

# Translating Ukrainian War Poetry into English: Why It Is Relevant

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## Résumé de l'article

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# Translating Ukrainian War Poetry into English: Why It Is Relevant

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**Abstract:** This article explores the English translations of contemporary Ukrainian war poetry featured in the two anthologies *Lysty z Ukrainy* (*Letters from Ukraine*, 2016) and *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine* (2017), through the prism of Jacques Derrida's concept of "relevant." It argues that although the economy of the original poems could not always be sustained, these translations nonetheless remain relevant primarily thanks to what they do rather than what they say. After contextualizing the recent (re)emergence of war poems as a genre of Ukrainian literature and providing an overview of the two translation anthologies, the article compares the Ukrainian originals with their English translations and discusses the various translation challenges. It then returns to Derrida's own case study to extend the modifier "relevant" beyond its "economic" parameters to apply it more broadly to translation's socio-political significance. It concludes with a discussion of how the two anthologies in question reflect the state of the reception of contemporary Ukrainian literature in the English-speaking world and how the translations they feature inform our understanding of the (un)translatability of poetry.

**Keywords:** poetry, translation, Russia's war on Ukraine, untranslatability, Ukrainian literature.

## INTRODUCTION: IS DERRIDA'S "RELEVANT" REALLY RELEVANT?

**W**restling with one of the greatest paradoxes of translation—its simultaneous necessity and impossibility—the philosopher Jacques Derrida, in his discussion of one line, or more precisely one word, from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, proposes the modifier "relevant" to describe a successful translation. "A relevant translation," he explains,

would therefore be, quite simply, a good translation, a translation that does what one expects of it, in short, a version that performs its mission, honors its debt and does its job or its duty while inscribing in the receiving language the most relevant equivalent for an original, the language that is the most right, appropriate, pertinent, adequate, opportune, pointed, univocal, idiomatic, and so on. (Derrida 368)

Such a translation, according to Derrida, would depend on the “most appropriating and the most appropriate economy,” premised on the two criteria: property and quantity. Comparable to content and form, property and quantity imply, respectively, “proper meaning” and a measurement of what it takes to effectively “transport it [i.e., meaning] home” (Derrida 369).

In this article I discuss English translations of contemporary Ukrainian war poetry through the prism of Derrida’s concept of “relevant” to argue that although the economy of the original poems could not always be sustained, the translations nonetheless remain relevant, primarily thanks to what they do rather than because of what they say. After contextualizing the recent (re)emergence of war poems as a genre of Ukrainian literature and providing an overview of two translation anthologies, *Lysty z Ukrainy* (*Letters from Ukraine*, 2016) and *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine* (2017), I compare the Ukrainian originals with their English translations and address the various translation challenges. I then return to Derrida’s own case study and extend the modifier “relevant” beyond its “economic” parameters to apply more broadly to the translation’s socio-political significance. I conclude by looking at how the two anthologies in question reflect the state of the reception of contemporary Ukrainian literature in the English-speaking world and how the translations they feature inform our understanding of the (un)translatability of poetry.

#### HOW UKRAINIANS ENDED UP WRITING WAR POETRY AGAIN

In 2014, the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, also known as the Euromaidan, ousted the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich and his increasingly unpopular corrupt government after he refused, despite public promises, to sign the association agreement with the European Union and ruthlessly suppressed the initially peaceful student rally in Kyiv by pitting riot police against unarmed protestors. Unlike the Orange Revolution of 2004-05, when millions of Ukrainians took to the streets to protest the rigged vote (Yanukovich’s first and failed attempt to secure the presidency), the Euromaidan resulted in violence and civilian casualties. More than one hundred people (now remembered as “The Heavenly Hundred”) were killed, and many more injured, as the Euromaidan strove—yet again—to steer Ukraine onto the pro-European, pro-democratic reform track. Disgruntled that, geopolitically, Ukraine was gravitating toward Europe and away from its post-Soviet sphere of influence, Russia retaliated in March 2014 by first invading Ukraine’s Crimea and then by holding a “referendum at gunpoint” there to annex the peninsula in blatant violation of international law (Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations). In April 2014, with the help of local insurgents, mercenaries, and, as it soon became obvious, its regular armed

forces, Russia also occupied parts of eastern Ukrainian Donetsk and Luhansk regions, known as the Donbas, where due to centuries of anti-Ukrainian colonial policies the majority of people speak Russian (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, fact 8). Falsely presenting the Euromaidan Revolution as a “nationalist coup” and insisting, despite overwhelming evidence of the Russian military presence (Gilmore), that the Donbas conflict is a “civil war,” Russian officials claim that Russia’s interests lie in “protecting” the Russian-speaking population (Zerkal). As of 2021, Russia’s war on Ukraine has lasted seven years and, according to the report of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has claimed well over 13,000 lives (4, 8).

The international community responded to this twenty-first-century catastrophe in eastern Europe by repeatedly expressing its grave concern, introducing sanctions against Russia, assisting Ukraine financially, providing military equipment and training to Ukraine, and by trying, albeit unsuccessfully, to mediate negotiations. Ukraine responded by fighting back to prevent further Russian invasion of other eastern and southern Ukrainian cities/regions, sacrificing human lives on a daily basis to preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity. It also attempted, though not always effectively, to counter Russia’s outrageous propaganda and outright lies about the war by telling its own story, which in addition to government reports and fact-based journalism included art, film, museum exhibitions, performances, monuments, and literature.

Whereas the poetry written during and about the Euromaidan has already become a separate genre of Ukrainian literature and can now be studied more systematically,<sup>1</sup> war poetry dedicated to and inspired by the Russo-Ukrainian war is still an emerging phenomenon. It continues to grow and evolve as the war goes on, but the sheer volume of works dedicated to it is already impressive. A Ukrainian-language Wikipedia page entitled “Rosii's'ko-ukrains'ka viina v kul'turi” (“Russo-Ukrainian War in Culture”) provides an extensive list of films and songs as well as fiction and non-fiction produced since 2014. Although prose prevails, the number of published poetry books is considerable; of course, the list does not account for innumerable poems posted online on personal or social media sites. Unfortunately, most of this poetry, written primarily in Ukrainian and

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<sup>1</sup> Despite a large corpus of materials, current scholarship on this subject is limited. Most discussions are available in Ukrainian (e.g., Kononenko’s “Ievanheliie vid poetiv” and Horishna’s PhD dissertation). One article written in English, and specifically dedicated to Euromaidan poetry, is Galina and Shtypel’s “Ukraine—Poetry, Maidan, Revolution.” Euromaidan poetry is also mentioned in passing in Rewakowicz’s and in Wallo’s monographs.

Russian, is not available in English translation to a wider international readership.

