, and conventions of American culture. The novel alternates between three distinct narrative lines. Most critics agree that the Observation Post chapters constitute the primary narrative, the "narrative present," which introduces a secondary, future-oriented narrative consisting of Paul Berlin's self-conscious fantasy of Third Squad's pursuit of Cacciato from Vietnam to Paris. A third narrative line, "War Stories," also focalized through Paul Berlin, recalls

various events of the preceding five months, including Cacciato's desertion and the squad's unsuccessful attempt to surround and capture him on a hill near the Laotian border (Herzog, McWilliams, Raymond, Vannatta). Both Observation Post and going-after-Cacciato narratives are motivated by Paul Berlin's introspective inquiry into the meaning of Cacciato's desertion: an ultimate rejection of military authority and a declaration of individual liberty. Cacciato's assertion of independence through his decision to leave the war intrigues Paul Berlin who alternately views his desertion as "silly," "immature and dumb" (8), yet also admirable and desirable:

> "I just hope Cacciato keeps moving," Paul Berlin whispered. "That's all. I hope he uses his head and keeps moving." (14)
>
> He might even have tried himself. With courage, he thought, he might even have joined in, and that was the one sorry thing about it, the sad thing: He might have. (24)

The imaginary journey to Paris represents both an escape from military authority and the horrors of the Vietnam War, and a potential liberation from those aspects of American culture which convinced Berlin to submit to the draft. It is an exploration of the "possibilities," "the very best of all possible outcomes" in life under conditions free of

social pressure, cultural expectation and convention (65). Paul Berlin, "whose each step was an event of imagination" (31), remains plagued by the "feeling of vague restlessness" he experienced in college (228), and the fantasy journey to Paris is partly his way of working out the details, coming to terms with the demands of family, community, and country. The Observation Post and going-after-Cacciato narratives consequently subvert the overt authority of the military and at the same time question the covert, yet no less "authoritative," ideology of culture.

A similiar undercutting of authority occurs within the "War Stories" narrative. Dennis Vannatta has argued that "the recollected war chapters have no ordering principle; they arise out of Paul's memory unbidden" (1982, 243). Never theless, Berlin's memories repeatedly return to and revolve around incidents of resistance to military authority. These range from relatively minor cases of disregard for "rules of war," such as Stink Harris throwing a belt of heavy machine-gun ammunition into the weeds (167), to serious overt acts of disobedience, Third Squad's conspiracy and mutiny, and the "fragging" of Lieutenant Sidney Martin. Martin is killed because, in the eyes of the squad, he risks their lives needlessly. His rigid determination to follow the army's standard operating procedures (SOPs) and his insistence that Viet Cong tunnels

and bunkers be searched before they are destroyed, even though the searches will likely result in the death of more members of the squad, conflicts with the men's deeply rooted survival instincts: "It's preservation," squad leader Oscar Johnson says. "That's all it is - it's self-fuckin-preservation ... the man don' grasp facts. All he grasps is SOPs" (235). The War Stories narrative details increasing resistance to Sidney Martin's authority until he is finally "replaced" by Lieutenant Corson.

The tension generated around authority and resistance is never satisfactorily resolved in the text. Analogous to the Vietnam War, where there was precious little middle ground, the story tends to oscillate between relatively passive acquiescence or grudging tolerance of the demands of war (i.e. it's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it), and some form of non-conformity or active opposition as suggested by Cacciato's desertion or the fragging of Lieutenant Martin. As Paul Berlin attempts to come to terms with the war and his role in it, he both accepts and rejects the legitimacy of the authority which propelled him into the war and which traps him in Vietnam. Drafted into the army when he dropped out of college (228), he secretly hopes to win a few medals and impress his father on his return home (49, 81), but he also believes that the war was a "sad accident," that "he had no stake in the war beyond

simple survival" (265). Whether he is in the war or at home in Fort Dodge, Berlin is always more ambivalent than decisive, and the choices he does make are generally half-hearted and always subject to later question and doubt: "It wasn't really a decision; just the opposite: an inability to decide. Drifting, letting himself drift..." (228).

Paul Berlin's persistent ambivalence is related to his difficulty in "separating illusion from reality" (206) and to his inability to organize his experience logically. He tries unsuccessfully to

> Focus on the order of things, sort out 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. (207)

In a war where most soldiers kept a "short-timer's" calendar recording the exact number of days until their departure fe from Vietnam, Paul Berlin does not even know the date; "November- the-what?" he keeps asking himself: "And now it was ... What was it? November 20, or 25. Somewhere in there. It was hard to fix exactly" (48). Berlin's confusion of reality and illusion and his problems with time and order are mirrored in the text's discourse.

On the level of discourse, Going After Cacciato undermines narrative authority by upsetting traditional

narrative conventions of sequence and logic, and systematically blurring distinctions between fact and fiction, memory and imagination. As Tobey Herzog has argued, the novel "involves readers in the pursuit of control as they struggle to master the disordered events in the book, find the center, and separate fact from fantasy" (1983, 88).

The disordered and episodic structure of the War Stories narrative generates interpretive uncertainty and ambiguity by creating profound temporal discordances between story and narrative. For example, in Chapter 14, Bernie Lynn enters a Viet Cong tunnel and is fatally wounded, but his actual death has already been described earlier in Chapter 9. Part Two of the thesis will discuss the effects of fragmentation and chronological disordering in undercutting the reader's ability to organize information presented in the text, and will suggest ways in which this effect of the novel's discourse is related to the U.S. government's manipulation of information during the Vietnam War.

One of the most interesting postmodern techniques in Going After Cacciato involves self-conscious narration and storytelling. Paul Berlin's story of Third Squad's trek to Paris is the obvious illustration of this phenomenon and the effects storytelling may have in eroding the borders

between what we recognize as real and imaginary. But the text "tells" a great many other stories, and its frequent preoccupation with the way experience is communicated in the form of stories draws attention to the process by which we understand and give meaning to events. Storytelling reminds us how easily "facts" may be altered or modified by the influence of imagination on memory. The final portion of this study will analyze the dynamics of storytelling in Cacciato and consider its relationship to how the United States became mired in Vietnam, in part, because its people believed the stories, the cultural myths, they told about themselves.

PART ONE: Flight, Fight, or Accommodation: Authority and Resistance on the Level of "Story"

> "For me, the purpose of writing fiction is to explore moral quandaries. The best fiction is almost always the fiction which has a character having to make a difficult moral choice." Tim O'Brien

In Going After Cacciato, Tim O'Brien creates an open text which expresses a postmodernist urge to question and subvert the legitimacy of authority. The novel generates a contradictory movement which both constructs and undercuts the prevailing ideology of authority in order to provoke a challenging of traditional assumptions of American culture.

On the level of story, Cacciato raises questions regarding authority by dramatizing the conflict between cultural expectations associated with wartime military obligation and the rights of the individual to human dignity and personal security. Frequently this latter impulse is expressed in terms of the "survival instinct." The novel explores the limits of social obligation by questioning the moral legitimacy of the American intrusion in Vietnam.

Set in the context of the Vietnam War, Cacciato has more than ample material to explore the consequences of

submission to authority and possible modes of resistance to it. Evasion of military duty surfaces in the opening paragraph with the information that "Ben Nystrom shot himself through the foot" (2). His action recalls a traditional combat-avoidance stratagem which is confirmed later when it is revealed that he had "talked privately with Doc Peret about self-inflicted wounds: where were the best places--the hand, a foot, a finger?" (106). The text is noticeably silent concerning the squad's reaction and offers little indication whether they either condone or condemn Nystrom. His ruse is simply treated as another one of the things the men joke about, like Lieutenant Corson's dysentery, Stink's ringworm, or Paul Berlin's purple biles (2).

In contrast, Cacciato's AWOL becomes the central image of resistance which motivates the text, and it acts as the catalyst for Paul Berlin's introspective exploration of "possibilities." Although it is reported as impassively as Nystrom's self-wounding, "In October, near the end of the month, Cacciato left the war" (2), his desertion provokes a complex reaction from the squad. It is more than just another crazy "fact" of the war. Cacciato represents a much greater challenge to military authority than Nystrom because, if successful, he upsets the system in a radically different way. Cacciato and Nystrom both escape the war,

but Cacciato also eludes the retribution of military authority. Although the text leaves it up to the reader to "fill in" the details, it requires little imagination to foresee Nystrom's fate: summary court-martial, a lengthy prison term, and a dishonorable discharge. Cacciato's desertion, on the other hand, effectively removes him from military "justice." By simply walking away and crossing the space between submission and resistance, Cacciato indicates he no longer acknowledges the arbitrary power of military authority. He places himself beyond its limits, beyond the borders of its jurisdiction. By apparently choosing some form of exile and accepting the social consequences of his act, Cacciato also rejects many of the cultural assumptions and social habits of American society.

Even sick and war-weary Lieutenant Corson realizes the enormity of Cacciato's threat, and his reaction suggests he harbors a fear that the appeal of the possibility of desertion may spread to the other members of the squad:

> What sort of silly crap is this--walking to gay Paree? What's happening? Just tell me, what's wrong with you people? All of you, what's wrong? ... Answer me. What for? What's wrong with you shits? Walking to gay Paree, what's <u>wrong</u>? (6)

Corson's reaction, albeit slowed somewhat and softened by

the relaxing effects of smoking Oscar's "makings," is orthodox: `"All right," he sighed. "Third Squad goes after Cacciato"' (7). In other words, bring him back to face the consequences. Lieutenant Corson's decision to pursue Cacciato will lead the squad to the "legal" boundaries of the war.

Linda Hutcheon has noted how in relation to undercutting authority, postmodernism is often preoccupied with borders: "the margin or border is the postmodern space par excellence, the place where new possibilities exist" (1988a, 4). Hutcheon argues that borders are paradoxical because they occupy the ground where opposites meet. Consequently, they represent places where opposites are both acknowledged and challenged. Her observations are particularly relevant to Going After Cacciato in which both literal and figurative "border crossings" are prominent metaphors for subverting authority. Passage across each international border is a reminder of the choices Paul Berlin faces and the decisions he must make.

Cacciato's desertion is, of course, the preeminent breach of conventional parameters from which many other challenges to authority can be said to radiate. It is an act which, as Paul Berlin recognizes, opens infinite possibilities. Early in the text it leads to a "border crossing" episode that expresses a challenge to authority

on multiple textual levels.

Third Squad's pursuit of Cacciato draws them away from the war zone and toward the Laotian frontier, and each step represents a gradual shift away from their roles and responsibilities as combat infantrymen: "It was country far from the war, rich and peaceful country" (16). As Cacciato approaches the border, he deliberately sheds his identity as a soldier by discarding his military paraphernalia: "ahead they found Cacciato's armored vest and bayonet, then his ammo pouch, then his entrenching tool and ID card" (17). The deserter undergoes a subtle transformation into a guide, leaving the squad hints and clues, "luring them on, gulling them" (18), pointing the way to liberation. On the margins of the war, the Laotian border corresponds to the limits of military authority:

> "He makes it that far," Doc said on the morning of the sixth day, pointing to the next line of mountains, "and he's gone, we can't touch him. He makes the border and it's bye-bye Cacciato." (18)

On another level, for Paul Berlin, the border represents the edge of his perception of "reality." It lies in an amorphous space between what is and what may be. According to my reading of the text, the events narrated in Chapter One as the squad follows Cacciato into the

mountains, are not part of Paul Berlin's fantasy. The first stirring of his imagination occurs the night before the squad's unsuccessful attempt to capture Cacciato, when, anticipating the trap they would spring in the morning, "He tried to imagine a proper ending" (23). The imaginary journey, proper, commences with Chapter Three, "The Road to Paris." Just as Cacciato, in sight of the Laotion border, is on the verge of breaking the grasp of military authority, so, too, does Paul Berlin begin breaking down the mental boundaries between reality and fantasy.

