

Introduction: War, Literature, and the History of Knowledge

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The first two decades of the twenty-first century have been marked by interminable warfare. Since the 9/11 attacks and the beginning of the so-called war on terror until the emergence of the pandemic and the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, the global imagination has been preoccupied by the seemingly unwinnable and never-ending wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. These “forever wars” as Mark Danner has dubbed them, have not only resulted in a vast production of literary works that seek to grapple with the experience and particular character of modern warfare; they have also given rise to a surge of interest in the topic of war among literary scholars.¹ There has been a widespread effort to re-read the long history of literature with a view to its multiple engagements with war. The literature of war is now as readily associated with the total wars of the twentieth century as it is with Shakespeare’s England or present-day Afghanistan.²

This contemporary interest in war and literature represents something of a departure from a more traditional approach derived from the writing

¹ Mark Danner, *Spiral: Trapped in the Forever War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

² Among other works, see for example Kate McLoughlin: *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and *Veteran Poetics: British Literature in the Age of Mass Warfare, 1790–2015* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jan Mieszkowski, *Watching War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Santanu Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture. Literature, Images, and Songs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Lily Gurton-Wachter, *Watchwords: Romanticism and the Poetics of Attention* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Adam McKeown, *Fortification and Its Discontents from Shakespeare to Milton: Trouble in the Walled City* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019). Among the collected volumes see especially Kate McLoughlin’s *Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson’s *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); and Laura Ashe and Ian Patterson’s *War and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

and criticism of military veterans. It goes without saying that many war novels and poems have been written by combat veterans, but it is notable that some of the most influential critical reflections on war literature have also been by veterans. Paul Fussell, for example, fought with the 103rd Infantry Division in France in 1944, while Samuel Hynes served as a Marine Corps pilot in the Pacific from 1943 to 1945. Concerned with the traumas of the combat soldier and the wholly distinctive generic form of what Hynes terms the “soldiers’ tale,” their work helped to consolidate the common assumption that modern war was not only uniquely appalling but that it could only be understood via what James Campbell terms “combat Gnosticism.”³ Only those who have lived through combat, Campbell observes, are believed capable of comprehending and so attaining the right to talk about the experience of war, an idea explored in more depth in this volume in essays by Sarah Cole and Mark Rawlinson. No doubt influenced by their own situation as civilian volunteers, subject to the incongruities of military life, the work of scholars such as Fussell and Hynes also appeared at a time of intense concern with the nature of war. Driven by the moral quagmire of Vietnam, the nuclear situation, the legacy of the holocaust, and the spectacularization of wars on TV, war had appeared to drift free from history as an absurd and horrifying catastrophe.

While their insights have been highly productive in the study of war literature, the effect has also been to isolate modern warfare as an aberration at the expense of enabling a deeper understanding of how war and literature intersect. It is notable from this perspective that central figures in the historical development of literary criticism more generally were veterans of war, including Raymond Williams, Ian Watts, T. E. Hulme, and F. R. Leavis, who served with an ambulance during the First World War.⁴ While far more work would need to be undertaken to see how their veteran-ship may have shaped their critical reflections, it is suggestive of how significantly the experience of war may have influenced our understanding of literature. At an obvious level this is apparent, for example, in the wartime imagery that suffuses T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922). More extensively, though, we can note that Eliot’s rejection of Wordsworthian Romanticism was in no small part influenced by the efforts of his mentor, Irving Babbitt,

³ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Pimlico, 1998); James Campbell, “Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism,” *New Literary History*, 30.1 (Winter 1999), 203–215.

⁴ For a brief overview, see Kate McLoughlin, *Veteran Poetics*, pp. 4–5.

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to denigrate Romanticism for having caused the First World War.⁵ We might add, though, that Wordsworth himself had theorized the poetic imagination in response to the ascendancy of Napoleon Bonaparte a hundred years earlier.⁶ The more we look, the more we see that central theories informing literature have been developed in the shadow of war and often highly shaped by direct engagements with war. As essays in this collection reveal, this is as true of much of the central traditions of literary theory, from the Frankfurt school to modern French theory and postcolonialism.

