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Writing around War: Parapolemics, Trauma, and Ethics in Ukrainian Representations of the War in the Donbas

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Article abstract

The article considers a range of literary texts about the war in Donbas and argues that one of the primary representational strategies employed by Ukrainian writers has been the use of “parapolemics.” The article operates with Kate McLoughlin’s definition of this term as a focus on the “outskirts” of armed conflict, but also relates the idea to concepts drawn from trauma studies. While, on the one hand, the use of parapolemics may be a way of avoiding direct representation of wartime violence and death, the opportunities it affords are extremely valuable: focusing on the “backstage” of war and eschewing direct representation of violence allows writers to explore otherwise marginalized, and highly complex, dimensions of wartime experience. At the same time, connecting the parapolemic approach to ideas taken from trauma theory, particularly relating to empathy and responsibility, allows us to understand how parapolemics provide a way of reflecting both on the ethics of representing war and the of self-other relationships that arise in wartime.

Writing around War: Parapolemics, Trauma, and Ethics in Ukrainian Representations of the War in the Donbas

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Abstract: The article considers a range of literary texts about the war in Donbas and argues that one of the primary representational strategies employed by Ukrainian writers has been the use of "parapolemics." The article operates with Kate McLoughlin's definition of this term as a focus on the "outskirts" of armed conflict, but also relates the idea to concepts drawn from trauma studies. While, on the one hand, the use of parapolemics may be a way of avoiding direct representation of wartime violence and death, the opportunities it affords are extremely valuable: focusing on the "backstage" of war and eschewing direct representation of violence allows writers to explore otherwise marginalized, and highly complex, dimensions of wartime experience. At the same time, connecting the parapolemic approach to ideas taken from trauma theory, particularly relating to empathy and responsibility, allows us to understand how parapolemics provide a way of reflecting both on the ethics of representing war and the of self-other relationships that arise in wartime.

Keywords: contemporary Ukrainian literature, war, Donbas, trauma.

Representing war is a paradoxical enterprise. As Kate McLoughlin notes in her influential study *Authoring War: The Literary Representations of War from the Iliad to Iraq*, "even as it resists representation, conflict demands it" (7). The problems that are faced by the writer who wishes to treat the subject of war are multiple: How can the unbelievable stories war produces be rendered believable to a reader to whom war is an alien experience? How can one do justice to the scale and complexity of war, from the grand sweep of a multinational conflict to the everyday details of experience on the ground? How does one negotiate the impossible moral dilemmas war throws up, or approach the polarized political positions it entrenches? How can one adequately and responsibly convey the extreme trauma of experiencing war first-hand? And, in the end, who has the right to speak about these things? Despite these difficult questions, as McLoughlin notes, "[t]he reasons that make war's representation imperative are as multitudinous as those which make it impossible" (*Authoring War* 7). These include the need to impose "discursive order on the chaos" of war; to keep a record of events and of the

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dead; to give meaning to mass death; to memorialize; to inform about the nature of front-line action; to facilitate the reintegration of veterans; to provide cathartic relief; and to warn or to promote peace, among others.

The techniques and strategies employed by writers to overcome the problems of representing war and to adequately respond to the imperative to do so are many and varied. According to McLoughlin, what unites them is an emphasis on avoiding direct representation of the extreme violence of war. Whether out of deference—often under profound social pressure—to the experience of survivors of war on the part of non-combatant writers, or the conviction that art and/or language themselves are inadequate to the task, writers often go to great lengths to write *around* war. This can involve reversion to the absurd, often involving black humour, or the use of euphemistic language; it frequently involves reflections on how war is unrepresentable. Sometimes, seemingly direct representation of violence can in fact be a smokescreen: war stories often rely on ready-made clichés gleaned from familiar, archetypal representations of conflict, what McLoughlin calls "strong" stories—the sort of heroic and action-filled images and narratives familiar from popular literature and blockbuster movies (*Authoring War* 2). Here, by appearing to represent war in all its glorious detail, an author or director can in fact avoid the true chaos and complexity of a specific conflict.

Another strategy that McLoughlin identifies as common to representations of war throughout history and which will be central to the discussion below, is a focus on "parapolemics," which she describes as:

> […] a distinct subgenre of war writing: a concentration on the "outskirts" of armed conflict (at least when combat is located as the central experience). Circumventing Whitman's "red business" of actual fighting, this subgenre deals in such phenomena as eve-of-battle scenes, preparation, waiting and recovery, aftermath. 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). (*Authoring War* 140)

Since the beginning of the war in the Donbas in 2014, writers and filmmakers have been faced with precisely the kinds of dilemmas described above, and they have responded in highly diverse ways. However, an emphasis on the "temporal and spatial borders of war," rather than the centre of war's action, has been a notable feature of the new Ukrainian war literature and cinema. This paper examines three prose works—*Internat* (*The Orphanage*, 2017) by Serhii Zhadan, *Dolgota dnei: gorodskaia ballada* (*Length of Days: An Urban Ballad*, 2017) by Volodymyr Rafeienko (Vladimir Rafeenko), *Movoiu boha* (Russ. *Na iazyke boga*) (*In God's Language*, 2016) by Olena Stiazhkina (Elena Stiazhkina), one play—*Bad Roads* (2017) by Nataliia

