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Traumatic Landscapes in the Poetry of the Prague School

Abstract

The article explores the representation of traumatic landscapes in the poetry of the Prague School. The émigré poets, who witnessed the struggle for independence, Ukraine's loss of statehood, and occupation by the Bolsheviks, created a lyrical chronicle of national catastrophes. Their works, filled with images of ruined spaces and suffering, became a form of resistance and a means of preserving collective memory.

Adhering to the philosophy of action and an existential worldview, the Prague School poets reflected on the tragic pages of history, shaping national identity and inspiring the struggle for Ukraine's future.

Keywords: Prague School, traumatic landscapes, national memory, catastrophe, exile, Ukrainian literature.

One of the central concerns of modernist literature is the exploration of finitude and catastrophe, driven by the unprecedented and unsettling realization that humanity now possesses the power to destroy itself. Lecia Rosenthal explores¹ the literary representation of decline atmosphere in 20th-century literature and criticism, focusing on the recurrent characterization of this period as a watershed

¹ L. Rosenthal, *Mourning Modernism: Literature, Catastrophe, and the Politics of Consolation*, Fordham University Press 2011.

in the history of violence and destruction. Art critic Hubertus Kohle summarizes this mood of modern art: “And it is part of the dialectic of modernity that these depths are characterized, not only by positive values such as love, constructive desires, and gaiety, but also by the yawning abysses of horror, fear, and destruction”.²

After World War I, European literature witnessed a surge in catastrophism – a profound sense of cultural disillusionment and existential crisis. This was expressed not only thematically but also spatially, through the depiction of traumatized landscapes. The scarred fields of Verdun, the desolate trenches, and the shattered cities became powerful literary topoi, representing both physical destruction and psychological fragmentation. These landscapes of trauma served as symbolic sites where the horrors of modern warfare were inscribed onto space itself, turning geography into a witness of suffering. In this context, the spatial dimension of catastrophe literature became crucial in articulating the disorientation and alienation of the post-war human condition. Writers such as T. S. Eliot (*The Waste Land*) explored not only physical devastation but also the moral and cultural breakdown, shaping a new literary sensibility in the interwar period.

The prevalence of such traumatized landscapes in post-war literature reflects a kind of spatial topophobia, a concept by Yi-Fu Tuan.³ While Tuan views space and place primarily through an affective lens – introducing topophilia as the positive emotional attachment to place – he also acknowledges its counterpart, topophobia, as the fear or aversion to certain places. In his framework, topophobia typically refers to feelings of discomfort, fear, or alienation triggered by specific environments. The phenomenon of topophobia, as described in broader context, emphasizes the symbolic and narrative construction of space as desacralized, wounded, and hostile.

² H. Kohle, *Nightmare – Anxiety – Apocalypse. The Uncanny and Catastrophic in the Art of Modernism, Dark romanticism: from Goya to Max Ernst*, Ostfildern 2012, p. 42.

³ Y.-F. Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1974.

This version of topophobia reflects not only individual estrangement but a broader collective trauma, often tied to historical catastrophes; it functions as a spatial metaphor for existential crisis.

The poets of the Prague School had ample grounds for catastrophism: they witnessed a vibrant national revival, a brief period of state independence, a bloody war against Russian occupation, and the subsequent advance of the Russian Bolsheviks.

The Prague School of poets represents the first Ukrainian artistic group in emigration. This group was not formally institutionalized, but united by shared values and common pain, the main points of which were the loss of statehood, the lost struggle for independence, and the impossibility of returning to their homeland, occupied by the Russian Bolsheviks. Some of the poets of the Prague School participated in the Ukrainian Revolution and the war for independence in 1917–1921, in particular Yuriy Daragan, Yevhen Malaniuk, Galia Mazurenko, or the battles for Carpathian Ukraine and World War II, like Ivan Irliavskyy and Oleh Olzhych. Others were children of statesmen of the Ukrainian People's Republic, like Olena Teliha. These poets were educated refugees, some of them with scientific degrees obtained abroad.

There are different opinions regarding terminology. Olesya Omelchuk⁴ calls them “Visnykivtsi”, that is, the circle of the *Visnyk* magazine, whose editor-in-chief and inspirer was Dmytro Dontsov. One of the self-designations of this circle was the “Visnykivska Quadryga”. Volodymyr Morenets⁵ writes about the Pragueans and members of the Warsaw group “Tank”. Mykola Ilnytskyi, the compiler of the anthology *Silver Trumpets*,⁶ unites them under the general name of the poets of the Prague School, and I will use this term further.

