An Introduction To War and Literature: Ajax Versus Ulysses

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At the time this collection of essays was in the planning stage, the world seemed to be entering a period of peace; as the collection now goes to press, however, the threat of war in the Persian Gulf has become a global preoccupation. Although this shift has had no direct bearing on the contents of this volume, in view of the way that the current crisis has a media-versus-might quality, the present situation does give a timely and practical edge to the basic question which seems to inform each of the essays: namely, what is the connection between historical events (particularly war) and war literature (including literary scholarship)?

Significantly, the answers provided here are far from being unanimous, just as each essay proceeds by considering a variety of competing possibilities. At the same time, however, it is possible to identify a number of basic positions, and because all of these essays tend to have a twentieth-century focus, perhaps the best way of profiling the various approaches is to use as a touchstone an ancient text concerned with the connection between literature and war. In this way, I hope that this introduction can serve not merely as a context for the present collection but also as a theoretical index to the kinds of issues that in general need to be addressed by those concerned with this subject.

Although many ancient texts might serve this purpose—a point worth reflecting on in itself—the one that seems ready made for it is the debate between Ajax and Ulysses for the right to the armor of Achilles, as depicted by Ovid in Book XIII of his *Metamorphoses*. Strictly speaking, of course, the debate is concerned with which aspect of military endeavor is more important: physical prowess or planning strategy. Yet insofar as Ajax represents the man of action and Ulysses the man of words, insofar as the debate involves rhetorical skill, insofar as the

articulation takes the form of a narrative recall of the war by each contestant, and finally insofar as the confrontation itself is a fictive construction of an episode in the Trojan war, the purely military subject of the debate cannot be divorced from its linguistic dimension. A would-be piece of "actuality reporting," in short, the debate between Ajax and Ulysses is simultaneously a metafictional consideration of the connection between war and literature.

As Ovid presents it, then, from one perspective the relationship can be seen as an antagonistic one based upon fundamental differences. Not only are Ajax and Ulysses rivals, but the impassioned and aggressive manner in which the former states his case contrasts with the controlled and structured arguments of the latter; Ajax's presentation is characterized by vivid recall and documentation, whereas Ulysses's has a distanced and interpretive quality. Similarly, Ajax's primary concern is to emphasize how he differs from Ulysses: that his talent is for fighting, whereas Ulysses is essentially a talker, and moreover a liar; emphasizing his own direct involvement in the war and his connection by blood-lines to Achilles, Ajax questions Ulysses's putative ancestry and relegates him to the war's side-lines, arguing that insofar as Ulysses did see action he was dependent upon the warrior Diomedes, and furthermore that at a crisis point in the war Ulysses was a deserter who had to be rescued (in more ways than one) by Ajax. Finally, Ajax concludes by arguing that, in matters of war, words are useless and that only physical modes of expression are appropriate for determining who wins and who loses: "Why talk? What good are words? Let us be seen / In action" (trans. Rolfe Humphries).

On this level, then, Ovid provides a classical precedent for a number of current perspectives on the war/literature connection: the view that first-hand experience is an essential requirement for those who write about war and that biographical background is necessary to interpret such texts; that the facts must speak for themselves and that the less sophisticated the writer the more accurate will be the account; that diaries and journalistic accounts are the most appropriate literary forms for capturing the realities of war; that war literature calls for a different mode of evaluation than that used to assess traditional literary works; that, as a rational mode of discourse, literature invariably distorts and domesticates the violent and irrational nature of war and that herein the historian of war and the war novelist go hand-in-hand. To the extent that Ovid uses Ajax as a focus for these attitudes, we could call this critical orientation the "Ajax syndrome," with its major characteristic being the tendency to see the war/literature connection in stark oppositional terms and to see violence as the exclusive domain of physical combat.