By turning to the role of war in the broader formation of literature, we can discover a far more pervasive understanding of war's extraordinary reach. If the combat veteran remains central, the effects of war also reverberate far more fully and permeate much more of our ordinary modes of being than we might ordinarily assume. At some level we are all subject to the experience of militarism and the threat of conflict. Such a view expands the ways in which we might understand aesthetic engagement with war. War literature is not simply a distinct category of writing concerned with historical conflicts. It is also a way of thinking about literature. What is more, the aesthetics of literature themselves penetrate deeply into theories of war. One example is how the military importance of information, now seen as the fifth operational domain of warfare alongside land, air, sea, and space, was first predicted by Jean François Lyotard in his reflections on post-modernism.⁷ Yet theorization of literature has long informed what we have come to know about war. War and literature have been deeply entangled.

The History and Theory of Knowledge

The present book examines war as a prism that reconfigures literary studies. It traces the multiple ways in which war has shaped the theories that inform the study of literature, and it explores the recurring and emergent concepts in contemporary critical engagements with the literature of war. Going beyond military or political approaches to the study of war, the volume thereby examines war as a problem of knowledge. It posits literature as an archive of military knowledges and as a distinct form of knowledge in its own right, and it considers war as a disruptive and generative force that at once disturbs established concepts and theories and produces new modes of knowing and thinking.

⁵ On Babbitt's influence on Eliot, see Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008).

⁶ See Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989).

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 5.

This approach owes much to a theoretical frame that has been developed in France and, particularly, in Germany. In the twenty-first century *Wissensgeschichte*, or the history of knowledge, has established itself as a research program. It is a large and fairly amorphous field whose borders are difficult to draw. In some ways the term *Wissen* – knowledge – has become an umbrella term that subsumes a number of already established disciplines and approaches while giving them a more distinct profile. Thus, the history of knowledge has affinities with disciplines such as the history of science, cultural history, the history of philosophy, the history of ideas, intellectual history, and literary history, yet at the same time it purports to treat an object that cannot be grasped by any one of these disciplines as traditionally conceived. The key term, “knowledge,” differs markedly from its conventional use both as a *terminus technicus* within science and philosophy, but also from its more pedestrian, everyday semantics. How so? What follows is a brief overview of the theoretical frame.

The history of knowledge has a venerable genealogy that goes back to the French epistemological tradition with Georges Canguilhem, Gaston Bachelard, and Michel Foucault. *The Archeology of Knowledge* in particular, Foucault’s 1969 volume, has become a foundational text. Following on the heels of *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault’s *Archaeology* presents his methodological self-reflection in which he tries to examine in a more systematic way the theoretical foundations of his own work. As readers of Foucault will know, he adopts several ideas already found in Bachelard and Canguilhem: the notion of the epistemological rupture, the focus on discontinuities, the move away from subjective perception and experience as the model for scientific inquiry, and so on. For the development of *the history of knowledge*, however, Foucault’s complication of the concept of knowledge is particularly important. English readers are put at some disadvantage, since the translation renders two distinct French terms by the same word: “knowledge.” In the French, however, Foucault is at pains to distinguish between *savoir* and *connaissance*. By “les connaissances,” Foucault generally means disciplines – the disciplines of the human and natural sciences, that is, groups of statements that tend to coherence and demonstrativity, that are institutionally grounded and organized and often taught as distinct sciences.⁸ A *savoir*, however, is not primarily a discipline and it does not necessarily have scientific status. A *savoir* appears when a certain rather low level of regularity crystallizes among the statements in a

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2010), p. 178.

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discursive practice. Such regularities may develop into the more rigorous forms of organization of a discipline or even a science, but it is not equal to either one of them. In Foucault's words:

This group of elements, formed in a regular manner by a discursive practice, and which are indispensable to the constitution of a science, although they are not necessarily destined to give rise to one, can be called *knowledge* [savoir]. Knowledge is that of which one can speak in a discursive practice, and which is specified by that fact: the domain constituted by the different objects that will or will not acquire a scientific status (the knowledge of psychiatry in the nineteenth century is not the sum of what was thought to be true, but the whole set of practices, singularities, and deviations of which one could speak in psychiatric discourse).

