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POETRY AS TESTIMONY: REFLECTIONS ON WAR IN KATERYNA KALYTKO'S TEXTS

Abstracts
Kateryna Kalytko's latest collections – *Nobody Knows Us Here and We Don't Know Anyone* (2019), *The Silent Women's Order* (2021), and *People with Verbs* (2022) – are all centered on understanding the current war, although the poet had previously addressed the issues of comprehending war and the experience of migration, particularly with a focus on the Balkan context. However, these last three collections can be seen as forming a conceptual unity: their main characteristics include the transversality of symbolism and key imagery, the recurrence of certain plots, and the construction of a vertical mythological narrative. At the risk of broad generalizations, the central concerns of Kalytko's recent poetry revolve around language, memory, and the female experience of survival. In this context, the relationship between space, body, and language is especially distinctive in Kalytko's work. Her attention to the *loci* that constitute the landscape parallels a specific conceptual strategy in her poetry that might be described as the *anatomy of language*. Thus, language itself is likened to a landscape—one with a non-homogeneous structure and a distinct profile. This atomization, the decomposition of linguistic fabric into its elements—sounds and letters, parts of speech, intonational accents—is similar to the creation of a map that records meaning in a bodily, tactile way. The real dividing line between the pre-war and wartime reality is language—its capacity to adequately reflect this new reality. The new language is grounded in the verb, which assumes all the consequences of rejecting moral hypocrisy. The reconfiguration of language under the pressure of wartime realities is also intricately connected to collective memory.

Keywords: Ukrainian literature, contemporary Ukrainian poetry, testimony, war, language, body, Kateryna Kalytko, memory, documentarism, metaphor, myth.

Introduction

"Here is language for you, woman. Shoot from it" (Kalytko, 2021b) is arguably the most well-known poetic reflection on the current Ukrainian–Russian war. This poem introduces the concept of language, which is of central importance in Kateryna Kalytko's poetry, and also contains a transparent reference to Lesia Ukrainka ("O word, thou art my only

armament") (Ukrainka, 1950, p. 50), who likewise conceptualized the problems of cultural threat and cultural war. On the one hand, language is positioned in opposition to silence and namelessness; on the other hand, it disintegrates into sound and writing—or more precisely, into sounds and letters—whose semantic validity is determined less by the transparency of their meaning-making function than by their capacity to transform and organize space.

It is important to note that the language in Kalytko's poems is consistently effective. Despite the bitter irony of the poem's final lines ("Who said that we leave our own to their fates? / We armed them, like we knew best") (Kalytko, 2021b), language remains a weapon for Kalytko. It is language that prevents "them from approaching" (Kalytko, 2021b), that upholds the boundaries of the inhabited space. In Kalytko's poetry, the concepts of borders and boundaries hold particular significance. These spatial images are not exclusively tied to the context of war, shifting maps, or the movement of demarcation lines and displaced populations from the occupied territories.

However, in the poem "Here is language for you, woman...," Kalytko employs military terminology to articulate the concept of occupation as a concentric narrowing of space. First, it is the distance of a radio intercept; then, the range of a gunshot; finally, the proximity of hand-to-hand combat. These correspond to the loci of land, household, and body. Kalytko presents the notion of personal space as an extension of the body. In her poetic world, this concept is further developed through the assertion that one's space endures "until the light in their eyes is fully extinguished" (Kalytko, 2021b). In constructing this spatial framework, Kalytko avoids abstract definitions of boundaries, instead offering a highly concrete demarcation: "And never, never let them approach / the old border on which / the plum tree planted by father grows" (Kalytko, 2021b).

Language as a weapon of war in Kalytko's poetry is primarily a feminine mode of resistance: "Only a woman's thin fingers are nimble enough for this" (Kalytko, 2021b). It is through this feminine linguistic resistance that another historical cycle is prevented—one in which the son is sent to fight in the same war from which his father returns crippled.

The relevance of the proposed article lies in the need to document the changes occurring in contemporary Ukrainian literature that affect areas such as poetics, themes, style, subject matter, and tone. While there is a temptation to equate these changes with the outbreak of war in 2014 or the full-scale invasion in 2022, drawing a direct correlation between socio-historical shifts and transformations in cultural and literary epochs appears overly simplistic.

In this regard, I find Tetiana Hrebeniuk's approach particularly compelling. She proposes analyzing the contemporary Ukrainian literary process through the lens of Western European and North American paradigms. According to this paradigm, a transition from postmodernism to metamodernism took place at the beginning of the third millennium. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of the emergence of a new sincerity in contemporary literature, the resurgence of subjectivity, a renewed focus on reality, and the revitalization of the concept of human social nature and social responsibility (Hrebeniuk, 2023, pp. 32–34).

According to T. Hrebeniuk (who primarily draws on the works of S. Abramson and G. Dember), the most characteristic features of metamodern poetics in literature include: oscillation (emotional fluctuation between opposing feelings); hyper-self-reflexivity (a focus on the creative process and the verbalisation of one's unique experiences); and potentiality as a marker of temporality (the comprehension and construction of a potential set of worlds). Other features include eccentric and pretentious characters; irony that merges

irony and sublimity; the return of metanarratives; attention to the influence of media on human identity; imitation of the formal features of postmodernism; cultivation of immersion in others' lived experiences; and engagement with the ideas of transhumanism and the Anthropocene. Hrebeniuk also notes the presence of cautious optimism and normcore (Hrebeniuk, 2023, pp. 48–54).

According to T. Hrebeniuk, the metanarrative of Ukrainian national identity has always been a central aspect of contemporary Ukrainian literature. Even Ukrainian postmodernism was not a rethinking of modernism but rather a critical examination of the artistic practices of socialist realism produced under totalitarian control (Hrebeniuk, 2023, pp. 42–44). In her analysis of the *RECvisits* anthology project, Olena Haleta describes Ukrainian literature from the post-independence period as post-totalitarian, post-colonial, and post-traumatic. She explains: "We are talking about post-totalitarianism in relation to the Soviet ideological system and the aesthetics of socialist realism, post-colonialism in relation to Russian culture, and post-traumaticism in terms of getting even with our own painful past" (Haleta, 2021, p. 18).

