

The White Chalk of Days: The Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series Anthology. Ed. Mark Andryczyk. Brighton, Mass.: Academic Studies Press, 2017. xiv, 354 pp. Index. Photographs. \$37.00, hard bound.

Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine. Ed. Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky. Brighton, Mass.: Academic Studies Press, 2017. xxv, 240 pp. Glossary. Notes. Index. \$37.00, hard bound.

In her excellent essay “Flowers for the Picking: Anthologies of Poetry in (British) Literary and Cultural Studies,” Barbara Korte observes that at the turn of the twenty-first century, “the shelves of bookshops in Britain and other western cultures abound with anthologies” and that a “scholarly interest in (poetry) anthologies too seems to be growing.”¹ She attributes this rising interest to “a general postmodern penchant for combinations of heterogeneous, or the revived and also popular interest in the cultural canon and its de- and re-constructions” and, possibly, to “the retrospective mood of the *fin de siècle et millénaire*.”² A recent study on the evolution of anthologies in Ukrainian literature by Olena Haleta, *From Anthology to Ontology: Anthology as a Means of the Representation of the Ukrainian Literature of the Late Nineteenth—early Twenty-First Centuries*, seems to affirm trends outlined by Korte also in the context of Ukrainian literary studies. Haleta, for example, presents interesting statistics showcasing the enormous growth in the publications of anthologies in Ukraine since 1991: “The anthologization of Ukrainian literature has accelerated in recent times: whereas in the first 110 years of the literary anthology in Ukraine (1881–1991) there appeared about 60 anthologies in total, in the last twenty years the number was four times greater.”³ Of course, her main focus is on anthologies published in Ukraine, however, one chapter in her monograph is devoted to postwar Ukrainian émigré literary activities resulting in the publication of two important anthologies: *Rozstriliane vidrodzhennia: Antolohiia 1917–1933. Poeziia, proza, drama, esei* (Executed Renaissance: Anthology, 1917–1933. Poetry, Prose, Drama, Essays, 1959), edited by Iurii Lavrinenko and published in Paris by Instytut Literacki, and *Koordynaty: antolohiia suchasnoi ukrainskoi poezii na zakhodi* (Coordinates: Anthology of Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry in the West, 1969), edited by Bohdan Boichuk and Bohdan Rubchak, and published by Suchasnist Publishing House in Munich.⁴ Because

1. Barbara Korte, “Flowers for the Picking: Anthologies of Poetry in (British) Literary and Cultural Studies,” *Anthologies of British Poetry: Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Barbara Korte, Ralf Schneider and Stefanie Lethbridge (Amsterdam, 2000), 1–2.

2. *Ibid.*, 2.

3. Olena Haleta, *Vid antolohii do ontolohii: antolohiia iak sposib reprezentatsii ukrainskoi literaturni kintsia XIX—pochatku XXI stolittia* (Kyiv, 2015), 629.

4. The publication of the former anthology by a Polish preeminent émigré institution such as Instytut Literacki is a striking example of Polish-Ukrainian literary cooperation in the diaspora at a time of the Cold War, achieved in large measure thanks to the efforts of the Institute’s co-founder and editor of the Polish émigré journal *Kultura*, Jerzy Giedroyc,

they were published abroad, both anthologies could foreground the work of silenced (executed) and/or marginalized (émigré) literati and thus constitute an important alternative and challenge to the prevailing socialist-realist literary canon in Ukraine under the Soviet regime. Their publication underscores the fact that some anthologies have power not only to conserve literary texts but also to considerably influence the process of canon formation even from abroad, regardless of political obstacles. Understandably, that kind of Cold War ideological divergence no longer applies, but it seems there is a precedence of anthologies playing a significant role in the history of Ukrainian literature.

