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Poetry, War, and Trauma: Poems from Ukraine

Abstract

While there is a long genealogy of war poetry across the world, the relationship between poetry and war is often misunderstood insofar as poetry is perceived as private, personal, and lyrical meditations removed from the world. This misconception was furthered by a misinterpretation of Theodor Adorno's injunction against writing poetry after Auschwitz. This paper refers to Adorno and Auden to contextualize the place of poetry in times of war. It locates war poetry within theoretical frames of trauma, witnessing, memory, and memorialization. The paper analyses war poetry from Ukraine in English translation, from the Russian occupation, beginning in 2014 to the current war in Ukraine. The poems discussed deal with the ways in which Russia's occupation and invasion have destroyed everyday lives and communities, ruptured any conception of peace, and instilled long-lasting trauma. Many poems focus on civilian lives since civilians have been deliberately targeted. Through a study of a handful of Ukrainian war poetry we perceive not just the devastation of a country, its lands and peoples, but also resilience and determination, and the necessity to keep bearing witness in and through poetry.

Keywords: memory, resilience, trauma, Ukraine War, war poetry, witnessing.

Why poetry? What is the place of poetry in times of war and its aftermaths?

One of the most cited and perhaps equally misunderstood statements about poetry and war is that of Theodor Adorno who wrote that it would be barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. Yet Adorno went on to argue that it was through poetic representations that language would find a means of expressing the horrors of the Holocaust. This paradox is expressed by the poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan who wrote about the essential value of language in the face of the annihilation of six million Jews, and the awful responsibility of writing about experiences in the camp and of survival.

Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing; language. ... It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening – but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again, “enriched” by all that. In this language I have sought, then and in the years since then, to write poems – so as to speak, to orient myself, to explore where I was and was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself.¹

Celan, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub point out, insisted on writing in German, the language of his tormenters and the language of degradation and humiliation. German was the language which needed to come to terms with its own losses and barbaric renditions, and in poetry Celan retrieves not just the horrors of the Holocaust, but the possibilities of poetry in the language that perpetrated that abomination. It is through language that he reorients himself, his reality, and what it means to live in the world after the Shoah. As Celan expressed it: “The concern of this language is, in all the unalterable multivalence of the expression, *precision*. It doesn’t transfigure, doesn’t ‘poeticize,’ it names and places.”²

I begin with the Holocaust because it was and is sometimes construed as being unrepresentable, an experience outside language and representation. In fact, early trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth seem to imply that traumatic experiences, because they are a rupture in the continuum of consciousness and time, are not experienced as recoverable events. In other words, they are either repressed or expressed unconsciously, without premeditation, and often in reaction to external stimuli (such as war veterans reacting to loud noises). The traumatic event or experience then becomes a kind of epistemic black hole, beyond language and knowledge. However, as more recent theorists such as Hanna Meretoja argue, trauma is not necessarily “unexperiencable, unsayable, and unknowable.”³ Poems, memoirs, and survivor testimonies make clear that the Holocaust was not and is not beyond language, even as it stretches the boundaries of expression and imagination.

In his work, *Interrupting Auschwitz*, Josh Cohen writes that after Auschwitz “The poet’s significance lies in his status as the agency through which the unsayable lets itself be heard as such, [...]” This is so because “The demand of thinking after Auschwitz would be above all to expose and bear witness to this silence at the heart of language.”⁴ I would like to think about poetry as a kind of witnessing, bearing witness to that which seems beyond or outside imagination and yet was terrifying and lived reality for millions of people. Witnessing as Carolyn Dean points out, is

¹ Cited in S. Felman and D. Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York, London, 1992, p. 25.

² Cited in C. Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, London, 1995, p. 41.

³ H. Meretoja, “Philosophies of Trauma,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 32.

⁴ J. Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy*, New York, London, 2003, p. 108.

related to testimony: “The speech-act of testifying forges legal and moral community by creating a relationship of trust between the witness and those who listen and is often referred to as the performative force of the testimony.” Witnessing creates what Dean calls a bond of “epistemic trust.”⁵ While Dean is primarily discussing acts of witnessing as enacted in the trial of Adolf Eichmann, I suggest that while the poetic testimony has no juridical weight, it too creates a “moral community” and engenders the expansion of “epistemic trust.” And just as testimony in the Eichmann trial restored the dignity of the witnesses, so too poetry restores humanity and subjectivity to those who had been stripped of them. “Literary narratives,” as Meretoja writes, “have the potential to provide hermeneutic resources not only for self-understanding but also for social change, in the struggle against traumatizing structural violence.”⁶ The poetry I read in the essay are examples of the “hermeneutic resources” that enable us to think about, commemorate, and bear witness to wars across generations.

Trauma as moral category

Before analysing poetry, I want to refer to the idea of trauma as a moral category that Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman analyse in their book, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. It is a detailed and complex set of arguments, wherein they write: “The point is to grasp the shift that has resulted in what used to excite suspicion now having the value of proof – the shift whereby what was false has become true.”⁷ During the First World War “shell shock” was seen primarily as a symptom of malingering, of cowardice, and of soldiers who wished to avoid combat. After the Vietnam War, PTSD was recognized as a medically valid condition triggered by the horrors of combat. The US soldier returned from the jungles of Vietnam traumatized by the war, the landscape, and the people he had gone to liberate. The soldier was constructed as a victim as much as the Vietnamese who were at the receiving end of American firepower. This is one of many examples that lead Fassin and Rechtman to conclude that “trauma today is more a feature of the moral landscape serving to identify legitimate victims than it is a diagnostic category which at most reinforces that legitimacy. [...] It identifies complaints as justified and causes as just.”⁸ This is what Lucy Bond refers to as the “popularization of trauma in the pathological public sphere” in the context of

⁵ C. J. Dean, “Witnessing,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 111.