Equating historical turning points and catastrophes with changes in literary styles would be as simplistic as ignoring literature's search for a new language with which to confront a new reality. Kate McLoughlin cites the need for catharsis and healing (McLoughlin, 2009, p. 20), as well as the desire to impose control over a chaotic reality, among the reasons for recording the traumatic experience of war. As McLoughlin puts it, "More realistic is the thought that writing about war somehow controls it: imposing at least verbal order on the chaos makes it seem more comprehensible and therefore feel safer" (McLoughlin, 2009, p. 19). Other reasons include "the need to keep the record for others – those who were there and can no longer speak for themselves, and those who were not there and need to be told" (McLoughlin, 2009, p. 19). The experience gap between the military and civilians is also significant: "Public ignorance and apathy provoke war writing that is amongst the angriest and most purposeful: at the very least having 'the truth told' about combat constitutes a vital opportunity for veterans to reconnect with their former lives" (McLoughlin, 2009, p. 20).

The analysis of war writing has a certain tradition and continuity. This can be seen in Angus Calder's (2004, pp. 117–144) study of the transformation of heroic discourse from Homer to Hollywood blockbusters, and in Margot Norris's (2000) study of the shift in the war-related worldview paradigm in the twentieth century. Reinterpreting Theodor Adorno's famous formula about poetry after Auschwitz, Kate McLoughlin clarifies, based on a textual analysis of later edits, "that it was barbaric to write anything other than protest literature after Auschwitz" (McLoughlin, 2009, p. 16). Thus, it is not only about the need to write about war, but also about finding a language in which to do so. After all, war usually defeats language — one of the symptoms of traumatic experience is *alexithymia*, that is, "the inability to identify, symbolise, and express feelings" (McLoughlin, 2009, p. 17).

The figure of the writer is no less important at the intersection of the functions of war literature, which involves recording experiences and memories, facilitating the healing process, and persuasively conveying the chaotic, fragmented, torn, and often ineffable nature of these experiences. According to M. Norris, "modern warfare is phenomenologically and ontologically discontinuous with earlier modes of warfare" (Norris, 2000, p. 16). The understanding of war as a fight, and the symbolic status that follows from this, is "grounded in the Hegelian notion that the moment of becoming human was

situated in an originary fight to the death because the transition from animal to human required the willingness to risk life, to transcend the survival instinct and set immaterial values above material life. This fiction of war's genesis as coeval with idealism has the value of locating the origins of war in a fissure or rupture between the impulses and interests of the body and those of the mind as a subject created by self-consciousness" (Norris, 2000, p. 16).

However, the twentieth century is characterized by a radical paradigm shift in this regard. As Norris puts it, "When modern war refigures combatancy as an atomic weapon aimed at a civilian population, or a military and administrative machine bent on annihilating an internal population, the gladiatorial or ludic model of warfare becomes inoperative; pure slaughter, without risk or instrumental justification, strips war of both rational and idealistic foundations" (Norris, 2000, p. 18). Margot Norris attributes the "unspeakability" of twentieth- and twenty-first-century wars, not least, to the massive number of civilian casualties. She explains: "Among the more egregious difficulties I would privilege a set of related problems: art's epistemological inability to totalize, to encompass all aspects of a phenomenon; the long-standing marriage of art and individualism that makes artistic representation resistant to human aggregations, to populations; and, concomitant with the previous point, art's inability to extend its power to express subjectivity – its power to make the interiority of lived experience available to its expressive media – to the representation of large numbers of people, and particularly to large numbers of the dying and the dead" (Norris, 2000, p. 20).

In this sense, the issue of subjectivity is also relevant to the believability and authenticity of the recounted experience. While previous writing focused on combatants who participated in war, the military experience of the 20th century led to the emergence of the figure of the civilian victim of war. Margot Norris also highlights the challenges involved in representing human subjectivity, which is often overlooked in dry historiographical accounts. As she puts it, "Looked at from this perspective, art can be seen to seize what is left over for its own terrain, a leftover in the form of the human remainder, the affective residue, the suffering that military histories imply but don't voice, the inner experience that can't be mapped, charted, counted, or otherwise quantified. The consequence of this intellectual economy is that the human remainder left over for art belongs to the discredited realm of the private and the subjective—a realm traditionally coded as feminine—while facticity lends history and political science the masculinely coded prestige of the public and the objective" (Norris, 2000, p. 21).

The shift in worldview evident in war writing suggests the existence of an alternative to the heroic narrative. Kate McLoughlin refers to this alternative as the antithesis of "strong" war stories, which serve to convey combatant experiences. In turn, the attempt to convey non-combatant experience affects both representation and rhetoric. McLoughlin discusses this using the term *parapolemics*, which suggests that the representation of war experience takes a "detour." As she puts it, "It may aptly be termed 'parapolemics': the discourse of the temporal and spatial borders of war (it is traditionally the field to which those without combat experience, particularly women, are confined)" (McLoughlin, 2011, p. 140).

In this sense, the heroic narrative is at odds with the need to convey the traumatic experience of war, both in terms of meaning and method. Among these methods, McLoughlin refers to "non-writing," which deals with the *apophatic* delineation of traumatic experience. According to McLoughlin, "The trick – simply put – is that not-writing functions analogously to military diversion tactics:

attention is diverted away from the main action, but with the inevitable result that the true target eventually becomes clear. It should be emphasised that such tactics are means of deliberately circumventing the direct depiction of conflict, as opposed to the failure to discuss war even while an attempt is being made to do so, artistic aloofness or the surrender to the temptation to look away from horror. These are literary means of intentional avoidance" (McLoughlin, 2011, p. 139).