If, as Arthur Saltzman has suggested, Paul Berlin's vision "represents a chance for the individual imagination to resist the stranglehold of the real world of duty" (1980, 35), that stranglehold is broken at the Laotion border. Paul Berlin imagines Third Squad crossing the border in Chapter Three, "The Road to Paris." It is an important episode that introduces many of the subversive threads that wind through the novel. Earlier in the text, the border was established as the geographical limit of military jurisdiction. In this chapter, the river is at the center of a cluster of incidents undermining authority. It is a symbolic point of no return, not only for Cacciato, who presumably would be well across the border by the time Third Squad reaches the riverbank, but also for each member of the squad. The choices and implications of crossing the

border are defined by Lieutenant Corson and Harold Murphy:

> "Turn back," Harold Murphy said ... "The border, that's where we turn back. Right,sir?"
>
> Lieutenant Corson did not answer...
>
> "Isn't that right, sir?" Murphy said. "I mean--you know--we can't cross the border, can we? That's--" He let it trail off.
>
> "Desertion," the lieutenant said. "That's what it is. It's desertion."
>
> "I tell you this," Harold Murphy said. "I don't like it. I say we turn our butts back right now. Let him go." (32)

A curious irony develops around Lieutenant Corson in this scene. He is the obvious authority figure whose orders have brought the squad to the edge of the war yet it is the rebel, Cacciato, who actually guides them with his hints and clues. The squad follows Corson's orders which, in turn, follow Cacciato's trail of ration cans and Hersey bar wrappers. Corson mirrors the postmodern text which, in a contradictory action, both establishes and undercuts "prevailing values and conventions" (Hutcheon, 1988a, 3). In a momentary reversal of the "old marching order" which always puts Stink Harris at point, the lieutenant himself leads the way across the river (34), and, paradoxically, his authority leads the squad into the precise action,

desertion, which negates that authority. The description of the event has echoes of a rite of passage:

> The lieutenant went first. He stepped into the slow water, paused a moment, then began wading. The others followed. It was easy. They waded across single file, holding their weapons high. The warm feeling of passage. They regrouped on the far side. (34)

As the squad pushes beyond the border, the army's diminishing authority is expressed by the lieutenant's physical deterioration and eventual collapse: "Partly it was his age, partly the dysentery. But it was something else, too" (35). This "something else" is never spelled out in the text and can only be inferred from succeeding events.

The scene that follows Corson's breakdown is a parody of American democracy. Linda Hutcheon calls parody "a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (1988b, 11). We can see this double movement operating in this scene as the squad decides what to do. Their ability to vote on a course of action rather than simply obey orders reflects a change in their attitudes, a change derived from crossing the Laotian border. While Corson sleeps, Oscar Johnson, who, as squad leader and the

ranking NCO, would normally assume command, instead calls a meeting around the campfire. At first Oscar seems to abdicate his position and let the squad decide, but when Stink anticipates the traditional speeches, Oscar cuts him off: "We're taking a vote, no bullshit", he says, and promptly begins his own speech (35). Harold Murphy, however, is not so easily dismissed. He mocks Oscar's argument that the squad's duty, its "mission," is to catch Cacciato:

> "Screw mission, that's all. I vote we bag it up. It's nuts. Chasing after the dumb slob, it's crazy as hell. There's a word for it ... Desertion." (36)

No longer subject to the commands of a "superior," the squad can make decisions for itself, yet, with the exception of Paul Berlin who votes for the "possibilities," to "See what happens" (37), the men continue to think in terms of military obligation - whether their primary responsibility is to track down a deserter or return to the war. Campfire democracy proves both a success and a failure. The will of the majority prevails, but the process destroys the unity of the group: "In the morning, Harold Murphy and his big gun were gone. They continued west without him" (37).

Cacciato's desertion intrigues Paul Berlin. It not

only stimulates his imagination and motivates the imaginary trek to Paris, but it also raises profound questions for him about the nature of social obligation and the limits of personal liberty. On the one hand, he is fascinated by the sheer imaginative possibility of walking from Vietnam to Paris:

> [he] considered this, figuring the odds, speculating on how Cacciato might lead them through the steep country, beyond the mountains, deeper, and how in the end they might reach Paris. He smiled. It was something to think about. (16-7)

On the other hand, Berlin wonders: "Why had Cacciato left the war?" (28); "What were his motives, or did he have motives, and did motives matter?" (3Ø). Margaret Stewart argues that:

> Though they are the impetus to fantasy, the questions about Cacciato are never explored. As Berlin gets deeper into his counter-scenario, the questions that absorb him are ones about himself. Is it right to desert? Is it better to stay? What is happiness, what is responsibility, and what is the correct balance between the two? (1981, 15Ø)

But surely Paul Berlin's self-examination and his questions

about Cacciato's motives are integrally related rather than mutually exclusive as Stewart seems to imply. Berlin really wants to follow Cacciato out of the jungle; the war scares him silly (40) and he is sickened by it - "all the bad things, the painful and grotesque and ugly things" (25); he feels trapped, "snared in a web as powerful and tangled" as that which he believes traps and victimizes the Vietnamese (265). In the final analysis, Paul Berlin simply does not know if the war is right or wrong (266) and not knowing if it is a moral war, he does not know if it his moral duty to participate. At the same time, he feels bound by a social and political responsibility:

> So he went to the war for reasons beyond knowledge. Because he believed in law, and law told him to go. Because it was a democracy, after all, and because LBJ and the others had rightful claim to their offices. (266)

In a sense, Paul Berlin personifies the postmodern paradox: he is both acquiescent in and suspicious of the legitimacy (authority) of the war. Cacciato's desertion troubles him and provokes an effort to resolve his uncertainty and confusion. Understanding what motivated Cacciato - "Was it courage or ignorance, or both?" (28-9) - is a step toward understanding himself.

During his inquiry into the meaning of Cacciato's

desertion and the relevance it might have for himself, Paul Berlin is frequently preoccupied with the nature of courage. Partly this is a reflection of Berlin's painful embarrassment concerning his own fear, a fear graphically evident in his incontinence during moments of crisis (20, 333). He hopes to bring his fear under control and secretly dreams of winning a Silver Star for bravery (81). It is also because Berlin realizes that desertion can be negatively or positively motivated: an act of cowardice - fear of facing the ememy - or an act of courage based on a conviction that the war is morally wrong.

Although, as Milton Bates has observed, "Paul Berlin cannot decide whether the moon-faced Cacciato is a genius or a simpleton" (1987, 272), he clearly admires Cacciato's courage - both physical and, perhaps more importantly, his moral courage. Cacciato may not be an impressive "hero"; nonetheless, Paul Berlin recognizes that he is competent, fearless, uncomplaining, adaptable, and honorable. Cacciato is an accomplished soldier whose "den was snug and dry" (9), and whose booby trap outwits the entire squad, sending them into a panic (19-20). He alone is willing to descend into a treacherous Vietcong tunnel to retrieve Frenchie Tucker's body (90), and he is the only squad member sufficiently self-possessed to clean what remains of Buff's face from his helmet (287). When Oscar Johnson organizes

the mutiny in "Lake Country" which culminates in Lieutenant Martin's fragging, Cacciato refuses to participate: "`A sad thing,' Cacciato had said on the day afterward" (248). Finally, apparently as a consequence of Third Squad's only confirmed "kill" reported in the text, Cacciato wins the Bronze Star (8). "He did some pretty brave stuff," Paul Berlin and Doc Peret agree, "You can't call him a coward" (15).

Since cowardice is a doubtful explanation for Cacciato's desertion, Berlin is led to entertain alternative motives. On the one hand, he is tempted to agree with the others in the squad who consider Cacciato a simpleton and usually refer to him with derision: "Dumb as a bullet, Stink said. Dumb as a month-old oyster fart, said Harold Murphy" (2); he "missed Mongolian idiocy by the breadth of a hair," Doc Peret says (8). He is called "a rockhead" (18), the "happy-assed light of the world" (22), the "gremlin" (90), and "that ding-dong, Cacciato" (6). On the other hand, Paul Berlin respects Cacciato, and he is suspicious of the squad's pat answers and attitudes that merely reinforce cultural stereotypes. Cacciato's desertion has stirred Berlin in "that secret chamber of the human heart, where, in tangles, lay the circuitry for all that was possible, the full range of what a man might be" (81). It leads to a questioning not only of the war itself and his

role in it, but also of his relationship to the organization of power in society - the cultural ideology of authority.

Paul Berlin's inquiry and response to the war occurs within all three narrative strands of the text. The apparently factual War Stories narrative, which recounts events of the preceding five months, evokes unpleasant, disturbing "truths" that undermine Berlin's ability to reach a judgement of the moral legitimacy of the war, a judgement that struggles to emerge from the imaginary going-after-Cacciato narrative. In keeping with the "teeter-totter" effect of the novel's structure, the Observation Post chapters function as a bridge, a place where the real and the imaginary frequently meet in the mind of Paul Berlin and the hard lessons of the war are softened and obscured by "the immense powers of his imagination" (27).

Because War Stories is essentially focalized through Berlin and includes earlier memories of his childhood and civilian life in Iowa, it is generally considered to represent personal recollections of his tour in Vietnam (Couser, Herzog, McWillaims, Vannatta, Zins). The War Stories narrative is random, fragmentary, and episodic, and while it is generally organized into separate chapters, occasionally it interrupts and intrudes upon the other two

narratives. Adopting a psychoanalytic approach, Dean McWilliams interprets this structural chaos as "reflecting the trauma of war on Berlin's psyche ... fatigue, jungle heat, and military routine have numbed his sense of time" (1988, 245-6). Dennis Vannatta holds a similar view:

> The recollected war chapters have no ordering principle; they arise out of Paul's memory unbidden, too devastating and horrifying to be leashed or ordered. (1982, 243)

Yet despite this temporal disorder, as the novel progresses it becomes apparent that Paul Berlin returns repeatedly to the series of events surrounding the squad's mutiny and fragging of Lieutenant Sidney Martin - an action far more subversive of authority than Cacciato's desertion. It is one of the crucial events in Cacciato and an event made even more significant by the text's suppression of its actual description.

