The Aesthetics of Post Bellum: From Umberto Eco to Abu al-ʿAlaʾ al-Maʿarri

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1. Introduction: a eulogy of war?

War is evil. War is inhuman. War is murder. Almost everyone agrees with these descriptions of war, to the point that they are treated as self-evident or commonsensical tautologies. Humans, from their lived experiences, hate wars, and none (except maybe for sadists) can claim that they wish for war or its bloody results.

The gods weave misfortunes so that future generations will have something to sing about.

Homer, The Odyssey
However, not all of the consequences of war are dreadful. War can make one see the human side of life, as times of misery motivate charity and coexistence more than times of peace. Perhaps this is because those who are caught in the middle of a war become traumatized by what is happening, and feel that they all share the same destiny. Warfare can make one appreciate what one used to take for granted, in the same way that the chirp of a small bird is appreciated more when one longs for it in a frightful hole, than in a meadow filled with beauty and life. Wars as well, can make one’s life seem priceless even if one is intending to commit suicide just minutes before it was unleashed, for one may realize that living equals fighting and to making a difference, even if this difference is frightening one soldier on the enemy side. Durkheim says, in his book, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*:

Great social disturbances and great popular wars rouse collective sentiments, stimulate partisan spirit and patriotism, political and national faith, alike, and concentrating activity toward a single end, at least temporarily cause a stronger integration of society (…) As they force men to close ranks and confront the common danger, the individual thinks less of himself and more of the common cause. (166–167)

Meaninglessness and nihilism have no place in times of war, since oddly enough, the most absurd and chaotic act of fighting provides everybody’s life with intensity, a goal and warmth. In war, suddenly, individuals become citizens, and the blurry notion of people becomes society. Thus, the reason to survive emerges, even if it is just for one more day. Times of war eliminate the neutral state; condemn voyeurism and the guilty pleasure of watching without being watched, and call for an accomplice, who cannot afford the luxury of hesitation, despair or intellectual daydreaming.

War also brings about works of art and literature and may inspire some artistic masterpieces. However, this does not serve as justification to wage a war, morally speaking. In this paper, we argue that although it seems that we do not have moral justification to wage war solely because it may inspire some artistic masterpieces, we can at least appreciate the works of art triggered by war. We reason on the basis of an aesthetic justification according to which we can transform wars towards a common good, building on the individual imagination and social memory. To illustrate such aesthetic justification of the consequences of war, we examine some of the writings in English, French and Arabic literature, such as, Eco’s *Inventing the Enemy*, Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, al-Ma’arri’s *The Epistle of Forgiveness* and *The Arabian Nights*, etc.

Notwithstanding, this paper is not a eulogy of war, nor is it an invitation to look at the cup as half full. It is a call to recognize the artistic prospects of war, such as those related to literature, without praising or legitimizing war itself. Warfare is not only beneficial in uniting individuals, or in pushing them to seek beauty and hope in the darkest of situations, but also in providing them with the urge to create masterpieces and fine arts. Thus, we realize that warfare, one way or another, incites numerous feelings and sentiments in people, that they do not know they possess during times of peace. Perhaps this is so because during peace they are too absorbed in the routine of their jobs and the flow of everyday life. War can change this dull tranquility, since the first reaction it triggers is shock and astonishment. War disturbs the current and provokes thinking not only about the oddity of the “now,” but also about the quietude of “back then,” of those old good days when everything was easier and achievable. Hence, the significance of war rises from the fact that it disturbs “the given” norms and interrogates our relationship with them, and this
questioning and wondering creates something out of the norm, which is art. However, in any case, the creativeness of a work of art cannot be used to claim a good side of war. We may epitomize and commend chivalry, bravery, solidarity etc. during the war, but not war itself as such. Although war inspires great art, it is not true that art is a consequence of evil. Art takes war as a subject, perceives it and makes us see it anew. Still, would people like to live in a world of great art with war or lesser art without war? Yet, even if most people would tend to choose the latter, fortunately, the absence of war does not necessarily mean less art. Despite all that war can do to art and to the aesthetic response, it remains an inhuman and dreadful act, to the point where we must ask: is it ethically acceptable to wish for war in spite of all its bloody consequences, just because it may inspire artistic masterpieces? In other words, is an aesthetic justification enough to accept the atrocity that is war?

