SHOOT AND CRY

MODERNISM, REALISM, AND THE IRAQ WAR FICTION OF KEVIN POWERS AND JUSTIN SIROIS

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It's not about our process. It's not about our awakening. . . . The story isn't about me searching their house. The story is about their house being searched. . . . If I've murdered someone innocent . . . I can fall asleep, but he's dead.

—Yehuda Shaul and Edo Medicks in David Zlutnick, dir., *Shooting and Crying*

Because not only will America go to your country and kill all your people. But what's worse, I think, is they'll come back twenty years later and make a movie about how killing your people made their soldiers feel sad. . . . Americans making a movie about what Vietnam did to their soldiers is like a serial killer telling you what stopping suddenly for hitchhikers did to his clutch.

—Frankie Boyle, "2014—Scottish Independence"

A hunter was hunting sparrows one cold day, and he was killing them while his tears flowed. And one sparrow said to another: "There is no danger from the man. Do you not see him weeping?" And the other said to him: "Do not look at his tears, but look at what his hands are doing."

—Arab proverb from Louis Cheiko, *Majānī al-adab fī ḥadāʾiq al-ʿarab,* quoted in Thatcher

INTRODUCTION: REALISM, MODERNISM, AND TRAUMA HEROES

In a recent essay, Roy Scranton traces the "trauma hero" from Stendhal and Tolstoy through Wilfred Owen and Hemingway to contemporary American literature about the Iraq War. Indifferent to both nationalist justifications for the war and to anti-imperialist critiques, the trauma hero observes, suffers, and testifies. Above all else, he has

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been there: returning home, torn and frayed, he utters an authentic truth somehow beyond language, beyond ideology, gesturing eloquently toward the impossibility of communication. But his apolitical ache has a political purpose:

> The trauma hero myth also serves a scapegoat function, discharging national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy. . . . [W]hen the trauma hero myth is taken as representing the ultimate truth of more than a decade of global aggression . . . we allow the psychological suffering endured by those we sent to kill for us [to] displace and erase the innocents killed in our name. (222, 236)

In this essay, I argue that the trauma hero is most at home inside a particular subgenre of late modernist fiction that emphasizes affect, fragmentation, and discontinuity, at the expense of cause, effect, and narrative totalization.[1] Reflecting on America's West Asian invasions and occupations, Michiko Kakutani argues that "Short stories, authors have realized, are an ideal form for capturing the discontinuities of these wars, their episodic quality, and so are longer, fragmented narratives that jump-cut from scene to scene" (2014). "Instead of a coherent explanatory narrative," George Packer says, recent war writing

> presents us with fragments; for example, *Dust to Dust*, a 2012 memoir by Benjamin Busch, a former Marine Corps captain and an actor, is organized not chronologically but around certain materials—metal, bone, blood, ash. Fragments are perhaps the most honest literary form available to writers who fought so recently. Their work lacks context, but it gets closer to the lived experience of war than almost any journalism.

Packer purges "lived experience" of the historical consciousness it had for the British marxist historians and (as *Erlebnis* and *expérience vécue*) for German and French existentialists. In the absence of context, chronology, explanation, and linear wholeness, we are left with fragmentation, discontinuity, cinematic metaphors, immediate subjectivity, and immediate objectivity—the stolid modernist innovations of a year, a decade, a century ago reappear, as if newly minted. Like all commodities, they can sparkle briefly by forgetting their own history. Late modernist war narratives have lost high modernism's obsessive historical interests, becoming not merely nonhistorical, but antihistorical, from the global level (by erasing primitive accumulation and imperial conquest) to the level of the individual sentence (by collapsing

subject and object, cause and effect). The resulting "shoot and cry" narrative, as I will call it, provides US readers with heightened affect and a political alibi.[2]

But late modernism is only part of modernism, and modernism is only part of modernity, despite the frequent efforts of its advocates to claim the whole. In his unfinished final book, *The Politics of Modernism*, Raymond Williams calls modernism a "selective tradition." All traditions select, but when "a highly selected version of the modern . . . offers to appropriate the whole of modernity," we create or imply a dubious vision of premodernist literary production ruled by notions of natural language, transparent representation, fixed forms, and authoritative, nonreflexive authors (33), and we neglect the continuing and formally innovative tradition of realist writing. Realist narrative, notably the historical novel, suggests the complex but knowable (not simple and known) quality of history, and the intelligibility of narrative cause and effect, despite and even because of its formal mediations. And an important current of contemporary war fiction is at home inside this realist current of the historical novel.

In 2012, Little, Brown and Company published Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*, one of the earliest and best-known works of American Iraq War fiction. It focuses on three US Army soldiers in "Al Tafar," a version of Tal Afar, the northern Iraqi city where Powers served as a US army machine gunner in 2004–5, before he returned to earn an MFA at the University of Texas. Admiring blurbs compare Powers to Caputo, Mailer, Hemingway, Remarque, Crane, even Homer. *The Yellow Birds* was a finalist for the National Book Award and won the *Guardian*'s First Book Award. It has been turned into a lackluster 2018 film (Moors).

In 2012, Publishing Genius Press, then situated in a Baltimore row house, published Justin Sirois's *Falcons on the Floor*. It focuses on two young Iraqi men fleeing the 2004 First Battle of Fallujah by walking along the Euphrates up to Ramadi. Sirois is not a veteran and has never been to Iraq. He wrote the book in e-mail consultation with Haneen Alshujairy, an Iraqi refugee attending dental school in Cairo. At the time, they had never met. Sirois's book has been favorably reviewed in small journals. No movie is planned.

Contrary to what we might expect, *The Yellow Birds* is a modernist and *Falcons on the Floor* a realist novel—though "MFA late-modernist"

and "experimental neorealist" might be better tags. The differences are not absolute, and as we might expect, when we get down to cases, there is some realism in the modernism, some modernism in the realism. Powers creates a late modernist novel focusing on three American soldiers. He turns the US destruction of Iraq into an impressionistic tragedy of American suffering, then slips into the degraded realism of an imperial romance. Sirois creates a picaresque realist novel focusing on two Iraqis and on Iraq itself, then puts it into a self-conscious genre dialogue with a narcissistic late modernist American war narrative, which bookends the central plot. When imperial modernism crushes the picaresque, the result is a sympathetic historical novel about Iraq's US-authored tragedy, in which the two narrative modes are vital parts of the totalization. In the difference between the two works, we can see a variant on the European Realism–Modernism controversy of the 1930s and 1940s, playing out in the niche genre of contemporary war literature, and a literary struggle over defining the US responsibility for the Iraqi politicide.[3] I will discuss Powers, then Sirois, concluding with some reflections on the relations among narrative form, PTSD, and the historical novel.

KEVIN POWERS, LATE MODERNISM, AND THE SAVAGES

In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Slavoj Žižek calls Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H** "a perfectly conformist film—for all their mockery of authority, practical jokes and sexual escapades, the members of the MASH crew *perform their job exemplarily*, and thus present absolutely no threat to the smooth running of the military machine" (26). This disconnect is the essence of ideology: "an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it, that there is a rich human person beneath it: 'not all is ideology, beneath the ideological mask, I am also a human person' is the very form of ideology, of its 'practical efficiency'" (28). As so often, Žižek exaggerates for epigrammatic effect, forgetting that such divided awareness can also lead to a critique and rejection of that same ideology. For all human beings and not just psychoanalytically oriented philosophers can reflect critically on ideology, and even change their minds. But his larger argument holds: at least since

Daniel Bell, an obedient non- or postideology is the American Ideology *par excellence*. It forms the dominant note in "serious" Iraq War film, fiction, and memoirs—let's say, "those respectfully reviewed in the *New York Times*"—which neither celebrate the Iraq War as a blow struck for democracy, nor condemn it as a murderous capitalist conquest, but present it as absurd, futile, vertiginous, shot through with unspeakable intensities.

