

War Discourse in Bohdan Tomenchuk's Poetry: language and memory

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Abstract. The article analyses the war narrative of the contemporary Ukrainian poet Bohdan Tomenchuk. The object of the analysis is more than three hundred works from the author's latest collection, each of which contains a war motif. The analysis is based on the works of memory by Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Ricoeur, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michael Basseler, and Dorothee Birke. The methods used are "memory studies" (at the intersection of history and psychology) with an emphasis on the sociological aspect of memory, as well as the hermeneutic method with attention to cognition mediated in symbols. This article aims to explore how B. Tomenchuk records the war through the material and spiritual dimensions. In Bohdan Tomenchuk's poetry, the material side of war often has a national colour. Weapons (sword, sabre) are correlated with the ancient epochs of Ukrainian history, and elements of protection (body armour) are correlated with national clothing (embroidery). Instead, the spiritual side of the war appeals to the universal experience of war as a wound (shrapnel in the body or torn off pieces, PTSD and mental distress). Ontologically, both physical and mental wounds appear as a symbol of a world fragmented by war, in which the fate of a person and a nation becomes a test of the ability to survive. From the point of view of linguistic representation, we can speak of a minimal number of tropes (similes and metaphors), but symbolization and polysemy in the poet's works are powerful.

Keywords: contemporary Ukrainian poetry; Bohdan Tomenchuk; war; memory; symbol; language.

Introduction

Unfortunately, war has long been a common human experience. However, anyone who studies it is aware that it is not events that unite people, but rather interpretations of those events. Therefore, memory and its representation in language become extremely important. In poetry, this representation must balance between emotionality and documentary style, between the concise volume of the work and the epic nature of what is depicted.

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This study aims to analyse the war discourse in the poetry of Bohdan Tomenchuk, a nominee for the Taras Shevchenko National Prize of Ukraine. The subject of the study is the recording of the realities of war in language in physical (weapons, battle, wounds, graves, death) and spiritual (trials, choices, wounds, loss) aspects. The object of analysis is more than three hundred poems from the collection *Embroider, Mother, a Bulletproof Vest* (*Вишивайте, мамо, бронезилет*).

The theme of war is not new to poetry studies. Guillaume Apollinaire, Wilfred Owen, Ezra Pound, Rudyard Kipling, and Ivan Franko wrote about the experience of World War I, while Keith Douglas, Tadeusz Ruzhevich, Anna Svirshchynska, Maksym Rylsky, and Lina Kostenko wrote about World War II. Since the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, poetic reflection has intensified (Liubov Yakymchuk, Borys Humenyuk), and since February 24, 2022, it has expanded even further, encompassing the works of front-line soldiers (Hlib Babich, Illia Chernilevsky, Artem Dovhopolyi, Artur Pavlenko, Yaryna Chornoguz), as well as civilians – both those who died (Viktoriia Amelina, Volodymyr Vakulenko) and those who survived (Bohdan Tomenchuk, Kateryna Kalytko). Olha Derkachova studied Bohdan Tomenchuk's poetry in a series of publications, which formed the basis of her monograph (2019). In that work, the author focused on the poet's lyrical texts, which she analysed from the perspective of spheres of existence – the contrast between the inner and outer space (the soul of the city), the antithesis of body and soul (sinful and sacred), and the binary opposition of the creative person and the traveller. Tomenchuk's poetry has also been studied in the context of references to other texts (folklore, literature, history) (Havryliuk, 2024). However, this article is the first attempt to show the experience of war through images of weapons, wounds, and fate as representatives of memory in B. Tomenchuk's texts.

The theme of the representation of war in literary research is studied in the context of issues of national identity and historical memory (Nahorna, 2012) and in the aspect of sociolinguistics (*Languages and Cultures in Times of War*, 2025). However, the language of poetry as a word that captures the experience of war has not yet been the subject of monographic studies and is the subject of study in isolated research (Nina Golovchenko, Olena Kitsan, Liliia Lavrynovych, Nadiia Gavryliuk).

