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## THE TEXT OF THE UKRAINIAN WAR IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

*This article delves into a significant and evolving branch of contemporary American literature – war literature, which vividly portrays present-day military conflicts. The article embraces fiction and non-fiction of purely American authors and authors with Ukrainian roots, addressing the Ukrainian topic within the scope of their works. The aim of this publication is to thoroughly examine and analyze how contemporary American authors depict the Ukrainian War. The publication explores the narrative techniques these authors employ to present war as a text, such as non-linear narrative, fragmentation, and metafiction, and highlights these works as modern examples of Ukrainian “witness literature.”*

*Research has shown that the American authors portraying the military experience, do it in a sort of fragmented way, limited by brief diplomatic perspectives rather than direct encounters. However, for North American writers of Ukrainian descent, composing in English, the reality of today’s conflict remains distant, with its true nature staying elusive. Their works thus contribute to a unique branch of American migrant literature, filled with a profound yet bittersweet nostalgia for Ukraine – its landscapes, people, and cultural heritage. This literature serves as a crucial space for honoring Ukrainian identity, albeit with a sense of longing shaped by displacement. Ukraine, as a heritage and identity marker, feels simultaneously prideful and distant, adding depth to their narratives about the challenges of cultural preservation in exile. The country’s complex history, marked by shared traumas such as the Holodomor and Soviet repression, deepens the theme of collective suffering woven throughout these works, highlighting the vital role of literature in preserving culture.*

**Key words:** *witness literature, cultural preservation, nostalgia, heritage, observer.*

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## ТЕКСТ УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВІЙНИ В СУЧАСНІЙ АМЕРИКАНСЬКІЙ ЛІТЕРАТУРІ

*Стаття присвячена воєнній американській літературі як динамічному напрямку американської писемності, що яскраво віддзеркалює сучасні військові конфлікти. У статті розглядаються художні та нехудожні твори як суто американських авторів, так і авторів українського походження, які у своїй творчості звертаються до української тематики. Мета публікації – надати ґрунтовний аналіз образу Українського військового конфлікту*

у творах сучасних американських авторів. Публікація досліджує нарративні техніки відображення тексту війни, такі як нелінійний наратив, фрагментація та метафікція, і виділяє ці твори як сучасні приклади американської та україно-американської «літератури свідчення».

Дослідження показало, що військовий досвід у творах американських авторів відзначений фрагментарністю, нарративна перспектива є обмеженою короткими дипломатичними місіями. Одночасно для північноамериканських письменників українського походження, що пишуть англійською мовою, реальність сьогоденного конфлікту залишається віддаленою, а його сутність примарна. Між тим, проаналізовані тексти формують унікальну гілку американської іммігрантської літератури, наповненої глибокою, але водночас гіркою ностальгією за Україною – її ландшафтами, людьми та культурною спадщиною. Цей шар літератури є важливим простором для вшанування української ідентичності, осяяної тугою, зумовленою розлукою. Україна, як спадщина та маркер ідентичності, одночасно викликає гордість і дається далекою, що додає глибини авторським нарративам, які прагнуть зберегти культуру у вигнанні. Складна історія країни, позначена спільними травмами, такими як Голодомор та радянські репресії, поглиблює тему колективних страждань, вплетену у ці твори, підкреслюючи важливу роль літератури у збереженні культури.

