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TOPONYMY IN CURRENT UKRAINIAN LITERATURE

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***Abstract:** This paper considers the role that literature can play in a time of war, using the present hostilities in Ukraine as an example. It is not just those in uniform who help to defend a country and its values. Authors play a part too, by expressing in print their sadness at the unfolding horrors and their contempt for the aggressors responsible for those horrors. They do this not only through the content of what they write, but also by devising various literary contrivances within that content. As this paper shows, toponymy can act as a weapon here, providing a basis for these contrivances, as the Ukrainian authors Lyuba Yakimchuk and Artem Chapeye have demonstrated.*

***Key words:** toponymy, literature in wartime, Ukraine*

1. LYUBA YAKIMCHUK AND “DECOMPOSITION”

Whereas outsiders are focused on February 24th 2022 as the date of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainians themselves are all too aware that current hostilities actually commenced eight years prior to this, in 2014, when forces of the Russian Federation occupied Crimea and part of the Donbas region. Almost immediately, Ukrainian literature began to react to this situation, and important in this context is a young Ukrainian poet named Liuba Yakymchuk [Люба Якимчук], who writes under the very similar names Lyuba Yakimchuk in English and Liubov Yakymchuk [Любов Якимчук] in her native Ukrainian¹. Yakimchuk was born in 1985 in the town of Pervomaisk, in Ukraine’s Luhansk region, in the heartland of the Russian-speaking Donbas, although she prefers to write her material in Ukrainian rather than Russian.

Shortly after the invasion of the Donbas, Yakimchuk published a book of verse, titled *Абрикоси Донбасу* (*Abrykosa Donbasu*), which translates as *Apricots of Donbas*

¹ This paper will refer to the author as Lyuba Yakimchuk throughout.



(YAKIMCHUK 2015A). An English-language version followed a few years later (YAKIMCHUK 2021). The title was a reference to the wild apricot trees with which she had been familiar as a child in the Donbas, and which, as legend has it, stop at the Russian border (the book begins with the line “Where no more apricots grow, Russia starts”). One of the poems featured in the book, carrying the title *Decomposition* [Розкладання: Rozkladannia], is of particular interest to toponymists, for it features an unusual and artful literary device for conveying the destruction of Donbas settlements during the 2014-15 conflict.

In this poem, Yakimchuk chooses to deconstruct – quite literally – some of the toponyms of the Donbas, so that they are reduced to individual constituent elements: sometimes syllables; sometimes non-syllabic letter combinations; sometimes even individual letters. She performs this toponymic artifice with the names of the cities Luhansk and Donetsk, her home town Pervomaïsk, and the settlement of Debaltsevo, where in early 2015 one of the bloodiest battles was fought. She uses the phenomenon of decomposition to convey the shattering destruction of language, territory and family. As she explained in an interview with the Canadian CBC radio station, “Language is as beautiful as this world. So when someone destroys your world, language reflects that. I decompose words to describe the decomposition of cities and towns, the decomposition of Donbas region, my little motherland” (YAKIMCHUK 2022). Here below are the relevant extracts taken from Yakimchuk’s poem *Decomposition*, in the original Ukrainian and in English translation². The toponyms she uses – real and imaginary; intact and deconstructed – are highlighted in bold type.

Розкладання	DECOMPOSITION
не кажіть мені про якийсь там Луганськ він давно лише ганськ лу зрівняли з асфальтом червоним	Don’t talk to me about Luhansk It has long since turned into hansk Lu had been razed to the crimson pavement
мої друзі в заручниках – і до нецька мені не дістатися	My friends are held hostage – And I can’t reach them. I can’t do netsk
щоби витягти із підвалів, завалів та з-під валів	To pull them out of basements, from under the rubble.
про війну не буває поезії про війну є лише розкладання	There’s no poetry about war About war there’s only decomposition
лише літери і всі – ррр	Only letters remain And they are all – rrr.
Первомайськ розбомбили на перво і майськ	Pervomaïsk has been split into pervo and maïsk
а де бальцево ? де моє бальцево ?	And where is baltsevo ? Where is my baltsevo ?

² The English translation given here is a compound of versions found on the Internet, together with adaptations of my own.

In the first verse, Yakimchuk straightforwardly deconstructs the name of Luhansk into its two syllables, but her treatment of Donetsk is more complicated. Instead of the two natural syllables “don” + “etsk”, she partitions the word after the letters “do”. This gives us an English verb of action (“do”) followed by a non-existent word (“netsk”) that when encountered in English cleverly suggests “nix; nothing”. The two elements taken together artfully symbolise the frustration of impotence.

In the second extracted verse, Yakimchuk emphasises the absolute reductibility of the decomposition, by in effect reducing the toponyms of all Ukrainian places involved in conflict to single letters; indeed to just one single letter, the letter “r”, repeated several times over – “rrr” – to convey the sound of gunfire. Her home town of Pervomaïsk features in the following line; this name means “First of May town”, which Yakimchuk splits simply and neatly into its two principal elements “Pervo” (“First”) and “Maïsk” (“May town”).