The proposed study examines the language of poetry through the category of memory. The study is based on the works of Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Ricoeur, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michael Basseler, and Dorothee Birke. Despite the actualisation of studies of poetry that record the experience of war, it has not yet been studied through the category of memory based on the material of Bohdan Tomenchuk.

1. Theoretical prerequisites for the representation of memory

Friedrich Nietzsche spoke of three ways of representing memory: from the perspective of an antiquarian, as a collection of the past with no connection to the present; from the perspective of a monument, which threatens to lose connections with the past and turn it into a myth; from the perspective of a critic who recognizes forgetting as a component and

driving force of memory (Nietzsche, 2009, pp. 218–219). Ricoeur held a similar position, distinguishing between evasive, passive, and active forgetting. It was with the latter that the scholar associated the conscious selection and interpretation of memories (Ricoeur, 1999, pp. 53–71), and thus the representation of what and how we will remember.

Memory is by no means limited to memorials and monuments; it is not so much a place as an expanse (*lieu de memoire*) that contains both material and immaterial components of a significant phenomenon, such as events, words, names, etc. For example, Ukrainian poet Maksym Kryvtsov, who died in battles with Russian occupiers, wrote: “When asked what war is, I will answer without hesitation: names” (Kryvtsov, 2024, p. 67). When it comes to a creative person, the author’s name is often synonymous with the words they have spoken. Therefore, it is important to record these words in anthologies and individual author collections in order to have an individualised vision of war.

In contrast to literary individualisation, scholars value the typification of the vision of war, an attempt to interpret this catastrophic and traumatic reality. Interpretation is not a purely individual phenomenon, but arises as a result of discussions and debates, defining the social framework of memory, according to Halbwachs. The difficulty lies in the fact that words are the most elementary and most stable framework of collective memory, but they retain the details and elements of our ideas, rather than the complex whole (Halbwachs, 1976, pp. 40–83).

This attention to detail has an artistic dimension, because detail is an element of an artistic image, an expressive and meaningful detail. On the other hand, such details in literary works about historical events liken these texts to memories and form an archive of information, based on what Basseler and Birke call the mimesis of memorisation (Basseler, Birke, 2022, pp. 213–238).

Being fragments, details, and memories still have the potential to recreate wholeness, either by assembling a puzzle or from the perspective of reflecting the least and containing the most. The first path is characteristic of prose genres, which tend toward exhaustiveness as epicness, while the second is a way to achieve epicness through the poetic symbolization of detail. Symbolization itself is the only way to comprehend a catastrophe (irreversible) and survive a traumatic experience by overcoming emotional attachment to it (Hundorova, 2013, pp. 11–15).

Recovery from trauma is possible through verbalisation as a repetition of what has been said, which leads the researcher to search for key words in the poetic narrative. Such words indicate concepts that are important to the author, while simultaneously acquiring the status of symbolised details. Through these fragments, the author’s image unfolds. The repeated words focus on the individual vision of a shared war experience: battle, wounds, death. Looking at Tomenchuk’s poetry, I’m focusing on these elements in the author’s poetic interpretation.

For this study, Halbwachs’ thesis on the social framework of memory is particularly important (because the experience of an individual or a generation is passed on to others and formed as collective, but only in language – spoken or written). Tomenchuk’s poetry, which appeals to Ukrainian history, demonstrates how collective memory works, while at

the same time mythologising and glorifying it, comparing it with contemporary Ukrainian events and selecting expressive details and symbols.

2. Weapons as a symbol of battle and struggle

In Bohdan Tomenchuk's poetry, war appears not only as a phenomenon belonging to a specific period of national or world history. It is perceived by the artist as a transhistorical phenomenon. The author directly refers to Ernest Hemingway's novel "A Farewell to Arms" to show the transience of this farewell:

Yesterday, the last ones said farewell to their weapons,
 Today, the first ones have already fallen... (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 237).
 So they said farewell to you, weapon?
 Who compared the statistical curves?
 Those who died are, of course, heroes.
 The living are to blame, just because they the living... (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 22)

Given the frequency of wars, weapons become a marker of time and, at the same time, a symbol of resistance and battle. In Tomenchuk's texts, modern weapons – tanks, bullets, mines – hardly appear at all. This is because, in context, they acquire the status of the enemy. The character in the poem stops it with his own body, consciously choosing death to save his compatriots.