According to Uilleam Blacker, the *parapolemic* mode of writing allows us to discuss war in a more nuanced and reflective manner. This is the conclusion he draws from his analysis of Ukrainian prose and drama reflecting on the onset of the Russian–Ukrainian War in 2014 (Blacker, 2022). However, "traditionally, the first literary reaction to a new stage of war is poetry, which is best able to capture the emotional spectrum of the experience" (Pukhonska, 2023, p. 801). Taras Pastukh indicates "the entry of Ukrainian poetry into new aesthetic horizons – direct perception of life, openness and sincerity of the figurative word, and the spontaneity of poetic speech imbued with a powerful narrative rhythm" (Pastukh, 2022a). He also notes a shift from hermeticism towards the depiction of everyday life, horror, tragedy, as well as the assertion of national identity in war poetry (Pastukh, 2022a). Oksana Pukhonska observes that "Every year, the literature on the war in Donbas grows, transforming from texts that record or inform to texts that analyse the historical, social, generational, gender and cultural problems of Ukrainian society against the backdrop of war, over the course of the entire last century and the three decades of independence" (Pukhonska, 2022, pp. 9–10).

These changes are more clearly evident in prose and drama, but a renewal of language can also be observed in poetry. In particular, Hanna Uliura discusses the shift towards narrative and verse in contemporary Ukrainian poetry, as well as the focus on intonation and the intention to make poetic language more akin to spoken language (Uliura, 2016). She also mentions the emphasis on testimony and documentation prompted by social upheavals such as the Maidan protests and the Russian-Ukrainian war (Uliura, 2018). Nataliia Lebedyntseva notes that the thematic palette of Ukrainian poetry has expanded over the last decade. This expansion encompasses both subjective experiences, as expressed through monologic and meditative writing, and socially engaged poetic texts (Lebedyntseva, 2021, p. 33). Taras Pastukh highlights several specific features of poetry written during the war: the prevalence of women's writing; the manifestation of Christian discourse in both affirmative and negative forms; the incorporation of folklore and mythology; significant intertextual references to the national canon; appeals to recognizable events, symbols, and situations, such as Mariupol and Azovstal; the documentation of the war in the poetry of front-line soldiers (Pastukh, 2022a); ironic rethinking of concepts previously considered normative or at least unquestioned before the war; and the normalization of obscene vocabulary (Pastukh, 2022b). In the context of war, both self-expression and self-identification are equally important, as is the engagement of others in empathizing with shared experience (Pukhonska, 2023, pp. 806–813). Yaroslav Polishchuk attempts to classify war poetry by focusing on the subject of expression and the specificity of experience: poetry written by military personnel and civilians, by men and women, and poetry written by and about refugees (Polishchuk, 2025, pp. 109–125). Illia Rudiiko emphasizes the growing narrative nature of poetry, which he attributes to inter-genre influences and the penetration of essays and reportage into other genres, including poetry, which is now primarily focused on recording experiences (Rudiiko, 2023). Another defining feature is the

interplay between the verbal and the visual. Rudiiko attributes this to the influence of the reportage genre, which emphasizes visual detail within the text and is often accompanied by photographs and illustrations (Rudiiko, 2023). Vitaliy Chernetsky, however, explains this by referencing media developments, particularly the growing popularity of Facebook since 2010, along with the decline of the predominantly verbal LiveJournal. According to Chernetsky, "In Ukraine, Facebook became especially prominent, and for all its problems as a commercial platform, it became an important community-building tool on the local and national level, as well as a crucial site for international engagement. In contrast to the almost entirely verbally oriented LiveJournal era, it also brought a closer interaction between verbal and visual art forms" (Chernetsky, 2024, p. 521).

However, the way in which literature copes with extreme violence appears crucial in terms of changing artistic language. In her analysis of Maidan poetry, Olena Haleta comes closest to outlining the specific relationship between language and reality in times of extreme violence. As she puts it, "Several models of creative reaction can be observed in response to the political protest in Ukraine and the violence against protesters, which resulted in numerous deaths and injuries: socially oriented creativity as social critique or social action; the creation of literary works as documents and monuments; silence and reflection on the 'lack of artistic language' in times of tragedy; writing practices as collective rituals to interconnect different elements of a broken reality and create new identities; new reconsiderations of figurative literature in the light of a 'language shift,' when it is impossible to predict the meanings and associations of words used by writers" (Haleta, 2020, p. 619).

As Haleta perceptively observes, the poetry of the Maidan is not based on metaphor but on metonymy, since a metonymic narrative implies authenticity and coexistence in space and time: "Maidan as a reality needs permanent collation in situ, it is checked by the sense of compatibility" (Haleta, 2020, p. 624). In this sense, the disappearance of irony is significant, as it implies a step toward reality rather than distancing (Haleta, 2020, p. 624). It is the destruction of a stable context—so crucial for the functioning of metaphor and irony—that marks the Maidan as a heterotopia, whose disturbance "is stipulated by abandoning not only the conventional system of reference (place) and calculation (time), but also the system of settlements and values, and the conventional use of language" (Haleta, 2020, p. 625).

Additionally, the *modus operandi* of language itself changes in situations of extreme violence: "Violence changes the narrator's situation, since he or she is literally lacking words, and is to have his or her voice changed to a shriek, a moan or other similar speechless reactions, including muteness, which, contrary to silence, has an anthropic character" (Haleta, 2020, p. 627). The rejection of figurative language, the gesture in the meaning of the word, silence as a trope and a speech strategy, the return to the economy of naming and the straightforward relationships between words and things, the restoration of relations with reality through the appeal to proper names and recognizable prototypes—all these features testify not only to the formation of a new language that records traumatic experience but also to a peculiar form of therapy: "In the case of Maidan, literary anthologies function as a collective language therapy, individual worldviews and narratives being still in formation" (Haleta, 2020, p. 635).

Taras Holovan also emphasizes the mutual influence of the individual and the collective when it comes to extreme experience. In his opinion, poetry is involved, among other things, in the construction of memory mechanisms: "The gravity of the events of 2022 and 2023 is so strong that memory mainly

works with what happened today or yesterday, or in recent weeks or months. Consequently, autobiographical memory is fading into the background, being replaced by a collective memory linked to the challenging experience of war" (Holovan, 2023, p. 87).

