

# WAR AFTER DEATH

ON VIOLENCE AND ITS LIMITS Steven Miller



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Steven Miller

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## War after Death

*For Barbara and Cleo*

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

—Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

One characteristic of hell is its unreality, which might be thought to mitigate hell's terrors but perhaps makes them all the worse.

—Jorge Luis Borges, *Emma Zunz*

In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him.

—Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*

Words dry and riderless,  
The indefatigable hoof-taps.  
While  
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars  
Govern a life.

—Sylvia Plath, *Words*

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction (i.e., the death drive)	I
1. Statues Also Die	18
2. Open Letter to the Enemy: Jean Genet, War, and the Exact Measure of Man	51
3. Mayhem: Symbolic Violence and the Culture of the Death Drive	84
4. War, Word, Worst: Reading Samuel Beckett's <i>Worstward Ho</i>	116
5. The Translation of a System in Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the War of Language against Itself	143
Afterword	174
Notes	187
Bibliography	217
Index	227

# Introduction

(i.e., the death drive)

*War after Death: On Violence and Its Limits* offers a philosophical reflection upon forms of violence that regularly occur in actual wars but do not often factor into the stories we tell ourselves about war. These stories—from Homer and Virgil to Kant, Clausewitz, Goya, Freud, Schmitt, and Derrida—revolve around killing and death. There is no way, it would seem, to capture the essence of war in word or image without linking it to death. Recent history demonstrates that body counts are more necessary than ever. I argue, however, that war-and-death is only part—a large part, certainly, but not necessarily the most important—of a much more bewildering story than is usually told. Despite tradition, this part of the story has little—if anything—to teach us about the psychic, ethical, and political meaning of war. Beyond the killing and death of human beings, everyone knows that war lays waste to the built environment, fragile ecosystems, personal property, works of art, archives, and intangible traditions. In addition, witnesses and researchers have amply documented that war provides a social framework that promotes the systematic perpetration of sexual violence. There is little question that the short- and long-term impact of such violence is more devastating than the loss of life on the battlefield (which is already horrible enough). There are ancient libidinal and cultural mechanisms designed to support the work of mourning the dead. But the aftermath of nonlethal violence against the living and nonliving remains more inchoate, improvised, and inarticulate. Sometimes this supposedly lesser violence is classified as “collateral damage.” Most often, it is not even called violence

because it poses no direct threat to the lives of human beings. In order to evaluate such violence, therefore, we need to rethink the critique of violence that structures the ethics and politics of war. It is necessary to take seriously, for example, the possibility that violence against the nonliving should rightfully be categorized as violence; that it can be (and perhaps always is) *more extreme* than killing; and, finally, that it is a constitutive dimension of all violence—including violence against the living.

Paradoxical as it may sound, killing becomes the exemplary as a use of force because of its economy and its self-restraint. The power of killing does not lie in its ability to possess or master life—which, in fact, it cannot do. If anything, killing lets life escape; it dispatches the soul of the enemy to the underworld. What matters is the finality and finitude of its act. The act of killing brings life to an end—finishes it off—and thereby brings itself to a conclusion without excessive expenditure. If all politics revolve around life—as theorists of biopolitics such as Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben teach us—this is because life underlies the primordial economy whereby power both extends its reach and holds itself in check. War-and-death, in turn, would be the narrative that at once maintains life at the center of an economy of power and upholds the power of economy. Killing is the use of force intended to end the use of force; it is war to end war.

Immanuel Kant opens his famous essay on perpetual peace upon a satiric note. The title of the essay, “Toward Perpetual Peace” (*Zum ewige Frieden*), is actually taken from an inscription on a Dutch innkeeper’s sign depicting a graveyard. We can leave open, Kant writes, whether the inscription “applies to human beings in general, or specifically to the heads of state, who can never get enough of war, or to philosophers who dream the sweet dream of perpetual peace.”<sup>1</sup> The satire suggests that the only peace worthy of the name would be the end result of a hyperbolic war to end all wars, the last war of the human race, the final war against war. At the same time, however, it reveals a fundamental and unquestioned supposition about the nature of war: that death—the peaceful and proper arrangement of the dead in a graveyard—is both the aim and the limit of war’s violence.<sup>2</sup> The hope, for Kant, is that peace should become possible before the dead are the only people left to bury the dead.

