

Tetiana Grebeniuk

University of Warsaw, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0003-1910-5411

War as a Reference Point in the Book *Ukrainian Literature: A Wartime Guide* for Anglophone Readers by Marko Pavlyshyn

Wojna jako punkt odniesienia w książce *Literatura ukraińska: przewodnik dla anglojęzycznych czytelników w czasie wojny* autorstwa Marka Pawlyszyna

Abstract

The article focuses on Mark Pavlyshyn's edition *Ukrainian Literature: A Wartime Guide for Anglophone Readers*, which aims to help the English-speaking audience find and select translations of works of Ukrainian literature. The book offers a view of the literary process from the perspective of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. The characteristics of Ukrainian poetry, fiction, and drama are substantiated by information on Ukrainian history and facts of writers' biographies, and also fit into a broader European cultural context. The material is presented in retrospective order and divided into ten sections, with each section focusing on an important event in the political, cultural or literary life of Ukraine. The author pays particular attention to the process of national identity formation, issues related to colonial discourse, and the distinctive features of Ukrainian literature.

Keywords: Ukrainian literature, literary translation, postcolonialism, national identity, Russian-Ukrainian war.

In spring 2025, a unique and extremely important publication for spreading knowledge about Ukraine abroad was released – Marko Pavlyshyn's book *Ukrainian Literature: A Wartime Guide for Anglophone Readers* (Cambridge University Press). The author is a renowned Ukrainian scholar, Emeritus Professor at the Mykola

Zerov Centre for Ukrainian Studies at Monash University's School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics. The book was published in the Cambridge series *Elements in Soviet and Post-Soviet History*, edited by Mark Edele and Rebecca Friedman.

While working on this small but very informative book, Pavlyshyn set himself the goal of helping interested readers to find English translations of the most important works of Ukrainian literature and understand them. In the first lines of his book, the author admits that it is an attempt to help all those foreigners who are interested in Ukraine, including his lecture attendees and seminar participants, who "would be glad to learn about Ukraine through its literature, but cannot because so little of Ukrainian literature is available in English translation".¹

The way the material is organised in the *Wartime Guide*² is based on what potential readers are currently most concerned about when it comes to Ukraine. Since the international community's interest in Ukraine today is primarily focused on the problems of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Pavlyshyn suggests that it would be better to guide the reader's perception in a retrospective direction:³ from the ongoing war to its origins and causes, hidden in the past and revealed

¹ M. Pavlyshyn, *Ukrainian Literature: A Wartime Guide for Anglophone Readers*, Cambridge 2025, p. 1.

² For the sake of brevity in this review, the following shortened title of the reviewed edition will be used hereinafter.

³ The strategy of explaining the nature of the Russian-Ukrainian war through a gradual immersion into past cultural and historical periods is very productive in contemporary academic and media discourse. For example, Oksana Zabuzhko builds her book *Najdowsza podoroż* (*The Longest Journey*) by explaining the ideological origins of the war, first in the immediate past, then in the thirty-year perspective, and finally in the three-hundred-year perspective: O. Zabuzhko, *Najdowsza podoroż*, Kyjiw 2022. Yaroslav Polischuk, analysing Ukrainian literature in 2021 from the perspective of the beginning of the war, retrospectively examines the oppression of Ukrainian literature and its 'tides' in the 20th century and finds the origins of the resilience and resistance of contemporary literature in previous periods of cultural development: Y. Polishchuk, "Ukrajins'ka literatura XX stolittia: retrospektywnyj pohlad" [in:] *Studia Ukrainica Posnaniensia*, no. 9.02, 2021, p. 165–176.

in the literary works of previous epochs. Pavlyshyn focuses each chronologically distinct section on a narrative that is key to it, related to Ukraine's relations with Russia. Through the prism of these narratives (10 in total, corresponding to the number of sections), the author examines the literary process of the respective periods, striving to be objective and to cover the literature as comprehensively as possible. All these key narratives are rooted in historical, cultural or literary events, including: the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the establishing of Ukrainian national independence in 1992, the beginning of the Ukrainian Shistdesiatnyky's (the Sixtiers) protests against the Communist Party in 1965, the suicide of Mykola Khvylovy and the Holodomor in 1933, the proclamation of the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1918, the signing by Emperor Alexander II of the Ems Decree banning the Ukrainian language, the suppression of the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius in 1847, the publication of the first three books of Ivan Kotliarevsky's *Eneida* in 1798, the publication of Meletii Smotrytsky's tract *Trenos* in 1610, and the defeat of Prince Ihor Sviatoslavych's army by the Polovtsi in 1185, which formed the basis of the poem *The Tale of Ihor's Campaign*.