The Anatomy of Language

This extreme concreteness applies equally to landscape and language. The attention to the *loci* that form the landscape is comparable to the specific tactics of conceptualisation in Kalytko's texts, which can be described as the *anatomy of language*. Language, like space, has a non-homogeneous structure and a distinct profile. Kalytko lovingly captures these features – grammar, phonetics, and syntax. Such atomisation — the decomposition of the linguistic fabric into elements such as sounds and letters, parts of speech, and intonational accents — is akin to drawing up a map that records things bodily, tactilely. This is the "quiet and powerful Ukrainian phonetics" (Kalytko, 2021a, p. 26) with "perfect Ch and Shch as stout as great-grandfather's apple trees" (Kalytko, 2021a, p. 26); where "our consonants are a settlement zone, a palisade in the dark, a fortress, ice" (Kalytko, 2019, p. 74); "and in the vowels, it turns out, there is such a core of worry, a bone full of prussic acid" (Kalytko, 2019, p. 74).

It is not without reason that, even at the level of figurative lines, the sounds of language are compared to things and bodies: consonants become palisades and ice, vowels become circles on the water or the core of a pit (probably an apricot pit, in which case it may be interpreted as a cue in the dialogue with Liuba Yakymchuk's *The Apricots of Donbas*). But such atomisation can also be understood as an image of the threat to language: it is not the infinite variety of variants that defines the linguistic space, but the finiteness of linguistic elements and the uniqueness of configurations. "The crows roam lazily over the cropland, / picking up like worms the scattered letters / of worthless poems" (Kalytko, 2021a, p. 15) — the sarcasm here does not refer to poor-quality poems but to the everyday perception of "this culture" as secondary, insignificant. The image of chaotically scattered letters is especially capacious, as it denotes the disintegration of cultural space — the destruction of culture as an integrity of meanings. There is no text as a unit, only letters devoid of semantics. The importance of this theme is indicated by another quote: "Shake the letters out of the book into a bug-out bag" (Kalytko, 2021a, p. 40) — here, the letters carefully collected in a bug-out bag — that finite number of elements — are both the key to preserving identity and a recognisable marker of it. There is certainly an echo of Ivan Malkovych's brilliant *Admonition* in these lines, where language is understood in the totality of its oral and written hypostases, and where writing is seen as being more acutely threatened.

The symbolism of the collection *People with Verbs* is based, among other things, on Ukrainian grammar. In developing the poetics of the verb in the collection, Kalytko etymologically explains the name of the grammatical category – the word that equals action. This change of direction appears particularly significant when we remember that the philosophy of modernism has primarily revolved around the name, the naming – see (Kiseliova, 2014, pp. 62–69). Kalytko directly contrasts the moral impartiality of naming, associated with the noun, with the verb's active voice: "at such a depth where no one can catch us, where nouns have been melted into a living verb" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 61).

This interpretation of the word as action echoes the rhetoric of the Prague Circle poets, especially Yevhen Malaniuk and Oleh Olzhych. In this sense, Kalytko's poetry dismisses the postmodern interpretation of an author as a

scriptwriter, as a conventional textual function. Speech (or silence) is always a moral choice. Moreover, the current war constitutes a conditional point of assembly, where our previously held notions of the past are being revised. Kalytko addresses this by de-automating the topos of "literary history" with all its stereotypical meanings (school curriculum; literature of weeping and suffering; incomplete literature; literature on rural themes; literature for domestic use, etc.): "it's better that they don't know how many line's breaks in the history of literature /– always on a verb" (Kalytko, 2021a, p. 97).

For Kalytko, the history of literature is shaped by ruptures at the level of individual choices and by the continuity of language in the face of a permanent war for existence. For the verb is a moral choice, a language as weapon, and a purely female war against the inertia of collective memory in articulating painful experiences. Moreover, for Kalytko, the unity of the subject's hypostases – the one who writes and the one who acts – is crucial: "It is really easy to distinguish human beings from a silent shimmering hologram / their heart muscle / is always a verb" (Kalytko, 2021a, p. 127). This metaphor is, in fact, strikingly existentialist: the tireless contraction of the heart muscle becomes an image of human self-transcendence in the daily situation of choice.

This demand for integrity and authenticity—the conception of a person as what he or she says, in fact, the coincidence of the inner self and the social role—allows us to speak of a shift in contemporary poetry. If the theme of a person's inauthenticity—the falsity of his or her social role—was a significant motif in the poetry of the 1970s (especially in the work of Hrytsko Chubai), the poets of the 1990s discovered the allure of the *mask*, which offered the luxury of exploring and trying on endless manifestations of otherness—so much so that authenticity, we might assume, appeared to these poets as perhaps the most boring of possibilities.

Today, the ongoing war is reshaping this perspective, and the demand for honesty (with oneself) is no longer perceived as pre-modern or archaic. More precisely, the war has only emphasized tendencies already evident in contemporary Ukrainian poetry of the 2010s and 2020s: a return to the real, a weakening of intertextual dialogue, an emphasis on factuality and *documentarism*, a call for precision, a focus on memory, the dominance of the literal over metaphor, and a diminished attention to emotional and psychological personal vicissitudes due to growing interest in the "drama of history[1]." It also signals a renewed emphasis on moral inquiry and the recognition of the importance of moral judgment: in this sense, *writing*, as a verb, is also a moral act.