Vorozhbyt, which was first performed and published in English,[1] and one film—*Kiborhy: heroi ne vmyraiut'* (*Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die*, 2017), directed by Akhtem Seitablaiev and written by Nataliia Vorozhbyt. Vorozhbyt, who is also internationally successful, as the premiere of *Bad Roads* in London attests, is probably the most prominent dramatist in Ukraine today. Seitablaiev is, arguably, Ukraine's most successful contemporary director. Zhadan is, similarly, probably contemporary Ukraine's most influential writer, and the fact that he comes from the area affected by the war adds extra power and legitimacy to his work. Rafeienko and Stiazhkina, likewise, come from the war zone, from Donetsk—both write predominantly in Russian, and have won awards for their work in Russia, but have, since the onset of the war, become prominent voices representing the Donbas in the public sphere in Ukraine. Given the prominence of these authors, their works could be considered among the most significant early representations of the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014–). They also, crucially, provide characteristic examples of a common parapolemic approach among Ukrainian writers and filmmakers. It is important to recognize that the literary and cinematic output produced in the years since the beginning of the war in Donbas has been large and highly diverse, and this article certainly does not claim to provide any hard-and-fast generalizations about it, nor does the article seek to assert that the parapolemic approach appears in Ukrainian culture for the first time in the new literature on the Donbas war. Nevertheless, the situation of having to find a language to describe a contemporary war is something that Ukrainian writers have not faced since World War II. The marked orientation toward the parapolemic in this context demands attention.

Before moving on to discuss the texts, it is useful to consider one extra dimension of war writing as a complement to McLoughlin's ideas: the question of trauma. In many ways, McLoughlin's discussion of the "outskirts" of war experience is reminiscent of trauma theory, whereby the object of traumatic memory is thought to be both at the centre of mnemonic processes and yet always out of reach. As Cathy Caruth writes, drawing on Freud's theories of melancholy and mourning, "the historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (17). At the same time, while retrospective access to experience eludes trauma survivors, they are also left with the compulsion to speak about the obscured events, a burden bestowed by the status of survivor and the feeling of "urgent responsibility" and "ethical relation" to the trauma and to those who

[1] *Bad Roads* was also released as a film, directed by Vorozhbyt, in 2020. The film was Ukraine's nomination for the Academy Awards in 2021.

did not survive it (Caruth 102–03). Dominic LaCapra, similarly, identifies a lacuna at the centre of traumatic experience:

> With respect to trauma, memory is always secondary since what occurs is not integrated into experience or directly remembered, and the event must be reconstructed from its effects and traces. In this sense there is no fully immediate access to the experience itself even for the original witness, much less for the secondary witness and historian. Conversely, to the extent there is immediate access through the reliving or acting-out of the event, memory is inhibited, and working-through requires that acting-out be supplemented by secondary memory and related processes (for example, narration, analysis, bodily gesture, or song). (*History and Memory After Auschwitz* 97)

LaCapra here identifies both a missing memory and a compulsion to speak that can result in unhealthy acting out—a melancholic reaction to the un-recovered trauma—or a healthier process of working through, that is, the creation of a productive "secondary" memory (working, we might say, on the outskirts of "primary" memory), expressed through various forms of representation.

In recent Ukrainian cultural representations of the war in Donbas, it is possible to observe many of the strategies for avoiding directly representing mass violence, destruction, and death that McLoughlin outlines, but the use of parapolemics is especially striking. The parapolemic chronotope, situated away from the primary traumatic events, provides room for LaCapra's secondary memory, whereby the trauma of violence is reconstructed, examined, contextualized, and worked through by exploring its "effects and traces." This happens, I will argue, because these types of spaces and situations provide unique possibilities for creating dialogue. The focus is often on the quiet moments between fighting, or before or after it, and in spaces away from front-line action, from the kitchens of apartments in a besieged city to sleepy army checkpoints: it is here that the characters engage in discussion about the conflict and the multitude of political, cultural, and social factors that become entangled in it, and attempt to make sense of their experience and ethical relations with one another; it is here also that marginal and less spectacular stories of war are articulated.

Zhadan's novel *The Orphanage* is one of the most important and influential prose works about the war in Donbas produced in Ukraine to date. The protagonist, Pasha, is a schoolteacher living in a city occupied by the Russian army and local separatists. The novel's plot revolves around his journey across the city to retrieve his nephew from an orphanage and bring him home to a relatively safe area. Pasha is a timid man who does not openly commit to any political position in relation to the events unfolding around him. His journey through the city becomes a journey through himself and his

insecurities about his relationships with his family and his wider local or even national communities. These factors, in Zhadan's framing, are bound up in masculinity: in succeeding in negotiating the hyper-masculine landscape of the war zone, Pasha also succeeds in gaining a new sense of himself as an ethically committed man capable of protecting those to whom he bears a responsibility of care. As Pasha and the boy return home having successfully completed their quest, the narrative perspective suddenly shifts to that of the boy, who explicitly recognizes that his once-timid uncle has begun to speak and behave in a markedly more self-assured way (Zhadan 327).