To answer this question, through three sections, the paper will focus on how war and art have always been considered a necessity that the human mind throughout history could not escape. We will start with questioning the worthiness of art and its results by discussing Umberto Eco’s *Inventing the Enemy*. Next, after arguing that there is no escape from war even if we do not wish for it to happen, and after reconciling with the question of ethics, we will focus on art as a necessity to mitigate for the awful consequences of war. As for the last part, we will focus on a specific genre in art that is storytelling, since it is the most popular and accessible genre, that everybody can relate to, unlike elitist forms of art, which only intellectuals can benefit from. We will also focus on the art of storytelling in the Arabic language, including, *The Arabian Nights* and the *The Epistle of Forgiveness* to demonstrate how great concerns and tragedies might produce meaningful art. However, this does not entail that such works of art are entirely the “result” of war.

The next three sections connect together since we will start from the general and most common feeling between human beings, which is the appreciation of beauty, or more accurately how much can we sacrifice for the sake of beauty. We will then place beauty against the agony and pain that war causes, and question whether they can be reconciled or there is negotiation between them: can we settle for less art in order to maintain peace? Is that compromise even potentially feasible? Finally, we will try to trace the results of the clash between beauty and evil within specific works of art that belongs to the genre of storytelling, in order to illuminate this moment, when the human, the lingual and the spatial intertwine and give voice to art. Yet, it is worth mentioning at this stage of writing, that it is not art for the sake of art that drives this paper, but art for the sake of expressing and articulating an inevitable human condition. In the conclusion, after summarizing, we will be dealing with a metalingual problem, while questioning the legitimacy of conceptualizing war about war as a theoretical issue, instead of a socio-anthropological political event.

### 2. Art worthiness

There are numerous reasons that may seem more “logical” and “reasonable” for unleashing a war than the sole need for better art. Grand majestic reasons include defending the honor of a state, expanding territory, fighting over power or over the people’s right to live with “dignity,” etc. All these pretexts come in handy for politicians, since these justifications allow them to play the role of “noble” and “just” leaders in the eyes of the people. However, putting all these “reasonable” causes aside, can one claim.
that one needs war, only, to stimulate people’s minds and emotions in order to produce a decent work of art that is deep and meaningful unlike the “plain and common” works produced during times of peace? Can a politician dare to confront the victims of a savage battle, and state to their faces that although they were hurt and their families were killed, their misery was useful in breaking the boredom and redundancy of everyday life and that their misfortunes had inspired an author to write a meaningful book? Or, even worse, that all the agony they are drenched in now will end up in a museum for future generations, to contemplate if not to appreciate? The question in simpler words is “Can aesthetics justify the evilness of war?”

This question may sound a little out of place because the equation that we are facing is simple: war is always bad, but could it be slightly accepted when what comes out of it is “worth” it? On what basis do we judge this worthiness? Is there a way to measure it? Not really. However, there is an implicit agreement in any society that we only fight in order to achieve and get “concrete” results, such as, land, money, power and status. What about literature, music and the rest of the works of art? Aren’t they concrete? Don’t we find them in museums and bookstores? Aren’t novels material objects before they are fictitious events? Aren’t they actual physical things that we can touch, collect and own? The same goes for paintings, statues and music. However, it seems that these materialistic aspects of art are not worth the fight. Since art is meaningful to individuals and is related to taste and personal experience, it may sound absurd to ask an entire society to interfere in order to provoke or inspire one genius, who remains unknown and unpredictable until he starts creating.

The justification or usefulness of the terror that war creates is challenged once we raise the simplest of questions: who benefits from this misery? If the answer is the artist – that one person, be it a writer or a painter, who desperately needs to see people getting hurt, in order to feel the urge and inspiration to create – then it is more proportionally justified to destroy his house and injure him physically, and then wait for him to create art. Evidently, Van Gogh who amputated his own ear might provide a good illustration for what physical pain can create, artistically speaking. Francisco Goya, as well, although he did not initiate his deafness, offers key evidence of how personal misery (along with the Napoleonic invasion) can alter one’s work from royal tapestry and church paintings into true works of art, filled with cynicism, despair and harshness.