⁶ H. Meretoja, op. cit., p. 31.

⁷ D. Fassin and R. Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. R. Gomme, Princeton, Oxford, 2009, p. 5.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 284.

the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.⁹ Bond examines the problems with trauma theory and its instrumentalization post-9/11, highlighting the limits of trauma theory. As Alan Gibbs points out “trauma theory sets an ideal foundation for tendencies which [...] enabled a sense of false innocence to take root and deflect attention from America’s complicity in actions both before and after 9/11.”¹⁰ Neither Bond nor Gibbs are claiming that Americans – as individuals or as a country – were not traumatized by the 9/11 terror attacks; what they are pointing to is how “the pre-existing fascination with victimhood was easily exploited into a fantasy of national traumatization that was mobilized to justify morally dubious foreign policies and the exportation of violence to other lands.”¹¹ To return to Fassin and Rechtman’s idea in the context of September 11: America and Americans were identified as legitimate victims and that legitimacy led to the open-ended war on terror and the creation of other victims and their separate, but not always visible traumas. In order to be visible, trauma must be seen as such and visibility is dependent on whether particular traumas or traumatized groups are granted legitimacy. To cite Fassin and Rechtman again: “The way in which one’s suffering is viewed will depend on their status or their social usefulness.”¹² Or, as Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja put it in their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*: “Being recognized as traumatized is a privilege not equally available to all trauma victims.”¹³ Davis and Meretoja give the example of asylum seekers who may have suffered intense hardships and trauma, but whose “status” and “social usefulness” is suspect and thus their recognition as traumatized subjects is downplayed or denied. There is, in other words, a hierarchy of suffering and legitimate trauma, and the process of legitimation is inflected by politics, ideology, culture, religion, and race. Context is everything: the shell-shocked soldier of World War I was seen as a coward, the traumatized soldier of Vietnam as someone suffering from PTSD. Trauma theory and traumatization is now ubiquitous and, to cite Davis and Meretoja once more, “a key challenge of trauma theory is to avoid false universalism.” In such a field “literature has the advantage of drawing our attention to the unique nature of each traumatic experience and its social and cultural contexts.”¹⁴ The specificity of traumatized subjects without the creation of hierarchies of suffering is crucial to our understanding of the role that literary representations play in this complex, contested terrain.

⁹ L. Bond, “9/11,” In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 415.

¹⁰ A. Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, Edinburgh, 2014, p. 121.

¹¹ Bond, op. cit.

¹² Fassin and Rechtman, op. cit., p.30.

¹³ C. Davis and H. Meretoja, “Introduction,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 6.

W. H. Auden and war poetry

Arguably literature and war have been intertwined for a very long time and I want to turn to two poems by W. H. Auden, one in which he refers directly to Hitler's invasion of Poland ("September 1, 1939") and the second, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," wherein he seems to undermine the role of poetry in public life, especially in times of war. In an earlier age, Auden expresses the value of poetry, values that we see embodied in poetry from the war in Ukraine. As Hitler invades Poland Auden writes of the "Waves of anger and fear" that sweep over the "darkened lands of the earth." In the midst of monumental violence, Auden emphasizes the value of poetry and the role of the poet: "All I have is a voice/To undo the folded lie/The romantic lie in the brain/ ... And the lie of Authority."¹⁵ Quite clearly this lone poetic voice – or even a hundred poetic voices, as in the collection *100 Poets Against the War* (written to protest the US invasion of Iraq) – does not alter the course of the war, but it enables us to think about war from perspectives that are not generally available in mainstream discourse. As Audre Lorde put it, poetry enables a shift in the "quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives."¹⁶ Lorde has in mind not only a scrutiny of individual lives but the reconfiguration of collective imaginaries and collective consciences, so that the poet speaks to us truths that others may not speak and many may not wish to hear. Now, there is a danger that the poet may think of himself as a prophet, as someone with access to truth that ordinary folks do not have, and this is a tendency that poets such as Allen Ginsberg, for example, display when they write of the Vietnam War. Auden, however, is conscious of this danger and writes:

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.¹⁷

The poet too is under siege, but he will use his craft to "Show an affirming flame," enabling shifts in the "quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives." The poet is neither a recluse thinking and writing fine thoughts in his ivory tower, nor is he a prophet delivering truths to a benighted people. He stands with the people and stands against "Negation and despair" in the midst of war.

Yet in his earlier poem, an elegy in memory of W. B. Yeats who died just before the outbreak of World War II, Auden seems to denigrate the role of poetry altogether:

¹⁵ W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939," <https://poets.org/poem/september-1-1939>.

¹⁶ Cited in H. L. Hix, ed., *Counterclaims: Poets and Poetries, Talking Back*, Maclean, Dublin, 2020, p. xxi.

¹⁷ Auden, op. cit.