#### THE TWO TRANSLATION ANTHOLOGIES FILLING THE GAP

The two anthologies of English translations that contributed to filling this gap are *Lysty z Ukrainy: poetychna antologia / Letters from Ukraine: Poetry Anthology* and *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*. Compiled by Hryhorii (Hryhory) Semenchuk and co-edited by Yuri Izdryk and Vitaly Chernetsky, the former appeared from the Ternopil-based publishing house Krok in 2016. The latter came out in 2017 from Academic Studies Press in Boston and was compiled and edited by Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky.<sup>2</sup> Whereas *Letters from Ukraine* is a dual-language parallel-text edition, containing original poems side-by-side with their translations as well as brief biographies of the authors, *Words for War* is entirely in English but offers a supplementary website with selected original poems, their respective translations, and information about the authors and translators. Both volumes are thematically rich, and while most feature poems that address the horrors of war, some bear only a tangential relationship to the subject. The polyphony of represented authors in both collections reflects the diversity of voices in contemporary Ukrainian literature. In his introduction to *Letters from Ukraine*, the renowned Ukrainian writer Iurii (Yuri) Andrukhovych notes that the volume brings together writers of different ages and generations, ranging from the 1980s to the millennials, thus allowing emerging younger talents like Liuba Iakymchuk (Lyuba Yakimchuk) and Kateryna Kalytko to rub shoulders with established writers, such as Serhii Zhadan and Iurii (Yuri) Izdryk (11). Importantly, both anthologies give an international voice to writers who come from the Donbas region, like Vasyl' Holoborod'ko (Vasyl Holoborodko), and to writers who volunteered and fought in the battlefield, like Borys Humeniuk

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<sup>2</sup> My review of *Words for War* appeared in *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* in 2019. In the summer of 2021, I located two other reviews of the anthology: Maria Rewakowicz's in *Slavic Review*, and Josephine von Zitzewitz's in *Slavic and East European Journal*. Regrettably, the print run of *Letters from Ukraine* was only 500 copies, and it is difficult to establish whether it received any publicity beyond Ukraine. I was unable to locate any English language reviews, though I did discover that in 2017, thanks to the Polish writer Bohdan Zadura, *Letters from Ukraine* was translated into Polish and came out in Rada Artystyczna "Dialog." *Words for War*, on the other hand, has received endorsements from prominent academics, writers, and editors, and, according to the OLCL WorldCat search engine, it can be accessed at numerous libraries throughout the world.

(Humenyuk). The anthologies represent female and male writers equitably, and notably include poets who write in Russian, such as Boris Khersonskii (Khersonsky), who switched to teaching in Ukrainian to protest the propaganda claim that the Russian invasion was invoked to “protect” the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine.

*Letters from Ukraine* features an astounding fifty-six poets and twenty-three translators, while *Words for War* includes poems by sixteen poets translated by twenty-nine translators, a balanced mix of academics and creative writers often working collaboratively. Many of the same authors appear in both collections, and in several cases the same poem receives two different treatments in translation. In addition to format, *Letters from Ukraine* and *Words for War* differ in paratextual elements. While the former contains an introductory essay by Andrukhovych, in which he bluntly acknowledges Russia’s war on Ukraine, the latter includes an editor’s preface, an essay by the Ukrainian-American poet and translator Ilya Kaminsky, and an afterword by the Saint Petersburg-born poet, translator, and scholar Polina Barskova. Moreover, *Words for War* provides a glossary of cultural concepts, realia terms, and geographical locations; it has endnotes and an index, a feature not typical of poetry collections but useful in this case. Recently, Academic Studies Press has posted video recordings of translators reciting poems from the *Words for War* collection.

#### “IRRELEVANCE” AND THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING UKRAINIAN WAR POETRY INTO ENGLISH

Poetry translation has always been a daunting task, often considered impossible. Robert Frost’s definition of poetry as something that is lost in translation, albeit taken out of the broader context,<sup>3</sup> unfortunately still holds currency, while Roman Jakobson’s verdict on puns and poetry—“by definition untranslatable” unless creatively transposed—can hardly be disputed, even if the debate continues on what exactly a creative transposition implies (131). Despite advocating for extreme literalism and then not quite following his own advice when self-translating his own work, Vladimir Nabokov suggests that literary translators are bound to choose between “rhyme and reason” (or, in other words, between form and meaning), which leads to privileging one or the other (119). Clare Cavanagh

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<sup>3</sup> In a 1959 conversation with Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and Kenny Withers, Robert Frost said, “I like to say, guardedly, that I could define poetry this way: It is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation. That means something in the way the words are curved and all that—the way the words are taken, the way you take the words” (203).

questions this dichotomy when she writes: “‘Why did you keep the form and mangle the meaning, or vice versa?’ we’re queried—as if poetry weren’t forever inviting us to consider the forms of meaning and the meaning of forms” (234). The dilemma thus lies in the fact that for a translation to be produced, form and meaning technically need to be separated (i.e., the original meaning(s) must receive new forms in another language), but it is precisely their inseparability that shapes the literariness and contributes to the aesthetic tension, factors for which poetry is appreciated.

Derrida’s “relevance” requirement of quality and quantity sets the bar even higher because in addition to capturing (what he calls) “proper” meaning—which most poststructuralist thinkers, including Derrida himself, would argue to be a debatable undertaking—it also puts forth an expectation of comparable economy (i.e., similar forms, number of words, length of the line, etc.), which is not always easily achieved even between cognate languages. My analysis of the original poems and their translations from the two anthologies leads me to conclude that if Derrida’s criteria for “relevance” were to be applied as he initially outlined them, not all of the translations in question would qualify as “relevant.” Although there are numerous instances of linguistic asymmetries, anisomorphism, and cultural incommensurability in both collections, the main sore points fall roughly into the following categories: (a) the Ukrainian/Slavic rhyming tradition, (b) issues related specifically to the theme of war and trauma, (c) word choice and untranslatability at the word level, (d) typos, omissions, and misinterpretations. I now discuss examples that illustrate each category.

### *(a) Dealing with the Ukrainian Rhyming Tradition*

One of the greatest challenges for English translators of Ukrainian poetry arises from the still prevalent rhyming tradition. Although some poems in both anthologies are written in free verse, most poets (including Viktor Neborak, Izdryk, Oleksandr Irvanets', Zhadan, Vasyl' Makhno, Marianna Kiianovs'ka [Kiyanovska], and Halyna Krug) contributed rhymed verses, confronting the translator with the “to rhyme or not to rhyme” dilemma, a choice always fraught with repercussions. If one chooses not to rhyme, translations of poems whose meanings are primarily driven by their soundscapes often run the risk of merely recounting what the poem allegedly says and turning into “mediocre prose.” If, on the other hand, one chooses to rhyme, considerable liberties need to be taken to make the rhyme pattern work. Moreover, there is always a possibility that the poem begins to sound like a ditty or limerick. Since most contemporary English-language poetry is free verse, perhaps the compromise, albeit uneasy, would be to move away from the rhyme and instead seek other means of foregrounding

the poetic language. But as is evident from the two collections in question, such compromise efforts are uncommon.