Initially, Lieutenant Sidney Martin's death is simply reported as one among the many deaths Berlin has witnessed:

> 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 tunnels. Pederson was

> dead and Rudy Chassler was dead. Buff was dead. Ready Mix was dead. They were all among the dead. (1)

But with each subsequent reference to Sidney Martin or his death, the text provides more information, sheds a little more light on his character, on the circumstances of his death, and on Paul Berlin's ambivalent attitude toward it - as if a door was slowly opening to reveal a dark corner of his consciousness. One critic has suggested that Paul Berlin is attempting to avoid the trauma of confronting the circumstances of Martin's death but that as the night on the observation post wears on, and Berlin remembers and struggles with more details of his combat experiences, the memory of Third Squad's conspiracy forces itself upon him (McWilliams 1988, 248-9). From being one of the "crazy things" about the war, like the deaths of Billy Boy, Buff, or Pederson (15), Martin's death in lake country is eventually revealed as being the squad's "solution" to the conflict between formal and informal Standard Operating Procedures:

> Formally, it was SOP to search tunnels before blowing them. Informally, it was SOP to blow the tunnels and move on, without a search, without risking life. Lieutenant Sidney Martin, who was trained at the Point, violated the informal SOPs

> and the men hated him ... These issues were not debatable. They were governed by the informal SOPs, and these SOPs were more important than the Code of Conduct. (45-6)

Martin's strict adherence to the "rules" and his insistence that the squad search the tunnels meets with increasing resistance:

> Once, when Martin ordered them to search a small bunker complex, Stink Harris and Vaught began making pig noises, softly at first, then louder, and the others joined in. It wasn't exactly mutiny, not quite, but it was close. (104)

Sometime later, when the squad is forced to search a network of tunnels they discover in "Lake Country," "Oscar Johnson began talking seriously about solutions" (178). Finally, after Frenchie Tucker and Bernie Lynn are killed searching tunnels, orders they grudgingly carry out only under the lieutenant's threat of court-martial (89), every member of the squad refuses to obey Martin's direct order (with the exception of Cacciato who was off fishing for walleyes in the rain-filled bomb craters), and he carefully records each man's name in his notebook (233-4). Lieutenant Martin's exactness for regulations despite the probability of more unnecessary deaths pushes the squad into open revolt. Military authority and cultural expectations

associated with "duty," "honor," and social obligation are undercut by an emerging realization that these traditional values have limits. Unqualified commitment to America's "noble crusade" in Vietnam yields to a deeply-rooted survival instinct: "'It's preservation. That's all it is - it's self-fuckin-preservation ... The survival of the species, which is us'", Oscar says (235). Then the mutiny is consolidated in a silent ritual as, one by one, each soldier reaches out to touch Oscar Johnson's fragmentation grenade (236).

Like Cacciato's desertion, Lieutenant Martin's fragging represents a confrontation with authority. But Cacciato's challenge pales beside the squad's radically subversive mutiny which has infinitely more complex implications. Cacciato's desertion can be seen as an isolated incident and dismissed as "foolish folly" (7), the aberration of "a dumb kid with maps and candy and an AWOL bag" (59). He essentially acts on his own and presumably will eventually pay whatever price his decision exacts of him, whether that be exile, a life underground, or a few years in prison. On the other hand, Third Squad's mutiny and conspiracy to kill Lieutenant Martin does more than merely challenge an existing power structure. It is an outright rebellion, an overturning of a rigid hierarachical relationship that successfully destroys a perceived

tyranny. It is also distinguished by its social dimension, being a popular revolt of an "oppressed" group as opposed to the purely personal solution enacted by Cacciato.

Paul Berlin is obviously troubled by what happens to Lieutenant Martin, but he is really more disturbed by its moral implications vis-a-vis the legitimacy of the war than he is by any personal feelings he may have had toward Martin. As it is reported in the text, Berlin's recollection of the incident suppresses the fragging itself and focuses on his role in drawing Cacciato into the conspiracy, in getting him "involved in some group rapport" (236). The most direct allusion to the fragging occurs in a short War Stories passage that momentarily interrupts the fantasy narrative:

> And then Lieutenant Corson came to replace Lieutenant Sidney Martin. The way events led to events, and the way they got out of human control.
>
> "A sad thing," Cacciato had said on the day afterward.
>
> "Accidents happen," said Paul Berlin. (248-9)

Berlin agrees that Martin's death "was a very sad thing"; nevertheless, he is fully aware that it increases his chances of surviving the war since Martin's replacement, Lieutenant Corson, "was a platoon leader the men could

finally love. He took no chances, he wasted no lives" (44-5). Berlin showed no hesitation either in refusing Lieutenant Martin's orders or in joining the mutiny, and he did what was necessary to bring Cacciato into the conspiracy, even if it meant pressing "the grenade against Cacciato's limp hand" (248). But the circumstances of Martin's death raise very disturbing moral questions about the war, questions that Paul Berlin grapples with but never quite resolves.

Lieutenant Martin's fragging represents a serious erosion of the moral legitimacy of the American presence in Vietnam. It overturns the cultural self-image of American innocence and virtue which identifies America as the "redeemer nation" whose special historical destiny is to lead the "Forces of Light" against the "Forces of Darkness, agents of Satan" (Hellmann 1986, 6). But in a bizarre war during which American soldiers kill their own officers for following official policy, belief in national innocence or in a "moral imperative" that can validate the kinds of personal sacrifices demanded on the battlefield, no longer seems tenable. The war's moral issues are most fully addressed in two important chapters: "Atrocities on the Road to Paris" and "The Things They Didn't Know." Significantly, one chapter occurs in the fantasy journey and the other in the realistic War Stories narrative, an

indication that the moral dilemma interpenetrates the two aspects of Paul Berlin's reverie - memory and imagination.

The point made repeatedly in "The Things They Didn't Know" is that for American soldiers like Paul Berlin, the Vietnam War experience is utterly incomprehensible - "a ridiculous, impossible puzzle" (264):

> He didn't know who was right, or what was right; he didn't know if it was a war of self-determination or self-destruction, outright aggression or national liberation ... he didn't know who really started the war, or why, or when, or with what motives ... he did not know where truth lay. (266)

Berlin feels trapped by his ignorance of the Vietnamese people. Their language, their customs and values, their "religions or philosophies or theories of justice" are a mystery: "the men did not know whom to trust ... they did not know friends from enemies (263-4). Yet despite not knowing "if the war was right or wrong" (266), Paul Berlin participates in burning villages, trampling rice paddies, and humiliating the Vietnamese he thought he had been sent to defend. His actions generate a contradiction between his emotive perception of the war and his intellectual understanding of it.

Emotionally Berlin empathizes with the Vietnamese

villagers. He feels compassion for a little girl covered with sores, for the women and children terrorized by Stink Harris; he wants the girl and the others to like him, to understand he harbors no hatred toward them:

> it made him angry and sad ... when women were frisked with free hands, when old men were made to drop their pants to be searched, when, in a ville called Thin Mau, Oscar and Rudy Chassler shot down ten dogs for the sport of it. Sad and stupid. Crazy. Mean-spirited and self-defeating and wrong. (265-6)

But Paul Berlin's overwhelming ignorance of the war, its history, its causes, the reasons and objectives of American involvement, and the issues at stake, undercuts his sympathy:

> They did not know how to feel. Whether, when seeing a dead Vietnamese, to be happy or sad or relieved ... They did not know how to feel when they saw villages burning. Revenge? Loss? Peace of mind or anguish? They did not know. (273)

This uncertainty makes it impossible for Paul Berlin to authenticate his feelings on an intellectual level. He is unable to integrate the conflicting emotional and rational dimensions of his experience, and as a consequence he is ill-equipped to unravel the moral implications of the war.

Berlin's protestations of innocence express this inability to achieve a realistic appraisal of his Vietnam experience:

> He was innocent. Yes, he was. He was innocent ... he wanted to harm no one. Not even the enemy. The enemy! A word, a crummy word. He had no enemies. He had wronged no one ... The others maybe, but not me. Guilty perhaps of hanging on, of letting myself be dragged along, of falling victim to gravity and obligation and events, but not--not!--guilty of wrong intentions. (265-6)

In endeavoring to rationalize his complex emotions, Berlin expresses another ambiguity of the soldier's experience of war: the sense in which he is both assailant and victim, an agent of destruction as well as a victim of the personally destructive consequences of the war and a victim of the cultural ideology that propelled him into it (Myers 1988, 26). In his struggle for a sense of moral integrity, Berlin appeals to the "good intentions" behind America's "noble crusade": "Even in Vietnam -- wasn't the intent to restrain forces of incivility? The intent. Wasn't it to impede tyranny, aggression, repression? To promote some vision of goodness?" (279). Yet what he actually sees, and acquiesces in, is an official policy of misery, death, and destruction; "Oh, something had gone terribly wrong", Berlin

confesses (280), but he cannot begin to imagine why. Daniel Zins argues that in limiting the moral debate to "the very narrow parameters of the cold-war consensus" and in "uncritically accepting [the] assumptions, perspectives, and language" of U.S. policymakers, Berlin reveals himself to be an "unwitting victim of the anti-communist consensus" dominating American political life (1986, 8). For Paul Berlin and the average infantryman, the paradox of experiencing himself as both assailant and victim, and the contradictions suggested in the horrifying consequences of good intentions, generates a confused illogic which creates the moral vacuum expressed in the chapter's final line: "They did not know good from evil" (273).

The moral ambiguity expressed in "The Things They Didn't Know" is developed primarily around the problematic relationship between Americans and Vietnamese. It raises questions about the nature of innocence and guilt in relation to military obligation in a morally and politically confusing war and challenges the cold-war cultural rhetoric used to justify American intervention in Indochina.

Lieutenant Martin's fragging, on the other hand, tears at a different moral fabric and explodes Paul Berlin's illusion of an innocence that derives from ignorance of the distinction between good and evil. Berlin may be a

reluctant and passive participant in the war, but he is an active and willing conspirator in the lieutenant's fragging. Martin's death is a stark example of the complexity of moral disintegration experienced in Vietnam. It is one thing to confuse friend and foe in bewildering relations with the Vietnamese and kill civilian innocents, and quite another matter to kill an unpopular officer who is resented because he adheres to the standard military policy of "mission over men." As Dean McWilliams has observed:

> By assenting to Martin's murder, Berlin and the others take a decisive moral step. They have killed before but always on the orders of their superiors; thus they can argue, in their own minds at least, that they are innocent. But this killing is deliberately planned and executed <u>against</u> orders. (1988, 248)

Martin's fragging is both an unequivocal subversion of military authority and a subversion of America's avowed purpose in Vietnam. Vietnamese communists kill U.S. soldiers because they disagree with America's vision of the world and its attempt to impose it upon them. If American soldiers also feel at liberty to kill officers with whom they disagree, the moral idealism supporting that vision is shattered and with it, the underlying "moral imperative"

which partly motivates the citizen-soldier to accept the traditional responsibilities associated with military duty.

In the fantasy journey chapter "Atrocities on the Road to Paris," Paul Berlin considers the implications of this moral vacuum in relation to his ambivalent commitment to the war. He imagines an argument between Doc Peret and Captain Rhallon of the Iranian Savak which, like all discussions occurring in the fantasy journey narrative, is, in essence, an argument Berlin carries on with himself and one which reflects his continuing dilemma.

