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Oleksandra Bagatska
Faculty of Philosophy
University of Warsaw, Poland
o.bagatska@student.uw.edu.pl

War Experience and the Breakdown of the World: Ukrainian War Literature

Abstract:

This article examines contemporary Ukrainian war literature as a site where the experience of war reveals a fundamental breakdown of meaning, knowledge, and selfhood. Analyzing works by Artur Dron, Artem Chapeye, Artem Chekh, and Oleksandr Mykhed, it argues that war produces an irreducible gap between mediated knowledge and lived experience, akin to the philosophical problem of qualia. Drawing on Heidegger, the article shows how war disrupts the background horizon of meaning, rendering the world fragmented. Finally, through Locke and Ricoeur, it explores memory and narration as essential practices for reconstructing identity and preserving meaning. Ukrainian war writing thus emerges as both testimony and existential response to a world that no longer "works."

Keywords:

war experience, Ukrainian literature, meaning disruption, memory, narrative identity

> *I was walking in the darkness, and I felt that only here was reality for me. Here-existence, Dasein. Call it what you will. The depth of Being. Only it is a depth of Being that no psychologically healthy person would ever choose of their own free will.*
>
> — Artem Chapeye[1]

Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 became a turning point not only in the history of this particular country, but on a much broader scale. Ukraine – a country rooted in the modern Western system of values – suddenly found itself in a state of full-scale war, the kind with rockets flying overhead and tanks rolling down paved streets.

Reading stories from Ukraine one could not help but wonder how people in a previously relatively peaceful country, with modern housing, developing businesses, and specialty coffee shops, could in a single day become soldiers in the trenches. What does it feel like to undergo such a radical transformation in one's life?

Literature about the war began appearing in Ukrainian and international bookstores very early on. The first texts were rather fragmentary and essayistic, but over time the new ones developed into increasingly coherent narratives by those who managed to process the war and present a more solid picture of what they had experienced. Former philosophers, journalists, and writers described what it felt like to wake up one morning and realize that survival now required fighting.

This article focuses on four chosen books written by army soldiers:

- Artur Dron's[2] *Hemingway Knows Nothing* (in Ukrainian: *Гемінгвей нічого не знає*);

1) Chapeye, *Ne narodzheni dlia viiny*, 114.

2) Artur Dron is a young writer, whose first poetry book was published in 2020. Since spring 2022, Artur Dron has served as an infantryman in the 125th separate brigade of the Territorial Defense Forces of Ukraine. In the fall of 2024, he was heavily wounded in action and has been undergoing rehabilitation. In summer 2025, he demobilized from the army (information taken from PENUkraine website).

- Artem Chapeye's[3] *Ordinary People Don't Carry Machine Guns: Thoughts on War* (in Ukrainian: *Ненароджені для війни*)
- Artem Chekh's[4] *Dress Up Game* (in Ukrainian: *Гра в переводягання*)
- Oleksandr Mykhed's[5] *The Language of War*[6] (in Ukrainian: *Позивний для Йова*)

These books are filled to the brim with reflection, honesty, and nuanced descriptions of the authors' feelings. Each writer offers his own understanding of the war, they describe the experience of military service and attempt to convey what it is like to inhabit that reality. These books were chosen as representative, but they do not exhaust the scope of Ukrainian war literature.

Ukrainian poet Serhii Zhadan wrote: "Conscience will torment the one who remains silent, if marked by a voice… . The one who is able to bear witness will not stand aside and wait."[7] It seems these books answer exactly this demand: they fight the silence and tell the stories. All of these authors – writers and journalists alike – are marked by voice, and they carry this responsibility by depicting their personal stories through the text.

This article aims at analyzing the chosen motifs from the four texts, and by those means outlining the selected components of the war experience using a philo-

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3) Artem Chapeye is a pseudonym for Anton Vasilyovich Vodyanyi, a Ukrainian writer, reporter, and translator. In 2008 he graduated with a degree in the field of philosophy from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. During the war in Donbass he worked there as a reporter and in 2022 he volunteered for the army. His book *Ordinary People Don't Carry Machine Guns: Thoughts on War* is on the Washington Post's list of the best books of 2025 in English (information taken from Wikipedia).