Izdryk's poetry offers one of the most illustrative examples of the case in point because in his sophisticated soundscapes meaning is almost always derived from sound, rhythm, and the unexpected playful tensions between similar-sounding words. The translator's attempt to recreate the rhyming scheme in the poem "Darkness Invisible," for example, is audacious but sometimes comes at the price of neglecting not only the rhythm but also Izdryk's signature wordplay (Izdryk 48). The title of the poem is the immediate challenge because Izdryk has a penchant for playful titles that incorporate English words. If the title is merely copied verbatim, the reader has no way of knowing (especially if the original and the translation are not displayed side-by-side) that the Ukrainian title was originally in English; thus, a bi/multi-lingual text turns into a monolingual text. Consisting of six stanzas in amphibrach hexameter and following an alternate (abab) rhyme, "Darkness Invisible" talks about evil pervading the world. The poem culminates in the lyrical protagonist's faith in the ability of love to conquer evil (or, in Izdryk's own words, "[the gift of mercy] that will conquer invisible darkness"). Overall, this translation, which has tried to cope with a plethora of problems, deserves special credit for dexterous rhyming. Whenever possible, it even sticks to the same rhyming scheme, especially in the first stanza (*water/futile* and *air/there*) and in the fourth stanza (*ways/face* and *anyone/fun*). In the other stanzas, the rhymes are slightly less precise, but still noticeable (e.g., in the second stanza *smooth/truth* and *place/of us*; in the sixth stanza *warmth/worth* and *darkness/face*). Rhythmically, however, the overarching amphibrach of the original, in which almost every line, including the opening one, starts with a conjunction that moves the stress to the second syllable, is extremely difficult to recreate. The table below illustrates the poem's opening stanza, underscoring the difference in line length between the two versions, especially in lines two and four.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Besides omissions (e.g., *сховалось* / *skhovalos'*, *has hidden*, in the fourth line or *непомітно* / *neromitno*, *imperceptibly*, in the second line), the sentence subject (*а зло* / *a zlo*, and *evil*) is not repeated in the second line.



Ukrainian	English
а зло розчинилося в нашому світі як лід у воді	evil has melted away in our world, as ice turns to water
і зло непомітно розтало неначе в повітрі туман	diffused invisibly, like mist in air
дарма вже шукати його на найглибшому темному дні	grope in the deepest, darkest of pits, your search will be futile
не скажеш про зло що сховалось воно десь отут чи отам	you cannot say evil is here, evil is there

In the second stanza Izdryk plays with the Ukrainian stem *por* and uses it in four different instances (highlighted below) to create internal repetitions, stressing its ubiquity.

Ukrainian	English
бо <b>спори</b> його роз <b>поро</b> шені рівно у <b>порах</b> землі	for its spores are dispersed in the pores of the earth, even and smooth
і в будь-яку <b>пору</b> зустрінеш його і у будь-який час	you can meet it at any old time, any old place
бо зло – не брехня а подібні на правду обмовки малі	for evil is not a big lie, but small shards, resembling truth
його мета <b>стази</b> мов <b>стрази</b> іскряться у кожному з нас	its metastases glitter like crystals in each one of us

While the words *spores*, *dispersed*, and *pores* contribute to a comparable effect of repetition in English, the second line, which reads verbatim “at any time/period/season/hour you can meet it and at any time,” misses the word *nopa* / *pora* (*time, season, period, hour*), perhaps, in order to avoid the repetition (“at this hour” / “at this time”), which in Ukrainian is emphatic rather than redundant. Instead, the words *old* and *place* are added, even though they are not in the original. Finally, *обмовки малі* / *obmovky mali*, meaning *minor slips of the tongue*, are rendered as *shards*, an interesting image but probably a confusion with *обломки* / *oblomky* (*fragments, debris*).

In Izdryk's other poem "Molytva," translated as "Prayer," an attempt to preserve the *abaab* rhyming pattern results in uncalled-for embellishments and overinterpretations that add little, if anything, to the translation (Izdryk 164–65). The last stanza of Izdryk's original side-by-side with its translation is shown in the table below.<sup>5</sup>

Ukrainian	English
я одне лиш знаю і одне засвоїв і прошу тебе тихо незграбно несміло: говори зі мною говори зі мною і нехай твоє слово станеться тілом	There's one thing I need and I know it well Tough (sic) my Prayer is awkward, indistinct and timid I'm begging you – Talk to me Just talk to me like you do And let your words breathe a breath in my body so lively and vivid

Because of its verbosity, the translation is considerably longer than the original, but its excessive surplus of meaning hardly contributes to the poem's literariness. By completely reworking the last crucial line, the translation does create a *timid/vivid* half-rhyme, but it comes at the cost of not only erasing the biblical allusion but also of drastically modifying Izdryk's message.

Irvanets's short poem "Svit na pliastery pokroivsia," translated as "The world has cut itself into pieces," is an example of how despite a very apt approach and the most dexterous rhyming solutions the translator may nonetheless end up on somewhat tricky interpretive turf (Irvanets 174–75).

Ukrainian	English
Світ на плястери покроївся Й сам себе жере-намина І така вже вона українська, Оця наша мирна війна. Хтось назве це «пошук балансу». Хтось насмішливо – «куля в лоб». Та без нас вона не збулася б, А без нас її не було б...	The world has cut itself into pieces Devours itself, in hunger roars Do you know what fight for peace is? It is our Ukrainian war. Some say "it's a struggle for balance" Others laugh "it's a suicide shot." This war would've not been without us This war is all that we got...

<sup>5</sup> Another translation of this poem, by the Canadian writer and translator Erín Moure and me, can be found in Izdryk's selected poetry collection *Smokes*. The last stanza reads, "I'm sure of one thing, only one thing I know / and I ask you quietly awkwardly timidly: / talk to me / talk to me / and may your word become flesh" (Izdryk, *Smokes* 61).

Although the translation captures both form and content well, the lines “і така вже вона українська, / оця наша мирна війна” (verbatim, “and it is so Ukrainian, / that peaceful war of ours”) are modified in a way that defines a fight for peace as “our Ukrainian war.” The paradox of a “peaceful war” being described as inherently Ukrainian may be intended to express the general reluctance of Ukrainians to fight. But given the Putin regime’s propaganda talking point that Ukraine is engulfed in a civil war, the phrase “Ukrainian war” is not the most felicitous choice.

Kiyanovska’s poem “Prospekt Svobody,” translated as “Freedom Avenue,” refers to a famous street in Lviv and is dedicated to Lyuba Yakimchuk, who used to live in Luhansk before the occupation and is a fellow writer represented in both collections (Semenchuk et al. 204–05). Metaphorically juxtaposing Lviv and Luhansk, respectively the westernmost and easternmost regional centres of the country, the poem relies on (what could be described as) episodic accentuated rhymes, found only in a few crucial lines. The first line comes from a graffiti “Люба Журба” (translated as “Lyuba, my sorrow”).<sup>6</sup> The other line is “мама мила раму,” translated as “mama washed the window frame” (a line from a Soviet primer and/or a popular nursery rhyme). Kiyanovska ingeniously employs this line to abruptly switch the tone after a heart-wrenching description of “naked Luhansk buildings” that “shake and bleed” as their “windows ache.” A literal translation does not achieve much in this case because it is impossible to appreciate Kiyanovska’s tragicomic spin unless the reader is familiar with that nursery rhyme line.