In fact, these works typically go *M*A*S*H** one better by turning the irreverently conformist service comedy into a "shoot-and-cry" narrative, which not only keeps the machine functioning smoothly, but appropriates the suffering of its primary victims.[4] "Shooting and Crying" translates the title of Nahum Barnea's *Yorim uvochim*. The phrase "refers to those Israelis who announce their repugnance at orders they are commanded to follow but follow them nonetheless; the soldier . . . cries to ease his conscience and purify himself morally, but shoots out of a loyalty to Israel and Zionism" (Grumberg, 49n.13). It captures a particular structure of feeling, light on Islamophobia and Arab-hating, yet subtly, unshakably nationalist—a defining note in liberal Zionist culture.[5] We can trace it back as far as S. Yizhar's brilliant 1949 novella, *Khirbet Khizeh*, celebrated as both an indictment of the village-killing Nakba and a tribute to the heroically dirty hands necessary for nation building. In the 1970s, it appears in Golda Meir's mawkish (and perhaps legendary) statement to Anwar Sadat before peace negotiations: "We can forgive you for killing our sons. But we will never forgive you for making us kill yours" (Gordis, 180). Shoot-and-cry defines films about Israel's second war on Lebanon, such as *Beaufort* (2007), *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), and *Lebanon* (2009).[6] As a sort of weaponized affect, shoot and cry need not imply complete insincerity, only a strategic focus on the psychic wounds of the powerful. Nor is it limited to Israel or wartime. Compare the gun-toting hysteria of nightriding US whites in pursuit of real and imagined slave rebels or uppity freedmen (Aptheker), and the blubbering "himpathy" that unites backlash patriarchs around the world (Manne).

Shoot-and-cry also permeates the films, fiction, and memoirs coming out of America's wars since 1965, which spend much more time on American trauma than on foreign perfidy, suffering, or writing.[7] It differs from simple racism or the colonial "othering" familiar from Edward Said's analysis of orientalism, for it denies responsibility for

the other's suffering while appropriating it as an authenticating experience. The detached moments of isolated, ostensibly uncaused traumatic affect form an alibi for the colonial narrative they comprise. Serious Iraq War film, fiction, and memoirs seldom affirm the war as a positive, patriotic good. Rather, they question its merits and parody a lost patriotic narrative, ultimately presenting the war as senseless or absurd. But instead of going on to analyze and attack the war as an imperial assault, they tend to bracket its moral and political status and assimilate it to an existential fate. Indeed, they reaffirm the narrative of duty, replacing anything like ideological reflection with a focus on the agonized loyalty among small groups of US soldiers.

The Yellow Birds focuses on three soldiers in Iraq. Private Daniel Murphy or "Murph," eighteen, is from southwest Virginia, blond, blue-eyed, and barely pubescent, with "soft down on his cheekbones" (38). The narrator, Private John Bartle, twenty-one, is from near Richmond (like Powers). And Sterling, twenty-four, is their blond and blue-eyed sergeant. Bartle promises Murph's mother to look out for him in Iraq. Traumatized by combat, Murph goes wandering. Iraqi insurgents capture, mutilate, and kill him. Bartle and Sterling find his body and swear a pact to spare his mother the sight of it. They conduct a river burial in the Tigris and report Murph missing in action. The nonlinear narrative proceeds in two parallel tracks, one in Nineveh Province, the other mainly in Virginia after Bartle's return, both interwoven with agonized recollections and anticipations: perhaps the default form of narrative in contemporary Iraq War fiction, film, and video. Murph's death hovers over the narrative from the beginning, but we learn its specifics only at the end of the novel, when the two tracks come together.[8]

The Yellow Birds remains agnostic on the war's origin: no WMDs or Saddam Hussein or Iraqi democracy, no war of civilizations or boilerplate Islamophobia—at least not at first. After Hemingway, the veteran's novel gains authenticity by reducing narrative to sensory reportage, not reflection, analysis, and explanation (Bennett, 385). Bartle tells us Sergeant Sterling's courage was "narrowly focused, but it was pure and unadulterated. It was a kind of elemental self-sacrifice, free of ideology, free of logic" (43). Reflecting on his as-yet unrevealed Iraqi trauma, Bartle gives us a late modernist critique of causality itself, as historical consciousness yields to affect, "What happened?" to "What was it like?"

> What happened? What fucking happened? That's not even the question, I thought. How is that the question? How do you answer the unanswerable? To say what happened, the mere facts, the disposition of events in time, would come to seem like a kind of treachery. The dominoes of moments, lined up symmetrically, then tumbling backward against the hazy and unsure push of cause, showed only that a fall is every object's destiny. It is not enough to say what happened. Everything happened. Everything fell. (148)

To search for causes, says Bartle, is a bad-faith effort to jettison the self: "It's impossible to identify the cause of anything, and I began to see the war as a big joke, for how cruel it was, for how desperately I wanted to measure the particulars of Murph's new, strange behavior and trace it back to one moment, to one cause, to one thing I would not be guilty of" (155).

George Packer praises recent American war writing for going beyond "causation, sequence, meaning." Beginning his "Author's Note," Powers says "*The Yellow Birds* began as an attempt to reckon with one question: What was it like over there?" (unpaginated). The question presents itself as a pre- or postideological query about lived experience, but it reveals a suspect immediacy. Roy Scranton notes the "politics of forgetting" built into Packer's turn from "the causes, background, and motivating forces" for the war to "the more narrow and manageable question of 'what it was like'" (234). Shorn of intention, cause, and effect, "what it was like" becomes a very narrow place indeed—like the "affect" celebrated by postpsychoanalytical theorists.[9] If connecting cause and effect produces realist *intelligibility*, refusing to do so produces late modernist *intensity* and *authenticity*, as in the classic 1970s joke:

> Q: How many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a light bulb?
> A: YOU CAN'T EVER KNOW, MAN! YOU WEREN'T THERE!

You must know, you can't know, so you must keep trying and keep failing to understand. "What was it like?" combines a seemingly universal affective content with an unselfconsciously imperial form, for it implies the nation that has largely cornered the market in global troop movements in the past fifty years. The question makes sense for

a Marine veteran returning to his family in Jackson, but not so much for a Mahdi Army veteran returning to his family in Basra, who have already experienced their own version of the "it."

The opening of *The Yellow Birds*, quoted in every review, and frequently compared to Melville's "Call me Ishmael," introduces the shoot-and-cry structure of strategic appropriation:

> The war tried to kill us in the spring. As grass greened the plains of Nineveh and the weather warmed, we patrolled the low-slung hills beyond the cities and towns. We moved over them and through the tall grass on faith, kneading paths into the windswept growth like pioneers. While we slept, the war rubbed its thousand ribs against the ground in prayer. When we pressed onward through exhaustion, its eyes were white and open in the dark. While we ate, the war fasted, fed by its own deprivation. It made love and gave birth and spread through fire.

Powers collapses invader and invaded into the generalized victims of a war's assault on "us." But even here, the menacing war begins to look more like Muslim Iraqi civilians only, for it fasts, prays with its ribs contacting the ground, makes love, and gives birth. Similarly, the third paragraph moves from a mixture of victims in the first sentence ("The war had killed thousands by September"), to an Americans-only tally in the last, where Bartle and Murph yearn not to be the thousandth dead American: "let that number be someone else's milestone" (4).

In his first episode of dramatized shoot-and-cry, Powers gives us his primary acknowledgment of Iraqi suffering. Bartle describes an elderly man and woman killed at a checkpoint. He dies immediately, while she creeps to the curb, then dies:

> "Holy shit, that bitch got murdered," Murph said. There was no grief, or anguish, or joy, or pity in that statement. There was no judgment made. He was just surprised, like he was waking from a long afternoon nap, disoriented, realizing that the world has continued uninterrupted in spite of the strange things that may have happened while you slept. He could have said that it was Sunday, as we did not know what day it was. And it would have been a sudden thing to notice that it was Sunday at a time like that. But he spoke the truth either way, and it wouldn't have mattered much if it had been Sunday, and since none of us had slept in a long time, none of it really seemed to matter much at all. (22–23)

Agency evaporates. Murph's "got murdered," is a colloquial intensive—an emphatic version of *was killed*—which first calls up, then

blocks out, the forensic literal meaning it would have at, say, The Hague. Bartle proceeds to strip away a number of object-centered, ethical emotions (grief, anguish, joy, pity), leaving only contained subjective affect and intransitive shock. As the smoke clears and the dust settles, the narrator enacts a classically modernist movement from plot to epistemology: from trying to convey what happened to denying we can ever know it fully. Bartle's reflective dithering about "Sunday" abrades the shooters' shock until "none of it really seemed to matter much at all." A little girl then comes along, "her face contorted with effort as she pulled the old woman by her one complete arm." The girl "rocked and moved her lips, perhaps singing some desert elegy that I couldn't hear" (23). The political fact of Americans shooting down elderly Iraqis in Iraq becomes an inscrutable oriental tableau that allegorizes a cosmic failure to connect.