4) Artem Chekh (real name: Artem Oleksandrovych Cherednyk) is a journalist and a writer. His first book was published in 2007 and since then more than 16 books have appeared on the shelves. Chekh had also been in the army from 2015 till 2016 in the Donbass region and then returned to the military after the full-scale invasion. In 2023 he sustained a concussion in the battle for the city of Bakhmut (information taken from Wikipedia).

5) Oleksandr Mykhed is the author of nine books and a participant in literary residencies in Finland, Latvia, Iceland, the USA, and France. He is the creator and host of the literature podcast *Station 451* (a project by The Village Ukraine). He also translated Marina Abramović's autobiography, *Walk Through Walls*, into Ukrainian (2018; shortlisted for the UNESCO City of Literature Award) (information taken from PEN Ukraine website).

6) Names of Chapeye's, Chekh's, and Mykhed's books are not literal translations, but were taken from articles in English about these books.

7) Fragment of the poem "Polonaise 13" is taken from Serhii Zhadan's personal Facebook page.

sophical conceptual framework. The first part addresses war as something inherently new for those who face it – something that does not at its core resemble the images known previously. The second part examines war as the event that disrupts the usual web of meanings. The third part concerns memory and narration as a crucial source for rebuilding the senses under the critical circumstances of war.

1. Qualia of the War and the Role of Literature

It seems that everybody possesses certain knowledge about the notion of war. Somehow, when learning the word, one also gets a grasp on the main stereotypes about it. Throughout our life we deepen the theory by learning history, watching news, and reading literature about the war period. We do not just passively consume these books or movies, but rather live through them, feeling the horror, bravery, absurdity, tragedy, and death under our skin. Thus, the interpretation of the authors from the far-away past becomes ours: theorized and appropriated, pictures of war form our imagination about the world, and about how one would behave in a similar situation. We implicitly assume that literature conveys experiential knowledge. Is the reality different though?

There is the famous philosophical thought experiment by Frank Jackson, where he describes Mary, a brilliant neurophysiologist, who knows *all* the physical facts about color vision: wavelengths, retinal stimulation, neural processes, and the behavioral effects of seeing red or blue – while living in a black-and-white environment. The crucial question is: when Mary first sees color, does she learn something new? Jackson's intuition is that she does. Despite possessing knowledge of every physical fact, only after getting out of the black-and-white world does she learn *what it is like* to see red. If that is correct, then there must be facts about conscious experience, which are accessible only in subjective living-through. These instances of subjective experience are called qualia. Using this thought experiment Jackson argues that there is a gap between knowing facts *about* a certain experience and knowing *what it is like* to undergo it.[8]

The four analyzed authors reveal in their texts the depth of their stupefaction in the face of the qualia of war. Being acquainted with different visions of it from litera-

8) Jackson, "What Mary Didn't Know."

ture, films, and other sources of other people's experience, they understand that the true colors of war are critically different from their factual descriptions.

This rupture provokes a certain doubt: are the mediated forms of experience (literature, films, and other) at all capable of transmitting what-it-is-like knowledge? Can imaginative participation in the war approximate the real one, and if not – why read at all?

In the books the most paradigmatic example of the medium that authors counted on as a source of knowledge about the war was literature. Being the writers themselves, they contemplate on the power and weakness of texts they had read before.

Arthur Dron writes about the feeling of being deceived by the authors he previously admired. He grew up reading Hemingway, Remarque, and others who described war in the smallest details. And then, when the time came, it appeared that none of this knowledge mattered, it was too speculative, theoretical, and outdated. Having named his book *Hemingway Knows Nothing*, Dron had to answer numerous questions about why he had chosen such an arrogant title. It seems that it was not an aesthetic provocation, but an epistemic diagnosis. What collapsed for Dron was not a mastery of Hemingway's writing, but a belief in an ever-reaching wisdom of past idols. "I believed in that literature. I thought it would prepare me for something, that it would help me" – writes Dron with almost childish despair.[9]

Artem Chapeye notices that the prior literature tends to be too archetypical. The picture of war in his imagination was connected with the image of battalions of young men who had not had time to live before the closeness of death made them grey-headed, if alive. That was the tragedy of the twentieth century. In Ukrainian trenches in the twenty-first century one would rather encounter men in their 30s and 40s. The ones who had families, children, and even grandchildren. Ones who had felt the taste of life, and came to protect it at all costs. So, for Chapeye literature fails at depicting reality because it imposes stereotypes from the past which distort the imagination of what it can be like.

