



The Recuperation of Humanism in the Context of the Martial Society: Homer, Anton Schneeberger, Kurt Lewin, and Narrative Medicine

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Many years ago, as graduate students, my then-husband and I spent a year of research at the University of Heidelberg. While living in Germany, we went to visit a friend in the Teutonic town of Bad Mergentheim, where her father, a gastroenterologist, ran a private sanatorium. Entertaining us in his library, Dr. K. asked my husband about the subject of his dissertation. Since at the time Stephen was working on Georg Friedrich Creuzer's *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, he thought it would be better to say simply that he was working on German intellectual history, but the gastroenterologist insisted. As it turned out, he was familiar with Creuzer's opus and with its reverberations in *Geistesgeschichte*. A long discussion followed, not unlike a Princeton University graduate seminar with professor Anthony Grafton. I have no reason to assume that all the while, Dr. K. was not a good physician. Even further back, in the 1970s, our own family doctor in Sopot, Poland was an amateur expert on the kabbalistic elements in Adam Mickiewicz's oeuvre and would travel to Copenhagen where he discussed the topic with Jewish scholars.

In the twenty-first century, in my Children's Literature undergraduate course at the University of Georgia in the United States, I dis-

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covered that no matter what methodology I employed, the majority of my students cried during class presentations. While reading basic canonical texts – Brothers Grimm’s folk tales, Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” Oscar Wilde’s “The Happy Prince,” Janusz Korczak’s *King Matt the First*, and others, less canonical for that field but all the more potent in the context, such as Albert Cohen’s *Book of My Mother*, Henryk Grynberg’s *Children of Zion* or Tove Jansson’s *Summer Book* – they experienced something that until then had not been expressed in their American lives. Subsequently, during oral presentations, they inevitably brought tears to their own and everyone else’s eyes. Later I observed the same phenomenon in my Honors Literature and Medicine seminar, whose existence the University of Georgia owes to pre-med students starved for a humanities course that would complement their science curriculum.

The two vignettes, that of a humanist physician conversant with philosophy and literature, and the oddly deprived modern-day university student, reduced to tears in front of a text that inadvertently mirrors the readers’ traumas and scars, serve here as an introduction to what I call the recuperation of humanism: a consideration of the imperative place of humanist thinking in the age of STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.¹ For the contemporary society to function not on a dystopian model described by George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Andrei Platonov, but instead as a humanist enterprise, it is imperative to reconsider the importance given in the present era to the sciences at the detriment of the humanities. I seek to demonstrate that humanist thinking does not go against science, neither does it exist in a separate sphere; on the contrary, just as in the original Renaissance project, it is the humanist insight that can inform, replenish, and sustain science, especially medical science. “Renaissance humanism was not, and probably could never have been, permanently confined to the restricted company that had once created it,” writes Ingrid D. Rowland in her “Abacus and Humanism.”² “Even its most esoteric branches – Neoplatonism, magic, cabala, alchemy – had their practical side, for they had been conceived and continued to operate in a world of practical needs.”³

1 For the purpose of this article I will draw a broad connection between the humanist enterprise as it originated in the Renaissance and the humanities as such, the vestiges of which we witness at present.

2 Rowland, *Abacus and Humanism*, 695.

3 Ibid.

The last notion – that of the successful combination and implementation of humanist notions in the real world, is what interests me the most. Humanism, in its purely theoretical aspect, is not worthy of its name. It is through a return of ideas in print to life, of ensuring that ink is also blood, that humanism matters because it does not remain contained in books. What Rowland identifies in the original humanist drive, is the continuity of thought and action, a salutary blending of the intellectual and the social spheres that we badly lack nowadays:

By the first two decades of the early sixteenth century, fundamental concepts of Neoplatonism, though they may have retained their esoteric charm for self-conscious cognoscenti, had also become common coin, the imagery in which merchants, professionals and technicians couched their own philosophical yearnings. At the same time, humanistic patterns of thought had come to govern actions in the political and financial sphere no less than they governed the progress of letters and art. Humanism had in effect become a social phenomenon as much as an intellectual stance.⁴

