

REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR

## Writing on War

### The Example of Arturo Pérez-Reverte's Novel, *The Painter of Battles*

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#### ABSTRACT

War is at the heart of European literature regardless of genre, the author's origin, or artistic movements. Arturo Pérez-Reverte's autobiographical novel, while following traditional codes, offers an original vision of war considered in the long view, and analyzed from every angle. The reader is then placed in an uncomfortable situation, for although war, which is reported on widely and in differing ways, seems familiar, the issues raised by the work place the reader before a reality that escapes him.



Exterior view of the Panorama Museum of Bad Frankenhausen that houses the monumental fresco (14 m x 123 m) painted by Werner Tübke from 1983 to 1987.

At the crossroads of an autobiographical account and a fictional novel, Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *The Painter of Battles* offers an original vision of war simultaneously represented as writing, by way of his pen and the works consulted by his hero Andrés Faulques; as painting, which serves as the backdrop to the story he is narrating; as photography, which is the former profession of the hero and the author; and through the discourse and representation of conflicts experienced by his characters—this is the case for the novel's three protagonists—or encountered for the first time.

## **A Closed Door Over War and the Traces of War**

An internationally recognized war photojournalist, Andrès Faulques abandons his former life after his illness and the brutal death of his colleague and mistress, Ovido Ferreira, during the Yugoslav Wars. He withdraws to a dilapidated watchtower on the Spanish coast to paint a monumental circular fresco—the fruit of his wanderings in museums with Ovido Ferreira, a major art connoisseur—as well as the experiences and traumas he accumulated during his different assignments. Through painting he hopes to produce the photograph he always wanted to take but never was able to do so. He brings together in a single work all of the artists who have painted war (Uccello, Bosch, Goya, etc.), while adapting them to retrace the key moments and stages of his own life. The author is implicitly transposing Werner Tübke's great historical fresco, *Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany*, painted at the end of the socialist period in the GDR.

This slow, meticulous and intimate work of memory is suddenly upset by the appearance of the Croat Ivo Markovic, whom Faulques photographed during the siege of Vukovar. This picture had transformed both of their lives, bringing celebrity to Faulques and despair to Markovic, for the diffusion of the photograph resulted in the rape and murder of his Serbian wife, as well as the death of his son. A dialogue begins, behind closed doors, between these two characters regarding Faulques's life and profession, between one's construction of memory and the other's search for answers, as Markovic has scrupulously followed the publishing history and material traces of the former photographer. The position of these two characters, hunter and prey, have in fact been reversed from the war to the post-war period.

## **An Emblematic Example of Literary Accounts of War**

When he wrote *The Painter of Battles* in 2006, Pérez-Reverte (born in 1951) was already an internationally successful author. His novels were available across the globe, won prizes, and were translated into different languages, such as the French translation by François Maspéro or the English translation by Margaret Sayers Peden, both appearing in 2008. Some were even adapted for the cinema, for instance the tribulations of his hero Captain Alariste. Yet it was with war journalism that this Spaniard began his professional career in the 1970s, covering different theatres of combat in the world until the Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s.

The subject of war chosen by the author is not original in itself. In fact, literature has placed this popular subject at the heart of its reflections since the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* attributed to Homer, and this regardless of the viewpoint adopted, literary genre, artistic movement, or the geographical origin of the author. Moreover, this autobiographical stance can also be found with a number of his colleagues, who published more or less fictionalized memoirs of their experience at the front. The works of Albert Londres (*Témoin de la Grande Guerre*) [Witness of the Great War], or those of Joseph Kessel, notably come to mind. The regular appearance of new editions of these works, along with the proliferation of new publications, show the interest and the need of European public opinion to understand war from the inside. Pérez-Reverte had incidentally already engaged in this exercise a first time by proposing, in *Territorio comanche* (1994) [Comanche Territory], a reflection on journalistic ethics in times of war by way of his experience in Sarajevo, a task he took up again in *El francotirador paciente* (2013) [The Patient Irregular].

## **A Total Discourse On War**

Pérez-Reverte, however, goes well beyond simply bearing witness. He presents the reader with an analytical framework and avenues for reflecting on war considered as a whole. It is firstly a total representation of war that he provides us with, in its violence—rape, torture, massacre, murder, imprisonment—as well as in the traces it leaves on the bodies, souls, and territories it crosses. Ferreira is thus interested only in the material traces that are visible after combat, while Faulques photographs the actors of war. The author also invites the reader to think of war beyond violence, in its historical globality. Far from considerations of technological and military evolutions,

he sets historical periods in dialogue with one another, thus mixing in Faulques's fresco "an array of ancient and modern armament...somewhere between medieval and futurist." The underlying chronological theme and the unfinished state of his hero's painting implicitly remind the reader that war is intimately linked to the human condition, and is still a current topic, even if it no longer directly involves the reader.

In the course of the chapters the author engages in a philosophical reflection on the central aspects of wars. He repeatedly returns to the actors of war, whether they be combatants such as the sniper of Sarajevo, or indirect ones as in the photographer, with the precise and implacable mechanism of his camera strapped over his shoulder like a rifle; or whether they are present or not at the place of conflict, as in the role of editorial boards that select, almost in real time, the photos Faulques sends them. The novelist then raises the question of choices—the instinctive ones of the sniper, easily led ones of war rapists, adventurous ones of journalists—and of the individual and collective responsibility of societies that are directly or indirectly confronted by the reality of war. The photographer's responsibility in the construction of the discourse on war is at the heart of his reflections: his supposed neutrality, his capacity of interaction with combatants, the viewpoint he adopts, the choice of taking a photograph or not... Yet he also takes his reader to task. A powerless witness to the conversations of Markovic the Croat and of Faulques the Spaniard, interspersed by the reflections of Ferreira the Italian, he is brought back to his own condition of ignorance, distance, powerlessness, unease, and even disgust with regard to war and its horrors, sentiments that are found in the troubled eyes of the Swedish guide, Carmen Elsen, when facing the nearly finished fresco. The war photographer's solitude is expressed in this isolated tower, the final point of a maritime escapade for European tourists: English, Germans, French or Italians. However, if the former mechanic Markovic is able to understand major painters through his direct experience of war, the reader, who is familiar with the painters, is invited to understand war. This was in fact the subject of Faulques's last project as a photographer: to capture the reactions of visitors before 62 paintings in 19 museums in Europe and America, which resulted in the album *Morituri* (Those who will die), "the shortest route between two points: from man to horror."

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