The institution of war supposes that the end of life corresponds to an official, mutually recognized end to a given conflict and that the goal of violence corresponds to its limit. In order to understand

the logic of biopower, therefore, it is not sufficient to analyze how sovereign power annexes life. It would also be necessary to examine how the relation between power and life itself founds a self-evident relation between violence and death. Agamben's analysis of biopolitics, for example, revolves around the construction of the originary politicization of bare life. "Not simple natural life, but life exposed to death (bare life or sacred life) is the originary political element."<sup>3</sup> To complete and complicate his analysis, however, it would be necessary to show that this politicization itself—which is inseparable from the reference to death—supposes a yet to be defined process whereby violence has been successfully reduced to killing. The same could be said of Foucault's construction of biopower in the final chapter of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, "The Right to Death and the Power over Life." This famous title does not only refer to the historical transition from a politics (of the people) that revolves around the death penalty to a politics (of population) that fosters and governs life; it also announces Foucault's philosophical analysis of the way in which the right to death lays the groundwork for biopolitics by making the life of the citizen into the subject of politics. But this historico-philosophical construction supposes an unanalyzed process whereby violence is reduced to killing. Life could never become a political issue unless the potential enormity of sovereign violence were captured, limited, and channeled toward death—the death of life.

*War after Death* presumes that the process whereby violence is folded into the narrative of war-and-death—which is nothing other than the politicization of violence itself—becomes most legible at moments, both historical and textual, when this narrative fails. Opting against an exhaustive historical survey, the method of this book is philosophical in that it privileges and seeks to reactivate selected moments of rupture at which the predominant narratives of war can no longer account for the extremity of war. More specifically, it selects moments at which the *nonlethal* or *extralethal* dimension of violence becomes the object of political discourse. Unlike killing, nonlethal violence against the living and the nonliving never encounters a natural limit upon its exercise. There are no criteria that allow one to judge whether such violence—an act of dismemberment, for example—stops short of death or continues after death; whether an attack situates its object as a living being or an inanimate object. Nor does such violence enact or prefigure the end of war; it possesses a specific finality—albeit difficult to define—that does not necessarily

correspond either to the strategic aims or to the political telos of war. Both everywhere and rare, then, instances of such violence are most likely to raise essential questions about violence as such, the violence of violence, violence and its limits. In order to address some of these questions, I sometimes examine historical events and their immediate discursive aftermath: for instance, the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in March 2001 or the attacks of September 11, 2001. More often, I turn to textual events because they are more likely to be hospitable to the unreadability of war after death: Jean Genet's co-option of the liberal public sphere to stage himself as an inanimate decoy addressed to a hidden enemy; Goya's visionary testimony to the disasters of the Peninsular War; Samuel Beckett's attempt to imagine the worst beyond war; Jacques Derrida's experimentation with translation as a war of language against itself.

Through readings of these histories and texts, I demonstrate—against the intuitively satisfying tradition of Hobbesian political theory—that war is among the most important achievements of human culture; that it is a complex institution governed by a system of idealized conventions or rituals (what Lacan would call a “symbolic order”); and that killing is foremost among these rituals. Rather than undermine civilization, war-and-death, I argue, functions to consolidate its fundamental limits. Peace and survival are not merely a matter of saving life from death, protecting culture from nature; they depend, more primordially, upon the protection of death itself against forms of violence that disregard it as a limitation.

