

Literature and War (An Introduction)

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European literature and world literature are permeated with war and wartimes from the very beginning. Gilgamesh kills the sacred bull of the goddess Ishtar and Achilles subdues the Trojans and kills Hector. Both heroes of the oldest literary works, Gilgamesh and Achilles, strive for immortality, and both of these desires lead to murder and war. But the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad*, amidst the design of a world of heroic ethics that enjoins the attainment of immortality by overcoming the enemy, also show scenes of self-reflection in which they ponder the purpose of their actions in remarkably similar ways. Thus Utnapishtim makes immortality for the seeking Gilgamesh: “The image of Death cannot be depicted. / (Yes, you are a) human being, a man (!) / After Enlil had pronounced the blessing, / the Anunnaki, the Great Gods, assembled. / Mammetum, she who forms destiny, determined destiny with them. / They established Death and Life, / but they did not make known ‘the days of death’.” (*The Epic of Gilgamesh* 90) Similarly, Achilles answers Odysseus, who persuades him to return to battle: “He that fights fares no better than he that does not; coward and hero are held in equal honour, and death deals like measure to him who works and him who is idle” (Homer)

Like war, doubt about its meaning and doubt about the expediency of killing are also themes in world literature. Seen in this light, war literature is often also anti-war literature.

Literary studies attempt to understand war in literature through literary historical analysis, narratological analysis, and cultural interpretation. In the first, we look for the characteristics of literary discourse of war and its connections and differences with other discourses; in the second, we look for literary representations of fighting and war; and in the third, we look for the cultural context of literary representations of war, such as trauma in literature. Among all three aspects, however, the most important feature of war literature is its experiential dimension. Literary treatments of war have their own truth, which neither history books nor essays nor witness testimonies can achieve in equal measure. Their truth is the truth of the individual who experiences the war in the context of his or her personal circumstances, colored in many ways,

such as by his or her gender, social situation, family and national perspective, existential reflection, experience of death and mortality, and also of meaning, hope, nostalgia, and love.

Literature can, of course, address the economic, social, or ideological causes of war, the true goals of the warring parties, and the historical consequences of wars, but literature's real job seems to be to show how individuals find themselves in these historical consequences, goals, and situations. Literature is about more than facts: It is about descriptions of the real experiences of an individual or about experiences that seem plausible and compelling to the reader. Through reading, we know and experience war as others see it—we know and experience the glory of war, but also suffering and helplessness, friendship and brotherhood, but also intolerance and hatred.

Therefore, the impact of war literature is never only esthetic, but also social, moral and psychological. In my paper on Svetlana Aleksijevič's *Chernobil Prayer*, I note that esthetics is a catalyst that, especially in literary texts, enables and perhaps even triggers experiences such as empathy and identification in the reader. Given the historical moment in which we find ourselves, we are aware that the moral and psychological implications of reading are often foregrounded, especially in war literature. We are once again living in Europe in a time that propagates certain authors, bans others, spreads individual opinions and views, and censors others. As a literary theorist, as cruel and ruthless as this may sound, I fully understand this, because I know how literature works; as a reader, however, I strictly reject all censorship and propaganda, because they restrict my freedom and offend my moral judgment.

A little over a year ago, when we were preparing the thematic issue on literature and war, we could not imagine that it would become—apart from discussing war literature in the European context—also necessary to think about literature in the times of war. Also, all papers predate the escalation of the war in Ukraine, although one of them touches on it indirectly through geographical and historical references and another one addresses it directly. Therefore, the question of the role of literary studies in war may be relevant—this thematic issue shows that reading literature in wartime is extremely important, but also that scholarly engagement with literature is socially, psychologically, and morally important.

The thematic section “Literature and War” consists of eight articles by four Slovenian and four foreign authors. The topics of the articles are diverse and range from strategies for teaching war literature to the creation of a historical memory of war. The methods used, which is characteristic of the methodological pluralism of modern literary studies, are also diverse—from hermeneutic to imagological to comparative-literary-historical.

The article by Vanesa Matajc deals with two novels about the World War II period, namely *Ko golobice izginejo* by Finnish author Sofi Oksanen and *Nokturno za Primorsko* by the Slovenian Alojz Rebula. The author compares the textual strategies of dealing with memory and half-past history in relatively modern novels with the strategies of accessing the past developed by contemporary historiography. She finds that the strategies used in both novels are very similar in content, especially by introducing new, previously silenced topics into the collective memory of the community.

