

Review of: "Ungaretti: the Soldier and the Poet"

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The article is a wartime biography of Giuseppe Ungaretti during the First World War, which highlighted his self-awareness as an Italian, his poetic compositions and his military experience. The geographical setting was the Italian war theatre of Isonzo and the French war theatre of Brienne-le Chateau/Gigny-Brandon, which stressed his combat duties related to the development of the self. The narrative, divided into sections, employed a chronological style of yearly and monthly plot of wartime experiences based on written communications between himself and his friends. It also draws upon battlefield accounts of Italian military history and psychological studies.

The introductory section presents the soldier-poet within the context of late nineteenth-century British colonization of Egypt where the soldier-poet was born and early twentieth-century French intellectualism, where he had his university education and earlier political outlook. This socio-cultural background created the need for his self-awareness as an Italian. The author provides robust biographical content that affirms the argument that the soldier-poet's nationalist viewpoint was a product of his early life in North Africa and France.

In the 1914 section, the author narrated the official politics of Europe preceding the war and Italy's participation in it. The crucial part of this international politics was the recovery of occupied Italian territories, *Italia Irredenta* (Unredeemed Italy) as noted by Peter Hart in *The Great War* (2013), from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This served the socio-political background to the journey of reaffirming and rebranding Ungaretti's identity through Italian nationalism. In this excellent section, the author drew upon psychological explanations that affirm the path of war the soldier-poet adopted to reiterate his self-awareness.

The 1915-1916 section commenced the wartime narrative of the soldier-poet drawing attention to his military posting, friends and the locations he served as well as the poems he wrote in those areas. The Italian warfront was the Isonzo battlefield, geometrically framed by the Quotas of Italian military mapping, cited in the beginning quotation. The author informs the reader at the outset of the personal geography of the soldier-poet captured in his poetic compositions through the date and place of creation. Again, the author employs sparse and dense descriptions of existing spaces and places using identifiable toponyms to provide literary cartography of the battlefields of Isonzo.

The section on 1917 began with the soldier-poet's unit in the rear, which allowed a flow of poetic compositions. The author shows the village geography of Santa Maria La Longa was an inspiration for several poems, including, "Cielo e Mare (Sky and Sea), in which the lyrical subject is completely immersed and melded together with nature" (p.24). In another poem, "My Ancestors", the author argued that the soldier-poet's concerns with "his own origin and his roots"

remained the central expression of his wartime subjectivity. The rest of the section narrates battles, writing poems, internal struggles, NCO training and the desire to transfer from combat duties. The spatio-temporal character of his poems later served as the basis to interrogate further the case of six poems claimed to have been written in Lokvica, which did not fall to Italian troops until a month later. This very interesting geographical question was left unresolved in this section or paper but it will be exciting to look forward to “Subsequent studies....to explain that inconsistency” (p.39).

The 1918 section narrated the soldier-poet's work in censorship and in combat duties in the frontlines for which he was awarded a military medal (p.35). These duties occurred in places in Italy and France. These duties and their locations influenced the soldier-poet's writing of poems but he also encountered different personal moods, which led to piling or hoarding poetry in his heart. Therefore, the author's explanations of the psychological condition of the soldier-poet further expand the introspective character of battlefield soldering stressing issues of collective and individual identity.

There is noticeable weakness in this interesting narrative of the soldier-poet. There is no hint about the command or staff appointment of Puccini in the Italian army, one of the key figures in Ungaretti's biography. Although introduced as an intellectual (p.5), he was also in a position to transfer or offer the soldier-poet a military translator duty (pp.26, 13). It would be useful to know what military appointment he held during this time of the conflict. Similarly, Prezzolini, described in the [end/foot] notes as a wartime company instructor and later posted to the frontline, was requested by the soldier-poet ‘to procure him treatment in hospital’ (p.36). It would also be valuable if readers could have the additional knowledge of the military appointment that affords Prezzolini to fulfil this request. Unlike Soffici, the military appointments of Puccini and Prezzolini are not stated (p.31).

In addition, the interchange of the term 19th regiment and 19th brigade introduces an ambiguity in the use of this military terminology. Is the Brescia Brigade also the 19th Brigade, which as the narrative shows, includes the 19th and 20th regiments (p.5, 6, 12, 28, 31-33)? However, there are references to the 19th brigade (pp.17, 28 and 31) – is this the Brescia brigade or the 19th regiment? Hence, there is a need for consistency in the use of terms to denote the basic and higher army formations in which the soldier-poet served. There are some typographical errors, for example, ‘attached’ instead of attacked, ‘transferral’ instead of transfer (pp.6, 27, 28). Some paragraphs are quite long; making them shorter might encourage a more enjoyable and a quicker grasp of the interesting narrative, particularly the very important question of the geographical location of where some poems were composed (pp.19-20; 20-21).

Again, there is a need for a very explicit central argument. The biographical evidence is well marshalled already, but there seems an absence of a central argument that entwines or weaves together effectively the military, psychological and poetic aspects of the narrative. This central argument should be made explicit in the abstract and the introduction. One of the ways to do this, a suggestion, is to reconsider this statement (and slightly modify it, if necessary) as the central argument, “In the ritual of the bloody military baptism, the military enabled the poet and his co-fighters to experience a spiritual melding and rebirth, thus solidifying his national belonging” (p.38). Since it is a wartime biography, the soldier-poet's experience of the military/war ought to be the fundamental link to weave together the psychological and poetic developments as the above-cited statement reveals.

This general argument should stress this biographical work as a contrast to the usual/available general histories of the

Great War. It should also highlight the sub-arguments. I think the question of geographical placement of the poems should be a sub-argument, as is the issue of self-awareness of the soldier-poet, since both issues were presented as such in the concluding section (p.39). These two key findings should be reflected more clearly in the abstract. Likewise, the introductory section ought to include a (socio-psychological) conceptual framework that weaves together the sub-argument on self-awareness in the narrative.

Although war is primarily about securing victory through the destruction of the enemy's military capability and resistance, Giuseppe Ungaretti's artistic spirit unveiled poems that were influenced by geographical aesthetics and psychological conditions. These poems emerged from his encounters with diverse local geographies of the battlefields and the introspective nature of the battlefield sufferings of the combatants. The histories of wars are presented as ordered accounts in books, but the messy realities of battles and internal/personal struggles of the combatants are chaotic and cluttered, and not always logically ordered. Sometimes, there is a slight representation of this disordered reality in documentation such as letters of soldiers from the frontline. The geographical question of the poetic composition at Lokvica probably echoes this chaotic situation.

Vanda Srebotnjak's biographical article of Giuseppe Ungaretti offers readers an impression of this disordered reality of the Great War, but it is presented chronologically to make it easier to comprehend. This interesting historical biography, based on a mixture of the soldier-poet's letters and military historical documentation, also highlights elements of battlefield psychology. Apart from some minor typographical errors and a few missing pieces of information, the author's wartime biography of Ungaretti is an important contribution to literary studies, political science and military history. It draws attention to the perspective of an individual soldier in the Great War, the political conviction that supported his military actions, the creative outburst of his experiences, and their psychological entwinements in a conflict that played a critical role in shaping the cultural history of Europe and the socio-political geography of the world.