The essence of the current historical moment and the impact of the ongoing war on contemporary literary phenomena are highlighted by well-chosen illustrations for each literary period. For example, photos of the shell-scarred monument to Shevchenko or the monument to Ivan Kotliarevsky in a protective sheath, to shield it from shelling, are extremely eloquent ways of conveying the criminal nature of war to the reader.

Sensitively anticipating what might be unclear to readers unfamiliar with the Ukrainian context, Pavlyshyn briefly and concisely explains certain historical, biographical, and literary facts in the reviewed edition – for example, he clarifies what the Central Rada is, who the Zaporozhian Cossacks are, what the Dnipro rapids are, and what makes the folk genre of the *duma* unique.

The *Wartime Guide* is also so interesting and readable thanks to brief digressions into the personal and public lives of the writers

featured in the narrative. For example, at the beginning of the seventh chapter of the guide (1847: From People to Nation), there is a mention that the wedding of Mykola Kostomarov was cancelled due to the suppression of the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius by the imperial authorities. It is noteworthy that when discussing 20th-century Ukrainian writers who collaborated with the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union, Pavlyshyn distinguishes between the civic positions of the artists and the artistic value of their works. For example, he notes both the conformist stance and the high artistic value of the early works of Tychyna and texts by Mykola Bazhan. The readability of the *Wartime Guide* is also enhanced by the presentation of material in the context of European aesthetic phenomena – the text mentions Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) and the European revolutions of 1848; Hryhorii Skovoroda is described as “a thinker in the spirit of European Pietism”, and so on.

In the preface, the author of the reviewed publication readily admits his own subjectivity and even prejudice in presenting the material: “this Element sides with Ukraine. It is a partisan text, in solidarity with the sovereign and territorially integral Ukraine whose existence is at present under threat. It is also unapologetically in sympathy with the idea of a Ukrainian nation of individuals of different cultures, languages and faiths, but united by a shared attachment to their state and its democratic civic ideals”.⁴ It should be noted that throughout his entire research career, Marko Pavlyshyn repeatedly addressed the question of whether the systematisation of historical and literary material can (and should) be objective. In his article “Literary history as provocation of national identity, national identity as provocation of literary history: The case of Ukraine”, the researcher, referring to Hans-Georg Gadamer's argument, concludes that “literary historians inevitably are informed or guided – ‘prejudiced’ – by their own values and conditioned by

⁴ M. Pavlyshyn, *Ukrainian Literature: A Wartime Guide for Anglophone Readers*, Cambridge 2025, p. 2.

their own circumstances”.⁵ Therefore, Pavlyshyn’s demonstrative political engagement in the *Wartime Guide* is a completely natural expression of the author’s conviction.

The book has high practical value, and its material is very well organised in accordance with the objectives of the publication – in the preface, the author provides very specific and detailed instructions on how to use the guide when searching for relevant translations of Ukrainian literature. Pavlyshyn provides the exact titles and years of release of the highest-quality translations of the works he mentions, or the original titles of those texts that have not yet been translated. He directs readers to the most comprehensive online resources where they can find relevant reading material and explains the principle of transliterating Cyrillic titles and names. All abbreviations used to denote the titles of collections, textbooks and anthologies are explained in a special section at the end of the book, before the References.

As we can see from the above, the *Wartime Guide* focuses not only on Ukrainian literature but also on translated books. “I dedicate the Element to its unsung heroes: the translators”,⁶ the author proclaims at the end of the preface. Pavlyshyn also analyses the quality of translations in the book and, importantly, draws attention to the gaps in the translations of significant works that need to be filled in order to ensure the complete representation of Ukrainian literature to the world. For example, the researcher notes that there are currently no translations of such significant works of Ukrainian literature as *Zhovtyi kniaz* by Vasyl Barka, *Liuboratski* by Anatolii Svydnytsky, *Princess* and *Land* by Kobylianska, large-form prose by Ivan Franko, polemical works by Ivan Vyshensky and some other texts.