However, what if we claim, for the sake of an intellectual exercise, that not only artists benefit from war, but the entirety of society does also? What if art has more privileges that can convince everyone? In the interest of stopping the flow of fertile rhetorical questions, we may need to start from the manifesto of F. T. Marinetti, leader of Futurism, who claimed that in order to have art with new blood we need war that erases the remains of the past:

There is no longer any beauty except the struggle. Any work of art that lacks a sense of aggression can never be a masterpiece […] We wish to glorify war—the sole cleanser of the world […] We wish to destroy museums, libraries, academics of any sort. (40–41)

Here, war is evoked as an obligatory transition phase to achieve innovation. A rite of passage that destroys the old and establishes the new. Accordingly, art becomes a phoenix that rises from the ashes, and if the act of burning never happens, then the
mythical creature would never see the light of day. Perhaps, that is what Charles Baudelaire meant by the last verses of his poem, “The Voyage,” when he said:

Pour out your poison and dissolve our fears!
Its fire so burns our minds, we yearn, it’s true,
to plunge to the Void’s depths, Heaven or Hell, who cares?
Into the Unknown’s depths, to find the new. (180)²

Although one can read this, as an internal strife rather than external, one might wonder if this unknown “new” which we have not experienced yet, is worth the destruction of beauty that was much appreciated to the point of being placed in a museum? In other words, if war destroys artifacts in a museum, is this then justified by the new art created? In his book, Inventing the Enemy, Umberto Eco tried to reveal another face of war. In this case, it is not a transitional necessity, but a moment of identifying oneself and the “us” that gathers a society. Eco argues that no society ever could live without an enemy, and that if it does not find one, it will create it. Accordingly, he enumerates the benefits of war, as follows:

War enables a community to recognize itself as a “nation” […] only war ensures the equilibrium between classes and makes it possible to locate and exploit antisocial elements. Peace produces instability and delinquency among young people; war channels all disruptive forces in the best possible way giving them a “status” […] war makes it possible, at last, to develop a truly “humanistic” art in which conflicted situation predominates.(18–19)

The perquisites that Eco enumerates are mostly about unity and finding a shared goal to fight for, yet interestingly, art is only mentioned at the end of these reasons. Art, according to him, is not any kind of art, but a “humanistic” one, that can reconcile people and make them forget the harshness of war. Art as a substitute, or as an alternative, disposed to compensate and deflect the agony and pain. Thus, art in itself is not a pure aesthetic pleasure for Eco, it is just an instrument, an escape – even if it is just a momentary one – from the harshness of reality. However, if we approve this track of thinking, art would only fulfill a secondary function that is only needed once we have reached post bellum.³ If there was no war in the first place, we will never have the urge to make art. That is, if art were only essential to fix what is already broken, then why would we need it if there were no broken pieces to fix? Hence, yet another response that proves that aesthetics is an absurd justification for war: if art’s only function is to remind us of the human side, then there is no need for it if we already live in peaceful humanitarian conditions.

Nonetheless, the question remains: can we really live in total peace, and assuming we manage to achieve that, and live in total harmony, does that not entail drowning in the mundane and banality of routine life? This question, as bourgeois as it may seem, is manifested in Ernest Hemingway’s life. The famous writer knocked every possible door in order to participate and be an eyewitness to bloodshed, and even when the Army, the Navy, and the Marine Corps turned him down, he volunteered for the Red Cross. He wrote to his sister Marcelline explaining his decision:

But I’ll make it to Europe some way in spite of this optic. I can’t let a show like this go on without getting in on it. There hasn’t been a real war to go to since Grandfather Hemingway’s shooting at the battle of Bull Run.
According to Oliver, the war as a “show” is what led Hemingway to “attend” WWI, WWII, the Spanish civil war and even bullfights in 1959 when he ran out of wars. Yet, Hemingway’s case can be considered an extreme special case; otherwise, we would have heard about other artists who were war hunters as well. Hence, the issue of mundaneness is similar to the need of art, for not everybody expresses the same sensibility or need, nor everyone complains of routine, particularly in poor countries where people’s dreams are to insure a steady income even if that means having the same monotonous job for years on end. Thus, the longing for excitement and spicy events will not appeal to everyone, and it will appear as a luxury that lower classes will never demand.

