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# The Auto/biographical Nature of Ukrainian Women's Literature on the War in Donbas

## SUMMARY

In the close reading of Natal'ya Vorozhbit's drama *Bad Roads* (2017), Yevgeniya Podobna's book of stories and memoirs titled *Girls Cutting Their Locks* (2018), and Tamara Duda's novel *Daughter* (2019), the author of the article examines the relations between subject and object of the Donbas war texts in the framework of their creation, auto/biographic nature, gender optics, and therapeutic effect. The goal of the study is to analyze how auto/biographical narratives employ actualization of life, leading to the fictionalization of drama and prose texts, which results in heterobiography or synthesis of auto/biographical narratives with heterobiographies. Mostly processed by professional writers, the documentary accounts of military experience of women characters convey the evidence of *Zeitgeist*, which forms a unique writing in modern war literature. The paper discusses the perspective of women, forms of undermining patriarchy, and rhetoric



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of “national autobiography” along with self-consciousness and self-reflexivity as markers of auto/biographical texts of Ukrainian women writers of the period in the selected texts.

### Keywords

war in Donbas, Ukrainian women writers, auto/biography, documentary account, heterobiography, language choice

### Introduction

Being a rich source of fiction, life-writing inspires and penetrates modern literature with “confessional and autobiographical materials and methods.”<sup>1</sup> The significance of auto/biographical texts cannot be overestimated: as Nancy Miller claims, “History and memory do not need to compete – they can collaborate – but in the case of missing stories, history takes over.”<sup>2</sup> The scholar emphasizes the importance of knowing one’s origins from personal and ancestors’ experiences, not only from official accounts. Simultaneously, there is a question of “unreliability of documentary state of auto/biographical texts explained by narrative and genre conventions as well as unstable personal memories.”<sup>3</sup> This article refers to a twofold premise of the auto/biographical nature of Ukrainian war literature: on the one hand, it is based on the consideration of Judith Butler about the ambiguity of the writing Self with not so much one’s own story but rather “the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms.”<sup>4</sup> Miller complements this, saying «In the space between the “I” and the “we” is that self-entangled with others through which autobiographers, finally, invent themselves.»<sup>5</sup> It is important that Butler selects an ‘account of oneself’ which is opposed to a ‘story of oneself’ and “social in character”<sup>6</sup> to that. The former (‘account of oneself’) recognizes that “the self has a causal relation to the suffering of others (and eventually, through bad conscience, to oneself).”<sup>7</sup> Thus, as Miller adds, “intimate anguish” as well as “self-defense” are at the forefront of the autobiography.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, there is a growing body of texts demonstrating close cooperation between the authors who serve as compilers and the selves who trusted their experiences (accounts) to them: the recent example of this emerging generic variety in Ukrainian literature is Ostap Slyvynsky’s *The Dictionary of War* (2022). His alphabet consists of the fragments

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<sup>1</sup> Donald J. Winslow, *Life-Writing: a Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography, and Related Forms*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy K. Miller, “I Killed My Grandmother: Mary Antin, Amos Oz, and the Autobiography of a Name,” *Biography*, vol. 30, no. 3, (2007): 332.

<sup>3</sup> Anja Tippner, Christopher F. Laferl, “Einleitung,” In *Texte zur Theorie der Biographie und Autobiographie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2016), 22. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Anna Gaidash.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, *I Killed My Grandmother: Mary Antin, Amos Oz, and the Autobiography of a Name*, 336.

<sup>6</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *I Killed My Grandmother: Mary Antin, Amos Oz, and the Autobiography of a Name*, 335-336.

