



Philological studies in times of war

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Abstract

This paper presents a literary journey through poetry, philosophy, literature, and one academic's experience of losing colleagues and students in the war. Yet, the author finishes on a hopeful note.

Keywords

philology, teaching in wartime, historic memory, truth

The title of this essay should be extended with a colon: Losses and gains. It is also necessary to explain why it will be about philological studies specifically. Not only because I am a philologist by education and work at the Department of Literary Studies named after Volodymyr Morenets - one of the most prominent Ukrainian philologists and until recently the head of this department. The thing is that philologists have a special perception and experience of the poetic word. They know that poetry, as the elder sister of philosophy, is a carrier of hidden meanings, which are often revealed precisely in critical moments of history. Then poets are able to capture the "historical rhyme" - a clear echo of the past in the events of the present. That is why, for philologists of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (both teachers and students), studying during the war became a joint immersion into the depths of the national conceptual sphere and an approach to the historical experience of ancestors encoded in the word. I will tell you a little later how this happened, because the end of June 2024 reminds us of both common losses and changes in university life caused by the war.

For the third time, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy students are finishing the academic year without the traditional Convocation ceremonies and the accompanying extended student festivities, which always start with the morning "dressing" of the Skovoroda monument (the head of the wandering philosopher, who gazes at his Alma Mater from a high pedestal, is crowned with a Mohyla bonnet). For the third year, the educational process is mainly online, and since even before the war live communication was limited by the Covid epidemic, many of this year's graduates have not experienced the joy of full-fledged classroom learning. They haven't felt the joy of creative collaboration in seminars, participation in literary discussions and presentations of scientific or literary

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achievements of the Mohyla community of different generations. There are also those who still don't know where exactly the Department of Literary Studies is located, which has always been a centre of informal communication between students and teachers, a source of psychological comfort and creative inspiration - a place where bold innovative projects were born. This distinguished Mohyla Academy from many other universities, so such a loss is especially painful.

Those who did not experience the first days of the attack on Kyiv and the merciless shelling of the capital, who did not see the pillars of black smoke, the mutilated buildings, the destroyed streets, the closed shops and pharmacies, will not be able to understand the mental state of Kyiv residents who remained in the city despite all the obvious threats. It was a desperate readiness to unite and resist: some old lady dragged a brick home to throw it at the occupiers from the balcony; someone collected bottles and shared recipes for ["bandera smoothies"]; groups were formed to search for saboteurs (and they actually caught some!). I still remember the long lines near the military enlistment offices, the names of our first students who volunteered for the war. Some gained not only military glory but also artistic recognition (like our graduate - philologist, poet, marine, and Shevchenko Prize laureate Yaryna Chornohuz), some died on the very first day of their stay at the front, like the third-year philosophy student Danylo Yevtushenko... And one of the young lecturers at our department, the famous poet and prose writer Myroslav Laiuk, to whom Danylo managed to send his literary work, combined his teaching activities with the work of a military correspondent. He visited the very heart of hell several times and wrote an impressive documentary novel about Bakhmut.

But this is what surprised me the most: at this time, students and teachers worked with some new enthusiasm, as if their work was part of the armed resistance. And despite the fact that many students left the dormitory for their homes or found themselves outside Ukraine, lecture and seminar classes online demonstrated almost one hundred percent attendance and unusual activity, a focus on creative dialogue. And in the work on coursework and diploma projects, there was a clear tendency to actualise the chosen material - its understanding in the context of the events experienced (in particular, this concerned the mytho-ritual intentions of poetic creativity, the structure and semantics of the "urban text", apocalyptic motifs in the poetry of the eighties generation). Thus, both the summer session of 2022 and the defences of diploma theses became milestones in the life of the Faculty of Humanities at Mohyla Academy. It was then that a new field of creative interaction was created, and new themes and directions of research were formed (in particular, this concerns the "discourse of war" in frontline poetry, the teleology and poetics of the alternative-historical novel in Ukrainian literature of the 21st century).

Something also changed in the relationship between teachers and students: phone calls and meetings became more frequent in the most attractive corners of the city at that time - for example, in the square near the Golden Gate with the monument to Prince Volodymyr, packed in wooden attire (near the metro, where you could quickly hide in case of an air raid). This was the already mentioned shared experience of the historical echo of what is happening again on the "blood-soaked Kyiv ramparts," about which Lina Kostenko wrote. And the lines addressed by Maksym Rylsky to Ukraine 80 years ago were perceived as if they were written today: "You have met more than one menacing pogrom - / You know the trampling, the knocking, and the rumbling of the Batu Khans, / But from the fire, each time with a sky-blue wreath, / Your singing, your mighty Kyiv arose"...

In the spring of 2022, we were all convinced that the war would end quickly. I remember how a third-year student at the time, Daryna Chupat (she was writing a term paper for me about Christian motifs in Ihor Rymaruk's "Bermuda Triangle"), firmly and menacingly said: "They won't take Easter Vigil away from me!" Unfortunately, they did: the church service was held behind closed doors, and it could only be watched on television.

Ahead was a difficult winter with blackouts, when there was no light, no water, no heating. Lectures and seminars were disrupted due to the lack of light and internet - they had to be rescheduled, and seminars were completed individually - by phone. However, this added a kind of fierce stubbornness, and we rejoiced at every opportunity for intensive and fruitful communication in such incredible times. Because it was not only intellectual solace but also a true "sense of a united family."

All this obligated us to search for new forms of teaching, structural restructuring, and content updates to the courses. Issues that previously seemed marginal or too complex for the student audience became so relevant that it was impossible to bypass them. First and foremost, this concerned the rethinking of the Ukrainian cultural and historical experience in the context of the pseudo-historical propaganda of the [Russians].

One of the achievements of philological education during the war can be considered the students' drive to restore historical memory. And this, in turn, transforms the semiotic vision, expands its possibilities. Therefore, in the last two years, the number of students in the elective course "Analysis of Artistic Text" has sharply increased. Group discussions and collective attempts to interpret poetic works in the closest and most distant contexts have enabled the understanding of the most hermetic texts. At the same time, well-known, memorised poems from school were renewed in the students' perception, revealed as if heard for the first time, and in the analysis of such works, the prophetic and providential meaning of poetry was unexpectedly revealed. Thus, Tychyna's well-known poem appeared as a magical formula, and the analysis of its poetic structures testified to the ritual intentions of the text: "I am the people whose truth's power / Has never been conquered by anyone. / Whatever misfortune, whatever plague mowed me down, / The power blossomed again. / To live, I ask no one's permission. / To live, I will break all chains. / I affirm myself. I assert myself, / For I live."

So be it! Let the power of the young generation of Ukrainian philologists, tempered by war, blossom - vivat et gloriat!

And, of course: Vivat Academia!