If this assumption is true, then what passes for social classes can pass for countries as well, and then only rich countries can worry about the need for unleashing wars; as for the rest, they would be too absorbed in their economic and social troubles that war would never cross their minds! The amount of wars that the United States got involved in since WWII (Cold War, Gulf Wars, Iraq War, Afghanistan War, etc.) might show this assumption to be true, and also prove that the need for war represents a luxury that comes with status and prosperity. However, while the U.S. has been selecting which wars to be involved in, the poorest countries were burdened with their share and have been engulfed in wars over internal issues (civil and proxy wars). Although these latter kinds of wars are not as big nor well represented in the media as the former, they can show the urge nations have to engage in war no matter how bad or good their economy is. Therefore, if people, regardless of their material status, cannot help living without fighting then why not make the most of this unavoidable bloody mess, and turn it to something valuable, as art? Would this not be a legitimate track of thinking that intellectuals can use to convince people of the significance of war?

### 3. War as necessity

Assuming that those intellectuals dared to ask for war, and managed to enumerate the reasons that Eco came up with, would people follow them? Well, we do not think so. No matter how much people value art, they will never place it before their own life or their natural instinct to survive. Compared to life and peace, art seems trivial and not worth mentioning. Besides, if we ask a widow or an orphan who lost their loved ones in a massacre, about the famous Guernica and Pianist—that many do not understand but may agree to appreciate since it is related to the name of Picasso—neither of them will accept this piece of art as an anodyne, for their personal loss is immeasurable. Hence, even Eco’s claim that the importance of art is to emphasize the human side in life after the damages caused by war, sounds like a “pretentious argument” that will not convince the families of the victims, nor alleviate their sadness.

Human or non-human, art remains incapable of giving life back to those who were gone, and to those who remained alone after them. As long as art does not bring back the dead (but it does bring back their memory!), there is no way to validate its value in the post bellum. The validation of art is even more impossible in cases where war is still going on. For instance, in the case of Palestine, it is true that Palestinians love Emil Habibi and they may all identify with his famous character Saeed Abu Nahs El-Motchail, since they are all in the middle of this blurry spectrum, torn between optimism and pessimism; between death and surviving to the next day where
something may happen and change their reality. Palestinians may also adore Mahmoud Darwish’s poems and appreciate the fact that he is famous internationally; however, they would settle for less decent authors and less charming language, if that compromise would pay off with some rest in peace.

After stating all the reasons that weaken aesthetics as a justification for war, let us move to the other side, where aesthetics is a necessity. Even Plato in his Republic, despite exiling the poets, keeps on citing their verses (Bloom). No matter what he did, he could not get rid of poetry, nor stop it from becoming a part of his work. Even when ridiculing it, he was still making it a matter of study and contemplation. People cannot negate their attachment to art, despite their diverse preferences, since it has been, from the beginning of time, their only medium to express the ineffability of their being – starting from the cave paintings that indicate this innate need to express one’s amazement and fear facing life. It is even more striking that a meaningful amount of these cave paintings illustrates scenes of hunting or fight to provide food in order to survive. Moving from the iconic to the linguistic stage, the need to uncover the self became even stronger, and literature was created thanks to this urge. Since the beginning, literature was in the core and a crucial part of language, and it was always this urge to express a feeling aesthetically that stimulated creating an endless corpus of words. That is probably what Calvino was trying to argue for, in his book La machine littérature, where he describes how language was all conventional and purely functional until the appearance of the narrator. This mysterious figure, in order to tell stories, started to play with words and experiment with all the possible relations between them in order to create new meanings (Calvino 7–8).

The need for art proves to be as old as language itself. Yet, if art can be traced to the beginning of language, doesn’t that mean that it is related to language in its pure communicative phase, before the distinction between function and aesthetic; before the distinction between intellectuals and the masses? The act of storytelling that people enjoyed freely and openly in the arenas, stands in contrast to what we claimed before, when we argued that art is mostly destined to intellectuals who can afford it. These lay people, used to gather every day after a long day of servitude and hard work to listen to epics and intriguing battles, involving heroes such as Antara Ibn Shaddad (Sirat Antara) and Abu Zid Al-Hilali, (Taghribat Bani Hilal) with their eyes wide open in disbelief, listening to how they killed hundreds of enemies with one single move. The harsher life gets, the more people – especially the less fortunate ones – need to listen to heroic stories with happy endings. The stories of war and heroic fights must be the fuel that kept them living to the next day. We are not romanticizing here the postponement of misery using fairytales, but we are only contemplating how they maintained living in dark times. Perhaps this explains why people still make movies on wars that ended a long time ago, such as Troy, Kingdom of Heaven, and The Book Thief. No matter how dreadful war is, it always comes with thousands of stories that are worth telling.