⁴ O. Omelchuk, *Literaturni idealy ukrainskoho vistnykivstva* [Literary ideals of the Ukrainian Vistnyk], Kyiv 2011.

⁵ V. Morenets, “Prazka poetychna shkola” [Prague poetic school], in *Oksymoron: literaturoznavchi statyi, doslidzhennia, eseï* Kyiv 2010, p. 42–63.

⁶ *Sribni surmy: Poety prazkoi shkoly* [Silver trumpets: poets of the Prague school], ed. M. Ilnytskyi, Kyiv 2009.

In general, the name “Prague School” is used quite widely, including in relation to those representatives of the Ukrainian emigration who did not live in Prague or in Czechoslovakia, but who shared common ideological and aesthetic orientations. These orientations are the philosophy of action, awareness of national identity, and moral uncompromisingness. The work of the Prague School has deep roots in the Ukrainian historical tradition – they were the first to speak in the Ukrainian artistic world about the primitive, early Slavic era, the period of Rus. Because, according to Yevhen Malaniuk,⁷ our writers did not look earlier than the Cossack times.

The poetry of the Prague School collectively forms a magnificent canvas of Ukrainian national life, from its Proto-Slavic origins, through the era of Rus, Cossack heroism, and the tragedy of the Ruin, to the sacrificial military feats of the soldiers of the Ukrainian People’s Republic and the ominous pre-war atmosphere of 1938. At the same time, their work brings to Ukrainian poetry the European traditions of anthropocentrism, faith in man and his ability to resist any forms of despotism, as well as the existential courage to live and fight in a world of absurdity. In circumstances where political statehood was lost, the poets of the Prague School cultivated the virtual myth of Ukraine. And one of the components of this myth was reflections on national catastrophes, from medieval to modern ones.

The experience of autonomy and independence from 1917–21 was perceived as the realization of many years of hope. The poet Pavlo Tychyna⁸ poetically captured this mood in the image of the “golden hum” – a joyful upsurge, a musical and picturesque, optimistic collective triumph of freedom and independence. Whereas the Battle of Kruty (1918) and the Bazar Tragedy (1921) became symbols of both heroism and disaster. The Ukrainians’ four-day defense at Kruty halted the Russian advance on Kyiv, securing international recognition and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. However, it was a tragic battle,

⁷ Ye. Malaniuk, *Knyha sposterezhen* [Observation book], Kyiv 1997.

⁸ *Antolohiia ukrainskoi poezii 20 stolittia* [Anthology of Ukrainian Poetry of the Twentieth Century], ed. I. Malkovych (A-ba-ba-ha-la-ma-ha, 2016).

as mostly students and high schoolers faced a much larger Russian force, which violated the rules of war regarding prisoners. Similarly, the 1921 Winter Campaign into Bolshevik-occupied Ukraine, the last act of armed resistance for statehood, ended in the execution of 359 captured Ukrainian soldiers near the village of Bazar. In addition, the mass tragic deaths of civilians at the hands of the Russian Bolsheviks since 1918 have brought to the fore in the collective memory the 1708 massacre at Baturyn. At that time, Moscow's troops destroyed the capital of Hetman Ivan Mazepa and killed over ten thousand civilians, including children.

As a result, Leonyd Mosendz accumulates the loci of historical tragedies from the Middle Ages to Bazar. The poem encapsulates these historical tragedies, positioning the Battle of Bazar as a culminating point in a long history of woe.⁹ The poet writes:

Behind them – the threats of the Kalka,
the groan from the dams of Berestechko,
the ashes of the Baturyn fires.
Dyw choked on the call,
jackdaws gasped from the cry,
Obyda, the slave of anxiety,
already lies in wait for Bazar.

Ivan Irliaivskyi, in his diptych "Earth", speaks more generally about the battlefields: "Land is desecrated – evil roamed here <...> For it, so many forces were spent, / So many rows of graves were heaped around".¹⁰ People who have seen war do not glorify it or seek its repetition, because they know the value of human life.

Our enemy celebrated victory
over the murdered bodies.

⁹ "За ними – погрози Калки, / з гребель берестецьких стогін, / пожеж батуринських згар. / Див захлинувся зовом, / від крику зайшлися галки, / Обида, раба тривоги, / чатує вже на Базар". L. Mosendz, *Zodiak*, Kolos 1941, p. 103–104.