The final extract concentrates in an innovative fashion on the battlefield of Debaltsevo. Yakimchuk fears that this place has disappeared completely, and she asks where it might be by using the first two letters “de” in an interrogative fashion (“de” [де] means “where” in Ukrainian). This leaves her with the remaining element “baltsevo”, a word that does not actually exist in Ukrainian but which she uses as an invented and almost plausible toponym. And as if to emphasise her affiliation with her “little motherland”, Yakimchuk reinforces her connection with this particular place by asking not just “Where is Baltsevo?”, but then adding a possessive pronoun to her question – “Where is my Baltsevo?” – thereby investing personal value in the name as indicating a location which is special to her. Finally, Yakimchuk extends her literary decomposition technique to her own personal name, lamenting that conflict has aged her and torn her apart; she is no longer “Lyuba” (which means “Beloved”), but simply “ba” – a nonsense name in which much of the “love” element has been lost.

It is worth noting here a wider historical significance in Yakimchuk’s transformative process of word decomposition. From quite early times, there were those who toyed with the notion of seeing words in terms of their individual letters, and sorting them accordingly – alphabetising them, in effect. But until the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, this notion was for the most part eschewed and considered to be anathema. Words were considered to be holistic and possessing an internal integrity, and they most certainly were not to be split into arbitrary components. The thought of deconstructing a word and sorting it according to its individual letters would mean that an entry for “Deity” might find itself alongside an entry for “Devil”, and this would be at best highly inappropriate and at worst sacrilegious. Instead, sorting was most frequently achieved by means of a taxonomy, one largely based on religious grounds. The Almighty and related entries would come first, followed by Man, and then sorting would proceed in a perceived descending order down to insects and inanimate objects. What Yakimchuk has done with her poem *Decomposition* is to purposefully bring to life the “sacrilege” of the pre-Enlightenment era, by actively promoting the disintegration of words and thereby deliberately destroying their true meaning. To us today, of course, the effect this produces in her poem is both clever and dramatic. Lyuba Yakimchuk fled from Ukraine at the end of March 2022. A recording of her reciting the poem in full (in Ukrainian) is available (YAKIMCHUK 2015B).

2. ARTEM CHAPEYE AND “THE UKRAINE”

In the days when speakers of the English language considered Ukraine to be a region or area, it was commonplace for that language to place a definite article in front of the name, and refer to “the Ukraine”. This is customary practice in English in instances where a simplex toponym does not inherently carry a sufficient degree of definition or precision within it. In such instances, English requires that additional supportive definition be provided, this being achieved by the insertion of the definite article. Hence even today English will normally refer to “the Donbas”, rather than simply “Donbas”, because – at least in the view of speakers of that language – this particular feature still carries an element of vagueness, lacking for example definite and universally understood limits. Yakimchuk, on the other hand, as a Ukrainian from that very region, has a perception of its extent and limits and omits the article in the English-language edition of her book (YAKIMCHUK 2021). For many decades, however, there has been little excuse for the English language to retain the definite article in the case of Ukraine. Ukraine has been a fully-fledged polity for a century at least, even if its independence was denied during the Soviet era. And, certainly, since its present independence was achieved in 1991, it has been just as improper to refer to “the Ukraine” as it would be to refer to “the Uganda”. Normally, Ukrainians are understandably very keen to point this out to any English speakers who might commit the solecism of adding the article. So when in 2018 a Ukrainian author published a Ukrainian-language book with – bizarrely – an English title, and when that English title is – even more bizarrely – *The Ukraine*, complete with the definite article, it was certainly puzzling. What could it mean?

The author of this unusual work is the Ukrainian writer Anton Vodiani [АНТОН Водяний], who was born in the western Ukrainian town of Kolomyia in 1981. He writes under the Ukrainian *nom de plume* Артем Чапай, which he renders in Roman as Artem Chapeye. Having already made a name for himself with earlier works of both fiction and non-fiction, Chapeye turned his attention some years ago to a candid identification of what he saw as the less obvious aspects of Ukraine’s visual landscape, capturing the *Dasein* of Ukraine, as he puts it, following Heidegger’s terminology. His view is that, alongside the customarily pictured aspects of Ukraine, there runs a parallel landscape which is equally typical of the country but which does not normally receive attention. So Chapeye compiled a collection of essays in an attempt to convey this parallel Ukraine to his readers, and in an article published in the weekly magazine *The New Yorker* he listed in snapshot style some of its features (CHAPEYE 2022):

- Middle-aged men in peaked caps, with long moustaches and leather jackets over their warm sweaters;
- Middle-aged women in chunky knit hats;
- College girls stepping over puddles in their fancy white boots, clutching the handles of checkered plastic tote bags with fingers red from the cold, trying not to chip their long painted nails;
- The old lady in the ankle-length brown overcoat, carting apples on a hand truck;
- The coiffed ageing blonde behind the wheel in a traffic jam, calmly smoking out of the car window;
- The unfinished concrete building on the outskirts of Kamianets-Podilskyi;

- The bottomless purple-green lake in a submerged quarry in Kryvyi Rih;
- The slow destruction of the Dominican church in Lviv;
- The abandoned Pioneer camp outside Mariupol, with its rusty swings.

