Arts and Letters, War and Peace: What Painters and Poets Can Teach Us about International Politics

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Abstract

Poets, painters, and those who study war often seem to inhabit different worlds. This is a product both of the fragmentation of knowledge in the modern university and the gradual evolution of quantitative approaches and formal methods in political science. There is, however, much that the arts can contribute both to the study of war and to our efforts to teach war (and peace) in a liberal arts setting. Following brief discussions of the fragmentation of knowledge and the development of the discipline of international politics, this paper examines some of the ways that poets and painters have handled the subject of war. It considers the depiction of war both as a heroic and an unheroic activity, while also describing the didactic purpose of some art. The paper concludes with a few reflections on Wendell Berry’s observation that “the thing being made in a university is humanity” and on the role that the arts can play in the “battle for hearts and minds” in education about war.