

# Historicity and the Invisible Eye in Luke Mogelson's War Writing

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**W**hen in September 2023, the journalist Luke Mogelson delivered a lecture to an auditorium full of cadets and faculty at the U.S. Air Force Academy, the central feature of his presentation was a series of photographs and videos poised to unsettle his predominantly young, predominantly military audience. Although he was there to talk about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he began with an account of his experiences covering the U.S. led global war on terror. He showed images from Syria and Iraq, which, he said, “represent a chapter in the global war on terrorism that spanned countries and years but featured certain consistent attributes that were distinct from the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan.”<sup>1</sup> These images – of, for example, the destruction of Raqqa, largely by U.S. artillery – were juxtaposed with images taken from the war in Ukraine. The landscapes were easy to distinguish, but apart from that there was very little difference. In his introduction, Mogelson claimed that our wars in the middle east during the 2010s “set the stage” for Russia’s invasion, in terms of military strategy and journalistic coverage.<sup>2</sup> It was difficult to avoid the conclusion that, whatever moral distinctions we might draw between our behavior and Russia’s – and there are of course many – the end results were strikingly similar.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Mogelson, “David L. Janetta distinguished lecture 2023 featuring Luke Mogelson,” *YouTube*, January 31, 2024, video, 21:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVITHj6kBYy>.

<sup>2</sup> Luke Mogelson, “David L. Janetta distinguished lecture 2023 featuring Luke Mogelson,” *YouTube*, January 31, 2024, video, 10:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVITHj6kBYy>.

Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in February 2022, Mogelson spent a decade and more reporting from some of the world's most inhospitable zones of conflict and unrest. In Aleppo, in 2013, he reported on the Office of the River Martyrs, an ad-hoc organization that trawled for corpses in the River Queic, where the victims of Bashar al-Assad's regime washed up.<sup>3</sup> In Liberia, in 2015, he wrote about emerging networks of mutual aid formed in response to the state's cruel failure to adequately address an outbreak of Ebola.<sup>4</sup> In Mosul, in 2017, he followed a SWAT team that had joined the military effort to free the city from ISIS control.<sup>5</sup> Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Mogelson has become one of the essential journalists covering the conflict. In April of that year, he reported on the Russian massacre in Bucha (with haunting photography by James Nachtwey) and, since then, most of his pieces for the *New Yorker*, where he now is a staff writer, have concerned this war.<sup>6</sup>

Mogelson's lecture at the Academy distilled into an hour one of the most compelling qualities of his journalism. Mostly, he reports internationally, but his work subtly reflects back on the U.S. In fact, I think it offers as nuanced a picture of America's place in the world as you're likely to get. Since 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, the U.S. has enjoyed largely uncontested global hegemony. Something shifted on September 11, 2001, but the nature of that change, as with all historical change, has been difficult to assess without the benefit of hindsight. Over the course of his journalist career, Mogelson has been sensitively recording the effects of this new geopolitical situation, in which America's power is at once hegemonic and

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<sup>3</sup> Luke Mogelson, "The River Martyrs," *The New Yorker*, April 22, 2013. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/29/the-river-martyrs>.

<sup>4</sup> Luke Mogelson, "When the Fever Breaks," *The New Yorker*, January 12, 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/19/when-fever-breaks>.

<sup>5</sup> Luke Mogelson, "The Desperate Battle to Destroy ISIS," *The New Yorker*, January 29, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/06/the-desperate-battle-to-destroy-isis>.

<sup>6</sup> Luke Mogelson, "Collecting Bodies in Bucha," *The New Yorker*, April 6, 2022.

anemic, absolute and enfeebled. What I want to suggest is that Mogelson's reporting stages a dialectical encounter between the consolidation and the dissolution of American power: the accumulation of power in a dense center and the ragged edges of the periphery. What results is an unflattering, but honest picture of our geopolitics.

