Slavic Review (2024), **83**, 485–503
doi:10.1017/slr.2024.500

SLAVIC REVIEW CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CRITICAL FORUM: POETRY AND AESTHETICS IN A TIME OF WAR

"In the Language of the Aggressor, I Cry for its Victims": Russophone Anti-War Poetry of Witnessing

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Abstract

The responses by Russian, Ukrainian, and other countries' Russophone poets to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 constitute a unified artistic discourse, animated by recurring topics, motifs, and images. This article aims to open a discussion of this body of work by examining one of its major topics—the Russian language as both a weapon and victim of war—and by offering an overarching theoretical framework, based on the concept of witnessing, for the analysis of contemporary artistic modes generated by war, extremity, and crisis. The topic of language foregrounds the problem of the speaking subject, participating or implicated in ongoing traumatic events. I examine these poems as poetry of witnessing: verses that employ digital media to respond to traumas and atrocities from within the events and as they unfold, while questioning the moral parameters of their response and the adequacy of their artistic instruments.

In the weeks and months following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many online publications offered their platforms to artistic responses to the war. The "Russian Oppositional Arts Review" (ROAR) invites accounts of "personal and collective resistance to violence and cruelty."[1] "True Russia" publishes a journal that features letters, art, and essays by opposition authors. The Russian-American publishing house KRiK runs a poetry project titled "No War—Poets against the War."[2] Publishing houses around the world issue collections of war poetry.[3] Today, there are hundreds of works by Ukrainian, Russian, and other countries' Russophone poets that constitute unified artistic discourses: bulky, multivocal, and exceedingly poignant utterances, animated by recurring topics, motifs, and images.

[1] Linor Goralik, "Ot redaktora," *Russian Oppositional Arts Review (ROAR)* 1, at roar-review.com/ROAR-58ff1e7b138249688cd0df96fcd18c42?p=4dfdbe7ff2094d42b1dd719b3cbd22e7&pm=c (accessed July 30, 2024). Starting with the sixth issue, the name has been changed to *Resistance and Opposition Arts Review*, with the language indicated as "Ukrainian/Russian."

[2] "No War – Poety Protiv Voiny," at nowarpoetry.com/about-the-project (accessed July 30, 2024).

[3] These include: Irina Golovinskaia, ed., *Poniatye i svideteli: Khroniki voennogo vremeni: Vtoraia kniga* (Tel-Aviv, 2022); Liubov Machina, ed., *Voina stikhotvreniia 24.02.2022–24.05.2022* (Berlin, 2022); Julia Nemirovskaya, ed., *Disbelief: 100 Russian Anti-War Poems* (Ripon, 2023); Yuri Leving, ed., *Poeziia poslednego vremeni: Khronika* (St. Petersburg, 2022); and Carolyn Forché and Ilya Kaminsky, eds., *In the Hour of War: Poetry from Ukraine* (Medford, 2023). These volumes' introductions and early reviews offer valuable contributions to the study of war poetry. Several important volumes of Ukrainian poetry came out since the war started in 2014, including the bilingual *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine* edited by Oksana Maksymchuk and Maz Rosochinsky (Boston, 2018), at www.wordsforwar.com (accessed July 30, 2024); and Boris and Lyudmila Khersonsky in Katie Farris and Ilya Kaminsky, eds., *The Country Where Everyone's Name Is Fear* (Washington, 2022).

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https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2024.500 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I aim to open a discussion of this body of work by examining one of its major topics—the Russian language as both a weapon and victim of war—and by offering an overarching theoretical approach based on the concept of witnessing. Language is crucial to this war in numerous ways: in Russia's claims of defending Russian speakers in Ukraine, as a marker of identity and the self and other divide, and in the artistic probing of the limits and responsibility of verbal art engaged with harrowing experiences. The topic of language thus foregrounds the problem of the speaking subject participating or implicated in ongoing traumatic events. In the absence of finalizing narratives, the authorial perspective of the participant in the events is open-ended and fluid; it evolves with the experience. I examine these poems as *poetry of witnessing*: verses that employ digital media to respond to traumas and atrocities from within the events and as they unfold, while questioning the moral parameters of their response and the adequacy of their artistic instruments.

I focus on Russophone poetry that has been written since the start of the full-scale war and explicitly addresses the topic of language and its entanglement with the issues of resistance, responsibility, and victimhood. The authors' backgrounds and situations vary: many have been uprooted by the war, others emigrated long ago; they are ethnically diverse and of different ages; some are well-established authors whereas others are amateurs. The terms "Russian" and "Ukrainian" indicate not citizenship or ethnicity, but the authors' stand as belonging, together with their native country, on the side of either the aggressor or the victims. The actuality of war has been vastly different for both groups; common to them, however, is the awareness that they are capturing the world in flux and participating in the events as they happen. I omit many important authors from this analysis but feel confident that the study of literature arising in response to Russia's war on Ukraine and, more generally, of the contemporary artistic modes generated by war, extremity, and crisis are firmly on our critical roadmap.

Witnessing

The act of witnessing, a signifying act in law and theology, acquires an "extraordinary moral and cultural force" when the witness is a survivor of atrocities.[4] In the past, the act of testimony by witnesses of atrocities came after the fact; in the digital age, however, witnesses produce and distribute testimonies in real time, blurring the distinction between witnessing as a primary act and an act of bearing witness.[5] As John Durham Peters notes, "cameras and microphones are often presented as substitute eyes and ears for the audiences who can witness for themselves."[6] Thus, with the constant real-time flow of information, the very concept of witnessing changes: indeed, when everyone can see live footage and hear the victims' voices, who is not a witness? For the artist, however, the position of witness matters not as direct access to the experience, but as a moral right to speak on behalf of those suffering.

In Ukraine, the war ongoing since 2014 has produced a literature that is characterized, in Tanya Zaharchenko's terms, as "synchronous," that is, relying on a "temporal proximity" to the events. She analyzes Serhii Zhadan's novel *Internat* (The Orphanage, 2017) as "a synchronous war novel—a creative text that emerges parallel to, and closely entwined with, unfolding warfare."[7] Those Russian authors who were mostly oblivious of the events in Ukraine were thrown into this synchronicity by the shock experienced when they found themselves

[4] John Durham Peters, "Witnessing," *Media, Culture & Society* 23, no. 6 (November 2001): 708.

[5] Mette Mortensen, "Connective Witnessing: Reconfiguring the Relationship between the Individual and the Collective," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 11 (July 2015): 1393–1406; and Sara Jones, "Mediated Immediacy: Constructing Authentic Testimony in Audio-visual Media," *Rethinking History* 21, no. 2 (2017): 135–53.

[6] Peters, "Witnessing," 707–8.

[7] Tanya Zaharchenko, "The Synchronous War Novel: Ordeal of the Unarmed Person in Serhiy Zhadan's *Internat*," *Slavic Review* 78, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 420. See also Olena Haleta, "Mined Words: An Un-imaginable Reality and the Search for a New Language in the Poetry of Maidan," in *Cossacks in Jamaica, Ukraine at the Antipodes: Essays in Honor of Marko Pavlyshyn*, eds. Alessandro Achilli, Serhy Yekelchyk, and Dmytro Yesypenko (Boston, 2020), 618–38.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2024.500 Published online by Cambridge University Press

witnesses to, and unwilling participants in, a full-scale war. The ensuing body of war poetry in Russian, as in Ukrainian, is both synchronous, and also *poetry of witness*, that is, in Carolyn Forché's terms, written by those "who had endured extremity during the past century—war, imprisonment, torture, exile, house arrest, banning orders, and extreme forms of censorship."[8] Again, this record, even if written in a time of extremity, often comes to light after the fact and serves as a memorial to "those who suffered and resisted through poetry itself."[9] By contrast, poets writing *during* the war, before the work of memory and retrospective analysis of experience begin, are concerned with the unfolding of experiences, and the aspects of witnessing and living through traumatic events. Thus, with a slight but important modification, we should term Russophone synchronous war poetry as *poetry of witnessing*, shifting the focus from the noun to the verb (in the present continuous), with the emphasis on witnessing as the perspective from within the events, and as the process of recording and interpreting the ongoing experience.