As much as Ajax and Ulysses seem to be different, however, so much does Ovid present them as having many things in common—the first of which is their mutually agonistic nature. That Ulysses tends to fight with words rather than with weapons does not make him any less an embodiment of a militant spirit. Far from presenting himself as anti-war, his major concern is to emphasize his instrumentality in promoting it—and not merely in an intellectual but in a physical manner as well: thus in response to Ajax's charge that his unscarred shield shows no evidence of active involvement, he bares his breast to show his wounds and argues that Ajax

is the one who has experienced no personal suffering. Refusing to admit to Ajax's charge that he is merely a talker, he counters by arguing that it is Ajax who is the "loud-mouthed" hero with "big talk." Similarly, although Ulysses emphasizes that he differs from Ajax by reason of the fact that in his own character "knowledge governs brute force," by the same token he admits that the Ajax aspect is also something that is part of his internal constitution. Military metaphors, moreover, constitute his basic rhetorical strategy, just as the dialectical nature of the debate format encodes the spirit of conflict.

Presenting Ulysses as the avatar of the soldier-poet or the war- veteran novelist, Ovid's point, in short, is that literature itself is structured on the same principle of combat which is the essence of war, and if we label this view the "Ulysses syndrome" we can again use it to group various current attitudes toward the war/literature connection: that protest literature frequently undermines its own project by reason of the way its style and mode of narration encode the ideology which informs war; that admission of impurities or self-interrogation is essential for the war historian and that the literature which best captures the essence of war is dramatic and internally agonistic; that those apparently on the side-lines or without overt scars may have suffered as much as those on the front; that large-scale conflicts may be projections of smaller, personal and interior ones.

To note that war and literature have much in common, however, raises the question of how to account for their affinities. Significantly, this is also an issue which Ovid addresses, and in doing so he not only further provides a paradigm for current orientations but also draws our attention to the ontological premises that inform them.

The most conventional way to account for the connection is in mimetic terms: war literature is a transcript of historical battles, a verbal imitation of what happened. Such a view, however, also implies a chronological relationship between war and literature—and more specifically involves granting temporal priority to war. Exploring this dimension, Ovid not only allows Ajax to speak first but has him base his claims to the prize on the grounds that he was a participant in the war long before Ulysses was involved. If this translates into the so-called naive belief that realism is an important criterion in evaluations of war literature, it also finds support in considerations of how experience of war and changes in the nature of war are mirrored in changes in the literature about it. Similarly, the tendency to see journalists as parasites is reflective of a mimetic attitude, as is the prevailing view that to be classified as war literature works need to have war as their primary concern or have a factual basis. In turn, one might notice that of all types of literature, war literature seems the most resistant to the notion that literary texts are autonomous constructs without any referential status or grounding in reality. Equally, of all types of autobiographical literature, war memoirs most resist being viewed as solipsistic exercises, and the more they tend to be self-reflexive and private the more they tend to lose their status as war literature.

A major reason for this, of course, is that war is a public matter, and hence that facticity can be checked. Not surprisingly, therefore, war "fictions" are typically narrated from the point of view of the deserter or the sole survivor of a conflict,

just as it could be argued that the real tension in metahistorical works and metafictional journalism derives from the intransigency of the facts and their refusal to be explained away in terms of authorial unreliability. Finally, it could be argued that a good definition of propaganda is war literature that is non-referential, just as one might notice that a recurrent feature of war literature is a protest against unrealistic depictions of war and a demand for verisimilitude.

To see the war/literature connection in mimetic and chronological terms, however, involves more than matters of narrativity; granting priority to war also calls into question peace-oriented views of genesis—"In the beginning was the Word"—and accordingly the belief that violence is a result of a "fall." Similarly, to the extent that chronology and mimesis involve notions of causality, what is also called into question is the notion that violence is necessarily to be condemned. Thus if one way to read the causal connection is in terms of action and reaction—to see literature as a civilized response to the atrocities of war—the other way is to see violence as a stimulus to creativity. As much as some of its effects might seem undesirable, for example, war must be credited for its introduction of new words into our vocabulary, new ways of describing the participants, new artistic subjects, and new literary talents. Particularly illustrative in this context is the way that the emergence of feminism coincides with the active involvement of women in war and the way that war is seen as the factor which encourages solidarity by encouraging debate.

