

Aporias of the war story

ANTONIO MONEGAL

This essay is devoted to a comparison of different approaches to the narration of war. I do not consider all approaches, nor even the most typical ones. Some of the examples I shall focus on are Spanish, though they are discussed in an international context and in relation to theoretical issues. The main Spanish examples are literary, but the other central reference is a film, *Before the Rain*, directed by Milcho Manchevski in 1994. I have chosen one of the very few twentieth-century cases of a war outside of Spain that has produced responses by Spanish writers – the conflict in former Yugoslavia – to draw the parallels between one of these texts, Juan Goytisolo's *El sitio de los sitios* (1995), and Manchevski's film. The main point of my argument is that both the novel and the film illustrate the need to move away from the epic representation of war, to avoid complicity with discourses which endow wars, and violence, with meaning. The narrative poetics can thus be read as a commitment to a politics of representation that resists co-option by hegemonic explanations of the event, particularly those of the media but also those of historiography. Both works – that of Goytisolo and that of Manchevski – position themselves at an intersection of discourses, allowing for fruitful discussion of the interactions between history, literature, journalism, photography, film and television in the representation of war.

The war story is ruled by a double and contradictory requirement: on the one hand, the need to tell, the ethical impetus of testimony, and, on the other, the impossibility of fully accounting for the kind of chaotic and traumatic experience the phenomenon of war entails.¹ This ambivalent status is shared by narratives as different and distant in form and function as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1966). Moreover, one of the oldest and most basic conventions of such eye-witness accounts of war is that true knowledge of the event can only come from experience. The idea is expressed, for example, in the *Chanson de Roland* and echoed in David Jones's First World War narrative, *In Parenthesis*, which ends with a quote from the French epic poem: 'The geste says this and the man who was on the field [...] and who wrote the book [...] the man who does not know this has not understood anything' (Jones 1963: 187).

We find the same concern in the words of a French soldier writing about the First World War: 'The man who has not understood with his flesh cannot talk to you about it'. And in the words of a German soldier referring to the Second World War: 'Those who haven't lived through the experience may sympathize as they read, the way one sympathizes with the hero of a novel or a play, but they

certainly will never understand, as one cannot understand the unexplainable.’²

The conflict inherent in this bearing witness to an unexplainable, and often absurd, event is the subject of Tim O’Brien’s ‘How to tell a true war story’, an insightful reflection on the limits and contradictions of the war narration (O’Brien 1990: 73-91). In this short fictionalized essay, O’Brien returns to the concerns he has dealt with since his earlier books about his Vietnam experience, while the issues he develops apply to many other wars as well. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), O’Brien provides an answer to the question of the authority of the eye-witness: ‘Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories’ (O’Nan 1998: 46). And in ‘How to tell a true war story’ he discusses the problems involved in the telling of these stories, pointing out the skewed perception of the event, the difficulty of separating ‘what happened from what seemed to happen’, the confusion and the lack of verisimilitude of it all:

In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It is a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn’t, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness.

In other cases you can’t even tell a true war story. Sometimes it’s just beyond telling. (O’Brien 1990: 79)

Thus, the need to be truthful which drives the telling becomes, paradoxically, an obstacle to be overcome, the limit of the impossible. It cannot be understood too literally, precisely because of the kind of event war is: ‘In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true’ (O’Brien 1990: 88). While making claims to truth, the story retains its ambivalent status, as fiction and event appear unavoidably intertwined in the telling.

In spite of all these difficulties and contradictions, the story is told. Most people owe their knowledge of war, however inaccurate it may be, not to experience but to representation, to indirect means. For those of us who have not ‘been there’, horror is part of our reading of the images and texts that represent the violence and suffering of war. It does not seem possible to approach and interpret such texts without taking into account the fact that they refer to a human experience. Nonetheless, there is an unbridgeable distance – in Derridean terms, a *différance* – between experience and representation. The desire or the need to account for the experience of war illustrates the tension between history and story, between reality and fiction. Evelyn Hinz remarks that ‘of all types of literature, war literature seems the most resistant to the notion that literary texts are autonomous constructs without any referential status or grounding in reality’ (1990: vii). Maybe we feel that there is something obscene in ignoring the reality of death, that it is an offence inflicted upon the dead, as if narrative responsibility were, in the case of the war story, accompanied by some form of moral responsibility.