The Grammar of Resistance

Appearing immediately at the war's onset, Russian anti-war poetry functions as an emotional reportage rather than artistic contemplation, perhaps not the "roar" or "*krik*" (scream) of the projects' titles mentioned above, but a collective gasp of horror and sob of grief. For Russian poets, the witness stance is morally complicated: their country is the aggressor who weaponized their language for the war's purposes, yet their denouncing the war leads to repression and exile, that is, at least in their view, to a victimhood of their own. As Russia continues its criminal war, the anti-war poets record the shock of this realization, empathy for the victims, their shame and guilt; yet, in so doing, they must use the same language that Russian propaganda is using as a weapon of war. The use of language in Russian official discourse is heavily regimented. The propaganda justifies the aggression and dehumanizes its victims by presenting the war in Ukraine as a continuing war against Nazism; the state has developed its own vocabulary for speaking about the war ("a special military operation," "de-Nazification," "Ukro-Nazis," and so on) and enacts severe punishment not only for criticizing the war, but even for the very use of the word. In addition to, and in a ghoulish twist of the cliché "there are no words," Russians who oppose the war found themselves both speechless and prohibited from using the words they have. At the start of the war, the mutilation of one's language forms a recurring motif:

я озираюсь в руинах речи	I gaze around in the ruins of speech
глагол военщиной изувечен.[10]	the language has been mutilated by warmongers.
Эй, куда ушли все слова?	Hey, where have all the words gone?
Слова ушли на войну.[11]	The words have gone to war.

The repression of language, and the loss of words as the loss of agency, constitute Russian poets' direct experience of the war. Posing their language as the war's first victim, and its mutilation as a personal encounter with violence, anti-war poets assert that they, too, are victimized by the war. The use of synonyms, such as "word," "voice," "tongue," and "speech,"

[8] Carolyn Forché, "Not Persuasion, But Transport: The Poetry of Witness." The Blaney Lecture transcript and video, 45:58, October 25, 2013, at Poets Forum in New York City at poets.org/text/not-persuasion-transport-poetry-witness (accessed July 30, 2024).

[9] Carolyn Forché, ed., *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (New York, 1993), 31.

[10] Yuliya Pikalova, "Ruiny rechi," at nowarpoetry.com/authors/julia-pikalova/ (accessed July 30, 2024). Going forward, I cite the title or the first line of a poem rather than the "postcard." Most but not all poems in the "collections" are unnamed.

[11] Olga Anikina, "Ei, kuda ushli vse slova," at litpoint.org/2022/07/16/3265/ (accessed July 30, 2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2024.500 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rebrands language from a tool of communication and sense-making to a foundation of fragile and easily corrupted social structures:

> Лишили голоса, слова, возможности текста и речи, смысла работы
> и любых разговоров, безграничное превратили в конечное.[12]
> [They've] forbidden our voice, words, the capability of the text and speech, the meaning of work and any conversation, turned the infinite into the finite.

The persistent motif of the loss of control over language as a dissolution of agency develops through the predominance of such passive grammatical forms as the passive voice and impersonal constructions, with the implied subject "they" construed as an external and hostile entity. The absence of the grammatical subject, or the making of language elements the subject of the sentence, leaves the poet with no verbal means of asserting agency. "The word" is either a subject "going to war," or an object of mutilation, but the speaker is always a passive entity with no control over speech. Consider the grammatical forms in Polina Barskova's verb-heavy lines with "the word"—"it"—as the object of violence in passive participle constructions:

Оно [слово] размято оно разъято	It [the word] has been mashed it has been disjointed
Оно разбито оно разрыто	It has been shattered it has been ravaged
Оно вываливается изо рта.	It tumbles out of the mouth.
Оно не действует ни черта.[13]	It doesn't affect a damn thing.

The disintegration of language is made literal by its fragmentation into words, syllables, individual letters, and "elementary particles." The word "war" (*voina*) breaks down into *voi*—howl, and the preposition "*na*" and disappears into silence:

Запрещено говорить "война"	It is forbidden to say "war"
Запрещено говорить "вой"	It is forbidden to say "howl"
Запрещено говорить "на"	It is forbidden to say "on"
Запрещено говорить.[14]	It is forbidden to speak out.

While the short word "war" fragments into still shorter ones, the long word "forbidden" opens and dominates each line, sounding more forbidding with each repetition. The total fragmentation of the mother tongue occurs simultaneously with, and as a direct result of, the disintegration of the motherland, a terrifying event the poet witnesses but has no control over:

ты видишь	you see
твоя родина распадается	your motherland disintegrating
погружаясь в хаос	plunging into the chaos of
элементарных частиц	elementary particles
и вместе с ней распадается	and along with it disintegrates
материнский язык.[15]	your mother tongue.

[12] Ada Kordon, "Lishili golosa . . ." *ROAR* 1, at https://roar-review.com/afa1301ac1c447c4a0c8877b8928a127 (accessed July 30, 2024).
[13] Polina Barskova, "*Itogi goda*," Facebook, December 22, 2022, at www.facebook.com/polina.barskova.3/posts/pfbid0po7NKPJa9bMyLUykBWxKd4rtLDyxtThdL484QS5agMLp6nssbrVBdo1T3zGWpbmel (accessed July 30, 2024).
[14] Nemirovskaya, ed., *Disbelief,* 124.
[15] Vladimir Ermolaev, "Z," *ROAR* 5, at roar-review.com/ROAR-14410d5fbf6a43dca95dd4b957c9d269?p=a48e395f64b1475b9f3d89d4af28ade4&pm=c (accessed July 30, 2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2024.500 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The double meaning of tongue as both language and a body part allows for the further embodiment of violence where, once again, the tongue, rather than the speaker, is the subject:

В нашем веке впервые	For the first time in our century
русский язык решился	the Russian tongue has decided
лизнуть дуло танка.	to lick the barrel of a tank.
Так, приникнув к холодной стали,	So, having nestled against cold steel,
он и прилип к войне.	it has bonded to war.
Намертво.[16]	Tightly and to the death.

Related to the motif of the mutilated word are the images of the poet's disfigured mouth and tongue as potent metaphors of imposed speechlessness as physical trauma:

когда наши языки вырвали с корнем
оставив нас распахнутыми почерневшими обеззвученными
словно дома после бомбежек вывернутые розовой мякотью наизнанку[17]]
when they tore out our tongues by the root
leaving us gaping blackened speechless
like bombed-out houses with their pink flesh turned inside out

The torn-out tongue is an allusion to Aleksandr Pushkin's programmatic poem "The Prophet," in which "a six-winged seraph" tears out the poet's "sinful tongue," replaces it with "a cunning serpent's forked tongue," and commands him to "ignite men's hearts with your words" (глаголом жги сердца людей).[18] It is noteworthy that contemporary poets do not aspire to ignite hearts but, rather, limit the scope of the allusions to violence and sin (or guilt) perpetrated on them and their language: "my sinful tongue trembles" (трясется грешный мой язык)[19]; "[he] tore out my cunning, sinful, tender mother tongue" (вырвал лукавый грешный нежный родной язык).[20] The "mutilated mouth/bombed-out house" simile is both powerful and problematic, especially for those whose houses were unmetaphorically bombed-out. Yet, in claiming their own victimhood, these Russian poets do not attempt to devalue the suffering in Ukraine, rather, they attempt to establish solidarity with the Ukrainian victims of Russian aggression by broadening the parameters of victimhood.

Recognizing, and resenting, the loss of language and agency moves some poets to avowals of resistance. One of the markers of the stance of resistance is the active subject "I:"

Странно пытаться что-то сказать, когда двадцать пять процентов людей лишились семидесяти пяти процентов слов и ставят звездочки на месте самого важного. Но слово— это последняя власть, и я ее не отдам.[21]

[16] Ekaterina Ageeva, "Vybor," *ROAR* 2, at roar-review.com/ROAR-c92634e7b7ba48dbb90a17f01b431b35?p=cd06a4e3f6404b61a377d8259f614083&pm=c (accessed July 30, 2024).

