

ENTANGLED MEMORIES: REPRESENTATIONS OF CRIMEA IN LITERATURE, POETRY AND ART

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Abstract: *The United Nations' cultural agency, UNESCO, has recently added the Historic Centre of Odesa (Ukraine) to its World Heritage List. Odesa is part of the Crimean Peninsula and it is a legendary port that has left its mark on the cinema, literature and the arts. Crimea has always attracted a large number of cultural figures including Alexandr Pushkin, Maxim Gorky, Anna Akhmatova, Ivan Bunin, Marina Tsvetaeva, Isaac Babel, Boris Pasternak, etc. Like the Russian-born Anton Chekhov, Ukrainian authors who have written about the peninsula were, historically, not native Crimeans. Crimea is not only the focus of geopolitical conflict, but also the source of artistic and literary inspiration. In this article, I analyze some perspectives on Crimea, starting with Ivan K. Aivazovsky's paintings (1817-1900), and some selected texts from those of the above-mentioned authors. For a current view on Crimea, I shall also consider some aspects of Ilya Kaminsky's contemporary poetry.*

Key words: *Crimean Peninsula, poetry, entangled memory, identity, literary geography*

Before being a city of the real world, Paris for me, as for millions of other people in every country, has been a city that I have imagined through books, a city that you appropriate when you read.

(Italo Calvino, *Hermit in Paris: Autobiographical Writings*, p. 167)

1. Introduction

Crimea is a peninsula located in the Black Sea region, and it has a complex history and relevant cultural heritage². It was part of Russia until 1954, when it was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. After the collapse of The Soviet Union in 1991, Crimea became part of independent Ukraine. In 2014, Russia

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² Crimean cultural heritage is relevant for several reasons: historical significance – Crimea has a rich history, with influences from various civilizations, including Greek, Byzantine, ottoman and Russian; cultural diversity – Crimea is home to various ethnic groups, including Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, Russians; identity and memory – cultural heritage plays a vital role in shaping the identity and memory of a specific community, helping people connecting to their roots and understanding their past.

annexed Crimea following a referendum³. Since then, the situation in Crimea has been a source of international tension and a subject of ongoing political disputes.

The region has a diverse population, including ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Crimean Tatars. Each of these groups has their own unique cultural traditions and history, and their sense of identity is closely tied to the region. Due to the ongoing political situation in Crimea, the issue of national and regional identity has become a complex and sensitive topic.

Going back in history, the struggle for the territory of Crimea has its roots centuries ago in the expansion policy of the Russian Empire, which sought to expand in all directions.

While success was visible in the east, with Siberia becoming part of Russia, the south has resisted since the time of Ivan the Terrible, when in the 16th century he led the campaign to annex the southern territories, conquering the Muslim inns of Kazan and Astrakhan. He then lost the battle to the Crimean Tatars, who briefly occupied Moscow in 1571 (Sixsmith, 2016, pp. 134-135). In 1654, Aleksei I, also called the Peaceful One (d' Encausse, 2008, p. 16) signed a treaty with Bogdan Khmelnytsky (d' Encausse, 2008, pp. 30-31). The provisions of the treaty allowed the integration of Ukraine into the Russian Empire. For Moscow, this represented the reunification of Kievan Rus', while for Ukrainians it became a source of resentment. Ukraine and Russia both saw themselves as heirs to Kiev's Golden Age. Ukraine was important to the Empire, ensuring not only Russia's proximity to Europe but also attracting a Western intellectual elite.

The transformation of Russia into a modern state and a genuine empire took place during the thirty-one years of Peter the Great's reign. Catherine II, the true heir of Peter I, resembled him in many respects and embraced the project of westernization, developing dynamic foreign policy strategies that enabled her to expand the territory of Russia.

With a penchant for letters and history, the Europe with which Catherine identified was primarily the French universe (d' Encausse, 2008, p. 39), but as with Peter, her geopolitical vision was aimed at integrating Russia into Europe and opening access to the seas.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were marked by wars with the Ottoman Turks over the regions in the north of the Black Sea. Catherine the Great was preoccupied with the Ottoman problem from the beginning of her reign. On July 6th, 1770, the Ottoman Empire was defeated on land and sea and lost the Azov, the territories held in Crimea, the shores of the Black Sea from the Dnieper to the Dniester, Bessarabia, Wallachia (d' Encausse, 2008, p. 42). Russia