Artem Chekh points out the inevitable gap in the war literature: this horrible experience filled with death is described by the survivors. We see it through the lens of people who managed to return. Chekh reflects on the English writer Saki, who

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9) Dron, *Hemingvei nichoho ne znaie*, 64.

died in 1916 at the Battle of Somme: not young, reasonably successful. The Ukrainian author adds that few people remember Saki today. Thinking about this Englishman, Chekh wonders how quickly memory of him would fade?[10]

Saki's example reveals a structural asymmetry: the literature that speaks so extensively about death is written from the position of survival. This does not mean that survivors "did not experience war," but rather that war as total annihilation remains inaccessible as an experience. Even those who directly fought, killed, and witnessed the deaths of their comrades can only testify from within survival, that is, from the standpoint of having continued to live.

In this sense, the biggest horror of war, as complete and irreversible annihilation, cannot be given within experience itself. It is not accessible from the first-person perspective because any lived experience presupposes continued existence. What can be experienced are only forms of proximity to death, but never the state in which there is no longer a subject to undergo experience. As Agamben writes: "The 'true' witnesses, the 'complete witnesses,' are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness… . The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony."[11]

Oleksandr Mykhed offers a diagnosis for a new system of literature evaluation: after experiencing the atrocities of war, the demands placed upon writing are significantly higher.

> And whereas before I was convinced that a work of art should contain certain timeless patterns that would allow it to stand the test of time, now an even higher demand emerges – to withstand the test of genocide. How many books will no longer be worth reissuing; how many films and exhibitions will lose their value and appear naive or anachronistic? How many war films will we no longer be able to watch? And yet, how many classical works of Ukrainian literature and culture will become close to us and truly comprehensible?[12]

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10) Chekh, *Hra v perevdiahannia*, 159.

11) Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 34.

12) Mykhed, *Pozyvnyi dlia Yova*, 197.

The war has fundamentally altered worldviews and values. The deeper one's knowledge of a subject, the higher the demands placed upon the testimonies of others, and the more sensitive one becomes to the nuances of another's stance.

We learn from these authors that literature turns out to be imperfect: it is neither the objective, nor informative enough. Then why read at all, and most importantly – why write? Arthur Dron answers this question by stating that books can function as a mirror, one that simultaneously reflects the reader, the writer, and that which cannot be described in words. Literature suggests a fragile relationship between human experiences, in which the pain of one can only be indirectly grasped by another. "And perhaps the only way to test whether you are truly alive," Dron writes, "is to read the real literature of your time and listen to whether it tells you that all of it, entirely and without remainder, now and always, is about you."[13]

One way to understand Dron's emphasis on reading contemporary literature is that it is crucial to learn what the world truly looks like in the present day, "tuning" your thinking to that of others through their testimonies. In this sense, to be truly alive is to engage in this shared resonance.

Mykhed points out that it is extremely difficult to describe one's experience to those who have not lived through something similar. However, this new and at times unbearable knowledge does not simply close off the possibility of sharing; while it creates barriers, it simultaneously opens new, different avenues for connection:

> Pain cannot be measured. Experiences cannot be compared. Yet my loved ones and I feel an increasing deepening of what we call a desynchronization of experiences. Put simply, it is difficult for my parents, who spent nearly three weeks under shelling in Bucha, hiding in basements together with dozens of others, to explain "what it was like" to their friends who left the country in the first days of the war.
> … And when my mother is finally asked, "What was it like under occupation?" she does not have the strength to find the words. At the same time, there is a synchronization of experiences with countries that have

13) Dron, *Hemingvei nichoho ne znaie*, 119.

> already suffered attacks by the Russians: Chechnya, Syria, Georgia. Each of them shares its pain.[14]

In the book *Life on the Edge: Ukraine, Culture and War* the authors, Tetiana Ogarkova and Volodymyr Yermolenko, describe the role of writing in a very poetic way: "To write during war is to conjure death, to resist, to bear witness, to create networks. To weave these networks as camouflage nets are woven in rear and frontline towns and villages. It is a direct, immediate experience of community."[15] Even if there is no way to get a grasp on the real qualia of war, however it is crucial to find a common ground between these different *what-it-is-like's*.

