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Three Scenes from Ukraine War, Language, and Justice

Abstract. This article brings together political, poetic, and philosophical themes to discuss the war in Ukraine and the disruptive and damaging effects that war—*this war in particular*—has on language and shared meaning. It accomplishes this using empirical and factual reporting on the gruesome events which took place in Mariupol and Bucha in March and April 2022, a literary analysis of the poetry of Paul Celan, and remarks on language and war made by Serhiy Zhadan during an acceptance speech at the German Book Trade. The author offers a poetic analysis of the war in Ukraine and shows how war fundamentally alters how language conveys and communicates meaning. And yet, this article maintains, following Zhadan, that language—and our shared hope in its meaningfulness—is, nevertheless, a profound source of healing and restoration after the trauma of war—and a significant and substantial site of justice.

Keywords: language and war, trauma of war, justice.

Scene One: War

War unequivocally changes language, its architecture, the scope of its use. War, like an intruder's shoe, disrupts the ant colony of communication.

(Zhadan, 2022)

In her memoir, *War Diary*, Yevgenia Belorusets (2022) writes:

One does not speak to a ruin. One contemplates it, holds it in one's mind. It is war's silent witness in the middle of the city. Looking at a ruin gives the observer a certain distance from events. What does this distance mean? It is in no way an emotional distance, but a detachment that gives strength and the feeling that you can control how close the war comes to you. As a giant trace of an inhuman force, a ruin devours everything human that makes up the street you're standing on (Belorusets, 2022, p. 85).

This entry is dated March 16th, 2022, a few weeks after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began and 8 years since the conflict began in the Donbas region. It is the same day that a Russian missile attack on the city of Mariupol targeted and successfully destroyed the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre which stood prominently in the city's center. Belorusets (2022) recounts her experience of the day,

Around 1,000 people whose houses had been destroyed found refuge in the Drama Theater, a large building in the city center. In satellite images, you can see that next to the theater, the Russian word for “children” was written twice in chalk in capital letters. Perhaps this word

was written on the ground at risk of death in *the hope* that it would provide protection from the bombs and shelling. The word looks like a warning, a dialogue with someone who could never imagine attacking such a place... When I read the word “children” in these photos, I can understand the belief that no one would commit such an atrocity, even when the war has already become so horrific.

Today the theater in Mariupol was bombed—there's discussion of a “high-performance bomb.” What does that mean? It means that the building no longer exists... I am safe. The air raid sirens have fallen silent and theoretically I could even go to sleep. Tomorrow is the beginning of another day. New events will come, and tomorrow we will speak of them and contemplate them instead of the theater in Mariupol. *I can't imagine it.* The days of the war should not draw to a close just like any other days in a life. (Belorusets, 2022, pp. 86–87).

The “soviet era building,” reported the BBC (2022), had previously been “designated as a shelter for civilians.” This designation came after nearly three weeks of constant shelling by Russian forces which had completely surrounded the city. The result of the siege left nearly 300,000 people trapped and without electricity, gas, or running water. The Mariupol Drama Theatre became a refuge for those who were unable to escape the city and at the time of the attack was housing around 1000 people. As the two satellite photos below show (*Figure 1*), the theatre had been marked with the Russian word for “children” (Дети), in *the hope*—and this word *hope* is important—that the Russians would avoid the theatre as a potential target. This hope, however, did not prove true: the latest Associated Press (2022) count numbered the death toll of the attack at around 600 people—some of whom were, in fact, children.

This pair of photographs and the destruction of the Mariupol Drama Theatre, serves as a concentrated picture of what the Ukrainian poet Serhiy Zhadan hoped to express during his acceptance speech after being awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in October 2022. The massacre at Mariupol shows the *seeming* impotence of language: does the word “children” no longer *mean* anything? Are the letters, the characters, the symbols, no longer *meaningful*? Has the word “children” been reduced to mere scratching’s in the pavement, in the same banal category as the sunbaked chewing gum and the splintered fissures which cover the concrete surface? Zhadan’s point: “war unequivocally changes language, its architecture, the scope of its use” (2022). Apparently, during war time, the word “children” means very little actually. “Turns out, language’s capabilities are limited...” (Zhadan, 2022).