**Ключові слова:** література свідчення, збереження культури, ностальгія, спадщина, спостерігач.

**Problem statement.** American literature has a rich record of portraying war, shifting from celebrating patriotic battles to deeply exploring the psychological, ethical, and social consequences of conflict. This historical survey of war in American literature highlights prominent themes, imagery, and literary techniques. Certain epochs and deals with inner conflicts and cross-boundary turbulences can structure the topic of war. Thus, the Revolutionary War and early American conflicts, depicted in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and the poetry of Philip Freneau, frequently spotlighted patriotic ideals, exploiting allegory and symbolism to present war as a righteous struggle for liberty, dwelling on the topics of national pride, heroism, and sacrifice. Civil War Eras, reflected in Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*, Herman Melville's *Battle-Pieces*, and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, focus on the horror and brutality of the military clashes and slide into a more personal and compassionate tone. With the arrival of WWI and WWII, works such as *Three Soldiers* by John Dos Passos and *One of Ours* by Willa Cather, *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut offer critical perspectives on the events of those days. The prevailing themes of the period are disillusionment and the loss of innocence, criticism of bureaucracy, the absurdity of war, and the dehumanizing effects on soldiers. The authors employed irony and ambiguity, questioning notions of patriotism and heroism, or produced a satire of the absurdity of military bureaucracy, selecting the technique of nonlinear narrative and fragmentation to address the traumatic war experience. The contemporary clashes involving American forces and, as a result, traumatizing American society revolve around the Vietnam War and Post-9/11 Conflicts (Iraq and Afghanistan). The fiction of the Vietnam cycle includes *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, *Dispatches* by Michael Herr, and *A Rumor of War* by Philip Caputo. These types of texts investigate

the moral ambiguity of the Vietnam War, focusing on individual soldiers' experiences, guilt, and alienation. Vivid descriptions of the jungle and chaotic warfare convey the sensory overload and confusion of combat. The choice of literary techniques distinguishes the metafictional approach, blurring the line between fact and fiction, questioning the truth in storytelling, gritty realism, and detailed reportage to present an unfiltered view of war. On the other hand, Post 9/11 Conflicts, represented by *Redeployment* by Phil Klay, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* by Ben Fountain, and *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers, focus on the psychological aftermath of war, examining themes of PTSD, moral injury, and the disconnection between soldiers and civilians. Writers employ fragmented structures and introspective storytelling methods to convey trauma. As an author-veteran, Powers uses lyrical prose and symbolism to illustrate the lingering impact of war on memory. In such a way, American war literature has thus shifted from patriotic idealism to complex, often critical portrayals of war, using a range of literary devices – realism, modernism, satire, and metafiction – to question its impact on the human psyche and society. This evolution mirrors changing attitudes toward conflict and the growing understanding of its psychological toll on individuals.

The topic of the Ukrainian War emerged in American literature as a new phenomenon. Unlike the types of war mentioned above, American involvement in the current clash is not defined by their inner human resources. It predominantly influences American society through the realm of economy. Consequently, the American person in objective reality and, therefore, a lyrical character turns into a watcher rather than a participant, which gives the texts a new perspective of depiction.

**The analysis of the main studies and publications.** American scholars producing academic works investigating Ukrainian military topics predominantly deal with the war's geopolitical, military, social,

and cultural dimensions rather than the literary ones. Consequently, the “*The Russia-Ukraine War Study Project*,” updated in 2023 and published by Eric Hartunian, is a part of the U.S. Army War College’s research, which addresses strategic military implications and scenarios related to the conflict, with a particular focus on NATO and U.S. policies. “*Path Dependent: Positioning Ukrainian War Memorials in a Post-Soviet Landscape*” by Anna Glew, published in *Canadian Slavonic Papers* in 2021, investigates how post-Soviet war memorials in Ukraine’s Poltava region are reinterpreted in the context of the ongoing Ukraine conflict, highlighting the role of symbolic spaces in cultural memory. “*Between the Home and Kin-State: Self-Identification and Attachment of Ukrainians and Romanians in the Ukrainian-Romanian Borderland of Bukovina*” by Nadiia Bureiko et al., which appeared in *Problems of Post-Communism* in 2021, examines the war’s impact on identity and cultural attachment in border regions, specifically exploring Ukrainian and Romanian communities’ self-perception amid the tensions.

The topic of the Ukrainian War in domestic Ukrainian literature and its English-language translations was retraced by Tetiana Starostenko in the article “*War as a Text in the Online Diary by Serhiy Zhadan*” in 2022.