If Ajax thus represents the view that art imitates life, Ulysses represents the view that life imitates art. Specifically, his strategy for dealing with the question of priority is to shift attention from the larger perspective to a consideration of the more immediate context—whereby he is able to claim that actually he came first. Thus Ulysses enters as evidence the extent to which his words were responsible for arousing the militant spirit in Achilles. Similarly his tactic is to shift attention from the present to the future; dismissing Ajax as one who merely fights, Ulysses presents himself as one who sets the time for fighting. Ulysses's claims to priority thus have their correlatives in the prodromic role of propaganda in war and the use of future-war stories as a means of inciting militarism. Equally, by arguing that words precede war, Ulysses reverses the notion that military metaphors pervade war literature because it is mimetic and in so doing identifies the dynamics whereby militaristic discourse takes its terminology from such apparently peacetime activities as games and sports. The view that literature is not mimetic of war may in turn be seen as the forerunner of the notion that literature is non-referential, and accordingly support for the Ulyssean view that war imitates literature may be found in the way that historians of war have been influenced by post-modernist literary theories.

One effect of giving literature priority and making war mimetic is to textualize war itself, and indeed this very notion seems to inform not only the definition of war as "the art of military operations" but also protests concerning the "unreal" nature of war. War seems "unreal" in short, not merely because of the way it has been romanticized in literature but because of the way it is modeled upon esthetic principles and is an imitation of something that is imaginary and artificial. In this sense, the technologizing of modern warfare is predated by the technologizing of the word, and it is no accident that as a man of words Ulysses was also the inventor of the first "tank"—the Trojan horse.

As we have seen, however, causal connections can also take the form of action and reaction, and to the extent that Ulysses expropriates for words the destructive role traditionally assigned to war, so much does he also transfer to war the constructive function usually assigned to literature. Thus it is via Ajax that Ulysses is brought to speak openly about his treacheries and in the process to reinstate himself as someone whose words can be trusted. As such, the debate provides the sounding board for the recurrent refrain in modern war literature that experience of combat results in the recognition of what human nature is really like and calls for a rethinking of the bases upon which civilization is structured. If "truth is the first casualty of war," in short, this casualty may also constitute the first blow to the real enemy.

One further ramification of Ulysses's claim to priority that needs to be considered, therefore, is whether changes in the depiction of war in literature would result in changed attitudes toward war. Such a question goes hand in hand with the view that literature causes war by virtue of the way it keeps war present and prevents past wars from being forgotten. Accordingly the argument would seem to be that war would be eliminated if war literature were eliminated and that literature devoted to the depiction of peace would result in a peace-oriented society. Implicit in such a view is the idea that cultural amnesia is a good thing, and here we should notice that Ulysses's strategy for claiming priority involves precisely this principle: it is by narrowing the time frame to the immediate present that he is able to argue that he came first and is able to determine the future.

Ovid's own strategy for addressing these issues, in turn, takes the form of restoring the larger perspective, a strategy which involves seeing Ajax and Ulysses as contemporaries, each of whom ultimately tries to claim priority by tracing his ancestry back to Jove. In this sense, then, neither came first, and both war and literature must be seen as primordial human impulses. Thus, if war is irrational and literature is rational, both the tendency to disorder and the tendency to order must alike be seen as "natural" and complementary. As Ovid presents it, moreover, their debate itself takes place in the context of a history of the world, and both are therefore part of a system which neither can fully comprehend. Accounts of war and attempts to account for it must therefore always be partial in both senses of the term, and hence perhaps humility is the primary requirement of those who attempt these tasks.

