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Colby Buzzell's *My War*: An Outsider's Voice from Inside Iraq

WEB LOGS OR “BLOGS,” BASICALLY ONLINE JOURNALS, are now common among soldiers in war zones. Today, there are nearly 2,400 military blogs by Americans,¹ and this virtually uncontrolled medium is allowing unheard voices into the global dialogue quicker than ever before. One of these voices is that of former Army specialist Colby Buzzell. His writing is interesting because it gets at truth in a subversive way that caught the attention of a wide audience including the military leadership.

Buzzell writes that kids from his working-class neighborhood had two choices after high school: “you either get your education on at some big-name university or you live at your parents’ and smoke pot and work a shit job, like telemarketing.”² Not content with either of those choices, Buzzell was a 26-year-old punk rocker, skateboarding through “dead-end” jobs around San Francisco, California, when he decided to join the Army because he was bored. He ended up in Iraq and began anonymously documenting his experiences on a blog. Buzzell’s often cynical and satiric blog gained a significant following of readers. One reader wrote that Buzzell’s “writings about Iraq are more interesting than those of Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, and Peter Jennings combined”³ which points to the apparent diminishing credibility of mainstream news outlets. But, the popularity of Buzzell’s blog invariably led to its temporary undoing when the website caught the eye of Army leadership who censored the online writings. Shortly after Buzzell’s discharge from

the Army, he published his blog inspired autobiography, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*. The text never appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list, but it is mentioned as one of 2005's "best books"³ according to *Publishers Weekly*, and in 2007 it won the Lulu Blooker prize for best blog turned book or block.⁵

As both author and subject Buzzell is unique, not just because of his role as an infantryman in Iraq or his writing's quick transition from blog to book, but also because of his self-proclaimed slacker status before joining the Army and his use of the internet to address a global audience. His identification with the punk subculture and use of a blog place him on the margins of mainstream society and establish his position as an outsider. One literary framework helpful in understanding Buzzell as an outsider is that of the picaresque narrative. Classic Picaresque texts like *Lazarillo de Tormes*, *Don Quixote*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Huckleberry Finn* revolve around the margins critiquing the centers of society. Picares, or rogues, are able to both satirize and negotiate hegemonic power structures at the same time. Howard Mancing, Cervantes expert and Purdue professor, writes that a Picaresque Narrative has four basic tenets: 1) that "the major character is a picaresque"; 2) that the picaresque "usually tells the story of his or her own life"; 3) the text "always displays some degree of generic self-consciousness"; and 4) the text is "protean in form."⁶ These broad guidelines correspond well with Buzzell's writing. My intent is not to argue that *My War* is a picaresque narrative, but rather to identify the text's affinities with the tradition. And, more importantly, how these broad traits of the picaresque seem to resonate in our society that is inundated with war coverage from a myriad of different perspectives. Overall, Buzzell's rogue qualities work to undermine conventional news sources to provide a fresh voice that should be listened to.

What is a picaresque and how does Buzzell fit in?

Picaresque are usually "jacks-of-all trades who may hold any number of menial jobs" and "frequently serve a series of masters."⁷ Buzzell establishes himself as a jack-of-all trades early in the book with a list of his low-pay jobs: "flower-delivery guy, valet-parker guy, mailroom guy, bike-messenger guy, busboy guy, carpet-cutter guy, car-washer guy, [etc.]."⁸ He writes "the longest I'd ever held on to a job was like three to six months, then I would quit or get myself fired. I hate jobs. If it wasn't for something called 'money' and/or 'rent,' I probably would have never worked one," (6). Buzzell continues: "I was sick of living my life in oblivion every fucking day was the same fucking thing as the day before," (21).

Buzzell's unwillingness to settle for a job he dislikes points to another key trait of the picaresque, that of self-sufficiency. Buzzell outlines his budget, highlighting the

fact that after expenses he had \$408 a month to spare, “(that’s \$102 a week, or \$13.16 a day extra) Not living at my parent’s house: Priceless.”⁹ Buzzell elaborates that the weekly \$102 was not enough “to save up for retirement, and [cover the cost] for my nonprescription medication that I was taking at the time in very heavy doses (booze),” (9).

