ЕЗИЦИ И КУЛТУРИ В ДИАЛОГ

LANGUAGES AND CULTURES IN DIALOGUE

WAR AND PEACE IN THE REPUBLIC OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the representation in European literature of the 'two poles of the human condition - war and peace, the destructive and the creative' - to use the formulations of Bernard Knox, the American Classicist, Homer's and Virgil's translator, writing about the "Iliad". It will dwell mostly on classical examples of representation of war and peace in Greek and Latin literature, the shield of Achilles in Homer's "Iliad", and the shield of Aeneas in Virgil's "Aeneid". The paper will also look cursorily at the treatment of war and peace – or indeed of states hovering between the two cycles of life – in representative works of English, Italian and Russian literature, namely the English epic poem "Beowulf", Petrarch's sonnet 134 ('Pace non trovo, et non ò da fa guerra'), Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach", and Leo Tolstoy's epic novel "War and Peace". This paper has examined modes of representation of war and peace in seminal Classical Greek and Roman narrative poems (the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*) as well as a range of major European literary works.

KEYWORDS: war, peace, literature, Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Petrarch, Arnold, Tolstoy.

I.   Introduction

Literature and politics have been entangled in a curious relationship since Plato and Aristotle. In his *Republic*, Plato deals with literature and the place of the poet in his ideal state. Through Socrates, the philosopher institutes censorship: only good stories, authorized ones, should be told by mothers and nurses to children. "Hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State", he maintains in Book X of the *Republic*.[1] Poetry is inferior, because it is an imitation of an imitation, being thrice removed from the original Idea, of which the poet is ignorant, according to Socrates/Plato. Further still, perhaps the most severe Platonic charge: "poetry feeds and waters passions instead of drying them up", he states in the famous Book X of the *Republic*![2]

This mechanistic idea of *mimesis* – representation – is countered by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, which amounts to an unstated polemic of the pupil with his teacher, Plato. Aristotle's *mimesis* factors in invention, creativity, because the poet creates a self-sufficient world of his own, working "according to the law of probability or necessity" (Aristotle, 1997, p.17). Tragedy and epic are treated at length in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is the master example of a good tragedy in his idea. His account of the epic is very significant for us today, for epic poetry was the precursor to today's novel, the newest major literary genre. Of course, Homer's *Iliad* (simple, a story of suffering) and the *Odyssey* (complex, a story of character) are the two primary examples of epic poetry dealt with in the *Poetics*. Aristotle says:

It is not the poet's function to describe what has happened, but the kinds of thing that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or

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[1] Plato, *The Republic*, Book X, translated by Benjamin Jowett. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.11.x.html> Accessed 20 February 2019. "The only poems we can admit into our community are hymns to the gods and eulogies of virtuous men", in Robin Waterfield's translation, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch et al., W.W. Norton & Company, 2010, p. 76.
[2] Plato, *The Republic*, Book X, translated by Benjamin Jowett. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.11.x.html> Accessed 20 February 2019.

necessary. [...] For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history; for while poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of particular facts.[3]

Poetry (which in Aristotle's *Poetics* means imaginative literature/fiction in modern-day literary discourse) is therefore more concerned with ultimate truth than history. Speaking of epic poetry in Chapter 24 of *Poetics*, Aristotle says "probable impossibilities are to be preferred to improbable possibilities". (Aristotle & Horace & Longinus, 1987, p. 68).

As the paper will be focussing mostly on Homer and Virgil, it is worth recalling (as background information) that the Trojan War is generally dated around the twelfth or thirteenth century B.C. All through the poems (*Iliad*, *Odyssey*; it should be noted the titles of these works appear in English alternatively with or without the definite article 'the') the weapons and arms of the heroes are bronze; this was the Bronze Age. Iron is but a precious metal in that realm. In book 23 of the *Iliad*, Achilles offers a piece of iron as a prize for the weight-throwing contest. The most likely dates for the composition of the *Iliad* are between 725–675 B.C. The *Aeneid* was composed by Virgil between 29 and 19 B.C., i.e. roughly seven centuries later than the *Iliad*.

Hector strips off Achilles's armour and puts it on himself. Hector will be killed by Achilles, after the latter returns to battle, sporting a splendid suit of armour, made by smith-god Hephaestus, the son of Zeus and Hera, a detailed examination of which follows.