If this tracing back to Jove involves locating the origins of war in something outside the individual, however, Ovid's biological theory of genesis and emphasis upon the mutual paternity and twinship of Ajax and Ulysses also locates the agonistic principle within the human psyche. In doing so, he therefore provides a way of explaining why those who have never experienced war can write about it so well or respond so intelligently to what has been written about it. In this way, he also provides a new/old way of accounting for the autobiographical impulse in war literature and encourages us to see self-awareness of this kind as the index to

the degree of authenticity and distortion in war literature and as the factor which lies behind the sense of culpability and complicity on the part of readers. Truth in war literature, in short, may be more of a psychological than a scientific matter, and questions of referentiality and the role of consensus need to be addressed in this light. If the "new journalism" brings us closer to the dynamics of war, to deal with such literature also requires what might be called the "new mimeticism."

That the connection between literature and war needs to be understood in terms of ultimate issues is also suggested by the way in which Ovid presents the cause of the debate between Ajax and Ulysses—not merely the death of Achilles but also the refusal to admit its finality. Thus the prelude to the debate takes the form of a memento mori—

> "Now he is only dust, and of Achilles,
> Of all that might, nothing, or almost nothing,
> Remains, a pitiful handful, scarce sufficient
> To stop a hole to keep the wind away."

—which is followed by a denial that this is his true measure:

> "But still his glory lives, and in that glory
> He fills the whole wide world....
> The gates of hell shall not prevail. His shield
> Still wages war, and arms are taken up
> Over his arms, that men may know, and know truly,
> Who owned them once."

The right to bear the arms of Achilles, in short, is directly related to the question of who will best keep his spirit alive. Thus both war and literature can be viewed as attempts by the human race to triumph over the fact of death and mortality—the former through perpetuation of the fighting spirit and the latter by immortalizing it. Both are protests against the human condition and both are hubristic attempts to take control. To emphasize this fact, Ovid notes that many of the would-be qualified claimants to Achilles's arms declined to come forward, and that "Only two captains had the nerve and daring / To claim so great a prize."

The prize is great because the issue at stake is deathlessness and because mortality is the real opponent. And in this context we begin to see that it is not so much questions of epistemology but rather of metaphysics that lie behind various concerns with war narratology. If death is reality, for example, then to emphasize the non-referentiality of war literature is to remove it from this fate. If death equals defeat, then to turn war into romance is a way of triumphing over this fact. If war literature serves to give permanence to war, perhaps it is the very fact that war has an ephemeral quality that prompts the writing about it. In other words, not death in war but death itself may be the real subject of war literature, and in this sense Ajax's desire to immortalize Achilles by perpetuating war is less irrational than it may at first appear, just as we may find herein the motivation for the soldier who re-enlists when his tour of duty is complete.

In his handling of the conclusion of the debate, Ovid equally suggests that life

and death issues are at stake, for the decision of the judges to award the prize to Ulysses has the effect of prompting Ajax to kill himself. On the one hand his suicide can be read as indicative of the self-destructive nature of war, but on the other this self-destructiveness can be interpreted to mean that only war can stop war, which is the interpretation he himself provides for his action: "no man but Ajax / Will ever conquer Ajax." As such, the death of Ajax exemplifies the tendency of apocalyptic and millennial war literature to go hand in hand.

The victory of Ulysses, in turn, also has two sides: although one way to see it is in terms of a progressivist view that word-fighting constitutes an advance over physical aggression, it could also be said that he is given the prize because of how his skill in marshalling his arguments attests to his militant abilities; far from appealing to a desire for peace, Ulysses's strategy has been to emphasize the remaining need for his agency if the Greeks are to triumph over the Trojans. That Ulysses is victorious, furthermore—both in the debate and subsequently in masterminding the downfall of Troy—has much to do with the fact that he has the gods on his side: not merely the ones whom he has stolen from the Trojans, but in particular his patroness, the goddess Minerva.

With this observation we come to a feature of this collection of essays which seems to suggest a fundamental difference between war literature of the past and that of the present: namely, the secular orientation of the latter and the relative absence of concern with the religious implications of war. Conversely, however, mention of the instrumentality of Minerva brings us to an issue which seems to preoccupy modern commentators: namely, the connection between women and war. Significantly, Ovid here too provides an instructive ancient context in a variety of ways.