Thus, the topic of the Ukrainian War in American literature that has been cultivated in recent years hasn’t lost its relevance and topicality and remains an unstudied field.

**Statement of the task.** The present publication aims to explore and analyze the manifestation devices of war as a text in the dimensions of the works by contemporary American authors depicting the Ukrainian War and serving as a modern example of American and American-Ukrainian “witness literature.”

**Presentation of the main material.** One of the major works created at the initial dimension of the conflict war was the poetic collection by an Iowan writer, Christopher Merrill, “*On the Road to Lviv*”, published in October 2023. “*This chronicle/ Took shape the day the war began, which was/ My 65th birthday,*” states the author, who was born exactly on February 24, 1957 (Merrill, 2023).

In *On the Road to Lviv*, Christopher Merrill crafts an intricate, reflective narrative about Ukraine, intertwining the country’s wartime turmoil with his personal perspective as an observer of the unfolding conflict. His language captures the immediacy of war with striking imagery, such as “*smoke billowing from the ruins of Mariupol,*” blending concrete scenes with broader, introspective reflections on themes like identity and the human impact of war. Merrill’s style

is characterized by its vivid yet restrained language, honed through his experience as both poet and war correspondent. By juxtaposing moments of daily life in Ukraine with violent episodes and historical references, he builds a layered, “prismatic” narrative that mirrors the complex reality of wartime and represents evocative symbolic depictions of Ukraine’s landscapes and people. Characterising Christopher Merrill’s text, the American critic Carlene M. Gadapee says, “The poet-speaker follows an external journey in order to confront interior questions. However, in a break from the classic format, by the end of the poem, we are left wondering who – if anyone – is the hero and whether anyone can even be the hero of contemporary conflicts that are rooted in a history of shifting boundaries and betrayed loyalties. Merrill introduces individual voices that represent various viewpoints, and he embeds history and public figures from both centuries and decades past and from contemporary times as well. In this way, the reader is a witness to present-day events unfolding as a continuation of geographic and generational hostility in the setting of Eastern Europe” (Gadapee, 2023).

Even though the title of the book *On the Road to Lviv* limits the text locally, in Christopher Merrill’s poem “*The sandbags piled around the monument,*” the author clearly addresses non-Lviv images: “*The sandbags piled around the monument // In Kharkiv to Taras Shevchenko*” (Merrill, 2023). The eastern city of Kharkiv is written in the context of Ukrainian history by the monument of Taras Shevchenko, a symbol of challenging the authorities and the Empire, he used to belong to. However, the poem is not a dialogue between a writer from the present and a writer from the past, as it is in the works of British romantics. There is no conversation. There is no aimed monologue. The figure of Taras Shevchenko simply serves as the one alluded to as proof of the existence of the Ukrainian language and culture spun off from the bigger context: “*poet // And founder of a literature and language // The Russian soldiers firing at the city // Do not believe exists*” (Merrill, 2023). A parallel arises: from the dimension of the XIXth century, Taras Shevchenko continues his fight against the same enemy of his. Such appeal to this very poet contains a sense of certain superficiality, which brings the concept of the Ukrainian literary culture as a young one, rooted only in the XIXth century. On the other hand, it evokes the image of the spirality of history, making its comeback: “*To some of the ways in which poetic logic // Can shape experience for generations, // Unconsciously, surviving in a turn // Of phrase, a cadence, or an adage passed // Along in pillow talk*” (Merrill, 2023). The presence of Shev-

chenko is reinforced by the poem's last line: "*A black cloud hid a cloud of white*" (Merrill, 2023), directing the reader to the original text of the writer depicting the oppression against the invading neighbors: the Tatars and the Poles, and manifesting the Ukrainian desire for freedom, as well as questioning the issues of the undesirable alignment, or the role and the fate of a true leader (Shevchenko, 2024).