Tanya Zaharchenko has described Zhadan's novel in the following way: "*Internat* is, essentially, a synchronous war novel—a creative text that emerges parallel to, and closely entwined with, unfolding warfare. This merciless synchronicity chips away at the 'post' in 'post-traumatic'" (420). Representing war is, then, often less about unearthing traces of experience from the depths of memory than it is about building a narrative that responds synchronously to traumatic experience. This is less the retrieval of memory than memory's formation. In Zhadan's work, and in the work of other writers discussed below, we see the same questions raised relating to the ethical relationship to the other that we also find in discussion of trauma, only here these things are being processed and worked through not much later, but almost in real time. The spatiotemporal structure that allows all this to happen is rooted in parapolemics: Zhadan's narrative takes place in a city in the grip of fierce armed conflict, but the guiding principle of the protagonist's quest, and thus of the authorial perspective, is avoidance of violence. While violence and death are proximate to the characters and the plot, they mostly occur off-stage: artillery fire is heard in the near distance or hits places where the characters have just been or where they had intended to go, but they do not witness destruction or fighting directly. This allows the narrative to create time and space for the exploration of immediate responses to trauma and the effect of that trauma on human relationships. As Pasha avoids the fighting, he engages in a series of encounters with soldiers and civilians, some on one side of the conflict, some on the other, and some on no side. These encounters are arranged in space, at various stopping points on the protagonist's journey, but always away from fighting.

The journey through parapolemic landscape in *The Orphanage* resembles Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope of the road, which, in its panoramic scope and the diversity of human interaction it entails, allows the protagonist travelling it to encounter the "sociohistorical heterogeneity of [his] own country" (Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope" 245). Zhadan combines the Bakhtinian road chronotope with what McLoughlin describes as the "unique situation" brought about by war, which is "unclassifiable as either neutral 'space' or significant 'place,' vital and intense

yet temporary (lasting 'moments') and arbitrary, as much a product of experience as of geographical factors" (*Authoring War* 83). The journey through the city allows Pasha to explore this unexpected wartime ambivalence of space, providing him with highly charged encounters with those who share this space, and in contact with whom Pasha is able better to understand the city, its community, and himself as a part of that community. This happens not through participation in or falling victim to violence, but through carving out and journeying through the space around violence. This is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than when Pasha finally reaches the goal of his journey, the orphanage, and engages with the people who have bravely stayed behind to care for the children as the area comes under fire. One of these is an older man who clings to the Soviet past and is suspicious of the present, willing neither to entirely condemn nor recognize the occupation; the other is a younger woman, a teacher, who challenges Pasha's insistence on staying out of politics and not taking sides: through his conversations with these characters, who represent the complacency of indifference and melancholic nostalgia on the one hand and a call to ethical action on the other, Pasha is finally forced to take a principled stance and to recognize his co-responsibility for what is happening around him and the people to whom it is happening. This response is made possible by parapolemic spaces and the dialogues that take place within them.

While Zhadan's novel is based in an unspecified city in the Luhansk region, Rafeienko's *Length of Days* takes a similarly parapolemic approach to Donetsk, which appears in the novel as the city of Z. Rafeienko's primary diversionary tactics in articulating the experience of war and occupation are fantasy and the grotesque: the novel's plot revolves around an attempt by the invading forces, aided by giant killer insects, to annex the Donbas not only spatially to Russia, but also temporally to the USSR. In order to reverse this spatiotemporal aggression, the protagonists engage in an absurd quest that involves obtaining a magical copy of the works of Taras Shevchenko and a statuette of the Hindu deity Ganesh, all of which can only be done by suffering death in Donbas and being reborn in Kyiv.

The reversion to the absurd and fantastic is in itself a way of speaking about the brutal and surreal intrusion of war into everyday, non-combat spaces: a Russian tank or a Kalashnikov-wielding separatist on the peaceful, complacent Donetsk streets is every bit as unlikely as a journey through time or an attack by a giant insect. Again, however, as in Zhadan's novel, the main function of the parapolemic space is to provide the possibility for encounter, dialogue, and ethical considerations. Confined by fear of the occupation to the very ordinary space of the bathhouse in which they work, the protagonists have time to engage in long, meandering conversations about their predicament. These conversations are sometimes dominated by the somewhat obscure philosophical musings of the main protagonist

(appropriately named Socrates), but they also focus on the specific nature of the Donbas, its culture, society, languages, and identities, as well as the region's place in Ukraine. While Rafeienko's protagonists do not see these questions as triggers for the war, the situation they find themselves in makes them reconsider how these factors may define their relationship with broader Ukrainian society and cause the misunderstandings that are exacerbated by the war (Rafeienko 28–29; 42–43).[2]

In addition to its fantastical main plot, *Length of Days* features several stand-alone stories, ostensibly composed by one of the characters, in which parapolemic spaces and conversations also play a key role. Perhaps the most powerful of these, entitled "Sem' ukropov" ("Seven Dills")[3], tells the story of a mother who struggles across the war-torn city to recover the body of her son, Pasha, who has been killed while fighting for the separatists. Again, the fighting occurs outside of the narrative, receiving only a brief mention, and the focus is on the lead up to and aftermath of a violent war death. Outlining the boy's decision to join the separatists, Rafeienko demonstrates, with painful irony, the potentially lethal nature of the misconceived cultural and political narratives produced by manipulative propaganda: the boy is inspired to go to war, on the one hand, by his stepfather Matvei Ivanovich's ill-informed tales of the superiority of Russian culture and the much-hyped threat of forced Ukrainianization, and on the other, by the murder of Matvei Ivanovich in mysterious circumstances. The following exchange between Matvei Ivanovich and Pasha encapsulates the misunderstandings that will eventually have tragic consequences:

> "The Russian language is richer and more beautiful, that's a fact. And I'll tell you why. First, my grandma Anastasiia Aleksandrovna spoke it. A professor of geology, by the way. Sent to Kolyma in '42. And second—smart people. Gagarin, for example, Gogol'. You know what I'm saying, Pashka, Gogol'?! *Dead Souls*, Pasha! Have you read it?"
>
> "Nope," the boy shrugged and blushed.
>
> "Well you should!" Matvei Ivanovich shook his head.