In my view, Mogelson's best essay, and the one most emblematic of his preoccupations, is the *New Yorker* article headlined "Trapped in the Trenches," for which he embedded with a unit in the Ukrainian International Legion.<sup>7</sup> These were foreigners to Ukraine who, for one reason or another, had decided to enlist in the fight against Russia. As Mogelson reports, the International Legion had begun with thousands of volunteers – twenty thousand, according to Ukraine's Foreign Minister – but dwindled as the intense fighting dragged on. He follows a unit made up of only five people: two Americans, two New Zealanders, and one German. We also hear of Portuguese, Brazilian, British, and Belgian people who have decided to join a war that is not their war, to risk their lives to liberate a country they have never seen. The central question driving Mogelson's piece is, what are these people doing here? Mogelson's journalism often revolves around ad-hoc, voluntary, relatively chaotic networks of affiliation (like, for example, the Gilet Jaunes protestors in France). What, Mogelson is constantly asking, are the historical and political conditions that make such affiliative networks not only possible, but necessary? What needs to be true for the Ukrainian International Legion to make sense?

The unit Mogelson embeds with in "Trapped in the Trenches" has virtually no oversight from the Ukrainian military, at one point taking friendly fire. What unites the different stories Mogelson tells, including this one, is that they take place in the absence of state power or

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<sup>7</sup> Luke Mogelson, "Trapped in the Trenches," *The New Yorker*, December 26, 2022.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/02/trapped-in-the-trenches-in-ukraine>.

authority, sometimes because the state is incapable of dealing with the crisis (as in Liberia), and sometimes because the state *is* the crisis (as in Syria). The central characters of Mogelson's journalism are *de facto* stateless. Partly because representatives of the U.S. are everywhere, and partly because we're reading the *New Yorker* or the *New York Times Magazine*, their distance from any state authority is set in relief by the spectacle of American power. Mogelson takes us to the farthest reaches of that power, where it is most contested and insecure, where American soldiers fight but not as representatives of the U.S. In doing so, he demonstrates that a world defined by unipolar American power is also a world in which spontaneous organization is the only way for some people to get by.

Mogelson is a self-consciously literary journalist. By his own account, his first ambition was to be a fiction writer – he published a collection of short stories, *These Heroic, Happy Dead*, in 2016 – and he approaches journalism much like he would fiction, insofar as the *New Yorker's* strict house style allows. His journalism is most insightful (which is different from being informative) when it most resembles fiction. In certain anchoring moments, it achieves a kind of irony, or a detached view irreducible to any one perspective or psychology. Instead of psychologizing the reported events, describing how they are experienced by an individual, Mogelson historicizes them, emphasizing the sociohistorical realities that condition those experiences. In these moments, the dialectical encounter between state power and its dissolution is most aptly represented.

For example, in "Trapped in the Trenches," Mogelson spends a lot of time talking to an American named Doc, who is a veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He spent about a decade in civilian life, working in the tech industry, but when Russia invaded Ukraine he jumped at the opportunity to enlist in the International Legion. Towards the end of the essay, Mogelson

asks Doc to think about his motivations for fighting in this terrible war. The essay concludes with a similar idea to the one Mogelson delivered in his lecture to the Academy:

The cause for which he is fighting in Ukraine is righteous because it consists of one country resisting occupation by another. But Doc's adversaries in Iraq and Afghanistan viewed their causes similarly...This is a thorny topic for veterans, and Doc was not willing to concede a moral equivalence between the U.S. and Russian invasions.<sup>8</sup>

This posited "moral equivalence" between the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the key stone of this piece, the string on which its pearls are strung. In retrospect, one can see Mogelson leading us here through the whole essay. But the analogy itself is not the crucial point. Rather, it's the form the analogy takes. "Doc was not willing to concede": the point is self-negating, explicitly implicit, or, if you like, expressly unexpressed. Neither Mogelson nor Doc makes the analogy, and yet there it is. A voiceless assertion rises to the surface of the text from some subterranean, unreachable place. This is the kind of irony I mean: the encounter between these two people in these particular circumstances gives rise to a perspective irreducible to either of them. We are free of any particular psychology, viewing the scene as if from a distance.