The representation of war is a fundamental and foundational act within our culture: Homer's *Iliad* and the Trojan War inaugurate simultaneously the epic tradition and an uninterrupted dialogue between narrative discourse and armed conflict. The traffic between history and literature goes both ways, because, suggests James Tatum, 'as wars pass from experience into memory, those who survive them as well as those who come long after them, shape their own discoveries of war into patterns first to be found in Homer' (1986: 16). The comment applies to epic poems and to novels, as well as to historical accounts, to memoirs, and to the most basic of soldiers' testimonies: diaries or letters. However, Homer does not have to be a conscious model, and, particularly in the case of diaries and letters, most often it is not. According to Samuel Hynes:

The stories that men tell of war belong to a curious class of writing. In most war narratives there is nothing to suggest that the author is aware of any previous example: no quotations or allusions or imitations of earlier models, and no evident knowledge of previous wars, or even of other theaters in the war that he is recalling. War writing, it seems, is a genre without a tradition to the men who write it. Still, it has a place among established literary kinds: such writing, we might say, is something like travel writing, something like autobiography, something like history. (1997: 4-5)

Hynes is clearly referring to war writing by soldiers based on first-hand experience. And he goes on to demonstrate that, although it can be likened to several genres, war writing is different from all of them: 'If war narratives aren't travel writing, aren't autobiography, aren't history, what are they? *Stories*, first of all: responses to that primal need we all have to tell and to hear individual experiences, and so to understand our own lives and imagine the lives of others' (Hynes 1997: 16). And when we move beyond the corpus selected by Hynes to include fictional accounts, war poetry, historical documents and journalistic reports, it becomes even more evident that the tradition of the war story can be traced across several genres. Also, the referential status of the works is very often ambivalent. Much of what is labelled as fiction is grounded in experience and historical event. Conversely, even what historians call the 'battle piece', the narrative depiction of documented combat, is a rhetorical exercise that requires a lot of imaginative work. The same subject matter recurs in different formats, allowing for all sorts of interference between fiction and testimony, so that the format is not indifferent to our interpretation of the story and of the event.

Thus, what at first may look simply like a thematic common denominator for a wide variety of works, usually studied by several different disciplines, turns out to be a revealing vantage point for discussion of such fundamental theoretical issues as the relation between reality and narrative, between literature and history, between verbal narratives and other forms of representation, and between representation and ideology. And the ideological debate can be summarized as, basically, the confrontation between epic and anti-epic perspectives.

Just as we can say that war is one of the main driving forces in history, so we

can say that epic as a genre has preferred to narrate of the course of history in terms of military exploits. But the view we characterize as epic is ideologically biased, to the extent that it glorifies heroism and other similar values. According to Evelyn Cobley, the issue is ‘to problematize war narratives in relation to the ideologically specific ways in which modes of representation seek to make sense of the war experience’ (1993: 15). This association between mode of representation and ideology reveals the breach between the event itself and a process of construction of meaning which wants to be identified with truth.

This relationship between war and language – or, more accurately, between war and culture – affects not only those discourses directly instrumental in facilitating the war effort, but also the general cultural context that provides the interpretive framework which endows war with meaning, sanctioning its occurrence. The epic thus becomes one of the faces of military propaganda, in the sense that, as Daniel Pick points out: ‘Battles do not necessarily begin when the first shot is fired. The relationship between language and military deeds must be reconceived. Words, ideas, images constitute the discursive support for military conflict; they should be understood not as though they were mere froth without consequences, but as crucial aspects of the destructive reality of violent conflict itself.’ (1993: 14)

War has framed and made possible two of the most traumatic events in contemporary history: the Holocaust and the use of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Both events are the object of a continued theoretical debate that raises the question of whether the horror of these experiences can be represented.³ War however, in itself a traumatic event, seems to be *domesticated* by the epic, as the object of an old and highly conventional tradition of representation.

