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A Portrait of Three Women Looking at War: The Poetry of Amelina, Szymborska and Akhmatova

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Abstract

This essay articulates how three poets—Amelina, Szymborska, and Akhmatova—navigate the complexities of war and history through their unique approaches to language and poetry. Whether through Amelina's focus on memory, Szymborska's ironic ease, or Akhmatova's personal engagement with history, each poet transforms their lived experience into art that resists tyranny and gives voice to the silenced. Their work is a testament to the power of poetry to reclaim history, reflect on human suffering, and provide a form of resistance to tyranny and violence.

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Savaşa Bakan Üç Kadının Portresi: Amelina, Szymborska ve Akhmatova'nın Şiirleri

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Özet

Bu makale, üç şairin -Amelina, Szymborska ve Akhmatova- savaş ve tarihin karmaşıklığını dil ve şiire getirdikleri benzersiz yaklaşımlarla nasıl ele aldıklarını ortaya koyuyor. İster Amelina'nın hafızaya odaklanması, ister Szymborska'nın ironik rahatlığı, isterse Akhmatova'nın tarihle kişisel ilişkisi yoluyla olsun, her şair yaşadığı deneyimi zulme direnen ve susturulanlara ses veren bir sanata dönüştürüyor. Bu şairlerin eserleri, şiirin tarihe sahip çıkma, insanların çektiği acılar üzerine düşünme ve zulüm ve şiddete karşı bir direniş biçimi sağlama gücünün bir kanıtıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:
Savaş, zulüm, tarih, kadın edebiyatı, Doğu Avrupa edebiyatı.

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Spring pays no heed to war. Without prior permissions, indifferent to secret police, it adorns cherry trees with blossoms overnight. The blossoms hold the spring skies, passionately kiss their serene blue and blush. The musk of memory swells the ravaged fields of war, upends barbed wires and festoons tales of hope and songs of time begone on the dejected and the despondent. From the edge of the page, we watch Victoria Amelina, a young, frail Ukrainian woman with golden hair hurriedly walking towards a cherry orchard, spade in hand. She is uneffaced by the tree tops incarnadine and the multitudinous currents of memory and desire they waft in the air. Her stride is resolute and firm with purpose, as is her grip on the spade.

When we meet her, this poet, novelist and war researcher with spade in hand is joined by an old man who struggles to keep apace. His body bears the weight of age and affliction. The old man points to a tree at a distance and stops exhausted. He watches listlessly as Amelina digs up the soil underneath the tree. The scene appears as an inversion of Seamus Heaney's celebrated poem *Digging*: "Between my finger and my thumb/ the squat pen rests/ I will dig with it" (Heaney, line 2). Born in an agrarian family in the Irish plains, Heaney does not take to farming like the rest of his family. His identity is that of a poet, he proudly affirms in these lines. Although he cannot quite handle the spade like the rest, he is adept with the pen. The pen too digs like the spade and unearths in turn the seductive lure of words buried behind the wear and tear of routine, hints the poet.

Amelina, the poet with the spade in hand, too digs. What she unravels from the ground beneath is the diary of Volodimir Vakuleno, a children's writer killed by the occupation in Ukraine. She carefully removes the stubborn dirt covering the diary. Wet with spring dew, its pages are clumped together, rendering the writing moist and almost illegible. Amelina will with great effort soon restore and publish it. For, this is an emblem of time-lived and time-told, she believes. The old guide with Amelina is the dead children's writer's father. Vakuleno emerges in the diary as a witness to the tumultuous period Ukraine's history, seeped in agony and bloodshed. But, despite these chilling descriptions of terror in the diary, it is the portrait of Vakuleno as a hungry man, famished to the bones, that gets under our skin. War starves as it slices and kills. All through the occupation in Vakuleno's village, people did not have much to eat. Vakuleno's thirteen-year-old disabled son and his father of seventy-three solely relied on the potatoes that the writer would dig up from their yard. When he was finally arrested by the authorities, he had become appallingly thin with hunger and disease. Yet, in the diary's final pages, we see a Vakuleno musing against the blue skies of spring. He is calm and collected beyond the destitution of the present. The cranes that fly above him announce the arrival of peace in Ukraine. He hears them say, "Ukraine shall be well again." Thus, in the writer's hand the horizon of reflections is stretched across a page and sealed with a sacredness that some people call prayer. It must be this unfazed optimism that Vakuleno

found worthy of preserving that he buries it under a cherry tree. Only a few days later he was executed and his body, dumped in a mass grave.