The photos of Mariupol also conjure the image which Zhadan uses to begin his discussion on the change which takes place in language at the hands of war: that of the “intruder’s shoe [which] disrupts the ant colony of communication” (2022). One wonders if these satellite images are *precisely* what Zhadan had in mind when we penned his acceptance speech: for the photos of the destruction appear eerily similar to a boot print stamped into the side of an anthill. These photos demonstrate the stark reality that words cannot always protect us from the evil of war, that language does not hold up against the onslaught of drone attacks and high precision missiles; that our words too, can become victim to the nihilism *and* annihilation of war. Like ants, it was only the act of going *further underground* which saved the lives of those inside as they sheltered in the basement of the theatre. I suppose that’s what happens during war: you find yourself rather lower to the ground than you are used to, sometimes wishing you could go lower, believing it might be safer there.

It is also a bit of poetic irony that this all happened *at a theatre*. The spoken word, the dramatic gesture, the facial expression, the tone of voice, the pause, the pitch, the cadence, the crescendo, the lyric, the meter, rhyme, and rhythm of the human voice, finds its home in the theatre. In fact, the entire *linguisticity* of the human person rarely finds such a concentrated expression as in the theatre. For it is there that language both gives birth to and cares for some of the most beautiful and pure manifestations of our shared humanity. Yet, what are we to do when the theatre—the public space of shared human language and creativity, solidarity and hope, sorrow and joy, tragedy and comedy—has been razed to the ground by a Russian airstrike? Or, as Zhadan puts it,

[T]he inability to utilize the usual mechanisms—more precisely, being unable to use previous, peacetime, pre-war constructions to convey the state you’re in, articulate your fury, your pain, your hope, is particularly painful and unbearable. Especially if you’re used to trusting



Figure 1 Mariupol Theatre: Before and After

language, used to relying on its capabilities, which seem inexhaustible to you. (Zhadan, 2022).

On April 1st, 2022, only a few weeks after the Mariupol theatre was attacked, photographs and videos began to surface from Bucha, a small town just outside of Kyiv. Bucha became occupied by Russia forces during the first wave of attacks on Ukraine and would remain under Russian occupation for one month. After Ukrainian forces successfully regained control of Bucha a slew of shockingly horrific images—which are too graphic and too gruesome to include here—began to flood the internet: images of dead bodies littered about in the streets and lying in flower beds, buried in makeshift graves and piled up in cellars. The people of Bucha also fled underground, hiding in cellars and basements, believing it might be safer there. Unfortunately, though, for the men, women, and children of Bucha these places of refuge became torture chambers, hellish prisons, and in many cases, tombs. In the weeks that followed Bucha’s liberation, nightmarish accounts from the month of the “occupation” began to be shared: Stories—no, *trauma, memories, experiences*—of torture, rape, starvation, mutilation, mass murder, and random execution style killings all began to testify to a growing litany of atrocities committed by the Russian invaders. The most recent death toll recorded for “The Bucha Massacre” is 458 civilians killed. Yes, *civilians*. (Gall, 2022 & Sly, 2022)

Belorusets (2022) wrote in her *War Diary*, recording her reaction as she first learned of what happened in Bucha. She expresses the failure of language to make sense of Bucha. She speaks for us all:

In Bucha, a city northwest of Kyiv that has just been “liberated,” the dead bodies of residents are lying in the streets. A mass grave with 280 bodies has just been discovered. *The whole world is speechless seeing the pictures from Bucha...* (p. 138)

What words would even be *worthy* of the task to describe what happened at Bucha? No matter how many articles, blogs, podcasts, and news reports document what happened there, we intuitively understand that words alone do not bring us any closer to justice

for the people of Bucha. “Turns out, languages capabilities are limited...” (Zhadan, 2022).