A true epitome of untranslatability is Viktor Neborak’s brilliant parodic reworking of the popular German World War II love song “Lili Marleen.” Neborak adapts it to the Russian-Ukrainian war context by portraying a superhero who at first is willing to fight “those damn russkies,” but after realizing he could get “a hole in [his] skull” changes his mind and wishes instead to die in his lover’s embrace (Neborak 369). A complex *aabccb* rhyming pattern poses an insurmountable challenge, especially given that the song has a plot and other playful elements the translator needs to keep in mind. One conspicuous transformation that stands out in the translation, however, can be found in the fourth stanza when Neborak’s protagonist says that instead of dying he prefers to give up his penis for Lili, along with—and the zeugma here is spot-on—Crimea and Donbas, which are paraphrased in the translation (second column in the table below) as “coalmines and seas” (Neborak 369). In the third column I offer my own translation of this stanza, focusing primarily on the recreation of the rhyming pattern and the rhythm, which are crucial to the song.

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<sup>6</sup> Here and elsewhere, the original transliteration has been preserved.

Original	Translation from <i>Letters from Ukraine</i>	My translation
Та не хочу зайву в голові диру У твоїх обіймах ліпше я помру Ліпше я віддам тобі свій член і разом з ним Донбас і Крим моя Лілі Марлен	Still I don't want a hole in my skull. I would much rather die in your embrace. To you I will give my steamy sex, and along with it coalmines and seas, my sweet Lili Marleen.	A bullet in the face – no thanks I'd rather die in your embrace I'd rather watch you flick your bean Crimea? Donbas? Who gives a rat's arse? My sweet Lili Marleen

*(b) Poetic Issues Related Specifically to the Theme of War and Trauma*

What can a translator do when the language of the original text, the very texture of what is supposed to be carried over into another language, disintegrates yet nonetheless remains meaningful? How can the meaningfulness of fragmented meanings be captured in translation? Such questions are inspired by Yakimchuk's poem "Decomposition," another example of self-reflexive poetry in the service of poetry (Yakimchuk 152). In this poem, Yakimchuk illustrates how language begins to gradually break down into syllables while at the same time "ideally slick poems, beautiful as embroidery" continue to be written (152). This disintegration starts with cities, Luhansk and Donetsk turning, respectively, into "hansk" and "netsk," and Pervomaïsk splitting into two, "pervo" and "maisk" (a hint at the toponym's Soviet labour-day, i.e., May 1, etymology). Ultimately, even the author's own name breaks up as she suddenly grows "frighteningly" (the intensifier used in Ukrainian) old, and consequently Lyuba is reduced to "ba."

Although on the macro level this poem works well in translation, conjuring up the terrifying images of shelled cities and debris of destroyed infrastructure, several difficulties remain unresolved. For example, the indefinite pronoun *якийсь там* / *iakyis' tam*, modifying Luhansk, is omitted. Meaning *some kind of* in this context, it carries a pejorative connotation (closer to *some god-forsaken*). The word *колообрій* / *koloobrii* in the line "я дивлюся на колообрій / *ya dyvliusia na koloobrii* | він трикутний, трикутний / *vin trykutnyi, trykutnyi*" is rendered as "I stare into the horizon / it has narrowed into a triangle." *Kolobrii* does mean *horizon* but thanks to a high register, in Ukrainian it acquires a more sophisticated and refined ring than the Greek-imported *горизонт* / *horyzont*. There are other poetic words with the same meaning of *skyline* or *horizon*, such as *небокрай*

/ *nebokrai*, literally “end-of-the-sky,” and while their semantics can be captured effectively, their literary qualities often defy translation.

Another important nuance involves the performance of the central theme of the poem, i.e., the very act of disintegration. In the stanza announcing the impossibility of poetry about war because there are only individual letters to describe its horrors, Yakimchuk says “лише літери / *lyshe litery* | і всі вони – *ppp* / *i vsi vony* – *rrr*.” In the translation, it turns into a somewhat lengthy and explicative “only letters / and they all make a single sound<sup>7</sup> – *rrr*.” In this stanza, Yakimchuk follows the same pattern to illustrate disintegration, whereby the first syllables of words are dropped: *litery* (*letters*) are reduced to mere “*rrr-s*,” which, if read out loud, create a rhymed connection with the last syllable “*ry*.” In the English version, it is less clear why the letters make a single sound. On the other hand, the English “*r*” reverberates with the word “war” in the first line of the stanza, offering an interesting, albeit unintended, connection. By the same token, “*ba*,” the last syllable of the proper name *Lyuba* (which is short for *Lyubov*, meaning *love*) is just a random syllable in English, but in Ukrainian it conjures up the word *baba* (*grandmother*), emphasizing the sound-image of an elderly woman.

In the original poem, the city of Debaltsevo is split into *de* (which means *where*) and *baltsevo* (which is not a word). Yakimchuk plays with the “*de*” syllable both to split the city’s name and to ask the “where is my baltsevo?” question, performatively suggesting that the city is gone. The decision to parse the word into three syllables in the translation does not really affect the meaning but does change the meaningfulness. The only time creative tension and ambiguity are achieved is in the case of Donetsk, parsed into *do* / *do*, which means *to*, and *netsk*, which is just a random syllable. Since *do* is a word both in English and in Ukrainian, some playful ambiguity can be achieved in this line: the translation “I can’t *do netsk*” does not mean “I can’t reach to / *do netsk*” (as the original Ukrainian line suggests), but it reflects the meaningfulness of disintegration, or, in other words, how the disintegration of language affects the perception of meaning. Unfortunately, though, in many instances the English lines turn out to be longer due to the translation’s explicative tendency.

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<sup>7</sup> My emphasis here and below unless otherwise indicated. This underlined phrase is added in the translation whereas an elliptical m-dash in Ukrainian establishes a more immediate and visual connection.

Ukrainian	Verbatim	English
про війну не буває поезії про війну є лише розкладання лише літери і всі вони – рpp	about war there can be no poetry about war there is only disintegration only letters and all of them --- rrr	there's not poetry about war just decomposition  only letters remain and they all <u>make a single sound</u> – rrr
а де бальцево? де моє бальцево?	and <i>don-de</i> baltsevo? where's my baltsevo?	and where's my <i>deb. alts. evo?</i>
я дивлюся на колообрій він трикутний, трикутний	I stare at the horizon it's triangular, triangular (it's like a triangle, a triangle)	I stare at the horizon <u>it has narrowed into</u> a triangle

Along the lines of what happens with the fragmented language in translation, a similar thought-provoking question arises from the last paragraph in Kaminsky's "Barometers." Reflecting in a deeply personal and emotional manner on a situation where he, a native of Ukraine, cannot stop writing about war in his native country (and has to do so in English, a language that the poets he discusses do not necessarily share), Kaminsky pauses to reflect on the uncontrollable silence between sentences. According to him, "even though it is a different language, the silence between sentences is still the same" (Kaminsky xxv). Silence in poetry is perhaps as important as sound, so what happens with silence in translation, whether it be conveyed in the first place, and whether it is really the same, become pertinent questions.