So, Buzzell decides to join the Army, but he is not joining for any notions of patriotism or duty:

I didn’t necessarily enlist [...] because I was a product of the suburbs and was afflicted with self-induced poverty or anything dumb like that, and I didn’t join [...] because I was all traumatized over September 11. I joined because like they say in the old recruiting commercials, I wanted to ‘Be all that you can be,’ and more importantly, ‘it’s not just a job, it’s an adventure. (20)

The rogue or picaro is usually an orphan, delinquent, thief, vagrant, beggar, or soldier.¹⁰ Consider the etymology of the word. Critic Harry Seiber argues that picaro “comes from some form of the verb *picar* (‘to prick, puncture...’).”¹¹ And *picar* is the root of “*picas secas* and/or *piqueros secos*,”¹² or pike-men, a type of soldier. Buzzell identifies himself as a delinquent by explaining his legal troubles that include “a couple of assault-and-battery charges, drunk in public, shoplifting, open containers, that kinda crap” and when asked by the Army recruiter about drug use, Buzzell responded, “dude, I’ve done like hella drugs man.”¹³ Buzzell’s association with the punk aesthetic, skateboarding, substance abuse, and tattoos point to a “sense of freedom, independence, and nonconformity,”¹⁴ the major lifestyle characteristic of the picaro. But, meeting character traits of a picaro are not enough, a true picaro must recount his life in a certain manner.

Picaresque life-telling in *My War*

Another important convention of the picaresque “is the use of the word *vida* [or life] in the title.”¹⁵ While *vida* is not part of *My War*’s title, Buzzell does subtitle a section describing his childhood “Mi Vida Loca”¹⁶ or my crazy life. By contextualizing his life before the Army, Buzzell captures an additional angle of the picaro, that of conveying a life story. Traditional picaros “have lives, rather than stories or misfortunes, that are interesting and worth recounting.”¹⁷ And they will “either volunteer or be asked to *contar su vida*,”¹⁸ to recount his or her life. Buzzell voluntarily begins to recount his life with his writings on the internet:

I found out about this blog website stuff in an article in *Time* magazine. It sounded like a good way to kill some time out here in Iraq, post a little diary stuff, maybe some rants, links to some cool shit, thoughts, experiences, garbage, crap, whatever. . . . You think the Sex Pistols knew what the fuck they were doing when they first started jamming? They just fuckin' did it.¹⁹

And, much like the Sex Pistols—a British punk band—Buzzell's voice, “shockingly informal, biting, and often hilarious,”²⁰ is what sets his narrative apart. Buzzell's “narration frames his story as at once tragic, noble, and absurd.”²¹ Take for example Buzzell's explanation of the death letter he was required to write to his parents. It would be given to them in the event of his death:

I never told them sorry for all the headaches I caused them [...] They did everything that they possibly could [...] but I never once listened to them [...] so I wrote them a letter and put it inside my body-armor vest. Here is what I wrote: Dear Mom and Dad, You're right. I should have gone to college instead. Love, Colby.²²

Just a few pages later, Buzzell brings the consequences of war back into relief with an account of how a war zone accident—the rollover of a Stryker armored vehicle—killed three of his friends: “I'm finding out all the details of the Stryker rollover and it's making me literally sick to my stomach [...] We haven't even done our first combat mission yet and we already have three dead.”²³ But, picaresque life telling is more than just autobiography, it is also cognizant of a literary tradition, a sort of “generic self-consciousness.”²⁴

My War's self-consciousness

No picaresque narrative “fails to evoke consciously the literary tradition with which it is associated.”²⁵ And, this intertextuality is one of the most interesting aspects of *My War*. There are hundreds of references to books, magazines, paintings, music, films, and television shows throughout the text. These references are evidence that Buzzell is trying to evoke and place himself within some type of literary or cultural tradition(s). Throughout *My War*, Buzzell creates a dual-layered mosaic, pulling in a dynamic collection of “outsider” works to include: authors like Jack Kerouac, Michael Herr, Kurt Vonnegut, Charles Bukowski, and Che Guevara; punk and alternative music figures like Social Distortion, Rancid, Black Flag, Johnny Rotten,

the Sex Pistols, the Dead Kennedys, and Outkast; and cult movies like *Pulp Fiction*, *Goodfellas*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Red Asphalt*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Dr. Strangelove*. Simultaneously, Buzzell anchors his work to more conventional, or perhaps more known or accepted, literary, historical, political, and cultural threads like: Ernest Hemingway, Ernie Pyle, John Steinbeck, Joseph Heller, George Patton, Albert Einstein, Carl von Clausewitz, and Sun Tzu. By mentioning and quoting these varied figures Buzzell illustrates his influences while outlining contexts through which his text can be read.

Buzzell's intertextuality becomes almost hypertextual. That is, a "non-sequential kind of text, achieved by embedding within it a number of links and references to other texts."⁶ Buzzell had the flexibility to link to other works on the internet, but the linking is left to the reader of the bound version. His work challenges the reader to make connections and conclusions from a relentless barrage of loosely connected and sometimes discordant fragments of information—allowing their cultural and current awareness to govern the ultimate impact of the work.