Perhaps most shocking of all, Russian authorities denied all responsibility for what happened at Bucha. In what can only be described as an attempt at *reductio ad absurdum*, Russia claimed that Ukraine had faked the whole thing and suggested that the photographs and videos were all staged and manufactured, insisting that the entire episode was nothing more than an elaborate act of *theatre*. This is but another example of how war fundamentally disrupts the relationship between our speech and our reality, between what happens and what we say about it. This disruption can be so profound that it severs the bond between truth and justice—between what happened and what we *do* about it—creating a world where words like “children” no longer communicate a common, shared meaning, a world where theatres become targets and tragedies become theatres. (Even the commonly understood English expression “theatre of war” shows how inoculated we have become to the absurdity of war and the collateral damage it inflicts on our language.)

What, then, is left of language? What remains of our capacity to communicate with one another, our ability to reach one another, to speak to one another, to allow ourselves to belong with and to one another, across our differences, and the distances of our speaking and listening after what happened at Mariupol and Bucha? Is there any hope for us? For language itself?

Scene Two: Language

Thing is, verbally, we have all found ourselves in a spot we haven't ever spoken from before. Therefore, we have a shifted system of assessment and perception; the coordinates of meaning have changed, and the boundaries of expediency have changed. (Zhadan, 2022).

Certainly, the events and images of Mariupol are implicit in Zhadan's acceptance speech, but it is the events of Bucha and Iziium which he mentions explicitly. Zhadan asks about the possibility of poetry after such evil and hopes to offer consolation:

Poetry after Bucha and Iziium is still undoubtedly possible. Moreover, it's necessary; however, the specter of Bucha and Iziium, their presence, will weigh too heavily in this post-war poetry, which, to a great extent, will determine its content and tonality. This painful, yet necessary realization—that mass graves and bombed neighborhoods will provide context for the poems written in your country—does not fill you with optimism, of course, yet it makes you understand that

language requires our daily labor, our constant involvement, our engagement. After all, what do we have in order to make our point, to express ourselves? Our language and our memory. (2022).

Zhadan is not the first to raise the question of language as a response to war. Paul Celan, in the middle of the previous century and in the aftermath of the Second World War, also asked about the meaning of language after the words and people who speak it have been nihilated and annihilated. Celan's poetry is marked by a single question: How can we speak at all after *what happened?* (This phrase “what happened” was Celan's way of referring to what we commonly call the Holocaust or Shoah.) In other words, how will our language heal what has been broken, if war has broken language itself?

Celan too, was not unacquainted with a blood-stained Ukrainian soil. As John Feltstiner writes in his introduction to a collection of Celan's poetry (2001), “Celan is both challenging and exemplary. There can have been only a few modern poets in whom the life and the work cleave so closely, so traumatically.” Feltstiner then quotes from Celan's poem, “With a Changing Key,”

Just like the blood that bursts from
your eye or mouth or ear,
so your key changes,
Just like the wind that rebuffs you,
packed round your word is the snow. (p. xxiii).

At one level, this stifled “word,” needs no biographical explanation to fill in its meaning. Yet, notice that Celan's “word” is shut in between “packed” and “snow.” Feltstiner points out that “what underlies those lines of Celan's, that *ars poetica*, is the Ukrainian snow where his parents were murdered” (2001, p. xxiii). Sometime during the years 1942–1943, Celan's parents were both victims of Nazi “purification.” His father died of untreated typhus in a concentration camp, and his mother was shot for insubordination. In the final analysis, Celan's parents were both murdered on Ukrainian soil for being Jewish and much of his poetry is an attempt to recover from this loss. That is, to find language on the other side of “what happened.”

Reading Zhadan's acceptance speech, I was constantly reminded of a very condensed, concentrated, poem written by Celan titled “The Shofar Place” which I would like to read and interpret alongside Zhadan's remarks on war, language, and justice.