In an interview, Powers reflects on this passage, ringing changes on "complexity," the touchstone of literary and critical modernism—indeed, of literature itself as reshaped by postwar literary criticism: "People make dubious moral decisions in the heat of battle, but they can feel guilty and do something chivalrous later. . . . People are mostly complicated, you know? I guess the one area I was interested in being realistic is the complexity, and I hope it reflects the complexity of the experience" (Foster). But if all lives are complex, not all complexities are the same. Samer Hassan, the likely inspiration for this unnamed girl, has lived a specifically Iraqi complex life. In January 2005, at the age of five, she lived in Tal Afar, as did Powers. An American patrol shot up her family car, killing her parents and wounding her brother. The late Chris Hondros captured her image, screaming and blood-splattered, in one of the most famous photographs of the war. In 2011, an interview in the Mosul home of her older sister captured Hassan's audible, intelligible, and unfinished urban elegy prompted by a picture of her family before the attack: "I always dream about my father and mother and brother" (Arango).

Reviewers frequently note that Powers writes prose like a poet.[10] This isn't always a blessing. Sometimes, he and his editors leave us with ineffectively reiterated poetic nuggets: "slick mess" (88, 206), "catacombed" (4, 194). Bloodshot blue eyes create a moist Old Glory, again and again, most memorably when Bartle gets up close with Sterling: "The tattoos on his chest heaved with his breathing and he put his

arms around my shoulders and squeezed hard. He was still smiling through his white teeth, and his eyes were wide and bloodshot and blue like the color of dried sprigs of lavender at the centers" (65).[11] Sometimes the prose attains a state of paratactic, unsubordinated fragmentation that would win points at the International Imitation Hemingway Competition: "And there were hamburgers and French fries and we were glad"; "The egret didn't seem to mind what I believed, and it tilted some and disappeared into the glare of the gone sun and it was full of grace" (43, 143). Noting the first passage, Tait hears a talented young writer's encounter with good models and bad editing, preserved for posterity because editors hesitate to criticize a veteran writer.

But the novel's occasional detractors fail to note that its more apparent stylistic "faults"—description overwhelming narration, prolonged interior meditation, interwoven and nonlinear plot lines—produce a classically late modernist novel. In this, *The Yellow Birds* conjures up Joseph Conrad's founding narrative of asymmetrical imperial warfare and the Euro-modernist abroad. *Heart of Darkness* shifts from an initial critique of colonial violence and exploitation to a parting meditation on the difficulties of knowing, and a futile struggle to convey what it was like in the Congo:

> [T]he whole imperialist enterprise is represented as essentially absurd. It is a surreally pointless exercise, symbolized by a ship firing purposelessly into a river bank, a pail with a hole in it, a hollow in the ground excavated for no apparent purpose, a man weirdly garbed in motley, and a chief accountant conducting himself in the middle of the jungle as he might in an English drawing room. (Eagleton 242)

Unquestionably critical, Conrad's gonzo mockery of imperial absurdity stops short of a full-fledged critique of violence and exploitation. That's why it tends to appeal more to writers ill at ease with colonizing powers, though imaginatively or physically embedded with them. But other responses are imaginable, particularly from indigenous perspectives. Can we picture an inhabitant of a smoldering village on Conrad's Congo, Coppola's Mekong, or Powers's Tigris pausing to quip, "how absurd!"?[12]

Like *Heart of Darkness*, *The Yellow Birds* is a modernist shaggy dog story, with an excess of affective buildup and a flimsy plot resolution.[13] Despite the foreboding that saturates Conrad's novel, Marlow's particular trauma never quite comes into focus. Is it his illness? Kurtz's

going native? the skulls festooning his compound? the failure of the ordinary thugs onboard the steamer to appreciate his extraordinary qualities? the soothing lies Marlow tells Kurtz's Intended? We strain for and miss the cause, and that's the point: the struggle provides a felt equivalent to Marlow's inconclusive quest. Similarly, in *The Yellow Birds*, Bartle never quite identifies the trauma that haunts his narrative: is it the death of Murph? the soothing lies Sterling and Bartle tell Murph's mother about it? the confessional letter Bartle writes her? the war itself? the impossibility, finally, of conveying any explanation? Marlow tells us, "This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it" (79). Reviewing *The Yellow Birds* for the *New York Times*, Benjamin Percy tells us "Kevin Powers has something to say, something deeply moving about the frailty of man and the brutality of war, and we should all lean closer and listen." Fraught but fuzzy pronouns tell the ineffable tale by failing to do so.

But as he concludes, Powers clips his shaggy dog, and we genre-shift from modernist flux to plot-driven, mass-cultural romance, with familiar traces of racism and Islam-hatred that construct a strong sense of an ending. In this turn, *The Yellow Birds* resembles not Conrad's rigorously modernist *Heart of Darkness* but his hybrid *Lord Jim*, which begins with an impressionistic modernist narrative focused on the baffling choices of Jim's shipboard career, and concludes with a Kiplingesque onshore adventure.[14] Similarly, Powers concludes his novel by moving from a fragmented modernist narrative to a romance origin-trauma. Seared by battle in an Al Tafar orchard,[15] Murph begins wandering aimlessly. Bartle finds him gazing at a blond American medic working nearby. He has fallen in love with her out of his need "to have one memory he'd made of his own volition" (165). Bartle and Murph, lonesome Virginians abroad, gaze at her walking toward a little Baptist bit of the Old Dominion: a makeshift chapel composed of "white painted boards" that were "chipped and peeling from the abrasive wind," its steeple topped by a "simple unadorned cross" (161, 165). As they return to their platoon, insurgents launch a mortar barrage on the hapless chapel, and one round penetrates its roof: "Its steeple had collapsed. The small wooden cross was broken and speared the earth near a clump of tamarisk trees," and the blond Christ-woman dies with a "deep wound in her side" (171).

Traumatized, Murph begins wandering even further afield, until one day, he strips himself naked and wanders through Al Tafar—an American Adam compounded of innocence and shock.[16] Sterling's squad searches for him, fearing he has been "swept up into the arms of captors, too weak to resist, as helpless as a child asleep in the wilderness." Sterling and Bartle trace him to the foot of a minaret, "a protuberance of mottled stone" (201). Iraqi savages have captured him, taken him up in the minaret, cut off his nose and ears, gouged out his eyes, "imprecisely castrated him," half-beheaded him, and finally, cast his body out the window (206). Powers begins his late-modernist pseudomemoir with impressionist formlessness, but the quest for closure introduces harder, plot-driven genres. Blending an American captivity narrative with a crusader romance, he turns *The Yellow Birds* into something like *The Two Towers: The White Chapel and the Mottled Minaret*.[17] The Iraq-set plot concludes with Sterling and Bartle forcing an elderly Iraqi cartwright to help them carry Murph's body to its river-burial. They pass by the unsympathetic locals, "who wailed some Eastern dirges in their warbling language, all of them sounding like punishments sung specifically for our ears" (210–11). Arriving at the river, they slide Murph's body in. The long last sentence of the book gives us a pastoral vision of Murph's body wafting down the Tigris to the Shatt-al-Arab and the Persian Gulf, in a mythic, cleansing metamorphosis, like that of the drowned priest Edward King in Milton's "Lycidas" (226).

But just before Murph becomes myth, Bartle and Sterling swear to keep his fate secret, sealing the pact with a ritual sacrifice:

> Sterling shot the cartwright once, in the face, and he crumpled to the ground. No time to even be surprised by it. The mule began to pull the cart, unbidden, as if by habit. The two dogs followed it into the coming night. We looked back toward the river. Murph was gone. (211)

Whatever the source of Bartle's trauma, it is not the crumpled cartwright, who has been forgotten by every single reviewer. Even here, our attention shifts from his corpse to his mule and dogs, and then to Murph's haunting absence.[18] Sterling and Bartle consecrate their fraternal secret by burning down the minaret. In 1638, John Underhill published *Newes from America*, which tells of two English "captive maids" held by the Pequots, then of the massacre at Mystic Fort,

where English colonists slaughtered and burned alive 400–700 Pequot "men, women, and children" (26–35, 39). In 2012, Kevin Powers also closes his captivity narrative with dead savages and a cleansing fire.