Kristina Bojanović, through an analysis of Levinas’ philosophy of otherness and using examples from war novels by Eli Wiesel, Erich Maria Remarque, and David Albahari, interprets war as the absence or suspension of morality. The author emphasizes the importance of literature as a medium that expresses the personal aspect of this suspension, that is, according to Levinas, the interruption of the continuity of personality. But the end of the war as an interruption of the continuity of personality also means a difficult and traumatic return of the personality, especially through memory. In this sense, she understands the process of remembering—including cultural memory—as the responsibility of the survivor (Wiesel) or the descendants (Albahari). In this experience, Kristina Bojanović, in accordance with Levinas’ derivation of ethics, sees the path of peace as the existence of a self without egoism and selfishness.

In their article Katarzyna Jakubowska-Krawczyk and Marta Zambrzycka take a similar methodological approach as Matajc and, in part, Smolej, in that their comparison is based on a thematic and motivic analysis of the texts. The authors discuss a number of contemporary novels about the war in Donbass, focusing on two novels, *The Pension* by Serhiy Zhadan and *The Eastern Syndrome* by Julie Ilyukhe. In the context of these two novels, the authors are particularly interested in the image of home, which they understand either metaphorically or literally as a place or even a house. The authors emphasize the individualized perspective of the novels, which depicts the fate of the individual in contrast to and in distinction from the broader historical,

political, and social contexts of the war. The image of home is thus a trace of the individual's identity formation, his relationship to himself and also to others, permeated by images of war and marked by trauma characterized by loneliness, homelessness, fear, and mistrust.

Tone Smolej performs a traditional imagological analysis of three Slovenian novels about World War II. The author is interested in the little explored image of a German officer in Slovenian literature, namely in the novels *Bele so vse poti* by Miško Kranjec, *Ukana* by Tone Svetina, and *In ljubezen tudi* by Drago Jančar. Each officer, Kranjec's Wutte, Svetina's Wolf and Jančar's Mischkolnig, is treated comparatively and comprehensively, so that many interesting parallels can be seen between them, which probably point to some distinctive features of the discourse of war in literature. For example, all three have relationships with Slovenian girls, have Slovenian roots, or are members of the German minority in Slovenia, which makes them well acquainted with their working environment during the war. They are intellectuals who, as Smolej notes, go from being representatives of the idealistic culture of poets and thinkers to members of the imperialistic culture of judges and rabbis during the war.

Milosav Gudović examines Heidegger's understanding of individual Hoelderlin hymns, particularly the hymn *Gedaechtnis* and the hymn *Wie an einem Feiertag*, from which he deduces the possibility of overcoming the war, which was, after all, the context of Heidegger's exploration of Hoelderlin's poetry. Heidegger is probably also looking for a way to confront a man with himself, a war of a man with himself that could mean victory over the lowest passions of the human soul. Such a war is not about hatred, but about remembering the unity and transcendence lost in a total war. For the whole community this happens on a day of celebration when the original bonds of its members with each other and at the same time with transcendence are restored.

Časlav Koprivica also opens up the theme of self-questioning in wartime through a phenomenological treatment of the war essays of Stanislaw Krakow and Ernst Juenger. The author's key concept for understanding war as human behavior is a situation, or a wartime situation, which he understands in terms of Heidegger's philosophy of appropriation, that is, a situation in which man not only finds himself but also lives and works out of it. He presents the uniqueness of the war situation through the testimonies of two authors who experienced such a situation in the trenches of the World War I. Their findings are indeed shocking, as they show, according to Koprivica, that the enemy exists only when he is killed.

The last two articles touch on cognitive and pedagogical theoretical understandings of literature to explain specific practical aspects of the use and impact of war literature on readers. Igor Žunkovič explores the question of how reading literary texts about war differs from reading non-literary historiographical or essayistic texts on the same topic. Based on recent neurocognitive findings about the ways of reading literary texts and by examining the case of testimonial prose by Svetlana Aleksijevič, the author concludes that the richness of literary reading comes primarily from the strategic narrative features of literary texts, while esthetics serves as a catalyst for specific effects of literary reading such as empathy and identification.

Anja Mrak examines excerpts from the high school *Reader 3* and related didactic tools. The author focuses on exploring the broader ethical and pedagogical implications of literary reading on murder, sexual abuse, stigmatization, and responsibility for crime. She notes that successful strategies do not neglect context, are linguistically sensitive, and do not generalize blame. Mrak sees literature as an eminent space for opening up these challenging ethical and social issues, which require sophisticated didactic strategies that take into account the context of reading (sociopolitical interpretation) and the reader (possible personal experiences, personal characteristics, etc.).

WORKS CITED

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