The "grammatical" structure of the latter collection is also confirmed by the title of the subsection, *"Personal Pronoun."* It seems that Kalytko is deliberately rethinking the fixation of modern Ukrainian poetry on the name; *nounness,* in a broad sense, implies the position of a creator who has power over words and things, and naming fixes existence within its rigid limits. And if Kalytko seeks to contrast the passive naming that underlies a noun with the active reshaping of the world by a verb, the reorientation from name to pronoun is the next step, focusing on shared experience and collective memory. The fact is that the inherently romantic opposition between the unique subjective self and the undifferentiated masses became a key marker of the Ukrainian identity in the poetry of the last century, in contrast to the Soviet emphasis on collectivism—it is worth mentioning the poetry of the 1960s, the best examples of which refer, in one way or another, to neo-romantic

[1] For more information, see Haleta (2020, pp. 618–638; 2021, pp. 13–24), Lebedyntseva (2021, pp. 25–34), Rudiiko (2023), Uliura (2016, 2018).

stylistics. This tendency is intensified in the poetry of the 1980s—Volodymyr Morenets called it the "return of the subject," which was the next step after the "return of the object" in the poetry of the 1960s (Morenets, 1997, pp. 166–172). In contemporary Ukrainian poetry, however, this apology for a name, as well as the emphasis on the uniqueness of subjective experience, seems to be losing ground. Kalytko's turn from noun to pronoun is precisely a move toward personal involvement in collective experience, the presence of a certain model that takes into account the value of the subjective but, at the same time, paves the way for dialogue through the presence of shared experience and common grounds of existence. These are the infinite possibilities of identification with the subject of the text that arise for the reader when the personal pronoun is *"I,"* and these are also the numerous situations of dialogue initiated by the use of the pronoun *"you."*

Testimonial Writings

The rethinking of one's own subjectivity within the *"we"* indicates the emergence of a very interesting trend related to the conceptualisation of communal experience. Researchers of the *testimonio* genre[2], including George Yudice, have defined it as an authentic narrative told by a witness who is prompted to share it due to the urgency of a given situation (Yudice, 1991, p. 17)—such as famine, war, social disaster, etc. As Yudice explains, the witness recounts their experience not as a representative, but as an agent of collective memory and identity (Yudice, 1991, p. 17). In this way, we are dealing with the consolidation of the national subject through the process of testimony (Yudice, 1991, p. 18). Since the narrator appears not as a representation of the referent—i.e., a nation or community—but rather as a practice involved in the formation of such unity (Yudice, 1991, p. 18), *testimonio* should be understood primarily as an action: a tactic through which people engage in the process of self-construction and survival (Yudice, 1991, p. 19). Naturally, *testimonio* as a genre has its own specific features. Scholars emphasize that these are texts usually produced by non-professional writers—often even illiterate individuals—with the assistance of an editor or journalist, and that their aesthetic value is secondary to their political significance.

By contrast, Kalytko's texts are poems written by a professional author—one of the most prominent figures in the contemporary cultural landscape and the recipient of the 2023 Shevchenko Prize for Literature. How, then, can a genre that emphasizes the marginal and popular (Yudice, 1991, p. 27), come into contact with *high* poetry legitimized by dominant cultural and publishing institutions? This tension becomes meaningful when we consider the rapid and sweeping process of decolonising our cultural space, which occurs both in personal everyday practices and habits, and in the public sphere, within cultural institutions and public initiatives.

Although John Beverley defines *testimonio* as a prose genre that may include elements of autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, and other forms (Beverley, 1989, pp. 12–13), it is precisely the nature of its relationship with conventional literary language—and its engagement with the narrative the problematics of women's writing in a postcolonial context—that allows us to draw meaningful parallels. These parallels, in turn, make it possible to interpret Ukrainian poetry about the current war through the lens of the *testimonio* genre.

In this sense, we can speak of the construction of collective subjectivity, including through the

[2] For more information, see Beverley (1989, pp. 11–28), Brooks (2025, pp. 181–222), Chernetsky (2007, pp. 159–163), Yudice (1991, pp. 15–31).

act of storytelling—literature that emerges as a direct response to the event of war, when the entire community, not just a part of it, is threatened and therefore mobilized in a situation of survival. Yudice emphasizes that the witness who speaks shares their personal history with the community to which they belong; in this sense, the speaker does not speak *to* the community and does not represent it, but rather performs an act of identity formation that is both personal and collective (Yudice, 1991, p. 15). As Vitaly Chernetsky puts it, "It is an instance of a text situated in a condition of 'public intimacy', when the boundaries between literature and life, the public and private spheres, which are fundamental in all forms of modern culture, are transgressed" (Chernetsky, 2007, p. 160).

In her poem *Personal Pronoun*, Kalytko speaks of this intersection between personal and collective experience: "Neither past nor future yet. / And I only ask: speak, / let this language not disappear. / Let it be / common" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 16). This situation of conversation, of speaking, is the zero point at which the collapse of the universe occurs—the destruction of all that is known. What is important is that this event of the extinction of previous life is not the war itself, but the conversation that takes place in the midst of world-shattering destruction. Speech—language—is a response to chaos, for it is through speech that the contours of a new world begin to emerge. The *commonality* of language in the final sentence underscores the importance of personal understanding at the level of "I" and "you," and the need to develop a shared language of understanding within the community.

It is the poem *Personal Pronoun* that captures the slippage between "I" and "we" that is significant for Kalytko. Whereas in the first stanza the subject is "we" ("we gave each other more than we really could"; Kalytko, 2022, p. 15), in the second and subsequent stanzas the subject becomes "I," telling a deeply personal story: "I miss the time when I didn't love him" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 15). This transition becomes even more dramatic in *Catechism*, where the opening of the poem articulates the consolidation of the community in the face of existential threat: "What is happening? / They have come to kill us" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 115). Such a strategy—defining the subject of speech through "we," positioning oneself as part of a threatened community—can be described as a "performative act of identity formation" (Yudice, 1991, p. 15), which G. Yudice identifies as a characteristic feature of the *testimonio* genre. After identifying the self through "we" in the first two stanzas, Kalytko later shifts to "I" in the following lines.