[...] There are bodies of knowledge that are independent of the sciences [...] but there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms.⁹

With this conception of knowledge, *savoir*, Foucault opens the doors to a vast field that precedes, underlies, and encompasses the disciplines and the sciences. "Archaeological territories" as opposed to "scientific domains" include a vast array of texts of the most disparate kind. Cutting across conventional genre distinctions, the territory of knowledge, *savoir*, covers not just scientific texts, but also philosophical treatises, literary fiction, diaries, institutional regulations, political decisions. Thus the task of the archaeologist is not to describe the specific structure of science, but to map this highly disparate territory, to reveal here the conditions of possibility of the disciplines and the sciences, to detect the rules that govern how the objects of discourse are formed, and to chart the relationship between *savoir*, *connaissance*, and science in their historical specificity.

To clarify this relationship, Foucault offers a basic schema that describes four thresholds and stages. He distinguishes between, first, the threshold of positivity, second, the threshold of epistemologization, third, the threshold of scientificity, and, fourth, the threshold of formalization.¹⁰ While the second threshold marks the entry into the domain of *connaissance*, and the third into science, the first one marks the emergence of a *savoir*. In other words, from the appearance of a certain degree of coherence and autonomy, a discursive practice may (or may not) develop a number of procedures and norms for verifying claims that brings it across the threshold of epistemologization. In spite of the tightened organization, the discourse still remains on the broad archaeological territory. Only when archaeological

⁹ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, pp. 182–183.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, pp. 186–187.

rules give way to propositional laws does the discourse become a science, which in a further step may become formalized.

Foucault's categories are broad and unsharp. There is some slippage between discourse, discursive practice, and discursive formation, just as "disciplines" can appear on each side of the thresholds. And as Arnold Davidson has also pointed out, Foucault often uses 'savoir' as a synonym for "discursive formation."¹¹ Foucault's thresholds, however, outline the frame within which archaeological analysis operates. The point is precisely to determine for any *given* discourse or any given *series* of discourses how and whether these thresholds apply – how, in each instance, *savoir* relates to *connaissance* relates to *science*. Against a normative epistemology that seeks justification for knowledge, that asks whether a series of propositions is true or false, better or worse, and that weighs historical claims against current truth standards, Foucault continues and expands the project of *épistémologie* as begun by Bachelard and Canguilhem – the project of substituting normative and scientific epistemology with an historical epistemology. An historical epistemology, moreover, whose object is no longer restricted to the territories that surround the natural sciences – Bachelard's physics and chemistry – or the life sciences, as examined by Canguilhem, but that includes the human sciences such as psychiatry or economics.

The history of knowledge in its current form owes its conception of knowledge to the French epistemological tradition: to its constructivism, its historicizing approach to knowledge, and to the much expanded and diverse concept of *savoir*. After the turn of the century, the field has been much developed by numerous German scholars who have variously sought to install the history of knowledge as a master frame for the description of societal change as they track the circulation and transfer of scientific, technical, or medicinal knowledge throughout society, or they have examined the formative role of representations, textual or graphical, in the processes of knowledge production.¹² In its contemporary German version, the research program poses a number of meta-questions about knowledge: how do fields and disciplines arise and develop? Which degree of scientific rigor do they have? What has historically counted as knowledge? How is

¹¹ See Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality. Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 193.

¹² For an overview see, for example, Philipp Sarasin, "Was ist Wissensgeschichte?" in *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*, 36.1 (2011), 159–172; Roland Borgards et al. (eds.), *Literatur und Wissen. Ein Interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2013); Tilmann Köppe (ed.), *Literatur und Wissen. Theoretisch-methodische Zugänge* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010). Daniel Speich Chassé and David Gugerli, "Wissensgeschichte. Eine Standortbestimmung" in *Traverse. Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, 1 (2012), 85–100.

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this knowledge represented? And how have these representations changed over time?