In the first place, not only does he recall that the ostensible cause of the Trojan war was the abduction of Helen, but he also highlights the fact that the man who felled Achilles and thus provided the occasion for the debate between Ajax and Ulysses was her seducer, Paris. Long ago, therefore, Ovid recognized the tendency to associate woman with man's mortality.

Equally, long ago Ovid recognized the way in which the military system fosters a notion of masculinity based upon a combination of sexism and racism. As we have seen, one of Ajax's primary strategies for discrediting his opponent involves calling Ulysses's ancestry into question—and by extension the virtue of his mother—and we might now notice how such insistence on "purity" goes hand-in-hand with his denigration of Ulysses as an "Ithacan." To Ajax, the failure of Ulysses to come to the aid of the wounded "poor old man" Nestor is the most heinous of crimes, and his ultimate argument is that Ulysses is not only morally but also physically too "weak" to bear the weight of the armor of Achilles.

The counter-strategy of Ulysses is to turn his alliance with the feminine into an advantage. Countering the slurs on his ancestry, for example, Ulysses argues that his claim to divine descent can be traced in both his maternal and paternal lineage. Similarly, he argues that it was precisely their connection with the feminine that he and Achilles had in common—a loving wife in his case and a loving mother in the case of Achilles—and that it was this that made them mutual latecomers to the

war. To the same effect, but conversely, he argues that it was his ability to penetrate feminine disguise that enabled him to bring Achilles into the war. For example, he recalls that, foreseeing her son's doom, the mother of Achilles had dressed him in girl's attire and that it was he, Ulysses alone, who perceived this and who roused the militant spirit of Achilles by hiding arms in the women's trinkets. Similarly, his method of arousing Achilles is to feminize the enemy: "Son of Thetis, / Troy, doomed, is waiting for you: why delay her?" Finally, he draws attention to the way that he was directly responsible for the turning point in the battle when he persuaded Agammemnon to sacrifice his daughter in the interest of the public good and in accordance with the demands of the goddess Diana.

Addressed here, then, are a number of issues currently being debated concerning the connection of women and war: the view that women are inherently opposed to war and that war proceeds by a denial of the feminine; the view that war involves depersonalization and an inhumane system of values; the view that what happens on the domestic scene has a direct bearing on what happens on the front lines and that the casualties of war are not limited to the latter; the questioning of whether militancy is an exclusively masculine trait and whether passivism is the best means to pacifism; the need to rethink the gender alignment of the protectors and the protected; the questioning of whether being raised in a feminine environment and shut off from war would result in a peace-oriented "hero" who could resist the call to arms.

In many ways, therefore, a consideration of how Ovid articulates modern concerns with war attests to the adage that the past is always present, whether we are aware of it or not, and accordingly perhaps what most recommends going back to his *Metamorphoses* is the way that it is conducive to consciousness-raising of this kind. In doing so, we may also discover that it is our resistance to the notion of precedence that is the major obstacle to progress and the root cause of war in our time: behind lateral forms of combat may be vertical competition, and star wars may be a self-defeating way of overcoming the "anxiety of influence." Moreover, to the extent that we ascribe to the notion of a generation gap we may provide the best ammunition for those who are empowered by the conviction that the gods and goddesses are on their side. We have seen that, according to Ovid, this was one of the secrets of Ulysses's success in the debate, and we might now notice that another strategy he used to support his claim to Achilles's arms is that he had "sense enough to know their meaning / Their full significance," whereas Ajax has no sense of history:

> "Ajax knows nothing of the work of this shield,
> And what to him are the swing of the Pleiades,
> The scattered cities, and Orion's sword?
> He is claiming arms beyond his power to value."

In emphasizing that questions of possession should be determined not merely in terms of their value but in terms of those who understand their value, Ovid thus returns us to the contemporary situation to which I referred at the beginning of this introduction and in so doing encourages us to see that concerns with the relationship of war and literature are far from being purely academic exercises.