A Re-Invention of Language: War, National Community and a Poetics of the First-Person Plural

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In this essay I explore how, in times of crisis, literary discourse constructs, maintains, and questions the fraught "we" of a nation across a variety of genres. In a well-known argument Benedict Anderson defines nations, these relatively young social formations, as imagined communities and suggests that the two genres particularly adept in the task of imagining such communities have been the novel and the newspaper. For example, when a novel addresses its readers with a "we," it implies an expectation that there exists a (linguistic, ethnic or other) community that can partake in this address.[1] The novel "with its 'prosaics' turned the idea of society based on a common language, traditions, habits, and space into something natural, everyday, and real" (Juvan 383; see also Anderson 27). The link between issues of national definition and literature wanes with the "progressive separation between the literary and political orders" (Casanova 133), but at times of great crisis we can again see it very clearly. Recently, Pascale Casanova has put forward a distinction between "combative literatures" and "pacified or non-engaged ones" (133) to describe the enmeshment of the political and national struggles and the literary-aesthetic concerns in certain historical conditions. In what follows, I rely on her idea of "combative literature" in a narrow sense, to refer to a national literature in times of war.

War obviously changes literary production—as well as the role of the writer in society—and it does so in many ways. One specific aspect, in which I am interested here, is the reactivation of the manifold quest for language: the ability to use pre-war structures and words, the need for new forms of expression that would at least approximately convey the new reality, horrific and incomprehensible at first, and, importantly, the possibility of referring to the imagined and contradictory national community as "we." "Nation" becomes a prominent—actively lived—category of collective identification in times of war. It is, however, difficult to bring this category

1 At the same time, as Jernej Habjan elaborates, the novel has become a global genre with transnational circulation so that the ties between the novel and nation rely on extratexual reality to clarify the meaning of the "we" reference (464).

into literary theory without invoking also the much more suspicious notion of "nationalism." But, as Etienne Balibar reminds us in relation to the Russian-Ukrainian war, "there is no such thing as a 'nation' without nationalism, hence an absolute rejection of nationalism as a reactionary ideology per se is meaningless, unless we decide that the nation-form itself should be rejected." Rather than avoiding these categories, or pretending that world literature and its theory exist only in cosmopolitan circulation (usually in English) and in a world without nation-states, scholars of literature must find ways of coming to terms with the continuing significance of the idea of "nation" in many literatures today, especially those in a combative state.

War is also a more general characteristic of the twenty-first century and a global structuring influence on the aesthetics of literary forms, as, for example, Debjani Ganguly explores. Ganguly singles out three global developments significant for the world-literary aesthetics that occurred after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union: the global proliferation of war and violence, developments in information technologies, which make distant suffering a feature of everyday life, and, as a consequence, a new humanitarian sensibility (10). These conditions, according to Ganguly, give rise to "a new kind of novel as a global literary form" (1). Selecting representative examples of the new genre, Ganguly, however, omits anything written in "Eastern Europe or the erstwhile Soviet Union" (6) and focuses on an Anglophone context—metropolitan or postcolonial—which, in turn, leads to an omission of distinctive socio-aesthetic questions preoccupying the newly independent post-communist states, including concerns of national (self)definition.[2] But, as Hrvoje Tutek demonstrates, if the Soviet Union were to be approached as an integral part of our global historical system, then this would reveal the formative influences on the cultural forms, caused by its dissolution, also in literatures outside the socialist bloc (5). This trajectory of influence is usually left unexplored and the literary cultures of what was formerly known as the "Second World" are assumed to follow the patterns visible from the world-literary core—such as those of the global novel. With this in mind, I intend this article to contribute to a larger project of the reconstruction of the "second-world" literatures within the current investigations of collective agency and, more generally, within the world-literary geographies at large.

The "combative" state of the literary field in post-1990s Eastern Europe, arguably, continuously challenges the novel for its cultural authority—even if its international prestige remains undeniable—and makes it compete with other, non-novelised literary forms (Bekhta, "Literatures"). When it comes to genres, in times of a particu-

2 Ganguly's rationale for the omission is that the end of the Cold War has had a lot more repercussions beyond the habitually discussed ones of the capitalist unification of the world and the end of Soviet communism (6). This is a valid point and yet a comparative study including examples from all of the former "Three Worlds" would most likely cast the global novel in a new light.

larly dramatic crisis, the stable narrative structures and the established conventions of the novel arguably start to feel too static; they cannot capture the reality at a breaking point, in the immediacy of this process. The novelistic representation needs temporal distance to its object and the novel's narrative form also imposes a particular set of possibilities and limitations on its material. Narrative, at its most basic, is a form of sense-making and thought that constructs a temporal whole, providing a closure that causally relates its various elements and thus endows them with meaning (Walsh 14). This is not to say that the object of narrative interest is necessarily complete, temporally rounded, or finite. But these are features—and side effects—of a specifically narrative mode of comprehension (Walsh). In times of war, the future of any kind of temporal progression is in jeopardy and the social time is radically open-ended in a way that resists narrative closure ("Will there be the next day?"). In times of war, it would seem, poetry, drama, essay and non-narrative genres come to the forefront as more fitting forms of speaking about reality.[3]

