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Poetry, War, and Trauma: Poems from Ukraine

Abstract

While there is a long genealogy of war poetry across the world, the relationship between poetry and war is often misunderstood insofar as poetry is perceived as private, personal, and lyrical meditations removed from the world. This misconception was furthered by a misinterpretation of Theodor Adorno's injunction against writing poetry after Auschwitz. This paper refers to Adorno and Auden to contextualize the place of poetry in times of war. It locates war poetry within theoretical frames of trauma, witnessing, memory, and memorialization. The paper analyses war poetry from Ukraine in English translation, from the Russian occupation, beginning in 2014 to the current war in Ukraine. The poems discussed deal with the ways in which Russia's occupation and invasion have destroyed everyday lives and communities, ruptured any conception of peace, and instilled long-lasting trauma. Many poems focus on civilian lives since civilians have been deliberately targeted. Through a study of a handful of Ukrainian war poetry we perceive not just the devastation of a country, its lands and peoples, but also resilience and determination, and the necessity to keep bearing witness in and through poetry.

Keywords: memory, resilience, trauma, Ukraine War, war poetry, witnessing.

Why poetry? What is the place of poetry in times of war and its aftermaths?

One of the most cited and perhaps equally misunderstood statements about poetry and war is that of Theodor Adorno who wrote that it would be barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. Yet Adorno went on to argue that it was through poetic representations that language would find a means of expressing the horrors of the Holocaust. This paradox is expressed by the poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan who wrote about the essential value of language in the face of the annihilation of six million Jews, and the awful responsibility of writing about experiences in the camp and of survival.

Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing; language. ... It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening – but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again, “enriched” by all that. In this language I have sought, then and in the years since then, to write poems – so as to speak, to orient myself, to explore where I was and was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself.¹

Celan, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub point out, insisted on writing in German, the language of his tormenters and the language of degradation and humiliation. German was the language which needed to come to terms with its own losses and barbaric renditions, and in poetry Celan retrieves not just the horrors of the Holocaust, but the possibilities of poetry in the language that perpetrated that abomination. It is through language that he reorients himself, his reality, and what it means to live in the world after the Shoah. As Celan expressed it: “The concern of this language is, in all the unalterable multivalence of the expression, *precision*. It doesn’t transfigure, doesn’t ‘poeticize,’ it names and places.”²

I begin with the Holocaust because it was and is sometimes construed as being unrepresentable, an experience outside language and representation. In fact, early trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth seem to imply that traumatic experiences, because they are a rupture in the continuum of consciousness and time, are not experienced as recoverable events. In other words, they are either repressed or expressed unconsciously, without premeditation, and often in reaction to external stimuli (such as war veterans reacting to loud noises). The traumatic event or experience then becomes a kind of epistemic black hole, beyond language and knowledge. However, as more recent theorists such as Hanna Meretoja argue, trauma is not necessarily “unexperiencable, unsayable, and unknowable.”³ Poems, memoirs, and survivor testimonies make clear that the Holocaust was not and is not beyond language, even as it stretches the boundaries of expression and imagination.

In his work, *Interrupting Auschwitz*, Josh Cohen writes that after Auschwitz “The poet’s significance lies in his status as the agency through which the unsayable lets itself be heard as such, [...]” This is so because “The demand of thinking after Auschwitz would be above all to expose and bear witness to this silence at the heart of language.”⁴ I would like to think about poetry as a kind of witnessing, bearing witness to that which seems beyond or outside imagination and yet was terrifying and lived reality for millions of people. Witnessing as Carolyn Dean points out, is

¹ Cited in S. Felman and D. Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York, London, 1992, p. 25.

² Cited in C. Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, London, 1995, p. 41.

³ H. Meretoja, “Philosophies of Trauma,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 32.

⁴ J. Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy*, New York, London, 2003, p. 108.

related to testimony: “The speech-act of testifying forges legal and moral community by creating a relationship of trust between the witness and those who listen and is often referred to as the performative force of the testimony.” Witnessing creates what Dean calls a bond of “epistemic trust.”⁵ While Dean is primarily discussing acts of witnessing as enacted in the trial of Adolf Eichmann, I suggest that while the poetic testimony has no juridical weight, it too creates a “moral community” and engenders the expansion of “epistemic trust.” And just as testimony in the Eichmann trial restored the dignity of the witnesses, so too poetry restores humanity and subjectivity to those who had been stripped of them. “Literary narratives,” as Meretoja writes, “have the potential to provide hermeneutic resources not only for self-understanding but also for social change, in the struggle against traumatizing structural violence.”⁶ The poetry I read in the essay are examples of the “hermeneutic resources” that enable us to think about, commemorate, and bear witness to wars across generations.

Trauma as moral category

Before analysing poetry, I want to refer to the idea of trauma as a moral category that Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman analyse in their book, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. It is a detailed and complex set of arguments, wherein they write: “The point is to grasp the shift that has resulted in what used to excite suspicion now having the value of proof – the shift whereby what was false has become true.”⁷ During the First World War “shell shock” was seen primarily as a symptom of malingering, of cowardice, and of soldiers who wished to avoid combat. After the Vietnam War, PTSD was recognized as a medically valid condition triggered by the horrors of combat. The US soldier returned from the jungles of Vietnam traumatized by the war, the landscape, and the people he had gone to liberate. The soldier was constructed as a victim as much as the Vietnamese who were at the receiving end of American firepower. This is one of many examples that lead Fassin and Rechtman to conclude that “trauma today is more a feature of the moral landscape serving to identify legitimate victims than it is a diagnostic category which at most reinforces that legitimacy. [...] It identifies complaints as justified and causes as just.”⁸ This is what Lucy Bond refers to as the “popularization of trauma in the pathological public sphere” in the context of

⁵ C. J. Dean, “Witnessing,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 111.