Among the different kinds of silence described in Billy Collins's poem with the eponymous title, "... there is the silence of this morning, / which I have broken with my pen, / a silence that had piled up all night." Collins implies a productive silence, a silence that is ripe with meaning and wants to break itself. Conversely, Kaminsky's silence emanates from the white space on paper and wants (redundancy intended) to remain silent. It is that kind of silence that allows readers of poetry to pause to breathe, to visualize the verbal images, and to marvel at the echoes of sounds. And since for each reader such silence will be deeply personal, it will rarely, if ever, be the same.

The kind of silence one is more likely to encounter in war poetry is the universal silence of fear, grief, indifference, despondency, and meaninglessness, and it poses no particular difficulty for translators. In *Words for War*, it is most explicitly expressed in the poetry of Serhiy Zhadan.

In his poem “Take Only What Is Most Important,” culminating in a very powerful image of “unedited lists of the dead / [being] so long that there won’t be enough time / to check them for your own name,” there is that bone-chilling “quiet of a cemetery” (Zhadan 187–88). In an untitled poem “So that’s what their family is like now” (Zhadan 178), in order to avoid arguments, family members do not talk to each other about any subject other than a dead neighbour, while in the untitled poem “Village street—gas line’s broken” the emergency service does not come to fix a leak because of shootings in the area: “when you call them—they are silent / don’t say anything, / like they don’t understand you” (Zhadan 182).

In Zhadan’s untitled poem “At least now, my friend says,” the silence is different. In the original Ukrainian, it is not even silence per se because the character does speak. Rather, the silence is a kind of self-righteous curtness, an abruptness stemming from hostility. The narrator’s friend, who manages to return home from captivity, “can speak about most things / with confidence, through that experience” because “he considers it the greatest honor / to hold one’s position in times of war.” When asked about the war, though, he keeps his responses brusque. The poem emphasizes this curtness through repetition: “what’s it [the war] like then? / Like . . . Nothing, he answers [...] / How did you feel? / Like . . . Nothing, / How did they treat you? / Like . . . Nothing. / How do you talk about all this? / Like . . . Nothing” (Zhadan 183). Interestingly, in the English translation the silence is highlighted, thanks to the translators’ creative resolution of a grammar / word choice problem posed by the original. In the original, the repetitive response comes down to one word: the feminine adjective *ніяка* / *niaka* (literally, “no-how”) and a corresponding adverb *ніяк* / *niak* (roughly, *in no way* or *by no means*), which cannot be expressed in one word in English. When it is used as an adjective describing the war, its meaning may range from *with no specific properties* to *nothing to write home about*. While there are several possibilities of paraphrasing it in a clause or a full sentence, none of them works effectively because they are not a one-word response. Recognizing this problem, the translators opted for the word *nothing* and added the filler word *like*, followed by an ellipsis to underscore the silence. The use of punctuation in this case is “creatively foreignizing” because in English the ellipsis is commonly used for an omission or for the suppression of information, whereas in Ukrainian it usually indicates an abrupt pause, a hesitation, or an unfinished thought that can be filled in by the reader. In both English and Ukrainian versions, the ultimate silence ensues when Zhadan’s lyrical persona switches from questioning his friend to posing a rhetorical question to readers using the first-person-plural pronoun: “Now, how the hell do we live with all this?” (Zhadan, “At least now, my friend says” 184). To Ukrainian and English readers of Zhadan, depending on (and in

spite of) what wars they continue to live with, this loaded question will evoke very different silences.

*(c) Untranslatability Issues Related to Word Choice*

Kateryna Kalytko's poem "He Writes" raises a whole gamut of translation issues, ranging from a difficult rhyming pattern and dialectal/regional vocabulary to proper names, alliterations, complex metaphors, and cultural realia terms (Kalytko 68–69). Composed as a young soldier's letter to his mother, whose face, along with other things, he is beginning to forget, the poem not only touches on the problem of memory (for example, the lyrical persona feels like "memories are leaking out of" him), but also offers an interesting metaphorical take on how the sad and happy times in life are interwoven. Despite the main motif of memory loss, the poem ends on a hopeful note. The soldier concludes his letter by asking if a girl he used to know still sings in the church choir.

The first problem the translators encounter in the poem is the word *zpuzoma* / *hryzota*, meaning *torment* or *emotional suffering*, a derivative of the verb *zpuzmu* / *hryzty*, meaning *to gnaw*. Although most Ukrainian dictionaries<sup>8</sup> do not mark it as dialectal or regional usage, it is common primarily in western parts of Ukraine. The word *distress* in the third line of the first stanza ("You'll cry, I know, I have caused you distress") captures the denotation but does not convey the word's regional flavour (Kalytko 68). This nuance could have been "sacrificed" if it was merely a dialect-related detail. In this case, however, it is part of a larger picture that contributes to the poem's tone and rustic vibe. In the second stanza, for example, life is metaphorically compared to a traditional house consisting of two parts, in which funerals and weddings are held at the same time. In the original, this house is described by the three adjectives: ancient, *подільська* / *podil's'ka*, meaning *Podillian* or *from Podillia*,<sup>9</sup> and "ours" (in the sense of *traditional*, "like the ones they build in our neck of the woods"). In the English version, the toponym *podil's'ka* is omitted, perhaps because it would either hinder the line or require a lengthy footnote explanation.<sup>10</sup> In the English version,

<sup>8</sup> It is listed in *Tlumachnyi slovnyk-dovidnyk Hutsul's'kykh hovirok* (*The Dictionary of Hutsul Dialects*) (Shkrumeliak). Hutsuls are "Ukrainian pastoral highlanders" who live in the Carpathian Mountains, according to the Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine (Pavliuc et al.).

<sup>9</sup> Podillia is an "upland region of southwestern Ukraine," according to the Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine (Kubijovyč et al.).

<sup>10</sup> It could have been provided in the "Geographical Locations and Places of Significance" supplement.



the stanza reads: “Life is a house on the side of the road, / old-world style, like our peasant house, divided into two parts. / In one, they wash the dead man’s body and weep. / In the other, they dress a bride” (Kalytko 68). Consequently, other elements of this pastoral discourse also had to be smoothed out. For example, the translation tries to render the respectful tone of addressing the parents by capitalizing “Mother” and “Dad,” but little, if anything, can be done about the formal second-person pronouns in the original or the typically rural use of plural verb endings when referring to parents in the singular (which is lost in English, becoming simply, for example, “the toffee that Dad used to bring from town”). Similarly, the English line “You cry so much mother, you don’t stop sobbing” (Kalytko 68) is a paraphrase that helps “to avoid” a rare and bizarre word *вколошкати* / *vkoloshkaty*, which, in a way that is reminiscent of Derrida’s *pharmakon*, carries two almost opposite meanings: *to kill* and *to soothe*. In addition, it rhymes with *волошками* / *voloshkamy*, meaning *cornflowers*, in the third line. “Like cornflowers” is a descriptor used for the smell of his mother’s hair, which, unlike her face, the soldier still remembers. He adds that “faces don’t matter much” (Kalytko 68), which, again, is only an approximate paraphrase of the idiom *z oblychchia vody ne pyty* (verbatim, *one cannot drink water from the face*, meaning *looks are not everything*).