In what follows, I will rely on the work of two Ukrainian writers, Serhiy Zhadan and Kateryna Kalytko, and explore the variety of genres in which they write, in order to trace the shape and meaning of the communal "we" of the nation in times of crisis. I construct my argument based on their recent poetry collections, dramas, essays, and interviews. This combination of literary and non-literary discourses will allow me to stay close to how Ukrainian society "thinks itself" (following the method from Alain Badiou, *The Century*), in an attempt to avoid a premature imposition of a certain designation that would arrest the movement of the we-discourse into a static notion (such as a particular notion of "nation"). I approach the problem of communal self-definition—and the overarching theme of this collected volume—via the pronoun "we" since to me it seems that, in contemporary philosophy and political thought, precisely this pronoun offers a form of expression of a utopian desire for an egalitarian future and formal placeholder for a collective agent that could bring about such a future (see Bekhta, "The Promise").

Absent Pronouns

Before the early morning of the February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine in the open (as opposed to, e.g., its unmarked troops in Crimea in 2014), the war had already been going on for eight years in a localized and hybrid mode. Eight years meant, amongst other things, a lot of reflection on how long this war would still continue and what kind of future was in store for Ukraine and its people. Serhiy Zhadan, in his 2020 essay in the collection *The Future We Want* (Kebuladze), asked

3 See also the WReC on the "irrealist" aesthetic of the (semi-)peripheral novel and its anti-narrative tendencies.

precisely this question: "What will come after?" (Zhadan, «Що буде потім?» 66). He did not have any ready answers and, in any case, answers from 2020 would hold less validity now. But what is of interest in the context of my article is Zhadan's language:

> We often talk about how everything will be after the war. Except, who do I mean when I say, "we often talk"? Most likely, it's a very subjective and distorted echo of those, with whom you speak. In other words, this phrase doesn't lay claims to objectivity, to being an analysis of social trends and of societal rhetoric. When it comes to this war, what kind of rhetoric does the society have? Does such a joint rhetoric even exist? I don't have a clue. But from time to time, I face this question: How will everything be after the war? […]
> How would we all (yes, yes, again with the "we") like to see the future of [our] children? (69–70; my translation)

A striking feature of this passage is uncertainty: Seemingly speaking about a widely discussed topic, Zhadan qualifies his every sentence. This uncertainty reflects a new social situation for language: the uncertainty or even suspension of the future in times of an indefinite war. Zhadan is struggling to find the right language not only to speak about the future–a futile speculation, it seems—but to speak on behalf of a national community as community, as a society with a consolidated position on the issues that are vital to its survival. Being a well-known poet, performer, and activist, Zhadan's social standing is an important one and thus there is a lot of weight to his "we," which leads to self-reflection on whether he can indeed speak on behalf of the national community. His "we," Zhadan qualifies, is a reverberation of his interlocutors. It is his interpretation that they share his position and, as with any interpretation, you cannot be absolutely sure how much of it is your own projection.

Normally, any social group contains various internal contradictions but these do not prevent the group members from identifying themselves as members of this particular group.[4] What matters for the cohesion of a social group is a certain baseline of agreement. Where does this baseline lie? Zhadan's uncertainty about the "we"-reference, similarly to other authors in the collection of essays *The Future We Want*,[5] put together by the Ukrainian philosopher Vakhtang Kebuladze, illuminates the tensions gripping Ukrainian society in 2020, in the sixth year of the "small" Russian-Ukrainian war. Zhadan, a native of the Luhansk region himself, has been aware of

4 For my discussion of this issue, on the basis of Cohen, see Bekhta, *We-Narratives*, 30-35.

5 For example, Andrei Kurkov, several pages into his essay, suddenly checks himself: "I have just allowed myself to say 'we', 'us', 'ourselves'. But it would be more honest to switch into singular—'I', 'me', 'myself'. As I said, we are a commonwealth/brotherhood [співдружність] and an 'rival-hood' [співворожість] of all possible and impossible figures-identities of our society, of our state" (109; my translation).

the painful contradictions within Donbas, partly occupied since 2014, where the allegiances to Ukraine or Russia or, beyond any nationality, to a local community or even to local "extralegal" business groups[6] would even divide families, and people closest to each other would fight on the different sides of the trenches.

But the large-scale Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 has dramatically redrawn the way Ukrainians see themselves in terms of group belonging. Judging by the public and literary discourse in the tragic year that followed, the new war consolidated the Ukrainian society to an extent unseen since 1991, the year of independence. While it is too soon to make any generalizations about the emergence of the new social agency and a new political identity in Ukraine, in the next section of the article I consider in more detail the first traces of this change and the possible trajectories for the development of Ukraine as a collective subject. In this section I stay with the pre-2022 state of affairs and briefly elaborate the causes of the delayed consolidation. (While my explorations are discourse-based, any discursive operations of the construction of the national "we" are underpinned by the material conditions of bodies "acting in concert," as Simone Knewitz, referencing Judith Butler, outlines in her essay in this volume (27). These collective acts range from demonstrations and uprisings to the physical defence of what is perceived as one's land).