“For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives.”¹⁸ At a literal level this is true, but Auden’s declaration of poetic impotence is not quite what it seems on the surface. Auden’s declaration is ironic insofar as he writes poetry that impinges on the reader’s perception of the world, offering new modes of imagination and thought. Yet Auden is conscious of a poetic desire for making things happen, of impact, of the prophet-poet-shaman speaking truths to the ignorant world – a desire manifested in much poetry dealing with political subjects such as war. Wars draw poets of all hues to express their pain, outrage, helplessness, empathy, and trauma. It is as if poets – of varying talent – are uniquely qualified to speak of war (and the reams of poor war poetry testify to the contrary). Such poets “importune attention,” they “reduce art to an endless series of momentary and arbitrary ‘happenings,’ and [...] produce in artists and public alike a conformism to the tyranny of the passing moment [...]”¹⁹ As with Auden, the best poets of our troubled times speak deftly and ironically, quietly creating domains of refusal that are not shrill, and articulating belonging that is neither sentimental nor obsessive. Poetry’s vitality lies in its expansion of civic spaces, the embodiment of climates of conscience amidst the accidental and the terrible.

Having declared that “poetry makes nothing happen,” Auden goes on to inscribe the value of writing during war:

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice.

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress.

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountains start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.²⁰

Poetry, and indeed literature at large, is a mode of overcoming the “Intellectual disgrace” that has overwhelmed Europe in the grip of Nazism and Fascism. While “the living nations wait,/ Each sequestered in its hate” the poet offers “rapture” and words and thoughts that inspire and teach “the free man how to praise.” Notice

¹⁸ W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” <https://poets.org/poem/memory-w-b-yeats>.

¹⁹ W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords*, New York, 1974, p. 394.

²⁰ Auden, *op. cit.*

the paradox where the poet sings “of human unsuccess/In a rapture of distress.” In other words, poetry is completely entangled with the world and “the deserts of the heart,” but it is in and through that “prison” that the “free man” will move beyond “Intellectual disgrace.”

We may wish for neat solutions to the conflicts and problems of our world but of course literature does not give us these easily digestible, swiftly weaponised modes of thinking and being. Instead, poetry in particular and literature in general, creates community and solidarity. As the American poet, Robert Haas puts it:

We have inner lives partly in language, a music of consciousness that flows in us and through us. Poetry is very good at representing it. And we need to hear each other. If we only heard the public language of intention and information, we would each be alone on the earth.²¹

What Auden and other great poets create for us is precisely this “music of consciousness,” they create linguistic and moral registers that are so different from “the public language of intention and information.” We are overwhelmed by information (and information warfare), by half-truths, and lies that leave us, as Auden put it, “sequestered” in our “hate.” Poetry revives our “inner lives,” making us recognize that one way out of this impasse of “hate” is to read, think, listen, debate, and establish a fellowship rooted in multiple, often contradictory, and always exciting ideas and thoughts.

Listening is crucial. To cite Philip Metres:

Poetry is not merely a way of beholding the beautiful and telling the truth, but also a mode of listening, a medium of dialogue with ourselves and the others we find ourselves among. And to reimagine what it means “to find oneself among.” As C. D. Wright has written, we read and write not only to delight and instruct (or be delighted and instructed), but “to be changed, healed, charged.” That sort of social change. That sort of social charge.²²

Metres categorically links the poetic with the social but not in a crudely instrumental sense. Truth and beauty might seem archaic, harking back to Keats’s idea of the relationality between the two, but it is with and through the aesthetic that the social is transformed, made meaningful in ways that had been invisible or shut out prior to the reading and the perception of new realities. Literature deals head on with the “disenchantment of the world” and conditions of modernity and refuses to imbue violence with any kind of beauty, value, or enchantment. I am using the

²¹ H. L. Hix, op. cit., p. 136.

²² Ibidem.

terms “disenchantment” and “enchantment” in the way that Sarah Cole does in her essay “Enchantment, Disenchantment, War, Literature,” where she writes:

What *disenchantment* means in my configuration is not a passive recognition of spiritual flatness but the active stripping away of idealizing principles, an insistence that the violated body is not a magic site for the production of culture. *Enchantment* refers to the tendency to see in violence some kind of transformative power.²³

While Cole’s essay is an analysis of T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, it is appropriate for our meditations on the relationship between poetry and war. Throughout history, cultures across the world have celebrated war and venerated war heroes who sacrifice their lives for the future of their nations. The body of the soldier becomes in this imagining a site of blood sacrifice and communal regeneration. This would explain, for instance, the great enthusiasm with which the outbreak of World War I was greeted in Europe. In contrast, Cole and the literature of war posits alternative ways of imagining violence. As Cole writes: “Disenchantment relies on an aesthetic that forces violence into a certain kind of view.”²⁴ That view is evident not only in canonical anti-war poetry (think of the English poets of World War I) or fiction (Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* or Henri Barbusse’s *Under Fire* or Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*), or memoirs (Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man*), but in the poems of Auden I mentioned earlier. These works embody “the active stripping away of idealizing principles” that Cole mentions, enabling us to see into the mouth of the gorgon, and offering ways to rethink ourselves and others in the midst of violence.

War poetry from Ukraine

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 received global media coverage, the present war with Russia dates back at least to 2014 when Russia occupied Crimea and the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donbas and Luhansk. I would like to begin by briefly citing two Ukrainian poets, Serhiy Zhadan and Lyuba Yakimchuk, who are from the Donbas region and whose poetry is available in English translation. Zhadan’s collections *A New Orthography* and *Catalogue of Ships*, and Yakimchuk’s *Apricots of Donbas* are about witnessing, remembering, and articulating what eight years of conflict have done to the people and the region. In the opening poem of *Catalogue of Ships*, Zhadan writes of the imperative to remember:

²³ S. Cole, “Enchantment, Disenchantment, War, Literature,” *PMLA*, Vol. 124, No. 5, Oct. 2009, pp. 1632-1647. Italics in original.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 1637.