Nowadays, neither humanism nor science seems to be a social phenomenon. We make daily use of most advanced scientific discoveries without the slightest notion of how they come about, and at the same time, most of the population has ceased to read the *belles lettres*. The trouble seems to be so much graver than in 1959 when C.P. Snow delivered his famous Rede lecture entitled “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution.” He outlined the “dangerous divide between the ethos, outlook, and practices of the sciences and those of the old humanities.”⁵ Speaking about his lecture in 2010 at the University of Cambridge, Lisa Jardine called the goal of integrating arts, sciences, and humanities “yet unachieved.”⁶ The work, then, is up to us. Justin Stover, in a recent statement published on 4 March 2018 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, expounds a clear credo of the humanist role both in the university and in today’s world. Stover compellingly argues that the humanities do not need to be justified because, without the humanities, there is no university:

4 Ibid.

5 Jardine, “Snow’s Two Cultures,” 49–57.

6 Ibid.

The humanities have always been, just as their critics complain, self-contained, self-referential, and self-serving. Those tendencies are exactly what enabled the humanities to create a class that continued to demand them. People have read Virgil for two thousand years, and people have built institutions designed to facilitate the reading of Virgil. For reasons high and low, people long believed that the one qualification truly necessary — for civil service, for foreign service, for politics, for medicine, for science, for law, for estate management, for ecclesiastical preferment, for a life of aristocratic leisure — was the ability to compose good Latin hexameters. They were not looking for skills or creativity or values. They did believe that conjugating irregular verbs would mysteriously produce moral improvement (perhaps it did), but they were not too concerned about how. They simply believed in the humanities and knew from experience that the disciplines would bring students above the categories of nation, vocation, and time to become members of a class constrained by no such boundaries.⁷

While well supported in a diachronic perspective and altogether convincing both in its modest and hubristic aspect, Stover's argument is nonetheless somewhat complacent. Let the humanities cultivate the minds that flock to them for their own sake, says Stover. Let us forget the other, more technical and vocational areas of civilization, and just read the Classics. As Rowland and Grafton demonstrate, that is not what the humanist enterprise was in the Renaissance, and Snow and Jardine argue that neither should it be the case now. The area in which it may be possible to combine the two cultures for the benefit of all involved is the one that affects humanity across disciplines in a very immediate way, that is, medicine. Anthony Grafton notes the following:

The humanists did not confine themselves to strictly literary areas of study. After 1450 they often analyzed scientific texts and produced results of interest to specialists in medicine and astronomy as well as to general readers. The scientists, for their part, often did work of great penetration and originality in the humanist fields of textual exegesis and cultural history. The two cultures, in short, were not locked in a battle [...]; they coexisted and collaborated.⁸

As an inspiring and still little known example of a genuine Renaissance man who combined erudition in the humanities with exper-

7 Stover, "No Case for the Humanities," 210–224.

8 Grafton, *Defenders of the Text*, 5.

tise in medicine let us consider the figure of Anton Schneeberger – born in 1530 in an upper-class Zürich family, died in 1581 in Cracow – the Swiss doctor and botanist who studied medicine in Basel and Cracow. He traveled extensively, as a modern European might, visiting Vilnius, Königsberg, Paris, Montpellier. Schneeberger wrote the first scholarly work in botany to be published in Poland: a catalog of wild plants in Latin and Polish (*Catalogus stirpium ...* 1554), as well as the first modern manual of health – both physical and mental – for the military, dedicated to the Polish King Sigismund II Augustus, *De bona militum valetudine conservanda liber*, a landmark work based mostly on a sophisticated reading of the Ancients. According to Stanisław Ilnicki, Schneeberger's work, published in 1564 in Cracow, is the oldest modern textbook of military hygiene. It predates other such works by over a hundred years (Janusz Abraham Gehema, 1684) or even by two hundred (John Pringle, 1754; Maurice Saxe 1757; Jean Colombier 1775; and the American Benjamin Rush 1777).⁹ The Polish edition, with the original Latin and a facing-page translation by Robert A. Sucharski, appeared in 2008. It is in *De bona militum valetudine conservanda liber* that Anton Schneeberger elaborated an early definition of what we now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and described the possible ways of preparing for trauma and assuaging its effects. To heal sorrow and mourning, he recommends the use of storytelling, arguing that memory and hope are reconciled through the creation of an interpersonal narrative.