Yulia Yurchenko, dissecting the socio-economic and political transformations in Ukraine between 1991 and 2014, notes that "the Ukrainian nation as an imagined community was weak when the country became independent and remained as such until the insurrection of 2013–2014" (20). In their struggle for political power,

6 That allegiance to a certain business fraction would constitute an identity element for a social group is significant. Large parts of Luhansk and Dontesk oblasts in Eastern Ukraine lie on the Donets Coal Basin (popular shortening: "Donbas"), with coal miners being the largest social group in this region. In their 1993 study of the transformations in the working class and the miner's movement after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Vadim Borisov and Simon Clark make several observations that help contextualize the difficulty of assessing social identities in this region. Coal mining in the Ukrainian Donbas begun already within the borders of the Russian empire and attracted large numbers of peasant migrants from the central governorates of the empire so that in 1993, according to Borisov and Clark, 54 percent of the population in Donbas identified themselves as Russian. At the same time, social identity of coal miners (the privileged and most numerous fraction of the working class in the region until the collapse of the Soviet Union) was constructed not so much in national or ethnic terms as in opposition to the official ideology of the Soviet Union (39). After the Union's dissolution, new categories of the capitalist alternative became defining, such as entrepreneur or business owner (39, 43). This, I should add, would lead to people's allegiances being tied to various competing business fractions. The economic and political instability that followed 1991 created a fruitful ground for criminal businesses and the rise of the so-called "mafia", which started to compete with—or even substitute—weakened state institutions. In other words, the "nation state" (держава) in Donbas would, in some cases, be a maximally abstract and distant phenomenon.

the newly formed capitalist blocs of Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk business elites relied chiefly on antagonistic methods that would manufacture simplified and homogenised identity narratives, subsuming various social, religious and linguistic groups in post-Soviet Ukraine, and pit them against each other (15). The political influence of the Dnipropetrovsk bloc clearly dominated the period of 1991–1998/1999, while in 1998/1999-2004 the Donetsk bloc acquired noticeable political leverage. After the "short interregnum of 2004–2007" (16), the Donetsk bloc has usurped state power in 2007–2013/2014. Without any meaningful ideological differences between the two rival blocs, their competition for political influence had to rely on the increasing "compartmentalization of society, the myths of 'two Ukraines' and each of them being the other's 'Other'" (17; see also 59). Often framed as ethnic or linguistic (chiefly, between Ukrainians and Russians), various conflicts in Ukraine have been "ideational/political, effective and manipulated rather than causal, and [they] can be interpreted as structural ruptures necessitated by shifts in the balance of power within and between social blocs, classes and their fractions […]. The true conflicts are class formation and accumulation struggles between foreign and domestic capital" (18), including Russian business stakes in Ukraine.[7]

In short, as a newly independent nation-state with a Soviet legacy, Ukraine's social, and political contradictions have been inextricably tied to the economic imperatives of neoliberal capitalism and the accompanying fundamental transformation of society's foundational institutions. These contradictions, going hand-in-hand with the manufacturing of the social reality by (domestic and foreign) political technologists (128–151), preclude any simplified analyses of the social problems within post-1991 Ukraine as well as of the reasons behind the Russian invasion (including the Kremlin tale of the "persecution of the Russian speakers").[8] While the dominant political narratives, both within Ukraine and outside, rely on antagonistic simplifications, Ukrainian society itself is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious (17; see also Bojcun). And trying to speak *on behalf* of the Ukrainian society, as Zhadan attempts to do in 2020, is always a challenging task. As in any contemporary society.

At the same time, social contradictions notwithstanding, Zhadan's work repeatedly makes clear that there's no escaping the "we," however fraught it may seem ("yes, yes, again with the 'we'"). Moreover, in the circumstances of a "combative" culture,

7 Yurchenko cites a striking example of the continuing imperial ambitions of the post-Soviet Russia towards former Soviet republics. When in 2013 the Ukrainian business elites started leaning towards the liberalisation of trade with the EU, this aggravated Russia and exposed its views on Ukraine as Russian property: "Putin referred to Ukraine's DCFTA ambitions—among others—as the EU attempt to 'choke' whole sectors of Russian economy that he would not accept" (157).