Let's start by whispering the names,
let's weave together the vocabulary of death.

To stand and talk about the night.
Stand and listen to the voices
of shepherds in the fog
incanting over every single
lost soul.²⁵

The “whispering of names” is not only a weaving of “the vocabulary of death” but also a refusal to obliterate the lives of thousands who have perished in a war not of their making or choice. The poet gives death back to people who died without dignity through his act of poetic commemoration. This refusal to forget enables both individual and collective remembrance so that “every single/lost soul” is paradoxically revived in the poem and all who read the poem.

Yakimchuk too is invested in memorialising the realities of everyday life ruptured and destroyed, physically and psychically damaged beyond recognition. In one poem she conveys the urgency of the outbreak of war: “run / drop all you have and run – / leave your house, your cellar with jars of apricot jam.” In “the return” she writes of the displaced people in Donbas:

we want back home, where we got our first grays
where the sky pours into window in blue rays
where we planted a tree and raised a son
where we built a home that grew moldy without us²⁶

And yet the “the road back home blossoms with mines.” Home is no longer refuge, its physical wreckage reminder of all that home meant: planting a tree, raising a son, both of which speak to rootedness, to intergenerational continuities that have been devastated. Devastation and ruin seep into every aspect of life. As the filmmaker and writer Iryna Tsilyk writes of the long war in Ukraine:

[...] war destroys the understandable world and leaves behind a burning void, and there is no longer any point looking for simple answers. [...] There has been a war in my country for many years. It destroyed our normal world for ever: it broke us, exhausted us, changed the way

²⁵ S. Zhadan, “To get together and talk,” *The Massachusetts Review*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.massreview.org/node/10334>.

²⁶ L. Yakimchuk, “the return,” trans. O. Maksymchuk and M. Rosochinsky, [in:] “The endless and innocent birdsong of the sky is for you,” 28 March 2022, <https://chytomo.com/en/the-endless-and-innocent-birdsong-of-sky-is-for-you-the-newest-ukrainian-war-poems/>.

we look at familiar things. It taught us to be strong and fragile at the same time.²⁷

In the midst of the broken, “exhausted” world, the poet and her poems will not forget, and although remembrance is painful, remembrance is all that stands between hope and futures, on the one hand, and the destruction of beautiful, painful, human pasts lived in Donbas, on the other. While returns may be painful and impossible in the present, there is a determination to return in the future:

we will walk back, even with bare feet
if we don’t find our home in the place where we left it
we will build another one in an apricot tree
out of luscious clouds, out of azure ether²⁸

Yakimchuk recovers the long arc of Russian violence and its occupation of Ukrainian territories, reminding readers that the war did not begin in February 2022, that Ukrainians have lived with death, destruction, and loss outside the glare of global media attention that Russia’s overt invasion in 2022 garnered. Within this terrible everyday, the poem articulates resilience and beauty, where home(s) will be rebuilt “in an apricot tree/ out of luscious clouds, out of azure ether.” The melding of the human and natural worlds indicates their interdependence (and the violence wrought on both by the war) and through that intertwining the possibilities of renewal, the strength and fragility that Tsilyk writes about.

While resilience and renewal are central to “the return,” Yakimchuk is aware that there are violations so severe that they test the limits of endurance. In the poem “CATERPILLAR,” Yakimchuk represents the trauma of rape in clinical fashion, as if she were writing a forensic report. Yet the trauma of the rape and its rippling effects outward from the woman to her child and the reader is reinforced by this clinical language. As the nameless woman and her daughter show their passports at a check post, two men figure she is a sniper:

they strip her
they probe her
they lay her down
as a queue
nine of them
(her favorite number)
rape her

²⁷ I. Tsilyk, “The Ouroboros Path,” 23 August 2022, In *Ukraine 22: Ukrainian Writers Respond to War*, edited by Mark Andryczyk, Dublin, 2022, p. 157, 160.

²⁸ Yakimchuk, op. cit.

wearing blue bathrobes
 (her favorite color)
 second-hand Nikes
 (her favorite shoes)
 nine of them
 on one disheveled –
 not bitch, but
 woman
 her little girl curls up like a fetus
 looks on without tears
 she picks up her mom's wedding band
 holds it in her mouth
 like a dog with a bone
 and watches a caterpillar devour
 their green town²⁹

While the language is pared down, the violence and violation are not; the matter-of-fact tone heightens the barbarity of the rape and the fact that the “little girl” witnesses it extends the circle of violence. Rape and sexual violence are a constant in war, as if by violating enemy women one is dishonouring not only them but their men who cannot protect them. Of course, this is a patriarchal construct based on insecurity and fear: the fact that the raped woman here has burns on her index finger “from shooting a sniper rifle” furthers that insecurity. The two men at the check post call her “Butch”: perhaps because she does not fit their idea of femininity or perhaps, they mean “bitch” or both. An ‘ordinary’ woman is subject to extraordinary violence: the references in parenthesis to her favourite number, colour, and shoes heightens that gap between the everyday and the horror of rape; a rupture that will reverberate for months and years after the event, as in all traumatic events. As Tsilyk writes rape is “someone else’s primitive desire to humiliate another human being, to destroy, to desecrate someone else’s body and spirit, to close someone’s mouth, to tear tender flesh roughly, to ‘punish’ someone else, their dignity, their otherness, their right to say no.”³⁰ The sites of war are not limited to a well-defined frontier because atrocity is visited on civilians and specifically women defending their homeland, who must be ‘punished’ for daring to stand up to the enemy. To repeat Sarah Cole’s formulation of disenchantment, the “violated body is not a magic site for the production of culture;” it is a site of barbarism and degradation and the fact that the rapists see the act as one of masculine validation further heightens that barbarism. The trauma is not limited to the mother as her little girl watches in mute horror.