¹⁰ "Поганьблена земля – гуляло тутки зло <...> За неї стільки витрачено сил, / Насипано ряди могил навколо" in *Sribni surmy*, p. 173–174.

And a black bird prophesied a
sad road for us over the bones.
The days of bloody harvest ended
under the roar of cannons and cries of pain,
and the complaints of the fields
and the misery of the looted villages followed us,¹¹

– is written in a poem about defeat in battle, the doom of the land, which calls after its defenders, who are forced to leave it in occupation.

Oksana Liaturynska writes about places of mass murder that remained hidden (what Martin Pollack¹² called poisoned landscapes): “To remain buried God knows where, without a feast and without a commemoration, or so that dear eyes and a raven pecked them out! So that, lamenting, not to sing tenderly / a knight’s death and a military feat”.¹³ Martin Pollack’s book has acquired a conceptual meaning. Its heroes are the nameless victims of the bloody regimes of the 20th century and everyday hatred. Its topography is a relief of oblivion and the denial of responsibility, which we must resist. Pollack writes about his anguished landscapes – we ache for our own unburied victims.

In response to the news of the Holodomor and mass repressions taking place in the Soviet Union, the sense of pain and anguish among Ukrainian émigrés deepened. As Yevhen Malaniuk writes in *Psalms of the Steppe*: “Predatory birds fly from the East / On the red

¹¹ “На замордованих тілах / справляв наш ворог перемогу. / І над кістками чорний птах / нам віщував сумну дорогу. / Кінчались дні кривавих жнив / під рев гармат і крики болю, / і йшли за нами скарги нив / і сіл обідраних недоля” in *Sribni surmy*, p. 283–284.

¹² M. Pollack, *Sarmatische Landschaften. Nachrichten aus Litauen, Belarus, der Ukraine, Polen und Deutschland*, transl. S. Fischer, Frankfurt am Main 2005. More on Ukrainian contexts of poisoned landscapes I wrote in: “Paysages empoisonnés de Pollack, de Boutcha à Bykivnia” in *The Ukrainian Week* (13.03.2024), URL: <https://tyzhden.fr/paysages-empoisonnees-de-pollock-de-boutcha-a-bykivnia/>.

¹³ “Похованим лишитись бозна-де, без учти і без тризни, / а то й щоб очі дороги та ворон виклював! / Щоб, так голосячи, не оспівати ніжно / смерть лицарську і подвиг ратний” in *Sribni surmy*, p. 315.

background of fires, – / I see, I see your Golgotha / And from here, from my dead borders”.¹⁴ Similarly, Natalia Livytska-Kholodna evokes a biblical image in her expression of collective suffering: “And the heart ascends... / along your path of Golgothas, oh, my Nation”.¹⁵ It was only in 2005 that crosses and memorials to the victims of the Holodomor and repressions began to appear en masse in Ukraine. Until then, for seventy years, Ukrainians were unable to reflect on the trauma and mourn their victims, neither on a personal, individual and family level, nor on a public, state level.

A notable instance, concerning specific prominent individuals, is the assassination of Symon Petliura. In 1926, Petliura was fatally shot in central Paris by an agent of the Kremlin, who discharged seven rounds. Natalia Livytska-Kholodna composed several poems inspired by this act. One such poem, titled “The Last Victim”, includes the following lines:

The blood has dried that on a spring day
flowed upon the cobblestones of Paris.
But there, beyond, chains still clatter
and the cry of a starving village <...>
The soil of Kyiv will tremble
and bear a hundred-thousand-strong army
to the gates of the white Kremlin.¹⁶

The poem constructs three symbolic spaces: peaceful Paris, disrupted by the echo of gunfire; devastated Ukraine, where the cries of the oppressed persist; and Moscow, envisioned as the locus of future retribution. This passage reflects a profound sense of grievance and resentment engendered by exile and the loss of statehood.

¹⁴ “Хижі птиці летять зі Сходу. На червоному тлі пожеж. Бачу, бачу Твою Голготу. І звідціль, з моїх мертвих меж” in *Sribni surmy*, p. 367.

¹⁵ “І серце вгору йде... / шляхом твоїх голгоф, Народе мій” in *Sribni surmy*, p. 271.

¹⁶ “Просохла кров, що в день весняний / на брук Паризький потекла. / А там, по той бік ще кайдани і зойк голодного села <...> Здрігнеться Київська земля / І понесе сто тисяч війська / Під стіни білого Кремля” in *Sribni surmy*, p. 283.