[17] Kseniia Pravkina, "Kak pisat′posle Mariupolia," *ROAR* 2, at https://roar-review.com/4957fd69c59849f4b0e67f325bdedf84 (accessed July 31. 2024).

[18] Aleksandr Pushkin, "Prorok/The Prophet" in *From the Ends to the Beginning: A Bilingual Anthology of Russian Poetry,* eds. Ilya Kutik and Andrew Wachtel (Evanston, 2001), at max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/mdenner/Demo/texts/prophet.htm (accessed July 30, 2024).

[19] Igor Bulatovsky, "From the cycle 'Na kontse iazyka,'" *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 177, no. 5 (2022): 10.

[20] Vera Pavlova, "Ia grazhdanka mira." *ROAR* 6, at roar-review.com/ROAR-ad4362991ffd42b3ac5b3e17fc608f02?p=5f2c11926af644abb270fa844962278a&pm=c (accessed July 30, 2024).

[21] Anonimno (Anonymous), "Granitsa," *ROAR* 1, at https://roar-review.com/0def9229801c43cdb013aee4685d20a6 (accessed July 31, 2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2024.500 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is strange to try and say something, when twenty-five percent of the people have lost seventy- five percent of the words and put asterisks in place of what's most important. But the word—is my only power, and I will not surrender it.

Since the time of the Romantics, the poetic word has been presumed to be a powerful weapon, as evidenced, again, by Pushkin's "The Prophet," in which the poet is trusted, or burdened, with igniting "men's hearts." Though the Romantic notion of "the word as power" remains a stable motif in modern Russian culture, the paradigm "poet vs. tsar (or the state)" has positioned the artist in perpetual, and often dangerous, opposition to the repressive state and, ironically, provided him with a comforting sense of virtue. The Other of the state is familiar; the rules of engagement are written into Russian cultural mythology where the intelligentsia is consistently opposed to the state, but rarely in open confrontation with it. Moreover, as an *intra*cultural concept, this paradigm keeps the poets' gaze trained inward—at their own largely symbolic losses.

A recent study of the Russian poetic response to what Russian scholar A. Markov designates as "a period of intense events" poses the Self/Other demarcation as the main thematic concern for both the pro- and anti-war poetic utterances. For the oppositional poets, the complexity of the Other is indeed key to resisting the official narrative, with its extreme simplification of an 'us vs. them' picture of the war.[22] I suggest, however, that Russian anti-war poets are less concerned with the Ukrainian Other, and even less so with the amorphous yet hostile western Other of Russian propaganda, than they are with witnessing and narrating the process of becoming the Other in their own country.

The Pronouns of Responsibility

The choice of a pronoun relates directly to the issue of responsibility. To withhold a personal pronoun in passive constructions is to reassign agency to an undetermined powerful "they." The use of "I" signals the poet's stance of resistance to the state which, in this case, alone is to blame. The most interesting pronoun in this respect is "we" because, to a greater extent than the first person "I," the first-person plural evokes the much-debated issue of collective responsibility.[23] Oppositional artists' position on the question of whether all Russians are to be held responsible for the war started by their government runs the gamut from reluctance to admission. Aleksey Oleinikov resorts to the "us vs. them" binary, in which the oppositional collective is weak and victimized, and leaves the question of blame open:

Как отвечать за палачей, преступников, ворюг,
Хотя они не ели хлеб из наших слабых рук?[24]
How do we answer for the executioners, the criminals, the thieves,
Even though they haven't eaten bread from our weak hands?

Maria Stepanova, however, uses the pronoun "we" to establish collective responsibility in no uncertain terms: "while we slept, we bombed Kharkov" (пока мы спали мы

[22] Aleksandr Viktorovich Markov, "Sovremennaia russkaia poeziia v period intensivnykh sobytii," *Filosophiia. Zhurnal Vyshei shkoly ekonomiki* 6, no. 3 (2022): 256–88.

[23] The heated discussion takes place on multiple platforms. See, for instance, Maria Stepanova's essay "The Russian Question: Reflections on the Collective 'Russian' Guilt and Responsibility," *Public Seminar,* March 20, 2023, at publicseminar.org/essays/the-russian-question/ (accessed July 30, 2024). See also a column in the Russian oppositional news outlet *Meduza* published in March 2022: "Rossiiane vinovny v voine protiv Ukrainy? Ili otvetstvenny, no ne vinovny? Nikolai Epple razbiraet eti kategorii – i napominaet, v chem raznitsa," *Meduza*, 18 March, 2022, meduza.io/feature/2022/03/18/rossiyane-vinovny-v-voyne-protiv-ukrainy-ili-otvetstvenny-no-ne-vinovny (accessed July 30, 2024).

[24] Aleksey Oleinikov, "Letit ves′mir ko vsem chertiam," *ROAR* 1, at https://roar-review.com/b5fb317478d0458680c07cf2d13163a7 (accessed July 31, 2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2024.500 Published online by Cambridge University Press

бомбили Харьков).[25] Bulatovsky similarly foregrounds the pronoun in considering agency and inaction:

мы не мы	we are not we
мы всех не нас немее.[26]	we are muter than all [those] who are not us.

Because the subject of these lines is in opposition to both sides of the official "us vs. them" binary, the oppositional poets must construe their Self in a situation of total alienation: from the government, from the people, and from the victims of the aggression, who are not at the moment concerned with the plight of the Russian opposition. See for instance Aleksandr Kabanov, a major Ukrainian Russophone poet, addressing this collective as the plural "you" with an emphatic (and, for him, unusual) lack of nuance:

В одном флаконе: гений и посредственность–	In the same flask: genius and mediocrity–
вы все с мечом пришли в мою страну,	Sword in hand you've all come to my country,
и ваша коллективная ответствен ность–	and your collective responsibility–
впадает в коллективную вину.[27]	flows into your collective guilt.

The plural "we" diffuses the responsibility, the active "I" accepts its weight. Vadim Fomin in the poem titled Молчащие вместе (Silent Together) reconfigures the anti-war opposition from a group, united by a common plight, into one united by common, cowardly silence:

я один из тех, кто стрелял по жилым массивам
я один из тысяч пособников палача
за комфортной ширмой «все это не в наших силах»
я сидел и молчал.[28]
I'm one of those, who fired on residential areas
I'm one of thousands of the executioner's henchmen
behind the comfortable screen of "all this is beyond our power"
I sat and kept silent.

The weight of guilt and responsibility could block all utterances, including the poetic. However, synchronous poetry is not concerned with objective evaluations; rather, its purpose is to capture the experience of facing the extreme with its difficult questions. Poetry of witness is implicitly concerned with the hierarchy and gradation of suffering: witness is often (mis)identified as victim, thus excluding other forms of engaging with the extremity. By contrast, poetry of *witnessing*, with its emphasis on the unfinalized nature of the experience, empowers the poet to judge the extent to which he or she is affected. The mechanics are similar to what Mikhail Bakhtin described as the workings of polyphonic

[25] Cited in Dmitry Kuzmin, "Oni vyzhivaiut. Ekho voennykh deistvii v russkoi poezii 2022 goda," *Radio Svoboda*, December 30, 2022, at www.svoboda.org/a/oni-vyzhivayut-eho-voennyh-deystviy-v-russkoy-poezii-2022-goda/32195546.html (accessed July 30, 20243).

[26] Bulatovsky, "Na kontse iazyka," 7.

[27] Aleksandr Kabanov, "Kak chelovek bolʹshogo sroka godnosti," at nowarpoetry.com/authors/aleksandr-kabanov/ (accessed July 30, 2024). Vitaly Chernetsky characterizes Kabanov's writing as "melancholic replaying of trauma resulting from continuing self-identification with the corpus of cultural and political realia associated with Russophone discourse in Ukraine as 'creole' or (post-)imperial, and the ideological baggage he sees it as carrying, even if against the poet's wishes, in contemporary Ukraine." Chernetsky, "Russophone Writing in Ukraine: Historical Contexts and Post-Euromaidan Changes," in *Global Russian Cultures*, ed. Kevin Platt (Madison, 2019), 64.