The proliferation of literary anthologies in Ukraine since independence unfortunately does not extend to the realm of anthologies published in translation, which are few and far between, especially in the context of the book publishing market in North America. All the more, the recent publication of two anthologies of Ukrainian contemporary literature in translation by the same publisher—Boston-based Academic Studies Press—is indeed a remarkable, if not watershed occurrence. *The White Chalk of Days: The Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series Anthology*, compiled and edited by Mark Andryczyk, and *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*, edited by Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky, could not be more different conceptually (although both, admittedly, are intended for use in academic contexts) and yet, as a pair of exquisitely-designed books, they strangely complement each other. The overlap of authors is minimal—only three poets figure in both (Mariana Savka, Liuba Iakimchuk, and Serhii Zhadan), and the chronological coverage of literature is vastly expanded if both anthologies are treated as a unit—spanning from the 1970s all the way to as recently as 2017. However, the reason behind collecting particular texts for these two anthologies or the principles of selection vary substantially. Andryczyk's project celebrates the success and continuation of the Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series, co-founded in 2008 by the directors of the Harriman Institute at Columbia University and the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, Catherine Nepomnyashchy and Blair Ruble, respectively. Maksymchuk's and Rosochinsky's anthology, on the other hand, aims at presenting new poetry from Ukraine but from a very specific perspective, that of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict in the Donbas region. The poets represented here, including the editors themselves, have all in some way been touched by war—either as eyewitnesses, refugees, fighters, activists, or relatives and/or friends of victims. Both anthologies allude to the bilingual nature of contemporary Ukrainian literature, although *Words for War* does so more emphatically than *The White Chalk of Days* (the latter offers only one Russian-language author, whereas the former offers four), and by doing so both implicitly acknowledge that collecting literature could potentially have some impact on the process of identity formation.

At first glance, one might assume that Mark Andryczyk's role in the selection of texts is somewhat limited. After all, his anthology reflects performances

whose political instincts were always on the side of the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation, especially when threatened with Soviet expansionism.

of the series participants—the invited authors from Ukraine who have been coming to the United States since 2008 with the purpose of presenting their work at events organized by the Harriman Institute in New York and the Kennan Institute in Washington, DC. Upon closer scrutiny, however, especially after reading the editor's extensive introduction, it becomes clear that his role as an anthologist (or, as Barbara Korte put it, "a composer of texts") is undeniable. First, as an organizer and facilitator of the series, it was up to Andryczyk to decide which authors merit invitation. Second, since one of the goals of the series (according to him) "was to introduce today's leading Ukrainian authors to as wide a US public as possible" (8), it was of utmost importance to have their texts rendered into English and he himself selected and translated many of the works included in the anthology. In other words, each visit of an invited author would invariably prompt work on new translations, although whenever possible, existing translations were utilized as well. The performative aspect of *The White Chalk of Days* cannot be overlooked; seemingly, it constitutes the very essence of the whole project. In a few cases, however, there is no correspondence between what was read at the event and what was included in the anthology.⁵ The editor justified this choice as follows:

A goal was to have the anthology include as many texts that were featured at series events as possible and also to have it debut new translations that were inspired by the series and had never been published before. In other words, *The White Chalk of Days* is both a collection of literary works that initially comprised and now commemorates the Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series and a volume collecting mostly new translations of the works of many leading Ukrainian writers (8).

The anthology features fifteen Ukrainian authors, twelve men and three women, arranged chronologically in accordance with the sequence of their participation in the series from 2008 to 2016. They represent various generations, ranging from those with literary debuts in the 1970s (the so-called generation of the 1970s—*simdesiatnyky*) and the 1980s (*visimdesiatnyky*) to the younger generations debuting in the 1990s, 2000s and beyond. Among them are well-known and lesser-known authors, including poets, writers and essayists, who engage a variety of genres, themes, and literary styles. Two featured authors are no longer alive (Hrytsko Chubai and Oleh Lysheha) and they were represented at the series events through the performance of Chubai's son Taras who composed songs to his father's and Lysheha's poems. Not all featured authors in the anthology are given equal space; it ranges from a single one-page poem by Lysheha to fifty-six pages of poetry and prose by Serhii Zhadan, which is not that surprising considering that Zhadan is currently one of the best known Ukrainian contemporary writers in the west.

The White Chalk of Days aspires to present as comprehensive picture of contemporary Ukrainian literature as possible, though the series format which

5. At a book presentation at the Ukrainian Institute of America in New York City on June 22, 2018, Andryczyk, answering my question, admitted that this is the case as far as the selections of Andrei Kurkov, Iurii Vynnychuk, and Sofia Andrukhovych were concerned.