Hynes describes this domestication in terms of familiarity, opposing personal narratives – which for him ‘bear witness’ while subverting expectations – to fictional accounts: ‘Those imaginary wars, however vivid and violent they may be, are romances: they are war turned into fictions, into shapely untruths. They feed out imaginations with the big abstractions of war – Heroism, Fame, Valor, Glory; they make death sentimental and battle melodramatic. Above all, they make war *familiar*; they can’t not do it – the conventions of war in art are simply too expected, too established, too dictatorial to elude’ (Hynes 1997: 30). The rules of genre imposed by the epic tradition define a horizon of expectations that is so familiar as to make war harmless and easy to assimilate. Even though one of the common issues shared by war studies and Holocaust research is the view that the horror of the event is beyond words, and even though one of the most repeated *topoi* of war narratives is the statement that you cannot understand unless you have been there, the epic story promises a semblance of historical knowledge embedded in an ideological construct.⁴

Whether in Troy or Bosnia, through film documentaries or photojournalism, memoirs or novels, the subject of war makes evident the most contested aspects of mimesis. As Hinz notes, ‘Truth is the first casualty of war’ (1997: ix). Writing war involves doing battle with writing and reality, and requires the writer to

confront the *conflict* inherent in the difference between representation and experience. The clash with reality is made evident in that – I quote from Hinz – ‘literature invariably distorts and domesticates the violent and irrational nature of war’ (1997: vi). In other words, when we examine the tradition of war representation we discover how the conventions of its poetics constitute a system of rhetorical figuration which attempts to contain – that is, accommodate and restrain – a chaotic experience and subject it to an order that endows it with meaning. As Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have shown in *The Forms of Violence*, narrative itself, as the driving force of the epic tradition and ‘the dominant mimetic strategy in our culture’ (1985: 42), is a means of making sense of violence:

Violence can be made intelligible through historical accounts of the circumstances in which it occurs. Such accounts, like almost all historical writing, are narrative in that they elaborate story lines as a way of making sense of experience. (1985: 47-51)

The matter is not whether experience can or cannot be dismissed altogether as a factor in the construction of meaning. What is at stake is the – at least possible – irreducibility of experience to discourse, and at the same time the fact that experience is always communicated in a mediated form. It is at the moment of representation that the conventions governing the form itself take on an ideological charge. This link between representation and ideology is formulated by Bates in two concise statements: 1) ‘All war stories are implicitly moral, just as they are implicitly political’ (1996: 264), and 2) ‘The politics of a story is thus expressed as a poetics and can only be experienced that way’ (1996: 216).

The recognition of the ideological implications of a repertoire of representational resources forces us to address the issues not only in terms of fictionality or truth, of faithfulness to historical events, but in terms of rhetoricity and of the history of modes of representation. This also means that any opposition between a politically committed version of cultural studies and a purely theoretical concern with the rhetoricity of the discourses is a false one, as what we read, and what we read into something, is inseparable from how we read. We need to pay close attention to modes of indirect statement as ways of transgressing epic conventions. For example, one could say, aporetically, that in *Guernica* allegory enables Picasso to convey the meaninglessness of war. From this point of view, according to Daniel Pick: ‘The most productive accounts of war, it seems to me, are those which recognize, precisely, the unavoidable roughness of the outcome, the lacunae, the inconsistencies of the execution, the questionable nature of the very enterprise to encompass war in writing’ (1993: 10). One way of undermining the possibility of assigning an epic meaning to the war story is to deconstruct its narrative structure, making it impossible to make sense of the story in a logical or teleological way.