[28] Vadim Fomin, "Molchashchie vmeste," at litpoint.org/2023/03/21/gosudarstvo-stanovitsya-rodinoy/ (accessed July 30, 2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2024.500 Published online by Cambridge University Press

poetics, when "a character's word about himself and his world" outweighs an external authoritative interpretation.[29] In the real world, where the future is unknown in ways that the textual constructions strive to recreate, as long as the experience is ongoing, its dimensions are determined by how the participants evaluate its nature and effects. Hence the predominance of violent images and claims to losses and victimhood that allow the oppositional artists to establish their own terms of engagement with the war. Synchronous poetry emerges when witnessing and recording are the only available response to the extreme, and when finalizing discourses have not yet appeared to establish the measures of guilt and suffering.

The Art of Metasilence

A key feature of the poetry of witnessing, and the reason it will retain its synchronous character even in the aftermath of the war, is the position of speaking from within the events: the point is not only that this poetry is written as events develop (although it is important), but that it explicitly chronicles this developing. As the war goes on, lamenting the ruined language in the face of mounting human losses in Ukraine is no longer morally acceptable. Thus, the anti-war poets focus on the predicament of the Russian oppositional intelligentsia in its powerlessness against the state; we see an intensification of identity crisis, accompanied by a refocusing of the poetic lenses. Language remains a major theme, though developed through an additional set of motifs: stunned speechlessness, self-imposed silence, and language as a tool of aggression, rather than its victim. Related to these is the problem of poetic language: questioning verbal art's ability to capture the unspeakable on the one hand and, on the other, a hesitancy to aestheticize the violence and destruction.

Initially, the recurring motif of imposed silence served to portray the poet as a victim of oppression. However, the question of

как писать когда все "буквы ушли на войну"[30]	how to write when all "the letters have gone to war"

has transformed into the question of how to write in Russian at all:

Там бомбят Украину, а тут ты готовишься повеситься, потому что эта ёбаная страна дала тебе язык, на котором больше не хочется говорить, тем более писать.[31]	They're bombing Ukraine there, and you're here preparing to hang yourself, because this fucking country gave you a language in which you no longer want to speak, let alone write.

The progression from a forced speechlessness to the rejection of the Russian language, from the romantic notion of "the word—is my only power, and I will not surrender it" to the demoralized assertion "you no longer want to speak" is an admission of both responsibility and defeat. The realization that one's language and culture are defiled is psychologically damaging, yet the ethical poetic position is to bear witness and find the words. For witnesses of past atrocities, the act of testimony comes after the act of witnessing; sometimes the temporal remove extends to include the next generations of those affected, hence the usefulness of

[29] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, 1984), 61.
[30] Pravkina, "Kak pisat"
[31] Ivan Klinovoi, "Tam bombiat Ukrainu," *ROAR* 5, at https://roar-review.com/d73f86f2c8494e0ab1b1f11a44361f80 (accessed July 31, 2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2024.500 Published online by Cambridge University Press

such concepts as postwitness and postmemory.[32] Often, the artists who do not claim personal or generational links to violence are nevertheless moved by their determination to provide ethical responses to it.[33] By contrast, the Russian poets have neither the temporal distance provided by the time lag of 'post,' nor the moral right to distance themselves from the violence brought on Ukraine by their own people. Therefore, the moral response is often silence, not out of fear but as an act of non-participation in the overwhelming din of propaganda:

телевизор всем сказал—нужно	the television told everyone—it's needed
телевизор всем сказал—можно	the television told everyone—it's permitted
тут и вылезло всё наружу	and here it all came out
я не буду дописывать—тошно.[34]	I will not finish writing—it's sickening.

Koshenbek chooses, is not forced, to stop writing: she "will not" rather than "cannot" describe what she witnesses. Instead, she distances herself from the propaganda on TV and chooses not to finish her poem. Unlike Fomin's "I" who "sat and kept silent," Koshenbek's lyrical "I" is mute by choice and in protest. Meanwhile, Aleksandr Gabriel views "the high art of silence in the Russian language" (высокое искусство молчания на русском языке) as an act of empathy and the poet's moral responsibility.[35] Needless to say, when developed verbally, the theme of silence, or metasilence, is a variation of the theme of language and culture as tools of war. It follows then that to be silent in Russian is to lay down a weapon in a gesture of protest, and out of compassion for the victims.

From the Implicated Subject to a Moral Witness

The extreme discomfort of Russian poets' position arises from the fact that it cannot be resolved along the lines of victim vs. aggressor: they are implicated in the violence by the very fact that their country is the aggressor. Michael Rothberg offers the category of "the implicated subject" as a conceptual framework that moves beyond the victim/perpetrator binary and detangles the issues of collective responsibility, victimhood, guilt, or complicity. Examining the history and variety of modes of implication, including slavery, racism, genocides, and the Holocaust, Rothberg suggests that implicated subjects are "more ambiguously situated" than victims and perpetrators: as indirect participants and, often, beneficiaries of both historical and contemporary violence and injustice, they participate in reproducing them.[36] The broad category of the implicated subject relates to the issue of collective responsibility: realizing one's role in perpetuating structures of violence and injustice constitutes "a claim to a kind of responsibility" and contributes to the quest for justice.[37]

Russian poets' position oscillates between claims to "a kind of responsibility" and a kind of victimhood. The implicated subjects in Rothberg's analysis, for instance, white Americans who acknowledge their implication in the conditions that contribute to racism in today's America, rarely fear repercussions for their position. The Russian opposition, however, faces a very real danger of persecution. The persistent motif of poetry as resistance and bearing witness suggests that many anti-war poets aspire to a different position, that of a witness who not only accepts the responsibility of the implicated subject but also pays a real price

[32] Alex Danchev, "Our Brothers' Keeper: Moral Witness," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 40, nos. 3–4 (2015): 191–200; and Marianne Hirsch**,** *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York, 2012).

[33] Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh, 2022), 1.

[34] Glasha Koshenbek, "Khochetsia ubivat′no v forme," at litpoint.org/2022/12/13/4686/ (accessed July 30, 2024).

[35] Aleksandr Gabriel, "Zalit′v sebia vina," at litpoint.org/2022/08/23/2322/ (accessed December 4, 2023).

[36] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, 2020), 21.

[37] Ibid., 6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2024.500 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for speaking out. They therefore assume the role of *a moral witness*, which Avishai Margalit defines as "a species of an eyewitness," someone who had "to witness the combination of evil and the suffering it produces" and provides a testimony.[38] "The paradigmatic case of a moral witness," says Margalit, "is one who experiences the suffering—one who is not just an observer but also a sufferer." He allows, however, that a sympathetic observer may rise to the stance of a moral witness if they report what they see, even at risk to themselves. In speaking out against the war at a time when doing so increases the risk of political repressions, poets claim an experience of suffering, albeit of a different kind, and thereby aspire to the high moral ground of a moral witness.

Vera Pavlova explicitly nominates anti-war poems to be "witnesses against the accused, deputies of the prosecutor" (свидетелями обвинения, помощниками прокурора).[39] In another poem, she poses speaking out of empathy for the victims as a moral duty, even if one speaks in the language of the aggressor:

В складчину—хлеб изгнания.	Potluck—the bread of exile.
Сдвинув четыре стола.	Four tables shoved together.
Дружеская компания.	Friendly company.
Только читать начала—	I'd just started reading—
руку листком порезала.	I cut my hand on a page.
Но не пропьёшь мастерство.	But you can't drink away the mastery.
На языке агрессора	In the language of the aggressor
плачу о жертвах его.[40]	I cry for its victims.