Similarly, a strategy of making the translation more fluent and accessible to the target audience is applied to proper names, which have also been domesticated. Thus Andriy, the soldier’s brother, who’s also in service, becomes Andrew while *Petrus*, the lyrical protagonist’s name, a diminutive form of Petro (similar to Pete in English), becomes Peter. In the same vein, the “*smak tiahuchykh konfet*” (verbatim, *the taste of gooey candy*) is translated as “the taste of toffee.” While semantically they are very close, emotionally the phrases are very different, as Petro does not even refer to the candy descriptively rather than by its Ukrainian name, *irys*. Finally, the first line of the last stanza performs its message through alliteration and sets the stage for the marching that happens in the next line (“We march hopelessly along rivers and under the clouds”) (Kalytko 68). It reads “Злива б’є в барабани, болото попід фронтами / *Zlyva b’ie v barabany, holoto popid frontamy*” and contains several plosives that imitate marching drums. The translation “Rain drums loudly, mud covers the front lines” (Kalytko 69) does little more than convey the propositional meaning.

#### *d) Misinterpretations, Omissions, and Typos*

Aleksandr Kabanov, a Russophone poet whose work is featured in both anthologies, writes witty satiric poetry. His ingenious, untitled allegorical poem “Once upon a time, a Jew says to his prisoner, his Hellenic foe” contains

several challenges, ranging from rather peculiar regional cultural concepts to intertextual references (Kabanov 59). For example, the appositive word *kolorad* (a derogatory term for a pro-Russian separatist coined after the Colorado beetle, whose colours resemble the Saint George ribbon), an essential concept that belongs in the notes, is missing in the opening line. The Russian word *terrikony*, which denotes the typical Donbas terrain, scattered with spoil tips or pit heaps, is rendered innocuously as “steppe” and could have instead been explained in the notes (Kabanov 59). Vladimir Maiakovskii’s (Mayakovsky’s) famous *shtaniny* / *trouser legs*, in “Stikhi o sovetskom pasporte” (“Poem on the Soviet Passport,” 1929) is translated as “trendy trousers,” which may produce an interesting “t” alliteration but at the same time somewhat obscures the reference to Mayakovsky (i.e., is the reader expected to know that wide trousers were trendy at that time?)<sup>11</sup> (Kabanov 59). Another important allusion, this time to Vladimir Putin’s infamous comment (made at a 1999 Astana press conference) regarding the shelling of Grozny, “My i v sortire ikh zamochim” “We’ll waste them [that is, ‘terrorists’] in a shithouse,” comes in the last stanza in the line “как, вначале, враги – мочили его в сортире,” and it is translated as “how his foes cornered him, placed a bounty on his head” (Kabanov 59), a transformation for which, as a reader, I fail to catch the meaning. But perhaps the most surprising translation decision is to interpret the salutation “Girkinson, shalom!” as “Girkinson, helmet down!,” which most likely resulted from a “creative typo” in the original (i.e., *шолом* / *sholom*, the Ukrainian word for helmet, vs. *шалом* / *shalom*) (Kabanov 59). Another rendition of Kabanov’s poem, by Alex Cigale, offers different solutions (including “slag heaps” for *terrikony*, “broad britches,” “enemies trashed him in a privy,” and “My shalom to Gerkinson!” [sic]) and can be found in *Plume*, an online magazine of contemporary poetry in translation.

Omissions and misinterpretations occur even more frequently in multiple translations in *Letters from Ukraine*. The last stanza of Mirek Bodnar’s untitled poem “Ми будемо відходити безшелесно” / “We depart without a rustle” incorporates a two-line quote from the opening verse of John 1: “На початку було слово / і слово в Бора було” [In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God] (Bodnar 68, my trans.), but then playfully switches gears and replaces the expected “and the Word was God” with “у кінці буде мовчання, / і мовчання буде у нас” [in the end there will be silence and silence will be with us] (Bodnar 68, my trans.). In the translation, this rather straightforward passage undergoes an unnecessary transformation, thereby losing the preposition *with* in lines 2 and 4: “In the

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<sup>11</sup> In Herbert Marshall’s translation (“My Soviet Passport” 1982) the line reads “I pull out / of my wide trouser-pockets” (Mayakovsky 154).

beginning was the word, / and the word was God, / in the end will be silence, / and silence will be us" (Bodnar 69). As a result, the biblical quote is distorted and the meaning, that posed no interpretative difficulty, is unjustifiably modified.

In Bodnar's next untitled poem "Огида до римованих віршів" translated as "Revulsion against rhymes," "терпіння і побожність" ("patience and piety"), perhaps again due to a typo, turns into "patience and pity" (Bodnar 70). The drastic changes in his untitled poem "Світло ніколи не увійде" ("Light will never enter," my trans.) are unwarranted because this unrhymed poem appears to be quite conducive to a "close" (or "closer") translation. Instead, the liberties with syntax mix up theme and rheme and shift the logical emphasis (for example, "Світло ніколи більше не увійде / до цієї кімнати, заповненої темрявою / і нашим з тобою диханням" is translated as "Darkness and our breathing fill the room / where light will never walk") (Bodnar 72). Other loose interpretations affect the content without contributing much to the form (for example, "Ми ще намагаємося сяк-так ходити, / щось говорити непевне" is translated rather awkwardly as "We struggle to walk, / blabber something") (Bodnar 72–73).

Vasyl Holoborodko's philosophical poems, featured in both anthologies, follow a structural pattern whereby a reflection on an experience culminates with a formulaic three-line "take-away" resembling a haiku. Almost like Joycean epiphanies, these revelations (which Holoborodko does call "epiphanies"), summarize the symbolism behind the poem's key archetypal image. For example, his poem "Наодинці з метеликом" ("Alone with a Butterfly"—my trans.), translated as "One on One with a Butterfly," recounts the lyrical protagonist's experience of chasing a butterfly, interrupted by an uncanny realization that it is in fact the butterfly that is chasing him. After a rumination about nature / art, transformation, and the inability to relive an evanescent experience as opposed to simply returning to a marked page in a book, the poem concludes with an epiphany: "метелик-не-метелик – / символ за ознакою / «бути тим, що є прихованою загрозою»" (Holoborodko 94). The translation "butterfly—not a butterfly / this is a symbol— / 'to be is a hidden threat'" takes on an eerily existential aura by equating existence itself with a threat, instead of saying "to be that which is a hidden threat" (Holoborodko 95).