II. The shields of Achilles and Aeneas: mythical and historical perspectives

Homer's Book 18 of the *Iliad* and Virgil's Book 8 of the *Aeneid* feature shields of Achilles and Aeneas, respectively. The shield of Achilles combines scenes of violence (war) and peace, life in a flux of contradictions, whereas Virgil in Book 8 of his *Aeneid* re-interprets it, bringing about a sense of direction out of the confusion of Homer's ekphrastic passage. *Ekphrasis* (from Greek 'description') is an intense pictorial description of an object, mostly an art-object, so as to evoke "an image in the mind's eye as intense as if the described object were actually before the reader" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 228); it is a verbal representation of a visual representation, that is.

Virgil wrote *Aeneid* emulating Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, whereas Dante Alighieri in his *Divine Comedy*, certainly in aspects of it, emulated Virgil's *Aeneid*. Dante could not have read Homer, for the knowledge of Greek had been lost in Western Europe for close to one thousand years after the demise of the Roman Empire, being reintroduced to Italy from Byzantium in the 14th century.[4]

In the seventh book of his *Politics*, Aristotle maintains that virtues of peace are the most necessary for both individuals and states. W. H. Semple, a prominent British Classicist, stated in a lecture in Manchester in 1953[5] that Aristotle opined that the legislator should pursue the establishment of peace, and wondered whether the same doctrine permeated the second half of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas's war aims at securing peace, whereas the aims of his adversary's (i.e. Turnus) is victory and conquest. At the end of the epic, Turnus is defeated, Aeneas prevails. Destiny is fulfilled with the fusion of Trojan and Latin peoples, which results in a new Roman nation and a *Pax Romana*. Virgil composed a sort of a Homeric epic celebrating the establishment of a new home for the defeated Trojans after the ruin of Troy by the Greeks. The Rome of Augustus (Caesar Augustus actually commissioned the *Aeneid*) is the triumph of close to one thousand years of struggle to achieve that perfect state.

What Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* share in common with Virgil's *Aeneid* is war, but Aeneas, the latter's protagonist, embodies "Roman qualities of fortitude, devotion to duty, and political sagacity" (Semple, 1953, p. 213). The Roman epic's crux of meaning is different from the Homeric one: Aeneas establishes a statesmanlike peace by uniting the Trojans and the Latin peoples, and does not exact vengeance, in contrast to what the Greeks had done to Troy. Virgil hates war, and depicts it as horrible; he pities the fallen (Semple, 1953, p. 221). In the early part of Book 7 of the *Aeneid,* the emphasis is on peace, for the Trojans beg for it. However, the hero is driven to war in the remainder

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[3] Aristotle & Horace & Longinus, 1987, pp. 43–44.
[4] Knox, 1990, pp. 5–6.
[5] Semple, 1953, p. 211.

of the poem, and "his vision is to see beyond the war" (Semple, 1953, p. 216). Turnus is his foil and contrast in the poem – he lives for fighting and profits by fighting; Drances, the political rival of Turnus, agitates for peace, however. "If war is not properly an end in itself, but a means towards an end which is peace, then war of Aeneas in Latium seems to fulfil Aristotle's precept" (Semple, 1953, p. 227).

Aeneas says in *Aeneid*'s Book 12, (Virgil, 2006, p. 361):

> *I shall not command Italians to bow to Trojans,*
> *nor do I seek the sceptre for myself.*
> *May both nations, undefeated, under equal laws,*
> *march together toward an eternal pact of peace.* (12.225–228).

Anchises, father of Aeneas, says to his son when the latter visits him in the Underworld (in Book 6, which displays Anchises' pageant of great figures who will establish the Roman Empire in the future):

> *But you, Roman, remember, rule with all your power*
> *the peoples of the earth – these will be your arts:*
> *to put your stamp on the works and ways of peace,*
> *to spare the defeated, break the proud in war.* (6.981–84)

The final words of Dido, Carthage's queen, who curses Aeneas when he leaves her ("I left your shores, my Queen, against my will", 6.535, he says to her when he sees the ghost of Dido in the underworld) predict eternal war between her people and his Trojans:

> *And you, my Tyrians,*
> *Harry with hatred all his line, his race to come…*
> *No love between our peoples, ever – no pacts of peace!...*
> *Shore clash with shore, sea against sea and sword*
> *against sword – this is my curse – war between all*
> *our peoples, all their children, endless war!* (4.775–84) (Virgil, 2006, p. 149).

The *Iliad* underpins the idea that the highest good is victory, explicitly in war, if not in every human endeavour. Homer teaches us *agon*, the contest for the foremost place. Moreover, Achilles is the epitome of the agonistic, as Harold Bloom (*Homer's The Iliad*, 2005, p. 7) rightly emphasises.