⁵ M. Pavlyshyn, “Literary history as provocation of national identity, national identity as provocation of literary history: The case of Ukraine” [in:] *Thesis Eleven*, no. 136.1, 2016, p. 85.

⁶ M. Pavlyshyn, *Ukrainian Literature: A Wartime Guide for Anglophone Readers*, Cambridge 2025, p. 3.

The awareness of the extraordinary importance of translating Ukrainian literature into the languages of the world became particularly acute during the Russian-Ukrainian war, when the nation's need for understanding and support from the global community became paramount. In particular, the literary discourse on Ukrainian studies emphasises the need to use translation as a form of cultural diplomacy⁷ or a mechanism of resistance to colonial remnants in consciousness.⁸ Yaroslav Polishchuk notes that contemporary Ukrainian women writers whose works have now been translated become 'ambassadors of war' when they speak abroad.⁹

It can be said that the translation-centric nature of the reviewed book, with its broad temporal coverage of literary material, guarantees the extraordinary relevance of its publication at this particular moment and distinguishes this guide from other editions of a similar kind.¹⁰

The author declares that the guide focuses primarily on Ukrainian literature translated into English. Works that have not been translated are also mentioned if they are important components of the literary process. However, certain questions arise regarding the proportions of the material devoted to the literary heritage of certain artists. Undoubtedly, the assessment of the aesthetic value of a work is subjective, and the personal hierarchies of each literary scholar specializing in Ukrainian literature are doomed to differ from one another.

⁷ K. Jakubowska-Krawczyk, "Dyplomacja akademicka w działaniach Warszawskiej Ukrainistyki" [in:] *Studia Ucrainica Varsoviensia*, no. 12, 2024, p. 9–22.

⁸ H. Zhukovska, "Postkolonial'na literatura: stratehija podolannia hlobalizacijnykh vyklykiv" [in:] *Studia Ucrainica Varsoviensia*, no. 12, 2024, p. 205–213.

⁹ J. Poliszczuk, "Poezja wojenna: między świadectwem a obrazem zbiorowym" [in:] *Studia Ucrainica Posnaniensia*, no. 13.1, 2025, p. 122.

¹⁰ Among the previous samples, which the author of the reviewed publication appears to have used as a model, it is worth mentioning Dmytro Chyzhevsky's *A History of Ukrainian Literature* (Chyzhevsky 1997), which Pavlyshyn considered to have the important advantage of placing Ukrainian literary phenomena in a European context (Pavlyshyn 1997, p. 309–310), as well as George S. N. Luckyj's *Ukrainian Literature in the Twentieth Century: A Reader's Guide* (1992), more similar in genre to the *Wartime Guide* but limited in scope to the 20th century.

But it still seems that Ahatanhel Krymsky's untranslated novel *Andriy Lahovsky* deserves a mention as an extraordinary and innovative work of Ukrainian literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Also deserving of wider commentary are the works by Yevhen Pluzhnyk, one of the most distinctive Ukrainian poets of the 20th century.¹¹ Of course, the limited scope of the *Wartime Guide* dictates that comments must be extremely concise and laconic (and the author brilliantly copes with this extremely difficult task), but the publication nevertheless provides fairly extensive commentaries on texts not translated into English, such as Olga Kobylanska's *Tsaryvna* and *Zemlia*, Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovyanenko's *Saldatsky patret* and even works by Nikolai Hohol.

When selecting material, Pavlyshyn aims to create as complete a picture of Ukrainian identity as possible, taking into account the migration processes of the 20th century, as well as the historical changes and multi-ethnicity of Ukraine's population. Pursuing this goal, the researcher considers the works of the Prague School and the New York Group of Ukrainian writers, and individual artists who were forced to leave Ukraine, including Russian-language writer Viktor Nekrasov, who lived in Paris, Moisei Fishbein, who lived in Israel and Germany for some time, and others, as part of Ukrainian literature. In addition, Pavlyshyn is keen to mention in his guidebook, the most prominent representatives of various ethnic groups that lived in Ukraine, including Russians, Poles, Jews, and Crimean Tatars. He attempts to trace a certain evolution in artistic interpretations of these ethnic cultures within the national culture as a whole. Therefore, the book mentions, for example, Crimean Tatar writers Noman Çelebicihan and Can-Muhammed Efendi, Jewish artists Karl Emil Franzos and Yaakov Yosef of Polonne, as well as Polish