JUSTIN SIROIS, NEOREALISM, AND TWO IRAQI SLACKERS

If the realist war novel feels a built-in dialogical impulse to reconnoiter the other side, the late modernist war novel holds this impulse at bay, limiting the dialogue to that within fragmented compatriot consciousness. Phil Klay, a Marine veteran of the Iraq War, wrote *Redeployment* (2014), which won the National Book Award for Fiction. Asked why "none of the stories are from an Iraqi perspective?" he responds, "I had a fairly specific intent with the collection and so a specific frame I was working within. I also wasn't sure how I could have a lone Iraqi voice without having that seem to try to represent some unified Iraqi perspective, which was exactly the thing I was trying to avoid when talking about Marines" ("Maximum Shelf: *Redeployment*"). But why would, for example, a specific Iraqi widow's view of her husband's death by torture have to represent a "unified Iraqi perspective"? And why not three Iraqi voices—say, a Yazidi, a Turkman, and a lonely Jew?[19] Or a story melding American and Iraqi voices? A politically correct effort to avoid a reductive view of the Iraqi Other becomes a question-begging excuse for ignoring the rather important Iraqi dimension of the Iraq War. Usually, such questions don't even come up. In the omnipresent query, "What was it like?" the unassuming pronoun does its work of quiet exclusion.[20]

In *Falcons on the Floor*, Justin Sirois expands the "it" to include Iraqis—specifically, two hapless Iraqi men in their early twenties, Khalil Hammadi and Salim Abid, who flee the First Battle of Fallujah. In the long middle section of the book, they travel up the Euphrates to Ramadi so that Salim can recharge his laptop and reestablish internet connectivity with Rana, his unmet beloved, exiled to a Jordanian refugee camp. Khalil, his friend from boyhood, is a high school dropout, a mechanic, and a temporary Fallujah celebrity: a novelized version of the jubilant but dopey-looking young man captured in the foreground of Khalid Mohammed's grimly iconic photograph of two Blackwater mercenaries who were killed, burned, and strung up from

Fallujah's Old Bridge—a picture quickly pressed into service to incite the US assault on Fallujah (Meyer).

But before we get to them and the center of Sirois's neorealist novel, we encounter the eleven unnumbered pages of its proem, titled "Before the War," which provide a note-perfect satire of late modernist MFA prose poetry, awash in innocence, longing, and introverted memory. The narrator is a teenage boy in Maine—in a nice reversal of literary custom, he never acquires a name, unlike the Iraqis—whose brother has gone off to fight in Desert Storm. He worships his schoolmate Katie from afar. After hearing that her mother was in an accident, he sets off in the woods at night to visit her. But in a close parallel to Murph's chaste longing for the blonde medic, he loses the nerve to connect with her, and stands outside, staring at her house:

> After taking one last look at Katie's window, where I always imagined the top of her brown head would rest, by the window, hair pulled up in a rubber band like at school, the pony tail I could spot from across the gym out of a thousand swarming perms and bobs and clam shell bangs, I trudged back home the way I came—the longest way to a lesson I'm still walking.

In a sympathetic review, Joe Hall says this lyrical reverie "almost sinks" the novel (173–74). But I suspect the overwriting represents a calculated MFA-effect. "Walking" a "lesson" is perfect of its kind.[21] Sirois's realism here lies in his accurate reflection not of the entire phenomenal world—that quixotic goal attributed to literary realism by its antagonists—but of one speech genre comprising it: the late-modernist American war novel of innocence lost.

But Sirois drops the faux-lyrical effect abruptly as his novel lurches to Iraq, marking the move with two spare realist maps: one of Iraq, with a scale of miles; one of Fallujah, with the municipal districts marked out, and the conspicuously everyday detail of the cloverleaf where Iraqi Highway Ten intersects Iraqi Highway One. This familiar image introduces the question of "othering," and Sirois's contrarian decision to write "primarily from an Iraqi perspective" (Woods). Warnings against such attempts stretch from the write-what-you-know stylistic fastidiousness of creative writing programs to Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial warning against premature bonding with the subaltern. Sirois gamely ignores them. He read Dahr Jamail's *Beyond the Green Zone*, watched documentaries about the Iraq War, then went

online and screened Iraqi consultants. He settled on Haneen Alshujairy, an Iraqi refugee attending dental school in Cairo, who became his critic, his friend, and the book's dedicatee. In a series of email exchanges, she provided crucial information about Fallujah, her father's hometown (*Falcons*, 267–68). It is possible to make too much of the postmodern net-based medium, for in his reading and his dialogue with never-met Alshujairy (perhaps suggested in the romantic dialogue of Salim and never-met Rana), Sirois joins the research-oriented mainstream of the historical novel, from Scott to Tolstoy to Mahfouz to Mantel.[22] Where Powers's "What was it like?" combines the appearance of painful empirical reflection with the reality of formulaic narrative, Sirois produces a highly original plot founded in further dialogues between two Iraqi characters, between an Iraqi and an American author, and even between two genres of war fiction, as we will see.

Despite this unusual turn to Iraqi experience, Sirois seems at first to follow in the tracks of "post-ideological" American fiction. Responding to an interviewer's question about his political position, Sirois says, "There is no political agenda. . . . I'm not interested in opinions, really. Left or right, for me all that is boring inside literature. . . . Ultimately, it's a novel about friendship and love and death" (*Falcons*, [269]).[23] Sirois repeats Powers's tunnel-vision focus on the male experience of warfare, and at first he seems to depoliticize the conflict, with hints of "The war tried to kill us." He Americanizes his two protagonists considerably. The lack of strong tribal identity or any sustained interest in religion seems unlikely for two young men from al Anbar province in 2004. Salim criticizes Khalil for earning some money by helping plant IEDs to take out American invaders, and Khalil appears abashed. Neither has a cross word about the Americans destroying their hometown and their neighbors—and such agnostics were thin on the ground in Fallujah (Jamail, 81). Instead, the two flee up the Euphrates to Ramadi, looking back over their shoulders at the American assault: "Thunderous drums thudded deep and offbeat, barreled in the stony peeks of cloud. . . . We stare at the bulbous mosques backlit by flashes, waiting collapse" (66, 76). Like most American readers, Salim and Khalil long to squint away the political horror of the American assault on Fallujah, viewing it as uncaused spectacle.

The power of the novel lies in the way it dramatizes the failure of this flight from history, producing a striking narrative critique of the

American invasion and occupation.[24] In his historical novel, Sirois focuses not on heroic *fedayeen* (like those left behind in Fallujah), nor on abject innocents, but on mediocre characters like those at the center of Scott's novels—characters whose middling, unheroic status, says Lukács, provides the crucial substrate for capturing the historical transition at hand (1983, 33). Sirois has acknowledged a debt to *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy's story of two postapocalyptic wanderers (McCabe). I think his linear picaresque sits closer to Cervantes and Twain, with a series of escapades and a nonrecursive narrative marked by a riverside walk and the diminishing percentages of full-charge beginning each of Salim's recorded weblog entries. Quixote's romance-fired quest for Dulcinea becomes Salim's internet-fired quest for Rana, while Sancho Panza's plebeian realism and loyalty become Khalil's proletarian competency and unrequited affection for Salim. And in Sirois as in Twain, flight produces literary totality. Huck and Jim flee down the Mississippi from Missouri to Arkansas, hiding from slave-hunters while imaginatively calling up the entire antebellum Mississippi Valley. Salim and Khalil travel up the Euphrates from Fallujah to Ramadi, hiding from US patrol boats while calling up all Iraq by connecting the river itself to its wildlife (river otters), to the everyday working countryside (the fields, the sound of a socket wrench), and to concrete, horrific tokens of warfare: a shot-up car, an empty house with signs of tragedy, gobbets of carrion, a traumatized and never-explained woman riding a tractor, a pastoral-elegiac "pyramid of cauterized date palms" (125).[25] Despite these traumatic sights, the plot remains complexly linear, riverine, and realist, not oceanic and modernist. In *City of Widows*, the exiled Iraqi writer, Haifa Zangana—Kurd, Arab, communist, feminist, survivor of Baathist torture, and ferocious critic of the US occupation—offers a Mesopotamian retort to those who see Iraq as a jury-rigged Ottoman contraption that can be handily disassembled: "From ancient times, Iraq has been a country straddling two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates" (25).

Sirois's historical novel thus combines a serious representation of everyday life (Auerbach) with a dialectical, complexly linear plot integrating subject and object (Lukács, 1983), not traumatized subjectivity and reified particularity. And formally, the central section of the novel produces a version of Bakhtin's novelistic dialogism of high and low, as Sirois alternates between Salim's written prose poetry and his

demotic oral exchanges with Khalil. The dominant voice belongs to Salim and his Symbolist internet logs, which reflect on their journey, as when he imagines creatures below the surface of the Euphrates:

> Mute leviathans—stripped of pigment and devoid of conscience. They croon hungry, kindless as knives. . . . Sons of the river and sons of Baghdad, we're here, and I know the drops leaking out of our armpits and eyelids were once molecules of the river. It smells us as we float, knowing our bodies belong to its ancient body. It won't hesitate to swallow us whole.