It is a tale as old as time. In his *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, Jonathan Shay, a doctor and clinical psychiatrist, has shown how the soldiers in Homer's *Iliad* suffered moral injuries not unlike those borne by Vietnam veterans.¹⁰ Later on, he explored the pitfalls awaiting them on the road back to civilian life in *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*.¹¹ Despite its ostensible state of peace, contemporary Western society is plagued by disorders frequently encountered in combat zones: PTSD and other anxiety disorders, depression, suicide. The lucid direction of humanist medicine and medicinal humanities must be to study the role of literature in the overcoming of these disorders. Arnold Weinstein, in his book *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches Us About Life*, opposes the medicine cabinet to the bookshelf, pointing out that in the United States,

9 Schneeberger, *De bona militum valetudine conservanda*, xxv.

10 Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, passim.

11 Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 11–148.

one is more likely to turn to the former than the latter. In twenty years of university teaching, I have seen that novels and memoirs focusing on traumatic events, be it individual (*King Matt the First* by Janusz Korczak, *Summer Book* by Tove Jansson, *Brothers Lionheart* by Astrid Lindgren) or collective (*Jewish War* and *Children of Zion* by Henryk Grynberg, *Comet in Moominvalley* by Tove Jansson), can have a therapeutic effect on the readers, as if literature allowed for an expression of their own traumas. In a culture in which Walt Disney supplanted both the Bible and Greek tragedies, the lack of a humanist education deprives individuals of a meaningful way of addressing their moral injuries outside of psychiatry proper. In a society such as that of the contemporary United States, i.e., one in which most basic human needs are met for the majority of its members, there is nonetheless a humanist lacuna which contributes to the current psychological crisis. In Europe, the situation is nearly equally alarming. According to data from 2010, one third of American college students suffered from depression that made them dysfunctional, as if they were in a combat zone. A dramatic increase in the number of suicides has been noted both on US college campuses and among US troops at home and abroad. In Poland, only 38 percent of people read at least one book in 2009. At the same time, increasing numbers of the population participate in long-distance running, triathlons, decathlons, and paramilitary sports such as paintball and airsoft. Soon the warfare model might be applicable in Poland as well, even though the Poles' identity is still shaped by the long shadow of World War II.

Under what guise does the issue of trauma appear in classical twentieth-century literature? In the opening paragraphs of *I and Thou*, the Jewish thinker Martin Buber proposes that the object of human relation affects the subject. "For the I of the basic word I-You is different from that in the basic word I-It."¹² In other words, the object of my relation makes me into a different person. If I have an It as my object, I am necessarily limited.

In contrast, "[W]hoever says You does not have something for his object. For wherever there is something there also another something; every It borders other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others."¹³ Buber foresaw the unstoppable progression of our modern society from the I-You to the I-It. The gaping discrepancy between medical sciences focused on the purely technical, laboratory orien-

12 Buber, *I and Thou*, 53.

13 *Ibid.*, 55.

ted medicine on the one hand and the disappearing modes of cultivating humanist interests that overlap with medicine in the center of which there is always the human being, on the other hand, means that it is ever easier to slip into what Buber defines as the continuum of Its.

There is a connection between literature and the meaningful naming of the disorders plaguing contemporary martial society. Novels and memoirs focusing on traumatic wartime memories, be it individual (Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour*, Ota Pavel's *Death of the Beautiful Deer*) or collective (Henryk Grynberg's *Jewish War* as well as his recent *Memoir*, *Memoir 2*, and *Memoir 3*), work both to heal and illuminate the abiding martial state in which we must function. Acts of war that punctuate the twenty-first century may not correspond to the propaganda rhetoric of the 'war on terror' but nonetheless deal real enough psychic wounds that literature dutifully marks (e.g., "Photograph from September 11" by the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska). When I taught Henryk Grynberg's *Jewish War* at the University of Georgia, the students who chose to do oral presentations were an Iraq war veteran (shot down over Karbala) and a criminal justice major who could not eat for three days after he had watched Paweł Łoziński's 1992 documentary film *Birthplace*. Both could speak only when literature breached a crack in their traumatic silence.