Here, space is imbued with ideological significance – peaceful Paris is desecrated by violence, Ukraine is portrayed as a traumatized homeland, and Moscow is constructed as a projection of future retribution and an inevitable justice.

The symbolic spaces delineated in the poem serve to amplify the emotional and political dimensions of Petliura's assassination. Paris, initially a symbol of peace and European civilization, is violently disrupted, highlighting the intrusion of political violence into even seemingly tranquil settings. Ukraine, depicted as a land of suffering, embodies the pain of national subjugation and the ongoing struggle for freedom. Finally, Moscow, presented as the anticipated source of retribution, underscores the desire for justice and the belief in an eventual reversal of historical injustices. This spatial symbolism effectively conveys the complex interplay of loss, trauma, and hope that characterized the Ukrainian experience in the aftermath of Petliura's death. It transforms the narrative from a simple account of an assassination into a powerful meditation on the enduring quest for national liberation and historical redress.

The greatest difficulty in discussing the thousands of victims in "bloodlands" of the 20th century, as Timothy Snyder¹⁷ writes, is that they eventually become just a nameless statistic. The human consciousness is no longer able to comprehend so much pain, and the land itself is anthropomorphized and cries out to the sky for retribution. The Prague School poets' approach resonates with elements of later existentialist philosophy.¹⁸ They chose creativity as a form of resistance, celebrating human dignity despite the absurdity of the situation. Their philosophy of action, inspired by existentialism, emphasized responsible action, courage, and a willingness to self-sacrifice in the struggle for their homeland. Ultimately, Prague School poets actively resisted both the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian

¹⁷ T. Snyder. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, Basic Books 2010.

¹⁸ More about the parallels with existentialism I wrote in: "Filosofia chynu v rokoví chasy," in *Verbum*, no. 90 "Zoloto i blakyt", URL: <https://www.verbum.com.ua/04/2022/gold-on-blue/philosophy-of-the-deed/>.

regimes and continued the fight for a Ukrainian state until their deaths: Oleh Olzhych was tortured to death by the Nazis in Sachsenhausen, Olena Teliha and Ivan Irlivskyi were killed in Babyn Yar in Kyiv. Oleh Olzhych writes: "Twelve years the earth was bleeding / And stiffened, hardened into stone. / And the unsubdued generation / Covered the burnt fields".¹⁹ He characterizes his strong generation, created by the historical situation that forced them to be fighters. "For weeping has not given anyone freedom yet, but he who is a fighter, he conquers the world",²⁰ writes Oles Babiychuk, another poet of the Prague School, whose poem has become the official march of the Ukrainian army since 2018.

The places analysed in this part are not neutral settings but charged "sites of national catastrophe" – what Pierre Nora²¹ would call *lieux de mémoire* – where history, trauma, and identity converge. The poetry transforms personal grief into a national spatialized narrative that sustains collective memory and fuels ideological resistance.

In this context, the role of the Prague School poets is exceptional. Their work was not merely a reaction to tragic events, but also a powerful instrument for preserving and transmitting the collective memory of national catastrophes during a time when any mention of them was impossible in occupied Ukraine. They were able to articulate the pain and trauma that permeated Ukrainian society, creating a kind of "canon" of places of national grief. Their poems, filled with images of ruined landscapes, suffering, and heroism, became a substitute for the monuments and memorials that had been destroyed or were impossible to erect due to political circumstances.

In this way, the Prague School poets fulfilled the function of "memory keepers", recording in lyrical form those tragic pages of history that the Soviet authorities tried to erase. They not only

¹⁹ "Дванадцять літ кривавилась земля / І сціпеніла, ствердла на каміння. / І застелило спалені поля / Непокориме покоління" in *Sribni surmy*, p. 444.

²⁰ "Бо плач не дав свободи ще нікому, / А хто борець, той здобуває світ" in *Sribni surmy*, p. 65.

²¹ P. Nora, *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire*. vol. 1, Chicago Press 1999.

lamented the dead, but also inspired the struggle, supporting national identity in the most difficult times. Their poetry became a kind of “voice of the voiceless”, enabling future generations to comprehend the depth of the national tragedy and preserve the memory of the heroic past. This reflection on traumatic places is especially valuable today, when Ukraine has again faced aggression and losses, emphasizing the indestructibility of national memory and its importance for the future.

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