If Wallace Stevens is right in his argument that, “The death of Satan was a tragedy for the imagination,” (qtd. in Forsyth ix) then we may as well assume that the disappearance of war will be no less of a frightening tragedy. In the same manner, one of the main characters in Fight Club expresses the same idea, by indicating that the problems of the modern generation and all its pathological issues are due to the absence of war:
We don’t have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. (110)

This excerpt justifies war, in terms of the need for it. Without wars or “external” fights, people will have to focus on their own selves and that would lead to nothing but depression. In other words, it might be better to worry about a common problem that is obviously in front of us, than to be drenched in complex deep issues that we cannot even find the right words to express. Here comes the need for the arts, for it fulfills the same function, by transforming the unspeakable or the ineffable into a material product that we can touch and see. It articulates the agony and gives it a collective voice. Of course, sometimes the artist can be both the tongue of the people and their hand that fights such as Antara Ibn Shaddad. Thus, war and art prove their necessity for the human spirit, for the first takes the mind from its inescapable intimate anxieties and the second provides it with the right language when there is no chance to run away.

4. War and storytelling

Since wars are happening, with or without our consent, we might as well accept the art it triggered, with a clear conscience and with pure aesthetic appreciation. It may sound harsh to declare that hostilities, after some time, – whether we like it or not – stop being shocking, even if it remains tragic. We will keep asking for justice, but the question fades like everything else, and we will keep waiting for big numbers of victims that may bring that shock back. With time, habit, and the need to console one’s self, grief turns to stories. We create the latter to convince ourselves that we are not the only unfortunate ones who lived this situation. We also turn to the past and sanctify it as a happy period when everything was going well; the past becomes the nourishing womb for fairytales.

Nothing lasts after the end of wars but their stories. A clear example of this is Harb Al-Basus (Basus’s war) that lasted for forty years between two tribes (Banu Taghlib and Banu Aban) because the king of one of them killed the camel of a woman called Al-Basus. From this whole period, all that remains today are the heroic tales of Kolaib’s and the heretic poems of his brother Al-Mohalhil, the first Arab poet. What happened to the soldiers who were fighting against their cousins? What became of the broken-hearted women and children who lost their loved ones? It is all gone; all these non-heroic figures are forgotten, and even when mentioned, they function as backstage “stories” that feed the bigger heroic/heretic tale. They are just a blurry mass of people who happened to be there. This might show that it is just a matter of time until countless tragedies turn to nothing but events and numbers. Yet as coldblooded as this might sound, at least art gave these catastrophes a voice and protected them from erasure and oblivion. Hence, art and war prove more and more to be intertwined, which leads to another question: how many stories that form our collective memory would we lose if there were no wars? Or, more ironically, how many sacred texts would have no reason to exist, if there is no duality and eternal fight between good and evil?

As unanswerable as these questions are, they all lead to one conclusion: war is a necessary evil that we need to cope with. What is even worse is that for us to feel and appreciate happiness, we need first to suffer and fight, for happiness is relational. It is only a state of relief
that comes after suffering and agony, or a cautious sentiment of appreciating what we have while facing the unpredictable future. Religious thinking validates this track of reasoning, when it promises believers paradise and redemption, but only if they pass the test in earth. A clear example of this is in the Qur'an where God addresses his believers, saying,

you who believe! Be patient, and advocate patience, and be united, and revere God, so that you may thrive. (Aya 200)

It seems that an enormous part of being a believer is about dealing with life as a test, a harsh one, which people must endure patiently in order to prove how faithful they are. In fact, the Arabic language demonstrates this necessity by creating al-intihān (test) and mihna (misfortune) from the same linguistic root. Thus, if we cannot live without miseries nor escape pain, then the logical deduction is to make the most of it, by creating works of art. At least within this perception, we can enjoy a feeling of agency, and holiness, for only God (and artists), can claim that:

He brings the living out of the dead and brings the dead out of the living and brings to life the earth after its lifelessness. (Aya 19)