Like Powers, Sirois is a poet who turned to narrative prose to capture the Iraq War. Here, he tethers the origin myths of river peoples to the material world via "armpits" and "molecules." His prose poems are more striking and skillful than Powers's, but not radically different in kind. The key difference is the sequence. Where Bartle and Powers tend to wander off from a quotidian event into a reverie, Sirois interrupts Salim's meditation with intersubjective realist narrative, building in Khalil, who manages the boat: "Rowing, Khalil turns to me. Smiles, Rows" (140). And a prose poem changes its function when contained inside a novel: "When an aesthete undertakes to write a novel," Bakhtin says, the result is that "in the novel there is represented a speaking person who happens to be an ideologue for aestheticism, who exposes convictions that are then subject in the novel to contest" (333). Again and again, Khalil muscles in on Salim's lyrical effusions, as he protects and entertains his questing friend, growing more motherly and eloquent with every step. Why does Khalil insist on accompanying his friend Salim to Ramadi? He never says, aside from asserting that he can't go back to Fallujah, having deserted his military and civil defense responsibilities—but that begs the question (58). Sirois makes clear Khalil's affection for Salim, going back to their schooldays. But he neither conspicuously asserts nor conspicuously denies that Khalil is in love with him. It remains an abstract possibility, crushed by the narrative's conclusion.[26]

This realist dialogue of genres appears even more dramatically in Sirois's 2010 novella, *MLKNG SCKLS: deleted Word documents from the laptop of Salim Abid, April 2004*, a novella-length work consisting of passages edited out of *Falcons on the Floor*, still in progress. Modernist "high" appears in a section titled "44% Battery Power Remaining," in which Salim imagines how he would gain Rana's admiration by

uncooking a chicken curry, returning it to something like its constituent parts by rinsing and reassembling the meat, drying out rice grains, restoring a separated coconut milk to the coconut husks, concluding with an absurdist nonmeal, and an imagined romantic encounter (40). It's a virtuoso *written* reverie, and formally modernist: running backward, outside of narrative logic, and hidden from Khalil. The remainder of the book belongs to Khalil, under the title of "29% Battery Power Remaining." It begins in dialogue, with Khalil saying he'd give anything for a cigarette. Rebuffing the lame conversational sally, Salim responds, "Whatever. You don't *really* smoke" (41). Khalil first protests: "I smoke. . . . I smoke all the time. You've seen me" (42). He then moves into a mock-heroic folktale about a mutual acquaintance, Falah, and his brother: "A cigarette saved his life." The tale itself, which allegorically previews Sirois's not-yet-published account of Salim and Khalil's flight from Fallujah and their tragic end in Ramadi, culminates with Falah and his brother running through the streets of Fallujah, carrying two chickens and pursued by two wild dogs. Falah's brother saves the day by expertly flicking a burning cigarette down one dog's mouth. It "runs away gagging." Khalil concludes with a formulaic tagline that conjures up Iraqi oral culture: "And that's how a cigarette saved Falah's life" (52). As he tells the story, Khalil interweaves a suspense-heightening delaying element by simultaneously assembling a mock-heroic spear from a stick, a pocketknife, and some electrical tape. He then moves into an extended, pantomime hunt, finally flinging his makeshift spear, and calling out, "I got one! I got one!" Salim approaches and sees "[a] pack of Marlboro Mediums crumple under the tip of the knife." Khalil pulls out one cigarette and "puts it in his mouth and draws deep, holding and holding before his nostrils flex with outward air." Salim responds, and Khalil concludes the book with improvisatory flair:

> —We don't have a light, I say.
> Khalil sucks another drag and passes it to me, says,
> —Guess we don't.

Thus end the outtakes: a novella-length middle of the novel, with no beginning or end. Khalil's oral storytelling and improvised theatrics win out over Salim's literary composition, but the dialogue is the thing: despite the danger and sometimes the reality of American

projection in this characterization, Sirois's two fictions call up Iraq by dramatizing a plausible difference between two Iraqis, capturing it in two distinct speech genres. And this dialogue enters into dialogue with an American trauma hero narrative, as we will see.

At the end of the novel's long central section, Salim and Khalil arrive in Ramadi, intending to visit Khalil's cousin Anmar, recharge Salim's laptop, and connect with Rana. They find Ramadi besieged by Americans but arrive safely at Anmar's house, where they find him and his friends, armed and boisterous, making menacing insinuations about mysterious prisoners behind a bullet-riddled locked door. One of Anmar's group tells Khalil and Salim to listen to the door. Khalil says he hears nothing, prompting a response from one of the group: "'The youngest one,' Hassan said, leaning closer, 'he cries all night. All night like a little falcon.'" Ordering Khalil to guard the door, the group leaves with Salim on a mysterious but sinister mission, and Khalil begins fantasizing about the captives:

> *Who the hell were they?*
>
> *Shia* businessmen captured off buses speeding to Syria? Bankers and salesmen embarking from Baghdad, ambushed and ransacked and shackled with tape? Had they been beaten, their feet turned eggplant by steel rods? Bound on the floor, their herringbone jackets pulled off by their buttons and inside out pockets. They could be women. They could be young sisters sleeping forehead to forehead.
>
> Khalil counted the bullet holes in the door.
>
> Five.

They could also be refugee Iraqi Christians seeking asylum in Jordan. Khalil imagines a whole family, including a little boy: "Would he screech? The falcon? The little boy? . . . He sat and stood and sat and tapped the rifle's steel butt plate on his shoe laces, believing the falcons on the floor were never going to pray again" (234, 235). Thus Sirois concludes the central section of the narrative by seeming to explain, finally, his cryptic title through another Christian captivity narrative. By casting Anmar and his friends as versions of the monstrous insurgents who mutilated Murph, Sirois suggests an act of Iraqi savagery that retroactively justifies the American invasion and the Battles of Fallujah and Ramadi. In the words of Michael Ignatieff's hyperventilated argument for preemptive war, "Against this kind of enemy, everyone can see that instead of waiting for terrorists to hit

us, it makes sense to get our retaliation in first." Quantitative change becomes qualitative; the horror of the imagined effect turns it into a cause.

In fact, as we soon discover, Anmar has sent Khalil on a snipe hunt: the locked room contains bomb-making supplies, but no prisoners, living or dead (254, 259). Thus Sirois turns Khalil into a version of hysterical American media consumers in 2002–3, terrified by the threat of Saddam Hussein's nonexistent WMDs. The title and the empty room form a McGuffin that delays the novel's actual climax, which arrives in an unexpected third section titled "The war," narrated by an unnamed American:

> We sat and watched from the rooftop. The insurgents came running. My brother's key and my dog tags hung from my neck. Hanging. The key that my brother gave me so many years ago—the key that opened doors he never imagined it would. . . . Illuminated by the night vision, it was the backpack-wearing kid that came jogging behind. (237)

The brother's key and the stale imagery identify the speaker as an older but still insufferable version of the prologue's teen narrator. And his view of the insurgents through night-vision glasses confirms that we are still in Ramadi, seeing Anmar's "insurgents," including Salim with his backpack. Fleeing the Battle of Fallujah, Salim and Khalil find themselves smack dab in the middle of the Battle of Ramadi. Throughout this passage, Sirois emphasizes US power and domination of the situation.[27] The narrator and his squad track Anmar's group to a café, where they are completing their secret mission: watching a football match on television. The Americans shoot and scatter them, and the narrator captures Salim, cuffs him, questions him, calls him a "muji," and feminizes him: "'Sally,' I said. 'Sally's a cute name.'" As we move from a fantasized Christian captivity narrative (like that of Jessica Lynch) to an actual Muslim one (like those of Bagram, Batavia, Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and Brooklyn's Metropolitan Detention Center), Salim becomes the actual abject falcon on the floor. The narrator searches through Salim's laptop, convinced he will find bomb-making instructions. The narrator leaves for a moment and silently returns to guard Salim.