Rhallon contends that the Vietnam War poses a problem for the Americans because they suffer from a lack of purpose:

> An absence of aim and purpose, so that the foot soldier is left without the moral imperative to fight hard and well and willingly. (198)

In effect, their sense of duty to fight in the national crusade is weakened by their moral confusion. Doc Peret agrees that Americans are "confused and muddleheaded" about "what the hell's going on" in Vietnam, but he argues that purpose is irrelevant to victory, that what counts is materiel, the capacity to produce sufficient "planes and trains and bullets and bombs" (199). Rhallon insists that the "absence of clear moral purpose" will eventually lead to America's defeat, and Doc counters by describing the

daily experience of the individual soldier in the field:

> I'm saying the common grunt doesn't give a damn about purposes and justice. He doesn't even think about that shit. Not when he's out humping, getting his tail shot off. Purposes--bullshit! He's thinking about how to keep breathing. (200)

In arguing that the soldier's instinct for personal survival precedes his recognition of "moral purpose" and "mission," Doc Peret recalls Third Squad's observance of the informal SOPs, the violation of which leads to Lieutenant Martin's fragging. Although, in the sequence of the text, this chapter appears before the one that alludes to Martin's fragging, in terms of Paul Berlin's memory it occurs after the fragging. Thus this imaginary debate between characters whose arguments are projections of Paul Berlin's own troubled conscience suggests that his moral confusion derives in part from his complicity in the squad's mutiny. Martin's death at the hands of his own men undercuts the war's purpose, its "moral imperatives to fight hard and well and willingly." Ironically, the subtext of Doc Peret's rejoinder to Rhallon supports rather than negates the Captain's argument.

For Paul Berlin, the questionable morality of America's intervention in Vietnam and the moral ambiguity

generated by Lieutenant Martin's fragging appear as two sides of the same coin. In either case the legitimacy of the war and his military obligation to serve in it are subverted, and desertion may, indeed, be a valid response. If, as Rhallon suggests, "It is purpose that keeps men at their posts to fight" (200), then the absence of "clear moral purpose" suggests Cacciato's decision to leave the war is the correct one. Berlin, however, is noncommital. "Maybe purpose is part of it," he imagines Doc saying,

> But a bigger part is self-respect. And fear ... Self-respect and fear, that's why soldiers don't run ... We stick it out because we're afraid of what'll happen to our reputations. Our own egos. Self-respect, that's what keeps us on the line. (200-1)

Despite the problem of the war's pervasive moral ambiguity, military duty and responsibility are apparently reduced to a fear of loss of reputation, self-image, to what my neighbor may think. Doc Peret's argument foreshadows Paul Berlin's eventual position at the conclusion of the novel. But here in the midst of his inquiry into the war, still troubled by the suffering of innocent Vietnamese children and by what happened to Sidney Martin, the meaning of "self-respect" is problematic.

But does not purpose reflect on self-

> respect? ... Does not the absence of good purpose jeopardize the soldier's own ego, thus making him less likely to fight well and bravely? If a war is without justice, the soldier knows that the sacrifice of life, his own valued life, is demeaned, and therefore his self-respect must likewise be demeaned. (201)

In the context of the Vietnam War, the meaning of abstract concepts like "good purpose," "moral imperative," "justice," "self-respect," and "self-preservation" is rendered problematic and provisional. The terms not only undercut each other, but they are also undermined by the phenomenon of near total ignorance under which American forces operated. If moral integrity and self-respect are linked, as Captain Rhallon suggests, then the soldier's position in Vietnam is truly tenuous.

Near the end of his long vigil in the observation post, Paul Berlin reflects on the "hard lessons" and "trite truths" of war and faces the issues that motivated his fantasy. His struggle to answer the questions raised by Cacciato's desertion culminates in the penultimate going-after-Cacciato chapter, "The End of the Road to Paris," in which his fantasy is extended to its "logical" conclusion, and Third Squad arrives in Paris. In this chapter, Paul Berlin openly confronts the conflict between authority,

expressed in the citizen-soldier's patriotic duty and military obligation, and the individual's right to personal liberty and self-determination. Despite the squad's avowed good intentions, their imaginary mission to return Cacciato to the war has made them accomplices in his desertion and resulted in their own guilt. The hunters fear they will become the hunted: "Far as law's concerned, we're nothin' but deserters," Oscar admits (312). The irony of their predicament parallels the U.S. experience in Vietnam as the wishful thinking of America's national myths drew it into the quagmire of the Vietnam War until the illusions of its idealist self-image were brutally exposed.

In a scene which alludes to the Paris Peace Talks, Berlin considers his options: submission to a cultural ideology of authority as it is expressed in various forms of social conformity, military duty, and national patriotic myths, or resistance to that ideology in preference to personal fulfillment. As Dennis Vannatta has observed:

> The desire to flee may have begun as a reaction to fear, but by the time the squad has reached Paris, Paul has nurtured and cultivated it until it has become a political, moral, and philosophical statement. (1982, 245)

Berlin projects the case for resistance through his imaginary refugee travelling companion, Sarkin Aung Wan,

who argues that desertion can be a positive commitment to "those qualities of dignity and well-being that are the true standards of the human spirit" (320). She sees opposition to the Vietnam War as a "final act of courage" and a catalyst for change that can edge reality toward the dream of a better world. Sarkin's argument elevates the individual's personal and spiritual welfare above social comformity and its pressure to adopt popular attitudes which pass for "truth." She criticizes the ideology of authority for its creation of false obligations and for generating a culture of fear and intimidation:

> Do not be frightened by ridicule or censure or embarrassment, do not fear name-calling, do not fear the scorn of others. (321)

But public scorn is precisely what Paul Berlin fears the most, although, in his reply to Sarkin, he initially speaks of social obligation in somewhat positive terms, how it "is more than a claim imposed upon us; it is a personal sense of indebtedness" (321). Berlin argues that obligation is largely a "feeling," yet his perception of how that "feeling" develops is mechanical and deterministic. He believes that obligation derives from an accumulation of "prior acts" and "tacit promises" that inexorably bind him to the performance of subsequent acts. One of the problems with Paul Berlin's argument is that it does not permit the

rectification or reversal of what may turn out to have been a bad or poorly informed decision. It is as if joining the army or allowing oneself to be drafted meant one was logically committed to perpetuating and expanding upon a mistake. In "The Things They Didn't Know," Berlin seems convinced that the war was "a sad accident ... chance, high-level politics, confusion," and that few soldiers went to Vietnam with anything more than a superficial knowledge of the morass they were getting into. Yet in "The End of the Road to Paris" he argues:

> I was not misled. I was not gulled ... I knew what I was getting into. I knew it might be unpleasant. And I made promises with that full understanding. The promises were made freely. True, the moral climate was imperfect; there were pressures, constraints, but nonetheless I made binding choices. (322)

The confident, positive sense of this statement also seems to contradict Berlin's earlier recollection of his indifferent attitude toward dropping out of college and facing the draft:

> It wasn't really a decision; just the opposite: an inability to decide ... And when he was drafted it came as no great shock. Even then the war wasn't real. He let himself be herded through

> basic training, then AIT, and all the while there was no sense of reality: another daydream, a weird pretending ... He was young. That was a big part of it. He was just too young. (228)

What finally determines Paul Berlin's decision to reject desertion and Sarkin's call to "March proudly into [his] dream" is his fear of social denigration:

> I fear the loss of my own reputation ... I fear being an outcast. I fear being thought of as a coward. I fear that even more than cowardice itself. (322)

In the end, Berlin submits to the tremendous power of the ideology of authority as it is expressed in social pressure to conform to cultural expectations. He argues a viewpoint that obligation is "a relationship between people" who, if offended, can retaliate: "it is this social power, the threat of social consequences, that stops me from making a full and complete break" (323).

Nevertheless, Paul Berlin's decision does not resolve the conflict between authority and resistance. At best, his commitment to the war is half-hearted, and, as one critic has argued, "there is no reason to believe that flight will not once again become an attractive alternative" (Vannatta 1982, 245). Despite his decision, Berlin continues to entertain the option of desertion as an imaginative

possibility. He may choose to remain in the war but in his fantasy he imagines Lieutenant Corson making the opposite choice:

> The old man then crosses to Sarkin Aung Wan. He offers his arm, she takes it, and they move away. A moment later Paul Berlin leaves by a separate exit. (323)

The text further undercuts the seriousness of Berlin's commitment through its subtle parody of myth-making cliches in his closing remarks. Arthur Saltzman has noted how the speech echoes government slogans: "a peace we can live with," "national honor," "democratic ideal," and how Berlin "finally embraces the organizing principles of duty and the American cause ... the most insupportable and, surely, most diabolical fantasies of all" (1980, 36).

The last chapter of Going After Cacciato reveals just how tenuous Berlin's commitment to duty really is. Half fantasy and half remembered reality, it thematically recapitulates and echoes several crucial story elements relating to authority and resistance. In the fantasy portion, for example, Lieutenant Corson deserts (326-7), Third Squad's conspiracy is mirrored in a ritualistic touching of Cacciato's M-16 (331), the squad surrounds and attempts to capture Cacciato (331-2), and once again Paul Berlin panics and fires his rifle prematurely (332). The

occurrence of these repetitions at the end of his fantasy suggests that Berlin really hasn't resolved the tensions they generate and that he remains troubled, scared, and confused.

The latter section of this chapter is actually the chronological resumption of the realistic war memories narrative that had been interrupted at the end of Chapter One when Third Squad surrounded Cacciato on a hill near the Laotian border (26). This circular movement of the text implies that Paul Berlin is more or less back where he started. During his night in the observation post he has explored some of the disturbing social, political, and moral questions of the war, but he has failed to find any convincing answers. The final scenes of the novel continue the paradoxical double movement of postmodernism which both establishes and undermines authority. On the one hand, authority is reaffirmed in the squad's return to conventional rules and patterns:

> It was the old order restored ... It was the war again. They spaced themselves ten meters apart, avoided paths, sent out flank security when it was necessary. (337)

Once within radio range, Lieutenant Corson reestablishes Third Squad's position in the army's organizational network and confirms his link in the military chain of command. The

men return to the certainties of routine: making camp at night, digging foxholes, setting tripflares, and posting guard - all according to the authority of the formal SOPs. On the other hand, Cacciato's escape from the war and military domination represents a contrary movement. His action subverts the authority that binds the men to the squad and the squad to the war, and demonstrates that personal aspirations can contest the demands of social conformity and cultural expectations. The indeterminacy of Cacciato's fate further destabilizes a form of authority associated with the desire for finality and truth in the way that it leaves the resolution of these questions open to conjecture. An effect of this uncertainty is reflected in the wistful ambivalence of Lieutenant Corson and Paul Berlin's final words:

> "I guess it's better this way," the old man finally said. "There's worse things can happen. There's plenty of worse things."
>
> "True enough, sir."
>
> "And who knows? He might make it. He might do all right." The lieutenant's voice was flat like the land. "Miserable odds, but--"
>
> "But maybe."
>
> "Yes," the lieutenant said. "Maybe so." (338)

The ambiguity of "it's better this way" (is the referent

Cacciato's desertion or the squad's failure to capture him?), and the understated yet apparent longing expressed in "He might do all right" and "Maybe so," perpetuates an uncertainty of exactly where the story stands in relation to the cultural ideology of authority. "It's still a lousy war," and Paul Berlin, the lieutenant, and the others are still a part of it. But Cacciato, regardless of consequences and the "miserable odds," has left it all behind and is out there, somewhere beyond the next hill, humping his way to Paris. By leaving his fate indefinite, Going After Cacciato assures his action remains an intriguing possibility and that it will continue raising disturbing questions about the validity of the "old obligations."