Getting back to art, and particularly literature, we may ask what these works would lose if there were neither wars nor crimes. First, there would be no epics, since they are by definition stories of war between heroes and supernatural forces. If there were no epics, there would be no novels either, since, as Lukacs writes,

novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem. (56)

Dystopian writings will not be needed either, since in the absence of war, we will not be able to picture communities or societies that are undesirable or frightening, such as the ones described in 1984, Fight Club, or Fahrenheit 451. Stories of romance would vanish as well, since the plot is always about an impossible relation, that one needs to fight for in order to earn. Moreover, there would be no Arabian Nights; that corpus of stories that was all stimulated by one simple existential threat: “Tell me a story, or I will kill you.” Those words, loaded with power and violence, were enough to make Shahrazad, the fictitious narrator, able to invent stories within stories for over three years. In other words, the world would be in such harmony that writing and longing for utopian places would seem pointless. Accordingly, there would be no need for these genres nor others if we assume that the whole point of art is to comfort humans for hostilities they encounter daily. For art is a bandage, and there would be no need for bandages without wounds. Without grief and misfortunes, people would not have the urge to produce painkillers, for there would be no pain anyway. And even when they produce them, just for the sake of producing, they would seem ostentatious and out of place; they would never find an audience. Art only feeds on tension, fear and the disturbing certainty that something is going wrong. Or, as Andre 1975 says: “It is with noble sentiments that bad literature gets written.” (504) That is, if there were no fight, perhaps people would wish for one, and then write about the utopian need for evil and chaos. They would go even further, just in order, to appreciate the system they belong to, and to feel that they have earned the contentment they are enjoining.

Abu al-ʿAlaʾ al-Мaʾarri, Arab poet and writer, a thousand years ago illustrated this twisted need for an incomplete world in order to produce art. In his book, Resalat Al-
Ghufran (The Epistle of Forgiveness), he proves how absurd it would be to write or discuss poetry in a perfect world as in the afterlife. The book tells the story of Ibn al-Qārih’s absurd journey, contrasting his obsession over poetry and language, with the pleasure the other characters enjoy while experiencing and discovering the wonders of the new world. Thus, as the fortuned poets in heaven were enjoying wine and the company of beautiful women, and the other unfortunate ones were suffering in inferno, our deluded hero – consumed by his knowledge of books and poetry – kept wandering between the two (heaven and hell) asking about interpretations of poems, and grammatical problems. Evidently, he did not get any response, since the poets in heaven were preoccupied with their joy and the ones in hell engrossed in agony and pain, to reflect on abstract thoughts. The only exception was Imru’ al-Qais, the most famous pre-Islamic poet, but ironically enough, Imru’ al-Qais was one of the unfortunate ones who got to al-Ma’arri’s hell. Thus, our hero comes back from his quixotic quest with nothing in his hands, but the realization of the alienating distance between knowledge and the comfort of the afterlife (it is comforting even for those in hell, because finally, there is no wonder about what may come next). Thus, Ibn al-Qārih realizes that eternity has a different logic of existence, and that the need for art ends in the ephemeral world, where incompleteness and loss stimulates creativity. Once that ephemerality and damage are fixed, there would be no reason to create nor the urge to make something unique. However, in a world as the one al-Ma’arri describes, not only loss and lack are absent, but gray areas as well, for the red lines are too obvious with no room for ambiguity nor for interpretation, and with those gone; the multiplicity of perspectives as well as the polyphony of voices vanish, thus making art impossible.

5. Conclusion: aesthetics as a weapon

Despite the atrocities that strike us in wars and their inhumanity, we may still find some good in them, especially if we realize that living itself is nothing but a fight with one’s self, nature or unconsciousness. Yet, at least in war the fight and enemy are so obvious and right in front of us, to the point that we do not have a choice but to know them and know ourselves through their eyes. However, as harsh as war might be, we can always take some advantage out of it; especially, concerning the aesthetic and historical part that build our social memory and individual imagination. Otherwise, why did historians choose battles as points of reference when writing history, and why did people attribute such importance to knights and make popular legends out of them? Does that not mean that we only estimate, remember and tell the stories of those who proved powerful and able to defend themselves? Thus, if war and fighting are inescapable parts of our need to survive, we may as well embrace them to create something beautiful and meaningful such as art and literature.