My choice of examples is determined by their use of this strategy. Some of the most successful and provocative accounts of the Balkan conflict have been provided by films that do not show the war as such, rejecting the powerful

impulse toward increasingly realistic depictions of military exploits and catastrophes that characterize even such supposedly anti-war movies as Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain* (1994) is among a series of outstanding films which choose indirect statement as the means of representing the war in former Yugoslavia. The list also includes Theo Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), Emir Kusturica's *Underground* (1995), and Jean-Luc Godard's *For Ever Mozart* (1996). *Before the Rain* is not about the war in Bosnia, but about ethnic struggle in a village in Macedonia, where in fact in 1994 there had been no war. Thus, this imaginary or potential war – the war to come, like the rain about to fall throughout the film – signifies the actual civil war nearby. In other words, indirect statement – poetic figuration – is the resource chosen to allow a distancing from the representation of the historical event, in order to address the issues of violence and conflict from a broader perspective.

The connection of the Balkan struggle with other wars and with a wider European context is achieved in the film by using London as the setting where the whole middle section takes place. And also through the character of Aleksander, the tormented, Pulitzer-Prize-winning war photographer, who resigns from his job with a British agency, leaves his British lover, Anne, and returns to his home village in Macedonia. Violence becomes present in London when a Serbian gunman shoots indiscriminately at the people in a restaurant, killing Anne's husband. This middle section is entitled 'Faces' and, through the photographs in the agency, shows us the faces of war and its victims around the world. The reference to journalism is very revealing, as it matches a trend in recent war narratives. The war correspondent, who nowadays is a key mediator of our information on wars, has become the preferred focalizing agent of the narrative in both fictional and non-fictional accounts, replacing the soldier and the victim as eye-witness. The journalist very often takes over the role of hero of a new kind of epic that has as its object not the fighting but the telling. The most recent example is Elie Chouraqui's *Harrison's Flowers* (2000), about a woman who rescues her husband, another Pulitzer-Prize-winning photographer, from behind the front lines at the beginning of the war in Croatia.

The first section of *Before the Rain* is entitled 'Words' and tells the story of a young Orthodox monk under a vote of silence, Kiril, who protects an Albanian Muslim girl, Zamira, accused of killing a Christian shepherd. He is expelled from the monastery and she ends up being killed by her own brother when she tries to run away with Kiril. The third section, 'Pictures', tells the story of Aleksander's return to the village, his attempt to break through the barrier that separates the Macedonian and Albanian communities to see a former Muslim girlfriend, Hanna, who is Zamira's mother, his effort to protect Zamira from his fellow Christians after she is accused of killing his own cousin, and Aleksander's death by another cousin of his.

It is obvious that the film has a symmetrical structure, with the two murders within a family mirroring each other. But the really fascinating thing about this symmetry is the way in which it produces a logical incompatibility, an aporia.

The film ends with Zamira running away towards the monastery, and with a return to the first scene of the film, showing Kiril and an older monk who repeats the same words he uttered at the beginning: 'Time never dies. The circle is not round'. Then we see the body of Aleksander under the rain with circles of blood on his shirt.

The suggestion of a circular structure to the film, which ends the way it began, is undermined by these enigmatic words – 'Time never dies. The circle is not round.' – which also appear written on a London wall in the middle section. But it is also further undermined by a few breaches in temporal continuity that do not allow us to explain the circular structure simply as a non-chronological arrangement of the narrative sequence.

In the first section, Anne, the British woman, is inexplicably present at a double funeral in the village, during which we see Kiril running across the mountain in the background, while he is already hiding Zamira. The viewer cannot know at this point that it is the funeral of Aleksander and his cousin, and it is very difficult to work this out even in retrospect, as we barely see the faces of the bodies. In the second section, Ann looks at pictures of Kiril next to the dead body of Zamira, and receives a phone call for Aleksander, who is about to leave London, from Kiril, who happens to be his nephew.

If we put all of this together, we realize it is impossible to rearrange the temporal sequence in any meaningful way. The last section cannot be placed first in the chronology as it necessarily follows the second one, Aleksander's departure from London. The second section cannot precede the first one because it includes pictures of Zamira's death, but Anne's presence at Aleksander's funeral would place the first section after the third one. These incompatible elements produce a logical impossibility that prevents the film from achieving closure. What has in fact happened is that the structure of the film contradicts the monk's words: in the film, time has been killed by making the circle perfectly round and thus aporetic: section two follows section one, section three follows section two, section one follows section three, and so on and on...⁵ The chronological time of history, the linear time of epic narratives, has been defeated by the circularity of the poetic time of the film. There is no closure, no conclusion, and thus no meaning is given to violence and conflict.