3 As the Russian military had control of Crimea, Crimean authorities proposed a referendum, which was held on March 16, 2014. It proved to be a sham, as it was illegal from the perspective of Ukrainian law. The voters were offered two choices: either to join Russia, or to restore Crimea's 1992 constitution. So, there was no possibility to be validated by the inhabitants of the peninsula who favored Crimea remaining a part of Ukraine.

then became a global power. In 1771, Catherine the Great decided to wage war in the Crimea, guaranteeing the independence of the Tatars if they submitted to Russian authority. An agreement ensued whereby Moscow elevated the territory to sovereign status under Russian protection. In 1773-1774, Russian-Turkish fighting resumed, culminating in the signing of the peace treaty of Kuciuk-Kainargi on July 21st, 1774 (d' Encausse, 2008, p. 43), by which Russia acquired freedom of trade on the Black Sea, access to the Aegean and the Straits, included territorial conquest, and ensured penetration into the Caucasus through the Kabardian region. Nine years later, the Russian success in Crimea was completed with the annexation of the region.

It was Catherine the Great who brought the rest of Ukraine, the Crimea, the ports of the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea under Russian rule, thus gaining the coveted control of the Black Sea. This followed the Manifesto of April 8th, 1783, signed by Empress Catherine the Great, on the annexation of Crimea to the Russian state and the creation of the Taurida region headed by Prince G. A. Potemkin. The Ottoman Empire could not react, as no one was willing to support it against the Russian Empire, and so signed the Convention of Ainali-Kavak on January, 9th, 1784, recognizing the right of possession over Crimea (to be called the „Taurida region“) of the Russian Empire (d' Encausse, 2008, p. 44).

Coming to present times, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the conflict in Donbas in the same year had a major impact on international and European politics. Located on the northern Black Sea coast, Crimea has been and continues to be the subject of disputes between the Russians and Ukrainians and is an important point of interest for the European Union.

Despite the geopolitical tensions, Crimea has remained a popular tourist destination, attracting visitors with its Black Sea coastline, historical landmarks, and cultural heritage.

2. Literary and artistic representations of Crimea

The main concepts we build our discourse on are *entangled memory* and *literary geography*.

The concept of *entangled memory* is quite new in the field of memory studies⁴. Considering memory as a tangible phenomenon (Feindt, 2014), memorials, museums, literature, poetry are taken as representations of memory.

⁴ The beginning of memory studies is linked with Maurice Halbwachs's *La mémoire collective* [1950] (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997); *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925). Another phase in memory studies began around 1980 with the publication of Pierre Nora's and Jan Assmann's works in the 1980s and early 1990s: Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992); Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* [1992] (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011). In a more recent phase, Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory: Whither Memory Studies", in *Parallax* 17 (2011), 4-18. See also Wulf Kansteiner "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies", in *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002), 179-197.

There is a time related connection that memory embodies. I chose some texts from different periods of time, and also images of Crimea through time, as it shapes its image differently, according to the author's perspective. Another important relation for understanding the concept is established between memory and language, and we mention in this respect the inspiration that Wittgenstein brought to social theorists, to imagine language as a form of life (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 67). Then, we have these acts of remembering, *faits sociaux*⁵ that shape the memory as we approach it in this study. The acts of remembering may be considered a phenomenon of discourse, and their objectifications are a semiotic phenomenon. Designating these objectifications as *mnemonic signifiers*, we can refer to any socially relevant figuration of memory.

For instance, we study the entangled memories of Crimea, and therefore understanding Crimea as a *mnemonic signifier* permits going beyond an analysis of this region in Pushkin's *Fountain of Bakhchysarai* (1821) as a place of impossible love, very romantic and special place. At different points in time, Crimea could be a metaphor for Russian imperialism, Ukrainian independence (Babel, 2005), or a meditation place, as seen in Aivazovsky's paintings.

The concept of *literary geography* is a multidisciplinary approach that explores the relationship between literature and the spaces it represents or is inspired by. It involves analyzing how authors depict and interact with geographical locations in their works and how these settings influence the themes, characters, and narrative of the literary work. Initially, the concept of *space* was attributed to divine creation by thinkers such as Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, or linked to the Absolute as perceived by Schelling, Fichte, and Hegel (Tally, 2021, p. 16). Lefebvre proposed three aspects of space: experienced space, representations of space, and representational space. Each of these aspects denotes physical space, a space represented through maps, and the one imagined by writers and artists. In a more expansive context, this distinction can extend to literary theory, revealing how fictional texts' representational spaces mirror, challenge, or endorse the geographical formation of diverse *topoi* through various portrayals of space (*idem*, p. 20).