PART TWO: Postmodern Discourse and the Subversion of Narrative Authority

"I think that two hundred years, seven hundred years, a thousand years from now, when Vietnam is filled with condominiums and we're all going there to vacation on the beautiful beaches, the experience of Vietnam--all the facts--will be gone. Who knows, a thousand years from now the facts will disappear--bit by bit by bit--and all that we'll be left with are stories. To me, it doesn't really matter if they're true stories." Tim O'Brien

Drawing on the work of Gerard Genette, Seymour Chatman, and others, Gerald Prince defines "discourse" as "the expression plane of narrative as opposed to its content plane or story; the 'how' of a narrative as opposed to its 'what'" (1987, 21). In Going After Cacciato, subversion of narrative authority on the level of discourse parallels the text's undermining of the cultural ideology of authority on the level of story. In the historical context of the novel, the subversion of narrative authority raises questions about how we perceive the phenomenon of the Vietnam War, and contests cultural assumptions that our knowledge of the war derives from an ability to determine and transmit the "truth" of events. This chapter will examine and discuss the effects of several techniques Tim

O'Brien uses to subvert narrative authority with emphasis on the radical disruption of chronological sequence in the War Stories narrative, narrative embedding and story-telling, and metafictional self-reflexivity and self-conscious narration in Paul Berlin's fantasy journey to Paris and in the Observation Post narrative. Throughout this discussion, I use the term "narrative authority" to refer to the traditional aspects of a conventional work of fiction that generate either a sense of believability or invite what Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief." This sense may derive from realistic detail, a realistic portrayal of events, logical correspondences to the real world (i.e. cause and effect), the reader's confidence in the voice or perspective of the narrator(s), the text's conveyance of a satisfying sense of meaning, or the text's ability to in some way integrate the reader into its fictitious world.

On one level, Going After Cacciato is an "open" text. It works to resist conclusive interpretation and encourages instead a response capable of entertaining multiple interpretations and the coexistence of many possible textual "meanings." The reader's desire to reach a finalized understanding of the text is thwarted by a narrative strategy which continually works against the conventions of sequence and logic, of closure and the sense

of completion. O'Brien achieves this through a narrative technique which produces discontinuity, and both generates and perpetuates textual uncertainty and ambiguity. The resulting "undecidability" undermines the narrative authority of the text. It destabilizes and decenters potential meaning, making the text "open," "plural," and fluid. Since uncertainty is never fully resolved in the narrative itself, interpretive resolution is rendered problematic and provisional as if in echo of the text's final words: "Maybe so."

The divergence of critical responses to the novel is a revealing indication of its interpretative "openness": Dean McWilliams argues that Going After Cacciato "has as its central theme the complex relationship between our understanding of the past and our hopes for the future" (1988, 245); G. Thomas Couser believes the novel "has at its center an inquiry into the appropriate method of communicating the experience and the significance of the war" (1983, 1); and Dennis Vannatta says Cacciato is "about the struggle and eventual failure to impose order on the flux of experience" (1982, 244). In John Hellmann's view, it "dramatizes the heroic pathos of a youth struggling in his mind toward some viable escape from the landscape of a seemingly meaningless war" (1986, 161); and, while ignoring the dynamics of Cacciato's narrative structure altogether,

Bellhouse and Litchfield feel that "O'Brien's novel concentrates on the attempt to resolve the soldier's question of duty, the military extension of the problem of political obligation" (1982, 168). Many critics have also ventured convincing arguments that the novel's complex structure is a recreation of the experience of war (Herzog, Raymond, Couser McWilliams). In light of the text itself, none of these interpretations is unreasonable, and each can be supported by thoughtful exegesis. Their very differences demonstrate that no single interpretation is capable of exhausting the full range of the text's possible "meanings."

But openness is more than a matter of individual readers arriving at different understandings of a text. Any text is likely to elicit a variety of responses according to the particularities of each reader. Nor is it a question of the text's presenting a number of alternatives from which the reader is invited to choose according to his or her personal predispositions or individual "prejudices." Openness is, as Umberto Eco has observed, a <u>deliberate</u> and <u>systematic</u> operation of the text to "increase its range of meanings" (1989, 58). Eco discusses a text's openness in relation to its degree of ambiguity and to the extent it contravenes conventional expectations. Thus, the more freely a text adopts unconventional forms of expression,

the greater is its potential ambiguity. He suggests that ambiguity derives from disorder in the way that deviation from convention provokes new forms of organization which, in turn, expand the possible meanings of a text: "The contemporary poet ... introduces forms of organized disorder into a system to increase its capacity to convey information" (1989, 60).

The War Stories narrative of Going After Cacciato demonstrates how unconventional ordering generates textual uncertainty and ambiguity that subvert narrative authority. War Stories is episodic, fragmented, and both temporally and spatially disordered. By upsetting chronology and logic, it creates rhetorical effects that undercut the reader's integration of information and stimulates a constant reconsideration and reconstruction of the incidents narrated. The War Stories narrative is further disrupted by the text's structural pattern of alternating chapters of the novel between the three narrative lines. The combined effect of these two techniques is so radically disorienting that it seriously inhibits the reader's ability to reconstruct events and form a stable interpretation of possible meaning.

The narration of Jim Pederson's death shows how disordering can undermine interpretative resolution. The text initially reports his death in the "litany of the

dead" which occurs in the first lines of the novel, and refers to it again on pages 7, 15, and 49 before finally relating the surrounding circumstances. But in narrating Pederson's death and Third Squad's reaction to it, the text reverses natural chronological sequence. Chapter Eleven, "Fire in the Hole," describes events immediately following Pederson's death while the event itself is narrated fifty pages later in Chapter Twenty, "Landing Zone Bravo":

> Pederson was a mess. They wrapped him in his own poncho. Doc Peret found the broken dog tags and slipped them into Pederson's mouth and taped it shut. Later the dustoff came ... and the helicopter took Pederson away. (77)

The remainder of the chapter describes the squad's total destruction of a Vietnamese village with round after round of white phosphorus and high explosive artillery:

> Then they began firing. They lined up and fired into the burning village. Harold Murphy used the machine gun. The tracers could be seen through the smoke, bright red streamers, and the Willie Peter and HE kept falling, and the men fired until they were exhausted. The village was a hole. (79)

The emotional tone of this chapter, with Paul Berlin repeating "Kill it ... Kill it," and the concluding lines:

"When it was night they began talking about Jim Pederson ... It was always better to talk about it," strongly suggests that the obliteration of Hoi An is an act of vengeance. Such is the interpretation of Michael Raymond who argues that the "village is leveled in retaliation for [Pederson's] death" (1983, 98; emphasis added). Given the information made available to the reader at this point in the narrative, it is not an unreasonable judgment. The text temporarily withholds the details of Pederson's death from the reader, but the reader still forms an understanding of it. Menakhem Perry has discussed this as a phenomenon of the reading process:

> The reader tries to organize the so-far incomplete semantic material given him in the best possible way. He relates, links, arranges the elements in hierarchies, fills in gaps, anticipates forthcoming elements, etc. (1979, 46)

In the context of this chapter and the preceding material in the text, it is logical to assume that Pederson was killed by a Vietnamese, and the squad reacts in anger. However, the narration of Pederson's death in Chapter Twenty reveals that he was, in fact, killed by American helicopter door gunners. This new information provokes a reconsideration of the perception of events at Hoi An, a

modification that undercuts earlier interpretations. When the reader learns that Third Squad understands Pederson was killed by "friendly fire," the senseless destruction of the Vietnamese village may be seen as a desperate act of frustration rather than one of vengeance and retaliation.

In Cacciato, the reader's ability to reintegrate new information into a stable interpretive framework is further problematized by a structural design that continually interweaves three narrative strands. Eight chapters of the novel intervene between the destruction of Hoi An and the narration of Pederson's death: two additional but unrelated War Stories passages, two Observation Post chapters, and four episodes of the fantasy trek to Paris. The intervention of this material, in which Pederson is referred to only once (125), undermines comprehension of events surrounding his death by distracting the reader and obscuring perception of the relationship between Pederson's death and the destruction of Hoi An. The sense of cause and effect, already disrupted by chronological reversal, is also subverted by the narrative complexity of the material which effects the break in continuity. The intervening chapters shift back and forth in time and alternate between fantasy, realism, surrealism, and metafiction. Assimilation and interpretive reorganization of information presented in this fashion is problematic even after several readings.

Fragmentation and radical disordering in the War Stories narrative allegorizes the soldier's disorienting experience in the field and the difficulty in making sense of that experience. "Order was the hard part," Paul Berlin admits:

> The facts even when beaded on a chain still did not have real order. Events did not flow. 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. (207)

Chronological disordering also allegorizes the sense-making problems the American public faced during the war. Although several critics have discussed the relationship of the novel's structure to the individual soldier's experience of combat, none has recognized how the text's manipulation of information mimics the wartime policies of the U.S. government and military bureaucracy. It was a common practice of both branches to suppress information that conflicted with the official view of events in Vietnam or to distort the outcome of failed social programs or military operations in order to influence public perception of the war (Halberstam 1988, 148-55; Kolko 1985, 170-5; Sheehan 1988, 315). In 1964, for example, the Johnson administration's distortion and manipulation of information

regarding a Vietnamese attack on a U.S. destroyer in the Tonkin Gulf led to a congressional resolution that gave the President extraordinary power to escalate the war (Karnow 1983, 374-6; Kolko 1985, 122, 171). Four years later, the extent of the government's deceit was revealed, but by this time, America was fully committed to the war (Karnow 1983, 375).

In the going-after-Cacciato and Observation Post narratives, narrative authority is subverted by metafictional self-reflexivity and self-conscious narration. Paul Berlin, "whose each step was an event of imagination" (31), creates the story of Third Squad's trek to Paris as an alternative to the harsh realities of the Vietnam War. Berlin is intrigued by the possibilities suggested by Cacciato's desertion:

> Yes, he thought, a fine idea. Cacciato leading them west through peaceful country, deep country perfumed by lilacs and burning hemp, a boy coaxing them step by step through rich and fertile country toward Paris.
>
> It was a splendid idea. (27)

His counter-scenario combines a general sense of realism deriving from naturalistic dialogue, logic, and chronology, with moments of unrestrained fantasy such as the hole in the road to Paris sequence (82-7, 91-90) and the magical

escape from Tehran (243-47). It is peopled with both "real" figures, Lieutenant Corson, Stink Harris, Oscar, and Doc, figures we have accepted as real because they appear in the ostensibly "real" War Stories narrative, and with purely imaginary characters like the refugee girl, Sarkin Aung Wan; a Vietcong Major, Li Van Hgoc; the Hotel Phoenix's Jolly Chand; and assorted Iranian police officers. The commingling of "real" and imaginary figures has a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, the presence of "real" figures works to validate or authenticate the fictional world of the fantasy journey (see Hutcheon 1988b, 114). On the other hand, by their presence in the fantasy, the squad members are overtly fictionalized.