Let us now ask the question we started this paper with: can we theorize about the aesthetics of war, as outsiders, who have never witnessed a war or suffered from its casualties? All the examples we introduced were purely textual. Of course, these illustrations are legitimate within the concerns of the paper, since our goal was to draw attention to the reciprocity between art and war. Our background in the humanities and social sciences contributed as well, in directing our gaze to the written and recorded material, because our discipline is mostly built on texts and “recognized” arts. Therefore, academically speaking, textual sources are coherent with our system of knowledge, and proportional to the demands of the subject discussed. Yet, another
problematic point in our selection of examples is the time period they belong to. Plenty of wars are happening currently; yet, we went back to Basus’s war that happened more than fifteen centuries ago, and to the fictitious world of al-Ma’arri, and poetic contemplations of Baudelaire. These figures and their stories are classics, appreciated and worth studying, yet they do not share this present moment with us.

It seems that it is easier to speak about the past, and people who are already dead or fictitious to illustrate an idea such as art as a justification of war. Yet it is not a question of ease, but of how complex and paradoxical the subject of study is. Perhaps the subject demanded this chosen time zone because such a matter requires lengthy speculation to trace how far war actually affected art, from different regions, eras and modes of creation. The present moment – the here and now – is absorbing, too emotional and personal. We cannot direct an academic gaze, unless we put enough distance, in order to see it clearly. Arabs were aware of this fact, when they derived the verb bayyana (to clarify, or to enunciate) from the root bayn, which means “in between,” and “to distance.” Yet, alienating ourselves from the subject matter is just a beginning; it is a primary stage of studying war “neutrally,” before we actually turn to the present and see if this art which used to be a consequence of war, can actually be used in the pre-war stage.

Now that we understand that war is inescapable through the course of history, we can learn, from it, how to make aesthetics the persistent and omnipresent. It is true that art has existed forever, but we need to make it an independent act, not a consequence or a side effect of misery, and if the realm of fighting is unavoidable, then let us just treat art as a weapon, instead of bandage, for moral training. Our world needs an art that shocks and disturbs, more than it needs an art that explains, especially, given that our heritage has plenty of explanatory texts, full of wisdom and moral lessons.

Notes

1. Interestingly, empirical evidence shows that during wartime the suicide rate declines because people find purpose in their life. See e.g. Stephen J. Rojcewicz, “War and Suicide,” Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 1971, Vol. 1, Issue 1, pp. 46–54. Muqtaba Osman and Andrew C. Parnell, “Effect of the First World War on Suicide Rates in Ireland,” BJPsych Open. 2015, 1(2): 164–165.

2. Dostoyevsky, like Baudelaire, believes that evil is somehow necessary. See his The Brothers Karamazov, Penguin Classics, 2003. Bernard Mandeville also believes that private vices are public benefits. See his The Fable of the Bees, Penguin Classics, 1989. In the Islamic tradition, Al-Ghazali (and Rumi) believe that ignorant people are necessary for this world. See e.g. Al-Ghazali, Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm ad-dīn [The Revival of the Religious Sciences] and Rumi, Masnavi-ye-Ma’navi [The Spiritual Couplets].

3. For more on Jus Post Bellum, see: Frowe, H., 2015. The Ethics of War and Peace, Routledge, ch. 12. For more on the ethics of killing in war, see: McMahan, J., 2011. Killing in War, Oxford University Press.

4. We can find an example of this in Malika Moustadrif’s short story “Mawt” [death] where she describes the situation of a family having lunch and discussing how well-done is the meat (and other trivialities) while they are watching the news of Gaza: http://www.miniculture.gov.ma/index.php/2010-01-11-01-40-04/naration/373-2010-01-09-14-00-27.

5. Of course, this does not entail that the function of art is only to protect wars from oblivion. There are some stories that can make people see the hideousness of war. For example, Sadat Hassan Manto’s Cold Meat (war of partition of India) or the Qur’an’s mentioning of the war of Abraha is not only to protect the story/war from oblivion. There is purpose,
a message, a grander message, which only uses the historical or imagined events for a different purpose altogether.

6. Possibly the threat is not an existential threat that the real author faced! This treat is a literary device faced by a character in the story.

7. As an alternative to al-Maʿarri, one can refer to Rumi who believes that one can talk about love forever.

8. Like most of Khayamian type of figures, such interpretation by al-Maʿarri can also be read as a poet’s rejection of the afterlife.

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