[2] For recent research on language and identity in the Donbas, see Arel; Sasse and Lackner.

[3] The word *ukrop* means, literally, dill, but was used as a pejorative word for Ukrainian soldiers in Donbas by their opponents; it was later ironically adopted by some on the Ukrainian side and even became the name of a short-lived political party that had links to the volunteer battalions. An English translation of the full story, by Marci Shore, was published in *Eurozine* in 2017.

> "Although to be honest I also didn't get through it. I prefer *Vii*. Know the film? Watch it! Great old movie." (Rafeienko 90–91)[4]

Nikolai Gogol' (Mykola Hohol'), of course, as a Ukrainian, somewhat complicates Matvei Ivanovich's point, as does his preference for the kitsch 1960s Soviet horror movie adaptation of one of Gogol''s Ukrainian stories to *Dead Souls.* There is also a tragic irony in the juxtaposition of his obsession with phantom Ukrainian nationalists with his own family's history of victimhood under Soviet repressions. On their own, these ironies and misunderstandings are by turns sad, unfortunate, or even comic; when mixed with poisonous propaganda and the social and legal breakdown that accompanies war, they can be lethal:

> [Pasha] signed up for the war against Right Sector[5] and, consequently, for Gogol', Gagarin and, most of all, for Matvei Ivanovich, agronomist by training. They gave the boy a Kalashnikov, two rounds of ammunition and sent him off to fight with thirty others. In battle, sadly, it turned out that they were not alone, but fighting an enemy. And it quickly turned out that in war people get killed. (Rafeienko 94)

Rafeienko uses parapolemic spaces—in this instance, the home of a young soldier before he goes to war—to demonstrate how the languages of propaganda and prejudice can be set in motion. The empathetic depiction of impressionable Pasha and misguided Matvei Ivanovich and their private motivations show the tragedy inherent in war on all sides and counter attempts to cast the conflict as about identity and culture in any straightforward way. Rafeienko provides a deeply ambiguous portrait of victims of the war who happen to come from the separatist side; they are not blameless or without agency, but neither are they cynical or evil. Rafeienko does not seek to condemn by shocking the reader with the violence of war, but rather tries to work through the events with empathetic analysis, building a secondary memory that supplements the lacuna of the trauma. This focus on the complex ethical relations that emerge from the trauma of war is most powerfully expressed in the story of the mother, who, as she struggles under the weight of her son's body after retrieving it, is given a lift to a separatist check point by Ukrainian soldiers. The same vehicle carrying these soldiers, she later learns, was blown up. Rafeienko's war zone is not a space of the heroic confrontation of good and evil, but of the complex

[4] All translations in this article are my own.

[5] Right Sector is a Ukrainian right-wing organization that came to prominence at the Maidan protests in 2013–14 and then formed its own volunteer battalion in the Donbas. The organization's significance and the supposed threat it represented to Russian-speakers was massively exaggerated in the Russian media.

entanglements and ethical grey zones that are only properly visible when we examine the outskirts of conflict.

Stiazhkina's novella *In God's Language*, like Rafeienko's *Length of Days*, also focuses on the surreal ways in which the reality of war and occupation enter into the consciousnesses and everyday lives and spaces of the inhabitants of Donetsk: Russian mercenaries appear in the supermarket carrying guns, separatists set up a mine thrower on the roof of an apartment block to the alarm of residents, an unassuming local schoolteacher is unexpectedly encountered among the ranks of the new "authorities"' secret services. The focus of the novella are relationships shattered by the war, and in particular, the friendship of two men—the protagonist, Revazov, a middle-aged businessman living on his own after the breakdown of his marriage, and Dima, an emotionally troubled and insecure younger man who both looks up to and resents his elder friend. The entire narrative, which features multiple flashbacks to life before and in the early days of the war, is framed by a tense encounter between the two men. Dima is now working with the separatists and asserting his previously lacking sense of self-confidence (in a kind of inversion of the story of Zhadan's Pasha). He holds Revazov prisoner in his own apartment on suspicion of resisting the new "regime." Revazov is, initially, politically uncommitted, somewhat like Zhadan's Pasha, and a similar transformation of his character accompanies the transformation of his city under wartime conditions. By the end of the text, Revazov has gone from being a detached and self-centred character to one able to commit acts of bravery and violence in defence of his city, and, finally, to being deeply invested in selfless concern for another—for Dima, whom, in the climax of the tense hostage situation, he seriously injures. Dialogue is key here too: the tense parapolemic setting that frames the narrative is defined by the two protagonists' engagement in a conversation that is less about political persuasions and more about the nature of their relationship with one another. By speaking about war through a conversation between two men in a kitchen, the more obvious political dimensions are replaced by a less visible, human dimension: how war, regardless of whatever political or ideological questions may be at stake, loosens social and legal limitations and provides space for realignments and abuses of power that are felt most painfully at the individual, personal level.