From the reader's standpoint, a perspective largely shaped by the text's narrative discourse, the distinction between what is to be taken as "real," that is, as having "actually happened" in the story, and those events which occur only in Paul Berlin's imagination, is deliberately blurred. The initial Observation Post chapter introduces Paul Berlin's self-conscious vision of his intention to work out the possibilities of "what...had become of Cacciato?" (28), and Chapter Three is the first of these fantasy episodes. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Tim O'Brien discusses how

> Cacciato is structured as a teeter-totter, with

> the "Observation Post" chapters as the fulcrum - the present of the book. The teeter-totter swings back and forth between reality - the war experience - and fantasy - the imagined trek to Paris. (1982, 139)

But with a few notable exceptions, the ostensibly "real" War Stories narrative and the "imaginary" going-after-Cacciato narrative are both written in the same realistic style, employing the same literary techniques designed to create the illusion of verisimilitude (description, summary, dialogue etc.). Since the going-after-Cacciato narrative reads as "real" as War Stories, searching out "the place where fact ended and imagination took over" (28) becomes as difficult for the reader as it is for Paul Berlin. As a result, the text actively involves the reader in breaching conventional literary genres. The uncertainty generated by this technique is compounded by a narrative strategy that delays the reader's realization that Third Squad's pursuit of Cacciato is purely imaginary. A close reading of the text reveals a few early clues which may alert a particularly attentive reader but their true significance really only becomes apparent on subsequent readings - when the reader possesses the advantage of hindsight. The description of the squad's marching order, for example, concludes with "Spec Four Paul Berlin, whose

each step was an event of imagination" (31, emphasis added). Then there are two suggestive lines near the end of Chapter Six and two more early in Chapter Seven related to Berlin's projection of his travelling companion, Sarkin Aung Wan: "A possibility. A thing that might have happened on the road to Paris. He looked into the fire for a long time"; "So, yes, it was curious to watch this girl, to imagine how it might have happened" (56, 57, emphasis added). Yet another clue appears in the succeeding Observation Post chapter in which Paul Berlin decides to continue standing guard at Quang Ngai rather than waking his relief, Doc Peret:

> Even now, figuring how things might have happened on the road to Paris, it was a way of looking for the very best of all possible outcomes. How, with luck and courage and endurance, they might have found a way. (64-5, emphasis added)

Repetition of the phrase "might have happened" is a fairly clear indication that Paul Berlin is exploring imaginative possibilities. What is not clear, what, at least at this point in the text, clouds each of these "clues," is exactly which are the "real" events he is responding to. Is Paul Berlin imagining chasing Cacciato, or is he imagining how the pursuit of Cacciato might have occurred differently than it did? Is the pursuit "real" up to a point and

subsequently imaginary, and if so, at what point does "reality" break off and fantasy begin? I would argue that, despite the clues, the reader cannot be certain of the terrain of the going-after-Cacciato sequence until the obviously surreal "falling through a hole in the road to Paris" episode, some seventy-five pages into the novel (ironically, it is precisely during a momentary "lapse of imagination" that Paul Berlin's fantasy is most imaginative). In Tim O'Brien's words: "The so-called fantasy sections of Cacciato are no less real than a soldier's memories of the war" (McCaffery 1982, 142).

The novel's blend of realism and fantasy invites consideration of its relationship to magical realism. On the surface, there are similarities between Cacciato and the work of such Latin American writers as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Miguel Angel Asturias who are known as practitioners of magical realism. In particular, the hole in the road to Paris sequence and the squad's miraculous escape from Tehran express characteristics associated with magical realism, but, from a critical standpoint, Cacciato's metafictional qualities would seem to override its inclusion in the genre of magical realism. Amaryll Chanady's study, Magical Realism and the Fantastic, discusses several criteria of magical realism that appear in Cacciato, including the "amalgamation of realism and

fantasy," and a matter-of-fact presentation of unreal events (1985, 19, 24). Chanady argues that in magical realism the supernatural is "integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator" (23), and we see this integration operating in the mind of Paul Berlin. What disqualifies Cacciato as magical realism is its acknowledgment that its most fantastic events are imaginary. As Paul Berlin and Third Squad pinwheel through the dark hole in the road to Paris, the fantasy journey narrative is momentarily interrupted by Berlin's view from his guard post, an interjection that reminds the reader that these events are Berlin's mental projections:

> For a moment he was back at the observation tower, the night swimming all around him, and, yes, even there he was falling, his eyes sliding slick over the surfaces of things, drowsy, pinching himself, but still falling. (82)

Similarly, the squad's magical escape from Tehran is presented as part dream, part wishful thinking:

> A miracle, Paul Berlin kept thinking. It was all he wanted--a genuine miracle to confound natural law, a baffling reversal of the inevitable consequences ... he slept, dreaming of miracles. And deep in the night, as the moon rose, Cacciato's round face appeared at the window. (243)

Chanady observes that "the portrayal of hallucinations, dreams, and superstitions does not make a story into an example of magical realism, unless the imagined events are presented as objectively real" (29). But in Cacciato, the two most magical events that invite comparison to magical realism are overt extensions of a character's fantasy.

The authority of the going-after-Cacciato narrative is undercut by frequent self-reflexive interjections that disrupt conventional fictional illusions and draw attention to the narrative as the creation of Paul Berlin's imagination. Patricia Waugh has observed that "the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction" (1984, 6). In Cacciato, the text comments on the creative process behind Berlin's imaginary journey even before he begins "writing" it. The first Observation Post chapter sees Berlin considering "the immense powers of his own imagination" and approaching his story as "An idea to develop, to tinker with and build and sustain, to draw out as an artist draws out his visions" (27-8). The periodic intervention of Berlin's narrative voice is a reminder that he is the author of the fantasy journey. For example, Sarkin Aung Wan's introduction into the story occasions several metafictional comments. Her presence is

reported as "A possibility. A thing that might have happened" (56):

> ... Paul Berlin could not stop toying with the idea: a mix of new possibilities. A whole new range of options. He wanted Sarkin Aung Wan to join the expedition. (60)

On several occasions Berlin self-consciously interrupts and overtly redirects his story when momentum has carried it forward to an undesirable turn of events. For example, early in his story Berlin foresees the problem of the squad's lack of passports, visas, and immunization cards:

> What about the law? Illegal entry, no documents, no military orders, no permits for all the weaponry? What about police and customs agents? (125)

At the time, Berlin dismisses these concerns as "petty" and "trivial": "If pressed he could make up the solutions - good, convincing solutions" (125). But later in the fantasy, when the squad approaches Greece on the freighter Andros, the logistics of international travel resurfaces as Berlin pictures a scene in which the squad's apparently imminent arrest threatens the continuation of their journey. He sees "a swarm of customs agents and police" crowding the dock, segregating all the male passengers, searching baggage, and "trying to match faces to whatever

was on the posters" they carried:

> "Us?" Stink said....
>
> "Screwed and skewered," Oscar said. "Cops up the ass."
>
> Doc Peret shrugged. "We almost made it."
>
> "I can't--"
>
> "So close," Doc sighed, "and yet so close." (259)

With circumstances on the verge of overwhelming Third Squad, Paul Berlin, as narrator, self-consciously interrupts his story: "It would not have ended that way: cops and customs agents, defeat ... It wouldn't have happened that way" (274). Observation Post and going-after-Cacciato narratives momentarily intersect as Berlin scrambles to imagine alternatives, "a way of playing with the possibilites, figuring out step by step how it might be done" (275). His solution is simply a temporary suspension of "facts" that allows the journey to continue according to his plan:

> So, no. No, it would not have ended at Piraeus. It didn't. They were not arrested. Coming down the gangplank, weary and expecting the worst, they filed through platoons of police and customs agents, eyes down, breath held, passing like magic through a gateway guarded by

two cops who only nodded and waved them by...

(275)

Paul Berlin's self-reflexive interjections and his comments on the development of his counter-scenario foreground the journey's fictional foundations and expose the arbitrary power of the creator of fictions to ignore or alter annoying details that may inconvenience his story. In the historical context of the Vietnam War, these metafictional devices are also a comment on the ideological bias America brought to the war and its determination to interpret the "facts" of its experience in conformity with its cultural self-image.

John Hellmann observes that "Americans entered Vietnam with certain expectations that a story, a distinctly American story, would unfold" (1986, x). He locates that story within the cultural myths that see America as the "redeemer nation" and the "leader of the Forces of Light" (1986, 6). Bellhouse and Litchfield call this the "Walt Disney epic which insists that [Americans] are heroes, the defenders of freedom and justice, and the protectors of the weak and oppressed" (1982, 158-9). In Vietnam, the American story went awry from the very beginning when the United States decided to support the oppressors - initially the French effort to reimpose colonial rule, and later, successive corrupt South Vietnamese governments that

maintained power largely through a combination of destroying their political opposition and suppressing the economic and social aspirations of the peasantry (see Fitzgerald 1972; Karnow 1983; Kolko 1985). In Cacciato, Paul Berlin's ability to ignore or modify the "facts" in order to pursue his counter-scenario to the war corresponds to the U.S. government and military bureauracy's refusal to see the "facts" of its war effort because they contradicted the unfolding of the American myth.

Much of the text's metafictional commentary concerns the relationship between fact and fiction. Berlin has difficulty distinguishing remembered experience from the imagined past and "separating illusion from reality":

> what part was fact and what part was the extension of fact? And how were facts separated from possibilities? What had really happened and what merely might have happened? (28)
>
> ... Focus on the order of things, sort out 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. Where was the fulcrum? Where did it tilt from fact to imagination? (207)

Paul Berlin's confusion and his self-conscious inquiry into

the rationalization of experience both foreground and undermine what Linda Hutcheon calls ideological assumptions that "use memory to try to make sense of the past" (1988b, 118). The novel acts as a commentary on America's continuing difficulty in coming to terms with its experience in the Vietnam War. Like Paul Berlin, the American national consciousness appears confused about what happened and what might have happened in Vietnam. America continues to debate why nearly 60,000 U.S. soldiers died in Indochina, the causes of the war, and how the nation became embroiled in it. Despite Vietnam's success in fighting an overwhelmingly superior military power to a virtual stalemate and its triumph in throwing off more than a century of foreign domination, the American people are divided and cannot decide whether or not the U.S. lost the war, or if it did, who was responsible for losing it (see McCloud 1989). As if in echo to Berlin's cry "It would not have ended that way" (274), apologists and critics alike seem capable of extending and tilting any number of "facts" from the remembered past to create a culturally palatable vision of events.