However, weapons from an earlier period, the times of knyazes and Cossacks, are mentioned quite often by the poet. This circumstance emphasises the historical dimension of the armed confrontation with the occupiers and the struggle of Ukrainians for their independence. At the same time, the mention of the sword refers to the image of a warrior-knight, a hero who is able to separate the essential from the non-essential, and truth from lies. The sword symbolises the straightforwardness, honesty, and dignity of the defender ("knyazes sword").

In addition to the sword, Tomenchuk also mentions the sabre, which is associated with the era of the Ukrainian Cossacks. On the one hand, it is similar to a sword that cuts ("precise saber"), and on the other hand, it differs from it because it is curved and symbolises the historical mistakes of the hetmans and their excessive trust in foreigners.

Both the sword and the sabre point to the long struggle for Ukraine's independence. Naturally, the poet conjures up the image of a cuckoo, which heralds the coming years of the Ukrainians' battle for freedom: "The cuckoo is cooing... for some people years, for us sabers."¹ (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 11).

The poet's metaphor, which likens the sword to writing implements that have been in use for too long, also testifies to the protracted resistance to the occupiers: "The swords have become blunt from writing history" (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 77). However, swords

¹ The word cooing in Ukrainian means both sound that cuckoo makes and forging. Also there is a superstition that how many times cuckoo coos, that many years you have left to live if you ask.

can be found not only in skilled hands, but also in a sheath. For the poet, such a sheath is the body of the land, wounded by war:

For crosses, like sword hilts,
Await in the chest, as in sheaths (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 13)

The metaphor proposed by Tomenchuk has another level of interpretation. The chest of the earth is the chest of the inhabitants of this land, the Ukrainians. And every surviving Ukrainian feels the pain of those who have fallen. Every cemetery cross wound the souls of the living. But at the same time, it reminds us why the soldiers sacrificed their lives and silently wait for the living to remember the defence of the Fatherland and take on this difficult duty, because

And the white world came, like a black hole...
War marches along the Milky Way...
In the universal astral plane – a computer game...
Where they kill us for still being Ukrainians. (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 37)

In his quatrain, Tomenchuk captures the global nature of the recent Russian-Ukrainian war and its existential character. In his poetry, he generally depicts weapons as being used for a noble purpose – to defend one's homeland. That is why swords appear alongside shields in his works.

Tomenchuk also does not shy away from highlighting the consequences of war – wounds and death – combining the realities of war with images of extraordinary emotional power and psychological authenticity.

3. Wounds of war as fragmentation of the world

In Tomenchuk's poetry, the wound affects not only the soldier but also the surrounding world. For example, the sky is bloodstained, and the sun resembles a clot of blood from a wound, while the moon resembles either a shot skull or the trigger mechanism of a grenade. Dawn, which in peacetime symbolised bright hopes, is now also marked by blood and festering wounds. And even an attempt to aestheticise them does not overshadow the tragic tone, because this is about bloody graffiti.

Such oversaturation with bloody colour no longer portends disaster (as it did in Ukrainian works of the 9th–13th centuries) but rather captures its universal scale and almost apocalyptic catastrophism, when the sky shifts from its place and rolls away bloodied, like a warrior's beret.

