

La Sapienza

Revisione esterna tesi dott. ANGELO ARMINIO (36 ciclo)

ARMINIO ANGELO

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Za zgodność z oryginałem

Podpis
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Evaluation form for PhD dissertation

Evaluation form

Title of the thesis

On the Frontlines of Fiction: Authority and Fictionality in American Veteran Narratives of the War on Terror.

Affiliation of the reviewer

Independent Scholar

Report

All in all, this dissertation explores a relatively new area of a wider research ambit, which is the study of war literature, and the author manages to prove that the texts he deals deserve attention and a long-term interpretive effort. The language is quite good and workmanlike; the corpus of secondary literature quoted by the author is remarkably rich (even though, as we shall see, not complete), and shows a very strong interest in literary theory, so much so that this dissertation reads like wide-ranging theoretical discussion in which the specimens of primary literature discussed after page 129 (that is, after two thirds of the dissertation) seem to be more a pretext than the main purpose of the research endeavor. If this were a literary theory PhD, the dissertation would be perfect; but since this is a PhD programme on "Studies in English Literatures, Language and Translation", one has to notice the disproportion between the theoretical introduction and the reading of primary texts (just 50 pages out of 180). Besides, the subtitle of the dissertation being "Authority and Fictionality in American Veteran Narratives of the War on Terror" the readers expect that the reading of the primary texts is the paramount concern of the author, while they must wade through is a very long (and sometimes repetitive) discussion of fictionality and factuality, aimed at defining the novel concept of "authofiction" before they can reach the primary texts.

This is a serious issue because the author is working on a spate of relatively new narratives which readers may not be familiar with, and since there is no preliminary introduction to the primary text this may engender confusion in the reader. One can legitimately give for granted that there is no need to summarize, say, Moby-Dick or The Great Gatsby before embarking upon a detailed discussion of a specific aspect of such ultra-canonized novels; but one cannot give for granted that readers of this dissertation are familiar with all the primary texts that are just briefly mentioned up to page 129 and only described in the last 50 pages.

Moreover, GWOT, or the Global War on Terrorism, is a relatively new province of the vast territory of war literature, which of course includes its canon of primary texts but also a

large-sized corpus of secondary literature. The author proves to have a good knowledge of the essays and monographs dealing with GWOT narratives, but some titles one would expect are missing. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* is passingly mentioned in the discussion but is not present in the Works Cited list at the end of the dissertation; and yet Fussell's groundbreaking discussion of the divide between soldiers and civilians in W.W.I (section "The Enemy to the Rear" p. 82 ff.) might have contributed to what the author of the dissertation says about the civilian-veteran gap (he might also benefit from reading "The Real War Will Never Get in the Books", p. 267 ff., in Fussell's *Wartime*, another glaring absence in the bibliography). By having a wider perspective on war literature studies the author might have found other uses for the category of autofiction he proposes, because other narratives dealing with older conflicts might be usefully reconsidered by applying the new "genre" (or mode) to them: *A Farewell to Arms* comes to mind, but a less famous war novel like William March's *Company K* (1933) could be usefully considered, as it seems to have all the features of autofiction as they are rigorously defined in this dissertation.

(When [p. 167] the author quotes the character in "War Stories" who mistrusts his memory but trusts "the vehicle, burnt and twisted and torn (...) Things. Bodies" I cannot help thinking of Hemingway's famous page on the abstract rhetoric of nationalism and the brutal concreteness of place names in *A Farewell to Arms*, and this is just an example. In the excerpt from Scranton's *We're Doomed* [p. 155] we have "I wanted the concrete names of villages", which sounds like a deliberate quotation of Hemingway's classic!)

All in all, some of the features of GWOT narratives are novel, but others are not so new as this dissertation claims. All the discussion of truthfulness, which is strictly connected to the pivotal issue of authority, might have mentioned a canonized theoretical classic, Jean-Norton Cru's *Temoins* (also available in the abridged English edition); but the author might have simply used the two Cambridge Companions to World War I and II to obtain an overview of state-of-the-art war literature studies and the fundamental secondary literature (one might add Margot Norris' *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*, UP of Virginia).

Getting to more local matters, one has to notice that the long theoretical part of the dissertation seems to have been written hastily, as there are several repetitions of the same concepts, such as the definition of autofiction, the criticism of the figure of the "trauma hero" or traumatized hero, the veteran-civilian divide. Some of these iterations are unnecessary. Moreover (p. 94), when the author mentions some narratives written by civilians or veterans, he adds to each title "(year)" which is surely a marker inserted to remind him to add the year of publication, which was unfortunately not added: something that proves a more attentive and careful copyediting of the whole dissertation is necessary (cf. also "withing" instead of "within" p. 163, "9/1" instead of "9/11" p. 153 – and the use of "wages" is unclear – "her" instead of "his" p. 143, and these are just some of the typos scattered in a text which is on the other hand written in very good English).

While the theoretical discussion is generally quite consistent and well argued, there are occasional moments of sloppy argumentation, like this at p. 104; "can assume that small parts of an autobiography or memoir are to be read as fictional because memory and recollection are expected to be aided by the imagination during the writing of a personal narrative"; this can be countered by the objection that often the fictional inserts in life narratives are not just fillers for memory holes, but are deliberately inserted due to political (the author's ideological leanings or censorship) or legal constraints (say, to avoid being sued for libel). A careful copyediting can also fix these.

The author should:

1. add a sub-chapter to chapter 1 where the corpus of primary texts he is going to discuss is introduced, with a brief description of the plot which may help readers who are not familiar with them to get their bearings before embarking upon the lengthy theoretical part;

2. add as many examples as possible to the theoretical part (everything that comes before page 129) that connect the theoretic discussion to the GWOT narratives, with textual quotations which may help to grasp the point the author of the dissertation is striving to make, and show how relevant the wealth of secondary literature used and discussed is to the primary literature that the whole dissertation should be about, so that the two parts of the dissertation are more tightly connected

3. strenghten the bibliography with some cornerstones of war literature studies, as suggested before

4. carry out a very careful final copyediting once these changes have been made, which should prune some unnecessary repetitions

Confidential report (it will not be shown to the candidate)

Evaluation file (optional)

Presentation and clarity

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The reviewer should be able to read the text without difficulty. This implies that the dissertation is clear and 'user friendly', without duplications or repetitions.

Integration and coherence

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The manuscript should present logical and rational links between different parts of the thesis.

Introduction to scientific background

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The text should contain a satisfactory introduction to the scientific background which is relevant to the research, preparing the reader to the exposition of the problem.

Review of relevant literature

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The candidate must have a detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues.

Statement of research problem

None Poor Average Good Excellent

A clear statement of the research problem should be made, together with specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

Originality

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The research must be the candidate's own work. The degree of independence may vary according to the research topic.

Contribution to knowledge and scientific relevance

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The dissertation should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of two articles on refereed journal, a book or research monograph.

Mastery of the English language

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The candidate must be proficient in written English and show mastery of appropriate scientific/technical language.

The thesis can be considered for a 'cum laude' award

Yes No

A major goal of the review process is to evaluate if the present version of the thesis is:

- 1) adequate as is
- 2) require minor revision
- 3) require major revision

for admission of the candidate to the defense of the work in front of a national evaluation board.

Accept as is Minor revision Major revision

Date: 3/30/2024

Reviewer: Rossi Umberto