²⁹ L. Yakimchuk, “Caterpillar,” trans. O. Maksymchuk and M. Rosochinsky, [in:] *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*, edited by O. Maksymchuk and M. Rosochinsky, Boston, 2018, pp. 150-151.

³⁰ Tsilyk, op. cit., p. 161.

In holding her “mom’s wedding band” in her mouth she unconsciously recognizes the value of the ring and the violation of her mother’s body and life. The child has no language for what she sees – replicating the idea that trauma is inexpressible – but the poem makes evident that she has an inchoate idea of what is happening and the image of the caterpillar devouring “their green town” perfectly captures the ways in which the war devours every living being in that town. The invasion of one’s homeland is also the invasion of one’s home and, in this poem, the invasion of one’s body. These invasions are physical and psychic, and they have intergenerational impact driving inward and rippling outward in inestimable ways. Writing of Yakimchuk and other Ukrainian poets such as Anastasia Afanisieva, Polina Barskova observes how their poetry represents “the hybrid war interven[ing] with private life, how the very idea of the private, ‘protected’ human existence is shattered and undone by political aggression.”³¹ In this poem Yakimchuk captures not just the horrors of rape and a child witnessing it, but the fact that the moment will live on. Elaine Scarry’s argument that the fundamental site of war is the human body is worth repeating here. While her primary focus is on male soldiers’ bodies, it is necessary to keep in mind that women’s bodies are equally the site of violation whether they be soldiers or not. Women’s voices are silenced in war (and peace), but Yakimchuk through her forensic detailing of one rape in one nameless town asks us as readers to think about what war means for those whose homes and territories have been invaded, and whose lives are altered in ways we can barely imagine. As Borys Humenyuk writes in one of his poems, “When HAIL rocket launchers are firing,”: “This is the war of all against all -/It touches everyone -/The dead, the living, and those not yet born.”³² The lines “The dead, the living, and those not yet born” are an allusion to the anti-colonial poem, “To the Dead, To the Living, and To Those Yet Unborn, My Countrymen All Who Live in Ukraine and Outside Ukraine, My Friendly Epistle,” by the founder of modern Ukrainian poetry and its most famous writer, Taras Shevchenko.³³ Shevchenko laments the lack of pride and patriotism in his homeland and is particularly scathing about the elite – among them landlords – who are self-centred and oppressive. In citing Shevchenko, Humenyuk highlights continuities of oppression and violence across generations and centuries, even if the contexts are different and the violence is now visited upon Ukraine by an external power. The intertextuality deepens our sense of poetic traditions in Ukraine at the

³¹ A. Barskova, “Afterword: On Decomposition and Rotten Plums: Language of War in Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry,” [in:] *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*, edited by O. Maksymchuk and M. Rosochinsky, Boston, 2018, p. 195.

³² B. Humenyuk, “When HAIL rocket launchers are firing,” In *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*, edited by O. Maksymchuk and M. Rosochinsky, Boston, 2018, p. 35.

³³ T. Shevchenko, “To the Dead, To the Living, and To Those Yet Unborn, My Countrymen All Who Live in Ukraine and Outside Ukraine, My Friendly Epistle,” *The Poetical Works of Taras Shevchenko*, trans., C. H. Andrusyshen and Watson Kirkconnell, Toronto, 1964, p. 249. I am grateful to Tetiana Grebenyuk for sharing this valuable insight and for her careful reading of a draft of this essay.

same time that Humenyuk emphasises an inter-generational memorial and traumatic landscape. Marianne Hirsch's theorization of postmemory is of relevance here. "The term," Hirsch writes, "is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its belatedness.... Postmemory characterizes the experiences of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, ... shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor re-create."³⁴ While Hirsch is right about traumatic events shaping those who come after, it is not as if belatedness or displacement preclude understanding and recreation, as in Humenyuk's poem. Further, Humenyuk himself has gone missing in the war and he and fellow Ukrainians are living through traumatic presents which the future will inherit.

In such a landscape poetry might seem to be insufficient and inadequate, barely able to hold on to language and its resources. In "Not a poem in forty days," Humenyuk catalogues the helplessness of poetry as it watches the destruction of war:

Poetry saw trees die.
 ...
 Poetry saw animals die.
 Wounded cats and dogs
 Dragging their spilling guts down the streets
 As if this was something ordinary
 Poetry didn't know what to do:
 Take pity and help them die, or
 Take pity and let them live.³⁵

Humenyuk details the breadth of destruction, focusing not just on humans – "Bullets always look for people" – but on animals, trees, and houses, so that we see war for what it is and does. While war is created and waged by men it touches everything:

Walls, floors, furniture,
 kids toys, kitchenware, grandfather clock,
 all of it bitten by war,
 licked by fire.³⁶

The war imposed by Russia upon the people and land of Ukraine has led to environmental degradation – the blowing up of the Khakhovka Dam by Russian forces

³⁴ M. Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," [in:] *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, edited by M. Bal, J. Crewe, and L. Spitzer, Hanover, London, 1999, p. 8.

³⁵ Humenyuk, "Not a poem in forty days," op. cit., p. 36.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 38.

is a spectacular example – that will take generations to heal. Yet Humenyuk does not give up on poetry; amid carnage, poetry bears witness:

Poetry would rather go blind
than see corpses every day.

