Literature about war seems to be as old as literature itself – at least in the western canon. One may go as far back as Homer's *Iliad* in pursuing a “canon” of war literature. The subject of war has permeated several different periods of western literary achievement since Homer's epic, from Shakespeare's account of the Hundred Years War in *Henry V* to the very recent accounts of the war in Afghanistan present in the collection of short stories *Fire and Forget*, by Matt Gallagher and Roy Scranton (2013).

Even with such a vast corpus of analysis, however, dedicated studies of war literature are rather recent. Apart from a few works such as Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), the bulk of war literature theory was introduced in the 1990s and 2000s, with the publication of important works like *The Cambridge Companion to War Literature* (MCLOUGHLIN, 2009) and *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II* (MACKAY, 2009), Margot Norris's *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* (2000) and Samuel Hynes's *The Soldiers Tale* (1997) and *A War Imagined* ([1991] 2011), just to cite a few.

This fairly recent development of the field displays a scenario in which there is still not much consensus on the theoretical approaches to the corpus, with each scholar or group attempting to shed their own light on the narratives of war. If we talk of a “theory of war literature” today, we must talk of a diverse and fragmented approach, developed by several different authors who themselves bear diverse intellectual, political and theoretical affiliations.

It seems to me that the greatest affiliation held by the scholars of war literature is to the studies of war literature themselves. This rather tautological statement derives from the fact that by now, it seems that something a “canon” of war literature studies has appeared, with several works that often transcend disciplinary boundaries being cited again and again by a number of authors. Authors like Paul Fussell, Elaine Scarry, Walter Benjamin, and John Keegan are shaping the landscape of war literature studies. I believe, however, that the development of such a “canon” might place war literature studies as yet one more “niche” of theory, isolated from more general discussions of representation, ideology, aesthetics, and literature.

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1And indeed some authors have read the “Illiad” as a founding text of the war literature canon. C.f.: VIEIRA, 2013.
This quick survey of the theoretical approaches of war literature studies is meant to show both how vast the field is and how great are the theoretical challenges posed. In this scenario, I believe of utmost importance to posit the studies of war narratives within more general discussions of theory, with more clear theoretical affiliations. In this article, I intend to show how Marxism might offer valuable contributions to this endeavor. Here, I will present two initial propositions, one focused on a more theoretical aspect and the other one more concerned with method.

**War Literature and Ideology**

The concept of “ideology” is one of the most complex and controversial aspects of the Marxist theoretical tradition. In an article of limited length and scope such as this, one can only hope to present an introductory conceptualization of the category.

A first glimpse may be seen in Jorge Larrain's entry “Ideology” in Tom Bottomore's *Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (2001). Larrain calls attention to a first “strict” sense of ideology often associated with Marx's criticism of German neo-Hegelian philosophers and French Materialism in his and Engel's *The German Ideology*. Larrain summarizes the concept of ideology from this book as a “distortion of thought that spawns from social contradictions”. (BOTTOMORE, 2001, p. 184, my translation). The notion of ideology, then, right from the start carries a “negative and critical connotation.” Larrain goes on to argue, however, that such a definition consists of a “synchronic” reading of Marx's writings, and that a diachronic analysis of the concept of ideology throughout the course of the philosopher's life would reveal a shift of meaning and apprehension of the concept, because, first, the concept of ideology is not inherently negative, and eventually in Marx's later writings, especially the *Grundrisse* – the concept seems to disappear from his work (although the notion of “inversion” and “inverted consciousness” remain). This diachronic shift of the concept, allied with the fact that *The German Ideology* was first published in the 1920s, has led to the development of a “neutral” concept of ideology in the early 20th century, especially in the writings of the Bolshevik thinkers – Lenin in particular. (BOTTOMORE, 2001, p. 185)

This neutral or positive reading of the concept of ideology, initially put forward by the Russian Bolsheviks and eventually developed by Gramsci and Lukács, proposes that in class struggle, “ideology seems to be linked with the interests of the ruling class and its criticism to the interests of the ruled classes; in other words, the critique of the ideology of the ruling class is made from a different class position, or – by extension – a different ideological point of view. Therefore, for Lenin, ideology becomes the political consciousness associated with the interests of each class; in particular, he focuses his attention on the opposition between bourgeois ideology and socialist ideology”. (BOTTOMORE, 2001, p. 185 – 186, my translation)

