

**SEAN GASTON (2009) *DERRIDA, WAR AND  
LITERATURE: ABSENCE AND THE CHANCE OF  
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How is it possible to write about war? What can language do to contend with the violence, the ruptures and collapses, the death and destruction war brings?

There's nothing new about these questions. *The Iliad* circles around them time and again in its relentless depiction of a handful of days combat in the tenth year of the Trojan war, as if attempting to finally pin down how violence, and its epic staging as warfare, can be written. (In so doing *The Iliad* suggests how war itself shapes language, how the attempt to narrate war pushes language in new directions, bringing poetry out of violence.)

Gaston's book is divided into two parts. In the first he gives an account of Derrida on absence, centred on the themes of the fallacy of seeing absence as 'pure possibility', and, via Derrida's engagement with Heidegger's work, on meeting as irreducible to either presence or absence. In the second he takes up these themes to interrogate the encounter between literature and war, via (principally) Schiller, Conrad, Tolstoy, Clausewitz and Freud's work. In so doing Gaston surveys the relationship between war and the chance encounter, the ties between the duel and war, the linkages between sovereignty and war, and the politics of anonymity and naming in wartime.

*Derrida, Literature and War* is a curious book though, offering at once an engagement with Derrida's work that provides routes into his myriad writings, and illuminating new dimensions to a series of literary (and other, as in the case of Freud and Clausewitz's) works. And yet, for me, the book is haunted throughout by a series of nagging, interlinked questions - of what Gaston conceives of war as being, of war's ontological profile and status, and its equivalence or reducibility to writing.

Gaston declares towards the end of the book, 'War has nothing to say, nothing at least that philosophy could make into a concept' (145). While it may be a little unfair to take this statement out of context, it is emblematic of much of what is perplexing about this work – namely, in the way it locates war as playing a secondary, supplementary role even, to philosophy and literature. We are in the limiting and narcissistic realm here of the world as existing for the sake of academic knowledge, over and above what this knowledge might tell us about the world. (At times, in reading part one, it feels as if war had been decided upon as a secondary theme at some point after work on the book had commenced.)

Indeed, the conception of war that emerges in Gaston's work is one of war reduced to the equivalent of language: as operating in a similar way to writing and analysable in these terms, as in for example the contention that, '(Not) meeting without name is always the possibility of a violent naming, of a duel or war that ends in name, in a profound loss of anonymity' (157).

In so doing, Gaston's work is haunted by the spectre of the Real of war, of war as an unleashing of mass violence that takes on material form and registers at the level of the material environment, and the death and destruction this brings. This haunting is doubly significant though. Taking up Lacan's formulation of the Real as the raw dimension of experience, which exists beyond signification, and which language and the social order strive to keep in check - war constitutes one of the most prominent instances of the eruption of the Real into the social world, as evident precisely in the damage it inflicts upon the physical environment, the human casualties it produces, and the breakdown of the social order it instigates.

Recognising the Real of war takes us back to a reformulation of the questions cited above: How is it possible to write the Real in the monstrous, violent effusions it takes in the guise of war? What can language do to contend with the violence, the ruptures and collapses, the death and destruction war as bringer of the Real unleashes?

The question of how to write the Real of war constitutes the fundamental question, that which all others emanate from and refer back to, in the relationship between war and literature (and writing more broadly). If the Real exists beyond signification, this is all too evident in the awareness, that dogs accounts of warfare, of the failure to offer an adequate enough depiction of war, and the way in which

language is time and again regarded as falling short in its attempts to do so - a theme taken up (alongside the attempt to write disaster and catastrophe more broadly) by Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster* ([1980] 1995). While Gaston's work at points begins to broach this question, in for example noting Tolstoy's recognition that 'the truth of war, war itself, cannot be told' (99); or, in discussing how in Clausewitz's conception of war, that, 'writing on war, would be interminable' (104), it swiftly abandons them, as if unwilling to face up to war as something that exists beyond the textual-linguistic.

The conception of war as forcing a confrontation with the Real, of the type that is typically kept at bay, or neatly contained, is itself suggestive about the nature of war.