of life narratives of Ukrainians escaping the full-scale invasion, produced as “a collaboration between the ‘autobiographised subject’ and the writer of the text, or heterobiography.”<sup>9</sup> Selected for illustrating Donbas war narratives, the contemporary women’s life-writing texts comply with the definitions of the term as a “biography written by another person”<sup>10</sup> as well as the “dimension of alterity in self-writing.”<sup>11</sup> Using the metaphors of ‘centrifugal’ and ‘centripetal’ aspects of subjectivity in her assessing of Bakhtinian understanding of the term ‘heterobiography,’ Erdinast-Vulcan argues that “non-coincidence with oneself is... a fully-fledged discursive version of the ‘centrifugal’ vector, the inherent alterity that inhabits every autobiography, turning it into a ‘heterobiography.’”<sup>12</sup> This mode of heterobiography with various modifications is indicative of Natal’ya Vorozhbit’s<sup>13</sup> play *Bad Roads* (2017), Yevgeniya Podobna’s collection *Girls Cut their Locks* (2018), and Tamara Duda’s book *Daughter* (2019), which are analyzed in this paper. Though the discussed texts belong to different literary kinds, *Bad Roads* being a drama, *Girls cutting their locks* pertaining to factual prose, and *Daughter* exemplifying fictional prose, all three texts have a common ground of auto/biographical texture. The article offers an overview of the concepts tackling the nature of auto/biographical writings, shedding light on the hybridity of military Ukrainian women’s literature. It is followed by an examination of the auto/biographical boundaries in the three above-mentioned books.

The collection of life accounts seems to originate from self-reflexivity, which is enabled by being “spoken to by someone and prompted to address [one]self to the one who addresses the self.”<sup>14</sup> In life narratives and autobiographies, self-consciousness goes hand in hand with self-reflexivity.<sup>15</sup> The documentary study of accounts (bios) is processed via the imagery of the writer, who recreates the shared experience (as if) from a distance rather than in a fictionalized manner. Such texts represent the cross-pollination and generic hybridity, which results in actualizing literature and fictionalizing life. In her review of Leigh Gilmore’s feminist and autobiographical criticism, Judy Temple postulates “self-writing as action, not as mere reaction.”<sup>16</sup> This surmise is applicable to the texts of women authors who tackle the war in Donbas. The following sentiment seems to be relevant to the article’s aims: “War, whether the writer is a combatant or otherwise a participant, is the main subject of military autobiographical

<sup>9</sup> Tippner, Laferl, “Einleitung,” 19.

<sup>10</sup> Winslow, *Life-Writing: a Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography, and Related Forms*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, “Heterobiography: A Bakhtinian Perspective on Autobiographical Writing,” *Life Writing*, vol. 15, no. 3, (2018): 415.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>13</sup> To avoid confusion with Наталія Ворожбит’s name in English, the article uses the transliteration Vorozhbit as translated by Sasha Dugdale.

<sup>14</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Katja Kanzler, „Adaption and Self-expression in Julie/Julia.” In *American Lives*, (Heidelberg: Verlag Winter, 2013): 370.

<sup>16</sup> Judy Nolte Temple, “Review: Theorizing the Personal, Personalizing Theory: Recent Works on Women’s Autobiography,” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, vol. 48, no. 2, (1994): 179.

writing.<sup>17</sup> Not only do Vorozhbyt, Podobna, and Duda reflect on what happened in the region in 2014 and after through their writings, but they also act in a way of attracting the attention of primarily the Ukrainians all over the country to the situation in the Eastern Ukraine. The aforementioned authors focus on certain episodes from their characters' lives, usually the most significant for the "autobiographised subject" with a strong confessional touch intermingled with self-consciousness and self-reflexivity. The selection of women writers is justified by the gender of both the authors and their characters, inspired by Maria Rewakowicz's study of autobiographical turn and hybrid genres in Ukrainian women writers of 1991–2011. The scholar claims that "The politics of gender as reflected in post-independence literary texts created by women authors is notable because the construction of a new image for an independent female intellectual subject is often juxtaposed with the construction of a new vision for an independent Ukraine."<sup>18</sup> To a considerable extent, the adoption of the confessional approach detected by Rewakowicz in the auto/biographical novels of the pre-war period,<sup>19</sup> which helps decolonize Ukrainian female agency, is indicative of the books about the current war.