The poem represents a mixture of Biblical elements and the supernatural, spotlighting the Ukrainian nation as resurrected (Christ analogy) and at the same time the one of shady nature, like the spirits from the Ukrainian mythology living between the alive ones and having dared to manifest themselves: "*Against a ghostly nation resurrected*" (Merrill, 2023).

Against the background of history, the destiny of the ordinary people whose life path was altered by the war find their embodiment: "*Between a couple headed for divorce // A week before their neighbors went to war*" (Merrill, 2023).

The poem "*The Faithful Chanting in Armenian*" is more about digging deep into Ukrainian history rather than creating the image of today's war. The author is trying to find the roots of the contemporary problem, creating a salad from the disjoint historical pieces, "served in an inedible dish" with a counterfactual flavor. Jews, Poles, the Nazis, Stepan Bandera, the history of Ivano-Frankivsk and its first name Stanisławów, gulags, WWI and WWII. "In keeping with epic conventions", writes Carlene M. Gadapee, "the poet-speaker has a female guide who serves in the same way as Dante's Beatrice. Natalya, a "Foreign Service National," is not there to provide commentary, but to guide; in fact, she "[i]gnores all questions deemed political" (Gadapee, 2023). However, this silence becomes obvious to a native Ukrainian reader as the lyrical character is not seeking the answers; he has his own ones and is waiting for the proof of his own conclusions, which she is not going to provide. And the issues raised are not that simple, so "*Natalya // Would add this photograph to her report // On my diplomatic mission, which would be filed // At the State Department*" and "*did not dare to speak*" (Merrill, 2024). The lyrical hero sees himself as a diplomat, though the mission is totally disguised from the reader: "*On my diplomatic mission*", "*On this or my next mission to Ukraine*" (Merrill, 2024). He manifests himself as a witness and the interpreter of the changing relationships between the two countries: "*After the revolution: how the rise // Of forces independent of Kyiv // Would usher in a different understanding // Of the relationships between Ukraine // And Russia*" (Merrill, 2024). The poem alludes to Zagajewski the question he asks linked to the events of WWII: "*why*

*must every city become // Jerusalem and every man a Jew?*" (Merrill, 2024). The question directs towards the destruction issues, which is reinforced in the following lines: "*Might have been on the lips of anyone // Awaiting the arrival of the missiles // Launched from the Sea of Azov or the air // Space of their ruthless neighbor to the east*" (Merrill, 2024). In connection to the figure of Zagajewski, emerging in Merrill's poetry, Carlene Gadapee, represents the following intertextual chain: "On page 18, Merrill reintroduces Zagajewski by talking about a time when he was reading for a group of poets outdoors who "kept looking up, as if in prayer, / Since poetry is prayer." This is the central point of the poem: who can speak, to the wider global community and to God, about what is going on in Ukraine? Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his essay, "In Defence of Poetry," states that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." This is the role of the poet-speaker in *On the Road to Lviv*. Merrill uses elevated, biblical diction when he says that the poets in Zagajewski's audience come to "revel in the word made manifest," and he goes on to say "amen to the poets, then, who savor/ A blaze of words under the chestnut tree." (Gadapee, 2023).

The topic of Jews and the Nazis become a recurrent one in the collection. In the poem "*The globes of mistletoe in the bare tree*," the poet comes back to the SS and their crimes: "*And gloveless women hauling sleds of kindling // Along the icy path by the soccer pitch // On which SS shot the Jews*" (Merrill, 2023: 8). Silence, which is probably more relevant to the images of the concentration camp prisoners, characterizes a group of children near Kyiv, praying – an image strange for Modern Ukraine and its central, non-Catholic part: "*a silent colony // Of children singing prayers in unison*" (Merrill, 2023: 8). The very word "colony" itself bears a sense of imprisonment. The Chernobyl zone is present and is given as "*an irradiated area*" [p.8]. The poetic narrative is marked by various animalistic images traditionally used in literature as a sign of a battle: crows and wolves: "*And murders // Of crows clearing the road of carrion // Save for the wolf splayed on a drift of snow.*" (Merrill, 2023: 8).