8 For several simultaneously possible ways of defining the current Russian-Ukrainian war, see Etienne Balibar.

the work of the poet is to find a fitting modality of expression for the stance of society; to find a suitable language. Themes of silence or of a false "we" of the public debate, which is rather an "I" multiplied by its own reflection, run through all of Zhadan's post-2014 work. Elsewhere I have traced some of the nuances of collective address in his 2018 poetry collection *Антена* [*Antenna*] (Bekhta, "'We'"), which juxtaposed falsities of the public language about society at war with the desired discursive situation, in which there will have to be "difficult questions" and "awkward replies." In other words, the "we proper" will have to be capable of negotiating differences, while remaining consolidated—while remaining a "we." Zhadan's work consistently engages with the problem of togetherness and of the related ability to rely on a common, mutually understandable language for a negotiation of such togetherness.[9]

Besides his poetry, Zhadan's drama *Хлібне перемир'я* [*A Harvest Truce*] offers the most poignant consideration of this problem. Here I will not read the drama in detail, only focus on my central question: What is a Ukrainian "we" in times of war? Published in 2020, *A Harvest Truce* is arranged, significantly, as a conversation amongst people who have known each other their whole lives. For the most part, it is a dialogue but, as Orysia Hrudka aptly describes, "the main thing happens here between the lines: Between a joke and a line full of tragedy, separated in the text only by one full stop; between a line about the trivial and about the vital." Two brothers are the central characters of the drama, a thirty-something Tolik and his older brother Anton. Anton learns about the death of their mother, who lived together with Tolik in their childhood house, and comes back home to help with the funeral. But it is Eastern Ukraine in the summer of 2014 and their house is on the front lines of the bloodiest battles between the Russian and Russian-backed forces and the Ukrainian army. The bridge across the river, connecting their tiny town with the main roads and administrative services in the nearby oblast centre, has been blown-up, phone connection is intermittent and there is no electricity nor running water. Anton manages to get through to the mayor to ask for help with the funeral but, when neighbors come by later, he learns that the mayor has been killed and so there is no more state authority left anywhere in the vicinity. (In a symbolically significant ambiguity, it is not clear whether the mayor has already been dead for a long time.) Several of the female neighbors come to stay for an overnight vigil and one of them, a local activist referred to as Aunt Shura, assumes control over the funeral rituals.

This is the background for the two brothers to try and talk about what has happened—with their lives, with the mother, with the war. But talk they cannot, having been estranged for years. Especially now, when no one is quite certain what is happening and who is fighting on whose side. Anton finds a hidden sniper rifle in the house and confronts Tolik about it but he just shrugs it off. The brothers try reminiscing but the uncomfortable and abusive family past becomes too unbearable, so

9 On togetherness, see Kangaskoski in this volume.

they fight, or drink, or hug and cry. The character interactions and the very form of *A Harvest Truce* dramatize an almost physical inability to talk about the most personal experiences and life choices, as well as the lack of an adequate, socially accepted language for the new, war-torn reality. Let us consider a few excerpts from the drama:

> *Anton*: We'll fix this. What's with the priest?
> *Aunt Shura*: Our priest went to war. Two months ago.
> *Anton*: Who is he fighting for?
> *Aunt Shura*: For the Christian faith. (*Turns to one of the women.*) Let's go!
> *Tolik*: Some Knights of the Crusades you are, fucking hell…
> (Zhadan, *Хлібне перемир'я*, 46)[10]

The short, curt conversations are punctuated by bitter humor and sarcasm so that it is easy to miss the silent unfolding of a heart-breaking tragedy. The drama, very symbolically, locks up all its characters, so familiar to each other and simultaneously so estranged, in one house, with no bridge that would allow them to leave and with wheat fields burning closer and closer. Unwilling to engage with the "difficult questions" and "awkward answers" (dramatized in Zhadan's 2018 poetry collection), they have no escape from their situation; the physical conditions force them to start talking and to look for ways out, for some kind of future and yet—they cannot talk. This is the case, for example, with an extremely difficult question of allegiances:

> *Tolik*: […] Aunt Shura.
> *Aunt Shura*: Yes?
> *Tolik*: So, on whose side you're on?
> *Anton*: Tolik!
> *Tolik*: I'm just curious.
> *Anton*: Tolik, that's enough.
> *Tolik*: What, I'm just asking.
> *Aunt Shura*: I am, Tolik, on the side of stopping these rivers of blood. And so that the church is open again.
> *Tolik*. I see.
> *Everyone sits in silence.* (59)

Much like in 2022, peace becomes an awkward answer—a non-answer—to the straightforward question. With the majority of expert discourse on the future of the Russian-Ukrainian war revolving around the static opposition of "peace"/indefinite

10 All translations from the Ukrainian into English are mine. However, an English translation by Nina Murray of *A Harvest Truce* is forthcoming with the Harvard Library of Ukrainian Literature.

military aid,[11] Balibar provides a much-needed meta-reflection: "I must confess that I have no ready answer. Even worse: in many cases, I fear that these answers do not exist. However, this cannot prevent us from seeking these answers, and before that *finding the correct formulation for the questions themselves*" (my emphasis). It is an anachronistic move to equate the meanings of the word "peace" in 2022 to what it may have meant in 2020. But what unites them is the socio-linguistic situation of the realities of war, when the very conditions for common discourse need to be carefully taken into account and the formulations most fitting the complexity of the dimensions of this war found.