Before writing the novel *El sitio de los sitios* about the siege of Sarajevo, Juan Goytisolo published *Cuaderno de Sarajevo*, an account of his visit in the summer of 1993, in response to an invitation by Susan Sontag who was staging *Waiting for Godot* in the besieged city. *Cuaderno* is the journal of a non-combatant traveller, so it shares some of the generic traits of travel literature.⁶ But at the same time it can be read as journalism since these chronicles were originally published in the newspaper *El País*. Although this testimony is an expression of the social responsibility of the intellectual, which since Zola has its own tradition and institutional framework, we cannot ignore the role played by the media.

I have already mentioned the current function of the journalist as privileged eye-witness and mediator of war. It is thus not surprising that two other Spanish

books about the war in former Yugoslavia should be based on the experience of journalists: Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *Territorio comanche* and Julio Fuentes's *Sarajevo: Juicio final*. Strictly speaking, these are both novels, fictionalized accounts of the war, although they both claim the authority of experience and employ the resources of autobiographical discourse. *Territorio comanche* appears to be more directly based on fact, and most of the people named are easily recognizable by the reader as actual participants in the historical events or as well-known journalists. Even Pérez-Reverte himself is mentioned, but the third-person narration is focalized through a fictional character, Barlés, who is the thinly disguised *alter ego* of the author.

Territorio comanche is an epic narrative but it is the epic of the journalist: of the courage, toughness and adventures of veterans of many wars. And it is presented as a decidedly male epic: even the women reporters are described in terms of male attributes.⁷ Not much is said about the viewpoints of the fighters and victims, or about the historical and political circumstances of the war. Pérez-Reverte is in fact writing about the war in Croatia, but it does not actually matter since Barlés himself states in a lecture to journalism students that all wars are the same: 'desde Troya a Mostar, o Sarajevo, siempre la misma guerra' (Pérez-Reverte 1997: 83).⁸

Sarajevo: Juicio final is also the story of a journalist, in this case a first-person narrative. It claims for itself the most truthful status: 'Este libro no es una de aquellas pesadillas que te proyectaban la realidad sin cambiarle una coma. Es la realidad. Mi visión de la guerra, el amor y la muerte en el interior del cerco, construida con los materiales más profundos y duraderos de mi memoria y mi experiencia' (Fuentes 1997: 11).⁹ But in fact his account is highly fictionalized, and, although the journalist is the narrator, the novel resorts to the conventional device of narrating the experience of the siege through the romance between a young militiaman and a woman who is the journalist's interpreter.¹⁰

Although the books by Pérez-Reverte and Fuentes exemplify fairly standard ways of addressing the subject of war, they are doubly symptomatic in their representation of the outsider's view, as journalist and as foreigner, of an alien conflict. As such, they provide an interesting contrast with Goytisolo's approach to the problem, both as it affects his position as author and narrator, and in relation to the ways in which he exposes and explores the limits of his own writing.

Cuaderno de Sarajevo relates immediate facts about the conflict to themes that have concerned Goytisolo for a long time: international passivity is compared with the non-intervention policy during the Spanish Civil War, which favoured Franco then as it did the Serbs later; the strategy of ethnic cleansing is associated with the old persecution of Muslims and Jews in Spain, and with the recent wave of racism spreading throughout Europe. For Goytisolo, behind the figures of murders, rapes, and tortures there lurks 'la memoria del horror' (1993: 43). Opposed to this memory is the killing of memory, what Goytisolo calls 'memoricidio' (1993: 55-6): the cultural genocide symbolized by the destruction of the Sarajevo National Library. Thus the book's testimony implies a double

fight against oblivion: the act of writing is an attempt to give voice both to the present horror and to the legacy of the past.