The expansion of the concept of knowledge and the focus on the constitutive role of representational forms have been particularly fruitful for literary and cultural studies. In his book *The Names of History* (1993), Jacques Rancière has analyzed how in historiography the change of narrative tense cannot be reduced to mere style, to a rhetorical turn of phrase. Rather, the linguistic change has epistemological significance as it ushers in a “new regime of truth.”¹³ Developing this idea, Joseph Vogl, in his programmatic essay “Für eine Poetologie des Wissens” (“Toward a Poetics of Knowledge,” 1997) argues that a history of knowledge must include an examination of the representational forms by which knowledge is articulated, that is, the ways in which the production of knowledge is bound up with aesthetic choices and techniques.¹⁴ Instead of examining the referents of various knowledge claims, a poetics of knowledge turns to the signifiers, to the aesthetic staging, organizing, and shaping that any representational medium will inevitably perform. Instead of weighing the truth claims of a given discourse, a poetics of knowledge examines the aesthetic conditions of such claims. Accordingly, epistemic objects are not what we find in nature, but the product of symbolic practices, operations, and forms. As Vogl writes elsewhere: “Every epistemological clarification is linked to an aesthetic decision.”¹⁵ So while Foucault expanded the concept of knowledge to include the field of literature, he did not engage in a closer analysis of the import of its poetic and aesthetic forms: its genres, narrative techniques, points of view, what, with Percy Lubbock’s classic book title, we might call “the craft of fiction” – its multiple and differentiated forms and devices without which no content can be articulated. Inventing its referents, literature, in this view, becomes the model par excellence for the production of knowledge in general. *Literature as fiction* reveals the poetic aspect of knowledge in the sense of a *poiesis* – a creation of forms. The task of the literary scholar is then to examine the details of how knowledge is staged and represented and the ways in which the literary medium participates in the larger complex and dense field of *savoir*, a field whose

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1994), p. 14.

¹⁴ Joseph Vogl, “Für eine Poetologie des Wissens” in Karl Richter, Jörg Schönert, and Michael Titzmann (eds.), *Die Literatur und die Wissenschaften 1770–1930* (Stuttgart: M & P Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 1997), pp. 107–127. See also Joseph Vogl, “Einleitung” in Joseph Vogl (ed.), *Poetologien des Wissens um 1800* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2010), pp. 7–16.

¹⁵ Joseph Vogl, *Kalkül und Leidenschaft* (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2007), p. 13.

various intersecting discourses it reflects and refracts. It is in this sense that literature can be seen as both an archive of knowledges and a producer of knowledge in its own right.

War in the History of Knowledge

War has a central place within such a history and theory of knowledge. Not only have military institutions long encroached upon numerous established scientific fields – from mapping, ballistics, and aeronautics to meteorology, surgery and materials science – and been a main driver of innovations within them; military theory has itself reflected on its status as an art or a science from Frontinus to the present day, while it has been deeply influenced by the changing scientific discourses throughout history.¹⁶ Weapons technology and military training of the early modern era, for example, clearly reflect the mechanical schemas of knowledge that suffused this era. Moreover, with his analyses of chance, probability, uncertainty, intuition, and the tact of judgment, Carl von Clausewitz came to regard warfare as an at base epistemological phenomenon that required new knowledge models to be managed or even understood.¹⁷

Far from a merely technical body of knowledge, the knowledge generated by war has penetrated deeply into our understanding of human behavior, communication, and even aesthetics and perception. The practices associated with military discipline has long contributed to broader knowledge of the body and its structures, while some of the first public health initiatives were undertaken in response to military needs, such as James Lind and John Pringle's work on the spread of disease within the British navy and army in the mid-eighteenth century.¹⁸ The military also played a role in shaping psychology. IQ tests, for example were first implemented on mass in the US army during the First World War.¹⁹ Studies of

¹⁶ See Beatrice Heuser, "Theory and Practice, Art and Science in Warfare: An Etymological Note" in Daniel Marston and Tamara Leahy (eds.), *War, Strategy & History: Essays in Honor of Professor Robert O'Neill* (Acton: Australian National University Press, 2016), pp. 179–196; Antoine Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of War. Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009); Neil Ramsey, *Romanticism and the Biopolitics of Modern War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹⁷ See Anders Engberg-Pedersen, *Empire of Chance. The Napoleonic Wars and the Disorder of Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

¹⁸ Tom Crook, "Healthcare and the Design and Management of Public and Private Space: Britain, France and the US, c. 1750 to c. 1950" in Paul Weindling (ed.), *Healthcare in Private and Public from the Early Modern Period to 2000* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 82–100, in particular pp. 84–85.