One particularly striking moment in Stiazhkina's novella is a scene where Revazov agrees to recover the dead body of his ex-wife's partner, who has been killed by Russian mercenaries and whose corpse is being held at a former soccer training base. The journey sparks memories of the city before the war, of Revazov's previous, happier life with his ex-wife. It also involves a tour of the backstage of the occupied city, through newly established, quasi-Soviet administrative organs, as Revazov tries to get permission to remove the body. Stiazhkina's exposé of the grotesque and dysfunctional

inner mechanics of the new "republic" says more about the war than any account of the battles over the city. Indeed, it is the attitude of the new authorities toward the body, piled alongside others, with no regard for the dignity of the dead, that is one of the most revealing aspects of this exploration. For McLoughlin, the dead body is an important element of parapolemics: it is a powerful synecdoche for the larger war, an indexical marker that speaks of a greater trauma without attempting to cover the larger conflict or focusing on actual battles (*Authoring War* 72, 140). Revazov's encounter with the man's body is visceral: he is forced to locate it by himself and carry it away on his shoulder. He experiences both revulsion at the feel and smell of a corpse and a strange intimacy that results from encountering, in such an outlandish way, a man whom he did not know, but who had played an important role in his own private life:

> During the siege of Leningrad they'd moved bodies on sledges. In winter. And in spring, when the snow had melted but there was still no food? How did they move them? Did they sling them over their backs? Drag them by the legs? They just abandoned them, because the winter had drained them of the ability to grieve, to feel…
>
> "Ivan," said Revazov to the body, "I'm Ivan. And I never laid a finger on her after your wedding. Just know that."
>
> He pulled the body onto his shoulder. He carried it to the bus stop. There was a smell. And the softness of a lifeless person. And yes, he began to feel sick. But it would have been even worse, impossible, to drag him by the legs. (Stiazhkina 78–79)

The description of one of the hidden spaces of war—a grim, make-shift mortuary—and the engagement with the dead body as an indexical sign of the larger conflict highlights the extreme disorientation of an often-neglected wartime experience—not that of combat, but of the predicament of having to do something with a body killed as a result of war. Notably, this is exactly the same premise as in Rafeienko's "Seven Dills," where the mother must retrieve her son, and is also similar to a scene from Vorozhbyt's *Bad Roads*, discussed below. This is the kind of detail a "strong story" that focuses on soldiers, battles, and heroism passes over. Dead bodies are often left at the point of death in representations of war. Encountered in this slow, intimate way, rather than as an anonymous falling figure in a landscape of explosions, the body is not something that can be dismissed easily. Bodies in parapolemic war literature, in Mcloughlin's words, "clog up the text," are "difficult to avoid or circumvent . . . like photographs, they are traces, memories, silent reproaches" (*Authoring War* 74). The photograph, as Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes have demonstrated, and as McLoughlin echoes here, has a powerful directness and ethical urgency given its status not just

as representation but as physical trace or evidence of what is being represented (Sontag, *On Photography*; Barthes). Yet, as Sontag argues, the depiction of the corpse as part of the broader genre of atrocity photography is problematic, entailing as it does the voyeuristic allure of the repulsive and also the risk of desensitizing the viewer (*Regarding the Pain* 42, 95). Such images can, however, if framed correctly, act as a spark that provokes reflections on consideration of the viewer's ethical implications in the suffering of others (Sontag, *Regarding the Pain* 103). Stiazhkina's parapolemic approach, presenting the body not as a shocking stand-alone image or as a prop in a battlescape, but as a feature of the transformed, everyday space of the war-torn city, provides the space for this consideration to happen. Again, here we are not confronted with violent death as such: Revazov does not witness his ex-wife's partner's death, but he is placed in the position of having to take responsibility for its aftermath. Exploring this in fiction does not provide the same level of obvious impact and drama as depicting combat death, but in constructing her narrative around the lacuna of trauma Stiazhkina gets to the heart of the everyday experience of war and highlights the ways in which war tests the limits of empathy, responsibility, and ethics.

The dead body as an indexical sign of war in a parapolemic setting also appears in Vorozhbyt's play *Bad Roads*. Of all the texts discussed here, this is perhaps the most dedicated to exploring the "outskirts" or "temporal and spatial borders" of war, presenting a catalogue of parapolemic spaces and situations. The first scene of the play follows the narrative of a writer who falls in love with a soldier while researching the war. Her encounters with him occur away from fighting, on the journey to or in proximity to the front line: the writer recounts, for example, how they drank wine and made love on a beach by the Sea of Azov to the sound of distant shelling. In the second scene, teenage girls discuss their relationships with Ukrainian soldiers posted in their town. In the third, a schoolteacher encounters Ukrainian soldiers at a checkpoint and challenges their interaction with local girls. The fourth scene of the play is a conversation between a serviceman and a servicewoman as they transport the body of a fallen comrade (and the former lover of the woman) through the night. The fifth scene features conversations between a separatist and a journalist he has imprisoned in a basement. The final scene, set before the war, unexpectedly revolves around a woman who runs over a chicken in her car and has to apologize to its owners.

