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Poetry of Witness in Selected Poems of World War II and the War on Iraq

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Abstract

This dissertation aims at comparatively analyzing selected works from World War II and the War on Iraq in an attempt to trace the poetics of witness and survival in the poetic expressions of these two historic events. World War II and the War on Iraq have both been linked in the narrative and rhetoric leading to the latter. The consequences of both being expansive, this dissertation tries to discuss selected poems by Anna Akhmatova, Czeslaw Milosz and a number of Iraqi poets to show the extent to which Witness Poetry might be considered one of the most expressive modes of writing and reading about the traumatic experience of war these various poets have witnessed. It also highlights the ways in which the abovementioned poets reacted to war and the extent to which their poetry was a means of survival and eventually reconstructing their own reality. These poets, having survived war and turmoil in their respective countries, present a decentralized narrative that offers a different viewpoint from the mainstream and official narratives of the wars. To this end, it is important to view these poems in the light of not only the background against which they were written, but also through examining the kind of narrative they attempted to challenge.

This dissertation tries to address these main questions: 1) What is Witness Poetry? 2) How can Witness Poetry be connected to the theories of Trauma and Memory? 3) Historically, how are the Russian, Polish and Iraqi experiences similar? 4) How did Witness Poetry written during both World War II and the War on Iraq navigate the reality of the war? 5) How was the notion of trauma and memory depicted in the selected poems discussed?

To answer these questions, I rely on Carolyn Forche's definition of Witness Poetry as such reading of these poems from the lens of Witness Poetry highlights new aspects of the poets' contributions that were not addressed in previous studies. With regards to the notion of trauma and memory, I build on the work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Dominick LaCapra and Maurice Halbwachs to discuss the relationship between trauma, memory and war.

I contribute to the field of comparative studies by bringing together works from Russia, Poland and Iraq in an attempt to study the connection between both World War II and the War on Iraq, which to the researcher's knowledge, has not been attempted before.

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Introduction

In times of war and turmoil, memory works as means of documentation by which events, public and private, are maintained and, later, retold. Memory, both individual and collective, helps in bridging the gap between what happened at a given point in time and how it may be narrated in history. Nevertheless, memory is not a completely objective process but has its roots in subjective experience and personal reflections. Memory is, first and foremost, a personal struggle that intertwines with the public at times of collective calamity or trauma. Personal memory, in this sense, can be said to have the power to pave the way for the more dispersed/scattered events of the public conscious to come to light and be foregrounded. Since the public can be subject to state manipulation and all the classic forms of hegemonic discourses, it is of importance for the public sphere to be penetrated by the personal view of events. In the same way, the personal can be unattentively turned into a mere journalistic recounting of personal reflections that only the writer can relate to. Therefore, in times of pivotal historical moments, the personal also needs the depth of public engagement. Both personal memory/retelling and the public documentation allow for a more encompassing understanding.

Individual memory in times of wars and political upheavals can only be consolidated when shared and circulated. The shared experience of the horrors of war, for example, allows for not only an understanding but even a kind of appreciation of the experience that the victims of this trauma went through. This sense of "community" when reconstructing a reality through one's mind also takes the personal experience to another level as it asserts the human dimensions of the experience while pointing to the possibility of further action; hence its transformative effect. Historians, for example, when studying a case of trauma might be tempted to scrutinize the personal experience for exact details and solid facts. This sort of hard facts is not what the personal recounting might show; this does not discredit the personal experience. Nevertheless, this experience can only be reinforced and thus "trusted" when shared by others. While maintaining the importance of a shared personal/public experience, it is important to note that the singular view of an event does not necessarily mean that it always needs support from the community. The public consolidates the personal and vice versa in as much as they both circle around the event, showing it from different angles, and discrediting any one-

sided “official” narrative that does not give voice or empower individual/communal narrative.

Memory, Trauma and Witnessing:

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag discusses the role of photography in the portrayal of war as depicted in several works whose goal was to present the “face” of war to readers. In the first part of her book, Sontag explains that pictures, as a means of testimony and recounting perhaps, are a means of facing the horrors of war and acknowledging them. She states that for some people, it is only through making war “vivid” that people might finally understand and take in its “outrageousness.” She exemplifies her idea through mentioning a photography book in which the author used photography as what Sontag termed “shock therapy” and which primarily relied on graphic images of German soldiers during World War I. In one particular part of the book, the author uses twenty-four images of soldiers with severe facial wounds all of which are, in Sontag’s words, “heartrending” and “stomach-turning” (15). In this sense, “showing” the atrocities of war, narrating them using pictures, is a means of acknowledgment which, in turn, could be a means of coming to terms with what happened. Sontag’s

notion of “showing” the war in a different light exemplifies the argument for a differentiated view of historical events that considers the different sources of information that do not have to be necessarily “historically” identical. To understand this notion it would be of use to examine what Judith Butler argues for in her book *Precarious Life* (2004). While discussing the nature of the historical account of the September 11 attacks, Butler argues that the US has been engaged in a one-dimensional narrative where the US is dominantly controlling the story. She points out that the US supports this “first-person point of view” and declines, with persistence, the different accounts of the events (7). However, Butler continues to say that to begin to understand the events that drastically affected American life, the US must first do without this unilateral view of the events and the world and proceed to accept the fact that the US and the lives of the people affected by the events are actually a product of both the American and the Iraqi experience. What Butler argues for, then, is a multiplicity in viewing the same event instead of repeatedly seeing one angle alone. The Iraqi experience, similar to the Polish experience and the Soviet/Russian experience, offers a different viewpoint to an event that has been mostly normalized in a particular narrative which became unquestionable.