it represents necessarily places some limits on the overall selection of texts. The anthology offers short stories and prose excerpts by such commercially successful writers as Andrei Kurkov, Iurii Andrukhovych, Serhii Zhadan, and Iurii Vynnychuk, juxtaposing them against more esoteric ones such as Taras Prokhas'ko, Vasyl' Gabor, and Oleksandr Boichenko. It features poetry from the 1970s literary underground (the already mentioned Chubai and Lysheha) and pairs them with the poetry of well-established authors from the 1980s (Viktor Neborak and Ivan Malkovych) and the 1990s (Andrii Bondar and Mariana Savka). Finally, it also gives space to the emerging voices of the millennials, presenting the prose excerpt of Sofia Andrukhovych and the poems of Liuba Iakimchuk. This particular collection, subjective as it might be, does offer a glimpse into a very dynamic period of literary production in Ukraine brought about by independence, but, arguably, does not adequately reflect the preponderance of female literary voices emerging after the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the main characteristics of the post-independence literary scene is the presence of a strong contingent of talented women authors, and the anthology no doubt would gain considerably if they were represented (invited to the series) in greater number. This conspicuous gender imbalance, however, is more than compensated for by the editor's in-depth introduction, first-rate translations, and indeed lively and very engaging texts on a variety of subjects and in various genres.

By contrast, *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*, as the title itself so eloquently indicates, is thematically uniform and focuses exclusively on one literary form—poetry. This anthology gathers together sixteen poets of different ages and of different regions, expressing themselves either in Ukrainian or Russian. Eight men and eight women, each and every one of them grappling with the horrors of the ongoing war in the southeast corner of Ukraine, attempt to find an adequate poetic language to channel the unfamiliar and the unimaginable. As the anthology's editors—Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky—aptly put it: “This emerging language needs to be handled carefully, responsibly, and expertise in this language is not to be taken for granted—it must be earned” (xvii). The husband and wife team, Maksymchuk and Rosochinsky, came up with the anthology that focuses on a specific armed conflict, yet manages to transcend its specificity by speaking in a universal language equally appealing to those who have experienced armed conflicts, displacement, or have witnessed death anywhere in the world, and to those who have been lucky enough to be spared such painful experiences but for whom the feeling of compassion and sympathy for war victims and survivors is ingrained in what it means to be human.

It was important for the editors of *Words for War* to feature both prominent as well as emerging voices, so that the breath of the poetic response to the ongoing war appeared wide-ranging and balanced. They also deemed it important to focus on the female dimension in a time of war, especially because women's role and input in such contexts are so easily overlooked. Here is how they explained their approach in the Preface: “In selecting the poems in this anthology, we have attempted to represent a variety of voices: young and old, female and male, somber and ironic, tragic and playful. We have tried to pay special attention to poems describing women's experiences

of war, as mothers and daughters, soldiers and victims of war crimes, spouses and lovers, citizens and experts” (xviii). One thing is clear, the proposed selection of poems not only touches because of its emotional depth and genuineness but also because it is so exquisitely rendered into English. The reader senses a great care given to every line, every word, and every punctuation mark. The editors, who themselves contributed a number of translations, relied on several teams of translators, often working as collaborating pairs to convey the best of each presented poet.

Reflecting on war and writing, Samuel Hynes says: “War turns the natural world into evil, indescribable spaces, and everything in it into broken, useless, unidentifiable rubbish—including human beings.”⁶ This “brokenness” of things, or established order, could not be better expressed than by Liuba Iakimchuk’s poem “Decomposition.”⁷ Here, familiar words of names of places and/or people are broken into separate syllables mirroring the destruction caused by war:

don’t talk to me about Luhansk
it’s long since turned into *hansk*
Lu had been razed to the ground
to the crimson pavement (152).

Her hometown Pervomaisk “has been split into *pervo* and *maisk*” (152), and the poet herself seemingly loses her identity: “I have gotten so very old / no longer Lyuba / just a-*ba*” (153).

Mulling over the connection between war and writing, Hynes comes to the following conclusion: “There seems to be two quite different needs that produce war writing: the need to report and the need to remember.”⁸ In *Words for War* the former need seems to prevail, quite possibly because the war in eastern Ukraine is still ongoing and the pain still fresh, and a number of the poets in the anthology, personally affected by the conflict, feel compelled to poetically record what they have seen and experienced. Internally-displaced seventy-three years old Vasyl Holoborod’ko knows that there is “no return” for him to his home in the Luhansk oblast, yet he says, as if encouraging himself: “you could come back in your thoughts as well” (20).⁹ Borys Humeniuk, the only poet-soldier in the anthology, sends gruesome observations from the battlefield where seagulls prey on the flesh of the dead: “It’s uncanny to see / A human finger / Or an ear / Fall before you / From the sky” (31). And then there are the poets who have become witnesses to other people’s distress, displacement, injury or death, and are eager to do something about it. The Russophone poet Anastasia Afanasieva listens to and relates the stories of refugees: “on our way to the market / the bullets whistled over our heads / we arrived here with a single bag / there wasn’t enough room for people, let alone things” (3). Serhii Zhadan gives voice to countless individuals marginalized

6. Samuel Hynes, *On War and Writing* (Chicago, 2018), 30.

7. This is one of only two poems by Iakimchuk that figure both in *The White Chalk of Days* and *Words for War*. There is no overlap in the selections of two other authors (Mariana Savka and Serhii Zhadan) that are featured in both anthologies.