The way in which the transition is made is telling – namely, through the question "What do I choose?" This transition from "we" to "I" – as well as the transparent rhetoric of the question – emphasizes the existential situation of choice that underlies any self-realization. Once again, the question underlying the lyric subject's self-identification is not "Who am I?" but rather "What shall I choose?", since it is through the act of conscious decision-making that the "I" is constructed (here again, the central image of "people with verbs," on which the collection is based, is spelled out). The answer to this question is no less revealing: "To be a platelet in the viscous blood of the country" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 115) is an eloquent metaphor, as it implies such a fusion of part and whole that the illusion of visual homogeneity is maintained; the community as blood, which only reveals the heterogeneity of its structure upon closer examination, when immersed more deeply, and which displays the plasticity characteristic of liquids, the absence of solidity. Moreover, this is not about the community as a given: these questions and answers are at the same time tools for its construction – Kalytko also writes about those whom she places outside this community,

asking, "Whom do I cross out?" and answering: "Those who / calculate how much they can squeeze / out of this war" (Kalytko, 2022, pp. 116–117). The precision of her word choice is characteristic: Kalytko does not say "reject" or "condemn," but "cross out" (as one crosses out what one has written), which confirms that the author is consistent in building a poetics based on the idea of language as a weapon. Here she refers not only to Lesya Ukrainka, but also to Taras Shevchenko with his message "*To the dead, the living and the unborn...*" (Shevchenko, 1979, pp. 175–182), which can be interpreted as an attempt to construct a national subjectivity (Finnin, 2011, pp. 29–55).

It is therefore significant that throughout the text there is a constant shift between the first-person singular and plural, and that the awareness of being part of a collective subject is taken to a new level as a result of these transitions. The question "What shall we do?" is thus correlated with "What shall I choose?", but it refers to the search for a common strategy for a community that has already realized its identity. And when Kalytko answers this question with "We must kill" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 117), it is characteristic that she does not stop there, because what she says next turns out to be no less important than self-defense in a situation of existential threat. The final two questions – "What should I say to everyone?" and "Who will hear?" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 118) – are both the key and the purpose of this text, for it is about communication, about developing a common language in which the community can talk about all the horrors that are happening to it here and now.

Hence the apparent simplicity and conciseness of the language of the catechism: its literalness and rhetoric, its uncomplicated syntax and transparent structures. Kalytko is attentive to the genre matrix, because in its original meaning, a catechism is a statement of the basics of faith in the form of questions and answers – a textbook of fundamentals, an alphabet of Christian discourse. It would be irrational to interpret this genre solely as a simplified summary or popularization of complex theological discussions, or as a vehicle for communicating truth to the general public. In a society based on religious identity, it is, first and foremost, the glue – the cement that holds the community together – the shared cultural foundation and the common language that make mutual understanding possible in principle.

And when Kalytko refers to the anachronistic genre of the catechism, the historical context must also be taken into account: when national identity, as the basis for societal self-determination, replaces religious identity, attempts to develop such a common language often rely on religious discourse through inertia (at least Adam Mickiewicz's *The Book of the Polish People and of the Polish Pilgrimage* and Mykola Kostomarov's *The Books of the Genesis of the Ukrainian People* are worth mentioning). By using the language of the catechism's genre specificity, Kalytko again speaks of matters central to our identity: this war is not a local conflict on the map of Europe, not a discrete or unexpected episode in the history of Ukraine, but rather another stage of decolonization in the long civilizational war of the Ukrainians for self-determination.

By turning to this genre, Kalytko invokes not only the OUN's (The Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists) *The Catechism of the Ukrainian Nationalist* (1941), but also the *Manifesto of the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius*. Once again, language becomes a weapon. But although Kalytko's catechism resembles a political manifesto, it is not. It is the final two questions that demonstrate the gradual melting of words into action – the emergence of a common language and the outlining of conditions under which communication is even possible. One of these conditions is the awareness of a new reality, in which abstract and speculative ethics no longer

apply and where context is of the utmost importance. In this new reality, language abandons euphemisms and returns to the literalness of meaning and the honesty of naming things as they are: "Say the word 'kill', / let it be written in the mind" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 118).

Moreover, the true boundary between pre-war and wartime reality is marked by language – by its ability to adequately reflect this new reality: "All the tickets of the old language have been validated, / only one remains: / the honest word 'kill'" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 118). At the heart of the new language is a verb that absorbs all the consequences of rejecting moral hypocrisy. That is why the poem ends with the answer to the question "Who will hear?" and another shift from "we" to "I." Because a common language also delineates the circle of "our people": "then it is worth trying to keep talking to such a person" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 119). The catechism, as a tool, makes it possible both to cross out and to define: the final stanza, which may be read as an act of creating a communicative situation, complete with its conditions and common language, correlates with another fragment – the answer to the question "Whom do I cross out?" These are "the commentators on the war," opposed to the "others" – those who "carry on their backs / its dirtiest work" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 117). The most important point in this response is not only the opposition between empty words and meaningful action, but also the rejection of a language that does not aim at communication or the development of shared meaning – commentators are monologic; they do not seek feedback or common ground. Because communicative language is by definition ethical and empathetic, it keeps the other in focus rather than ignoring them.

However, Kalytko does not simply oppose the monologic, empty, unethical chatter of language to the communicative, effective language of the new reality: the final stanza is, quite literally, a search for understanding and the birth of a community through word-action. The one who says *"I will kill with you"* (Kalytko, 2022, p. 118) shares with the poem's subject not only a language, but also the burden of war, with its necessity to kill: *"Let's carry this war"* (Kalytko, 2022, p. 118). It is therefore worth considering this utterance not as a figure of speech or metaphor, but as a performative act, in which the expression of a verbal formula is equivalent to its implementation – and the dialogic situation outlined in the final stanza is an act of community formation through the articulation of shared meanings and a common existential and cultural context.