This ironic distance, an irreducible layering of multiple perspectives, represents one of the best qualities of Mogelson's journalism. In some ways, the *New Yorker's* house style lends itself to its production. Famously, the magazine uses a braided structure, with intimate stories of individual people interwoven with broader views of the situation. Built into this structure is a kind of perspectival contrast, where the personal and the particular about the general and the

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<sup>8</sup> Mogelson, "Trapped in the Trenches."

synthetic, where the psychological and the historical exist side by side with just a small page break between them. These contrasts can generate irony, although I suspect that is not the *New Yorker's* primary goal. Many of the sections in "Trapped in the Trenches" end with a quotation from one of the story's characters, or a description of a gesture. For example, one section ends with Doc's words: "'when two of your guys die and you're sitting on a beach in Ibiza...' He trailed off, grimacing." The next section begins, "The team left the house the following afternoon."<sup>9</sup> Each section opens in Mogelson's voice, which sometimes describes the movements and decisions of the unit, and sometimes the broader facts of the war. This structure allows the different perspectives to accumulate, thereby both insisting on and refuting any psychologized experience of the world.

One way to take Mogelson's point would be to say that Doc and people like him feel – or that it would make sense for them to feel – guilt for their participation in the U.S. wars. But I don't think that's the right way to read this scene, and not only because Doc himself refuses to acknowledge any guilt. Mogelson's essay is after the historical conditions that make Doc's decision make sense, regardless of how Doc himself feels about those conditions. Psychology is the wrong framework. Within the context of Mogelson's essay, Doc becomes a character, which is different from being a person. His actions (including his experiences and his speech) indirectly reveal a historical process that can only be revealed indirectly: unipolar American power – so spectacularly expressed in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq – is inseparable from a dissolution of that power. The consolidating force of global hegemony unravels to the point that, as Mogelson writes, for people like Doc, Ukraine "must feel less alien than home."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mogelson, "Trapped in the Trenches."

<sup>10</sup> Mogelson, "Trapped in the Trenches."

The crucial point here is that the relationship between American power and its dissolution is not simply geographical, that power dissipating the farther one moves from its center, leaving people to fend for themselves in ad-hoc, affiliative networks. It's happening in the U.S., too. This point is saliently brought home in the articles Mogelson wrote for the *New Yorker* in 2020, which were later expanded and compiled in his excellent book, *The Storm is Here*. These pieces – covering the anti-mask, anti-lockdown protests in Michigan during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic; the Black Lives Matter protests in Minneapolis, after the murder of George Floyd; the antifa movement in Portland, Oregon; and, most thrillingly, the storming of the capital on January 6 – reveal that *de facto* statelessness is happening at the very core of American hegemony.

In the article about the Capital riot – headlined “Among the Insurrectionists” – Mogelson takes another de-psychologizing approach to reveal this historical process. He was an all-too literal eyewitness, following the crowds as they move through the halls of Congress and, later, as Proud Boys and other violent actors rampage through the streets of D.C. Although Mogelson sees so much, he does *not* see the actual breach of the building: “A jet of pepper spray incapacitated me for about twenty minutes,” he writes. “When I regained my vision, the mob was streaming freely through all three doors.”<sup>11</sup> His experience of the event, and ours, is interrupted when his eyes are closed. It's a frustrating but fascinating moment: the essay's perspective has not expanded outward into ironic distance, as in “Trapped in the Trenches,” but has been

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<sup>11</sup> Luke Mogelson, “Among the Insurrectionists,” *The New Yorker*. January 15, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/01/25/among-the-insurrectionists>.

radically reduced to the act of perception itself. One is reminded of Emerson's "transparent eyeball" – "I am nothing; I see all" – except here the eyeball gets pepper sprayed.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the more apt antecedent to Mogelson's eye is Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*. In that work of historical fiction, the narrator pauses to comment on the novel's realism: "a novel is a mirror, taking a walk down a big road. Sometimes you'll see nothing but blue skies; sometimes you'll see the muck in the mud piles along the road. And you'll accuse the man carrying the mirror in his basket of being immoral!"<sup>13</sup> Mogelson's eye, like Stendhal's mirror, may show readers what they don't want to see, the muck and the mud of American power, but it is not a psychology – curating, judging, and falsifying. It reflects what is there, which is why the pepper spray is so meaningful. Just like eyes, mirrors are imperfect and vulnerable. They can warp and crack; they reverse things. The concept of reflection, and its many complexities, has been central to theories of realism in the novel, especially for Georg Lukács. "If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected," he writes, "then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface." Lukács reminds us that, though reflecting is what realism does, the value of that reflection is determined by its capacity to reveal what is in fact invisible. "The crux of the matter," he continues, "is to understand the correct dialectical unity of appearance and essence."<sup>14</sup>

What kind of mirror, what kind of eyeball, can reflect the invisible? The kind, I want to suggest, that is distinct from any individual psychology. Mogelson's temporary blindness is a

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<sup>12</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, seventh edition, vol. B, eds., Robert Levine & Arnold Krupat (New York: Norton, 2007), 1112.