¹¹ By the way, mentioning this poet's work only in the context of the romantic tradition (M. Pavlyshyn, *Wartime Guide* 2025, p. 34) seems a bit far-fetched. After all, his works are mainly associated with impressionistic and neoclassical stylistic dominants, represented to varying degrees in the writer's works of different periods.

writers Bruno Schulz and Józef Ignacy Kraszewski. Pavlyshyn also writes about Russian artists who lived in Ukraine, marking their place within Ukrainian identity. In particular, Pavlyshyn notes the ambivalence and complexity of Nikolai Hohol's legacy in relation to the formation (subversion?) of Ukrainian identity. Overall, the author of the reviewed work considers the question of these writers' belonging to Ukrainian literature to be a sensitive one that requires further reflection. It should be noted that the appearance of Isaak Babel, Ilya Ilf, and Yevgeny Petrov among the names of writers associated with the formation of Ukrainian identity currently raises questions in the context of the war. And obviously, these questions are not likely to be resolved in the near future – at least until Russian language and Russian cultural ties cease to be painful triggers in the Ukrainian context.

Since Ukraine's relations with Russia are a cross-cutting issue in the *Wartime Guide*, Pavlyshyn attempts to identify colonial/anti-colonial/post-colonial markers within each literary era, focusing on the contemporary period in particular. As Tamara Hundorova notes about the discursive field of Pavlyshyn's work, he in fact equates postcolonialism with postmodernism.¹² What is characteristic of the first chapter of the reviewed work is that postmodernism is presented here in a somewhat detached manner, as an outdated project. Characterising the current state of literature, the researcher speaks of 'residues of postmodernism' in its manifestations. The war is seen as a catalyst for Ukrainian literature's departure from its postmodernist foundations.¹³

¹² T. Hundorowa, "Postkołonial'nyj romanheneracijnoji trawmy ta postkołonial'ne czytannia na schodi Jewropy" [in:] *Postkołonializm. Heneraciji. Kul'tura*. T. Hundorowoji, A. Matusiak (eds.), Kyjiw 2014, p. 38.

¹³ Undoubtedly, the gradual departure of Ukrainian literature from postmodernism is inevitable, as this tendency is global. In the last two decades, postmodernism has been replaced by another worldview and aesthetic direction with its own fundamental features, such as awareness of the value and uniqueness of the human experience, oscillation between irony and sincerity, the return of metanarratives, eccentric characters, etc. Among the terms used to describe

However, one of the most important aspects of Pavlyshyn's representation of the contemporary literary process seems to be the proclamation of the 'arrival of the subject' in the artistic space of writing. In the 2012 article devoted to the study of Yuri Andrukhovych's book *The Secret*, Pavlyshyn sadly notes that, contrary to all the expectations from postcolonial postmodernist literature, Andrukhovych's text does not contain any signs of the protagonist's social subjectivity. Now, in the *Wartime Guide*, we see the author's implicit admiration for the social activism of Ukrainian writers, especially the younger generation. About the formerly socially indifferent character of Serhiy Zhadan's novel *The Orphanage*, the researcher writes: "His journey across the treacherous terrain teaches him that neutrality is neither psychologically nor ethically sustainable".¹⁴ In other words, the horrific experience of war, hastening Ukrainians' farewell to the postmodernist tradition, contributed to the formation of a clear civic position among both writers and readers. The first chapter of Marko Pavlyshyn's book, devoted to the current state of Ukrainian literature, convincingly demonstrates that in this tragic time, the subject has finally emerged. And it is thanks to this subjectivity, which has been shaped over centuries, that Ukraine finds the strength to fight.

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this trend, 'metamodernism' has been the clear leader in recent years. As for Ukrainian metamodernism, it is difficult to disagree that the undeniable global feature of this phenomenon is the determinism of its specificity by war. For more details, see: T. Grebeniuk, "Spil'nyj bil', wijna j identycznist': Nacional'na specyfika ukrajins'koho literaturnoho metamodernizmu" [in:] *Suczasnii literaturoznawczy studiji*, no. 20, 2023, p. 30–58.

¹⁴ M. Pavlyshyn Andrukhovych's *Secret*: "The return of colonial resignation" [in:] *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, no. 48:2, 2012, p. 11.

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