Giorgio Mariani, *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature*

Rachele Dini

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 17 March 2017.

Creative Commons License
Whenever we talk about war literature, we are always, however implicitly, also talking about the question of how war literature is either resisted, accepted, or both. Posed in one form or another, the anti-war question will always be there,” Giorgio Mariani tells us in the introductory chapter of *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature* (8). Few attempts however have been made to date, to conceptualise or define anti-war literature as a genre in its own right. While the field of war studies continues to expand, new work in this area tends to either assume that “all war writing is at bottom anti-war writing” (9, emphasis in the original)—a view Mariani shows to be both critically and politically problematic—or to avoid the question altogether. This absence, he argues, is partly due to the innate difficulty of defining the subject: a text’s “anti-
war credentials” shift according to its reader, while war literature as a whole can be seen to grapple to a greater or smaller extent with the ethical complexities of culturally-justified or condoned violence. The discussion of war in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse 5*, and Vonnegut’s own desistance from terming his novel “anti-war”highlights these difficulties:

6 Vonnegut is aware of the antinomy at the heart of his novel, and if he hesitates in calling it an anti-war novel, this is probably because he himself does not know what exactly this literary object consists of. Is it a tale that indignantly attacks the madness of war, even though wars need to be fought? A story that promotes a wholesale condemnation of War—*any* war, no matter how “just”? Or is it a narration that purports to help us understand the causes of war? Should an anti-war novel unambiguously rail against the monstrosity of human slaughter? Or, as many argue, should a war narrative only present the real or imagined thoughts and actions of men and women at war, leaving explanations to politicians and historians? (4).

7 Mariani seeks to address these questions through a series of careful close readings of literary texts written by American writers between the late nineteenth and the early twenty-first century. Each text he examines serves as a case study for how literature—and language more broadly—might speak out against war without “feeding back into the machinery of war on both ideological and practical grounds” (xv) or being subsumed “by its horribly fascinating subject matter” (224).

8 Mariani’s overarching aim, then, is to trace an “anti-war tradition that, by trying to imagine peace as the fight for truth and justice, works hard to turn war against itself” (xiv). As this quote suggests, one of his central concerns is rhetoric, including the insidious ways in which war is framed as a form of “peace-keeping” and peace conceptualised as merely “a pause between wars” (to quote Simon Kilian), and the extent to which the terms “war” and “peace” themselves, particularly in the context of drones warfare and the US’s on-going military presence overseas, are effectively interchangeable. The text aptly references at different points in the text the hypocrisy of American mainstream culture today, as exemplified by Obama’s reception of the Nobel Peace Prize despite his oversight of
the ongoing war in Afghanistan (xvii; 190-191). Crucially for Mariani, the interchangeableness—or fluidity—of these categories, which he shows to be longstanding, is rendered explicit in literature, where it is revealed through the very blurring of the genres of “war literature” (literature about war), “anti-war literature” (literature against war), “paciﬁst literature” (literature against all war) and “peace literature”—that is, literature “one reads with the intention of assessing not only its representation of war but also what image of ‘war’s other’ [in Nick Mansﬁeld’s words] the text either explicitly or implicitly constructs” (20). As well as literature that actively critiques war, Mariani’s book is concerned with this last category. He complicates his analyses by considering the extent to which the texts under discussion qualify as “peace literature” and, too, the extent to which they advance the cause of peace: “if we wish to grasp the critical (anti-war/pro-peace) aspects of war literature, we cannot restrict our analysis to the ways in which war is represented. We must also investigate how peace is implicitly (as is often the case) or explicitly constructed” (25). More to the point, he argues, we must consider whether that peace is conceived as separate from or “continuous with the text’s imaging of armed conﬂict”—which is to say, whether the text “allow[s] peace to speak in a voice that does not merely echo that of war” (25). Several of the analyses in turn relate to historical peace efforts and, cumulatively, reveal a non-violent tradition that has been overlooked to a large extent by scholars of American history and to which, in fact, international peace-keeping efforts are indebted.

Perhaps the book’s greatest strengths (of which there are many) are its contextualisation of its multiple strands within a broader framework, and its repeated and concerted efforts to complicate and challenge both received truths and the very points it is putting forward in a dialectical approach that is both elliptical and absorbing. The first three chapters of book approach war from a variety of theoretical standpoints. They begin this discussion however by considering how the history of American studies itself—which, to quote Werner Sollors, “may be ﬁrst and foremost a child of war” (46)—contributed to the growth of war, rather than peace, studies. How, in other words, might the Vietnam era itself have shaped the course of war studies, and impeded efforts to critically engage with peace? This point is particularly interesting in light of Mariani’s own background: having come of age in
1960s Italy, Mariani is a child of this same context, while his position as an outsider (a native Italian who has lived for long periods of time in the US) gives him a unique perspective on the subject under examination.