THE SHOFAR PLACE

deep in the glowing
text-void,
at torch height,
in the timehole:
hear deep in with your mouth. (Celan, 2001, p. 361).

Like the explosive, deafening, thunderclap of artillery, Celan's "The Shofar Place" begins with a trumpet blast. It interrupts us. Our disorientation likely results from *not* knowing: not knowing from whence this trumpet blast has come—not knowing *why* or what for. Does it mark the beginning or the end of time? Is it the sound of victory or defeat? Does this annual ritual—the ram's horn blown each year—celebrate the past, the year just finished? Or the future, the year ahead? Celan's poem speaks to us from a "void," from "deep in the glowing," from "the timehole." Or, as Zhadan puts it,

... when you can't feel movement, when you're lost in silence, unable to discern what's up ahead, in front of you, in the gloom and silence. Wartime truly is a time with a disjointed panorama, disrupted communication between the past and the future; a time when you feel the here and now with maximum acuteness and bitterness, when you immerse yourself in the space that surrounds you and focus on the moment that overwhelms you. (2022).

Like those who went underground to find shelter in Mariupol and Bucha, Celan and Zhadan both speak words which bring us close to the ground, lower even. Their language is itself a kind of compression, claustrophobic and cramped. The sphere of life is smaller during war time, our lungs feel weak, the air feels heavy, the fog of war is asthmatic. We find it difficult to catch our breath, our *psyche*. Celan, so in tune with the cadence of our psyche, disrupts it, reinterprets it, and confronts our commonly held notions of language and time. His shofar place is somewhere else, in a medieval cell, a *nunc stans*, perhaps, or in a frozen Ukrainian snowdrift, an eternal monument to grief and loss.

In the same key, Zhadan asks,

What does war change first? One's sense of time, one's sense of space... This is the feeling that accompanies you from day one of a major war: the feeling of a temporal fracture, the absence of continuity, the feeling of air being compressed, that it's hard to breathe because reality is exerting pressure on you, trying to squeeze you out to the other side of life, to the other side of what's visible. There's this compression of events and emotions, this dissolution into a thick bloody current that envelops you and sweeps you up—what distinguishes the reality of war so drastically from the reality of peace is this pressure, this inability to breathe freely and just speak. (2022).

Zhadan's language here offers us two potential word-pictures: that of *birth* and *bomb*. In the first place, he likens the disruption of wartime to something akin to being born, to the first waking moments of temporality. Only, this birth into time is fractured, broken, and left incomplete. That is, because war leaves us with no imaginable future, no conception of tomorrow, *all that remains is the travail*, the labor pains of survival, while natality is left to miscarry. Zhadan also creates

the feeling of *the bomb*—the feeling of being hit with a bomb, of being exploded, of being hit by the breath-taking blast of a shockwave, of superheated air, of the percussive force of an explosion which stretches our sense of space and time, a feeling that we can *only* imagine if we are still breathing. These are the extremes of our language—birth and bomb, life and death. We come into the world and receive language as a gift, as an inheritance, as a kind of promise to each other. And it is not long before we blow it all to bits with our bombs, destroying the gift, squandering the inheritance, and breaking the promise. In a sense, language itself has this vulnerability and liability built into it, to speak is always a risk. Because, if we pay attention, we notice how we lose our capacity for language all the time in daily life during our arguments, disputes, insults, marital strife and family feuds. We hope and understand that language has the ability to bring us closer together, yet we know all too well how often it can tear us further apart. Sadly, when we speak, bombs are never far away.

Celan knew this too, and his "Shofar Place" approaches language with both admiration and suspicion. It is all too easy for one to become lost in the "text-void" where language collapses, folds in on itself. Language *lies* "at torch height." Because language, even as it reckons us with and against time, traps us, deceives us. It may even be that language itself creates the conditions of our temporality—and the conditions of our *divisiveness*. This ram's horn, this trumpet blast, language! Such a gift, yet a curse. Language brings us together, grants us common ground to stand upon. It even erects mountains, upon which we stand, taking in the vista view—an apocalyptic view—of past, present, and future. But oh language! Do you not also "throw mountains into the sea?" You who fell the walls at Jericho! Do you not also divide, conquer, and erect new walls? Oh language, that ram's horn caught in the thicket that stayed Abraham's hand! Do you not also announce war?