While in the trenches of World War I – on the German side, because he had been born in Moglino, near what was then called Posen, and studied in Berlin – Kurt Lewin, the Jewish-German topological psychologist developed his theory of "war landscape" which he then wrote up in an extraordinarily clear and compact essay entitled *Kriegslandschaft* (published during a furlough in 1917).¹⁴ Lewin puts forth a distinction between the landscape of peace that extends indefinitely in all directions and that he describes as "round, without front or behind,"¹⁵ and the landscape of war, which is directed and bounded. "The danger zone changes depending on the combat situation. The general character of danger increases or diminishes with the intensity of combat; furthermore, the danger points shift, new

14 Kurt Lewin, after his World War I experience, became a Gestalt psychologist and worked in the United States (most notably at MIT), both as a clinician and theoretician. His work, just like that of Mikhail Bakhtin, is used in organizational studies and in psychology.

15 Lewin, "The Landscape of War," 201.

ones are formed and old ones disappear.”¹⁶ Thus in the landscape of war, the line of combat is everpresent, however changeable or even invisible it may be. Lewin makes several points that both harken back to Schneeberger’s categories of fear and terror and at the same time pertain to modern war. For instance, he recounts an incident in which his fear – as a field artilleryman – was diminished by his perception of the place of combat as an ordinary, peacetime village: “While we were halted on the road after a lengthy march as army reserves, the battle for a nearby village suddenly escalated. The village remained a normal “village in the landscape.”¹⁷ The battle as a whole did not seem to me to be particularly serious, and the reminder to take cover seemed somewhat pointless despite the relatively high level of danger, clearly because the combat landscape had not yet taken the place of the peacetime landscape.” Such difference in perception is attributable to the changed aspects of the war landscape that contains “things of combat,” *Gefechtsdinge*, while in the peace landscape, the same things are “peacetime things,” *Friedensdinge*. A village, a farmhouse, a forest appear differently to the observer depending on their status in a given landscape. Things of combat do not contaminate peacetime things if those are clearly distinct from them by their purpose: “Thus, for example, in mobile warfare a tent or even an exposed sleeping spot next to a cannon has the character of being removed from the war, a virtually homely character, which is particularly striking precisely on account of its being alongside pure things of combat.”¹⁸

Inversely, when over a century after the publication of Lewin’s wartime essay one travels by air and is forced to surrender a bottle of water to the security agents at the airport in order to be able to board a flight, it is because the ostensible landscape of peace is at any moment subject to a disturbance. On September 11th 2001, passenger airplanes were deftly transformed from peacetime things into things of combat. Lewin concludes his essay with an analysis of combat things in time. A trench position “filled with death and war” is left behind not as something meaningless but rather as a “war formation,” a tangible trace that speaks of what has taken place there. Lewin calls burnt villages “*Kriegsinseln*” im *Friedensland*. The modern landscape is, even to this day, dotted with these “islands of war,” and, after 9/11, they also appear in Manhattan, Paris, or Brus-

16 Ibid., 202–203.

17 Ibid., 204.

18 Ibid., 206.

sels. It takes a humanist of Lewin's stature to render the soldier's perspective meaningful: the space in which the human person moves, his or her environment, is significant precisely because it is perceived in a certain manner. In the contemporary society the purely peacetime landscape has ceased to exist.