The discourse of Going After Cacciato is frequently preoccupied with telling stories and the dynamics of the storytelling process. This occasions a further erosion and blurring of distinctions between fact and fiction. It also

questions conventional beliefs regarding the transmission of knowledge by demonstrating how our knowledge of the war is inevitably mediated. We "know" the war in Vietnam only through other "texts": "the past arrives in the form of texts and textualized remainders - memories, reports, published writings, archives, monuments, and so forth" (Dominick LaCapra cited in Hutcheon 1988b, 129). Only those with personal experience of the war have direct knowledge of it, but their communication of that knowledge is made provisional and problematic by the necessity of its being textualized. Tim O'Brien acknowledged this phenomenon in an earlier work, If I Die in a Combat Zone:

> Can the foot soldier teach anything important about the war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories. (1973, 32)

In Cacciato, storytelling is a form of narrative embedding that undercuts narrative authority by contesting the reality of each story segment (Waugh 1984, 30) and by foregrounding the provisional nature of knowledge which is transmitted through texts.

Storytelling is one of the major organizing principles of Cacciato. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, O'Brien discussed how he designed individual chapters of the novel to function as independent stories:

> I like my chapters to have beginnings, middles,

> and ends ... There should be a sigh from the reader at the end of a chapter, the sigh signifying he's recognized a natural end and that the chapter has an internal integrity to it. Sure, the reader knows that the book will go on, but there has been a temporary resolution--not just a dramatic resolution, but also in terms of psychological development, suspense, or whatever. (1982, 137)

The sense of "internal integrity" is particularly evident in the episodes constituting the War Stories narrative. Many of these passages focus on specific and more or less self-contained incidents. For example, the deaths of Bernie Lynn, Frenchie Tucker, Jim Pederson, Billy Boy, and Buff, are described in Chapters 9, 14, 20, 31, and 41 respectively. Chapters 4, 16, 24, and 39 recount Paul Berlin's orientation week in Vietnam, the peaceful period along the Song Tra Bong when the squad played basketball, Berlin's unsuccessful attempt to call home, and his appearance before the battalion promotion board. In terms of reader comprehension, each passage provides a satisfying sense of resolution and provokes an intuitive reaction that it is a complete story or an integral anecdote.

The fragmented and achronological structure of the War Stories narrative emphasizes the independence of each

episode by frustrating the "normal" reading process that tries to arrange and link narrative elements logically. The reader is encouraged to engage each episode or "story" without regard for either temporal ordering or for its adherence to "facts." Dean McWilliams, despite an admirable attempt to reconstruct events described in the War Stories narrative into chronological sequence, has failed to recognize that in the final analysis, internal evidence makes such a reconstruction impossible. McWilliams, relying on "temporal and geographical references in the text," outlines a "rough chronology of Berlin's Vietnam experiences" that he argues essentially confirms Berlin's own effort "to order the known facts" (1988, 247). According to Berlin's memory:

> Billy Boy was first. And then ... then who? Then a long blank time along the Song Tra Bong, yes, and then Rudy Chassler, who broke the quiet. And then later Frenchie Tucker, followed in minutes by Bernie Lynn. Then lake country. World's Greatest Lake Country, where Ready Mix died on a charge toward the mountains. And then Sidney Martin. Then Buff. Then Pederson. Then Cacciato. (207)

McWilliams observes that Paul Berlin's chronology is flawed, that he "lists Rudy Chassler as the second to die,

but elsewhere he describes Chassler alive at the deaths of Frenchie Tucker, Bernie Lynn, and Pederson," and he notes that Berlin's list also reverses the sequence of Pederson's and Sidney Martin's deaths. Berlin's memories are "hopelessly tangled," McWilliams argues, because "fatigue, jungle heat, and military routine have numbed his sense of time" (1988, 246). McWilliams and current Cacciato criticism in general, mistakenly assumes that the War Stories narrative should be considered factual, that despite its disordered and episodic structure, the narrative "presents the facts of Paul Berlin's tour in Vietnam" (Raymond 1983, 98; emphasis added). But a close reading of the text reveals that this interpretation overlooks internal evidence which undercuts the "factuality" of the War Stories narrative.

On at least one occasion, the narrative relates a contradictory situation that could not exist in the "real world" and one which makes it impossible to reconstruct a chronology of events. Chapter Fourteen, "Upon Almost Winning the Silver Star", has Jim Pederson witness the deaths of Frenchie Tucker and Bernie Lynn:

> They waited on the chance that Frenchie might come out. Stink and Oscar and Pederson and Vaught and Cacciato waited at the mouth of the tunnel. (88)

Later, when Lieutenant Martin demands someone follow Frenchie into the tunnel, a fatal task which falls to Bernie Lynn, Pederson's presence is noted again: "Pederson and Buff and Rudy Chassler slipped off into the hedges" (90). But in the story of Pederson's death, narrated in "Landing Zone Bravo," Bernie Lynn is alive, and he accompanies Pederson in a helicopter assault, an action during which Pederson is killed by American door gunners:

> Paul Berlin rubbed himself against the cold. He watched the others. Buff was working on his left thumbnail and Bernie Lynn played with his pant leg. Pederson was curled inside himself... (127)

One may be tempted to dismiss this contradiction as an anomaly, an inadvertent "author error." It is, arguably, a relatively unobtrusive discrepancy in the overall integrity of the text and one that could well be missed by all but the most circumspect of readers. Nevertheless, it <u>is</u> present in the text and it does undermine the supposed "factuality" of the War Stories narrative. I would argue that the contradictory situation of Bernie Lynn and Jim Pederson observing each other's death is less a mistake on O'Brien's part than it is a sign indicative of the narrative's artifice and its unreliability as "truth."

In <u>Going After Cacciato</u>, considerable ambiguity about

the distinction between fact and fiction derives from the text's use of the signifier "story." The primary referent of "story" is simply "an account of events." But the events may be ostensibly factual, as in the case of a news story, or they may be invented, as in a fictional narrative or short story. By failing to differentiate between real and imaginary stories, Cacciato exploits the double referent of "story" to create interpretive uncertainties and express Paul Berlin's difficulty in "separating illusion from reality ... What happened, and what might have happened?" (206). The text's discursive strategy also expresses O'Brien's belief in the power of stories, "whether they're true, or embellished, or exaggerated, or utterly made up. A good story has a power that ... transcends the question of factuality or actuality" (cited in Lomperis 1987, 53). Playing upon the ambiguity of "story," the novel creates doubts regarding the factuality of events depicted in the War Stories narrative. Paul Berlin equates the "real" events of his personal experiences with the imaginary occurrences in his fantasy:

> Years later he could look back and tell them about the war. Wasn't that normal? To tell a few war stories--Billy Boy and Pederson, the bad time in lake country, the tunnels. And how one day Cacciato walked away, and how they followed

him, kept going, chased him all the way to Paris. (125)

By categorizing both experiential and imaginative events as "stories," Berlin blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. The text implies that scenes and images created by the "immense powers of his own imagination" (27) are in many ways as real as the memories, the "trite truths" (288), he relives in his mind.

An analysis of the narration of the death of Billy Boy Watkins demonstrates some of the ways the text erodes boundaries, how it "plays with the relation between reality and imagination" (Couser 1983, 3), and between events and the retelling of those events as stories. Billy Boy's death is a central incident in Going After Cacciato. It is the first event mentioned in the novel, and it is referred to repeatedly within all three of the text's narrative strands. From the outset, the text generates a sense of mystery and larger-than-life drama around his death. Before it is finally narrated in Chapter Thirty-one, "Night March," more than two hundred pages into the novel, Billy Boy's death is mentioned more than a dozen times and most often as a variant of the initial reference: "Billy Boy had died of fright, scared to death on the field of battle" (1, 15, 49, 85, 143, 144, 209, 213). Repetition and narrative delay create suspense and a desire to know the "truth" of

the incident. But they also tend to "fictionalize" the eventual narration of Billy Boy's death. For example, the repetition of similar phrases such as "collapsed of fright," "died of fright," "expired of fright," and "death by reason of fright" displays what Robert Scholes has described as "literariness," the way an act of communication "loses its simplicity and becomes multiple or duplicitous" (1982, 21). This kind of diction labels the incident as extraordinary and tends to set it apart from events occurring in the "real" world. Also, the text's overt play upon the reader's curiosity by periodically approaching then postponing its revelation of the details of Billy's death, generates a suspicion that the text is manipulating the distribution of information for purely rhetorical effects.

Billy Boy's death acquires further fictionality through its representation in narrative forms associated with popular folk myth: it is made a subject of the squad's jokes (2, 211) and "commemorated" in a nursery rhyme song (211, 219, 317). Association with these traditional fictional genres undercuts the reality of Billy's story and gives it an imaginative shading. This movement is paralleled within Paul Berlin's own fantasy in the Tehran nightclub episode when Captain Rhallon and members of Third Squad swap war stories. Linda Hutcheon has noted how "the

oral model of communal gossip is tied to myth, legend, fairy stories, and the fanciful imagination of the tall tale" (1988a, 53). As the men relax and drink beer, the scene in the Tehran bar tends to mimic a stereotypic friendly exchange of gossip and "tall tales":

> Eddie told the story about Pederson, then Oscar told about Big Buff ... Fahyi Rhallon smiled ... then he told his own war story ... and then Oscar put his hand on Doc's shoulder: "Tell him," he said. "Tell the man the best story." ...
>
> "Tell him," Oscar said. "Tell him the ultimate war story."
>
> Paul Berlin was sick.
>
> "Billy Boy. Tell him about Billy Boy Watkins." (204-5)

Billy's story is portrayed as the one to top them all, "the ultimate war story." Its designation as such no less than four times in the space of twelve lines invests the incident with a mock symbolic or pseudo-mythic quality that is only emphasized by its continued suppression in the text. Evidently on the verge of revealing the secret of "the ultimate war story," the narrative postpones its disclosure yet again. In a rather curious twist, Paul Berlin (who, it is remembered, imagines the entire episode)

pictures himself leaving the nightclub to avoid hearing Doc Peret tell the story, but his imaginary travelling companion, Sarkin Aung Wan, remains behind. Ironically, Sarkin hears the crucial story to which the reader is denied access. Her subsequent comment that "it was such a silly story. So silly" (204-5), has a double effect. On one level, it deflates much of the dramatic suspense that has been constructed around the story of Billy Boy from the first lines of the novel. On another level, Sarkin's observation demonstrates two narrative strands interacting with each other to the exclusion of the reader. Sarkin Aung Wan, an overtly imaginary figure in Paul Berlin's fantasy journey to Paris, comments on an unreported episode from the "real" War Stories narrative - an episode the reader has been systematically disqualified from judging. This pronounced effect of distancing the reader from Billy Boy's story reduces the sense of immediacy that characterizes "real" events. It creates an impression, already suggested in the incident's association with jokes, songs, and story-telling, that Billy's death is being transformed into a folk tale, based perhaps upon a kernel of truth, but with an imaginative dimension developing around it.