No less interesting, however, is the question that Kalytko does not ask in her catechism, but which inevitably arises in the process of defining the circle of "her people": who are the enemies, and how can we distinguish between our own and others? And although the genre she chooses for the final poem of the collection offers simple answers and clear contrasts, Kalytko consistently speaks of "us" and does not mention "them." Only one line hints at the danger of generalizations that allow "them" to evade personal responsibility for their own choices: "Dead civilians are twice dead, / if you do not say that they / were killed, / and how, / and by whom" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 117). Indirectly, Kalytko again refers to the grammatical distinction between plural and singular, which actually correlates with the fundamental ethical distinction between collective guilt and personal responsibility. This distinction reinforces the meanings that Kalytko establishes in the title of the collection: the literalness of the word-action is conditioned by its intentionality and ethics.

Language and Reality

The relationship between language and reality, whether in the form of rupture or

interaction, has been a defining feature of Kalytko's poetry since 2014. Her latest collection of poems, *People with Verbs*, exhibits a notable characteristic: Kalytko consciously refrains from "inventing" language as a specific poetic gesture. This decision reflects the trauma of war on a structural level and instead draws upon the conventional, contextual language that society has developed since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. This is a language directly connected to reality, rather than to other texts.

This tendency is manifested not so much through an increased narrative character in the poetry (though that is present), but rather in the consistent appeal to shared experience—what might be described as common knowledge. The profound changes in our lives, from worldview to everyday practices, have shaped linguistic transformations and underscored the emergence of a new literality. Death, war, and darkness are no longer metaphors. Hanna Uliura aptly defines the difference between experience and representation: "There is a mutilated body, and there is a linguistic template — and the two are vastly different" (Uliura, 2023, p. 8).

In this context, the direct documentation of experience through an extended narrative appears to be a natural strategy: the story of our losses and victories told in detail. Such a detailed narrative is often oriented toward an external audience—someone out of context—be it a descendant or a sympathetic other. In either case, the addressee exists outside the temporal or spatial continuum marked by the indescribable, inexpressible horror in which the lyrical subject is immersed. The addressee is, by default, someone who has not lived through the lyrical subject's experience but is prepared to listen empathetically. This very factor influences the narrative's construction, as it involves the challenge of translating into language what language itself is often powerless to convey.

Instead, the recipient of Kalytko's poetry is situated not outside the circle, but within it. The poet does not tell us what it is like to lose relatives, to lose limbs, to die quickly or slowly, to sit in shelters or in the trenches, to lose and regain contact. Her story is for her people, for those who already know, which means she can omit details and lengthy explanations. The reality of war in Kalytko's poetry is not a story but a memory—not a continuous thread, but a dotted line. In this sense, *People with Verbs* resonates with Ostap Slyvynskyi's *Dictionary of the War* (Slyvynskyi, 2023), which is unexpectedly poetic despite its conceptually non-monological nature: both collections record linguistic changes and compile dictionaries that reflect the new reality.

And when Kalytko writes, "As if with a plywood shield against the wild evil" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 22), or "And as if I could smell the smoke / from your tense shoulder" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 22), these are not metaphors but references to recognizable events and realities of the Revolution of Dignity: construction helmets and plywood shields, cobblestones as weapons, burnt tires, and the smell of smoke by which protesters could be recognized. "To shove giblets into their torn bellies" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 22) is not a literary exaggeration but the true story of Volodymyr Rybak, who was tortured in Russian-occupied Horlivka for flying the Ukrainian flag.

This reference to the real appears as a dotted line, a hint, and rarely becomes the foundation for a coherent narrative. Among the narrative poems, "Time is nesting in baileys..." (Kalytko, 2022, pp. 86–87)—a poem about a woman in an occupied town who has finally awaited her army and is now digging potatoes for the soldiers—states: "Our own army is entering the town. / Everyone is alive / and therefore hungry" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 87).

"A neighbour burned to death in the Debaltseve cauldron" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 96) is a parable told in the language of visionary,

dreamlike imagery; a dream about a dead soldier that occurred during the full-scale invasion becomes a story about the mobilisation of a community of the dead, the living, and the unborn: "Now it became clear: / the angels, the reservists, had been called to a meeting / on the other side" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 96).

Similarly, the starting point of another narrative is the grain corridor—the export of grain by a country at war: "And the heavy grain ships sail over the horizon, / and death dances over each of the warm decks" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 104). Death here is not only about the present ("here is a charred tractor, here is a tractor driver without legs" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 104)); as in her other texts, Kalytko deepens the narrative by appealing to collective experience: "there is much more than the memory of hunger, of transparent figures from the night" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 104). In this case, however, memory is actualised not through affirmation but through opposition; sowing the land with grain, despite the danger, is not a trauma of the past but an aspiration for the future: "For this is the right to root, to sow, to look deeply, / not the animal fear that tomorrow there will be nothing to eat" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 104).

It is worth mentioning another important technique that becomes particularly expressive in Kalytko's latest collection. This concerns the use of a common, recognizable rhetoric—understandable to the Ukrainian people—*topoi* that do not require interpretation or translation. These *topoi* may take the form of memes, rhetorical questions, aphorisms, or even references to broader texts and situations. Their main characteristic is their embeddedness in the media context, their recognizability, and their dissemination across society as a whole, rather than within a particular social segment. Such *topoi* include, for example, the meme about cyborgs—the defenders of Donetsk airport: people who demonstrate a miraculous endurance and superhuman abilities, who withstand everything, while concrete and iron do not, and collapse. In Kalytko's poetry, this recognizable *topos* becomes part of a broader context and a more complex network of symbols: man against iron, man against history, man against death:

> In fact, there was nothing horrible about being cut out of our destiny.
> It was just the epochs and men standing there with big scissors.
> They cut the umbilical cords, family memories, and lives.
> Can you do it now?
> I replied: I can.
> It was just a war or a famine. A drunkard or a bigamist.
> It was just sticky with blood to walk on.
> They just moved the border.
> They took away the grain and the millstones.
> Can you bear it now?
> I replied: I can bear it (Kalytko, 2022, p. 83).