Offstage and outside the narrative, Khalil's intelligence and affection for Salim have led him to abandon his prank guard duty. He finds

Salim bound, at the café, and begins to rescue him. The hidden American narrator keeps the two of them in his sights. Khalil lays his rifle down, cuts Salim's plastic cuffs, and "hugged Sal, wrangling his shoulders and kissing the top of his head." In WikiLeaks' *Collateral Murder* (2010), a secret cockpit video released by Chelsea Manning, the anonymous US helicopter gunner follows the rules of engagement with murderous bad faith, longing for the unarmed Reuters correspondent Saeed Chmagh, whom he has just mortally wounded, to pick up a rifle dropped by someone else so he can execute him legally: "All you gotta do is pick up a weapon" (8:34). Here, Sirois's narrator also waits until Khalil picks up his rifle, then fires:

> Five rounds unzipped his shoulder and chest. His face contorted, mesmerized and sleepy. He collapsed. His weapon slipped from his grip and cracked, bayonet down, on the cement, and his stomach fell on the stock where he balanced limp like a marionette and dropped, dead before hitting the floor. . . . Sal sat there with his hands on his laptop like the laptop was a shield against any bullet or bomb, and I lowered my rifle so that he knew I wouldn't shoot again. His peeled eyes told me, then, that I'd killed Khalil, I'd shot him—Khalil with black track suit. Khalil from the photo—and Sal couldn't move or make his mouth sound. (263)

After setting up a sensitive, cross-cultural encounter between two lovelorn guys from Maine and Fallujah, Sirois obliterates it in a burst of bullets, leaving the former a wanton killer and Salim shattered and bereft of the man who loved him. Like the empty chamber of horrors with no falcons on the floor, this violation of literary romance produces literary realism.

The American gunman remains a prose poet, however. Separating the quick and the dead, he lets Salim run off and tells his fellow soldiers that he tried to shoot the Iraqis, but they all got away. As in Conrad and Powers, a lie shared with the readers provides narrative closure, gesturing sublimely toward some nonexistent deeper truth. He takes a piece of gum from a fellow soldier—a G.I. Joe fetish—and portentously concludes: "I chewed it. Bruised auroras bloated above the tenement house—baked on the clouds. . . . There was a fire we had to let burn" (264). With the signature tone of American imperial casuistry, the narrator submits himself to unelaborated metaphysical necessity, rewriting strategic city-killing as a fated fire, as Bartle and Sterling burned the minaret. Sirois's narrative brilliance lies in the bad

smell of this trauma hero lyricism. Like *The Yellow Birds*, *Falcons on the Floor* concludes with a genre shift. But where Powers turns to romance to create melancholic closure for the novel, Sirois returns to late modernism to convict it of being a literary accessory to murder. And while we forget the Iraqi carter, we remember Khalil and Salim, whose sympathetic intelligence the narrative has nurtured. Khalil shot and Salim crying, plain and simple, caught in the US-authored chapter of modern Iraq's tragic history.

CONCLUSION: PTSD, THE HISTORICAL NOVEL, AND NARRATIVE FORM

If we inflect the sardonic and skeptical "shoot-and-cry" story in a clinical direction, we come up with "post-traumatic stress disorder." More than an ideological ruse of empire, PTSD is a real wound: the "psychological afterburn" produced as much by "killing conspecifics" (fellow human beings) as by the threat of them killing us (Jones et al., 299). That's the US Army's 1995 *War Psychiatry* manual, but Frantz Fanon provides impeccably anti-imperialist corroboration in "Colonial War and Mental Disorders," the less-read final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon emphasizes the "severe reactive disorders" experienced by Europeans who tortured and killed Algerians, an FLN fighter who avenged his mother's murder by killing a colon woman, and two Algerian boys who killed their European playmate (185, 192–94, 199–201).[28]

PTSD has had a cultural as well as a psychological afterlife. If the cosmopolitan metropolis is modernism's first home, then the battlefield and hospital ward come in second. And from the Congo hysteria of Conrad, Kurtz, and Marlow to the shell shock and suicide of Woolf's Septimus Smith to the trauma and near-suicide of Powers's John Bartle, PTSD is the key mediator of war modernism, shaping form as well as content by connecting the experience of combat with the shattered, obsessive, and recursive sentences on the page, and with noncombat forms of trauma, such as sexual violence (Henke). Trauma narrative in the era of high modernism offered an alternative to and critique of triumphalist nationalism. But in late modernist American war fiction, it serves that very nationalism. Keeping a tight, quasi-clinical focus,

it avoids political questions as strenuously as does a government-funded study of government-produced PTSD. The former can ask, "What was it like?" as the latter can ask, "Is PTSD of mechanical as well as psychological origin?" (Worth). But for both, it would be a sort of genre error to ask, "Who sent the trauma hero to war in the first place, and why?" and completely impossible to add, "Might they be tried for murder, mayhem, and war crimes?"[29] Instead, sympathy with trauma heroes and submission to the authenticity of their shattered vision take the place of political responsibility for sending them into combat, and economic responsibility for their therapy. As the wait list lengthens for chronically underfunded V.A. counseling, new PTSD narratives pile up at the bookstore, the multiplex, and the video screen, merging easily (for instance, in *The Hurt Locker*) with the established myth of the vengeful, half-cracked lonesome cowboy. Even the film version of *American Sniper*, its director and star tell us, is really an antiwar movie focused on the psychological plight of returned American veterans (Kilday; Buckley). First Lady Michelle Obama agrees, adding a note of sympathy for women veterans and veterans' families.

The US culture of PTSD takes up a local trauma of political origin, with a medical, therapeutic, and social cure, and turns it into an alibi, an aesthetic, a font of truth, and a modernist metaphysic whose pseudo-profundity derives from blurring cause and effect, thus removing us from history and self-conscious politics. In *The Yellow Birds*, Powers gives us not only Bartle's anxious reveries and attack on causality, his attempted suicide and Sterling's successful one. He also allows us to share safely in the experience of traumatic flashback by interweaving the Iraq and Virginia sections of his narrative. Consuming similar narratives—fiction, film, or memoir—we forget the origin of the war and merge with the trauma hero, in a second-order transfer: if "shoot-and-cry" allows shooters to appropriate the shot, then the culture of PTSD allows readers and watchers to appropriate both. We don't want these narratives to stop, and we certainly don't want them to turn into rational analyses of the war itself, like the suicide epistle of Marine veteran Daniel Somers, who links his physical and psychological illnesses with his imminent death, reflects on Iraq, and longs to turn his military skills against those who sent him there (Watson). We recode our willful amnesia as something cruelly visited on us. Political ADHD becomes vicarious PTSD.

And we practice a highly selective triage, as nation-specific as "hysteria" is gender-specific. While most psychological victims of US wars are citizens of the countries we invade and occupy, who absorb the brunt of violence and grieving, our PTSD narratives focus almost exclusively on our own veterans. Among the millions of Iraqis who fall below David J. Morris's horizon of interest in *The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, we might list Rana Abdul Mahdi of Sadr City. When a US helicopter fired a rocket at her, she lost her left foot, the fetus she was carrying, her eight-year-old sister (who was eviscerated), her husband (who left her), and almost her life and faith, when she tried to kill herself: "God must hate me for leaving me alive!" (Kukis, 179–83). Should we condemn Powers for focusing on American trauma heroes and failing to consider any Iraqi character seriously? No literary work does everything; all literary works omit many worthy tasks. But bracketing the Iraqi experience in the US war on Iraq is a special sort of literary selection, for it reproduces the origin of the war itself. The first great trauma narrative of the Iraq War, the epidemic US pre-traumatic stress disorder of 2001–3, combined a collective nationalist hysteria with a self-denying anxious pleasure, while remaining completely indifferent to the US role in installing and maintaining Saddam Hussein, the murderous agony of sanctions, and the eminently foreseeable outcome of bombing, occupation, artificial anarchy, and a shattered economy. Above all, we ignore the sheer illegality of waging a "war of aggression," in the phrase of Robert H. Jackson at Nuremberg (Broomhall, 46).[30]

So late modernist literary PTSD selects and excludes. While professing an involuted formlessness, it rigorously eliminates certain narrative alternatives, including cross-national dialogue. *The Yellow Birds* simply could not remain a shoot-and-cry narrative if, rather than alternating between Bartle in Iraq and Bartle in Virginia, it alternated among Bartle, an ex-Baathist Insurgency fighter, and his wounded sister. Nor could *The Yellow Birds* survive a decision to trace the bullet in the dead carter's face to Vice President Cheney's petrocapitalist résumé. Breaking up the claustrophobia of Bartle's narration and putting it into dialogue with something outside itself would feel like a genre error. It would bring Powers's novel too close to the totalizing, cause-and-effect rhythms of the realist historical novel—like Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat*, which traces a raped Chechen mother, her backstabbed

boy, and a gutshot Russian serf in the Caucasus to Tsar Nicholas, the incestuous monster in the Winter Palace (Holstun, 2016).