Literary geography draws from various fields, including literature, geography, cultural studies, and anthropology. It aims to understand the interplay between literature and the physical, social, and cultural landscapes it portrays. By examining the geographical context of a literary work, scholars and readers can gain a deeper understanding of the text's meaning, themes, and the author's intentions.

Some key aspects of *literary geography* include: sense of place (how writers use descriptive language to evoke a strong sense of place in their narratives). This helps readers immerse themselves in the setting and better understand the character's experiences), landscape and identity (*literary*

5 M. Halbwachs emphasized the importance of memory study toward memory's social embeddedness and its specific social reality.

geography explores how certain landscapes or environments shape the identity and experiences of characters, communities, or cultures depicted in literature). It also investigates how authors' perceptions of their own environments influence their writing. Another key aspect is related to *imagined geographies*, as some literary works may create entirely fictional or imagined geographies. We cannot ignore *ecocriticism*, a branch of *literary geography* that examines how literature engages with environmental issues and ecological concerns. It explores representations of nature and landscapes and their relationship with human society.

In a nutshell, the concept of *literary geography* enhances our understanding of literature by recognizing the profound impact of geographical settings on storytelling and how authors use these settings to convey complex ideas and emotions. Literature can be explored as a means of understanding the world and the diverse ways people interact with their environments.

Alexander Pushkin⁶ wrote upon the theme of Crimea, and celebrated its beauty and cultural heritage. We'll consider in this respect the poem *The Fountain of Bakhchysarai* (Pushkin, 2017), in which he portrays the exotic and full of mystery allure of Crimea, weaving together elements of history, legend, and folklore to create a powerful and evocative depiction of the region on the basis of the love of a Tatar khan for a Polish Countess.

Night came; covered with shadow
 Taurids sweet field;
 In the distance, under the quiet shadow of the laurels
 I hear the song of the nightingale;
 the moon rises for the chorus of stars;
 She cloudless skies
 on the valleys, the hills, forest
 Radiance languid suggests.
 Covered with a white veil,
 Like shadows flickering light,
 In the streets of Bakhchysarai,
 From house to house, to one another,
 Simple Tartars hurry wife
 Share evening entertainment (Pushkin, 2017).

Evoking the Palace of Bakhchisaray and its fountain, Pushkin creates a sense of exoticism. "The rose breath" or "the fountain noise" from the next lines make us think of life, love and tenderness; these metaphors might also induce the idea of solitude.

⁶ He was born in 1799 and lived through the tumultuous period of Russian history and saw the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire, in 1783, under the reign of Catherine the Great.

The magic of Bakhchysarai:
 While the heart was full:
 rose breath, fountains noise
 Attracted to involuntary oblivion,
 Unwittingly indulged in mind
 inexplicably excitement,
 And the palace volatile shadow
 Maid flashed before me! (Pushkin, 2017).

To the Sea (1824) is another Pushkin's poem that captures his personal connection and admiration for the sea, particularly the Black Sea. Similar to Aivazovsky's paintings, the poem expresses his longing for the sea, and its waves symbolize the ebb and flow of human emotions.

So, Sea, farewell. I will recall
 Your august splendor all my years.
 Long shall your boom as evening fall
 Sound and resound within my ears (Pushkin, 1824).



Fig. 1. Aivazovsky, I. *Night in the Crimea. View of Ayu Dag*, 1850⁷

We can notice in this image (fig. 1) the same metaphor as in the poem above. “Evening fall”, “august splendor” may indicate the connection with time, as Borges once put it (Borges, Mihăilescu, 2002, pp. 26), recalling the Greek philosopher with the famous sentence: “No man steps twice into the same river” (Heraclitus, 1889). What Borges emphasizes here is that we are made to feel that we are the river, that we are as fugitive as the river.

To go further, we can make the connection with death. I introduce in this respect another painting by Aivazovsky (fig. 2), which indicates the end of the day, but may signify an end in general, also the end of life. Also, the symbol of the

⁷ Source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/ivan-aivazovsky/night-in-the-crimea-view-of-ayu-dag-1850>

sea is very strong. To emphasize this idea, Borges introduces the verses of another poet, Manrique (1440-1479): “Nuestras vidas son los ríos / que van a dar en la mar / qu’és el morir⁸” (Idem, pp. 26).



Fig. 2. Aivazovsky, I. *Windmill on the Sea Coast*, 1851⁹

Using similar symbols, I mention the poet Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966). She was born in Odesa, Ukraine, but she chose to write in Russian. Akhmatova wrote about Crimea in several of her poems, and this place is described as a place of beauty, love, and endless memories. The sun, sky and the sea are frequently met elements in her lyrics.