¹⁹ Paul J. Black, *Testing: Friend or Foe? Theory and Practice of Assessment and Testing* (London: The Falmer Press, 1998), p. 18

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trauma have, in addition, clearly depended on the progress of war, from Freud's work on shell shock to the inclusion of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* at the start of the 1980s, in part from pressure of Vietnam veteran groups. Paul Virilio has, furthermore, undertaken wide-ranging work on the role that war has played in the development of technologies of perception, most notably linking cinema and twentieth-century warfare by observing that the camera and the machine gun developed in tandem.²⁰ The computer and its networks can also be traced back to military technologies, the origins of the internet, ARPAnet, evolving from the late 1950s from US military research, while the US military keenly developed computer technologies for its weapon systems during the Cold War to give itself an edge against the numerically superior Warsaw Pact forces.²¹

As these few examples demonstrate, war has also been integral to continued developments in the history of knowledge as a field of research beyond its earliest beginnings. If Foucault at times lacked precision in formulating his concepts, he also frequently revised his thought. He was, notably, drawn to the question of war in his later work, leading him to revise his archaeological studies of knowledge by positing a genealogy of knowledge concerned with the history of conflict and struggle. By examining knowledge in terms of struggle, Foucault was not only drawing attention to the intersections of knowledge and power but was also attempting to advance beyond an economic theory of power. In effect he was rejecting the view held by liberal and Marxist theory alike that power stems from the economy and is held as a kind of commodity. Foucault does not deny the value of this economic approach, but he also sees power in terms of conflict and domination. He proposes that power relations are the result of previous, real wars, that are inscribed into contemporary social and institutional knowledge. A genealogy of knowledge examines this process by which certain forms of knowledge become dominant while others are discredited or marginalized in a contest between "scholarly erudition and local memories."²² There is much to question about Foucault's discussion of whether war forms the basis of knowledge and modern institutions, as Anders Engberg-Pedersen discusses in this volume, but the question of war was central to his efforts to recover, to politicize, and to unleash

²⁰ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989).

²¹ William Merrin, *Digital War: A Critical Introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), pp. 46–47.

²² Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 8.

marginalized forms of knowledge against the intrinsic power effects of dominant knowledge.

Foucault saw a related position to his genealogy in Deleuze and Guattari's work on minor knowledges, in which they also sought to recover subjugated or what they termed nomadic knowledge.²³ Strikingly, they regarded war itself as a minor science that is subjugated by the state. Drawing on the political anthropology of Pierre Clastres and elaborating their own mythico-anthropological history, which traces the genealogical origins of modern thought through thousands of years of history, they argue that war originated with nomadic peoples as a war machine that initially formed in resistance to the intrusions of the imperial state.²⁴ Their history is obviously sweeping and suggestive, less a detailed description of history per se than an effort to relativize and question our present. Refusing to see history as a singular movement towards greater rationalism, they instead view history in terms of tensions between contending forces: centralization and fragmentation, striated and smooth, order and chaos. The nomadic war machine aligns with the deterritorializing movements of these historical forces, it is a form of subjectivity that emerges in relation to the smooth spaces that lie beyond the ordered regularity of the state and its dominant knowledge. Here, they borrow liberally from Paul Virilio's insights into the nature of the war machine in terms of motion, vectors, and speed to conclude that war is a force that threatens, disrupts, and overturns established order.²⁵ In this sense, war must be understood as an outside or exteriority of scientific knowledge – a limitation of conceptual thinking, or the power of thought to always push beyond and overrun what is currently known. War and its knowledge thus appear as something external to dominant fields of knowledge, an exteriority of thought, a rhizomatic becoming, the power and force of the event, a form of mute materiality, even an obduracy or foolishness.

In part, their thought points to the peculiar difficulties of determining a precise ontology of war and hence war's uncertain position in any history of knowledge. In his wide-ranging account of how key thinkers in the Western tradition have theorized war, Nick Mansfield argues that war has always been defined in relation to its other, however that other has

²³ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 10.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 357.

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 386. See also Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, trans. Marc Polizzotti (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2006).