In the end, every single experience in people's lives has its own qualia. That is why quite often it is hard to share any knowledge. And even if some people are able to do it, there is still a chance that there will be a lack of connection on the receiver's end. Sharing one's experience is always about attunement of both counterparts of this process also with a constant acknowledgment that something unexplainable will still remain. That is why information sources stay far from being guiding instruction, but can be a great tool for creating a common space of meanings.

2. The World That Does Not Work

> I became part of an indivisible and closed-off generation, part of the most disenfranchised caste now at war – one that will later, someday, watch the last iron plough of the Russian troops disappear along the railway tracks, return home, and not know how to go on living. For how does one live in a world that no longer works?[16]

What does it mean to say that the world does not work? When evoking this conceptualization, the philosophy of Martin Heidegger comes to mind. The notion of the world is central for his philosophy. Heidegger emphasizes that "world" is not merely a collection

14) Mykhed, *Pozyvnyi dlia Yova*, 65.

15) Ogarkova and Yermolenko, *Zhyttia na Mezhi*, 26.

16) Chekh, *Hra v perevdiahannia*, 129.

of physical objects. Instead, it is a horizon of shared practices and meanings that we are always already "in," in simple terms: we do not create these practices and meanings, but take them from the shared space with other people that we are born into.[17]

In the day-to-day world most things and practices surrounding us are transparent: they are functioning seamlessly within our goals and projects not requiring conscious attention to them. This way of appearing of the things in the world to us Heidegger calls "readiness-to-hand." Whenever one goes to the shop to buy a pack of chips or takes a pen to sign a document, they do not stop every time to contemplate on the color and form of the package or the weight of a pen. Only when surprised by something unusual would one start paying more attention to the object itself. The world "works," because it is familiar and ready-to-hand, it does not resist us. It provides the background for the meaning that supports the action. This coherence allows us to make sense of experience.

Heidegger describes the different ways things appear to us using two concepts: readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand. The former, as mentioned above, would stand for the "transparency" of objects in daily life, and presence-at-hand for an unusual experience when one actually notices the nuanced characteristics of the object. When our world suddenly changes, when certain situations make us "look at things differently" it becomes unfamiliar to us. The things which previously were obvious, usual, and "ours," suddenly are shown to us in a new light – they become present-at-hand.

War also disrupts the coherence of the world in this way. In the accounts of Artem Chapeye, it creates a space of unbearable contrasts that make familiar patterns collapse. He describes it as a never-ending feeling of absurdity, and illustrates it with the example from a night on duty:

> The sense of absurdity did not fade. During a summer night watch, another soldier and I stood mesmerized, watching the moon rise above the forest. It was warm and quiet. I was aware that such a beautiful experience may occur only a few times in an entire lifetime. How, in a world so beautiful, do there exist people who start wars?[18]

17) See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 63–126.

18) Chapeye, *Ne narodzheni dlia viiny*, 85.

This absurdity is not about general meaninglessness. The war-reality is absurd in comparison with the pre-war world, with all the knowledge acquired before. Absurdity here does not stand for hopelessness but rather a state of confused reassembling of one's world map.

Later, Chapeye illustrates the same disruption with the story of the ruined city of Bakhmut, where a blossoming cherry tree grows amidst destruction. The juxtaposing of human catastrophe and the indifferent beauty of nature makes the mind stumble: these images simply do not belong together.[19]

Mykhed artistically describes his experience of seeing the cities affected by the war:

> Each time it feels as though Russian shells are striking the very structure of reality, sending cracks through its fragile walls, and the world now follows the brutal logic of a terrible dream from which it is impossible to awaken. Elements of this shattered world fall into an absurd order, governed more by the logic of surrealist painting than by the laws of everyday life, where everything has its proper place.[20]

The laws of everyday life – the laws of the space of meanings before the full-scale war just do not work anymore. Targeting civilian buildings, Russian missiles do not just break the concrete walls, but a people's anthill filled with life and light, which brought security and the feeling of being settled down.