When answers are not available—full or partial, however awkward—and even individual words, such as "peace," require painstaking redefinition, one could start with pronouns. They are also an uncomfortable part of speech in times of war but, as *A Harvest Truce* shows, they contain potential solutions to discursive dead-ends. In Zhadan's drama Tolik, Anton, Shura and others only very reluctantly come to say "us" or "them" as the content of neither of these collective references is clear, in Donbas in the summer of 2014.[12] News are mostly delivered in sentences without sentence subjects, where only the sentence predicate bears a person ending. Significantly, in Ukrainian plural conjugations of the verb do not make it clear, whether the verb without a (pro)noun refers to the first-person plural (we) or to the third (they):

> Anton: So here you say: [we/they] went [to fight], then came back. But as far as I can tell, half of ours left, [they] didn't want to stay here, with these ones.[13] (77)
>
> Rinat: […] (*Addressing Tolik.*) Anyway. One can't go that way. There these ones left, others came. Changed the flags on the commandant's office.
> Anton: Changed? And the post office, phone office, train station — whose are they now?
> Rinat: Post office? [They] burnt *my* post office. (107; my emphasis)

Pronouns, linguistically speaking, are semantically empty: The meaning of "I" depends on who says it, the meaning of "this" depends on the situation in which it is said. Pronouns, in other words, do not carry semantic meaning but acquire it by

11 How will the large-scale Russian-Ukrainian war end? With peace, since individual wars do not last forever. But how will it be achieved, on what conditions and when? These are the questions that are still not being properly considered, two years into the new war, beyond two unsatisfactory answers: Either Ukraine surrenders to Russia (so that there is "peace"), or Ukraine is continuously armed to a certain degree so that the war is endless but contained within Ukraine's borders at all costs.

12 For a novel-length consideration of the problem of allegiances, see Tamara Duda's novel *Daughter* [*Доця*, 2019].

13 «Ось ти кажеш: пішли, потім назад прийшли. А у мене половина наших виїхало, не захотіли тут лишатись, із цими» (Zhadan, *Хлібне перемир'я* 77).

directing attention to the object of reference in a given context (see Bekhta, *We-Narratives* 56, for elaboration). In *A Harvest Truce* this pronominal lack of meaning is particularly visible: Pronouns are the only designation for the warring parties in the drama, so that it is up to the reader to piece together Ukrainian or Russian allegiances of the characters. Which is also part of the point: It is often very difficult, even for the characters themselves, to figure out these allegiances. Working-class people, they often express anger and confusion at having to live in the midst of war, which none of them seems to actively support but, at the same time, in which each of them is somehow implicated. For example, Kolia, a local farmer, whose wife is about to give birth and who allegedly helped the Russian invaders build fortifications, bursts out in desperation: "We're stuck here as if in a mousetrap, and can't leave anywhere. What, is this what I wanted? My harvest is burning, I don't need your politics at all. I don't need to hide, I've done nothing wrong. It's you lot who are being silent, hiding something" (109). The striking directness of the second person address in this passage suddenly breaks through the round-about conversation and confronts the group in the house. It also marks a slow re-surfacing of personal pronouns towards the end of the play. For example, it turns out that Tolik and Rinat, local postman, went to the same school. They look through the school photo album and enumerate all those who haven't survived:

> *Tolik*: […] Denys. See? Wearing gloves. Goalkeeper. He was killed in the park.
> *Rinat*: Yeah, I know.
> *Tolik*: And do you know, by whom?
> *Rinat*: No, I don't.
> *Tolik*: Yeah you do.
> *Rinat*: How would I know?
> *Tolik*: Everyone knows. Our own killed him. (117–118)

> *Aunt Shura*: You know, Rinat, there were other things you weren't taught at school. Like blowing up bridges. Burning the fields. But you are burning them.
> *Rinat*: Who, me?
> *Aunt Shura*: You, who else.
> *Rinat*: Me?
> *Tolik*: You. We… Us, who else?
> *Rinat*: What's up with you, Tokh?
> *Tolik*: What's up, what's up. You know everything yourself. We all know everything. Just won't say it. […] (122)

The appearance of personal pronouns of collective reference in character speech towards the end of the drama is stylistically marked—these lines stick out from the character's idiom and are clearly the author's own voice, a certain deus-ex-machina move that introduces a hopeful note into an otherwise desperate discursive situa-

tion. This move may break literary conventions but, within the larger socio-linguistic situation of a stalled public debate and the lack of appropriate language for devising a collective future, Zhadan's intervention into his characters' speech shows how a strikingly small adjustment—a straightforward use of personal pronouns—can create a big shift towards mutual understanding. This linguistic experiment, if I may call it so, shows an opening for a difficult conversation about which collective identity mobilizes this group—and which identity mobilized Donbas in 2014 and why—and this is also an opening onto a collective site of overcoming of the divisive social myths, manufactured by the political technologists in the course of Ukraine's independence, amplified by the scandal-hunting media and reinforced on social media. In *A Harvest Truce*, however, there are no easy answers. Zhadan offers a brief glimpse of how a change in pronominal reference makes it possible for a group of alienated people to find an agreement—all of the characters, except Tolik, decide to leave the house. But they come back almost immediately and lock the doors, first locking themselves in the house in the middle of burning fields, and then locking themselves in the room with the dead mother. A grim finale.