The most obvious example of Buzzell's intertextuality is the book's title. *My War*, references a song by Black Flag, an 80's punk band led by Henry Rollins. Buzzell originally subtitled his blog *Fear and Loathing in Iraq* "as a nod of respect" to Hunter Thompson.²⁷ The mention of Hunter Thompson invokes yet another genre—New Journalism, or more specifically Gonzo Journalism—which is perhaps the literary tradition Buzzell is most consciously emulating. Thompson explains that "Gonzo Journalism is a camera-eye technique of reporting in which the writer's notes are published supposedly without editing...the writer is expected to select details and interpret events, including in his notes whatever comes to mind, as if thoughts were also part of the observed happening."²⁸ The key to the Gonzo Style is the writer's participation "in the scene, while he's writing it."²⁹ Gonzo is especially applicable to blogs since there is no hierarchical chain of editing as there is in conventional news or military produced news releases. Buzzell appropriates Gonzo to portray his war. As a soldier, Buzzell is an active participant in his subject matter. Buzzell's personal journalism is an "act of reporting, of representing, the war to the public" and is "at one level, [is] about the limits of perception and representation."³⁰ Gonzo Journalism blurs fact and fiction to get at what the writer sees as truth.

Buzzell best exhibits his Gonzo Style in a post titled *Men in Black*. It recounts a massive insurgent offensive downplayed by both the media and military. Buzzell intros the piece with the text from a CNN article titled "Mosul clashes leave 12 dead."³¹ The CNN article makes no mention of US involvement in the fighting. Buzzell continues:

Now here's what really happened...We were driving down Route Tampa when all of the sudden all hell came down around us, all these guys, wearing all black, a couple dozen on each side of the street, on rooftops, alleys [...] everywhere, just came out of fucking nowhere and started unloading on us. AK fire and multiple RPGs were flying at us from every single fucking direction...[I] engaged them with a couple good ten-round bursts of some .50 cal, right at them...this gunfight had been going on for 4 ½ hours when the ING (Iraqi National Guard) showed up to the party. (250-1)

Buzzell then posts the Army news release about the incident which claims that “Iraqi security forces repelled all of the attacks [and] multinational forces served in a supporting role,” (261) which completely contradicts Buzzell’s account of the battle. It is ironic that a figure like Buzzell provides a more accurate account of an event than the government or media. This incident exemplifies Gonzo Journalism’s adaptability to the blog format which itself is another tie to the picaresque model, that of a protean form.

The protean nature of *My War*

Mancing’s theory that the picaresque is a protean form argues that the narrative “can take any shape”³² and *My War* certainly does just that. Consider Buzzell’s use of the internet. By their very nature, blogs are protean. Carolyn Miller, digital rhetoric scholar and expert on blogging as social action, writes that blogs require “reverse chronology, frequent updating, and [a] combination of links with personal commentary.”³³ Buzzell’s blog entries are in reverse chronological order, which implies immediacy, but this order is reversed in the book version. With every update, the blog is ultimately changed. And, frequent updating is central to any blog’s success. Buzzell continuously updated his blog until the military censored him. Buzzell’s personal commentary is episodic in nature and this style is carried to the text. But, *My War* the book is not a continuous monologue; rather it is a series of stories of various forms tied together by the author’s contextualization.

A picaresque narrative “may consist primarily of interpolations, rather like a collage.”³⁴ Just as Buzzell’s intertextuality leaves the reader to consider each reference potential, so too does the hybrid-genre nature of his writing. Buzzell includes quotes from various found texts like e-mails, funeral programs, military documents, news articles, song lyrics, poems, and prose to show irony and hypocrisy. Through this process, Buzzell is able to mix these cultural components like a disc

jockey, not unlike the “DJs” described by new media scholars Geoffrey Sirc and Lev Manovich.³⁵ Specifically, they address a new media writer capable of mixing and arranging cultural fragments of text and visuals into a powerful composition.³⁶ Buzzell is engaged on both fronts as he fuses traditional literature, music, and film with the unconventional. It seems that there are no restrictions for the blogger, which is likely a welcome change for a US infantryman in Iraq.