This writing nevertheless reveals itself as insufficient. For a start, it is limited by its point of view: it is the testimony of a passing foreigner who has not suffered the experience narrated and who narrates it from the outside. The book consequently needs to incorporate other voices and testimonies, and thus there are abundant quotes from journalists, politicians and victims. As if this proliferation were not sufficient to document the facts, the text also overflows its margins by means of glosses and commentaries in the author's handwriting (reproduced in facsimile) as well as photographs with their own captions. Autobiography is fused with autograph and with photograph as modes of documenting the truth and of testimonial responsibility; but this inscription of the author within the text reveals even more clearly his position outside the experience.¹¹

The insufficiency of the testimony in *Cuaderno de Sarajevo* is confirmed by the novel *El sitio de los sitios*, which represents Goytisolo's engagement with an on-going challenge.¹² In an interview printed in *El País* on 4 December 1995 and included in *Cuaderno de Sarajevo*, Goytisolo explains: 'Después de *Cuaderno de Sarajevo*, después de numerosos artículos, reportajes y películas desde y sobre la ciudad sitiada [...] comprendo que sólo la ficción me podía curar, que sólo desde una ficción extrema podía exorcisar la pesadilla' (1995: 8). This concept of extreme fiction has a specific meaning here. *El sitio de los sitios* is a text ruled by indeterminacy and undecidability, in which any possibility of clinging to a truthful or epic narration of war is violently called into question.

It is a novel in which the author writes his own death, inscribed in the book through the death in Sarajevo of a character who shares the initials J.G. with the author but whose identity is a mystery. The novel's strategy recalls Maurice Blanchot's view, in his essay *The Writing of the Disaster*, of the disintegration of the subject of knowledge, who appears fragmented as an effect of the violence of the traumatic experience: 'To think the way one dies: without purpose, without power, without unity' (1986: 39). The identification of thought and writing with death is, according to Blanchot, the only way to confront the experience of disaster, making it equivalent to the experience of writing: 'Writing is per se already (it is still) violence: the rupture there is in each fragment, the break, the splitting, the tearing of the shred – acute singularity, steely point. And yet, this combat is, for patience, debate' (1986: 46). Blanchot's metaphors evoke the battle inherent in the process of apprehending and communicating an experience that is irreducible to language.

The starting point of the story is the alleged death of J.G. – the alleged initials of an allegedly Spanish traveller – in a room of the hotel H.I. in the besieged city of S.: thinly disguised references to the Holiday Inn in Sarajevo. The scene begins with the traveller watching from his hotel window a woman who crosses the street, ducking to avoid the snipers' gunfire, and ends with an explosion. A Spanish commander with the UN forces sent to investigate discovers that the corpse has disappeared, but finds among his belongings two

manuscripts in Spanish: a book of poems with a homoerotic content, bearing the initials J.G., and a collection of four stories in the third person, which make reference to the siege of a district inhabited by immigrants in a city that, although it is not named, we easily identify as Paris. Later a fifth story is found which, according to the commander, ‘correspondía palabra por palabra al contenido de las primeras páginas del presente libro’ (1995: 60). How could the mysterious J.G. have written his own death?, asks the commander. And how can the commander know the content of this book in which he figures?, asks the reader.

The novel is constructed as an intricate jigsaw of sites, viewpoints and narrators, which the text itself identifies, following Bakhtin, as a ‘polifonía de voces’ (1995: 122). There are numerous textual sources for the multiple discourses woven into the novel’s fabric: short stories, erotic and mystical poems, letters, dream sequences; these seldom refer directly to the actual fighting. *El sitio de los sitios* is thus a labyrinth of fragmented subjectivities. Goytisolo circles around the disaster, writing from its margins and on its margins – as he did in the *Cuaderno*. The characters’ participation in the process of dissemination of discourses is part of the fight of the besieged city’s inhabitants: ‘Víctimas de la brutalidad de la Historia, nos vengábamos de ella con nuestras historias, tejidas de ocultaciones, textos interpolados, lances fingidos: tal es el poder mirífico de la literatura’ (1995: 155).