The paper attempts to approach "anxiety over the future loss," inferred by Temple on the basis of her analysis of Kathleen Woodward's gender distinction, which is present in the auto/biographical writings of Ukrainian women about the war in 2017–2019. To this end, the article reflects on a "national spirit" indicative of a "national autobiography" (the notion is introduced by Nancy K. Miller, 2007) representing individual identity interwoven with the collective one. Fundamental for the genre of auto/biography,<sup>20</sup> identity is manifested in the selected texts via (narrator's/autobiographised subject's) journeys (e.g., the opening sequence in Vorozhbit's *Bad Roads* and episodes in Duda's *Daughter*), with interaction of other representatives of the nation creating the dichotomy of individual/collective national autobiography. In addition, the paper selects self-consciousness and self-reflexivity functions as markers of auto/biographical texts of Ukrainian women writers of the period.

### State of the art

Contemporary Ukrainian literature about the war is (largely) auto/biographical. In contrast to the fictional texts about WWII, indicative of "warrior's heroification and war glorification" aimed at securing the totalitarian regime in the ex-USSR, current books about Donbas attempt to focus on the other side of heroification, namely "the tragedy of war beyond the frontline in timespace."<sup>21</sup> In the introduction to their collection of

<sup>17</sup> Alex Vernon, "Military Autobiography." In *Encyclopedia of life writing (2): L-Z* (London: Routledge, 2001), 603.

<sup>18</sup> Maria G. Rewakowicz, *Ukraine's Quest for Identity: Embracing Cultural Hybridity in Literary Imagination, 1991–2011* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 236.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 113–116.

<sup>20</sup> Tippner, Laferl, "Einleitung," 27.

<sup>21</sup> Оксана Пухонська, "Від 'Іншого' до 'Свого': літературна рецепція героя російсько-української війни в сучасних художніх текстах" [Oksana Puhons'ka, "Vid 'Inšogo' do

the excerpts from the Ukrainian prose on the Donbas war translated into German, Strauch und Molderf emphasize the authorship of “fictional realities” of war texts, “nothing more and nothing less.”<sup>22</sup> The scholars infer that the selected texts “do not make the incomprehensible nature of this war comprehensible, but rather capture its incomprehensibility through literary means.”<sup>23</sup>

What can be applicable to current Ukrainian war literature based on auto/biographical narratives is its therapeutical function for the writers who (re)consider traumatic experiences “such as war, violence or personal crises” and can use them as evidence.<sup>24</sup> In her examination of home front autobiographies authored by US-American military wives, Katharina Gerund detects the encompassing therapeutic effect in one of them:

It may well be read by readers from all walks of life, but the text claims to be primarily for the purpose of its author's and her fellow military spouses' well-being, self-assurance, and self-understanding.<sup>25</sup>

The scholar develops her statement with the focus on reception aesthetics emphasizing its emotional register since one of the autobiographies intends “to make its civilian readers *feel* the consequences of war at home rather than to explain them argumentatively”<sup>26</sup> because, as Gerund claims, “the experience of war exceeds the boundaries of the symbolic forms of language and literary genre.”<sup>27</sup> Widely employing autobiographical narratives for its goals, therapy serves as a valuable tool in fictional texts helping reveal the silenced or unspoken. Thus, the readers of *Bad Roads*, *Girls Cutting Their Locks*, and *Daughter* receive first-hand experience of frontline routine, occupation, warfare, and volunteering.

Another important function of literature with elements of auto/biographies is the juxtaposition of an individual model against the backdrop of an *époque* in forming a *gestalt* of societal experience and historical understanding: narratives that reflect military experience become “a mediator between individual and collective history, between personal experience and historical eras.”<sup>28</sup>

In his study of the war topos in combatant prose (akin to veteran literature and documentaries), Prysivok infers that its authorship is based on the

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‘Svogo’: literaturna recepcija geroja rosijs’ko-ukrains’koj vijni v sučasnih hudožnih tekstach’]. In *Bohater utworu literackiego jako InNy w literaturze europejskiej po 1989 roku*, (Siedlce: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UPH, 2023), 70.

<sup>22</sup> Christian-Daniel Strauch, Oksana Molderf, «Neue Helden zwischen Krieg und Krise,» in *Zwischen Apokalypse und Aufbruch. Der Donbas-Krieg in ukrainischer Krisenliteratur* (Leipzig: Edition Hamouda, 2021), 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>24</sup> Tippner, Laferl, “Einleitung,” 12.