The poem, quoted here in full, is composed of short, incomplete sentences. The demonstrative lack of eloquence, even awkwardness, marks the opening as a minimalist setting for the two concluding lines. The setting is impermanent: the friends are in exile, no one is the host, the table is makeshift. A poetry reading begins with a papercut, so the page might be marked by blood, albeit inconsequentially in proportion to the blood spilled in the war. The last two lines comprise the only complete sentence, with the subject implied by the first-person verb form. The sentence carries the poem's ethical position: more than a choice, weeping for the victims is an obligation, something one does despite obstacles; the fact that the poet must do it in the language of the aggressor is a source of unease. Self-imposed silence and weeping for the victims are related positions: both are construed as acts of resistance and empathy. Antony Rowland describes post-Holocaust poetics as awkward: "self-questioning, anti-elegiac," expressing the poet's suspicions of traditional poetic means and fear of aestheticizing atrocities.[41] Like Pavlova, many anti-war poets, too, resort to awkward poetics to mark their privileging of ethical over aesthetic concerns. This poem is a paradigmatic act of a moral witness: it is not enough to witness evil and suffering; the poet must write her own suffering of homelessness and feeling of guilt into the record.

How to Write after Bucha? An Argument with Adorno

From imposed muteness to silence in protest, to awkward poetics, the theme of language extends to broader considerations of the limits and responsibility of verbal art in the face of violence. The anxiety of having to write in a despoiled language is exacerbated by the need to question the worth of poetry and art in general in times of war. When language is both a

[38] Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, Mass, 2021), 148–57.

[39] Vera Pavlova, "*Bog pokaraet kesaria*," Facebook, February 20, 2023, at www.facebook.com/vera.pavlova.522/posts/pfbid0jWSzqXeX8CrW3XEPMXdpAJjuya34V1HxyLDPLJGhG4yZH7DrzmVvNzzouHuQ5gzDl (accessed July 30, 2024).

[40] Vera Pavlova, "V skladchinu—khleb izgnaniia," *ROAR* 3, at roar-review.com/747c014b288d480fa4eaf9ca982d5492 (accessed July 30, 2024).

[41] Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry*, 11–12.

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powerless victim of war and its weapon, the relationship between art and violence becomes even more problematic. As poets mark writing poetry as folly, they arrive, once again, at the imperative of silence: if art has not saved anyone, what is its use? Herman Lukomnikov admits to not finding the words in poetry's defense:

Мои поэтические строчки	My poetic lines
не спасли ничьего сына, ничьей дочки.	haven't saved anyone's son, anyone's daughter.
Здесь должно быть какое-то продолжение,	Something should follow, here, a continuation,
Но я не нахожу подходящее выражение.[42]	but I can't find a suitable means of expression.

In responding to propaganda's heavy-handed use of Russian culture in war narratives, poets reduce the propagandistic thesis to absurdity by implicating Russian writers in violence.[43]

Vladimir Druk composes almost an entire poem by stringing famous names together and concluding each line with the word "war." He opens the poem with:

чехов, толстой, пастернак. война	chekhov, tolstoi, pasternak. war
достоевский, тургенев, пушкин. война	dostoevskii, turgenev, pushkin. war
наташа ростова. о, наташа, наташа!	natasha rostova. oh, natasha, natasha!
булгаков, лермонтов, есенин, гоголь. война[44]	bulgakov, lermontov, esenin, gogolʹwar

He continues by piling up the names—in lower case—and letting the word "war" maintain the rhythm. Poems like this pit Russian literature against Putin's state propaganda and see it lose, because in today's Russia, literature is either irrelevant, or responsible for a genocidal war.

Alongside the anxieties of how to write in a mutilated language and why contribute to Russian culture at all, the most poignant question is how to write after the atrocities, formulated as an obvious allusion to Theodor Adorno's over-quoted statement that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz.

как писать после Мариуполя	how to write after Mariupolʹ
как писать после Бучи	how to write after Bucha
как дышать после	how to breathe after
и существует ли это после.[45]	and does this after even exist.

The Ukrainian poet Olga Bragina puts this question into a different temporal frame: "we haven't yet answered the question can one write poetry after Bucha" (мы еще не ответили

[42] Nemirovskaya, ed. *Disbelief*, 188.

[43] Two of the more striking instances on a long list: Mikhail Piotrovskii, the director of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, stating in an interview: "Our recent exhibitions abroad are just a powerful cultural offensive. If you want, a kind of 'special operation,' which a lot of people don't like. But we are coming. And no one can be allowed to interfere with our offensive." In "Pochemu neobkhodimo byt<'> so svoei stranoi, kogda ona sovershaet istoricheskii povorot i vybor. Otvechaet Mikhail Piotrovskii." *Rossiyskaia Gazeta,* June 22, 2022 at rg.ru/2022/06/22/kartina-mira.html (accessed July 30, 2024); and for billboards erected by the occupiers on the streets of Ukrainian cities with portraits of the Russian classics, see Anna Narinskaia, "Pushkin, chto li?" *The Moscow Times*, July 13, 2022, at www.moscowtimes.eu/2022/07/13/pushkin-chto-li-a22221 (accessed July 30, 2024).

[44] Valdimir Druk, "belye flagi nad goriashchim gorodom," *ROAR* 5, at roar-review.com/f179188ead6e417f-943c517305cd10d1 (accessed July 30, 2024).

[45] Kseniia Pravkina, "Kak pisat'"

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на вопрос можно ли писать стихи после Бучи).[46] For her, the question remains unanswered since the start of the war in 2014, before Bucha became this war's Auschwitz.[47] Olena Maksakowa, a poet from Kharkiv who lives in Germany, changes the temporal frame as well: not "after" but "during":

Я спросила тебя	I asked you
—А мы сможем писать после Освенцима?	"But will we be able to write after Auschwitz?"
—Во время.[48]	"During."

By shifting the gaze from "after" to "now," Maksakowa emphasizes the synchronicity of war poetry, the coexistence of experience and poetic response, which precludes retrospection and aesthetic preoccupations. Synchronicity is more than a temporal category; it is an artistic perspective.

It could be argued that war losses in Ukraine, even in their terrible magnitude, nevertheless do not approach the death toll and suffering of Holocaust. We should also be wary of engaging in a "contest of comparative victimization," as Michael Rothberg argues, because it obscures the fact that "the Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories" of genocides.[49] As Rothberg shows, the traditional view of the Holocaust as an event so unique that it defies historicization separates it "from other histories of collective violence" and "removes that suffering from the field of historical agency," yet, it is the most powerful set of metaphors, analogies, and symbols that evokes violence and suffering of a genocidal war.[50] Unlike the callous over-use of the term by politicians across the world, anti-war poets' references to Holocaust neither downplay nor trivialize it, rather they acknowledge its symbolic centrality to discourses of horrific events. Toponyms, such as Auschwitz, became word-symbols of the Holocaust; Bucha and Mariupol now stand in for the atrocities of this war as a testimony to civilizational failure.[51]

In discussing Ukraine's synchronous war literature, Zakharchenko challenges "the 'post' in 'post-traumatic,'" a category whose application to new Ukrainian literature is problematic.[52] Indeed, literature of witnessing challenges a number of contemporary academic conceptual frames, such as the idea of the unspeakability of trauma, a cornerstone of trauma theory. Trauma theory developed as a critical interpretation of the Holocaust, the defining trauma of the twentieth century, which eliminated its own witnesses and left the survivors reliving an experience that defies representation.[53] This theory's concept of witnessing relies on a temporal reality in which past, future, and present collapse, so that the trauma

[46] Olga Bragina. "25 June 2022," in *Shest´stikhotvorenii o voine*. *Asymptote*, at www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/six-poems-about-war-olga-bragina/russian/ (accessed July 30, 2024).

[47] See for instance, Anastasia Afanasieva's 2014 poem "Can there be poetry after . . ." ("*Vozmozhna li poeziia posle . . .*"), in Maksymchuk and Rosochinsky, eds. *Words for War*, 17.

[48] Olena Maksakowa, "Eti slova v stolbik," at nowarpoetry.com/authors/maksakowa-olena/ (accessed July 30, 2024).

[49] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, 2009), 6.

[50] Ibid., 9

[51] See Tamara Hundorova's discussion of Chernobyl as word-symbol, in which she relies on Jean-François Lyotard's use of "Auschwitz" in illustrating the failure of western civilization. Tamara Hundorova, *Tranzytna Kultura: Symptomy postkolonialnoi travmy* (Kyiv, 2013), 387.

[52] Zaharchenko, "The Synchronous War Novel," 420.