The Biblical motif is linked to the images of the church in the same poem: "*Crowned with a green dome, onion-shaped and layered // With murals of the Savior resurrected*" (Merrill, 2023: 8). The image of a church is juxtaposed to the symbols of the Soviet communist regimes marked by atheism: "*Beyond the statues of the fallen order – // Of planes and tanks*" (Merrill, 2023: 8).

The Ukrainian topic appears in *This is not Propaganda. Adventures in the War against Reality* by Peter Pomerantsev, published in 2019. The timeframe

of the text automatically limits the author's perspective as the work doesn't spotlight the "hot" and wide-scale phase, revolving around the Crimean theme, balancing between the Soviet Era, Philippines, the Gulf of Finland, Balkans, Latin America, China and cities in Ukraine, like Chernivtsi or Odesa. The semantic lines revolve around the notions of disinformation war, the psychological and social impacts of information warfare on the sense of national identity, and the broader philosophical and moral questions. Bearing his personal grudge in connection to the KGB, who arrested his father in the Soviet times, the author creates the notions of 'The Weaponisation of Information', 'The Kremlin's Firehose of Falsehood' and 'The Digital Maginot Line' (Pomerantsev, 2019: 86). The text holds the image of Ukraine as a "laboratory" for disinformation tactics; state media is looked upon as such, creating a "fog of confusion". Altogether, the image of Ukraine in war is absent in the book, being unfamiliar to the author. Peter Pomerantsev's *This Is Not Propaganda* fits primarily within the creative nonfiction or literary journalism genre. It combines elements of investigative journalism, memoir, political analysis, and philosophical inquiry, making it a unique blend of genres that serve to explore complex topics in an accessible yet nuanced way.

In *Paper Bridge* by Vasyl Makhno (2022), Ukraine emerges as both a setting and a significant cultural presence, shaping the themes of memory, identity, and displacement throughout the book. Makhno, a Ukrainian poet and writer who has spent much of his life abroad, uses Ukraine as a touchstone in exploring personal and collective history, belonging, and the tensions between past and present. Through Makhno's reflections on Ukrainian identity and history, *Paper Bridge* illustrates the complex emotions and experiences tied to his homeland. Ukraine represents a wellspring of memories, and Makhno's portrayal is infused with a deep nostalgia. Ukraine, particularly the landscapes of his youth, becomes a "paper bridge" connecting him to his origins and to a sense of place that time and distance cannot sever. Thus, the "paper bridge" symbolizes a fragile but enduring connection to Ukraine. The dominant semantic lines are as follows: an exploration of Ukrainian identity and exile, historical and cultural context, personal and collective exile, loss, and resilience. The collection of poetry doesn't hold any military images. The poetry produces the feeling of elusive autumn-like nostalgia (especially in the first part) recognized through some domestic realia, symbols, and hints: "If palms have thistles // If rivers are milky and sour // Then New York beacons flash // From all directions, from random slopes // Into shattered // Unreliable hearts"

(Makhno, 2022: 63); "The Magi would not oversleep, they would not miss the star // The one that said "I will guide you" // Golden like gingerbread with thickened honey // Golden like cinnamon // I say to the star: guide the heart of the fish and its fin <...> The light sprinkled them with camel's milk // I say, today I am lost // And behind the star that awakened me // The door opened // I lay in the heart of a fish with a skinny fin // An angel licked her lips // Covering her eyes with transparent wings // And paper fibers" (Makhno, 2022: 69); "Your body is your home, your eye is a lantern // But when the lantern goes out, or the ocean wind // begins to blow // Who will shine upon you? - And then that thing about the cheek // They listened and didn't know how these words // would come to life // How easing your breath would ease your spirit // And the honeybee swayed on the thistle" (Makhno, 2022: 73); "I write books. Are you surprised? // Loneliness turns you inside out // Mice stroll along the ceiling // A familiar thrush alights // And cleans its green tail and feathers // In this paper desert" (Makhno, 2022: 83). Quotes reflecting his feelings of being between worlds, carrying Ukraine with him even while abroad, would appear throughout the text as he explores the "bridge" of memory that links him back to his roots.