Western Marxism – especially the Frankfurt School – and, by extension, most of the
English-speaking Marxist literary critics and theorists have considered the “negative” concept of ideology in developing their own approaches to the category. The way Michael Ryan defines “ideology” in his chapter on Marxism in Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction is illustrative of this tendency:

Ideology or “the ruling ideas of the ruling class” is a way of legitimating or justifying social and economic arrangements that might otherwise appear unjust because they are characterized by inequality. Those who rule or who possess economic power need to convince everyone else that the arrangement of the world is reasonable, or natural, or good. They also need to elicit the consent of those whose subjection to the role of productive workers is needed for the society to survive. (…) A (...) major form of Marxist criticism consists of a critique of ideology. It seeks to understand how ideology works in literature to mask social contradictions such as those between economic groups. (RYAN, 1999, p. 53-54)

Considering these two conflicting concepts of “ideology” in Marxist thought, it should be noted that both, according to Larrain, find resonance in Marx and Engels, since “elements of a neutral concept of ideology might be found in certain formulations by Marx and Engels themselves. Despite the basic tendency they display towards a negative concept, their texts are not exempt from ambiguities and unclear affirmations, which occasionally seem to point to a different direction.” (BOTTOMORE, 2001, p. 185, my translation)

The first association in war literature that might be made with the concept of ideology – considering the idea of “distorted” or “inverted” thought that comes out of social contradiction – is with Samuel Hynes' category “the myth of war”. In The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War, the author puts the concept as such:

By “myth” I don't mean a fabrication or fiction; I mean rather the simplified narrative that evolves from a war, through which it is given meaning: a Good War, a Bad War, a Necessary War. Myths seem to be socially necessary, as judgments or justifications of the terrible costs of war, but they take their shape at the expense of the particularity and ordinariness of experience, and the inconsistencies and contradictions of human behavior. The myth of a war tells what is imaginable and manageable. (HYNES, 1997, p. xiii).

In his book on the Great War, A War Imagined, Hynes gives a complementary definition of the category:

I use that phrase [Myth of the War] in this book to mean not a falsification of reality, but an imaginative version of it, the story of the war that has evolved and has come to be accepted as true. The construction of that story began during the war, and grew in the years that followed, assimilating along the way what was compatible with its judgments, and rejecting what was not. The Myth is not the War entire: it is a tale that confirms a set of attitudes, and idea of what the war was and what it meant.(…) This story [the Myth of the First World War] has been told in many ways: in histories of the war, in fictions and memoirs, in poems, in plays, in paintings, in films; but its essential elements remain much the same (HYNES, 2011, loc. 72-83)

The “myth of the war”, then, is a “simplified narrative” that serves as a “judgment” or a “justification” of the terrible costs of war, which leave out particularities, inconsistencies and

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2 For the writing of this article, I have used an e-book version of A War Imagined for the e-book reader Kindle. Since the typography of its software is variable, there is no specific “page” to be cited – instead, there are “locations”, since page numbers vary. As there are still no standardized ABNT or MLA norms for the citation of Kindle excerpts, I have chosen to cite them as “loc.”, as in “location.”
contradictions, offering an “imaginative version” of reality, which is evolved and is accepted as true. In the eyes of a Marxist, it seems to me that this could easily be a definition for “ideology.” The fact that Hynes doesn't make this connection stops his theory from being able to move much further in its political implications. If we take the “myth of war” to be a part of the “ideological discourse,” it is easier, for instance, to understand why certain versions of the war narratives are enforced by the State, the educational system and historiography – leading, for example, to the effacement of England's imperialistic interests in the Second World War, but tending to the creation of the “myth” (or the “ideology”) of the resilience of the British people and their bravery during the conflict.

Of course, the myth of the war is not always belligerent; for Hynes, the myth of the First World War, for instance, is one of patriotic disillusion, summarized as such:

(... a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of abstractions like Honour, Glory and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance. (HYNES, 2011, loc. 72 – 82)

Even with such an example, the coincidence between the concepts of “myth of war” and “ideology” still holds water. As Ryan (1999) puts it, “all ideology, because it masks real contradictions, contains fissures or fault-lines within it where those contradictions manifest an obdurate resistance to ideological pacification.” (p. 54) The “isolation” of the concept of the “myth of war” and its remarkable proximity to the concept of ideology evidence how harmful for the studies of war literature such isolation might be.