But in the history of forms as in all histories, forward movement is not automatically a progress. Nor is it uniform. Even when crowded out of certain cultural currents and genres, realist etiology reappears in others. In literary history as in revolution, Trotsky's "combined and uneven development" is the rule, not the exception.[31] Lukács notes that the narrative impulse eliminated from modernist high culture oriented toward description tends to migrate into the "empty literature of pure adventure," which "has flourished alongside the official, serious literature. Nor can there be any illusion that this literature is read simply by the 'uneducated' while the 'élite' stick to the significant artistic literature" (1970, 124–25). And the shift in form frequently brings a shift in content: if Iraqis tend to disappear from late modernist fiction in the United States, they reappear eloquently in fictional films like Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* and documentaries like Bingham and Connor's *Meeting Resistance*. In a brief but richly detailed strategic analysis of Kevin Powers's Tal Afar, the late Colonel Travis Patriquin proceeds like a realist novelist, sketching out the city's determinate, cross-hatched complexities: North and South Tal Afar, Turkmen and Arabs, Shia and Sunni, Islamist and Baathist, tribe and clan, and implicitly crashing through them all, Ambassador Paul Bremer's disastrous program of de-Baathification, which we can now recognize clearly as pre-ISISization.[32]

And realism persists and develops inside fiction as well, as we can see in Sirois's *MLKNG SCKLS*, *Falcons on the Floor*, and *The Last Book of Baghdad*, the third book in his Iraq trilogy. Is my distinction between Powers's late modernism and Sirois's neorealism too sharp—a binary opposition? In some ways, yes. The very name of "the Realism-Modernism Controversy" is part of the problem, for it cedes the modern field to Modernism, while consigning Realism to the past, and to a credulous belief in something called "straightforwardly mimetic" literature. Lazy theorists of modernism, seeking an easy contrast, chronically ignore the baroque artifice of realism.[33] Even going back to the classic European debates of the Thirties, we find some significant blurs, with "Modernist" Ernst Bloch arguing that fragmented modernism mirrors authentic, discontinuous reality, while "Realist" Georg Lukács responds that modernism eschews the hard work of mediation,

settling for the false aesthetic immediacy that reflects fragmented "surfaces" (Adorno et al., 36–37, 38). Even the most fragmented and discontinuous high modernism makes "realist" truth claims; even the most linear socialist realism appears to us through self-conscious "modernist" formal mediation, as we can see in the painstaking formal analysis by realism's great theorists: Lukács, Bakhtin, Auerbach, Williams, and Jameson.

Any effort at rigorous classification will go awry. Is the proletarian novel "realist" or "modernist"? Afro-American literature? Global resistance literature? magical realism? the war novel? Realism and modernism form not a rigorous *opposition* or *sequence* (whether progress or decay), but a formal and ideological *debate* within modern literature, and even within particular works comprising it—a debate at the center of a recent resurgence of critical interest in global literary realism.[34] One of the great works of modern Iraqi fiction, Fuad al-Takarli's *The Long Way Back*, set at the time of the Baathist coup against Abd al-Karim Qasim, combines a polyphonic, Faulkner-influenced modernism with a future-oriented feminist existentialism that insists on the intelligibility and consequentiality of human action. And it is easy enough to imagine a reading of *Falcons on the Floor* as modernist, with its discontinuities, genre-shifting, origin in an urban small-press culture, and quirky serial publication.

But deconstructing invidious binaries doesn't solve all our problems. In an epoch of American imperialism, we should be at least as suspicious of invidious monisms that relentlessly transform the pain we inflict into the pain we suffer, and of the literary modes that aid in this task. The question of late modernism bleeds into the question of imperial narcissism, for this literary selection and appropriation, which turns an important modernist current into the totality of modern literature, resembles shoot-and-cry itself, which turns an aching experience of American veterans into the global truth of the Iraq War. Given our pressing need for historical understanding and a future different from the present, we still need to be able to distinguish an anticausal literature that produces affective intensities by sealing off the past and the future, from a literature that traces the complexities of causation, including the movement of history itself, with an eye to imagining, for instance, where the Iraqi politicide came from, and where it might end. It matters little whether we call

the latter "realism," "modernism," "the historical novel," or something else. It matters a lot if we attempt to deny its very possibility on the grounds of its distance from a tendentious but attenuated vision of "the modern."

For literary realism also has a claim on modern war literature. If modernism turns first to the *fragment* and the forms of consciousness and culture appropriate to it, then realism turns to *history*: human beings and social processes shaping each other, or in more Hegelian terms, the totalizing, historical dialectic of individual and collective subject and object. In *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács traces literary realism itself to the wars following the French Revolution, which created a new mass experience of historical change:

> Whereas the wars fought by the mercenary armies of absolutism consisted mostly of tiny manoeuvres around fortresses etc., now the whole of Europe becomes a war arena. French peasants fight first in Egypt, then in Italy, again in Russia; German and Italian auxiliary troops take part in the Russian campaign; German and Russian troops occupy Paris after Napoleon's defeat, and so forth. What previously was experienced only by isolated and mostly adventurous-minded individuals, namely an acquaintance with Europe or at least certain parts of it, becomes in this period the mass experience of hundreds of thousands, of millions.

The mass citizen army required the propaganda that would connect its members with its social context, "with the entire life and possibilities of the nation's development." Their wars broke down "estate barriers" among legitimists as well as Jacobins. The *citoyen* in arms and his White antagonist were the first historical novelists, gaining "world historical consciousness" before Hegel even formalized the concept (24, 28).[35] The process continues among imperial conscripts (European, American, Japanese, and others) and the indigenous partisans resisting them, who helped to seed global realisms. Warfare has a cognitive and historical dimension in addition to its affect and traumas—"What happened?" and "Why?" alongside "What was it like?" Novelists living under occupation have typically not found it satisfactory to stop short in a vision of individual, nonideological trauma, and have turned instead to the totalizing realism of the historical novel. But the same is true for a Baltimore poet, who read with horror about US white phosphorus raining down on Fallujah, and began to write a tragic historical novel in response.

This last phrase suggests a potential contradiction, since tragedies sometimes project an inescapable fatality onto the cosmos, denying the future as effectively as does any late modernist dirge for the end of history. But *Falcons on the Floor* maintains a focus on history and agency. First, it blocks two exits from Iraqi history that would prematurely reassure American readers and allow them to look away from the Iraqi politicide: it gives them neither a romance of reconciliation between Salim and the unnamed American narrator nor a shoot-and-cry appropriation of Iraq's suffering. Second, its vision of a striated and dynamic Iraqi culture and society, constructed during the picaresque journey of Salim and Khalil, survives the final killing. And finally, in Khalil's last action, neither abject nor fanatical, the novel sounds a defining note of authentically Iraqi heroism. On the way to Ramadi, he comically debunks his own fifteen minutes of insurgent fame: he was only at the bridge for Khalid Mohammed's grisly photograph, he confesses, because he was out buying soda for his sisters (191). But Sirois's conclusion solemnly restores Khalil's heroism. Through the uncomprehending eyes of a murderous American occupier, we see an Iraqi *shaheed* who gives his life to save his friend.

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Notes

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1. Molin reviews ten essays on recent American war literature. See also Suman Gupta's bibliography of English-language writing about Iraq. Iraqi literature in translation, though widely available, is less well known in the US and

UK. See Salih Altoma's guide to English translations of Iraqi literature since 1950, Shakir Mustafa's anthology of contemporary Iraqi fiction, Margaret Obank's special issue of *Banipal*, and the studies of recent Iraqi war literature by M. Lynx Qualey and Ikram Masmoudi. On the absence of Iraqi writing and writing about Iraqis from the American scene, see Benedict; and Maass.

2. Discussions of "late modernism" are almost as complex as those of modernism itself (Genter). Fredric Jameson says that late modernism devolved from avant-garde critical modernism to become little more than "the more basic programme of modernization . . . the bourgeois conception of progress" (2002, 166–67). In this essay, I use the term to indicate a particular current of modernism that emphasizes antihistorical affect, not bourgeois progress.