The scene in *Bad Roads* that features the transport of the body is similar to Stiazhkina's and Rafeienko's treatment of the same motif. As in those works, the characters have an intimate relationship with the dead person, which is expressed through an intensely physical encounter with the body. Thus, the body here is indexical not only in relation to the broader violence

of the war, but also in relation to a broader world of personal relationships shattered by the war. This sense of the entangling of violent war death with the private and intimate is further developed through the motif of the mobile phone. The enemy soldiers who killed the man still have his phone and send obscene texts to the woman from his number. This motif—of the mobile phone that is still somewhere on the person of a dead soldier or civilian and is still functioning after death—is another common feature of writing on the war in Donbas and reappears in Vorozhbyt's screenplay for the film *Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die* and in Zhadan's novel, among others. While the body provides the function of the parapolemic indexical sign that points to war, the motif of the phone that continues to function after its owner's death underlines the multiple lines of shock that emanate from this individual death in the lives of relatives, partners, and friends, highlighting the dead person's status as simultaneously lost and powerfully present and reflecting the disbelief that accompanies the trauma of sudden loss. The phone, as a still-functioning means of communication, is perhaps the most powerful "trace," in LaCapra's terms, that could be encountered in relation to war loss, and its appearance alongside the dead body, in the quiet space in the aftermath of death, allows these authors to build a secondary memory in relation to the trauma of that loss.

The final part of *Bad Roads* occupies a different kind of parapolemic chronotope—the war zone before the onset of war. The seemingly innocuous death of a chicken, accidentally run over by a character who is passing through a Donbas village, turns into a study of the strange, exploitative relationships between perpetrators and victims of violence that also problematizes these very categories. The discussion over the value of the chicken's life and what would constitute appropriate compensation begins as absurdly comical. Very quickly, however, disturbing parallels are established with the deaths of soldiers in combat, which are themselves the object of speculation, distortion, and emotional and political manipulation (as, indeed, are their bodies, as part four of the play suggests). The connection is clear to the viewer, since it is pre-empted in one of the previous scenes, where a separatist declares that the lives of Ukrainian soldiers he may have killed are worth less than those of chickens, and jokes about having to travel around Ukraine apologizing to families for killing their sons and paying out compensation. Here, the most removed type of parapolemic—that which takes the narrative to a time when there was no war—moves the conflict and the ethical problems it exacerbates beyond its immediate frame, forcing the viewer to confront the relationship between banal, everyday acts of exploitation and mistrust and the way these are exaggerated exponentially in wartime. The things that happen in the reality of war are not complete aberrations, cut off from and incomprehensible outside of the wartime context: they have their roots in universal everyday behaviours.

Of the texts discussed here, Vorozhbyt's is the only one that focuses overwhelmingly on a key element of parapolemics: women's experience of war. None of the authors discussed ignore female experience, and the latter is represented fairly robustly in contemporary Ukrainian literature through the works of writers like Tamara Horikha Zernia, Has'ka Shyian, or ex-combatants or volunteers like Valeriia Burlakova. Nevertheless, war narratives in general do tend to be male narratives, and works by Zhadan, Stiazhkina, Rafeienko, and many others follow this rule, albeit steering clear of strong stories of military heroism and occupying the more oblique terrain of parapolemics, which, in turn, facilitates a more nuanced exploration of masculinity.

McLoughlin writes that women often do not have direct access to the spaces of war—understood as the spaces of front-line violence—and are thus often treated as less credible participants/witnesses (*Authoring War* 3, 33). Nevertheless, as she also notes, the widespread phenomenon of "combat gnosticism," whereby only combatants themselves are deemed to have the right to speak authoritatively about war, can and should legitimately be extended to non-combatant war experience: "experiences such as living as a civilian in a city under bombardment and war-caused bereavement, loss and displacement are also unique experiences, conferring similar authority" (McLoughlin, *Authoring War* 43). Through her documentary techniques—the play is based on first-hand research and gathered testimonies—Vorozhbyt seeks to reproduce women's experiences and reveal parapolemic spaces as venues in which gender roles are both entrenched and reversed. In the play's opening monologue, the progressive, liberal-minded writer from Kyiv has her values shaken as the war awakens within her both partisan nationalist passion and sexual desire for a rough, macho soldier: war, here, reveals a tendency to primitivize gender roles and sexuality, and it is in the backstage of the conflict, in the home-front apartments, dark dugouts or dingy hotels in the rear that this is played out. The play's second and third scenes, which revolve around the boredom of the army checkpoint, highlight the potential for sexual violence toward and exploitation of women and girls that comes with the presence of armed men in a front-line community. The fourth and fifth scenes—featuring the transportation of the body in the night-time truck and the journalist held hostage by the separatist—provide painful analyses of how sexuality becomes weaponized as violent urges and power relations go unchecked.