The smith-god Hephaestus makes the shield for Achilles at the request of the latter's divine mother, Thestis. On the other hand, Venus persuades the smith-god Vulcan, to make arms and a shield for Aeneas.

Virgil's picture of the lower world – featured in Book 6 of the *Aeneid* – and the separation of the great sinners for whom there is no forgiveness and the rest who win redemption through long years of punishment, as well as "those who are immediately admitted to heaven, reappears in many ways in Dante's *Divine Comedy".*[6] Dante chooses Virgil as his guide through Hell and Purgatory, whereas Beatrice through Heaven. Virgil had the Sybil of Cumae guide him through the Underworld. The Kingdom of the Dead idea originates from Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*, though. The cunning Odyssey meets ghosts of dead people he had known, including Achilles, when he descends there in pursuit of consultation with Tiresias, seeking help for his journey home to Ithaca.

This exchange between the two fellow prominent Greek warriors in Troja – Odyssey and Achilles – is worth quoting at length:

> *'But you, Achilles,*
>> *there's not a man in the world more blest than you –*
>> *there never has been, never will be one.*
>> *Time was, when you were alive, we Argives*

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[6] Knox, 2006, p. 29.

honored you as god, and now down here I see,
you lord it over the dead in all your power.
So grieve no more at dying, great Achilles.

I reassured the ghost, but he broke out, protesting,
'No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus!
By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man –
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive –
than rule down here over all the breathless dead. (Homer, 2006, 11.548–559)

The god-like hero of the *Iliad*, Achilles, is now a humbled man in the *Odyssey* (in the Kingdom of Dead), valuing life over honour and glory.

II.1. The shield of Achilles

Book 18 of Homer's *Iliad* features this plea:

So now I come, I throw myself at your knees,
please help me! Give my son – he won't live long –
a shield and helmet and tooled greaves with ankle-straps
and armor for his chest. All that he had was lost,
lost when the Trojans killed his steadfast friend.
Now he lies on the ground – his heart is breaking. (Homer, 1990, 18.534–539.)

This is Thetis speaking, the mother of Achilles, who commissions the shield to be crafted by smith-god Hephaestus, the son of Zeus and Hera. The marvelously elaborate shield is described in the *Iliad* (Book 18.558-709). The following are selected parts from the long ekphrastic passage:

And first Hephaestus makes a great and massive shield,
blazoning well-wrought emblems all across its surface,
raising a rim around it, glittering, triple-ply
with a silver shield-strap run from edge to edge
and five layers of metal to build the shield itself,
and across its vast expanse with all his craft and cunning
the god creates a world of gorgeous immortal work. (Homer, 1990, 18.558–564).

Further down, an exposition of the two cities, where peace and war rein, respectively:

And he [Hephaestus] forged on the shield two noble cities filled
with mortal men. With weddings and wedding feasts in one... (Homer, 1990, 18.572–573)

But circling the other city camped a divided army
gleaming in battle-gear, and two plans split their ranks... (Homer, 1990, 18.593–594)

What we see in the shield is an image of life as a whole. War is the lesser part in the scene; the peaceful aspect dominates. It is worth citing in full here a summary of the shield's scenery penned by Bernard Knox, the American Classicist who worked closely with one of the best modern translators of Homer and Virgil, Robert Fagles:

Here are two cities, one at peace, and one at war. In one a marriage is celebrated and a quarrel settled by process of law; the other is besieged by a hostile army and fights for its existence. Scenes of violence – peaceful shepherds slaughtered in an ambush, Death dragging away a corpse by its foot – are balanced by scenes of plowing, harvesting, work in the vineyard and on the pasture, a green on which youths and maidens dance. War has its place on the shield but it is the lesser one;

most of the surface is covered with scenes of peaceful life – the pride of the tilled land, wide and triple-plowed, the laborers reaping with sharp sickles in their hands, a great vineyard heavy with grape clusters, young girls and young men carrying the sweet fruit away in baskets, a large meadow in a lovely valley for the sheep flocks, and, above all, the dance, the formal symbol of the precise and ordered relations of people in peaceful society. (Homer, 1990, p. 62).