[53] This aspect of trauma theory has seen numerous challenges in light of the more recent developments in psychology and aesthetics; see, respectively, Michelle Balaev, ed., *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (New York, 2014), and Anna-Lena Werner, *Let Them Haunt Us: How Contemporary Aesthetics Challenge Trauma as the Unrepresentable* (Bielefeld, 2020); and in studies of the postcolonial trauma representations that eschew "the Western discourse of unspeakability," see Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1–2 (2008): 1–12.

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is recurring and thus ongoing; as Dori Laub writes, it is "an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after."[54] For the wars and atrocities of our digital age and for synchronous literature arising in response to them, the temporality is skewed as well, developing in the continuous present, in the perpetual "during." These texts' synchronous character determines an array of digital practices that have an instantaneous effect and intersect with empirical environments in numerous ways.[55] Modern technology allows the voices of witnesses to become testimonies and reach audiences with almost no time lag. It also allows for the blurring of lines between the victim and a (moral) witness: when the authors define the parameters of their trauma, who is not a victim? Stacey Peebles, in writing about American soldiers' experience in Iraq, points out that blogging brought about "the most significant changes" to the way in which war stories relate to individual experience.[56] Similarly, Roger Luckhurst looks at the effect of the new technologies, such as online journals and blogs, on the new "forms of witness;" he calls for a reconsideration of the framework of trauma studies, in order for them to be more useful in understanding contemporary events.[57]

The search for adequate linguistic and poetic means to represent trauma explains the recurring references to Adorno, as well as to Paul Celan, a Holocaust survivor who fought to remake his native German into a language capable of depicting the atrocities committed by its speakers. Celan, at once a victim and a witness, struggled to reconcile the imperative and the inability to speak, so that his poetry, in Adorno's words, "is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation."[58] Pavlova confronts and misquotes Adorno's dictum about poetry "after Auschwitz." She rephrases it in terms similar to Maksakowa's and, moreover, adds a spatial aspect: at the time of and from within the terrible reality, "in hell:"

Март. Одиночные пикеты	March. Solitary picket signs
с чистым листочком А4	with a blank sheet of A4
студенток в тоненьких чулочках.	[held] by female students in thin stockings.
Ты говоришь, в аду зазорно	You say it's shameful to write poems
писать стихи? На тех листочках	in hell? I've been writing on those sheets
пишу весь этот год, Адорно.[59]	this whole year, Adorno.

The blank pieces of paper in the hands of lonely protesters at the beginning of the war are brave but ineffective acts of protest by implying rather than articulating an anti-war slogan. The fact that the pieces of paper are held by young women in their insubstantial stockings underscores the protesters' vulnerability. The poet steps in to fill the pages: the present tense of "write" next to the time period of "this whole year" stresses the exhausting synchronicity of her writing.[60] Construing writing poetry as defiance allows the poet to dispute Adorno's view of the shamefulness of art in the face of suffering: she poses art born of suffering, during and inside "Auschwitz," as neither shameful nor barbaric, but a moral obligation.

[54] Cited in Marita Nadal, Mónica Calvo, eds., *Trauma in Contemporary Literature. Narrative and Representation* (New York, 2014), 3–4.

[55] Kerstin Schankweiler, Verena Straub, and Tobias Wendl, *Image Testimonies. Witnessing in Times of Social Media* (London, 2018); Mette Mortensen, "Connective Witnessing."

[56] Stacey Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier's Experience in Iraq* (Ithaca, 2011), 9.

[57] Roger Luckhurst, "Not Now, Not Yet: Polytemporality and Fictions of the Iraq War," in Marita Nadal, Mónica Calvo, eds., *Trauma in Contemporary Literature* (New York, 2014), 52.

[58] Theodor W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 1997), 322.

[59] Vera Pavlova, "Vzletaiut krasnye rakety," *ROAR* 6, at roar-review.com/5f2c11926af644abb270fa844962278a (accessed July 30, 2024).

[60] In another poem in this cycle, Pavlova refers to her poetic practice as stenography.

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The name Celan has become a word-symbol for resistance through reclaiming one's language from the aggressor.[61] Remarkably, while Adorno's statement and its implications are relevant for all poets, it is mostly Russian, rather than Russophone Ukrainian poets who turn to Celan with the awareness that their language is implicated in violence. Bulatovsky, in the cycle "На конце языка" (translatable as both "on the tip of the tongue" and "at the end of language"), alludes to Celan's most famous poem, "Death Fugue," and develops a lament over the powerlessness of words into a chilling accumulation of Celan's images: Margareta's and Shulamith's hair, graves, and the putrid black milk of a lifeless breast:

слишком понятны слова	words understood too well
слишком их мало	of which there are too few
да и те дребезжат	and even these rasp
как на скрипочке Квитко	as on Kvitko's violin
ледяной волосок	an icy hair
твой Маргаритка	your Margareta
твой Суламитка	your Shulamith
мы роем могилу в песочнице	we're digging a grave in a sandbox
сосём почерневший сосок.[62]	we're sucking on a blackened nipple.

On accepting a literary prize in 2023, Bulatovsky wonders whether the means could be found in the Russian language "to talk about the crimes being committed before our eyes on its behalf and in its name" (говорить о тех преступлениях, что совершаются на наших глазах его именем и во имя его).[63] Allusions to the Holocaust do not mean that anti-war poets equate themselves with Holocaust victims; rather, they mark a recollection of the fact that the unspeakable happened before and poets found the way to speak about it. Thus, we see an acknowledgement of the limits of silence as resistance. Celan viewed language as "only one thing [that] remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses," as he stated in a speech in 1958, even if "it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech."[64] Tentatively, today's poets set up a plan for future work, looking forward to the time when their language is restored or a new one invented.

New Language for the Post-War World

The search for adequate linguistic means a longing for the time after, for the post- of trauma: "I'll write poems about this, / when the war ends" (Я напишу стихи об этом, /

[61] Maria Stepanova comments on the importance of Celan to the Russophone poetry of resistance but does not allow Russian poets the right to this affinity because that would equal a claim to victimhood, whereas they are "neither victim nor aggressor." Kevin M. F. Platt and Mark Lipovetsky, "A Conversation with Maria Stepanova," trans. Kevin M. F. Platt, *World Literature Today*, March 2023, at www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2023/march/conversation-maria-stepanova-kevin-m-f-platt-mark-lipovetsky (accessed July 30, 2024).

[62] Igor Bulatovsky, "*slishkom mnogo prirody v adu . . .*" Facebook, March 5, 2022, at www.facebook.com/igor.bulatovsky/posts/pfbid0TfLTieAA8JjAS9QkX7vDgguMeZaAZdtcx4A9VYR5uM1y26kXjfy6dqUQmuKK7Zx8l (accessed July 30, 2024). Leyb Kvitko, a Soviet-Yiddish poet from Ukraine, was executed in 1952 along with other members of the so-called "Kiev group" of Jewish poets and members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Bulatovsky refers to Kvitko's children's poem "Violin" (*Skripka*) about a violin made of tree branches and "four strands of hair." For a study of Kvitko's poetry see Harriet Murav, *As the Dust of the Earth: The Literature of Abandonment in Revolutionary Russia and Ukraine* (Bloomington, 2024).

[63] Igor Bulatovsky, "accepting the Andrei Belyi prize in literature in January of 2023," Facebook. January 22, 2023, at www.facebook.com/igor.bulatovsky/posts/pfbid023yh1LGCjfQ2aBE33WuDxXHuXJoxnNEfqG889z42Y-moHsxUKuvGaNv1JjiZ9Eqq4Xl (accessed July 30, 2024).

[64] Paul Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen," in Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Riverdale-on-Hudson, 1986), 34.