If modern Western society functions in a surreptitious landscape of war, becoming a kind of martial society, i.e., a society whose members are exposed to psychic and moral injuries comparable to those sustained in battle, how does literature help in the recovery from those injuries? One answer was offered by Joseph Brodsky, who himself had grown up in a totalitarian system that attempted to erase the human person from the heart of society. In "The Condition We Call Exile," the Russian poet wrote:

Since there is not much on which to rest our hopes for a better world, since everything else seems to fail one way or another, we must somehow maintain that literature is the only form of moral insurance a society has; that it is the permanent antidote to the dog-eat-dog principle; that it provides the best argument against any sort of bulldozer-type mass solution—if only because human diversity is literature's lock and stock, as well as its *raison d'être*.¹⁹

Applying Brodsky's insight even further, let us state that literature shall have a chance to function as a form of moral insurance only if it is, as it were, returned to life. A relatively new discipline of health care, narrative medicine, that has developed along the lines foreseen by doctor Anton Schneeberger in the sixteenth century places storytelling at the heart of its practice.²⁰ It is not an exaggeration to consider the therapeutic value of storytelling as a homeric insight.²¹ Thus, in narrative medicine, patients and health professionals are

19 Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason*, 23.

20 To name just a few examples, Narrative Medicine has been taught at Columbia University since the 1980s, and Medical Humanities are a part of the Alpert School of Medicine at Brown University, while in the United Kingdom, research in Medical Humanities is conducted both at Oxford and at the University of Glasgow.

21 Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, chapter 11: "The ancient Greeks revered Homer, the singer of tales, as a doctor of the soul. In the *Odyssey*, Homer paints a (self-) portrait of the epic singer whose healing art is to tell the stories of Troy with the truth that causes the old soldier, Odysseus, to weep and weep again. (*Odyssey* 8:78ff)" [Why and how does narrative heal?]

encouraged to tell and listen to stories of illness. The key to humanist medicine is the human being at the center of care – not an individual part or organ, but the entire sentient person, with memory and traumas, but also with resilience. Narrative medicine, humanist medicine, and medical humanities confirm the value of humanist training for both disciplines. The Renaissance humanists did not limit themselves in their inquiry and neither should we.

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ABSTRACT

The humanist tradition developed in the Renaissance that not only cultivated the human spirit but applied its knowledge for the purpose of improving society across various humanist and scientific disciplines is not altogether extinct. Using the erudite Swiss physician and botanist Anton Schneeberger (1530–1581) as a founding father of sorts of modern humanist medicine confronted with war, I discuss the recuperation of humanism in the twentieth century, first in the thought of psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) who, under war circumstances, produced a work whose analytical acumen can still be used today, and subsequently in the creation of the discipline of narrative medicine that, unwittingly perhaps, echoes Schneeberger's insight into the imperative of inserting storytelling into the practice of both patient- and physician-centered medicine. In the background of the argument is the existence of a new society, a martial society that functions as if there were war despite its ostensible state of peace.

KEYWORDS

humanism, narrative medicine, psychology, war, martial society, storytelling

IZVLEČEK

Krepitev humanizma v kontekstu borilne družbe:

Homer, Anton Schneeberger, Kurt Lewin in narativna medicina

Renesančna humanistična tradicija, ki ni le vzgajala človeškega duha, temveč je znanje v različnih humanističnih in znanstvenih disciplinah uporabljala za izboljšanje družbe, ni povsem izumrla. Izobraženi švicarski zdravnik in botanik Anton Schneeberger (1530–1581) velja za nekakšnega ustanovitelja sodobne humanistične medicine, soočene z vojno. S pomočjo njegovega primera članek razpravlja o oživljanju humanizma v dvajsetem stoletju. Najprej v zapuščini psihologa Kurta Lewina (1890–1947), ki je v vojnih razmerah ustvaril delo, katerega analitično ost je mogoče uporabiti še danes, nato pa v luči nastanka narativne medicine, ki morda nevede odraža Schneebergerjev uvid o nujnosti, da se pripovedovanje zgodb vključi v medicinsko prakso, naj bo osrediščena na pacienta ali na zdravnika. V ozadju tega argumenta je obstoj nove družbe, borilne družbe, ki se obnaša, kot da je v vojni, dozdevnemu miru navkljub.

KLJUČNE BESEDE

humanizem, narativna medicina, psihologija, vojna, borilna družba, pripovedovanje