The institution of war represents—for soldiers and civilians alike, for everyone—the right to a specific form of death. The official burial of the dead and private rituals of mourning do not just occur in the aftermath of war; they are integral to the institution of war itself—perhaps even its most essential component. Despite the best intentions, protests against “the violence of war” or the “horror of war” do not necessarily amount to a struggle against war itself. Rather than promote peace, in fact, the struggle against war could very well begin with a struggle to defend the dignity of war-and-death against the incursion of violence worse than death. It is my contention that war itself—which is to say, the political economy of war-and-death—is founded upon such a defense of war. Precisely because war imposes and upholds death—celebrating it as both sacrifice and limit—philosophers and political leaders can claim it to be the elementary condition for eventual peace—or, at least, for a clean transition to a

postwar world. It is only an apparent paradox that Barack Obama—whose administration has contributed as least as much as the Bush administration to the transformation and expansion of war around the world—was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and that, in his lecture upon receiving this honor, he could resolutely affirm, “So yes, the instruments of war do have a role to play in the preservation of peace.”<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, however, I conclude that war’s defense of war has never been effective. War has always been and will always be marred by forms of violence without internal limit that utterly disregard the distinction between the living and the dead, persons and things, combatants and noncombatants. This incontestable fact demands that we rethink the limits of violence and the role of violence in politics. The problem with war is not killing as such. Killing becomes a problem only if and when it fails to impose effective limits upon the use of force; if and when it becomes the means to restore limits where they have been breached, to restore death to war and thereby war to itself. The attempt to stop violence through killing achieves nothing but the atrocity of mass death. In a lecture offered within the framework of the Dictionary of War project, which I discuss at greater length in chapter 1, Saskia Sassen dares to raise an essential question: can we still take a stand against war in an age when war is no longer war? “‘Anti-war’ does not work any more as a word,” she writes. “Is it that war itself is a situated historical something and that we’ve moved beyond that historical period? Is it that we are no longer positioned in a clear way so that we can identify war?”<sup>5</sup> To these questions, I would add a few more. Is not opposition to war predicated upon the authority of rituals and conventions that orient combat toward death’s decision? In the name of what, therefore, could one struggle against war *after* death—if not war *and* death? The epochal legitimacy of this model of war derives from the fact that the aim of combat appears to coincide with its limit; and this limit appears to be unavoidable, immanent, and natural.

*War after Death* thus returns to an old question: Is there a substitute for war? If the function of war—on the most fundamental level—is to institute death as the officially recognized limit upon violence, could there be a limit upon violence beyond war? Is there a compelling and authoritative limit upon violence other than or beyond death? Is there a war to end war after death? Is war after death still war? Or does war after death demand a response to violence that

breaks altogether with the paradigm of war and its vicissitudes? In order to respond adequately to this question, it will be necessary—at a minimum—to abandon the notion that the limit upon violence should correspond to its aim and end.

These considerations bring us to the Freudian theory of the death drive, for two primary reasons. First, the very drivenness of the death drive, which Freud aligned with primary masochism, bears witness to an agency of violence that structures the living being's relationship to its own existence; at the very heart of what is commonly called "death," is a disregard for the distinction between the living and the dead. Second, the psychoanalytic construction of the drive in general is predicated upon the refusal to align the aims of the drive with its limits. In fact, for Freud, the pathogenic effects of the drive can be limited only through what he called the "vicissitudes" or "destines" of the drive, which continue the work of the drive—beyond any putative object or aim—through various displacements or transformations. Indeed, it is precisely this limitlessness of the drive that founds—albeit upon ever shifting sands—the ethics of psychoanalysis and that ultimately distinguishes this ethics from morality and practical reason.<sup>6</sup> Psychoanalytic theory would thus be essential for thinking violence and its limits beyond the political economy of war-and-death.