Blood has a voice and tries to shout to every human heart. Metaphorically, the poet depicts it as the voice of a shot sunbird beating in every chest. In this vision, the sun resembles a firebird – a symbol of happy fate that was violently destroyed and mutilated. More often, however, the poet avoids metaphors and poetic embellishments, distinguishing

between those for whom war is a distant reality and those from whom it has taken even the bodies of their loved ones, leaving only their bloody pieces:

You want a plaid and a fire in the fireplace...
 ...But somewhere the whole world has been blown up by a mine.
 If only the bloody pieces could be gathered,
 If only not the black insides of the catafalque (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 70)

The world is falling apart. One can either try to put the fragments together, sew them up, or bandage them, like a wounded soldier. For the poet, bandages not only heal physical wounds inflicted by the enemy, but also emotional ones. They bring together the righteous anger that arises in the soldier's heart toward the occupier. On the other hand, bandages become a sign of war; they talk about it. The author likens bandages to snow, combining three characteristics of the latter: colour, cold, and belonging to winter. Winter here is not just a season, but the time when the Russian-Ukrainian war began (both in 2014 and 2022). Therefore, it is a metaphor for war in general and alludes to the coldness of the coffin when a soldier is "in zinc camouflage" (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 18). Tomenchuk speaks in a similar vein about fierce wounds: like the wounds of February², when the renewed Russian-Ukrainian war began, and like wounds that testify to the extreme cruelty of the Russian occupiers.

In the same vein, in another work, the poet speaks of a fierce summer and refers to angry Ukrainians – military and civilians – as "broken shards of war" (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 14). Shards cause wounds, so there is also a hint of post-traumatic stress disorder, when people who have survived the war can hurt others. After all, when they return from the war, they carry it within themselves – like shrapnel in their bodies and like restless dreams in which they relive the battles of this Russian-Ukrainian war.

The restless dream is fragmented and disjointed. And these fragments of dreams are like shrapnel. In Tomenchuk's poetry, they first appear as a bad premonition in a restless mother's dream. Here, a woman senses her son's injury and tries to overcome this ill fate. Later, the fragments of prophetic dreams turn into fragments of post-war dreams.

The poet reflects the reality of war using graphic techniques, combining black and white. Moreover, the final colour is white, symbolising faith in the victory of light over darkness and good over evil. Even when this light is harsh and blinding after the darkness of night.

In Tomenchuk's view, the black moan of human pain contrasts with the white world. From the artist's point of view, this world is like a fragment stuck in a wound. A world that has lost its pre-war integrity. In which even fragmentary memories of life before the war seems inappropriate and therefore hurtful. But only these memories give purpose and strength to overcome the path.

For Tomenchuk, the current Russian-Ukrainian war is not purely local or European. The poet scales it up not even to a global level, but to a galactic one. This does not contradict

² In Ukrainian fierce and February is the same word.

historical truth, but only shifts the focus from the geographical dimension (Ukraine, Europe, the world) to the spiritual one. The lyrical character identifies himself as someone who has “a piece of sky with a fragment of the Star of Bethlehem” (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 302). Even the star that points the way to God is now a fragment that wounds. But it still leads to the light and gives light in dark times.

4. The fate of man in the coordinates of war

The concept of fate has changed over the course of literary eras. In ancient times, it was understood as a destiny determined by the gods. However, since the Romantic era, fate has been seen as dependent on the actions of the individual and capable of being changed through effort. In times of war, when “living through the day is already a record” (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 272), these antagonistic views paradoxically converge. On the one hand, a person cannot control whether they will survive or not. On the other hand, a person has a choice: to be doomed to death or to resist the occupiers and the circumstances they have imposed.

In Tomenchuk’s poetry, fate is cunning, capable of deceiving the lyrical character, intoxicating him with grand promises. In most of the author’s poems, fate is comparable to life, but at the same time, it is something external to the lyrical character. For example, the poet compares it to camouflage that has been patched up countless times and can only be removed by dying. Thus, fate becomes synonymous with war, and camouflage is likened to a wounded body that has been in the hands of a surgeon countless times. However, the human soul is also pure pain, which must be dealt with on one’s own, again and again, “stitching” the soul together from pieces of pain.

In Tomenchuk’s poetry, the fate of a person in war is sacrifice for the sake of the Fatherland. The poet compares the nameless soldier who gave his life for the freedom of Ukraine to a crane flying away to its wintering grounds. He compares the fate of this defender to blood caked on a wing. In this way, the author focuses the reader’s attention on fate as a wound, suffering, but also life. Life that slips away from the soldier. However, it has a chance to return in the dimension of memory.