3. On politicide, see Kimmerling on Palestine (3), Rosen on Iraq (Whitney).

4. For an Iraq War novel closer to *M*A*S*H,* see Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. With minimal appropriative "crying," it remains generally noncommittal on the ethics and politics of the invasion, tending at times toward a modernist view that we can never really know the war (97, 197).

5. In *The Myths of Liberal Zionism*, Yitzhak Laor analyzes the sensitive good cop of the Occupation, now crowded out by Israel's hard-right turn. For an English-language Israeli shoot-and-cry memoir, see Matti Friedman's *Pumpkinflowers,* tonally quite distinct from his dry-eyed Zionist journalism.

6. Anita Shapira discusses the reception of Yizhar's novel. Zlutnick's short documentary, *No More Shoot and Cry*, examines Israeli resistance to the paradigm and the founding of the Israeli veterans' resistance group, *Breaking the Silence*. He embeds it in his web essay, "Shooting and Crying: Israeli Soldiers after Their Service." See also Nurith Gertz's study of shoot and cry in Israeli films on the Lebanon War, which concludes with a sympathetic study of her husband, writer Amos Kenan, a perpetrator of the Deir Yassin Massacre and a possible rapist of Palestinian prisoners (Kenan).

7. My argument about contemporary American war literature also applies to US Vietnam War literature, particularly in its earlier phases. But Matt Gallagher discusses a recent movement toward literary realism and a serious critical consideration of Vietnamese writers.

8. A recent essay reveals the autobiographical dimensions of Bartle's descent into attempted suicide (Powers 2018).

9. On affect theory, see Gregg and Seigworth; Leys's critique of its surprisingly old-timey effort to separate corporal affect and rational meaning; and the ensuing debate in *Critical Inquiry*.

10. See Powers's poems in *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*.

11. See also 7, 32, 33, 35, and 196. The warrior bonding here suggests that of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, whose story met modern eyes on tablets discovered in Nineveh, just across the Tigris from Mosul, where Powers also served. Speaking of Enkidu, Gilgamesh's mother prophesies, "like a wife you'll love him, caress and embrace him" (George, xxiii, 11). Long-term literary historical motifs, like the overlap of homosocial martial solidarity and same-sex desire, should not unduly

startle historical materialists (Timpanaro, 51–52). See Meagher on warrior bonding and on Euripides' *Herakles* as an early meditation on PTSD.

12. This defining American note does inflect some Iraqi fiction. Iraqi magical realists and fantasists, like those in other non-Western traditions, gain fast-track immigration access to US reviewers (Blasim; Saadawi).

13. See Just on Conrad's "inability to convey a story" as the very essence of his novel, which focuses on an absent and perhaps unrepresentable event (275, 276). Conrad himself criticized this mystification of colonialism in "Outpost of Progress," his almost unknown Congo-based story, which wrote back to *Heart of Darkness* two years before it existed, and in *Nostromo*, his impressionist reflection on revolution which turns into a historical novel offering a scathing critique of creole neocolonialism (Holstun 2018).

14. Jameson says Conrad produces "a qualitative shift and diminution of narrative intensity as we pass from the story of the Patna and the intricate and prototextual search for the 'truth' of the scandal of the abandoned ship, to that more linear account of Jim's later career in Patusan, which, a virtual paradigm of romance as such, comes before us as the prototype of the various 'degraded' subgenres into which mass culture will be articulated" (1981, 206–7).

15. Powers perhaps alludes to a battle in the orchard on the outskirts of Tal Afar in September 2004 (Faramarzi).

16. Kakutani calls *The Yellow Birds* "a philosophical parable about the loss of innocence and the uses of memory" (2012). America's magic cherry: we lose our innocence, again and again, amid commemorative heaps of foreign corpses, but it keeps growing back. For a founding treatment of the theme, see R. W. B. Lewis.

17. See Slotkin on the American captivity narrative, which has repackaged American imperial expansion as victimization since the seventeenth century, and Baepler and Sayre on the post 9–11 revival of critical interest in Barbary captivity narratives. In *American Sniper*, Chris Kyle also blends captivity narrative and crusader romance: "On the front of my arm, I had a crusader cross inked in. I wanted everyone to know I was a Christian. I had it put in in red, for blood. I hated the damn savages I'd been fighting. I always will. They've taken so much from me" (297).

18. Moors's film adaptation reproduces perfectly this moment of oblivious, murderous narcissism.

19. Sirois may be the only US fiction writer who repeatedly passes the Iraq War version of the Bechdel Test. *The Last Book of Baghdad*, his 2016 sequel to *Falcons*, focuses on Iraqi print culture and on three Iraqis: an unemployed printer, a bibliophile bookstore worker (Salim's estranged mother) struggling to ransom her kidnapped second husband, and a masked translator working for Coalition forces. All three come together in a house raid seen from the point of view of the Iraqi family being raided.

20. Klay subtly justifies the American invasion through colonial feminism and dogged references to "Al Qaeda," "AQI," and "Zarqawi"—like the US journalistic-government apparatus, turning an effect into a cause. But he also creates this perfect exchange between an American narrator hot on the trail of an exotic *nom-de-guerre*

and an unemployed Iraqi forced to work for him: "'Why do they call you the Professor?' I asked him. 'Because I was a professor,' he said, taking off his glasses and rubbing them as if to emphasize the point, 'before you came and destroyed this country. . . . You have baked Iraq like a cake,' he said, 'and given it to Iran to eat'" (85).

21. Sam Sacks says MFA programs have homogenized recent American war literature. Eric Bennett shows the Cold War impetus behind MFA programs, which have produced late modernist narratives of subjective immediacy that fetishize "particularity" while sidestepping ideas and synthesis.

22. Alshujairy (now "Hamad") moved to Baltimore in 2014.

23. In a contradictory explanation, Sirois traces his books to his horror at the US assault on Fallujah (Elizabeth).

24. Sahar Khalifeh's prodigious multivolume sequence of historical novels also presents a detailed realist account of Palestinian daily life as a failed flight from occupation. See particularly *The Inheritance* and *The End of Spring*.

25. Compare Sartre on the effect of someone walking across a room to open a window: "His conduct *unifies* the room, and the room defines his conduct" (154).

26. In *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad notes the limitations of Euro-American models of gay identity for understanding Arab same-sex love.

27. Sirois could have proceeded differently, in a less "asymmetrical" direction, for on April 6, Iraqis defending Ramadi killed twelve US servicemen in one assault (Schmitt).

28. On PTSD and war, see also Baum; Grossman; Meagher; and Wypijewski.

29. But see Brian Castner's *The Long Walk*, his remarkable memoir on the Iraq War and traumatic brain injury, with its subversive late realization: "Our mission was to come home in one piece. That the best way to accomplish this mission was not to go on the call, to never leave in the first place, only occurred to me much later" (198).

30. For an Iraqi version of this nationalist narcissism, see Ibtisam Abdullah's "The Face in the Mirror," which focuses on the PTSD of a returned veteran of Iraq's war on Iran, without a thought for its Iranian victims (Mustafa, 185–90).

31. Trotsky describes Russia's economy as "a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of the separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms" (6). On the literary connection, see WReC.

32. Patriquin, who proposed an amnesty and strategic reintegration of Baath elements to repair the unemployment and political chaos Bremer produced, was killed by the al Anbar resistance in December 2006. In June 2014, ISIS captured Tal Afar (Nordland). In August 2017, the Iraqi Army recaptured it (Callimachi).

33. Deconstruction should make critics more nervous about referring to any mimesis at all as "straightforward," but easy contrasts of modernism with realism keep the phrase in circulation (Miller, 123; Pericles Lewis, 10; and many more).

34. On the return of realism, see Abu-Manneh; Beaumont; Bewes et al.; Cleary, Esty, and Lye; Jameson 2013; Prendergast; WReC; Neal Lazarus on the "selective tradition" of postcolonial criticism, which has neglected global realism (22, 26);

and Esty and Lye on "the newly current realisms of Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Amitav Ghosh," which "throw into relief the realisms that were there all along underneath the crust of global modernist discourse" (276).

35. "Historical" doesn't automatically mean "progressive." Perry Anderson emphasizes the conservative current: nineteenth-century historical fiction derived from romantic nationalism, whose "original matrix . . . was the European reaction against Napoleonic expansion." This current continues in di Lampedusa's aristocratic Sicilian *Weltschmerz* and in Tom Wolfe's "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel," his controversial defense of his *Bonfire of the Vanities* and the journalistically-based historical novel against modernist postwar American writing.

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