The project of *War after Death*, then, is perhaps best encapsulated by the final parenthesis of the second chapter—the earliest written, containing the book's project *in nuce*—on Jean Genet's "open letter to the enemy": "(i.e. the death drive)." This almost ridiculously telegraphic evocation of the Freudian concept of the death drive was originally an impulsive insertion that I deleted and restored many times. The decision to insert it in the first place was based on the intuition—difficult to substantiate—that my entire reading of Genet was an allegory of the death drive and that, even in its elliptical form, this allegory would say more about the death drive than extensive theoretical elaboration. The decision to delete it was based on the conclusion that it can't be theoretically legitimate to throw in the death drive as final afterthought; that any mention of this notorious unruly concept must be rigorously justified and extensively elaborated. I would have to embed the Genet chapter within a larger project that elucidates how the questions of war and the politics of truth that it raises can only be evaluated in terms of the Freudian theory of the death drive or even be understood as an elaboration of this theory. Had I not decided to omit

this parenthetical insertion, the remainder of the book might never have been written. Rather than theoretical elaboration, however, the book—perhaps inevitably—hazards a series of further allegories; and so I ended up restoring the parenthesis in order to punctuate this allegorical pattern.

Nonetheless, a very specific reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* both generates and emerges from these allegories, and I would like to take the opportunity of this introduction to outline this reading. Freud's speculations on the death drive revolve around three theses that build upon one another:

1. An instinct is an urge in organic life to restore an earlier state of things.<sup>7</sup>
2. The aim of all life is death.<sup>8</sup>
3. Inanimate things existed before living ones.<sup>9</sup>

These theses clearly delineate the central enigma of the Freudian theory of the death drive. This drive does not hasten the living being forward toward the end of its life but rather backward to a state that preceded the emergence of life (and thus also of death). The death drive, in other words, is not true to its own name: rather than designate the living being's inner urge to die, it evokes the much more complex process whereby it seeks to nullify the fact of its own birth. Freud's representation of the unicellular life that becomes the unlikely hero of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* might well have been animated by Job's lament:

Why died I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost  
when I came out of the belly?

Why did the knees prevent me? Or why the breasts that I should  
suck?

...

Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which  
never saw light.<sup>10</sup>

If the death drive aims to reverse the course of time, to revert to the inanimate state that preceded birth, then it impels the living being to do more than die: it *cancels itself out*. Death is less cessation than dissipation:

The attributes of life were at some time evoked in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception. . . . The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavored to cancel itself out. In this way the



first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to an inanimate state [*zum Leblosen zurückzukehren*]. It was still an easy matter at the time for a living substance to die; the course of its life was probably a brief one, whose direction was determined by the chemical structure of the young life. For a long time, perhaps, living substance was thus being constantly created afresh and easily dying, till decisive external influences altered in such a way as to oblige the still surviving substance to diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated detours before reaching its aim of death. These circuitous paths to death [*Umwege zum Tode*], faithfully kept to by the conservative instincts, would thus present us today with the picture of the phenomena of life.<sup>11</sup>

James Strachey's translation of this passage is interesting: both off the mark and oddly to the point. Whereas Strachey's prose tells us, "The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavored to cancel itself out," Freud's German reads: "Die damals entstandene Spannung in dem vorhin unbelebten Stoff trachtete darnach, sich abzugleichen." Rather than "to cancel out," the verb, *sich abgleichen*—in keeping with the logic and tonality of the pleasure principle itself—means roughly "to equal itself out," "to level itself out," "to balance itself out," or perhaps "to settle down." The verb (whose root word *gleichen* refers to resemblance, equality, or *homoiosis*) thus underscores Freud's assumption that inanimate stuff exists in a state of unsullied equilibrium or selfsameness—that is, pure pleasure—that the birth of life will disturb. Freud's use of this word, then, bears an interesting relationship to his earlier citation of Nietzsche's concept of the "eternal return of the same" to designate the agency of the compulsion to repeat. On the one hand, the "same" would be the traumatic event or situation—the insuperable difference—that recurs in repetition. On the other hand, it would also be the compact sameness that precedes the upsurge of life. Read together, these references to the "same" clarify the paradoxical manner in which repetition supports the death drive. Repetition bears witness both to the living being's inability to escape trauma and to the ongoing endeavor to retract it once and for all, even if this means nullifying its own existence.

The etymology and dictionary definitions of the English verb, *to cancel*, carry a different—more violent—set of connotations. Strictly speaking, the *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us, cancellation is a matter of writing. First and foremost, *to cancel* means "(1a) To deface or obliterate (writing), properly by drawing lines across