The argument here is that there is always a different way to recount the same historical "fact". There is the historical account and there is the "individual" effort of humanizing the experience. In this regard, it is important to revive the role of memory and testimony as a tool of comprehension and analysis. In her seminal book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth argues that trauma can be used as a means of resisting history and rendering it "no longer straightforwardly referential" or bound to certain frames of experiences (11). This understanding of historical events is coupled with an acknowledgment of one's own limitations in fully comprehending the reasons and repercussions of a given event. Even if the person has in fact lived through the event, seeing its different aspects and shifting the focus of questions away from one's own viewpoint to the multiplicity of focal points through which the events can be understood, is vital. Writing of her experience as a "listener" or a psychiatrist dealing with World War II survivors, Shoshana Felman discusses this notions of history, memory and testimony as intertwined and inseparable. She argues that when someone attempts to listen to events of human suffering, one is inevitably looking for what is not there. In a sense, listening to testimonies that have to do with

profound human pain is an attempt to find what is not yet discovered. While "historical" documents may be in abundance, the authentic individual traumatic experience of the event has not yet been discussed and is, therefore, of crucial importance. To quote Shoshana Felman: "Knowledge in testimony is…not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testified, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right" (62).

The importance of this kind of knowledge coupled with the willingness and, rather, determination to transmit it makes the action of witnessing/testimony a rebellion against the oblivion of history. This notion of "vowing" to tell and producing one's own story out of a historical moment makes this moment of telling an accomplished "speech act" and not simply a formulated statement that has no bearing of its own (Felman 5). In all its forms, this witness account embedded in the context of the historical event discussed gives both the account and the historical event a root that is different from the one offered solely by history. When discussing the traumatic experience of those who lived under Nazi-occupation, Felman asserts that this urgency in witnessing and telling coincides with the fact that this traumatic experience and its memory

linger as an unfinished story that does not reach a closure. This way, unless the story/experience is "re-externalized" and transferred outside the person experiencing the trauma/memory itself, it will remain within the person and thus "contaminate" him/her (69). Regardless of the medium of transferring this memory/knowledge, it is significant to examine the narration of history and the documentation of experiences from the point of view of individuals who lived it. The sense of inclusion and plurality that exists in viewing historical events through the individual lens paves the way for a multitude of feelings and responses to the same event (Haynes 206). This multiplicity is perhaps the reason why memory in this form is the means by which people can preserve and recollect their own past stories. It is with this link between the "now" and the "then" through the individual eye that one can have an encompassing idea of what happened during war and not have a mere "image" that represents a "social construct" or, in other words, history (Hynes 206). While history can be regarded as a construct by some, memory can be seen as lacking proper depth and accuracy by others. Historians, at times, do show mistrust in the notion of deriving the recollection of an event from a personal point of view believing that it might render the historical element

incomplete. It could be argued that instead of recounting incidents based on human recollection, historical records can do the same function of telling exactly what happened during challenging times. Individual memory, in this instance, is sometimes said to be questionable. In this sense, memory and history can be ostensibly seen at odds. Pierre Nora, for instance, argues that history is constantly distrustful of memory and perpetually aims to "suppress and destroy it." It is history's mission, Nora continues, to "annihilate what has in reality taken place" (9). In this sense, history is a source of mistrust and as a construct is "always [a] problematic and incomplete" portrayal of events that are no longer happening (Nora 8). What this suggests is that historical accounts, as opposed to personal recounting, is not an inherently valid source of information. It is my contention that contrary to the aforementioned views, memory has the ability to be fundamentally authentic and changeable. As it is rooted in the remembrance of "spaces, gestures, images and objects" (9), it entails diversity and is collective and public as much as it is individual and personal. If history is said to recount the past, memory has the privilege of invoking the present. (Nora 8).

In discussing memory in relation to traumatic experiences, many theorists have suggested different forms and ways in which trauma affects one's own understanding of the event, one's assimilation and integration of the event and its consequences, and ultimately one's own means of expressing this particular event. In her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) Cathy Caruth outlines a number of theories relating to how memory works under a traumatic effect and how trauma is inevitably incomprehensible event that is rather hard to integrate into the understanding and consciousness of the person experiencing it. The main underlying idea here is what Caruth explains as the impossibility of perceiving trauma by placing it within the realm of prior knowledge or understanding (153). Since trauma is an unprecedented event, its recalling has within its folds the unattainability of its truth. Caruth contends that allowing a traumatic experience to be told – and thus becoming a part of a person's or a community's idea of the past – could risk rendering the traumatic recollection unprecise and unforceful (153). This could hold merit some truth in the sense that trauma, perceived as a personal/individual experience, should be free from the exigencies of a collective narrative that might undermine its authenticity or individuality.