In *A Terrible Love of War* (2005) James Hillman makes the case for the repeated desire for war as constituting a fundamental feature of human societies - the type of difficult, amoral desire that is disavowed in the contemporary West. In his 1964 seminar, Lacan conceives of repetition as produced by the desire to reach the Real, suggesting the repeated desire for war as the attempt to produce an encounter with the Real in all its dreadful majesty. This is a conception of war that takes us away from Clausewitz's rationalised definition of war as 'politics by other means', into a rather different realm. It would be an oversimplification though to conceive of war as the repeated attempt to either reach the Real, or achieve political objectives. Wars may be sparked by political confrontations and be directed towards seemingly clear, 'rational' objectives, and yet the very decision to go to war and the conduct of wars once they have been embarked upon point towards this desire for an encounter with the Real. As Slavoj Žižek (1996: 104) has contended, all violence can be regarded as a form of acting out. (These contentions prompt a further question though: Why this desire to reach the Real? Why is it not left alone? The Freudian death drive, in its unresolved perplexities, offers one answer to this.)

From a different direction, what happens when we reverse Clausewitz's assertion and see politics 'as war by other means'? We are then faced with politics as the type of 'irrational', strangely driven undertaking to achieve an encounter with the Real, or at a stage more developed than this, to manage this encounter with the Real. Alain Badiou's *The Century* (2007) points towards the ties between war and politics in instigating this encounter with the Real, via the 'passion for the Real' that Badiou identifies as a defining feature of

the twentieth century - the desire to finally, ultimately reach the Thing itself - that he traces at work in art, science and politics (most clearly in the century's great ideological projects). It is this passion for the Real that underpins the century's reluctance to give up war, no matter the multiple structures (legal, institutional, ethical) put in place to (purportedly) stop war taking place - the very failure of which point instead to their serving as a means to legitimise the desire to go to war. (And yet, these assertions themselves raise their own question in defiance, a question that could serve as an epilogue to the twentieth century: Why did nuclear war - and Mutually Assured Destruction - not take place?)

And yet, if war confronts us with the ineffable, war raises the broader question - one that underpins the concerns of Gaston's book, but remains confined to the shadows - of how it is possible to write about anything.

The case of war - in its very extremes, and its foregrounding the presence of the Real - serves to cast into doubt the whole process of writing, illuminating in its searchlights, the limits of the legible, and the way in which language endlessly runs up against the incommensurability of the Real. (Hence poetry, and the struggle it manifests to make language reach further and do the impossible.)

The awareness of the failure of language when confronted with war emanates above all from the attempt to convey the damaging, tragic dimensions of war, and the (ethical) burden language takes on in attempting this task. And yet there is another side to the writing of war, a celebratory mode, of writing war as aesthetic spectacle and experience, that sits uneasily with the 'correct' attitude we should have to war in the twenty first century.

To take one example of this, from perhaps not the most expected source, we can turn to the last volume of *Remembrance of Things Past* - a text in which language attempts to catch time itself - *Time Regained*. The narrator recalls a Zeppelin raid on Paris and his conversation with a friend:

He went on to ask me if I had had a good view, very much as in the old days he might have questioned me about some spectacle of aesthetic beauty ... [The raid] had in fact looked marvellously beautiful from our balcony when the silence of the night was broken by a display which

was more than a display because it was real ... I spoke of the beauty of the aeroplanes climbing up into the night. "And perhaps they are even more beautiful when they come down" he said. (Proust, [1927] 2000: 83)

Here, for many of today's readers I imagine, the issue is not primarily one of language falling short, but rather, of language doing too much, of its excessiveness in adopting this celebratory tone. (A similar experience can be found in reading *The Iliad* and the glorification of combat it lays out.) And here Julia Kristeva's (1989) analysis of the relationship between depression and the frustrations and failures of language is illuminating in suggesting why the sense of language falling short acquires particular potency when confronting experiences of tragedy and things going wrong. For, while states of joy and rapture can themselves give rise to a sense of ineffability, what is at stake in these moments is less often perceived as threatening or destructive - much less appears at stake in the attempt to make sense of what has taken place.

These two opposing ties between war and language are sides of the same problem though - of language struggling to address the monstrous, unwriteable Real when confronted with its epic unleashing in war. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot quotes Paul Valéry's statement 'Optimists write badly', following this with his own comment, 'But pessimists do not write at all' (1995: 113). Blanchot's assessment raises a closing question that Gaston's work goes some way to illuminating, but might have gone further: how can war be written without producing the desire not to write at all?

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