**Horizons of reading**

As mentioned above, the field of war literature studies is occupied by several different theoretical traditions – some of them which bear almost irreconcilable approaches, which often leads to a dichotomization between more “subject-oriented” approaches (such as psychoanalytic criticism) and more “politically-oriented” ones, such as otherness studies. I believe that, once again, a Marxist approach might be a possibility for bridging this gap, since it can hold in its scope several different critical theories. As Frederic Jameson puts it, Marxism can be conceived as an “untranscendable horizon” that “subsumes (...) apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations”.

Jameson offers a key to an analysis that might be fruitful for war literature studies: the idea of distinct “semantic horizons,” which consist of different “moments of the process of interpretation” (p. 1941). Jameson proposes three distinct horizons:

(...) in particular we will suggest that such semantic enrichment and enlargement of the inert givens
By using Jameson's three horizons, I would like to propose a similar – but not at all identical – analytic method for war literature. When reading a war narrative, one must first acknowledge to which “punctual event” in “political history” - to use Jameson's category - it is related; in other words, one must acknowledge that a World War II narrative has specificities that a novel of the Korean War does not, for example. Even a British account of the Battle of Britain, for instance, might feature aesthetic and literary peculiarities much different from a German one of the same battle – for the “political history” behind them shares a different ideological background. This level – as Jameson himself puts it – also refers to the level most related to the “text itself”: its linguistic and poetic level.

The next level, that of “society,” must acknowledge the stage of the class struggle during the period of production of the narrative and the period depicted by it. In this sense, the condition of a British working class soldier in the First World War, his stance towards the Victorian era and his feeling towards the German soldiers constitute a narrative marked by the typical conflicts of early 20th century England – which seems to coincide a lot with the aforementioned “myth of the First World War” put forward by Hynes. This narrative would differ greatly from that of a lower-middle-class US Marine sent to Afghanistan in the 2000s, for example – for the difference in the condition of the class struggle in these two different periods is immense. It should be noted that this level – differently from the other one – does not exactly concern the specificities of the conflicts themselves (where were they waged, which weapons were used, etc.), but rather the conditions of the class struggle in the period during which they were waged (who are the soldiers, from which class do they come, how strong is the ideological grip of the war propaganda, why is the war fought, etc).

Finally, the horizon of “history conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of the modes of production” is especially applicable when doing comparative studies between narratives of different eras of human history, marked by their succession of modes of production – slave economy, feudalism, capitalism, etc. In this sense, a comparative work of the Iliad and contemporary conflicts should acknowledge the peculiarities of armed conflicts in the Greek slave economy – in which the class of exploiters (slave holders and “citizens”) were the ones who actually waged war and actually fought, while in the capitalist wars, the bourgeoisie drafts its soldiers out from the working class, who fight their wars for them. This level presumes a “big-picture” understanding of the nature and role of war in a determinate mode of production.
It should be noted that the method of the three horizons, in war literature, might be – and should be – applied by taking into consideration a text's own contradictions – especially that between the period of writing and the period of publishing. One good example of such a work is Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, a satirical novel about the Second World War, but one that was written in 1961, shortly before the outbreak of the Vietnam War. The novel must be read differently considering its time of depiction – the Second World War; its time of production – between 1953 and 1961, the so-called “Golden Years” of economic growth in the USA-; and its time of reception – the 1960s, especially the period of the Vietnam War. The preface of the 50th Anniversary edition of the book discusses a little these different readings of the book, although it focuses only on different modes of reception:

> A book resonates along different bandwidths as it ages. *Catch-22*'s first readers were largely of the generation that went through World War II. For them, it provided a startlingly fresh take, a much-needed, much-delayed laugh at the terror and madness they endured. To the Vietnam generation, enduring its own terror and madness, crawling through malarial rice paddies while pacifying hamlets with napalm and Zippo lighters, the book amounted to existential comfort and the knowledge that they were not alone. (HELLER, loc. 151, 2010)

The method of the three horizons of reading proposed by Jameson might serve as a key to bridge the different tendencies within war literature studies, since it opens up space both for readings based on the level of the text and of the subject – at the first level – and readings more concerned with the social and cultural aspects of production and reception of the text, on the second and third levels of reading.

**Final Considerations**

This article aimed at evidencing how Marxism might offer a bridge that might overcome the “isolation” in which the studies of war literature are immersed. In order to do so, I offered only initial provocations on two topics, one related to theory and one to method. Further studies and discussions should offer more insights on this matter, and I believe Marxism might prove itself to be, as Jameson puts it, that “untranscendable horizon” of criticism.

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