Poetry is the shortcut to heaven.
Poetry sees into the void.
When you fall
It lets you remember your way back.
Poetry went places
where there isn't place for poetry.

Poetry witnessed it all.
Poetry witnessed it all.³⁷

Poets can turn away from war, but they do not because poetry can represent that which seems beyond imagining and language. Humenyuk is being ironic when he says: “Poetry is the shortcut to heaven.” Quite clearly, poetry is not a “shortcut to heaven” nor, as Auden had observed before him, does it make anything happen. Yet in going places where there is no place for poetry it helps us remember, to see into the heart of darkness, and to find a way back via language. The very medium that is corrupted by the war is restored by the poet so that poetry becomes a mode of commemoration, even consecration: bearing witness to secular desecrations. There is an incantatory quality to the last two lines – “Poetry witnessed it all./ Poetry witnessed it all.” – as if through a kind of prayerfulness, poetry will witness that which may be forgotten or repressed.

In an essay on affect and trauma, Andrea Ritivoi argues for an affective reading of witnessing: “Re-cast in terms of affect theory, witnessing trauma becomes a form of being drawn into it and thus becoming morally responsible.”³⁸ A poetics of witness, as all poetry on war is, draws us into worlds we may not know or avoid, or know, but have no language to express. In reading war poetry, we are no longer bystanders, we too are witnesses, and in our witnessing, we become “morally responsible.” Humenyuk’s incantation is not merely rhetorical, it is an affective reaching out to all of us who are touched by the terrors of war and its destruction of humanity. “Trauma is,” as Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman write, “both the product of an experience of inhumanity and the proof of the humanity of those who endured it.”³⁹

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 38.

³⁸ A. Ritivoi, “Affect,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 150.

³⁹ Fassin and Rechtman, op. cit., p. 20.

In poetry we find the most resilient expressions of humanity in the face of inexplicable, inexhaustible trauma.

In the poem “TESTAMENT,” Humenyuk writes of how soldiers who live with the omnipresent consciousness of death, wish to be remembered:

Tomorrow we will die
 Maybe some of us
 Maybe all of us⁴⁰

The soldiers then list the ways in which they do not wish to be remembered:

Don't gather our remains from the field
 Don't try to put us back together again
 And – we beg you – don't erect crosses
 Monuments or memorial slabs
 We don't need them
 Because it isn't for us –
 You erect these monuments for yourselves.

Don't engrave our names,
 Simply remember:
 On this field
 In this earth
 Ukrainian soldiers lie
 And – that is all.⁴¹

They refuse monumental mourning because that serves only to console the living, and the reasons and causes for which the dead are commemorated is forgotten. The soldiers repudiate memorials that strive toward healing and reconciliation (such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.). While inscribing names of the fallen in monuments allows for collective mourning and recollections, it also leads to closure and forgetfulness through closure. The soldiers testamentary desire in the poem is for a more fundamental oneness with the world, specifically nature.

Can you imagine the grain a field
 Where warriors are lying will yield?
 To remember us, eat the grain from the field
 Where we laid down our lives

⁴⁰ B. Humenyuk, “TESTAMENT,” op. cit., p. 42.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 43.

It would be good if there were meadows there
 And many flowers
 And a bee under each flower
 And lovers who come in the evening
 To weave wreaths
 To make love till dawn
 And during the day, let new parents
 Bring their young children
 Don't keep children from coming to us⁴²

The soldiers recall all that is lovely and life-sustaining wherein their deaths are not an end but enabling of beginnings. Futures are imagined within a pastoral frame distinctly separated from the terrors and brutalities of war. This is an idea that was prevalent during the First World War where England was seen as an ideal landscape. For instance, one Lt. C.C. Carver wrote in a letter to his brother on 27 February 1917 that he always felt he was “fighting for England, English fields, lanes, trees, English atmospheres, and good old days in England.”⁴³ Carver’s eulogy is a precursor to a pattern of fond, idealized remembrances of peacetime. It is an evocation of an Arcadian archetype that both heightens and ameliorates the horrors of war. Humenyuk’s soldiers live in the shadow of death but see their lives and deaths in war as a gift to the future. Underpinning the poem is the fact that an entire generation of Ukrainians have lost their youth and that thousands are either dead or traumatized by what they have seen or done in war, or what has been done to them in territories occupied by Russia. In the midst of war there seems to be no future, yet the war is being fought for better, more peaceful, more just futures, and the poem is a testament to these hopes. If war zones are spatially besieged, literature is open and portable, enabling readings and perceptions beyond the battlefield.

Lyudmyla Khersonska is a Ukrainian poet who writes in Russian and the short poem “I planted a camellia in the yard” speaks of fortitude and resolve in a time of war.

I planted a camellia in the yard.
 I wanted to be a lady, not a war-ravaged rag,
 To cast down my lashes, let fall a light glove,
 Put on red beads, patent-leather boots,
 I listen: are there explosions,
 Does someone stomp the earth ...⁴⁴

⁴² Ibidem, pp. 44-45.

⁴³ Cited in H. D. Spear, *Remembering We Forget*, London, 1979, p. 35.

⁴⁴ L. Khersonska, “I planted a camellia in the yard,” op. cit., p. 80.