The rich history of Crimea can be also envisioned in her writings. As a Crimean native, A. Akhmatova conveyed through her poems the strong connection she felt with this place, especially with her childhood, respectively a time connection and life as a dream. *Poem Without a Hero*¹⁰, *Requiem*¹¹, or *Here Pushkin’s exile began* evoke the strong connection of the poet to the region, as they are her connection with a period in her life that will never come back: her childhood.

Here Pushkin’s exile began,
And Lermontov’s ended.
Here a light fragrance of mountain herbs,
And once I caught a glimpse

8 Our lives are the rivers / that flow into that sea / which is death.

9 Source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/ivan-aivazovsky/windmill-on-the-sea-coast-1851>

10 Anna Akhmatova remained in Leningrad throughout its 900-day siege in World War Two. “Poem Without a Hero” has a powerful imagery.

11 Akhmatova, Anna, Thomas D.M., 2018, *Requiem and Poem without a Hero*, translated by D.M. Thomas, Ohio: Swallow Press. Akhmatova began writing “Requiem” in 1935 after the arrests of her son, Lev. It is an autobiographical poem, but she expresses the collective grief for all those vanished under the regime.

By the lake, in dense plane-trees' shade,
 In the cruel, evening hour,
 Of shining dissatisfied eyes,
 Of Tamara's immortal lover. (Akhmatova, 2005, p. 106)

Anna Akhmatova did not focus extensively on Crimea in her poetry, but she did mention the region in a few of her works. Crimea served as a backdrop for some of her poems, and its landscapes occasionally found their way into her verses. In *This city, beloved from childhood*:

Yet with a stranger's curiosity,
 Enchanted by every novelty,
 I watched the sleds as they raced,
 I listened to my native tongue.
 And happiness breathed in my face,
 With a wild and powerful freshness,
 As if some dear friend of old
 Stood here, on the porch, with me. (Akhmatova, 2005, p. 107)

I also mention the *Northern Elegies* (Akhmatova, 1985), a cycle of five poems written by Akhmatova in the early 1960s. The main theme of the elegies ("Elegy Beyond Crimea") is the suffering and despair of those who were unjustly imprisoned far away from their homeland.

Crimean Rose is dedicated to the memory of her good friend, Marina Tsvetaeva, who tragically committed suicide in 1941. In this poem, Crimea is referenced as a place full of memories, and it becomes a symbol of their friendship.

The poetry of Akhmatova is appreciated for its emotional depth and powerful expression of personal and collective experiences during tumultuous times.

I have lit my treasured candles,
 one by one, to hallow this night.
 With you, who do not come,
 I wait the birth of the year (Akhmatova, 2004, p. 241).

I shall introduce here the poet's own comment, an instant that may anticipate everything that would follow:

Wedding candles, spiraled, green with age (as at an *auto da fe*), in glass candlesticks, start burning on their own, with a suspiciously bright flame; in the dark corners of the room there's something that's not really good, not to mention that the music box (as if it couldn't bear the long silence) began either to sing or to rave about something completely pointless (Akhmatova, 2004, p. 242).

As I have already mentioned, Ivan Aivazovsky, the renowned Russian painter known for his beautiful marine landscapes and seascapes, and particularly famous for his depictions of Crimea, his images may entangle Akhmatova's verses.

Born in Crimea himself, Aivazovsky had a deep connection to the region, and this is evident in his numerous paintings that capture the beauty and majesty of the Crimean landscapes and seascapes.

The stunning natural beauty of the region is easily seen in his paintings, but he also masterfully captures the changing moods of the sea, from calm and serene waters to dramatic and stormy seas (fig. 2). The sandy beaches or picturesque coastal towns are also common elements in his compositions (fig. 5).



Fig. 3. Aivazovsky, I. *Crimea*, 1852¹²

He was a true master of portraying light and atmosphere in his paintings. His use of light, especially in his seascapes, is captivating, with the play of sunlight on the waves and reflections adding depth and realism to the scenes. He often painted sunsets and moonlight nights, creating a sense of tranquility and romanticism in his works. Naval themes are also frequently met: As a marine painter, Aivazovsky included ships and naval elements in his paintings (fig. 4). Crimea's strategic location on the Black Sea made it a significant naval base, and Aivazovsky's works often feature naval battles, sea voyages, and the grandeur of sailing ships.