The concluding part of the 'shield of Achilles' episode runs as follows:

> *Here young boys and girls, beauties courted*
> *with costly gifts of oxen, danced and danced.*
> *linking their arms, gripping each other's wrists.*
> *And the girls wore robes of linen light and flowing,*
> *the boys wore finespun tunics rubbed with a gloss of oil,*
> *the girls were crowned with a bloom of fresh garlands,*
> *the boys swung golden daggers hung on silver belts.*
> *And now they would run in rings on their skilled feet,*
> *nimbly, quick as a crouching potter spins his wheel,*
> *palming it smoothly, giving it practice twirls*
> *to see it run, and now they would run in rows,*
> *in rows crisscrossing rows—rapturous dancing.*
> *A breathless crowd stood round them struck with joy*
> *and through them a pair of tumblers dashed and sprang,*
> *whirling in leaping handsprings, leading on the dance.*
>
> *And he forged the Ocean River's mighty power girdling*
> *round the outmost rim of the welded indestructible shield.* (Homer, 1990, 18. 693–709)

There are very few other glimpses of peace in *The Iliad* beyond the passage featuring the shield of Achilles, for indeed the poem is one of war, in contrast to its sequel, *The Odyssey*, where peace prevails, barring the poem's ending with the slaughtering of Penelope's suitors and indeed the housemaids by Odyssey and his son Telemachus.

The Homeric ekphrastic scene has been refashioned by later authors. Perhaps the most famous is English poet W. H. Auden's 1950 poem "The Shield of Achilles". Instead of a peaceful, almost blissful world depicted in Homer's *Iliad*, we have now a corrupt, militaristic, totalitarian, inhumane world: rather than vines and olive trees, marble well-governed cities, ships on untamed seas, there was "artificial wilderness, and a sky like lead", the first stanza of the poem says.[7] ('The Shield of Achilles' phrase appears even in a seminal book on international relations, law and politics, Philip Bobbitt's *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History*, published in 2002.)

II.2. The shield of Aeneas in Virgil's *The Aeneid*

While the shield of Achilles has no historical but a poetic-mythical setting (indeed figures and places engraved on it virtually unidentified), the shield of Aeneas in *The Aeneid* depicts

> *[There is] the story of Italy,*
> *Rome in all her triumphs (...)*
> *all in order the generations born of Ascanius' stock*
> *and all the wars they waged.*   (Virgil, 2006, 8.738–42)

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[7] Auden, 2006, pp. 2437–2438. See also Rick Brown, "A Bloody Torpor: The Banality of Violence in Auden's 'The Shield of Achilles'". <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/rick-brown-bloody-torpor-banality-violence-audens-shield-achilles > Accessed 20 February 2019.

Virgil combines mythological epic (Romulus and Remus and the rest) with themes from Roman history up to and including the author's time, the age of Caesar Augustus, which marks the victory of the West over the barbarous tribes of the East.[8]

III. *Beowulf*, Petrarch's sonnet 134, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"

The great Anglo-Saxon heroic narrative *Beowulf*, a 3000-plus-long poem composed before the year 1000 A.D., which features a hybrid pagan world steeped in Germanic heroic code of honour and a Christian world, has the eponymous hero fight for renown, that is glory, and not redemption. The poem is set in Scandinavia and the hero fights Grendel, a descendant of Cain, his mother, and a dragon. *Wyrd* (Anglo-Saxon for 'fate') had a determining role in the society of the time. Beowulf's pursuit of justice and peace by fighting Grendel and his mother (conflicts he might have wished to not enter into) and the dragon, and being involved in wars against other people is rendered in the poem, which is also imbued with an anti-war discourse. While "the conflict is a fact of life, it need not be a way of life".[9] *Beowulf*'s last three lines are beautifully paradoxical, for how can one be gracious and fair-minded if he has to engage in war to win fame?

> *They* [the Geat people, MH] *said that of all the kings upon the earth*
> *he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,*
> *kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.*[10]

Meanwhile, on a more personal level, Petrarch begins his programmatically oxymoronic sonnet (number 134: 'Pace non trovo, et non ò da fa guerra') with the following two verses:

> *I find no peace, and have no arms for war,*
> *and fear and hope, and burn and yet I freeze*, […]

They were rendered thus by Thomas Wyatt, the English Renaissance poet, who, alongside Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, introduced the sonnet form to England:

> *I find no peace, and all my war is done;*
> *I fear and hope; I burn and freeze like ice;* […]

These verses encapsulate powerfully the-neither-piece-nor-war state of strife and paralysis of the human condition, as if to demonstrate that war and peace are encoded into one another. This is also true of three other great works of literature: John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, Leo Tolstoy's epic novel *War and Peace*, and Matthew Arnold's short lyrical poem "Dover Beach", that are here glanced at cursorily in pursuit of an understanding of how fundamental battles of the human condition – war (strife) and peace/serenity/equanimity – are represented in literature.