In this regard, it is revealing to compare Vorozhbyt's play with her script for the film *Cyborgs*. The film contains significant elements of the "strong story," in which the emphasis is on fighting and male heroism: much of the film is taken up with noisy scenes of dramatic battles as the defenders of Donetsk airport fend off Russian and separatist forces. Women appear only for a few seconds at the beginning of the film, and one of them is literally

shoved out of the frame of the camera by one of the protagonists as he is in the process of angrily explaining to his wife, somewhere far from the front line and clearly unable to comprehend his experience, that she should stop bothering him with her jealous suppositions about what he is up to—he is "at war," and not interested in chasing women. Despite the trappings of the "strong story," however, the film also has a significant parapolemic dimension: between the battles, there are extended scenes where nothing much happens and soldiers are allowed space and time to engage in dialogue. Here, Vorozhbyt provides the viewer with a cross section of Ukrainian society, confronted with its differences and enclosed in the space of the ruined airport between battles. The conversations that ensue take place in Ukrainian, Russian, and *Surzhyk,* and range across topics from language rights to cultural identity, from the Soviet legacy to right-wing versus liberal politics. In a striking echo of Rafeienko's text, at one point an older nationalist soldier (whose call sign is Serpen') and his younger, more liberal comrade (Mazhor) discuss Ukrainian culture and argue over Gogol'. Serpen' is from western Ukraine and a native Ukrainian speaker, while Mazhor was brought up speaking Russian and, as Serpen' guesses from how correctly the younger man speaks, learned Ukrainian rather as a second language. The argument is diffused by a third soldier, Subota, who speaks *Surzhyk*:[6]

> SERPEN': Gogol'—he wrote in fucking Russian!
>
> MAZHOR: What's the difference what he wrote in?
>
> SERPEN': Ah, sure—he betrayed Ukraine, glorified Russian literature—what a hero.
>
> MAZHOR: That's why I'll never join your lot. Nationalists. You're intolerable.
>
> SERPEN': I tolerate you!
>
> MAZHOR: Gogol' is a genius, born on Ukrainian land. A gift to humanity. His work goes way beyond nationality, he formed the context of world literature.
>
> SERPEN': Ah, so you're one of those *tolerasts*! There are consequences of this. Because of people like you we have what we have. Citizens ashamed to speak their native language. Always ready to switch to another. We're all so tolerant!

[6] *Serpen'* means August. *Mazhor* is a slang word originating in Russian that refers to privileged or wealthy young people who often distinguish themselves by their arrogance; here it is clearly used ironically. *Subota* means Saturday. *Surzhyk* is a mix of Ukrainian and Russian.

> SUBOTA: Guys, enough! No point in falling out over this crap.
>
> SERPEN': Oh, so you think national consciousness is crap?
>
> SUBOTA: Dear friends… Forgive me, but I couldn't be bothered reading either Gogol' or Shevchenko in school. I like Stephen King. But I'm here all the same. (Seitablaiev)

Elsewhere, Vorozhbyt, provides a surprising moment of agreement between the two most polarized characters in the film, Serpen' and a captured separatist, who speak Ukrainian and Russian respectively during their dialogue. The pair suddenly find a moment of conservative solidarity and mutual recognition in their dismissal of the pro-European, liberal political views of Mazhor. Indeed, Serpen''s use of the term *tolerast* in the citation above is revealing: this is a portmanteau of the word *tolerantnyi* (tolerant) and a slur for a homosexual, *pederast*, that is often used to dismiss liberals and, ironically for Serpen', is, most likely, originally a Russian neologism.

As is the case with Rafeienko, Vorozhbyt does not entertain the possibility that differences over language, culture, or identity caused the war, but she does recognize that the war has shone a new light on them, a light than can throw some distorted shadows, but can also afford a clearer view on neglected complexities and misunderstandings. The moment of stillness provided by the lull in the fighting in the besieged airport, the parapolemic space, gives a moment of reflection in which these factors can be explored through dialogue. What is revealed is not sharp division, but surprising complexity and ethical entanglements. In this sense, Seitablaiev and Vorozhbyt's film is a particularly effective and high-profile example of a larger trend. There are, for example, instances of popular autobiographical accounts of front-line service in Donbas by writers like Artem Chekh or Valerii Anan'iev that do something similar: these ostensibly first-hand accounts of war, at first glance, may lead to an expectation of classic "strong" war stories, but actual fighting is rarely their focus. These narratives describe the boredom and banality of the everyday reality of military service, which often provides space for self-reflection and dialogue with those who happen to share the predicament, and whom the protagonists would never normally encounter beyond the context of the army.[7]

The parapolemic conversations on language and identity discussed above speak to a sense that Ukrainian culture may have missed something before the war, something that now needs to be worked through. As Zhadan noted in a column written before the Maidan protests of 2013–14, a narrow vision of Ukrainian cultural life that would, for example, exclude Russian-

[7] Artem Chekh's *Tochka nul'* (2017) has been translated into English as *Absolute Zero*.

language voices such as those of Rafeienko or Stiazhkina (and, we might add, Gogol'), results in a vision of Ukrainian culture that is unnecessarily self-limiting:

> neither Crimea nor Donbas fits into this "authenticity" of Ukrainian literature because they do not speak Ukrainian. It turns out suddenly that Ukrainian literature is inadequate to this country, it simply does not correspond to it. Because the country turns out to be bigger than its literature, it turns out to have more options, at least in terms of language. ("Hetto")