In some instances, blatant misinterpretations are caused by confusing homonyms and paronyms. For example, in Bohdan-Oleh Horobchuk's poem "Птахи," translated as "Birds," the lines "дві сороки метушаться на березі, / підсилюючи біло-чорний ефект" are translated as "two magpies bicker on the shore / their white-black impression / magnified ..." (Horobchuk 104–05). Contextually, given what we learn in the original from the next line (which reads "intensifying the white and black effect"), the fussing (or bickering) is more likely to be happening in a birch tree (на березі) than on

the shore (на березі). The confusion might have arisen due to the Ukrainian words for *bank/shore* and *birch tree* having identical forms in the locative case with the only difference being the stress. Similarly, the Ukrainian paronyms *місто/city* and *міст/bridge* wrought havoc on the last stanza in Nataliia (Natalia) Belchenko's poem "Вроцлав," translated as "Wroclaw." "Над карамельною рікою / І містом W на Миколая / Дівчатко відкопало Трою / І досі ще її копає" is translated as "At the caramel river and / The W bridge on Christmas Eve / A little girl was digging up Troy / And she's still digging today" (Belchenko 48–49). While one can maybe turn a blind eye to St. Nick's transformation into Christmas Eve in English, the "W bridge" (whereas it should clearly be *city*, not *bridge*) in the poem, when the name of the city is in the title, just sounds oddly comical.

#### CAN THE CONCEPT "RELEVANT" BE EXTENDED?

As my discussion of the translation challenges and the instances of untranslatability in the two anthologies suggests, due to both objective reasons of untranslatability and subjective reasons of human error or misapprehension, many of the translated poems would not be considered "relevant" if judged solely by the criteria of quantity and quality as outlined by Derrida. Surprisingly, however, after his explanation of what a "relevant" (also referred to as "the best possible") translation would entail (Derrida 372), in a rather counterintuitive move Derrida admits that his translation of the English verb *seasons* as *relève* in French (in the line "when mercy seasons justice" from Portia's "The quality of mercy" speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*) "will not be answerable to [*relever de*] what is currently called a translation, a relevant translation" (382). Derrida suggests—again, counterintuitively—that "the most relevant translation (that which presents itself as the transfer of an intact signified through the inconsequential vehicle of any signifier whatsoever) is the least relevant possible" (382). What he proposes instead is more of "a transaction, transformation, travail, *travel* – and a treasure trove," which "puts to work the languages, first of all, without adequation or transparency, here assuming the shape of a new writing or rewriting as performative or poetic" (384).

Derrida concludes his essay by returning to the idea of the relevant, invoking Walter Benjamin's view of translation as the survival/afterlife of the original and insisting that "every translation should be relevant by vocation" (385). In this section, following Derrida's urging, I attempt to extend the concept of "relevance" so that it would apply not only to what translations say but what they do, or in other words, so that it would reflect not only meaning per se but also meaningfulness. For bilingual readers like

myself (i.e., those who understand both English and the original Slavic language), the debate about the quality of some translations in the two anthologies may never be completely resolved. For anglophone audiences around the world who cannot read Ukrainian or Russian, these translations will be relevant primarily by vocation: they are packaged as war poems and as poems reflecting current events; thus their relevance lies in the meaningfulness of their overall message rather than their quality or the meanings of specific poems, lines, or words.

In his endorsement of *Words for War* on the anthology's website, poet and scholar Charles Bernstein enumerates various functions and facets of Ukrainian war poems in English translation: "*Words for War* is not your conventional poetry of witness but poetry and collective translation as intervention, complicity, weapon . . . Poetry in the service of poetry. Poetry on the front lines." To call for words (or poems) to metaphorically serve as weapons is immediately evocative of a famous poem by Lesia Ukrainka, one of Ukraine's most prominent modernist writers. It opens with the lyrical protagonist's emotional appeal to words, asking why they are *not* weapons. The full stanza (in Peter Tempest's translation) reads as follows: "Why are my words not like steel brightly flashing / Out in the field where two armies are clashing? / Why not a sabre whose pitiless blows / Cut off the heads of our bitterest foes?" (Ukrainka). After the initial violent image of decapitation, Ukrainka, whose health was deteriorating but whose spirit remained unflinching, prophesies in the following stanzas that some "unknown brothers" will be able to employ her "(s)/word" even more effectively against tyrants and oppressors: "My only weapon, dear words that I cherish, / We must ensure that not both of us perish! / Wielded by brothers we do not yet know, / You may do better in routing the foe." What Ukrainka must have had in mind is most likely the future generations of Ukrainian writers and thinkers. But given how strongly she echoes Benjamin's concept of afterlife (from "The Translator's Task") and how she herself was heavily invested in translation, it is not unreasonable to believe that by "unknown brothers" she may have also meant translators, whose primary role of linguistic experts, cultural mediators, and artists is supplemented, if not superseded, by political activism.

The unprecedented political significance and relevance of the translations in both anthologies lie primarily in their giving voice to the formerly colonized, oppressed, marginalized, and underrepresented—or, to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak, in letting the subaltern speak. The subaltern in this case is colonized Ukraine vis-à-vis colonizer Russia (imperial and Soviet), which for centuries has been imposing its discourse on Ukraine and silencing all things Ukrainian. *Words for War* and *Letters from Ukraine* are not the first translation anthologies of post-1991 Ukrainian literature, but they are the first volumes of such magnitude to be devoted to a specific (and

very tragic) topic. The key objective of both projects, therefore, was not only to share the best selections from contemporary Ukrainian poetry (which, to be clear, they did anyway), but to draw the world's attention to Ukraine's current plight and to demonstrate that this war has lasted so long that war poetry has become a genre in its own right—a horrifying fact when one stops to think about it.

The impact of these translations on the anglophone public is difficult to measure (which is true about poetry in general), but whatever it may be, in terms of outreach translations cannot compete with journalism or social media. Yet, back in 2016 and 2017 (when *Letters from Ukraine* and *Words for War* came out), contributors to both anthologies had the courage to call a war a war (rather than merely a conflict or confrontation) at a time when not many politicians and reporters directly admitted the truth about Russia's role in this war, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of its involvement.

Whereas the lack of a united constructive response to Russian aggression from the western world continues to reflect (or even be justified by) the *hybridity*<sup>12</sup> of this war (a term that is sometimes incorrectly interpreted to imply that the war is invisible, hyperreal, or “unreal”), both anthologies offer aesthetic perspectives of those who fight this war every day and continue to lose their loved ones. For example, Borys Humenyuk's untitled poem “Our platoon commander is a strange man” reads:

A strange man, I say.  
 But today he outdid himself  
 In the early morning, he entered our tent and said  
 That's it! No more war today!  
 That's what they announced on TV—  
 War is done for three whole days.  
 ...  
 We were getting our weapons and ammo ready  
 When our weird platoon commander  
 Shocked us with this news.  
 ...  
 On the first day of no war  
 We lost our machine gun loader.... (Humenyuk 28–29)

Moreover, both collections offer an aesthetic response to Russian propaganda and provide ground for a comparison between politicized

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<sup>12</sup> As Hans Petter Midttun explains, “it implies a war of mixed character or composed of different elements,” a war that “seeks to weaken and subdue” (rather than to destroy), a war “whose ultimate aim is to exploit the protest potential of the Ukrainian population, ensuring a weak government willing to compromise with Russia” (“Hybrid War”).

poetry that acts as propaganda and poetry that engages with political issues but remains art. One telling example of the former is a book of collective authorship edited by Vladimir Vinnikov and entitled *The Russian Spring: An Anthology of Poetry*,<sup>13</sup> which, based on the sample poem footnoted below, can be taken seriously only if viewed as either parody or propaganda.