In his poetic vision of fate, contemporary Ukrainian poet Tomenchuk unfolds it in horizontal and vertical dimensions, earthly and heavenly. These dimensions are interconnected. Thus, the warrior-crane falls wounded on the blades of grass (similar to a sword), and his soul flies into the sky. In another poem, all soldiers are souls walking the Milky Way as if on sharp blades. And a short earthly fate, cut short by war, suddenly becomes identical to Eternity as an afterlife (short human memory).

Precisely because people tend to forget past wars, they can be repeated again and again. This bitter prospect shows that a forgotten war is a war that has been lost. And those who are now infants are already marked by the stamp of another war.

Tomenchuk does not shy away from depicting the inaesthetic truth of war in his poetry. He says that only bones and a military badge remain of a soldier. He also depicts a cry of pain, likening it to the cry of a grave waiting for the next person it will swallow.

Tomenchuk's poetic words present the life of a young widow who is expecting her first child and burying her husband who died in battle. The life of that unborn son is marked by the sadness of the grave from the cradle. And since this story becomes typical in wartime, the sadness is magnified many times over:

Pain – fates, bullets – thorns,
The flag spreads over the coffin. (Tomenchuk, 2023, p. 57)

Tomenchuk compares the bullets mentioned in this poem to thorns. Thus, in the poet's vision, fate is likened to a field of rye and to life. This life cannot be realised because of the turmoil of war and countless deaths. And these deaths cause pain to permeate the lives of many Ukrainians. And Ukraine, weary with grief, bleeds like a cry. Not a cry from the throat, but from the soul.

Therefore, the visual image for the book could be Edvard Munch's painting "The Scream" (1893), which, according to one version of art historians, reflects the tragic loneliness of man, and according to another, the tragic premonition of two world wars, as well as the genocides and epidemics of the 20th century. Symbolism, which flourished during this period as an artistic movement, changed the language of poetry and gave it a special depth. A symbol, unlike a sign or allegory, does not simply point to another reality, but adds other meanings to one. Therefore, the cry of a living person becomes the cry of a grave. This is how the tragedy of loneliness, abandonment, and unheardness is scaled up, not only for a living person (wounded in spirit and body), but also for a dead one (by ignoring a genocidal war, for example).

Conclusion

When examining the war narratives in Tomenchuk's poetry, we see that the author is able to incorporate references to literature about World War I (Ernest Hemingway's novel "A Farewell to Arms"), creating an artistic image that symbolizes the pain and loss of war (the cry of an empty grave, ready to swallow another victim, so reminiscent of Edvard Munch's painting of the same name). However, the poet's distinctive feature is his unique ability to experience war as a wound and fragmentation of the world. Not being a front-line soldier due to his age, the author nevertheless depicts war from the perspective of both a soldier and his family members. In particular, he describes the tragedy of a mother who cannot bury the body of her dead son because only fragments of his body remain. Tomenchuk does not shy away from depicting the pain of a pregnant wife who has just lost her husband in the war and feels that the son in her womb may repeat his father's fate, because imperial encroachments on Ukrainian lands have been going on for centuries.

In depicting Ukrainian soldiers, the author focuses on three aspects of their identity. First, there are weapons, which refer to the period of knyazes and Cossacks and are not only a symbol of ancient times, but are also identified with the concept of human dignity and military honour. Second, it is about the wounds that war inflicts on both the body

(bullets and shrapnel stuck in it) and the soul (PTSD, restless dreams in which all the horrors of war are relived). And finally, it is about fate, which appears as a universal test and is synonymous with war for the sake of life as Ukrainians. This fate has an earthly dimension (camouflage, battlefield, coffin), but also a spiritual dimension (as a battle against universal evil).

The author comes to a philosophical conclusion here: the world into which war has burst is a complete wound and loss of integrity. People, the landscape, Ukraine, and even the starry space (the Milky Way) are marked by this suffering. However, the cry of pain must be heard and become a cry of life that echoes even in the space of memory.

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