Another point that Heidegger makes is that this pre-theoretical sense of the world, the background for all meanings, is the basis upon which theoretical knowledge is built. No science can interpret empirical facts unless a "world" has already been disclosed. The *a posteriori* facts about what surrounds us are gained on the basis of feeling that the coherent interpretable world actually exists. That is why if the background horizon fails, so does the abstract knowledge about it.

Artem Chapeye shows the losing of trust in general theories. As someone who studied philosophy, worked as a journalist, and had been deeply influenced by twen-

19) Ibid., 91.

20) Mykhed, *Pozyvnyi dlia Yova*, 141–42.

tieth century French intellectuals, during peacetime he constructed what he sarcastically calls "layers of theoretical viewpoints,"[21] which turned out to be entirely inadequate for the lived experience of war. These "layers of theoretical viewpoints" get created by means of very abstract reasoning, especially when one considers a situation that is very improbable. For example, Chapeye recalls being a committed pacifist before the invasion. He had always believed that if war came, he would desert immediately. However, reality proved otherwise, and in one moment peeled off all the theoretical layers. In the book, Chapeye describes his former stance as abstract pacifism: "Abstract pacifism is a privilege of those who are not faced with an existential choice and can afford to merely theorize. Being a pacifist in peacetime is like being a vegan as long as you don't eat. You can't write a petition against bombs and cruise missiles."[22]

Artem Chekh nuances this distortion of the world; he writes: "A person who has lived through war as a direct participant, who has felt its sacred terror and its full, chilling essence, looks at the world through distorted lenses. And it is their gaze that is distorted, not the world they are looking at."[23] It is not the world that changes, but the way we see it, the way it appears to us.

The texts demonstrate the evident dependability – the closer to the frontline the person's life is the more his worldview changes. That is why one of the tragedies of the war lies in the fact that within Ukraine the meanings change unevenly. For some, military experience is as much painful as it is obvious, and for others it still remains obscure. Chekh describes it in this way: "It is easiest closer to the front, where you simply do not see this contrast. Gradually, the people I serve with in the military: peasants, construction workers, supermarket security guards – have become closer to me than the hipsters in cafés, journalists, artists, and the literary crowd."[24]

For Heidegger, things and practices in the world gain meaning only in interaction with others. People are not automatically born into the world, but also into being with others. And it is also the commonality of senses that bring some people closer and push some of them away from each other.

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21) Chapeye, *Ne narodzheni dlia viiny*, 40.

22) Ibid., 26.

23) Chekh, *Hra v perevdiahannia*, 126.

24) Ibid., 82.

War disrupts the familiar background of meanings. It takes away the coherence of the world, juxtaposes things that were never imagined side by side before. The space which once appeared as transparent and functional becomes absurd and disorienting. All ordinary understanding and abstract theories fail. And even the common silent understanding seems to break down at moments, leaving the individual face to face with the world which does not work.

3. Remembering is Unbearable, Forgetting is even Worse

Memory is a crucial topic that appears in each of the analyzed texts. It seems that remembering serves the authors as means to locate themselves in this new world, but also as a reason to write. Memory becomes the instrument to ground both one's own identity and the world around.

When putting memory and identity side by side, the theory of John Locke comes to mind. His record of personal identity is based on the continuity of consciousness. This continuity is closely connected to memory since memory allows a person to relate to past experiences as their own. It plays a central role in preserving one's identity: if you do not remember your past, you are not the same person anymore.[25]

However, the texts described in the article are not just memory itself, they are vessels for memory. It is the narration in them that gives this memory structure and continuity, thus helping to achieve coherence.

This is the moment where Paul Ricoeur's critique of John Locke's theory of identity[26] becomes relevant. Ricoeur points out that Locke's view is too limited, and identity cannot be narrowed down only to continuity of consciousness. Instead Ricoeur emphasizes the role of narration that binds together two constituents of personal identity. Ricoeur differentiates the *idem* self from the *ipse*. *Idem* (sameness) answers the question "What?" and is defined by numerical identity (being one and the same object) and qualitative characteristics (similarity to oneself), as well as continuity through time and personality traits, including behavioral dispositions, habits, and identification

25) Locke, "Of Identity and Diversity," 319–20.

26) Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 126.

with certain values.[27] The most stable point of *idem* is character, understood as a set of lasting dispositions by which the person is recognized. *Ipse* (selfhood) addresses the question "Who?" and does not require a specific substrate to be grounded in. It is the ethical dimension of the Self responsible for being true to oneself: keeping promises, taking responsibility, and remaining faithful to one's choices and relationships. Even if the sameness criterium fails, and the person's traits or the way they look changes, the selfhood part – "it was I who made the promise, and I should fulfil it" – stays. What connects *ipse* and *idem* into one coherent whole is, in Ricoeur's view, the narrative self. It acts as a mediator between *idem* and *ipse*, helping to integrate changes and contingencies into a continuous life story.

Artur Dron's narration acquires a therapeutic function. His text opens up with an epigraph on prolonged exposition therapy which is one of the approaches to treat PTSD that requires retelling the traumatic story multiple times to gradually confront and integrate all the details.[28] Dron revisits several times through the book the death of his beloved comrade, Oleksandr Kobernyk, each time revealing new details or nuances. A traumatic episode if not fully processed becomes a separated piece until integrated into an articulated long-term memory about one's life. Without being put into a continuous story about one's life, trauma comes back as uncontrollable flashbacks tearing a present reality into pieces. That is where narration becomes crucial – by putting traumatic memories into articulated stories one can finally make it one of the many points of a personal life and finally let it become an event from the past.

Artem Chekh creates the narration of himself through music. It functions for him as an anchor to his pre-war life, as a thread that connects him to the past. Chekh describes listening to it in all different situations: inertly waiting for orders in one place, going to the most unsafe battle-places, coming home for a few days. Music becomes the inner place in his life, which neither the army, nor the war can occupy. It is not something heavy to carry, but it makes the existence more material:

> For me, music became a mithril thread, strong and almost magical, connecting me to the past, that is, to my life before the great war: to the

27) Ibid., 116.

28) Dron, *Hemingvei nichoho ne znaie*, 5.

> quiet coziness of winter evenings and sunlit summer mornings, when my thoughts were not about survival but about living, and not about yet another generational tragedy with its characteristic archetypal traumas that Russia inflicts on my country with manic regularity, but about a kind of typical European melancholy, absorbed in individual experiences, the torments of creativity, and the search for meaning in metaphysical things.[29]

The war experience changes what people are, makes them "not the same," undermines the *idem* that Ricoeur addresses. Chekh describes these changes. During his 5-day shift in trenches near Bakhmut on the very front line and under constant attacks he tried to make videos for his family, so that they would have some message from him, if anything happened. After getting out of these trenches he started rewatching them, not recognizing himself on the recordings: "For it was me yet a version of myself I had never been. And it turned out to matter deeply to me, to see myself as someone I had never been before."[30]

People are never the same throughout life. They constantly change, and sometimes want to cross out the previous life as non-existent. However, surrounded by war and annihilation one feels the strong need to connect even the most fractured points of one's life because it is not that this fracturedness decides who we are, but the importance we place on looking into it.

Chekh's quote resonates deeply with what Mykhed writes about. Mykhed describes his experience of the war as incessant changes of "selves" where a new event brings to life a different "self":

> One evacuated from Hostomel on the first day of the invasion and has since reacted sharply to sounds resembling exploding shells. Another spent 100 days in the [military] barracks.
> Somewhere between the military oath to the Ukrainian people and the expectation of deployment, with backpacks already packed, yet another identity began to take shape.

29) Chekh, *Hra v perevdiahannia*, 57.

30) Ibid., 149.

> And then someone else went out of the barracks, returned to Kyiv, and confronted a new life – without a home, without a past, burdened with a mass of unspoken traumas and inarticulate experiences.
> How many more "selves" will I see in the mirror so abruptly, so brutally, so Kafkaesque waking one morning from restless sleep? Another monstrous insect growing out of me.
> How many more times will this war kill our "selves"?[31]

No matter how painful it is to look in the mirror and find each time a new person looking back at you, all the authors seem to highly prioritize preserving identity. This preservation is not just a personal need – it is part of the fighting. Dron writes: "Time is cruel. Unjust. Wounding. But we cannot hide from it. We must live through it, even through this one. Wounding. Cruel. To tell it that it will never be able to take everything. For instance, to tear fragments out of this time and turn them into literature."[32]

Saving identity is about telling a story, not only your own story. It is clear in these texts that remembering is not merely an act of self-preservation. The narration that each author creates serves as a means to save people, interactions, emotions, to keep them from being lost in a cruel time of war.