Pronouns That Became Verbs

Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine started at 3:40 a.m. on February 24, 2022 across all of the 1,974 kilometers of the joint land border and through the 1,084 kilometers of the Belarus border, not to mention attacks from the sea and air. This invasion changed things swiftly and dramatically within the Ukrainian society and, in the year that followed, it also increased social consolidation.[14] Coming back to the category of "nation," it is now possible, together with Balibar, to envisage "an 'optimistic' scenario linked to the character of the current patriotic resistance, which suggests that Ukraine and its *ideal identity* is moving from an 'ethnic nation' in the direction of a 'civic nation', or a prevalence of the *demos* over the *ethnos*" (Balibar; emphasis in original). The primary sign of optimism for Balibar is "the remarkable fact that—contrary to the expectations of the invader—the two 'linguistic communities' existing in Ukraine […] have joined forces in the patriotic resistance and identified with the idea of an independent Ukrainian nation-state." This joint resistance has indeed been multicultural and *multilingual*—more so than the implied reference only to the Russian-speaking Ukrainians would suggest (see, e.g., Aliev). And, while civic national transformation is far from complete or certain, at this point it registers also

14 Registered, e.g., by the surveys of the Ukrainian NGO "Centre for Society Research" (Bobrova et al.), conducted soon after the Russian invasion, then at three, six and at nine months of the ongoing war.

on the level of language. In this section of the article, I will focus on the same question as above, what a Ukrainian "we" is in times of war, but in the new, post-2022 context.

Kateryna Kalytko's poetry collection *Люди з дієсловами* [*People with Verbs*] was already in production when the large-scale war broke out and her finished manuscript fell apart—a sign of very tangible ties between literature and its social context. As Kalytko describes in her interviews, the collection was subsequently stitched together with new texts, some of them raw, impulsive and "skinless," and published in this updated shape («Люди»). Kalytko shares her understanding of poetry with Zhadan: According to Kalytko, the important work of the poet in times of war is to speak despite the feelings of being helpless and lost for words. The poems in *People with Verbs* are punctuated by uncertainty and meta-poetic questions ("I do not know how to speak. And what for these poems are," 24; "I asked you if it was prudent to write poetry now," 24; "Wherefrom do these poems come?," 30). But the poet continues speaking: It is an important service to the rest of the society, which needs new language to come to terms with the new reality ("We are to re-invent the words, later," 25). In Kalytko's own words, poetry comes to the forefront of language, crippled by war, as "the space of ultimate honesty and humanness, where one refuses to accept the utter helplessness of language" («Люди»).

If we compare the distribution of pronouns in Zhadan's 2020 *A Harvest Truce*, with the linguistic situation Kalytko observes in the immediate aftermath of the 2022 war, the changes are striking. What Zhadan's work registered in the public discourse was the vagueness of demonstrative pronouns used in place of personal ones, the sematic emptiness of the personal pronouns and, finally their absence. Kalytko's poems clearly mark the change that 2022 has brought about: There is no future and no certain answers still, but there is an absolute clarity about the meaning that fills the national "we" and there is a refusal to speak only in private, with the mirror, refusal to compromise and accept comfortable but false answers. One of Kalytko's poems in the collection, «Особистий займенник» ["Personal Pronoun," 15–16], offers an elaboration on the new linguistic and, specifically, pronominal situation.

Nouns are worthless without verbs, says Kalytko in the description of *People with Verbs*. One has to think that pronouns are right there with the nouns, worthless on their own. They need verbs—which is to say, they are defined through action (rather than through context, as linguistic theories would have it). The poem "Personal Pronoun" is divided into eleven stanzas, with the shortest ones comprising only one or two lines. Pronouns and their meanings change with each stanza, as each stanza also brings about a shift in spatio-temporal coordinates. I shall quote the poem in full, having numbered the stanzas, alongside my own rough translation:

Особовий займенник

[1]
Прийде час подякувати, що сталася доля така
і що ми віддавали одне одному більше,
ніж насправді могли. Що тримали землю в руках
серед попелу і гнилого м'яса, дати і дні згубивши.

[2]
Я любила Європу наприпочатку весни,
цей залитий сонцем порядок, шляхетний
присмак усталеності.

[3]
Я могла би приїхати і лишитися.

[4]
Ось тільки залізна нитка,
що за мною тягнеться, на шматки розітне
міста.

[5]
Я й скучаю за часом, коли не любила його,
не відгадувала модуляцій голосу, не думала
взагалі,
не ходила туди, де щем і високий вогонь.
Та велика історія шкіриться, і зуби у неї гнилі,
і різець її — у вузлуватих пальцях.
А у нього потріскані губи і довгі вії.
Він сміється.
Різець здіймається, опускається.
Отже, це зі мною, ще раз.

[6]
Тепер ніде не спокійно.