Much like Iraq, cyberspace “resembles the nineteenth-century American West: vast, unmapped, and legally ambiguous.”³⁷ The internet is ripe with “counter-hegemonic discourses, challenging established systems of domination and legitimating and publicizing political claims by the powerless and marginalized.”³⁸ Buzzell challenges his “established system of domination” through language. Miller notes that what is compelling “about blogs is the ability to combine the immediately real and the genuinely personal.”³⁹ And, just as Gonzo Reporting can blur fact and fiction, so too does this competition between the real and the personal. Buzzell “insists on talking about the war, and his place in it, in the most common terms possible, rejecting the sterile, politicized and often misleading representations of the war purveyed by military officials and the media.”⁴⁰

Buzzell earned some media attention after his *Men in Black* post which thereby drew the Army’s interest. As the Army’s monitoring of Buzzell’s blog increased, he changed his writing style. The once detailed vignettes became stripped down caricatures when he began posting cynically vague statements like “the other day we went somewhere, and did something (counter-mortar mission).”⁴¹ Buzzell taunted the Army censors that he knew were watching: “I would like to take this time now to say a nice warm *Mar-Haba* (that’s ‘Welcome’ in Arabic) to all my new readers down at MI [military intelligence],” (285). He also posted Amendment I of the US Constitution with the disclaimer “story developing...” (289). Buzzell was officially ordered to stop blogging after he posted a message from Dead Kennedy front man and first amendment activist Jello Biafra:

... we are the real patriots here, not the unelected gangsters and scam artists who started this war. Real patriots care enough about our country – and the world – to speak up, stand up, and fight back when the government breaks the law, lies, steals, and gets innocent people killed... As long as people in the field speak up we have a chance at preserving the truth. Otherwise it’s the bullshit gospel according to Fox News and the Bush-Croft regime. . . . (320)

Technology alone did not provide Buzzell his position of power in the eyes of the Army hierarchy. The Army saw rebellious traits in the young specialist's writing. Buzzell's rogue character, combined with his desire to tell his story while anchored in a myriad of cultural references and shifting writing styles results in an overall surreal feel to the book. It is as though the book tracks Buzzell's life through a progression of increasing oddity: from his suburban San Francisco home into a war zone and eventually a narrative of blurred fact and fiction. Buzzell's weaving of fact and fiction offers a scathing social critique as well as a nod toward fiction's ability to better capture reality than non-fiction. These rebellious traits—the traits of the picaro—are the seeds of subversion, and perhaps the seeds of truth. We need to become more aware of these types of writers, not only in terms of their subject matter, but also their protean form.

Notes

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3. *Ibid.*, 4.
4. Karen Holt, "The Year in Books," Publishers Weekly Nov. 7, 2005, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6281155.html>.
5. The Blooker Prize, "2007 Overall Winner," *The Blooker Prize*, March 10, 2008, <http://www.blookerprize.com/>.
6. Howard Mancing, "The Protean Picaresque," in *The Picaresque: Tradition and Displacement*, ed. Giancarlo Maiorino (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1996), 281.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Buzzell, 6.
9. *Ibid.*, 9.
10. Mancing, 281.
11. Harry Seiber, *The Picaresque* (London: Methuen, 1977), 5.
12. *Ibid.*, 6.
13. Buzzell, 14.
14. Mancing, 282.
15. *Ibid.*, 283.

16. Buzzell, 16.
17. Mancing, 284.
18. Ibid.
19. Buzzell, 107.
20. Matthew Hill, review of *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, by Colby Buzzell, *War, Literature, and the Arts* 18 (2006): 331.
21. Ibid.
22. Buzzell, 84.
23. Ibid., 93.
24. Mancing, 284.
25. Ibid.
26. M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms 8th ed.* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2005), 24.
27. Buzzell, 115.
28. Bruce Novoa. "Fear and Loathing on the Buffalo Trail," *MELUS*, 6.4 (1979), 41.
29. Ibid.
30. Philip K. Jason, "Introduction," in *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Iowa City: Iowa UP, 1991), xiii.
31. Buzzell, 248.
32. Mancing, 285.
33. Carolyn Miller & Dawn Shepherd, "Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog," in *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*, ed. Laura Gurak et. al. (St. Paul: U of Minn., 2004), <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/> (accessed March 6, 2008).
34. Mancing, 285.
35. Geoffrey Sirc, "Box-logic," in *Writing new media: Theory and applications for expanding the teaching of Composition*, ed. Anne Wysocki (Logan: Utah State UP, 2004), 111-146. & Lev Manovich, *The language of new media* (Cambridge: MIT, 2001).
36. Ibid.
37. Barney Warf & Johnny Grimes, "Counterhegemonic Discourses and the Internet," *Geographical Review*, 87.2 (1997): 261.
38. Ibid., 260.
39. Miller.

40. Hill, 332.

41. Buzzell, 277.

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