⁶ H. Meretoja, op. cit., p. 31.

⁷ D. Fassin and R. Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. R. Gomme, Princeton, Oxford, 2009, p. 5.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 284.

the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.⁹ Bond examines the problems with trauma theory and its instrumentalization post-9/11, highlighting the limits of trauma theory. As Alan Gibbs points out “trauma theory sets an ideal foundation for tendencies which [...] enabled a sense of false innocence to take root and deflect attention from America’s complicity in actions both before and after 9/11.”¹⁰ Neither Bond nor Gibbs are claiming that Americans – as individuals or as a country – were not traumatized by the 9/11 terror attacks; what they are pointing to is how “the pre-existing fascination with victimhood was easily exploited into a fantasy of national traumatization that was mobilized to justify morally dubious foreign policies and the exportation of violence to other lands.”¹¹ To return to Fassin and Rechtman’s idea in the context of September 11: America and Americans were identified as legitimate victims and that legitimacy led to the open-ended war on terror and the creation of other victims and their separate, but not always visible traumas. In order to be visible, trauma must be seen as such and visibility is dependent on whether particular traumas or traumatized groups are granted legitimacy. To cite Fassin and Rechtman again: “The way in which one’s suffering is viewed will depend on their status or their social usefulness.”¹² Or, as Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja put it in their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*: “Being recognized as traumatized is a privilege not equally available to all trauma victims.”¹³ Davis and Meretoja give the example of asylum seekers who may have suffered intense hardships and trauma, but whose “status” and “social usefulness” is suspect and thus their recognition as traumatized subjects is downplayed or denied. There is, in other words, a hierarchy of suffering and legitimate trauma, and the process of legitimation is inflected by politics, ideology, culture, religion, and race. Context is everything: the shell-shocked soldier of World War I was seen as a coward, the traumatized soldier of Vietnam as someone suffering from PTSD. Trauma theory and traumatization is now ubiquitous and, to cite Davis and Meretoja once more, “a key challenge of trauma theory is to avoid false universalism.” In such a field “literature has the advantage of drawing our attention to the unique nature of each traumatic experience and its social and cultural contexts.”¹⁴ The specificity of traumatized subjects without the creation of hierarchies of suffering is crucial to our understanding of the role that literary representations play in this complex, contested terrain.

⁹ L. Bond, “9/11,” In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 415.

¹⁰ A. Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, Edinburgh, 2014, p. 121.

¹¹ Bond, op. cit.

¹² Fassin and Rechtman, op. cit., p.30.

¹³ C. Davis and H. Meretoja, “Introduction,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 6.

W. H. Auden and war poetry

Arguably literature and war have been intertwined for a very long time and I want to turn to two poems by W. H. Auden, one in which he refers directly to Hitler's invasion of Poland ("September 1, 1939") and the second, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," wherein he seems to undermine the role of poetry in public life, especially in times of war. In an earlier age, Auden expresses the value of poetry, values that we see embodied in poetry from the war in Ukraine. As Hitler invades Poland Auden writes of the "Waves of anger and fear" that sweep over the "darkened lands of the earth." In the midst of monumental violence, Auden emphasizes the value of poetry and the role of the poet: "All I have is a voice/To undo the folded lie/The romantic lie in the brain/ ... And the lie of Authority."¹⁵ Quite clearly this lone poetic voice – or even a hundred poetic voices, as in the collection *100 Poets Against the War* (written to protest the US invasion of Iraq) – does not alter the course of the war, but it enables us to think about war from perspectives that are not generally available in mainstream discourse. As Audre Lorde put it, poetry enables a shift in the "quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives."¹⁶ Lorde has in mind not only a scrutiny of individual lives but the reconfiguration of collective imaginaries and collective consciences, so that the poet speaks to us truths that others may not speak and many may not wish to hear. Now, there is a danger that the poet may think of himself as a prophet, as someone with access to truth that ordinary folks do not have, and this is a tendency that poets such as Allen Ginsberg, for example, display when they write of the Vietnam War. Auden, however, is conscious of this danger and writes:

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.¹⁷

The poet too is under siege, but he will use his craft to "Show an affirming flame," enabling shifts in the "quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives." The poet is neither a recluse thinking and writing fine thoughts in his ivory tower, nor is he a prophet delivering truths to a benighted people. He stands with the people and stands against "Negation and despair" in the midst of war.

Yet in his earlier poem, an elegy in memory of W. B. Yeats who died just before the outbreak of World War II, Auden seems to denigrate the role of poetry altogether:

¹⁵ W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939," <https://poets.org/poem/september-1-1939>.

¹⁶ Cited in H. L. Hix, ed., *Counterclaims: Poets and Poetries, Talking Back*, Maclean, Dublin, 2020, p. xxi.

¹⁷ Auden, op. cit.