Consider the very real situation of Zhadan's mother tongue—the Ukrainian language. It has been a consistent site of dispute and division within Ukraine since it was first established as an independent state in 1991. Prior to that, it was banned as a subject of study and as a language of instruction in the old Russian Empire and in similar ways during the Soviet Union. Today, Ukrainian is officially recognized in ten Eastern European nations as a minority language. However, the Constitution of Russia only recognizes the Ukrainian language *on any level* within the disputed Crimea territory. Otherwise, due to policies of Russification, Ukrainian is all but ignored within the borders of Russia. Language itself, apparently, creates division, borders, impasse. Again, we must ask: how can language heal what is broken if our language itself has become the site of war?

Returning briefly to the final lines of Celan's poem: To "hear deep with your mouth," isn't this the capacity

to catch one's breath by *not speaking*, precisely in order to *listen* to the Other? How much war might have been avoided if *this* aspect of language was cultivated more? To *listen*.

Scene Three: Justice

What may look like talk about death from the outside oftentimes is a desperate attempt to cling to life, to its opportunities, to its continuity. After all, in this new, fractured, shifted reality, where does war as a topic of conversation end and where does the domain of peace begin? . . . Do we have to remind others about our right to keep existing in this world or is this right obvious and irrefutable? (Zhadan, 2022)

This “other side” of language—listening—it seems to me, is what Zhadan hopes will be heard in his acceptance speech: he hopes that the wider, watching world—he specifically mentions “European intellectuals,” but I want to suggest that this now also includes non-Europeans and Americans—would begin to actually *listen* to what Ukraine has been trying to tell us. To listen not only to the eloquence of her poets or the expertise of her pundits, but to the pain and perseverance of her people, to the stories of suffering and trauma so terrible—*so evil*—that death itself begins to seem like a kind of mercy. In Zhadan's words,

The world listening to us isn't always capable of understanding one simple thing—when we speak, the degrees of our linguistic tension, linguistic sincerity, and linguistic emotionality differ too drastically... This appears to be about having differing fields of vision, views, and perspectives, but most importantly, it's about language. Sometimes it seems like as the world watches what has been transpiring in Eastern Europe for the past six months it has been using vocabulary and definitions that haven't been able to explain what's going on for a long time. For instance, what does the world ... mean when it speaks about the need for peace? (2022).

For “the listening world,” for the “watching world,” for *you and I*, the very hard pill to swallow is this: the distinctions we make between Russian indifference, regarding the word “children” labeling a theatre in Mariupol, and some of our discussions about “peace,” is not as wide a gap as we might like to think. In fact, the breakdown of language, the fracturing of communication, the disconnect *in both* of these failures of language, is probably more similar than any of us are comfortable with, or at least, than I am comfortable with. As it turns out, the word “peace” doesn't necessarily mean the same thing for Ukrainians as it does for the rest of the world:

So what do Ukrainians find alarming about European intellectuals' and European

politicians' declarations about the need for peace...? It's the fact that [Ukrainians] understand that peace won't come merely because the victim of aggression has laid down their arms... where is the line between supporting peace and not supporting resistance? The thing is, though, I'd say that when speaking about peace in the context of this bloody, dramatic war instigated by Russia, some people don't want to acknowledge a simple fact—there's no such thing as peace without justice. (2022).