[7]
Вже за місяць війни забувається, як раніше було.
Я тепер не поетка, я глина у печі горя.

Personal Pronoun

[1]
Time will come to thank for the fate that happened
and that we gave each other more
than we actually could. That [we] held this soil in hands amidst ashes and rotting meat, having lost dates and days.

[2]
I used to love Europe at the very beginning of spring,
this sun-drenched order, this noble aftertaste of stability.

[3]
I could have come here and stayed.

[4]
Except the iron thread,
which unravels behind me, will slice the cities into pieces.

[5]
I even miss the time when I didn't love him,
when I didn't guess the modulations of the voice, didn't think at all,
didn't go there, where there is anguish and tall fire.
But big history is sneering, and her teeth are rotten,
and the cutting tool bit of hers is in the arthritic fingers.
And his lips are cracked and eyelashes are long.
He is laughing.
The cutting tool lifts, it lowers down.
So, this is happening to me, once more.

[6]
Now nowhere is calm.

[7]
Already one month into a war one forgets how it used to be.
I am not a poet anymore, I am clay in the oven of grief.

І не вірш це, а коридор, пробитий крізь безголосся,
це ось, чуєте, він сміється у коридорі.

[8]
Прийде час подякувати, що все сталося саме так,
що була безладна ніжність розмов
між сиренами, попід градами.

[9]
Уві сні він стріпується, як накритий хусткою птах, —
я не вмію більше молитися, тому отаке пригадую.

[10]
Очі наших двохсотих. Обвуглені прапори.
Дикі гуси вертаються з вирію.
Річки у кривавій піні.

[11]
Ні минулого, ні майбутнього поки ще.
І я прошу лише: говори,
хай ця мова не зникне.
Хай вона буде
спільною.

And this is not a poem, it's a corridor, broken through voicelessness,
and this here, listen [pl.], it's him laughing in the corridor.

[8]
Time will come to thank that everything happened exactly this way,
that there was a disorderly tenderness of conversations
in-between the sirens, under the Grad rockets.

[9]
In his sleep he twitches, like a bird covered by a cloth, -
I don't know how to pray any longer, that's why I recall such things.

[10]
Eyes of our KIAs. Charred flags.
Wild geese are coming back after winter.
Rivers foam with blood.

[11]
No past and no future, not yet.
And I ask only: speak [sing.],
may this language not disappear.
May it be
communal.

The contemporary poem, Alain Badiou observes, is "the opposite of mimesis" (*The Age* 51). It identifies itself as an "experience of thought" (29). How do we then approach the metaphorical language of Kalytko's poem? When the poet says, for example, that "[we] held this soil in hands amidst ashes and rotting meat, having lost dates and days" («тримали землю в руках серед попелу і гнилого м'яса, дати і дні згубивши»), it is not merely a loftier way of saying that we were defending our land selflessly. To "defend selflessly" is a phrase that does not mean much to anyone outside that situation. The notions it evokes become too abstract too quickly: Do you ever think of the soil underneath your feet, your house, your city and so on as your country? Saying "to defend the land selflessly" does not carry a matching meaning for those outside and those inside the situation, where there is the need to actually, physically defend what used to be a symbolic idea ("one's land"), not to yield, not to move away under the pressure of deadly force from the soil on which you stand. And, more than that, to experience this resistance on a scale of the whole national community, on a collective rather than individual level. National community, as the

reader will remember, is an *imagined* community,[15] which, in the midst of war, suddenly becomes material and physical. This is why the poem offers the concrete language of "holding the soil in hands," in which the material embodiment of the action of defense is strengthened by an evocation of senses: ashes from the burning cities in your throat and eyes, and in the nose—the stench of corpses rotting in the yards, in the bomb shelters you are in, in the trenches, which you are still holding. The numbness of the mind in the situation where the past life is already destroyed but the future one cannot be thought of or imagined (yet?). The result of the poem's thought process is a renewal of language so that this language can speak truthfully in the new, war-torn reality.

Against the background of the first stanza, concerned with the real, the next stanza offers a seemingly out-of-place, idealized image of Europe: "this sun-drenched order, this noble aftertaste of stability." This is Europe in the eyes of a traveler going on a spring vacation. The image further defines the contrast between the old and new realities, when neither order nor vacations are possible. Not even movement as a refugee, as stanzas [3]-[4] clarify, because the imperceptible but iron-strong ties to one's own land, to its people will make an absence physically felt, both in the one who leaves and in the place left behind ("the iron thread, // which unravels behind me, will slice the cities into pieces").[16] Significantly, the deictic coordinates of the stanza [3] places the "I" of the poem right within Europe. Europe is not a distant, promised land—it also contains a war-ravaged country, so unfitting into its idealized (self-)image.