<sup>13</sup> Stendhal, *The Red and the Black: A Chronicle of 1830*, trans. Burton Raffel (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 342.

<sup>14</sup> Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007 [1977]), 33–4.



reminder of the imperfection of witnessing, the fact that an individual's experience is only so valuable and no more. It is vulnerable to attack, just as it is vulnerable to falsification. By reducing his experience of the event to a physiological, rather than a psychological, one, Mogelson allows the events to reveal themselves. He calls this a scenic method, according to which his job as is to represent scenes, rather than to participate in them or to create them. What we see in this reported piece is the unfolding of chaos. That chaos has not been molded or shaped; it's like raw data. But what that chaos reveals about itself is that it's not really chaos at all. It just looks that way. It's a voluntary, spontaneous affiliative network. It's a mutual coming together, like a happening, literally inside the most spectacular emblem of American power. It's the perfect representation of the dialectal relationship between that power and its dissolution – it's appearance and its essence.

I am aware of the perversity of using historical fiction and literary theory to understand Mogelson's journalism. This stuff is *real*, not fake. It is nonfictional, to use that imprecise and somewhat defensive designation. But the subject of Mogelson's journalism is so complex that it can only be conveyed with the full suite of representational strategies. These de-psychologizing passages – one transcending psychology and the other reducing it – are when Mogelson's work most accurately reflects the historical processes it seeks to uncover.

Mogelson writes this self-consciously literary journalism, using de-psychologizing strategies derived from fiction, at a time when the dominant form of fiction writing is intensely psychological. Stendhal wrote in the nineteenth century, and Lukács was principally invested in the same historical period, most famously addressing the work of Walter Scott. Mogelson's journalism resembles, in certain ways, a tradition of literary realism that has been superseded for more than a century.

In a sense, Mogelson's short stories in *These Heroic, Happy Dead* take a similar theme as his reporting, showing the deleterious effects American power has for Americans. Each of the stories is focalized through a single character who has been touched, one way or another, by the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They are service members and veterans, or their families. The stories attend to the trauma of war – sometimes as it spreads outward from the veterans, sometimes as it cruelly burrows into their own minds – without, thank goodness, ever becoming sanctimonious. Obviously, this is a worthy subject of fiction writing, and Mogelson's is more interesting than most. But, as a result of their tight focalization – some written in the first person, some in a close third person – these stories lack the historical complexity of his reporting. They adopt the psychologizing aesthetic that characterizes most contemporary short fiction. The irony of Mogelson's work is that, in some crucial ways, his journalism deploys fictional techniques to greater effect than his fiction.

As I read through *These Heroic, Happy Dead*, I kept waiting for the narrative voice to break free of the character's psychology, to juxtapose two or more perspectives, as Mogelson does in "Trapped in the Trenches." But the stories stubbornly resist this movement. In "A Beautiful Country," the fifth entry in the collection and the first written in the third person, I thought Mogelson might be incorporating some of the irony that makes his reporting work so well. The central character, Healy, is a veteran and some kind of contractor in a warzone, presumably in the middle east. The story is an exercise in reduction. Almost all details are vague: he has a "home," where his ex-wife and two sons live; he has been living in an unspecified "Mediterranean city"; and his job (we don't know what the job is) takes him to "the city," though

not the Mediterranean one.<sup>15</sup> Healy's internal experience is the point, so it makes sense that the story would leave these details fuzzy. But after a section break, the perspective seems to shift: "Healy's wife and sons stand shoulder to shoulder."<sup>16</sup> Suddenly, we are free from Healy, offered an additional vantage on the story's events. It was anticlimactic to realize that this is merely Healy's dream.