The vertical, temporal context in Kalytko's poetry is also deepened, as modernity appears not as an isolated mode but as part of a broader perspective that encompasses the entire twentieth century. The woman who "just sold the apartment and bought Kevlar helmets / They all held up – but the concrete did not" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 83) carries with her the stories of other women's resistance, even if that resistance consisted simply in survival. Kalytko also expands the context of the *topos*: this is a woman trying to survive war and famine, but also struggling with illness, domestic violence, and social prejudice. By appealing to the shared knowledge of which such recognisable *topoi* are a part, Kalytko seeks to incorporate into the collective experience the displaced and silenced stories of women whose often invisible resistance ensured the survival of the community.

Another noteworthy example is the literary metaphor of the "open fracture of history": "It is not yet the end of history, only / its open fracture" (Kalytko, 2022, p. 99). This appears to allude to the well-known book by philosopher and futurologist Francis Fukuyama, *The End of*

History and the Last Man (1992), but such a conclusion may be premature. In fact, Kalytko is referring not so much to Fukuyama's thesis, or even to the critical debates surrounding it, as to the specific media context of the current war, which ultimately negates the assumption that humanity will inevitably evolve in accordance with the values of the Western world. This problematic thesis of the "end of history" extends beyond the confines of academic discourse and has become part of our shared context since the onset of the full-scale invasion—particularly given Fukuyama's active support for Ukraine in his recent publications and interviews.

In other words, the "open fracture of history" is less a poetic appropriation of a famous quote than a media reframing of it in light of the current war. However, although Kalytko draws on media rhetoric as shared cultural knowledge, her poetry does not merely reproduce rhetorical tropes. This metaphor—anchored in a reference to Fukuyama—is both eloquent and profound: an *open fracture* becomes the language of pain spoken by a vulnerable, defenceless human body. Speculative theses and theoretical frameworks are shattered by the brutal reality of torn flesh. Here, Kalytko again affirms the gap between language and reality: reality changes rapidly, eludes grasp, and language fails to keep pace. Yet it is within this very gap that a new kind of language—capable of expressing the unspeakable—emerges, along with a transformed communal identity forged through shared experience.

Conclusion

The understanding and articulation of the experience of war in Kalytko's poetry lacks a clear chronological framework that can be directly correlated with either 2014 or 2022. In Kalytko's poems, the current war is presented both as an immediate experience—the quintessence of reality (hence the recurrent images of the body as a map and the landscape as a body)—and as a mirror reflecting the country's history through family narratives. Equally important is the figure of the *Other* in all its manifestations: the one who has become close through the commensurability of experiences (one of Kalytko's most insightful poems, *"Sixth of April,"* deals with the Bosnian war); the one who has become alien; and the alien as an existential threat.

This concept of language as a weapon—so central to Ukrainian culture—forms the basis of Kalytko's idea of language as resistance. The poet's understanding of language as grammar implies a reorientation from noun to verb—where action replaces passive naming. Kalytko also reconsiders the dynamics of the relationship between the public and the private in the context of the ongoing war: speaking in the first-person plural serves as a marker of community belonging and shared identity. In addition, Kalytko deliberately refrains from "inventing" a new language to reflect the trauma of war on a structural level. Instead, she appeals to the conventional, contextual language that society has created since the beginning of the full-scale invasion—a language directly connected to lived reality rather than to other texts. By operating with the topoi of shared knowledge, Kalytko addresses her compatriots as members of a community bound by collective experience.

Kateryna Kalytko's poetry reflects the emergence of significant trends in Ukrainian poetry over the past two decades—trends that are both universal and local. On the one hand, these developments align with the metamodernist shift in European and North American literature and can therefore be considered universal. They entail the establishment of a new sincerity that fuses an intensely subjective vision of reality with an awareness of humanity's social nature. This vision aligns with the growing sense of

literature's responsibility to society and the environment and is accompanied by the presence of metanarratives, such as that of Ukrainian national identity. On the other hand, the renewal of poetic language in recent decades is deeply rooted in local experience and constitutes a direct response to the trauma of extreme violence brought on by the Russian-Ukrainian war and the deaths of civilians during the Maidan protests. In this context, the focus shifts to rethinking the relationship between language and reality, engaging with the *modus operandi* of ineffability, rejecting figurative language, returning to literality, and conceiving of writing as a form of testimony and documentation—one that contributes to shaping collective identity and preserving memory.

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Анотація

Останні збірки Катерини Калитко – «Ніхто нас тут не знає і ми – нікого» (2019), «Орден мовчальниць» (2021), «Люди з дієсловами» (2022) – присвячені осмисленню нинішньої війни, хоча до рефлексії війни та досвіду міграції поетка зверталася й раніше, зосереджуючись на балканському контексті. Однак останні три збірки можна об'єднати в концептуальну цілісність: виразними рисами тут є наскрізність символіки та ключових образів, наявність повторюваних сюжетів, побудова вертикального міфологічного наративу. Якщо вдатися до граничних узагальнень, то проблематика лірики К. Калитко останніх років зосереджена навколо мови, пам'яті та жіночого досвіду виживання. У цьому сенсі для К. Калитко дуже характерний зв'язок між простором, тілом і мовою. Увагу до локусів, які формують ландшафт, можна порівняти з тією специфічною тактикою концептуалізації в ліриці К. Калитко, яку

можна назвати анатомією мови. Таким чином, сама мова уподібнюється ландшафту, який має неоднорідну структуру і специфічний профіль. Така атомізація, розкладання мовної тканини на елементи – звуки і букви, частини мови, інтонаційні наголоси – подібна до укладання мапи, яка фіксує речі у тілесний, тактильний спосіб. Фактичним вододілом між довоєнною і воєнною дійсністю є мова, її здатність адекватно відображати цю нову реальність. В основі нової мови лежить дієслово, яке бере на себе всі наслідки відмови від морального лицемірства. Переформатування мови під впливом реалій війни також пов'язане з колективною пам'яттю.

Ключові слова: українська література, сучасна українська поезія, свідчення, війна, мова, тіло, Катерина Калитко, пам'ять, документальність, метафора, міф.

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