The confusion thus generated ends up affecting the very same people responsible for it, who seemingly control the ‘authorship’ of the text. A series of crossings and overlappings, of motifs inexplicably repeated across texts from different and distant origins and sources provoke doubts about who wrote them. Any explanation of the sequence of events is called into question by the process of dispersion and contamination of the various texts, to the point that the characters themselves become aware of their own unreality, particularly when a different version of the poems by J.G. and the five short stories appears in a flea market. Nobody seems to control the narrative, as it is war itself that writes:

¿No es verdad increíble que todos seamos a la vez investigadores, cuentistas, poetas, falsarios y manipuladores de textos? ¿Cómo explicar racionalmente ese cúmulo de coincidencias sino por el hecho de que, víctimas de un asedio que años atrás hubiéramos juzgado impensable, nos hemos convertido en personajes de una Historia impuesta? ¡Alguien – los señores de la guerra y sus cómplices – escribe el argumento y nos maneja como títeres desde su atalaya! ¡La realidad se ha transmutado en ficción: el cuento de horror de nuestra existencia diaria! (1995: 162)

The writing of the disaster, following Blanchot, is not only what is written about the disaster but also what the disaster writes: the inscription of disaster on our culture, its imprint, its trace, and its memory. And what Blanchot suggests is that the disaster de-scribes, un-writes (1986: 7), because its discourse challenges the capacity of writing to register it, and that of the subject to make sense of it, while at the same time the disaster cannot be left unsaid, it must be accounted for. There is a desire to tell, a desire to write, a desire to know, but it is a knowledge

that does not lead to a truth: ‘when knowledge is no longer a knowledge of truth, it is then that knowledge starts’ (Blanchot 1986: 43).

Goytisolo resorts to the fictionalization of a very real war in order to fight against its reality. The last chapter, narrated by the so-called ‘compiler’, returns to the initial scene: the traveller’s gaze from the hotel window focuses on a woman crossing the street, only now she is the one who dies from a sniper’s shot. A ‘Nota del autor’ follows the account:

Con mediano valor y algunos puntos de civismo, el escritor estuvo dos veces en Sarajevo durante los peores días del cerco: el horror e indignación de cuanto vio le consumen aún y tuvo que recurrir a la ficción para huir y curarse de las imágenes que a su vez le asediaban. Tal es el poder de la literatura.

Pero el sitio continúa y trescientas mil personas siguen atrapadas en la otrora hermosa ciudad sin ninguna posibilidad de huida ni curación a la vista. Tal es el límite de la literatura. (1995: 183)

Two sieges, that of the city and that suffered by the writer, and a dividing line between both, a frontier between an inside and an outside of the siege, which also divides reality and literature. *El sitio de los sitios* signifies that siege and that limit, thanks to the proliferation of its meanings. The novel’s title itself has multiple meanings, hinging on the various senses of the word ‘sitio’: it can be read as the siege of sieges or the site of sites; it is, as a metaphor, a centre of condensation and multiplication of meaning. The novel thus becomes the site of the siege of reality by writing: going round in circles, disseminating its discourses, without providing the reader with a conclusion, without closure. It is this circular organization and lack of closure that allow for a comparison between Goytisolo’s novel and Manchevski’s film. Manchevski uses Macedonia as the background against which to signify all the violence in the Balkans and uses London as a European counterpart. Goytisolo resorts to a siege in Paris as a metaphor of the siege of Sarajevo, while Sarajevo itself has become, like Guernica, a metaphor of other places and other conflicts. More names and stories, and different ways of telling them, to be added to that long tradition that began at Troy, which is also the siege of sieges and the site of sites: the siege and site that founds all war stories.

Notes

¹ On the ethical dimension of autobiographical discourse, with some theoretical insights that are very relevant to the issues addressed here, see Loureiro (2000: 1-30).

² These statements on ‘being there’ have been collected by Samuel Hynes (1997: 1-2).