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когда закончится война).[65] In the imagined post-war future, a new manner of discourse will be found, and art will be able to embark on the "retrospective processing of experience," as other (post)witness writers have done before them.[66] The longing for the future and the return to normalcy is understandable, of course; yet for the poets who have witnessed and recorded the undoing of their language, agency, and culture, this return implies reconsidering these very notions and, perhaps, as Pravkina believes, even the need "to learn a new language," post-war, "to articulate this blown-up new world" (научиться новому языку артикулировать этот взорванный новый мир).[67]

There is little optimism in these visions of the future; neither is there a consensus about the nature of poetry after the war. Polina Barskova envisions after-war celebrations as animated by ominous silence: "Silence likened to a howl" (Молчанье уподобленное вою).[68] Viktor Fet believes the words that matter, "the remaining indispensable words" (оставшиеся нужные слова,) will survive and

сквозь кровь и грязь пробьются, как трава, навстречу новому огню и зною.[69]	push their way through the blood and the filth, like grass, to meet the new fire and stifling heat.

Similarly, Olga Anikina, who asks, "where have all the words gone?" (куда ушли все слова?), believes in their return, even if disfigured by the war, that is, she believes in the restoration of speech:

Когда они вернутся с войны, калеки без рук без ног, воспрянет речь—перерыта вдоль, распахана поперёк.[70]	When they return from the war, cripples missing arms missing legs, speech will rebound—dug up lengthwise, plowed up crosswise.

The post-war world is imagined as a new growth, an inevitable stage of the natural cycle. However, this picture of the future populated by mutilated survivors of the war on language evokes, and at the same time obscures, pictures of the real war: the crippled people and ruined cities.

"A Russophone Poet under Russia's Bombs"

Ukrainian war poetry is poetry of witnessing in the truest sense: poets face extremity personally, on their land; their losses are real and ongoing, and mutilation occurs not to the word or tongue, but to the human body, including poets' bodies.[71] In Ukraine, after the dramatic events of 2014—the Revolution of Dignity, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas—many Russophone writers, who had until then comfortably claimed a hybrid

[65] Vera Pavlova, "*Otkroesh´ dver´— ot skvozniaka . . .* ," Facebook, June 5, 2022, at www.facebook.com/vera.pavlova.522/posts/pfbid02GsTCqAWi3oHanCnMaXdVRzHJVMhz5BH2iraGbGDTxMm2f9d4GmZsnXNNmYm3mB9ol (accessed July 30, 2024).

[66] Leona Toker, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose—From the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies," *Poetics Today* 18, no. 2 (1997): 188.

[67] Kseniia Pravkina, "Zavtra byla vesna," *ROAR* 2, at roar-review.com/4957fd69c59849f4b0e67f325bdedf84?pvs=25 (accessed July 30, 2024).

[68] Polina Barskova, "*Den´ porazheniia*," Facebook, January 26, 2023, at www.facebook.com/polina.barskova.3/posts/pfbid0227nq82XQS8BcLbvnN4Gqg367oh9wFXjxg8UC5T3iKkCKFs5veN1Zq7XdnLeWXDJKl (accessed July 30, 2024).

[69] Viktor Fet, "Mir izmenilsia," at https://litpoint.org/2022/08/21/2496/ (accessed December 4, 2023).

[70] Anikina, "Ei, kuda ushli vse slova?"

[71] At least two Ukrainian poets, Volodymyr Vakulenko and Victoria Amelina, were killed since the start of the full-scale war.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2024.500 Published online by Cambridge University Press

status as "a Russian poet, a citizen of Ukraine," made a firm decision to switch to writing in Ukrainian.[72] This shift engendered dynamic reflections on the interconnection of language, culture, identity, and memory.[73] Following the onset of the full-scale war in 2022, however, the scholarly and popular debates about the role of the Russian language and the Russophone population in Ukrainian politics and culture seem concluded. What had been a complex problem, involving issues of the social vs. ethnic concept of nation, cultural heritage, and colonial residues, has been simplified in the most radical and painful of ways.[74] People who might have felt comfortable with being bilingual or primarily Russophone mark their shift to Ukrainian as an act of resistance and outrage. This is also an act of eliminating the dividing line between the individual and the national, and thus bracketing off, at least for a time, the tension between the internal Self and Other typical of a hybrid identity.[75] A striking illustration of this is the poem "New Song of Silence" by acclaimed Ukrainian Russophone poet Anastasia Afanasieva, which begins in Russian and switches to Ukrainian in the middle.[76] The poem, which Alex Averbuch rightly suggests "can be read as a manifesto," performs the transition from the language of the aggressor to Ukrainian as a step toward "a total renunciation of one's past."[77] Ukrainian poetry written since the start of the war is extremely powerful; it is, however, beyond the scope of this study. I address, briefly, Ukrainian and diaspora poets for whom Russian remains the language of creativity and who either refuse to allow their language to become another victim of the Russian aggression or, like many diasporic poets, simply do not have mastery of the Ukrainian language.[78]

Facing extremity, the individual and the national self in Ukraine solidified, thereby shifting the divide to that between all Ukrainians and the external adversary. Dominic LaCapra, in *History in Transit*, makes an important distinction between identity as a complex construction and identification "in the sense of total fusion with others wherein difference is obliterated and criticism is tantamount to betrayal."[79] As the war goes on, most Ukrainians pare down their identity to identification in precisely this sense, as a shift to what Volodymyr Kulyk calls "the *ideology of identification*, which prioritizes the role of language as a marker of group identity, first and foremost a national one."[80] Being a Ukrainian Russophone poet interferes with the stark clarity of this vision. However, renouncing one's native language is as traumatic as it is unfeasible; the dilemma summed up by the Odessa-born Israeli poet Iryna Sapir:

[72] Marco Puleri, "Ukraïnskyi, Rosiiskomovnyi, Rosiiskyi: Self-Identification in Post-Soviet Ukrainian Literature in Russian," *Ab Imperio* no. 2 (2014): 379.

[73] See for instance Vitaly Chernetsky, "Russophone Writing in Ukraine," 48–68; Dirk Uffelmann, "Is There Any Such Thing as 'Russophone Russophobia'? When Russian Speakers Speak Out against Russia(n) in the Ukrainian Internet," in *Global Russian Cultures*, ed. Kevin Platt (Madison, 2029), 207–29; and Volodymyr Kulyk, "Between the Self and the Other: Representations of Russian-speakers in Social Media Discourse," *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018): 65–88.

[74] This is what Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, the lead vocalist of the immensely popular rock band Okean Elzy, means when he writes of how his loathing for the aggressor left him with no other thoughts or feelings, made him one-dimensional: "You've made me black and white, / You've made me simple, without gradient or shade" (Ty zrobyla mene cherno-bilym. / Ty zrobyla mene prostym). Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, "Where'd you come from, my loathing?" trans. Alexandra Kutovoy, https://quote.ucsd.edu/alchemy/whered-you-come-from-my-loathing/ (accessed August 1, 2024).

[75] See Marko Puleri, *Ukrainian, Russophone, (Other) Russian Hybrid Identities and Narratives in Post-Soviet Culture and Politics* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 2020). For an illuminating discussion of hybrid identity in earlier literature, see Yuliya Ilchuk, *Nikolai Gogol: Performing Hybrid Identity* (Toronto, 2021).

[76] In Forché and Kaminsky, eds., *In the Hour of War*, 91–93.

[77] See Alex Averbuch, "Russophone Literature of Ukraine: Self-decolonization, Deterritorialization, Reclamation," *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 65, no. 2 (2023): 149.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Dominic LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, 2018), 37.

[80] Kulyk, "Between the Self and the Other," 76.

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Мне диктует Муза только на русском.	My Muse dictates only in Russian.
На каком мне теперь писать языке?[81]	In what language am I to write now?

While Russian poets mourn their language and culture as both victims and tools of the war, in Ukrainian Russophone poetry, a more prominent motif is Russian culture in Ukraine "destroyed by Russian tanks" (уничтожили и продолжают уничтожать российские танки) [Lyudmila Sharga].[82] Olena Maksakowa in "History of Literature" makes the same point:

Сегодня рос-армия	Today the rus-army
Разбомбила	Bombed out
Мой универ	My uni
Там я учила	There I was studying
Историю русской литературы.[83]	The history of Russian literature.

Andrei Kostinsky casts Russian classics as combatants on the side of the aggressor:

Пилот Чехов поднял в небо самолёт	Chekhov the pilot took a plane into the sky
По приказу командира Пушкина	On the order of Commander Pushkin
Выпустил по украинскому Днепру ракету...[84]	He fired a rocket on the Ukrainian Dnipro...