Poetry as a mode of remembrance reveals what it is like to live in “the crevices of cultures in conflict.”⁴⁵ The planting of the camellia is a sign of defiance: “I wanted to be a lady, not a war-ravaged rag.” It is also a refusal to let the war define the self and everyday life. The poem resists the annihilation of the personal, embodying what Suvir Kaul eloquently calls “the resilience of the everyday.” Kaul is writing of a different conflict, but his observations are worth citing here:

One way to be revenged on the brutality of the actions of the people in authority is to survive their worst efforts, to go back home, to return to threatened patterns of everyday life, and thus to refuse to let official imperatives and actions, arrogance and paranoia, define individual and community.⁴⁶

To plant a camellia, “put on red beads, patent-leather boots” is to insist on the autonomy of the self, even if or perhaps especially because those assertions are fragile. The war is never far away – “are there explosions/Does someone stomp the earth ...” – yet the use of the word “stomp” emphasizes the infantile petulance of men in power who invade others countries and homes. The exercise of power has devastating consequences and creates the basis for intergenerational trauma, yet Khersonska will not dignify the powerful: she will plant a camellia, “let fall a light glove.” Writing of the relationship between lyric poetry and trauma Charles Armstrong says that poetry “is a medium that has been frequently used to respond ethically, imaginatively and honestly to cataclysms that transgress the limits between the personal and the political.”⁴⁷ The war in Ukraine is one such cataclysm and the poets I have mentioned highlight how the personal and political are deeply interconnected, not in a theoretical manner, but in matters of traumatic survival, bodily harm, injury, and death. While the conflict zone Kaul describes permits people to go home, in innumerable instances in Ukraine there are no homes to return to. Yet the cataloguing of terror, fear, rape, and death does not lead to subservience: rather the poetry serves to memorialize and to dwell not just on trauma but to work through to the other side of war, when planting a camellia will be restored to its everydayness, its beauty not so much an act of defiance or primarily an act of refusal, but an act of communion with the world.

In an essay on trauma and photography, Cecile Bishop points to the relationship between seeing a photograph and trauma: “Spectatorship thus returns us to the pathological affectivity of trauma itself: between feeling too much and feeling nothing at all.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ A. Kalu, “Angelus,” *Broken Lives and Other Stories*, Athens, 2003, p. 25.

⁴⁶ S. Kaul, *Of Gardens and Graves: Essays on Kashmir*, Gurgaon, 2015, p. 154.

⁴⁷ C. Armstrong, “Trauma and Poetry,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 303.

⁴⁸ C. Bishop, “Trauma and Photography,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by C. Davis and H. Meretoja, New York, 2020, p. 343.

Bishop writes of how we are overwhelmed by the excess of visual suffering: wherever we turn we are struck by images of violence, war, displacement. One response to this is to feel “nothing at all,” to be numbed into silence, as victims of traumatic events are silent. The issue, however, is not the excess of images of suffering and the trauma that arises thereof. Bishop cites Jacques Ranciere who writes:

We do not see too many suffering bodies on the screen. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak.⁴⁹

It is this silencing of the traumatized other, the reduction of other people’s suffering to a spectacle that leads us to feel “nothing at all.” Poetry restores speech, it resists the spectacle in favour of the lived, granular realities of the everyday. Thus, poetry bears witness, it testifies to the traumatic and the terrifying, it reinforces moral and ethical realities cynically undermined in war and conflict zones.

“Poetry after Bucha”

I want to turn now to the acceptance speech that Serhiy Zhadan gave on October 23, 2022, when he was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Booktrade. Zhadan lists all that the war has altered and how life is lived in war. “War unequivocally changes language, its architecture, the scope of its use.” Language seems to fail in the face of war, and yet language and literature are vital: “We are all attempting to articulate ourselves, the truth, the outer bounds of our turmoil and trauma. Literature may have a slightly better chance at achieving this, since it’s genetically tied to all our previous linguistic catastrophes and upheaval.”⁵⁰ It is not surprising that Zhadan should believe this, given his position as a writer and poet, but what he is also expressing is the individual and collective need to give voice to terror, hopelessness, fear, anger, and defiance. Part of the hopelessness and anger is because the world outside Ukraine speaks a language of peace, of negotiation, of ceasefires, that have little meaning within the country.

It all comes down to language – I’ll say it again. It comes down to how precisely and aptly we use certain words, how measured our tone is when we speak about teetering on the edge between life and death.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 346.

⁵⁰ S. Zhadan, “Poetry after Bucha: Serhiy Zhadan on Ukraine, Russia, and the Demands War Makes of Language,” trans. I.S. Wheeler and R. Costigan-Humes, 2022, <https://lithub.com/poetry-after-bucha-serhiy-zhadan-on-ukraine-russia-and-the-demands-war-makes-of-language/>.

How sufficient is our previous vocabulary, the vocabulary that enabled us to encapsulate the world quite well just yesterday, how sufficient is it now to talk about what hurts or to give us strength? Thing is, verbally, we have all found ourselves in a spot we haven't ever spoken from before. Therefore, we have a shifted system of assessment and perception; the coordinates of meaning have changed, and the boundaries of expediency have changed.⁵¹

Arguably all wars change “the coordinates of meaning;” this is partly what Adorno had in mind when he said poetry after Auschwitz was impossible. Yet, like Adorno, Zhadan believes that poetry is essential to the moment. “Poetry after Bucha and Izium is still undoubtedly possible. Moreover, it’s necessary,” he says. Like Celan, Zhadan too speaks of the necessity of precision – “how precisely and aptly we use certain words, how measured our tone is when we speak about teetering on the edge between life and death.” – because he too is aware of how war corrupts language; language twisted in the service of war and political expediency becomes an instrument of propaganda from which language must be retrieved and rescued.⁵² David Malone, a Canadian poet, writes of Zhadan’s poetics as a spare, direct one. This directness is inspired by the bitter and tragic history of his country. “There’s little point in any excessive embellishment or metaphor. It’s as though the reality is all too clear, and that what’s required is simply to name it, and name it some more, making those effects unnecessary.”⁵³