The eventual narration of the death of Billy Boy Watkins bridges two narrative strands and mixes passages of memory and imagination in a way that casts doubt on the

"facts" and suggests that the "truth" of an experience is elusive, that it is skewed by the fragmented nature of human perception and by the influence imagination can have on memory. It is introduced as a recollection when, standing guard in the observation tower, Paul Berlin remembers "His first day at the war. How hot the day had been, and how on his very first day he had witnessed the ultimate war story" (208). The text then shifts to the War Stories narrative, to a night march on the evening following Billy's death four months earlier when Berlin, "pretending he was not in the war ... pretending he had not watched Billy Boy Watkins die of fright" (209), nevertheless recalls some of the details, how "Billy died of fright, his face going pale and the veins in his arms and neck popping out, the crazy look in his eyes" (213). Berlin remembers how Cacciato talked about it later: "`A heart attack! You hear Doc say that? ... Can you believe it? Billy Boy getting heart attacked? Scared to death?'" (216). But just before the incident is actually related, Berlin makes a sudden imaginative leap. He embellishes the "known facts" and, stimulated by Doc Peret's ironic diagnosis, creates a serio-comic scene:

> He giggled. He couldn't stop it, so he giggled, and he imagined it clearly. He imagined the medic's report. He imagined Billy's surprise. He

> giggled, imagining Billy's father opening the telegram: SORRY TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON BILLY BOY WAS YESTERDAY SCARED TO DEATH IN ACTION IN THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM. Yes, he could imagine it clearly. (217)

Paul Berlin anticipates telling his father about Billy but here again, the text's repeated emphasis on the incident as a "story," how Berlin will tell "the story of Billy Boy Watkins, only a story, just a story" (211), works to problematize its authenticity. It suggests that communicating the "reality" of experience is, at best, approximate and tentative, that it necessitates the selection of some "facts" and the exclusion of others, highlighting some details and minimizing others. Indeed, the eventual narration of Billy Boy's death is distinguished by its circumspection. Margaret Stewart has discussed how in Cacciato "the memory chapters screen out" certain aspects of the war. She suggests that the way "the war memory chapters are sanitized ... underscores once again Paul Berlin's felt need for the imagination's cleansing power" (1981, 148). While Stewart's observations are directed toward the text's suppression of the "most shameful aspects of U.S.-Vietnamese relations," she identifies a prominent discursive characteristic that gives the narration of the death of Billy Boy a fictional

quality.

The narration of Billy's death "screens out" the realistic detail and imagery which, in a conventional description, contribute to the illusion of verisimilitude. Although Billy suffers a horribly mutilating wound when his foot is blown off by a mine, the report of his injury is marked by its restrained diction and a sardonic irony that derives primarily from understatement. Paul Berlin remembers how

> Billy tripped the mine, and how it made a tinny little sound, unimportant, poof, that was all, just poof, and how Billy Boy stood there with his mouth open and grinning, sort of embarrassed and dumblooking, how he just stood and stood there, looking down at where his foot had been, and then how he finally sat down, still grinning, not saying a word, his boot lying there with his foot still in it, just poof, nothing big or dramatic, and how hot and fine and clear the day had been. (217)

Far from appearing factual, this report has obviously undergone some alteration in the process of filtering through Paul Berlin's consciousness. For example, any mention of the blood, lacerated tissue, or shredded bone accompanying a severed limb is notably absent. By ignoring

the wound itself and focusing instead on Billy's grotesque attempts to retie his boot and reattach his foot, the account of his death is turned into an anecdote. This transformation is reinforced by the text's bracketing of the entire passage with Paul Berlin's uncontrollable giggling fit.

In Going After Cacciato, the subversion of narrative authority by the text's "discourse of storytelling" raises questions about the authority of our knowledge of the Vietnam War. By demonstrating how knowledge is transmitted through stories, that is, through sanitized "texts" in which the distinctions between "fact" and "fiction" or memory and imagination are frequently blurred, Cacciato invites es us to consider the "truth" of our understanding of the war. This is not to deny the historical reality of events, but rather to problematize the configuration of events into facts (Hutcheon 1988b, 122). The dynamics of storytelling in Cacciato alerts the reader to the complexity and ambiguity involved in any communicative act and to the role the imagination plays in the interpretation of events. In the context of the Vietnam War, it reminds us how, particularly in the early years of the conflict, the U.S. government and military bureaucracy simply could not imagine the possibility of defeat and, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, believed their own wishful

thinking and consistently misrepresented events. The Americans told themselves stories of their own cultural and military superiority and then waited for those stories to unfold. The subversion of narrative authority in Cacciato suggests we approach the representation of events with a degree of scepticism and with a view to the problematic and provisional nature of "truth."

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, Going After Cacciato is a profoundly equivocal novel. It poses more questions than it answers, creates more tensions than it resolves, and generates sufficient interpretive uncertainty to render any conclusive hypothesis of its overall meaning problematic and provisional. The text undermines the cultural ideology of authority in both its story and discourse, but rather than simply overturning various authoritative forms in order to replace them with apparent opposites, the novel displays the paradoxical double movement of postmodernism by which cultural assumptions are both established and subverted.

On the level of story, Cacciato revolves around two acts of resistance to authority: Cacciato's desertion and Third Squad's fragging of its commanding officer, Lieutenant Sidney Martin. The novel's exploration of these events undercuts many of the presuppositions and national myths that led the United States and thousands of citizen-soldiers into what Vietnam War journalist and novelist David Halberstam aptly described as a "quagmire" (1988, 178). It questions the limits of social obligation and

military duty, and expresses skepticism regarding the moral legitimacy of the American intrusion in Vietnam.

The possibilities suggested by Cacciato's desertion stimulate Paul Berlin's creation of the imaginary journey to Paris and provoke an effort to resolve the nagging personal doubts he has about the war: the nature of fear and courage, the conflicting feelings of guilt and innocence, his ignorance of the causes of the war and the reasons behind American involvement, and the increasingly uncertain moral landscape in which he finds himself. But the underlying issue raised by Cacciato's desertion is the conflict between authority, as expressed in traditional cultural values of patriotic duty and military obligation, and the right of the individual to personal liberty and self-determination. Ultimately, the question that fuels Paul Berlin's confusion is "Whether to flee or fight or seek an accommodation" (80).

The fantasy trek to Paris subverts the ideology of authority by exploring the possibilities of resistance. But while it expresses Berlin's longing and his willingness to consider alternatives to staying in the war, it paradoxically also acknowledges authority. The journey may be inspired by Cacciato's desertion, but its underlying mission is to capture and return him to the war. Consequently, there is a continual oscillation between

authority and resistance. As often as authority is challenged, it appears to reassert itself. For example, as Lieutenant Corson's authority gradually diminishes, Oscar Johnson's increases; the long, peaceful march through Laos is followed by the hopeless, "caught feeling" of Li Van Hgoc's tunnels; after the "good times" in Delhi, the squad is imprisoned and threatened with execution in Tehran; and the normality of Paris is interrupted by Oscar's insistence on "the realities" - the squad's need to deliver Cacciato to the U.S. embassy or be charged with desertion themselves.

At the end of the novel, the text's postmodern doubling compromises Paul Berlin's decision to acquiesce and fulfill cultural expectations to perform military duty in Vietnam. Berlin's submission to the ideology of authority may resolve the question of "fight or flight," but his commitment to the war has already been undercut by its evasion of the political and moral issues that trouble him. Berlin rationalizes his decision to stay by appealing to an "obligation to people, not to principle or politics or justice" (322), then admits that he really acts out of fear of social censure. His final argument for "peace of mind" and an honorable dignity within the context of social obligations, is mocked by the revelation of his complicity in Lieutenant Martin's fragging.

If there is any doubt regarding the problematic status of social responsibility and military duty at the end of Going After Cacciato, it is surely dispelled in the final words of the text, "Maybe so." By leaving Cacciato's fate indefinite and open to conjecture, the text displays post-modernism's suspicion of closure and assures that successful resistance to authority remains a possible alternative.

Operating in conjunction with the novel's postmodern effects on the level of story, O'Brien employs a discursive strategy that upsets conventional narrative authority in a way that destabilizes textual interpretation and questions cultural assumptions regarding the communication of experience and transmission of knowledge. The reader's impulse to form an interpretive framework capable of logical assimilation of new information is repeatedly frustrated by the fragmentation and radical disordering of the War Stories narrative. These narrative techniques also allegorize the efforts of the American government and military bureaucracy to mold public opinion throughout the war by deliberate distortion and manipulation of information.

The text's systematic erosion of distinctions between fact and fiction through the dynamics of storytelling and self-conscious narration, foregrounds the textualization of

experience and shows how our comprehension of events is invariably mediated. Cacciato demonstrates how the interaction of memory and imagination involved in story-telling undermines the certainty of knowledge and makes the communication of experience tentative and problematic.

Overall, Going After Cacciato is a remarkably successful expression of Tim O'Brien's personal experience and view of the Vietnam War. In a letter to junior high school students in which he discusses what he believes are the most important things to understand about the war, O'Brien emphasizes its ambiguities:

> how difficult it was to separate right from wrong on any given issue. For each argument in favor of the war, there seemed to be an equally compelling counter-argument, and in the end most Americans were left with an abiding sense of uncertainty and moral confusion. (in McCloud 1989, 96)

The novel's postmodern practice of doubling and its complex interaction of story and discourse in undermining cultural ideology and narrative authority creates a text that both recreates and explores O'Brien's own ambivalent attitude toward the war.

There is little doubt that Going After Cacciato is a significant artistic achievement. However, if only because

it is set in the specific historical context of the Vietnam War, the novel inevitably invites consideration of its politics. Certainly the text's subversion of the ideology of authority and its challenging of cultural assumptions is a political stance that, on the surface at least, sets the novel in some form of opposition to existing power-systems. But at the same time, the novel's carefully constructed ambiguities seem to provide an excuse to avoid confronting the moral implications of the war. There were many who, more like Cacciato than Paul Berlin, were able to evolve a clear moral position on the American intrusion in Vietnam and act accordingly. Those who may have sympathized with the nationalist aspirations of the Vietnamese, or witnessed the disintegration of families whose sons and brothers chose jail or exile rather than perform military service in Vietnam, will recognize the usefulness of ambiguity in effecting an evasion of moral responsibility. It is one thing to go to war out of fear of the social consequences of refusal, and quite another matter to efface one's guilt in participating in the systematic destruction of a society by appealing to situational uncertainty. By shrouding the question of guilt and innocence in a cloak of moral ambiguity, Going After Cacciato inevitably cy creates more room on the fence and may hinder rather than encourage a fresh and honest look at the consequences of the American

experience in Vietnam.

On the other hand, despite (and perhaps as a result of) its ambiguous stance on the moral issues of the war, the novel focuses attention on the operation of power relations in society. The Paris "peace talk" scene during which Paul Berlin and his alter ego, Sarkin Aung Wan, state opposing views on the limits of social obligation expresses an acute awareness of the power of ideology in influencing individual behavior. Going After Cacciato may not persuade us of the "correctness" of either position, but it does expose the way collectively held beliefs generate the kinds of cultural expectations that translate into national loyalty. If Paul Berlin echoes the slogans of the Nixon era such as "peace with honor" and "national dignity" to justify his continued participation in the war, the novel suggests he does so because for an American teenager brought up on TV heroes like John Wayne and Matt Dillon, they are the familiar ideological pillars that give his fragile world meaning. By foregrounding the effect of power systems on Paul Berlin, Cacciato reminds us how closely our own lives are defined by where we are situated within those systems.

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