Chapeye approaches these features – attractive and unattractive alike – with a wry smile and an insider’s empathy, even finding an element of romance in them. He considers them to be valid reflections of the reality of life in Ukraine today, and as much representative of the country as any of the more conventional features usually on display. But Chapeye needed to find a way of distinguishing one Ukraine from the other and, being adept in English and understanding the potential of its definite article, he realised he could capture the distinctiveness of this parallel landscape by referring to it as *the Ukraine*. His problem then, of course, was that he could not successfully make this distinction in his native language, for Ukrainian does not possess a definite (or an indefinite) article. So he chose to write the title in English, and in 2018 the essays were duly published in the Ukrainian language in a book with the English title *The Ukraine*.

3. THE TOPONYMIC FUTURE

There are occasions in each of the above works where the authors seem to have the English language in mind, almost to the same degree as their native Ukrainian. This is of course more obviously true of Chapeye, but it is evident in Lyuba Yakimchuk’s poem too, particularly perhaps in her treatment of the toponym “Donetsk”. It is also clear from the work of Yakimchuk and others that war can quickly become reflected in language, and that literary devices can be deployed to considerable effect as a response to conflict, conveying an author’s attitude to the aggression that has instigated it. Given that toponymy is a function of language, we should not be surprised if aggression sparks some degree of toponymic shift as well. (This is despite the obvious difference between literature and toponymy, in that literary authors start with a blank page, whereas toponymists are usually confronted with an existing and complex onomastic reality of place and feature names).

As a personal example, for all my adult life I have considered “Kiev” to be the conventional English name for the capital city of Ukraine. Although conscious also of the Ukrainian name, romanized as “Kyiv”, it had never crossed my mind to use this in an English-language context – except perhaps out of a sense of politeness when in contact with Ukrainian colleagues. Yet within the space of a few weeks in the early months of 2022 I found myself completely unwilling to write the name “Kiev” at all, in any context, let alone as a standard conventional name. Events in Ukraine since February 2022 have forced us all to think deeply about what we mean by that word “conventional”. Does it mean perpetual continuation with past practice, regardless of circumstances that currently confront us, or can conventions adapt to changing circumstances? The vast majority of the population are not toponymists, geographers or historians. They may have little knowledge of Ukraine and will not know the Russian-language origin of the “Kiev” spelling. They may not even be aware of that spelling at all, never having come across Ukrainian matters in the past, and are accordingly quite happy to adopt “Kyiv” now that it is in the news, without having to displace any former spelling from their minds. It is this majority who ultimately help determine what is conventional in a language, and it seems to me that it is rapidly becoming conventional

across the English-speaking community to use the spelling “Kyiv”. In this way a new conventional name is being born, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the Ukrainian endonym is beginning to function as the conventional name in English-language contexts (and perhaps in other language contexts too). It also seems to me that toponymists need not be anxious about this for any scientific reason, since toponymy is not an exact science. The selection of one name from the corpus of toponyms available for a particular feature is subject to adaptation through time, as language constantly reflects changing societal norms, mores and attitudes.

Perhaps events will take us further than just the name of the capital city. There are already Ukrainian authors deploying literary devices to deal with the so-called “people’s republics” in the Donbas. They refuse to accord them recognition by insisting on writing them only in a Russian (not a Ukrainian) form, or by enclosing them within quotation marks and thereby separating them into a kind of literary quarantine. In fact, such practices of belittlement and disparagement, bordering on contempt, have spread more widely within informal Ukrainian texts, where the words “Russia”, “Russian” and “Russians” are now frequently being written entirely in lower-case letters – “росія”, “росіян”, “росіяни” respectively – in an act of depersonalisation (see for example RUKOMEDA 2022). And future events, as yet uncertain, may have a toponymic impact too. We have noted that the name of Lyuba Yakimchuk’s home town in the Donbas, Pervomaïsk, is a celebration of May Day. It is a Russian-language name, reflecting the fact that it is in what has hitherto been a preponderantly Russian-speaking part of Ukraine. Such toponymic instances as this have long been common in eastern Ukraine, but will they continue? Will the Ukrainian inhabitants of Pervomaïsk remain content with their Russian-language name, or will they wish to change it into the Ukrainian-language equivalent, Pershotravensk [Першотравенський]? Or, even more drastically, will the very concept of May Day, with its Soviet resonances, any longer be welcome at all as the source of their toponym? Time will tell.

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