The greatest English epic poem after *Beowulf*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), published 350 years ago, when the author was blind and in house arrest for his anti-monarchical views (he had been Latin Secretary in Oliver Cromwell's administration; that is Foreign Secretary in today's political discourse), features a fallen angel, the rebellious Satan, as the real hero of the work. In book 1.261-263 Satan says:

> *Here we may reign secure, and in my choyce*
> *To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:*
> *Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav'n.*

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[8] Knox, 2006, p. 35.
[9] Pollock, 2011, p. 124.
[10] *Beowulf*, a new verse translation by Seamus Heaney, 2000, p. 213.

Milton's masterpiece resists interpretation as to whether it is pro-peace or pro-war/military. A British scholar, Islam Issa, wrote in a piece in *The Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) in late 2017 that one of the two recent translations into Arabic was published in 2011 by the Syrian government's official publishing house. When a Kurdish commentator in Iraq praised Satan for rebelling against autocratic authority, a pro-Assad Government commentator responded with an article about Milton, which claimed that the poem is in fact more about the human condition than politics. The columnist pressed the readers to bear in mind that Satan's rebellion against the Father failed, and that Milton's anti-monarchical activities for Cromwell ended in disaster. The conclusion: Bashar al Assad would prevail,[11] as he did, at least so far (the present piece being completed in early 2019, MH).

A beautiful Albanian translation of *Paradise Lost* was published in Communist dictator Enver Hoxha's Albania by Alqi Kristo in 1960 (Kosovo's "Rilindja" published it in 1964). The translator's introduction praises Milton's anti-monarchical views, certainly, and engenders a Socialist Realist interpretation of the Satan, as a heroic and revolutionary figure.[12]

The beautiful poem "Dover Beach" by English poet Matthew Arnold, composed in 1851, is a lament for the wane of religious appeal in the Victorian age. The speaker pleads for love as a substitute, and the concluding part of the poem evokes times of misery and war:

> *Ah, love, let us be true*
> *To one another! for the world, which seems*
> *To lie before us like a land of dreams,*
> *So various, so beautiful, so new,*
> *Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,*
> *Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;*
> *And we are here as on a darkling plain*
> *Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,*
> *Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

'Ignorant armies clash(ing) by night' may well allude to Thucydides' account (in his history of the Peloponnesian War) of the night fight at Epipolae "upon a plain at the top of a cliff, in the moonlight, so that the soldiers could not distinguish clearly between friend and foe, with the resulting flight of certain Athenian troops, and various `alarms,' watchwords, and battle-cries shouted aloud to the increasing confusion of all".[13] Some suggest the poem may refer to the 1848 revolutions in Europe, which spared England. It is best appreciated as a personal confrontation with strife at a time when religion, and indeed other creeds, cannot console you.

III.1. Tolstoy's *War and Peace*

"What is *War and Peace*? It is not a novel, even less is it an epic poem, and still less an historical chronicle",[14] Count Leo Tolstoy said about his masterpiece, observing that "*War and Peace* is what the author wished and was able to express in the form in which it is expressed" (Tolstoy 2007, p. 1217).[15] He further claims that none of the major works in the modern Russian literature, from Gogol's *Dead Souls* to Dostoevsky's *Dead House*, would fit "into the form of the novel, the epic, or the story". There are some 600 characters in the novel, of which 160 historical figures. More than a third of the action takes place on or near the battlefield. He challenged the idea of a great or legendary historical figure. "*War and Peace* has been called Russia's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, with some justice. The return of the hero and the securing of the family are as essential to the great work's meaning and

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[11] Issa, 2017. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/john-miltons-authority-paradise-lost/> Accessed 20 February 2019.
[12] Kristo, A, 1964, pp. 7–12.
[13] Tinker & Lowry, 1940, p.175.
[14] Tolstoy 2007, p. 1217.
[15] "A Few Words Apropos of the Book *War and Peace*", originally published in 1868.

artistic victory as are the glories and fatalities of the battlefield", concludes Amy Mandelker in a 2010 introductory essay to Louise Maude's translation of *War and Peace*.[16]

IV.   Conclusion

This paper has examined modes of representation of war and peace in seminal Classical Greek and Roman narrative poems (the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*) as well as a range of major European literary works. Epic and lyrical poetry, fiction in general, including the novel as the newest and dominant literary genre of late, has engaged with the plight of human race – issues of life and death, of strife, of peace and war – in a bid to make sense of our humanity. Elusive as they are, literature has demonstrated its power in pursuit of universal truths, as the re-readings of Homer, Virgil, Petrarch, Milton, Arnold, Tolstoy, and W.H. Auden demonstrate.

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[16] Tolstoy, 2010, p. XX.

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