I have personally been guilty of this sin, of this *war crime*. I don't think I am alone in this either. How often have some of us inadvertently shut our ears to the legitimate and morally justifiable outcry of those who remain steadfast in the face of evil, those who continue to fight, suffer, and fall victim in their struggle against evil. How often have we stood behind some misplaced sense of Christian virtue, insisting that one must “turn the other cheek” at all costs, that to “love one's enemies” means to simply lie down and roll over so their boot can come down all the more swiftly on your head? Are such scriptural invocations really *absolute injunctions*? Or, something else? Could it be that what really lurks behind our virtue signaling and peacekeeping peacocking is really just moral laziness, a kind of sloth which refuses to enter into the reality of another's pain and suffering, and join the fight against evil, because it is simply easier, more comfortable, and less messy to shout slogans about peace from a safe distance? Could it be that what seems on its face like the moral high ground, is something else? (Perhaps the point is to get *lower* anyway?) Like it or not, the refusal to speak out against the senseless killing of innocent lives and stand in solidarity against evil, *is its own kind of evil*. Is *this* a pill we are willing to swallow? Zhadan again, has us dead to rights,

[T]his is no longer a question for Ukrainians—this is a question for the world, for its willingness (or unwillingness) to swallow yet another manifestation of utter uncontrollable evil in favor of dubious financial gain and disingenuous pacificism. (2022)

As Zhadan says emphatically, “It all comes down to language—I'll say it again” (2022).

The reality of this war is that it has not only been fought with guns and missiles, but with words and information, language and communication. Our speech *and* our silence are being weaponized. The Russian strategy of hybrid-war has been a major feature of this conflict for years (Clark, 2020). The idea is to disrupt the avenues of communication, to disorient the centers of meaning, to break the chains of continuity which unite people and give them a shared sense of purpose. Russian hybrid-war is a literal attempt to distort language, to fracture the sense of a shared world,

and to break the bonds of a common humanity, between truth and justice—*between what happens and what we say and do about it*. Language itself becomes collateral damage. Zhadan seems particularly aware of this, and goes out of his way to emphasize the fact that we must not allow the breakdown of language to carry on in perpetuity; to quote him at length:

...these days a lot of things, phenomena, and concepts need to be explained, or, at the very least, they need a fresh reminder, they need to be re-articulated and embraced again. Typically, war shows what people have been trying not to notice for a long while; war is a time of uncomfortable questions and tough answers. This war launched by the Russian army has suddenly put forth a slew of questions that reach well beyond the context of Russo-Ukrainian relations. Like it or not, in the upcoming years, we will have to talk about things that make us uncomfortable: populism and double standards, a lack of responsibility and political conformism, ethics, which, as it turns out, have hopelessly disappeared from the vocabulary of those who make crucial decisions in the modern world. One could say these things pertain to politics, that we'll have to speak about it, about politics. Nevertheless, in this case, politics is merely a screen, a cover, a chance to avoid bumping into any sharp edges

and avoid calling a spade a spade. But that's just what's needed—calling a spade a spade. Criminals being called criminals. Freedom being called freedom. Deceit being called deceit. During times of war, these lexical units sound particularly sharp and expressive. Avoiding them without getting cut is very hard. They shouldn't be avoided. They really shouldn't be. (Zhadan, 2022).

This, I think, is the challenge issued to us by Zhadan's speech: that we must continue to speak and to listen to each other, even in the face of war. That, yes, it is true, sometimes "language betrays us" (Zhadan, 2022). Sometimes, when you say the word "peace," you mean something different than when I say the word "peace." That, yes, war is such a horrific condition that even words like "children" come to mean different things on opposite sides of the battle lines. But Zhadan wants us to know that this does not mean we should lose hope. This is the challenge we all face in a world that is more and more divided by how it understands language and its connection with truth and with justice. That although sometimes "language seems weak" it is actually "a source of energy." Even in the midst of war, with its fractured temporality and claustrophobic conditions, language remains an ineluctable source of *hope*. "The possibility of truth is behind our voices" (Zhadan, 2022).

At the time of this writing, it has been 22 months since the events at Mariupol and Bucha: "So we speak and we go on speaking. Even when words hurt our throats" (Zhadan, 2022). Justice cries out.

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