Kostinsky empties the writers' names of their symbolic prestige and recasts them as empty signifiers in a war of narratives.

With all of Ukraine under attack by Russia, *intra*cultural tension between Russian and Ukrainian speakers, while still palpable, is no longer a top concern. For Vitaly Kovalchuk, the configuration "Russophone Ukrainian" is not only natural but gains coherence "under Russia's bombs." Moreover, he firmly distinguishes between the concepts of "Russia" and "Russophone": his poet is Russian-speaking, the bombs—Russia's:

Снова пишет стихи в украинском несломленном Харькове
Под российскими бомбами русскоязычный поэт.[85]
Once again writing poems in unbowed Ukrainian Kharkov
Under Russia's bombs is the Russian-speaking poet.

Alex Averbuch conducted a unique survey of Ukrainian Russophone poets' positions on refusing or continuing to use Russian as their language of creativity. Switching to Ukrainian, his study shows, is motivated by a number of interrelated reasons, including "annulment of—the withdrawal from—everything related to Russia and Russian owing to the destruction caused by the war" and a "refusal to be a part of Russian culture."[86] However, some Russophone poets in Averbuch's survey refuse to give up their language: "Russian is [their] native language that Russia should not be allowed to take from them. Losing this linguistic "territory" would mean, for these authors, another defeat, another expulsion from one's

[81] Cited in Martin Schmitz, "#VesḾirZaMir (5): Khroniki agressii (Berlin, 2022)," at litpoint.org/2022/11/01/vesymirzamir-5-hroniki-agressii-berlin-2022/ (accessed July 30, 2024).

[82] Ibid.

[83] Olena Maksakowa, "Istoriia literatury," *ROAR* 3, roar-review.com/37d6d03727994a029ec6fade2c0a5f95 (accessed July 30, 2024).

[84] Andrei Kostinsky, "Pilot Chekhov podnial v nebo samolet," at litpoint.org/2023/02/25/kostinskiy/ (accessed July 30, 2024).

[85] Vitaly Kovalchuk, "On prikhodit pod vecher," at litpoint.org/2022/11/02/4285/ (accessed July 30, 2024).

[86] Averbuch, "Russophone literature of Ukraine," 149, 151.

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home—that of one's native language and comfort, one's identity."[87] Kovalchuk's defiant lines, a short manifesto of the Russophone Ukrainian artist, similarly foregrounds a political, rather than linguistic concept of identity: the Russophone poet, as undefeated as his native Ukrainian city, continues writing verses under Russia's (not Russian) bombs.

Where Russian poets operate with the metaphors of fragmented words and speakers' mutilated tongues, Ukrainian poets' concern with the corporeality of war makes the body a central metaphor. Maksakowa fuses the physical and emotional impact of the war by feeling her body respond in pain to the bombings of cities:

Каждый новый день	Every new day
Приносит новую боль	Brings new pain
Сегодня болит Харьков	Today Kharkov hurts
До него Чернигов.[88]	Before that—Chernigov.

Iryna Ivanchenko also marks each day by tracing the war as evident marks on her body:

По утрам зашиваешь себя, словно рваный шов,
в каждой морщине—воронка расцветки хаки,
и подходишь к зеркалу, чтобы узнать, во Львов
прилетело ночью или бомбили Харьков.[89]
In the mornings you sew yourself up, like a torn seam,
in every wrinkle—a khaki-colored crater,
and you approach the mirror, to find out if it flew into Lviv
overnight or if they bombed Kharkiv.

Analyzing corporeality in Belarusian revolutionary poetry, Alessandro Achili noticed the same centrality of the body in the poetic world and its transcendence into a collective national body.[90] We see in Ukrainian war poetry how the metaphor of the poet's body as a site of war configures this body as a national one, a corporeal representation of the national identity, scarred and shaped by war. With the Self/Other divide lying outside this national whole, the imperative to preserve its integrity restrains internal conflicts and streamlines identity constrictions. Unlike Russian poets who focus on the disintegration of their language and fragmentation of society, Ukrainian poets affirm a unity earned by common suffering, clarity of vision, and purpose.

Herman Lukomnikov stated in an interview that the poems he has written since the start of the war "are uncharacteristic for me, they're a wail, a cry from the heart" (для меня не характерны, это вопль, крик души).[91] No doubt other poets could say the same about the heightened immediacy and emotion of their war poems. The shared feelings of grief, compassion, and guilt; recurring images of death and destruction, and a strong sense of irretrievable

[87] Ibid., 159.

[88] Olena Maksakowa, "Kazhdyi novyi den′," *ROAR* 3, at roar-review.com/37d6d03727994a029ec6fade2c0a5f95 (accessed July 30, 2024).

[89] Irina Ivanchenko, "Otgudela sirena," in "God voiny: Stikhi poetov Ukrainy na russkom iazyke," *Novaya Gazeta*, February 22, 2023, at novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/02/22/god-voiny-russkie-stikhi-poetov-ukrainy (accessed December 4, 2023).

[90] Alessandro Achili, "The Body of the Poet, the Body of the Nation: Corporeality in Recent Revolution Poetry from Belarus," *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 64, nos. 2–3 (2022): 247–73.

[91] Dmitrii Volchek, "German Lukhomnikov: Neofitsial′naia kul′tura vyzhivet v podpol′e," interview *Radio Svoboda*, January 1, 2023, at www.svoboda.org/a/german-lukomnikov-neofitsialjnaya-kuljtura-vyzhivet-v-podpolje-/32237402.html?fbclid=IwAR00yX-dfYQJsYoGC5KR14w3hHsp6IsY7XI4khryYunGYSq07sGCi_V1CLM (accessed July 30, 2024).

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losses are among the features that consolidate hundreds of Russian anti-war poems into a coherent body of work. For Russian poets, the motif of language connects many other themes: from envisioning the violence toward language as emblematic of violence against the poet, to stunned muteness, to the determination to speak in protest, out of empathy for the victims. Language is thus a marker of social identity: documenting the horror of war is a moral imperative, yet it puts oppositional artists in confrontation with the state and the vast majority of their own people, forcing them into exile both literally and symbolically. To continue writing against the war in the language of the aggressor is to act as both a moral witness, creating a record for the future, and a political actor, hoping to change the present.

Ukrainian poets develop imagery that foregrounds societal unity and displaces tensions of language and identity, even if this sense of cultural coherence is achieved at a terrible price. When Russia's war against Ukraine becomes a topic of literary works engaged in retrospective assessments and employing familiar differentiations among victims, eyewitnesses, perpetrators, and enablers, the memory work, and perhaps memory wars, will begin. As the war goes on, the artists' response is an attempt to capture and interpret what precedes memory: the experience. The open-ended nature of experience allows the artists to formulate a perspective from within the events, with their role defined as moral witnesses, envisioning a solidarity of suffering and empathy. Poetry of witnessing, with its immediacy and heightened, very public emotionality, awkward poetics that privilege ethical over aesthetic concerns, open-endedness, and overt socio-political engagement challenges our habitual interpretive frames. While it is important to chart the contrasting historical narratives that fuel this war, we must recognize that the familiar theoretical apparatus of memory studies, historical mythology, and trauma theories needs a radical refocusing for the study of texts that are written and read synchronously with the war, and that challenge our understanding of the relationship between memory and testimony, and trauma and narrative.

Lyudmila Parts is Professor of Russian at McGill University (Montreal). She is the author of *In Search of the True Russia: The Provinces in Contemporary Nationalist Discourse* (2018), *The Chekhovian Intertext: Dialogue with a Classic* (2008), and the editor of *Goncharov in the Twenty-First Century* (with Ingrid Kleespies, 2021) and *The Russian 20th Century Short Story: A Critical Companion* (2009). She has published articles on the provincial myth and national identity, and on the micro-encounters and the narrator in the Russian travelogue. Research and teaching interests include nineteenth and twentieth century literature, Chekhov, post-Soviet literature, cultural representations of nationalism, genre theory, the travelogue, and symbolic geography.

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