The next story, "Visitors," includes a few moments of perspectival complexity that make it the best story in the collection. Like "A Beautiful Country," this story is written in the third person, closely following Jeanne as she visits her son, Rob, in an Idaho prison. We learn that Rob, immediately after being discharged from the Army, killed someone called Derick Leisure in a barfight, and is now serving an eleven year prison sentence. Jeanne is continually running up against all the things she doesn't know about her son's experience of the world. But her uncertainty runs deeper than that:

when Rob stepped through the door, Jeanne experienced the same instinctive jolt as usual: a kind of momentary lapse during which the cognitive dissonance that normally made living possible—the simultaneous acknowledgment of his situation and belief that he would emerge from it OK—short-circuited.<sup>17</sup>

Jeanne is shown not to have a complete grasp of her own psychological experience. This passage is narrated in a style the literary scholar Dorrit Cohn calls "psychonarration": it is a description of Jeanne's internal experience, but it is related in the narrator's voice, not her own.<sup>18</sup> The vocabulary and sentence structure are suddenly much more complex than they were before.

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<sup>15</sup> Luke Mogelson, *These Heroic, Happy Dead* (New York, Tim Duggan Books, 2016), 86, 88.

<sup>16</sup> Mogelson, *These Heroic, Happy Dead*, 89.

<sup>17</sup> Mogelson, *These Heroic, Happy Dead*, 102.

<sup>18</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), 25.

It is a moment when Jeanne is alienated from her own psychology, when we are ironically offered a perspective to which she has only partial access.

Jeanne learns that, while in prison, Rob has been corresponding with Derick Leisure's father, Neil, a veteran of the Vietnam War, writing "letters that contained more words, by far, than Rob had spoken to Jeanne during all of her visits over the past year combined."<sup>19</sup> When Neil shares these letters with Jeanne, she thinks, "all she had to do, to betray Rob, was to read."<sup>20</sup> But she doesn't read the letters. They stay in the box, and we don't get to read them either. This is admirable restraint: a lesser story would have included the letters, dispelling the carefully crafted uncertainty that characterizes Jeanne's experience of the world. Instead, "Visitors" allows us to glimpse the possibility of a perspective other than Jeanne's, a whole, presumably widely different, worldview. Here, too, by means of this narrative denial, Mogelson's work is able to transcend the psychological limits it sets for itself.

Still, "Visitors" is constrained by the genre of the short story, which is good for some things but not for everything. As Elif Batuman writes, "The short-story form can only accommodate a very specific content: basically, absence. Missing persons, missed opportunities, very brief encounters." This is a perfect description of Mogelson's stories. By contrast, the novel is "based on information overload": "the novel," Batuman concludes "is a fundamentally ironic form," and the short story a "fundamentally unironic one."<sup>21</sup> Mogelson's short stories demonstrate how right Batuman is: the ironic excess, the historicizing complexity of the novel form – and of Mogelson's journalism – is largely absent from the collection. The best version of

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<sup>19</sup> Mogelson, *These Heroic, Happy Dead*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Mogelson, *These Heroic, Happy Dead*, 114.

<sup>21</sup> Elif Batuman, "Short Story & Novel," *N+1*, 2006. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-4/essays/short-story-novel/>.

"Visitors" would expand beyond Jeanne's consciousness, representing multiple perspectives, so that readers could see Rob's experience and his letters, too, while Jeanne remains ignorant. In other words, the best version of "Visitors" would be a novel.

My sense is that, if Mogelson writes a novel, it is likely to be excellent. The genre's formal capaciousness and flexibility will allow him to match or even transcend the dialectical historical insight that his journalism so compellingly achieves. Mogelson has seen more of the devastation of modern warfare than most of us ever will. But his skill as a writer derives less from this fact than from his ability to represent the historicity of what he has seen. The simultaneous consolidation and dissolution of American power and the consequent emergence of spontaneous, affiliative networks is his proper subject: those forces that condition our psychological experiences and make otherwise inexplicable phenomena make sense. For most of its history, the novel has been concerned with more than the psychology of its characters, narrators, and authors. In the best novels, we get a panoptic view, coming in and out of psychologies because psychologies aren't the central point. Rather, the key is to represent, with every available formal technique, the essence of things. This is the novel's job, and Mogelson, it seems to me, is up to it.

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