Fig. 4. Aivazovsky, I. *Arrival into Sevastopol Bay*, 1852¹³

¹² Source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/ivan-aivazovsky/crimea-1852>

¹³ Source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/ivan-aivazovsky/arrival-into-sevastopol-bay-1852>

While Aivazovsky's works primarily focus on nature and the sea, he also incorporated human figures and activities in some of his Crimean paintings (fig. 3). These figures often add a sense of scale to the vast landscapes and help tell stories within the scenes.

Aivazovsky's paintings evoke a strong emotional response, whether it's a sense of awe and wonder at the power of the sea or a feeling of serenity while gazing at a peaceful coastal scene. Many of his works were created during the 19th century, a time of significant political and social changes in Crimea and the broader Russian Empire.



Fig. 5. Aivazovsky, I. *Crimean Tartars on the Sea Shore*, 1850¹⁴

There are also many writers who set their novels' actions in Crimea, like Leo Tolstoy¹⁵ or Anton Chekhov¹⁶, capturing its essence, its historical significance, and its allure.

From the contemporary literature, I will mention the Ukrainian poet and writer, Serhiy Zhadan¹⁷, who has written about Ukraine in his poetry and prose, on themes of displacement, war, loss, related to the region's recent history. In *Anarchy in the UKR* (Jadan, 2021), Zhadan reflects on the political turmoil and upheaval that Ukraine faced during the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. He expresses his emotions and frustration at the loss of Crimea and the impact it had on the Ukrainian people.

14 Source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/ivan-aivazovsky/crimean-tartars-on-the-sea-shore-1850>

15 In *Ana Karenina* (1875-1877), part of the story takes place in Crimea, particularly during Levin's journey to Yalta.

16 The short story *The Witch* (1898) revolves around the life of a peasant woman in Crimea and explores themes of superstition and supernatural.

17 Ukrainian poet, prose writer, translator and public activist. Serhiy Zhadan's literary works have received numerous national and international awards; have been translated into many languages, which made him one of the most renowned Ukrainian writers. Furthermore, Serhiy Zhadan is an active contributor to literary life in Ukraine and participant of synthetic art projects.

Similarly, Ilya Kaminsky's¹⁸ poetry explored themes related to identity, displacement, and the human experience, especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. It is important to understand the depth of his poetry, as he is the strong voice of an entire people. I selected his poetry, as it is different from the others', as *silence* is a metaphor for suffering and the darkness of war, as we can find in a note of the poet at the end of his volume *Deaf Republic* (2019): "The deaf don't believe in silence. Silence is the invention of the hearing"¹⁹. In relation to this concept, Crimea shapes a different image of the place, a special significance for the reader. Here are some lines from the poem *What we cannot hear* (2019):

[...] and what remains of her is
 a puppet
 that speaks with its fingers,
 what remains of a puppet is this woman, what remains
 of her (they took you, Sonya) – the voice we cannot hear – is the clearest voice²⁰.
 (Kaminski, 2019)

Fury and beauty are entangled in Kaminsky's poetry, and so are the feelings of grief that strengthen the concept of silence with its valences that we can identify everywhere in his poems. It is an active concept with many nuances, as well as the absence might be considered a different form of presence.

3. Conclusions

The views on Crimea I mentioned here are only a starting point for a more in-depth study and analysis of this region. We saw how the beauty of Crimea is depicted in paintings, and how it is represented in literary texts and poetry. This way, on the realms of memory, the history of Crimea is transmitted from generation to generation, through what we call *entangled memories*.

Crimea is mostly associated with the sea, but also with light and the darkness of war, with the power of its people who have struggled so much through earlier historical times and present days to keep their faith and identity complete, with love, and with natural beauty. Crimea is inevitably linked to the sea, and therefore to the symbols of the sea: time, love, eternity, and death.

¹⁸ Ilya Kaminski is the author of the collection *Deaf Republic* (2019), a finalist for the 2019 *National Book Award in Poetry*. He is also the author of poetry collections *Dancing In Odessa* (2004) and *Musica Humana* (2002).

¹⁹ Poems from *Deaf Republic*, by Ilya Kaminsky. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/02/18/deaf-republic>. February 11, 2019 (status 23.07.2023).

²⁰ Kaminski, Ilya, *What we cannot hear*. From *Deaf Republic*. Copyright © 2019 by Ilya Kaminsky. Used with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of Graywolf Press, <https://poets.org/poem/what-we-cannot-hear> <https://poets.org/poem/what-we-cannot-hear> (status 23.07.2023).

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