Amelina stopped writing stories the day war began in Ukraine. Where gunshots tear the air and all speaking is benumbed, words turn frigid and meaning, regimented. War reality destroys plot comprehension, the poet declared. Language is the vocabulary of the values, anxieties, dreams and sorrows of a people. Dictatorship destroys the capacity of language to make sense of reality. Just as it empties the present of its pasts and deprives it of its heterogenous legacies, dictatorship invents its own vocabulary as well. We are reminded of George Orwell perspicacious observation on tyranny as being inimical to prose. There are certain themes that cannot be celebrated in words and tyranny is one of them, opines Orwell (Prevention of Literature, orwellfoundation.com). Prose is the product of the autonomous individual. She is the enemy of the state and is summarily annihilated by the regime. How else can a culture be reimagined if not by weeding out the individual who dares to think when the madness of unreason is all about her! When the asphyxiating bind of tyranny thus tightens on thought, prose loses its function altogether. Amelina's distrust in fiction is, in this context, only a natural consequence. However, as she devoted herself to the war effort, continued writing poetry

Unlike prose, poetry has a more complex relationship with reality. It is in the business of thinking language whilst weaving anew the web of associations that words come to bear. The poet's art, as Virginia Woolf maintains, is to have at one's beck and call every word in the language, knowing their weights, colours, sounds and associations and thus making them suggest more than they can state (205). In other words, the poet renders reality acute to experience through the power of intense suggestion. Phantoms of time enter into intimate collaboration with the present and memory is redeemed once again in the poet's hand. In doing so, the poet delivers the impersonality of history into the intimacy of experience. Multitudinous voices throng the lines of the page, the remote becomes pressingly immediate as human life is rethought into poetry. The poet is at once immensely ancient and contemporary, 'temporal and timeless' as Eliot calls it, in whose voice disparate generations are fused together in seamless harmony. If poetry has been able to resist the iron fist in great measure unlike prose that suffers a quick death, it is because the former's relationship with reality is far more complex than the latter's. Restraining the poetic voice for its service to a cause, personal or political becomes rather precarious. This is not to say that poetry is atemporal. Amelina's *Testimonials*, for instance, which lends us a snapshot of time stripped to the bone:

only women testify in this strange town
one speaks of a missing child
two speak of the tortured in the basement

three repeat what rapes and avert their eyes
four speak of the screams from the military headquarters
five speak of the executed in their own yards
six speak but are incomprehensible
seven check food supplies counting out loud
eight call me a liar because there is no justice
nine talk on their way to the cemetery
I'm also on my way because
I know them all in this town
its dead are my dead
its survivors are my sisters

Not long after writing this, thirty-seven-year-old Amelina was hit by a Russian missile while waiting for her meal with three other Colombian journalists at a café. She succumbed to her injuries in a hospital a couple of months later. Published soon after her death, the poem is spectral in its affect, clinching the past to the present with a sorcerer's art. From every grave it raises the deads, unvanquished and fiercely whole. Otherwise, what could possibly drive someone, with such dangerous conviction, to risk their life in search of a diary—particularly one by a minor writer—if not for what seems like a death wish! She stated things straight, after all. A poem for her at the time was just "obvious things that were written down in a column during the war" (Amelina qtd in Korniyenko).

"In a room where people unanimously maintain a conspiracy of silence", said Czeslaw Milosz, "one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot" (Nobel Lecture, nobelprize.org). That he was a poet who survived the Holocaust and the subsequent autocratic government that rendered him stateless, gives the statement a grave sincerity. If Milosz impresses us so with the solemn ardour of his words, his contemporary Wislawa Szymborska shocks us into attention with a casual ease with which she approaches humanity's most confounding questions, starting with tyranny and war. What can be interpreted as reticence in her work also comes forth as an approach that renders history strange with the ingredients of humour. We know too well that to laugh at a good joke, its object must be distanced, made impassive to sympathy. The laughter that appears integral to Szymborska's form, however, is unsettling, prompting us to reflect on absurd contradictions that shape reality.

After every war
someone has to clean up.
Things won't
straighten themselves up, after all.
Someone has to push the rubble

[1] "Pieces de guerre" translated as Pieces of War.

to the side of the road,
so the corpse-filled wagons
can pass./
Photogenic it's not,
and takes years.
All the cameras have left
for another war.
Those who knew
what was going on here
must make way for
those who know little.
And less than little.
And finally as little as nothing.
In the grass that has overgrown
causes and effects,
someone must be stretched out
blade of grass in his mouth
gazing at the clouds. (Szymborska, The End and the Beginning)