Finally, the translations in *Letters from Ukraine* and *Words for War* are relevant because they allow Ukrainian poems that capture local experiences to transcend their immediate context and exist in relation to universal values by acquiring and speaking, in a Benjaminian sense, a pure language, one that simultaneously invites translation and at the same time requires no translation. An example of such a profoundly simple and lucid poem comes from Humenyuk. In a metaliterary and self-reflexive piece entitled “Not a Poem in Forty Days,” he writes,

Poetry is the shortcut to heaven.  
Poetry sees into the void.  
When you fall  
It lets you remember your way back.  
Poetry went places  
Where there isn't place for poetry.  
Poetry witnessed it all.  
Poetry witnessed it all. (Humenyuk 36–38)

This poem reminds us of the testimonial and cathartic functions of poetry but also illustrates an important function mentioned by Bernstein, that of “poetry [being] in the service of poetry.”

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<sup>13</sup> Hoping that the Latin saying “*epistola non erubescit*” (“paper does not blush”) is true, I will quote one short poem by Igor' Karaulov: “Nazovite molodykh poetov, – / poprosil tovarishch tsekhovoi / Nazovu ia molodykh poetov / Motorola, Bezler, Mozgovoi. / Kto v bibliotekakh, kto v khinkal'niakh / a oni poety na voine / Aktual'nye iz aktual'nykh / i kontemporarnye vpolne / ... krov'iu dobyvaetsia v atake / nezatertykh slov boepripas. / Khokku tam ne pishutsia, a tanki / Ilovaisk shturmuiut i Parnas.” A gloss translation reads: “Name some young poets / a factory comrade asked me / I'll name some young poets / Motorola, Bezler, Mozgovoi / Some stay in libraries / others in khinkali diners / but they, conversely, are the poets at war / the cream of the mainstream / and quite contemporary too / ... shedding blood in battle gains them / the ammunition of unhackneyed words / hokku isn't written there / but tank-a-s are / rushing Ilovaisk and Parnassus.” All three “poets” mentioned in this poem were insurgency militia field commanders. Today, Motorola, Russian citizen Arsen Pavlov's nom de guerre, and Aleksei Mozgovoi are dead after infighting, while Igor' Bezler is no longer involved in the war and lives in Russia-occupied Crimea, according to Grigory Alexandrov's article “Where Are They Now?”



## RECEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY UKRAINIAN LITERATURE AND THE UNTRANSLATABILITY OF POETRY

To conclude, I briefly consider the bigger picture of the anglophone reception of contemporary Ukrainian literature and the broader issue of the (un)translatability of poetry. Although literary translation, especially from less commonly translated languages/cultures like Ukrainian, remains largely underappreciated, underpaid, and understudied, in recent years English translations of Ukrainian literature have been, relatively speaking, on the rise. This positive dynamic is reflected in the growing number of single-author volumes and, more importantly, of anthologies produced in the last decade. The monumental *From Three Worlds: New Writing from Ukraine* (1996) and *Sto rokiv iunosti: Antolohiia ukrains'koi poezii XX st. v anhlomovnykh perekladakh / Hundred Years of Youth: A Bilingual Anthology of 20th-Century Ukrainian Poetry* (2000) were followed by *In a Different Light: A Bilingual Anthology of Ukrainian Literature* (2008), *An Anthology of Modern Ukrainian Drama* (2012), *Herstories: An Anthology of new Ukrainian Women Prose Writers* (2014), *The Frontier: 28 Contemporary Ukrainian Poets* (2017), and, most importantly, *The White Chalk of Days: The Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series Anthology* (2017).

The number of translators working on such projects has also grown. For example, a total of 52 translators were involved in *Words for War* and *Letters from Ukraine*. As more translators are attracted to Ukrainian literature, working in collaborative teams that consist of poets (not just academics who have traditionally carried the burden), and as more stakeholders (“native informants,” poets, actors/performers, proofreaders, editors, publishers, reviewers, critics, literary organizations, conferences/readings) become involved in the processes of production and reception, translation of Ukrainian literature will continue to evolve from a parochial to a more cosmopolitan enterprise.

My analysis of the translation challenges and issues in the two anthologies confirms that content-vs.-form and domestication-vs.-foreignization, the two persisting dichotomies that frame the discourse of translation studies, continue to affect how translation is defined and practised. Few theoreticians and practitioners today need to be persuaded that literary translation, especially of poetry, demands not just reproduction but transformation, a highlighting and appreciating of the many levels on which meaningfulness is conveyed through forms and soundscapes, things that are part of literariness, of literary value. Yet, in reality, “reason” (to return to Nabokov’s catchy way of putting it) still too often continues to be privileged over “rhyme.” Due to the irreconcilable differences in contexts and sensibilities and the considerable asymmetries in forms between Slavic languages and English, many translation decisions are made in favour of



semantic value over literariness. And the belief in the possibility of capturing and transferring the “intact signified” (in the words of Derrida) manifests the utopian pursuit of equivalence or adequacy, which, ironically, often results in “irrelevance.” “Creative transposition,” Jakobson’s solution for poetry translation, which many of us wish he could have further elaborated, seems to be clear on transposition but less so on the “creative” part, as the “just-about-right” amount of creativity and the extent of poetic license are yet to be determined (131). Similarly, despite rigorous advocacy for foreignization by scholars like Lawrence Venuti (and others), domestication—which often results in “fluent” but “smoothed-out” translations produced at the expense of stylistic and cultural nuances or formal properties—remains a “default safe mode,” a “necessary evil,” a trade-off between a translation and no translation.

The question of the untranslatability of poetry remains open, and this status quo can be viewed as useful. On the one hand, as any completed translation project, including the two anthologies in question, would testify, poetry is translatable: it has been and will be translated, the only caveat being “how effectively?” (which in most cases is a judgment call). On the other hand, untranslatability—“as a matter of aspect, kind or degree” or “in the shape of connotation, nuance or poetic quality” (in Theo Hermans’s apt description)—nonetheless persists (302). Perhaps this could be seen not as an obstacle or failure on the translator’s part, but as a stimulus, a positive creative challenge encouraging the translator to look for new solutions. Ultimately, from the translator’s perspective, a “relevant” translation depends on the translator’s ability to explore the potential of the target language to capture those echoes of the original; to strike a balance between the author’s and their own voices; to creatively experiment with the intertexts and contexts, especially when originals resist; and, most importantly, to strive to create a work of art rather than a copy that is “faithful” but deficient as literature. From the audience’s perspective, a “relevant” translation depends on the subjective response of an individual reader, which, among other things, varies based on whether the reader knows both languages. Those who speak only the target language might be more inclined to celebrate translation and appreciate the gain, whereas those who speak the original language might be more prone to focus on the loss. Both types of readers will hopefully recognize the importance of these afterlives of Ukrainian war poems as they offer an aesthetic testimony to the tragic events and experiences of war, pay symbolic tribute to the victims, promote historical justice, enrich international poetic heritage, and invite future reinterpretations and (re)translations.

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