³ For a review of some of the theoretical issues involved in the writing of the Holocaust, see LaCapra (1994) and Bartov (1996, 2000).

⁴ In reference to First World War narratives, Copley states: ‘The impulse to “set down what can be remembered” is complicated not only by the possible distortions of memory but even more seriously by the recognition that the horrors of mass slaughter were ultimately beyond words’ (1993: 6).

⁵ One could apply to *Before the Rain* the title of another film about the war in Bosnia: *The Perfect Circle* (1996), directed by Ademir Kenović.

⁶ Peter Handke's *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morava und Drina* is also a travel journal but to the other side of the front lines and with the opposite political message to that of Goytisolo's book. The second part of each book's title is explicit: that of Handke reads *Justice for Serbia*, while that of Goytisolo is *Anotaciones de un viaje a la barbarie*.

⁷ *Territorio comanche* was made into a film in 1997, directed by Gerardo Herrero. A female protagonist was added to make it more commercial.

⁸ His bad-boy attitude also applies to his view of intellectuals. There is even a reference to Susan Sontag staging *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo. Barlés refuses to interview her and comments: 'Mandad a un redactor de Cultura, había dicho. O mejor a un intelectual comprometido. Yo soy un hijo de puta y sólo me la ponen dura la guerra y la vorágine' (Pérez-Reverte 1997: 104).

⁹ Julio Fuentes was recently killed in the war in Afghanistan.

¹⁰ The most striking feature of *Sarajevo: Juicio final* is paratextual: a publicity blurb by Pérez-Reverte reproduced on the cover of the book which summarizes the issue of the eye-witness's narrative authority: 'No me sorprende que Julio Fuentes haya escrito este libro duro, real, excelente y sensible. Vivió meses y meses en Sarajevo como un drogado de la Guerra. Tenía esa mirada inconfundible de quien ha visto cosas que nadie debería ver nunca.'

¹¹ Goytisolo explains how he got to hate the bulletproof vest he was forced to wear as a condition of his being allowed to travel to Sarajevo by the UN forces. The vest set him apart from the rest of the victims of the siege (1993: 103-4).

¹² Cristina Moreiras-Menor has analysed this novel from a different perspective, focusing on the connection between racism and violence.

Works cited

- Bartov, Omer (1996) *Murder in Our Midst* (New York: Oxford University Press).
 — (2000) *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
 Bates, Milton (1996) *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press).
 Bersani, Leo and Ulysse Dutoit (1985) *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture* (New York: Schocken).
 Blanchot, Maurice (1986) *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).
 Copley, Evelyn (1993) *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
 Fuentes, Julio (1997) *Sarajevo: Juicio final* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés).
 Goytisolo, Juan (1993) *Cuaderno de Sarajevo* (Madrid: El País-Aguilar).
 — (1995) *El sitio de los sitios* (Madrid: Alfaguara).
 Handke, Peter (1996) *Un viaje de invierno por los ríos Danubio, Save, Morava y Drina o Justicia para Serbia*, trans. E. Barjau and S. Yunquera (Madrid: Alianza).
 Hinz, Evelyn J. (ed.) (1990) *Troops versus Tropes: War and Literature* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press).
 Hynes, Samuel (1997) *The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Penguin).
 Jones, David (1963 [1937]) *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber and Faber).
 LaCapra, Dominick (1994) *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
 Loureiro, Angel G. (2000) *The Ethics of Autobiography: Replacing the Subject in Modern Spain* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press).

- Moreiras-Menor, Cristina (1999) 'El espacio del horror', *Quimera* 179, 40-4.
- O'Brien, Tim (1990) *The Things They Carried* (New York: Penguin).
- O'Nan, Stewart (ed.) (1998) *The Vietnam Reader* (New York: Anchor Books).
- Pérez-Reverte, Arturo (1997 [1994]) *Territorio comanche* (Madrid: Ollero y Ramos).
- Pick, Daniel (1993) *War Machine: The Rationalization of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Tatum, James (1986) 'The *Iliad* and memories of war', *The Yale Review* 76, 15-31.