Szymborska speaks as one of us while exercising a careful remove where very little of the personal is revealed. Yet, she does not pretend to be speaking for the people. Just as time moves on, people too are subject to change, memory gives way to forgetting, history follows the whims of few. "Poetry does not save mankind or people. It is my strong belief that poetry cannot save the world. It may help the individual to think. It may enrich his spiritual life. Reading it one may feel less alone" (Szymborska qtd in Young). At its heart, is not the whole struggle of existence the quest to feel less alone! Predicated to deliberate thought, this quest gives rise to the individual, the regime's primary target. Let us remember that just like Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Rozewicz, the most important Polish poets of the twentieth century, Szymborska was among the fortunate that were spared by the Holocaust and the subsequent regime that took hold of their country. The quality of ordinariness that Szymborska infuses into her writing turns to poetry with astonishing rigour and depth. She is precise, straightforward—"sceptically smiling" as Milosz puts it— with an essential remove. Language is in her hands a potent tool that delineates with penetrating clarity terror, war, hunger and death—ideas that otherwise evade description altogether. *Hunger Camp in Jaslo* takes as it subject the act of writing itself:

Write it. Write. In ordinary ink
on ordinary paper: they were given no food,
they all died of hunger. "All. How many?/
Write: I don't know.
History counts its skeletons in round numbers.
A thousand and one remains a thousand,
as though the one had never existed:
an imaginary embryo, an empty cradle,
an ABC never read (ibid, Poemhunter.com)

When history like a false witness takes refuge in silence, Szymborska turns words into mirrors illumining the enormity of experience that power stills to submission. There seems be in her the conviction that the lives shattered by war speak through poets like her who were lucky enough to survive. The weight of this responsibility lends her voice philosophical proportions. We find her saying: "There's no life that couldn't be immortal if only for a moment. Death always arrives by that very moment too late" (ibid, *On Death Without Exaggeration*).

The larger sense of responsibility that women tend to take towards life is reflected as much in their attitude to history as to other fellow human beings. Another luminary in this line is the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. When Amelina poetry takes the voice of a witness and Szymborska assumes a clear-sighted objectivity, Akhmatova shows how awfully dependent history is on poetry. For Anna of the Russians, writing is romantic as it is provocative and sharply personal. Modigiliani had painted Anna in the nude. In Anna's own words, Modigiliani. who was self-conscious in the company of women, took to her because he deeply admired her capacity to intuitively sense the thoughts and aspirations of others. Even when having to grit one's teeth and bear "such grief that makes the mountains stoop"(*Requiem*, "Dedication") and pain that rends the heart in half, Akhmatova prepares language to look at terror in the eye. Truth stares out of words to engage with time, like Anna posing naked before the painter. Akhmatova had lost her first husband, son, lovers and friends to Stalin's regime. Even then no external authority could ever crush her spirit. She was not beyond human inadequacies either. When her son was taken into custody, she had written a poem in praise of Stalin, although it did not come to help her case.

Akhmatova begins her celebrated long poem *Requiem* with an anecdote, firmly grounding the work's emotional and historical context. In what is fittingly titled *Instead of a Preface*, she offers a defense of the poet's role and the conviction which informs her work:

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line
outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing
behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard

me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):

"Can you describe this?"

And I said: "I can."

Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

(Akhmatova, "Instead of a Preface")

It is in the poet's hand that language acquires the capacity to represent the incredible complexities of the human condition, underscores Akhmatova in these lines. In doing so, she writes history as poetry. Neutrality is only the value of half-truths and history that debilitates the individual is the regime's most loyal aide, she affirms. In the poem that beings with" that was a time when only the dead could smile" (Requiem, "Prologue"), Akhmatova inscribes the history of Leningrad in indelible ink that no authority, however sinister, can obliterate:

For seventeen months I have cried aloud,
calling you back to your lair.
I hurled myself at the hangman's foot.
You are my son, changed into nightmare.
Confusion occupies the world,
and I am powerless to tell
somebody brute from something human,
or on what day the word spells, "Kill!" (ibid, Sec.V)

Time is penetratingly personal in Akhmatova's verse as the lines above show. Yet, an entire generation of Russians breathe through them. Joseph Brodsky remarks in his conversations with Solomon Volkov that people—artists, poets, intellectuals—went to see Akhmatova because she set their souls in motion, because in her presence they seemed to move on from the emotional and spiritual level they were on; and abandoned the language they used for the language she used (Brodsky qtd. in Haven). The personal in Akhmatova is transmuted into the universal that it comes to reflect the whole world. In Brodsky's words, "It is the soul's response to existence that we learned from her"(ibid).In another introduction to her poems Brodsky exhibits confidence that Anna's poems will survive time. "They will survive because language is older than state and because prosody always survives history. In fact, it hardly needs history; all it needs is a poet and Akhmatova was just that" (Brodsky qtd. In Blum).

All the poets we have discussed are those who have liberated language from the muteness inflicted on it. They affirm that history is the reality of experience; that poetry is the intimate conversation that an individual has with time. How else do we reckon with history, that we too are a part of, outside the immunity lent by intimate realities!

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