The book 2017, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* by Anne Applebaum, although it addresses the Ukrainian topic, deals with the non-military reality, examining the devastating impact of the 1932–1933 Holodomor. It dwells on the ideas of independence and self-definition, arguing that the Holodomor remains vital to Ukraine's national consciousness (Applebaum, 2017).

*Dancing in Odessa* by Ilya Kaminsky (2004) is a rich, lyrical collection of poems that delves into themes of memory, identity, exile, and language, with Ukraine woven deeply into its fabric. Born in Odessa, Ukraine, Kaminsky emigrated to the United States as a teenager, and in this collection, he interlaces Ukrainian history, culture, and his own sense of nostalgia, capturing both a profound connection to and a sense of distance from his birthplace. In these poems, Ukraine emerges as a complex symbol – representing heritage, loss, and the poet's fragmented sense of self. Below is an analysis of how the theme of Ukraine unfolds in *Dancing in Odessa*. The timeframe of publication is again non-military, and all the military images, if they appear, are linked to WWII: "the German tanks on tractors, I kept a suitcase full // of Brodsky's poems." (Kaminsky, 2004: 19). In *Dancing in Odessa*, Ukraine is more than a geographical setting; it is the heart of Kaminsky's emotional and poetic landscape. Through themes of nostalgia, cultural resonance, language,

displacement, and mysticism, Kaminsky paints a portrait of Ukraine that is both deeply personal and universally resonant: “*I was born in the city named after Odysseus // and I praise no nation – // to the rhythm of snow // an immigrant’s clumsy phrases fall into speech. // But you asked // for a story with a happy ending. Your loneliness // played its lyre. I sat // on the floor, watching your lips.*” (Kaminsky, 2004: 56–57). In Kaminsky’s hands, Ukraine becomes both a lost paradise and a wellspring of inspiration, a place that profoundly shapes his identity and creativity. And anyway, the collection is hopeful and manifests existential spirit: “*If I speak for the dead, I must leave // this animal of my body, // I must write the same poem over and over, // for an empty page is the white flag of their surrender <...> Yes, I live. I can cross the streets asking “What year is it?” // I can dance in my sleep and laugh // in front of the mirror*” (Kaminsky, 2004: 8).

**The conclusion and investigation perspectives:** Thus, the topic of the Ukrainian War is one of the branches of War literature in the USA. It has emerged both in poetry and non-fiction. However, for an American far-distanced author, military reality is more fragmented, lived through only during short diplomatic missions. Although all the writers try to go deep into the historical labyrinth, their perception is politically predetermined and doesn’t convey the

‘true’ feelings that a real witness may bear. The writers of Ukrainian roots living in North America and creating in English don’t know the contemporary war, and its real face is more elusive. Their literature makes another branch of American migrant literature. Ukrainian migrant writers frequently evoke their homeland with a deep sense of longing, remembering its landscapes, people, and cultural traditions. This nostalgia is often bittersweet, reflecting both admiration and sorrow for a Ukraine they can no longer fully access. These writers use references to folklore, language, and national symbols to keep Ukrainian culture alive on the page. Their works often serve as bridges connecting past and present, providing an artistic space to honor and preserve Ukrainian cultural identity despite physical separation. Ukraine is both a source of pride and an identity marker that feels distant and complicated in the context of displacement. This tension creates a layered narrative that speaks to the challenges of preserving one’s heritage in exile. Ukrainian history, particularly the traumas of events like the Holodomor and Soviet oppression, leads to the topic of collective suffering.

The investigation of the topic can be extended towards examining the Ukrainian topic within contemporary English-language works of literature, i.e., British, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand.

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