Zhadan's words proved prophetic, but hardly in the way that he could have expected when he wrote them in 2013. The war in the Donbas has led to a significant shift in the perception of culture from that region in the rest of Ukraine: in a way that seems to respond to Zhadan's warning, Russian-language writers like Stiazhkina and Rafeienko, who come from and write about Donbas, have re-orientated themselves toward the Ukrainian cultural process, while that process has also reciprocated. Donbas writers, whether they write in Ukrainian or Russian, are now more central than ever to Ukrainian culture. While the phrase "to hear the Donbas" was once a cynical and empty political slogan, disingenuously suggesting that the Donbas was politically disenfranchised (an idea rather undermined by the pre-Maidan prominence of the Party of Regions, whose power base was in the industrial south-east), today this slogan has acquired new meaning and become accepted (albeit not universally) as one of the pressing tasks of contemporary Ukrainian culture. Suddenly, Ukrainian culture has had to reconsider its parameters, uncover previously unexamined elements of itself, and regard itself in a new light. This has come about through reconsidering cultural identity but also, simultaneously, stereotypical images of war, and both of these things are achieved through the dialogic, parapolemic orientation that dominates in so many texts and that represents a dynamic, live process of the working-through of trauma, even as it unfolds.

Dialogue, in this context, should be understood not simply as conversation, but in the Bakhtinian sense as part of an ethical relationship with the other—not just a conversation, but a meeting of worldviews, ideas, discourses, subjectivities, in which openness to "another's word" is a key precondition (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 349–53). Fundamentally, what takes place in the parapolemic space is an attempt to engage with the other, to find space in which the relationship of the self and the other can be re-examined and renegotiated in the light of the "mutual precariousness," to use Judith Butler's term, that war highlights (48).

As discussed above, Sontag has argued that viewing images of war atrocities, while fraught with ethical risks, can make us reflect on our implication in the suffering of others (*Regarding the Pain* 103). Such images

should not inspire sympathy, which creates a false sense of distance between us and the victim, in the context of which "our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence": they should appeal to our sense of entanglement in the violence depicted and the structures that make it possible (Sontag, *Regarding the Pain* 102). By rejecting familiar, safe frames of war representation, the authors discussed here refuse to allow the reader/viewer the safe distance of sympathy. Their works bring war into the most familiar, intimate spaces, confronting the reader with its messy reality rather than its spectacular myth, and spur the reader to reflect on their own, personal relationship with and ethical implication in what is being described.

The question of trauma is crucial to all this: the structure of the representation of traumatic experiences closely follows the principle of the parapolemic in that it skirts around the traumatic experience. In this process, emphasis on the supposed accuracy of direct representation is replaced by a concern with ethical responsibility to the other, to the victim. While the victim's trauma can never be fully witnessed, it can be the focus of a critical and constructive second-hand witnessing, a state of paradoxical knowledge that LaCapra describes as "empathetic unsettlement" (*Writing History* 41). The writers discussed above achieve this state of empathetic unsettlement through attempts by characters or authorial voices to recognize others as—in Butler's words—"grievable." In describing relationships between people who are different in terms of access to power, politics, native language, cultural identity, or gender, but who are thrown together by war, these texts represent a negotiation of interdependence and mutual precariousness: "the condition under which we are passionately bound together: ragefully, desireously, murderously, lovingly" (Butler 183). This is precisely the situation we are faced with when Vorozhbyt's nationalist discusses Ukraine's historical traumas with his mirror image in the captured separatist, or when her misogynistic, ultra-conservative separatist engages in a tortured, but somehow brutally tender relationship with the female journalist whom he is convinced he must hate, yet cannot help but be attracted to, physically and emotionally. This latter scene also highlights the important fact that what is happening here is not about idealized reconciliation: the scene ends in the most brutal fashion, with the journalist killing the separatist in self-defence. Vorozhbyt is alive to the deceptive conceit of "closure in discourse" and "harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events" that LaCapra identifies as antithetical to empathetic unsettlement (*Writing History* 41). These texts directly confront the possibility of violent othering and the failure of dialogue. Vorozhbyt's parable of the chicken or the flippant attitude of the custodians

of the dead man in Stiazhkina's novella show how easily the other can be rendered "ungrievable."[8]

The refusal to provide closure is also key to the ending of Stiazhkina's novella, which entails a plot twist that is at once savage and understated: Revazov and Dima, whose tense conversation reaches no resolution other than in an act of extreme violence, end up doomed to silent co-existence. Wracked with guilt for injuring Dima to the point where the latter loses the ability to walk and speak, Revazov takes it upon himself to care for his friend, spending his last *hryvnia* on taking him abroad to seek medical help. This war text ends, thus, far from the front line, but in removing itself from the theatre of war it opens up a parapolemic space in which the ethical and personal reverberations of war can be felt all the more starkly. Dima is slowly regaining the power of speech, and the pair are slowly coming to terms with their implication in one another's suffering, with their mutual precarity. As in almost all of the texts discussed here, the process of resolution or reconciliation is incomplete, and this is the ultimate, unsettling challenge to the reader. Yet neither is this process hopeless. It is simply ongoing, long, and difficult. The main thing is that time and space are created for dialogue to develop when it is ready. It is in this cautiously hopeful parapolemic space of anticipation that the novella closes.

[8] For discussion of related problems in Vorozhbyt's other works, see Holt and Mahoney.

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