All of the authors fill their books with recounting relationships, fleeting interactions and fates, how some lives went ahead, and the other did not. The four texts are filled to the brim with names and faces. Writing about them means remembering them. And remembering means conserving their lives in the text.

> We will speak and write about our own [people], because we know how to speak and how to write. And through us they will not be forgotten. It is we who preserve their memory. But others will be forgotten – those about whom nothing is written. Their loved ones do not know how to write, do not know how to speak; they know only how to remain silent and swallow their pain. Quiet tragedies. Small family wounds. A faceless, distant mourning.[33]

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31) Mykhed, *Pozyvnyi dlia Yova*, 153–54.

32) Dron, *Hemingvei nichoho ne znaie*, 119.

33) Chekh, *Hra v perevdiahannia*, 113–14.

In the end, what is the world if not a sum of personal stories. The smaller family wounds are shared, the more people learn about each other, the more intertwined their worlds become. Painful and discomforting as it may be, telling a story is a way to rebuild the common background of senses. Not just for people within Ukraine, but throughout different continents.

The war is not something one wants to recall but it is crucial for creating a new world, for being able to communicate. Mykhed's book ends with a sentence: "I want to forget all of this. I want never to forget any of it."[34]

"Our literature today is a viscous journey against the current of silence"[35] – write Yermolenko and Ogarkova in their book. Tragedies make people silent; traumas steal their voice. It takes a lot of courage to find the words to describe the surrounding catastrophe of human life. The easiest way is just to shut it all out. However, Ukrainian writers choose to speak up. They find strength to describe deaths, atrocities, tears, despair, and doubt, and retell the stories of ones who might have been lost in history. Because in the world where old senses are incurably outdated, the creation of new ones is a question of survival. Weaving this new net of meanings takes a lot of strength, but as Artur Dron put it: "To remember all of this is terrible. The only thing worse is to forget it."[36]

Conclusion

The testimonies of modern Ukrainian authors Dron, Chapeye, Chekh, and Mykhed reveal that war is not merely a historical event, but a radical transformation of experience itself. It leaves the world divided into "before" and "after."

The first rupture occurs at the level of knowledge. As the analogy with Jackson's knowledge argument suggests, there is an irreducible gap between knowing about something and knowing what it is like. The qualia of war cannot be conveyed through literature, film, or historical study. Any constructed image of war fails to capture what it truly feels like, and thus cannot prepare one for it or serve as a good background

34) Mykhed, *Pozyvnyi dlia Yova*, 336.

35) Ogarkova and Yermolenko, *Zhyttia na Mezhi*, 21.

36) Dron, *Hemingvei nichoho ne znaie*, 129.

for theoretical reflection. However, literature can be a way to freeze the moment and give a material form to the short-lasting feelings, experiences, and lives.

The second rupture concerns the structure of the world. War shatters the background horizon of meaning: reality appears absurd, disjoined, and deeply destabilized. The coexistence of catastrophic destruction and ordinary or even beautiful phenomena becomes incomprehensible because the normal transparency and coherence of the world are suspended. The war-world is not merely dangerous. It undermines the very framework through which we make sense of experience.

To preserve themselves in this fractured world where nothing seems stable, individuals seek grounding in remembering and telling the stories. Echoing Locke's insight that personal identity rests on continuity of consciousness and Ricoeur's elaboration on narrative self, the authors show that sharing an experience with others becomes an existential act: it functions as therapy, as resistance to time, a way of safeguarding people from oblivion and an instrument of creating a new net of meanings.

The texts of Dron, Chapeye, Chekh, and Mykhed do not offer theoretical closure or a grand philosophical system. Instead, they reveal the lived reality of war in all its controversial, painful, and inexplicable phenomenology, showing that the experience of war is as profound as it is irreducible.

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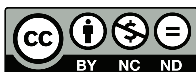

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