Among the concepts Mariani addresses in the book’s subsequent two sections on theory are the “narrative impossibility” of peace (insofar as narrative itself “hinges on conflict” [48]); the extent to which the non-violence of Gandhi, King and others “entailed not only a willingness to be the target of someone else’s violence but [was] in fact predicated on the expectation that one’s opponent would engage in violent behavior” (51); and the extent to which language can be at once emancipatory in “undo[ing] the work of violence” (58); “coterminous with violence” (59); and inadequate to the task of representing violence. The thoughtfulness with which Mariani unpacks and deliberates over these ideas—and recounts the evolution of their academic discussion—cannot be over-emphasised. These three sections brilliantly set the stage for the readings to follow, particularly in their exploration of quite discomfiting truths, such as the possibility that war (according to William James) is both “the foremost expression of human cruelty [and] also the context within which some of the highest moral qualities of mankind take shape” (69).

The chapters themselves address these and other ideas in Joel Barlow’s *Columbiad*; Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*; Ellen La Motte’s *The Backwash of War*; William Faulkner’s *A Fable*; Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story”; and post-9/11 texts about Iraq by Maxine Hong Kingston, Brian Turner, and Helen Benedict. Of particular note here is Mariani’s analysis of *The Backwash of War*, a collection of thirteen short stories La Motte wrote based on her experience as a nurse in Europe between 1915 and 1916. The “backwash” of the collection’s title refers to “the squalid, foul-smelling, revolting” underside of war generally obscured by propaganda and patriotism (139). Until recently overlooked (and in fact censored as soon as the US entered World War I to its negative portrayal of war), La Motte’s stories in fact anticipated the central conceits of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* in their attention to the irrationality of war. One story highlights the paradoxes of nursing soldiers back to health so they can go back into combat to die; another tends to the army’s encouragement of married soldiers to sleep with prostitutes, since wives “endanger the functioning of the war machinery” by
dampening morale (141). The Backwash of War, Mariani argues, “insists on the obscene, nauseating, revolting, insufferable connotations of these devastated bodies on the verge of decomposing” (134). In so doing, it “tirelessly bring[s] to light the effects of violence on human bodies that are war’s most intimate raison d’être” (130), and “forces us to rethink war as a form of collective suicide rather than through the commonly invoked notions of ion’” (132).

12 Mariani’s glossing of the relationship between war and sacrifice as manifest in Melville and Faulkner is also inspiring. These readings are based, in part, on René Girard’s conceptualisation of sacrifice in Violence and the Sacred, according to which the sacrificial expulsion of the Jonah in the biblical Book of Jonah effectively “prevents the community from disintegrating and plunging into the utter chaos of reciprocal violence” (109). Mariani builds on and complicates these ideas in his reading of Moby Dick in order to consider how the text itself becomes a scapegoat in its own right. For Mariani, Moby Dick is ultimately “divided between, on the one hand, the critique of the victimary mechanism and its cathartic effects and, on the other, the need nevertheless to provide its readers with an obligatory scapegoat, which entails a recanting of the former critique” (117). That is, it “alerts us […] to the fact that, in Girard’s own words, ‘the indignant or ironic denunciation of the hunt for scapegoats may constitute a new kind of scapegoating’” (117).

13 Finally, it is worth noting his chapter on The Things They Carried. Here Mariani resists the allegations of Jim Neilson and others that the text “irresponsibly turn[s] his back on historical reality in order to accept a depoliticized notion of the imagination” (172). Instead, through his analysis of O’Brien’s “How to tell a war story” he considers the multiple complexities within the text that in fact show it to be profoundly concerned with the hypocrisies of war and, more importantly, with understanding the war experience as ultimately unfinished. “In O’Brien’s case the impossibility of reaching a final truth does not translate into nihilistic desperation but stimulates a series of endless attempts at storytelling”—rather than glorifying “the ontological indeterminacy of the linguistic sign” (178) his opposition to positivist realism bears relation to what Alessandro Portelli describes as “‘the sense of fluidity, of unfinishedness, of an inexhaustible work in progress, which is inherent to the
fascination and frustration of oral history” (vii, as cited in Mariani 178). The care with which Mariani unpicks O’Brien’s text is commendable, and illuminates it in important ways.

14 The length of a book review cannot do justice to the complexity and depth of Mariani’s study. In its systematic challenging of a veritable litany of contradictions within and fallacies about war and war writing, from the danger war narratives run of being utilised for ideologically suspect purposes (such as American schools’ recitals of soldier-poet Brian Turner’s anti-war poems about Iraq to celebrate the “sacrifices” of US soldiers), to the problematic nature of conceptualising peace as something won by, and thus dependent upon, violence, Waging War on War makes for a fascinating and at times very painful read. It remains to say that the book is also beautifully written, and its elegant prose a pleasure to read. This is no small feat, considering the density of the subject matter and complexity of theoretical ideas invoked. Mariani has achieved the commendable feat here of producing a strikingly original, and difficult, work of scholarship that is also accessible and in fact enjoyable to read. This is a valuable contribution to American studies, and will—I hope—inspire further critical investigation into anti-war literature, and the aesthetic imagining of peace.

AUTHOR

RACHELE DINI

University College London; Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge; Foundation for International Education