8. Hynes, *On War and Writing*, 30.

9. His selection is opened by the poem bearing such title: No Return.

by the war—whether it is Sasha, Anton, Andrii, Pavlo, or the nameless, who, if not for his poems, would otherwise remain forgotten, no matter if they are already buried or literally stare death in the face:

Half a year she's held firm.
 Half a year she's observed death
 the way you observe a rhinoceros at the zoo—
 dark folds,
 heavy breathing.
 She's scared but doesn't look away,
 doesn't close her eyes (171).

The images offered by the poems in this anthology are like the snapshots of war photography: they do not try to convince one side against the other, or rally for or against the war; rather, they capture the painful consequences of military interventions on civilian populations and portray the absurdities of daily life under such circumstances.

Words for War, while not the first anthology to collect war poetry from Ukraine, takes great care to provide the reading public with much needed context.¹⁰ To that effect, there is a glossary of lesser-known terms and expressions; a list of geographical locations and places of significance, as well as substantial notes to chosen texts. It also seems very meticulous about the selection of participating poets and their oeuvre, as if making sure that each individual poetic voice shines on its own and yet, at the same time, constitutes an indispensable part of the whole composition. The editors Maksymchuk and Rosochinsky succeed in convincing the reader about the universality of human suffering in war zones that transcends any particular borders, though they do not dismiss the geopolitical reality that each armed conflict entails. Both are aware that wars often create unbridgeable cultural, social, and political fault lines, yet they are by and large hopeful and draw attention to cases where the opposite is true. As a married couple of two different ethnicities (Oksana is a Ukrainian from L'viv in western Ukraine, Max is a Russian from Crimea), they are the living examples of the potential that mutual understanding and reconciliation can bring. This spirit of collaboration—working together toward a greater end—permeates the whole anthology. A contingent of thirty-one translators (including two editors), oftentimes working as collaborative pairs, only proves how much can be achieved when people are guided by a just cause. As if this collaborative translation powerhouse was not enough, Maksymchuk and Rosochinsky also invited two literary critics, poets, and American academics, Ilya Kaminsky (born in Odessa, Ukraine) and Polina Barskova (born in St. Petersburg, Russia), respectively, to augment their Preface with two short essays, one preceding the poetry selection (Kaminsky) and the other one following it as Afterword (Barskova). Kaminsky approaches his task very personally. Reminiscing about his recent trips to Ukraine, he relates his impressions about the situation since independence and comments on the meeting with his friend and Russophone poet Boris

10. Cf. *Letters from Ukraine: Poetry Anthology*, comp. by Hryhory Semenchuk (Drohobych, 2016).

Khersonskii (included in the anthology), who among other things switched to Ukrainian when lecturing at Odessa National University in protest against the Russian occupation of Ukraine. By providing concrete examples, Kaminsky undermines false claims about the discrimination of the Russian language in Ukraine, but ponders over the future implications of the language being so weaponized. Concluding the anthology with an afterword, Barskova deems the existence of pro-Ukrainian poetry in Russian as a positive development in post-independence Ukraine and strongly believes that “the Ukrainian revolution and Russo-Ukrainian war has already led to the emergence of new poetics” (193).

Both *Words for War* and *The White Chalk of Days*, each in its own unique way, aim to provide English-speaking readers with the best examples of contemporary Ukrainian literature, while at the same time promoting it as diverse, inclusive, vibrant, and simply too riveting to be unknown or ignored. Andryczyk’s anthology presents a more sweeping picture of that literature by virtue of the wider thematic range and more extensive timespan of the featured selections. It has all the trappings of a classic companion to contemporary Ukrainian literature and an indispensable textbook for teachers and students engaged in that subject. The poems in *Words for War*, as gathered by Maksymchuk and Rosochinsky, have the potential to permanently inscribe themselves in the global canon of war poetry. While narrower in thematic scope, this gripping anthology serves as a reminder of what it takes not to lose humanity and dignity in a time of war.

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