Poetry is a mode of remembrance, of articulating the horrors of war, of archiving the everyday that has turned upside-down. Rather than monuments to dead soldiers, Zhadan, like Humenyuk, prefers commemoration offered by poetry. War changes time and reality and memory:

Actually, war changes our memory and fills it with excessively painful images, excessively deep traumas, and excessively bitter conversations. You can’t rid yourself of these memories; you aren’t able to fix the past. It will always be a part of you. Hardly your best part.⁵⁴

The dilemma is how one is to account for and live with these “painful images” and “deep traumas” because they cannot be wished away, they will remain long after the fighting is over. Poetry will remember and articulate traumas, it will name and remember the dead, and it will dream of futures where camellias may be planted in peace. Zhadan’s speech is an angry and passionate one, yet also hopeful, resilient,

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ D. Malone, personal email.

⁵⁴ S. Zhadan, op. cit.

even lyrical in its refusal to give up on the value of poetry and the resurrection of peace and humanity. The connections he draws between war, language, memory, and trauma are ones that poets and writers of earlier wars have also drawn, but they have an urgency given the war that rages in his homeland.

In a conversation with Georgina Godwin, the novelist and poet Oksana Zabuzhko, said that the Russian invasion of her homeland was an interruption in the nation's creativity: a violation of the right to be productive.⁵⁵ The Russian invasion is thus not only a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, human rights, and dignity, but also an unjustified disruption of productive lives once lived in peace. Zabuzhko is referring not only to the thousands of dead and injured, the millions displaced internally and as refugees, but the difficulty of being productive – whether in literature or in everyday endeavours – when one's nation is besieged, bombarded, and destroyed. This is what explains the anger in Zhadan's speech (and poetry) and in the writings of other Ukrainian poets. It also helps us understand the determined refusal to give in to the terrors unleashed by Russia, the resilience of everyday Ukrainians, and the need for poetry in a time of devastation.

In his speech, Zhadan raises questions that Alice Templeton asked in an essay "What's the Use? Writing Poetry in Wartime": "what kind of lyric aesthetic – what kind of first-person authenticity – does writing in wartime require to be both authoritative and truthful?"⁵⁶ Zhadan and the other poets I have considered answer that authority and truth lie in the varied expressions of grief, anger, despair, and trauma; in the refusal to forget, to give up, or to stop writing. If the language of politics and war is a constriction of time, hope, and life itself, poetry, to cite Templeton again "amplifies our range of imagination even as war acts to constrain it."⁵⁷ The political power of poetry, Templeton argues, lies not just "in naming or telling, but in rousing our vitality, by uniting us with others through 'the truth of feeling.'"⁵⁸ War is not only a failure of imagination; it represents the breakdown of community and solidarity; war is only possible when we construct the 'other' as an enemy who must be obliterated or subjugated. The repudiation of humanity enables atrocity just as the resurrection of that very humanity unites and gives hope for the future. Naming and telling are important: each individual whose life is upended by the war – whether soldier or civilian – must be commemorated. The "truth of feeling" that Muriel Rukeyser writes about is not a sentimental one: it is as much an ethical and moral truth as it is a material one.⁵⁹ As Yulia Musakovska writes:

⁵⁵ O. Zabuzhko "In Conversation with G. Godwin," Ukrainian Institute London, 22 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdKWVQtOXOs>.

⁵⁶ A. Templeton, "What's the Use? Writing Poetry in Wartime," *College Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 4, Fall 2007, 43-62.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 58.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 45.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

Our words, hard and protuberant from rage,
 black from grief,
 like a concrete ceiling of an old bomb shelter.
 There is nothing more durable than them,
 nothing more everlasting.⁶⁰

This final stanza answers the question she asks in the first line: “Who said that the words have no value now?” Words and poetry have value precisely because they express rage and grief, hopelessness, and resolution. Everyone who reads poetry partakes of these emotions and through reading and recitation, the circle of empathy and solidarity is expanded.

A paradox of war and its representations in poetry is the recovery of humanity amid inhumanity. In a very different context, Robert Antelme wrote that the horrors of the concentration camp – “darkness, absolute lack of any kind of landmark, solitude, unending oppression, slow annihilation” – conferred on the inmates “an ultimate sense of belonging to the human race.”⁶¹ Antelme’s work, *The Human Race*, Josh Cohen suggests, is a record of “an intimacy with suffering that exposes the very limit of the human” and “simultaneously the *indestructibility* of the human.”⁶² I am not suggesting an analogy between the Lager and other terrains of war, but it is worth thinking about the proximity of the human and the inhuman, of “intimacy with suffering” that seems beyond endurance and language, and yet is expressed in everyday acts of love and generosity and in poetry. Poetry, as a critic put it, is a “feat of style by which a complex of memory is handled all at once.” The best war poetry reaches out to us across cultures and geographies precisely in its memorialization of trauma, fear, desolation, as well as hope, resolution, and futures.

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⁶⁰ Y. Musakovska, “Who said that the words have no value now,” trans. E. Yevtushenko, [in:] “The endless and innocent birdsong of the sky is for you,” 28 March 2022, <https://chytomo.com/en/the-endless-and-innocent-birdsong-of-sky-is-for-you-the-newest-ukrainian-war-poems/>.

⁶¹ Cited in J. Cohen, op. cit., p. 140.

⁶² Ibidem, p. 141.

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