But to come back to pronouns: The first stanza [1] is defined by "we" and by timelessness («дати і дні згубивши», "having lost dates and days"). Mentioned only once, "we" is present in this stanza through the verbs, conjugated in the first-person plural. The next three stanzas are marked by "I," in the past [2], in a hypothetical present [3], and in the actual present [4] which transfers to stanza [5], where the "I" unites with "him". Who is "he"? Someone "I" loves and someone emblematic of the new time, this perpetual present. Consider the stark contrast with which "he," youthful, laughing, weary, is positioned against the old "big history," with her rotten teeth, arthritic fingers and a sneer. This is the past, which repeats itself ("So, this is happening to me, once more") and which makes a sharp cut between the previous life and the current one. But this repetition of the past is not the abstract phrase of "history repeats

15 As Benedict Anderson put it, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6).

16 This line captures the need for many Ukrainians, who lived abroad before February 2022, to go back home and to take up arms (see, e.g., the story of the Ukrainian dental surgeon in Austria, Natalia Fauscher [Ivanov and Zhykalova]).

itself." It is happening to the "I," something she has lived through already once before (the 2014 war?) and thus, again, a concrete, material experience born by a living person.

Stanza [5] also marks the biggest intensity of feeling in the poem. It is the poem's personal center, the so-called zero-point in the deictic system of coordinates, which the personal pronoun "I" (as well as "now" and "here") occupies and against which the other pronouns and deictic elements of language acquire their meaning. «Отже, це зі мною, ще раз», "So, this is happening to me, once more." After this statement, the "I" is not alone anymore, implicitly relying on the "we"-community, whose presence is coded even into the impersonal sentence structures. (Stanza [8], for example, repeats the formulation of the opening stanza [1], defined by the first-person plural.) What is striking about the "we"-address here—and what exemplifies particularly well the new, consolidated collective identification of the Ukrainian society as a clearly defined group—is, paradoxically, its occasional appearance, its mostly implied and unspoken presence. Mentioned only once directly, the "we" of this poem marks the conjugation of the verbs, marks the structure of address (as in the plural "listen [first-p. pl.], it's him laughing in the corridor"), it appears as a possessive pronoun in the tragic and tender phrase, "Eyes of *our* KIAs." The "we" of Kalytko's "Personal Pronoun" does not need to rely on constant repetitions (that only foreground the absence of "we proper"). This new "we" is certain of its existence. While Zhadan registers a self-dissociation in the Ukrainian "we," before 2022, in Kalytko's work we begin to find a near-equivalence[17] between the "I" and the "we," their mutual certainty.

My intuition about the change in the social meaning of the we-reference in Ukraine after February 2022 can be confirmed by briefly turning to a meta-linguistic reflection again. The excerpt cited below comes from Zhadan's speech at the 2022 Frankfurt Book Fair, where he received the prestigious German Book Trade Peace Prize. Talking about Ukraine's future now, Zhadan's words do not have any uncertainty of his 2020 essay. Compare the following passage with the one quoted at the beginning of this article:

> One way or another, we will need to again reconstruct a sense of time, a sense of prospects, a sense of continuity. We are doomed to have a future, moreover—we are responsible for it. The future is being formed right now from our visions, from our opinions, from our readiness to take responsibility. [...] We are all joined by our language. And even if at some points its possibilities seem limited to us and insufficient, one way or another we will be forced to return to these possibilities of language, which give us hope that in the future there will be nothing unsaid

17 I borrow this phrase from Badiou's analysis of the relationship between the "I" and the "we" in another poetic context (*The Century* 90).

> and no misunderstandings between us. […] For as long as we have our language we also have at least an ephemeral chance to explain ourselves, to talk through our truth, to bring order into our memory. So let's talk, let us talk.

Kalytko's poem culminates in the same imperative: "No past and no future, not yet. / And I ask only: speak [sing.], / may this language not disappear. / May it be / communal" (16). This gradual arrival at the communal language in "Personal Pronoun" is in line with Kalytko's more general observation, present throughout her collection, of how one of the immediate effects of war on language is an inability to simply speak, caused by the break-down in the usual sense- and meaning-making mechanisms. So to start uttering words again is the first step towards regaining the communal ability to use language, again. The concluding word of Kalytko's poem, «спільний» (which can be rendered into English most closely as "communal," "common," "joint") leaves no doubts about the newly found togetherness. To fully understand its significance, let us in conclusion consider the temporality that develops throughout the poem. Stanza [7] is key in this respect, offering a direct comment on the linguistic situation, in which the poem was written: «не вірш це, а коридор, пробитий крізь безголосся, // це ось, чуєте, він сміється у коридорі» ("this is not a poem, it's a corridor, broken through voicelessness, // and this here, listen [pl.], it's him laughing in the corridor"). This poem is to be understood as a break through the lack of voice, the lack of language, but where to? It would seem that the poem offers an escapist timespace, alternative to the present, or even a nostalgic longing for the past, when it was possible for "him" to laugh. But this would be a misreading: What is significant is that the poem should function as a corridor (a passage leading from and towards) rather than a static spatial image. This poem is thus an opening onto a trajectory towards a communal future, a possibility parallel to the present and capable of actualization. And the way forward is through speech, through a thorough attention to language and through a painstaking work of finding the correct formulations for our problems first, before looking for their answers.

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