<sup>25</sup> Katharina Gerund, “Home Front Autobiographies of the ‘War on Terror’: Narrative Liminality, Tacit Knowledge, and Affective Labor,” In *Exploring Narrative Liminality and Its Cultural Work* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2022), 190.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>28</sup> Tippner, Laferl, “Einleitung,” 12.

“need for self-reflection.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the majority of war books are written on the cusp of non/fictionality: the scholar pinpoints their actuality, subjectivity, and prevalence of diaries and memoirs.<sup>30</sup> Apart from self-reflection, he singles out detailed elaboration of routine,<sup>31</sup> documentary style, traumatic experience, reevaluation<sup>32</sup> among their textual features. In the home front autobiographies, indicative of second-hand knowledge of war, Gerund detects employment of sentimental tropes along with irony, defamiliarisation, and pop cultural intertexts,<sup>33</sup> which can be found in the texts by Vorozhbit and Duda. The books selected for this article, analysed in chronological order, raise the uncertainty in determining either autobiographical or biographical life-writing while revealing some of the above-mentioned textual characteristics.

### Naturalism and symbolism in drama

The play *Bad Roads* was born from conversations that Nataalka Vorozhbit as a volunteer has had with internally displaced persons in the Ukrainian East since 2014. The playwright claims that human nature is unchanging and rather weak,<sup>34</sup> which determines the pessimistic optics of the drama: encoded in the title of the work, the poor quality of roads has symbolic content, that is, the tragic experience of political and cultural divisiveness within the nation during the war in Donbas (e.g., Wallo considers the long-term colonization of Ukrainian lands to be one of the reasons of the conflict<sup>35</sup>). Devoid of any romance, *Bad Roads* is about the life of people in the front-line zone, narrated through a female experience. This perspective reveals the defenselessness of a woman at war through poignant stories of teenage girls as well as the complicated love stories of female adults. Deconstructing the traditional division of a play into acts, Vorozhbit sets six chapters written in a naturalistic, “unsterile,” according to the playwright,<sup>36</sup> manner. Flynn claims that “the exceptionally incisive quality of Vorozhbit’s writing is rooted in its realistic, indeed documentary-like dialogue.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Дмитро В. Присівок, “Топос війни в сучасній українській комбатантській прозі.” *Література та культура Полісся. Філологічні науки*, vol. 106, no. 20, (2022): 41 [Dmytro V. Prisivok, “Topos vjny v sučasnij ukrains’kij kombatants’kij prozi”. *Literatura ta kul’tura Polissja* 2022, no. 106. Seria “Filologični nauki” № 20, S. 32–41] [in Ukrainian].

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Gerund, “Home Front Autobiographies of the ‘War onTerror’: Narrative Liminality, Tacit Knowledge, and Affective Labor,” 194.

<sup>34</sup> Сергій Жадан, “Наталія Ворожбит про Погані дороги, критику, іронію та людяність,” *Говорить Жадан [Govorit’ Žadan: Nataliâ Vorozhbit pro Pogani dorogi, kritiku, ironiû ta lûdânist’]* [in Ukrainian], 2020, <https://youtu.be/c1GQyjm2rI> (accessed 26 March 2024).

<sup>35</sup> Oleksandra Wallo, *Ukrainian Women Writers and the National Imaginary: From the Collapse of the USSR to the Euromaidan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 12.

<sup>36</sup> Сергій Жадан, “Наталія Ворожбит про Погані дороги, критику, іронію та людяність,” *Говорить Жадан [Govorit’ Žadan: Nataliâ Vorozhbit pro Pogani dorogi, kritiku, ironiû ta lûdânist’]* [in Ukrainian], 2020, <https://youtu.be/c1GQyjm2rI> (accessed 26 March 2024).

<sup>37</sup> Molly Flynn, “Ivan Vyrypaev and Natalia Vorozhbyt. Language, memory, and cultural mythology in Russian and Ukrainian new drama,” In *Contemporary European Playwrights*, eds. Maria M. Delgado, Bryce Lease, Dan Rebellato (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 240.



A representative of new, independent Ukrainian drama, Vorozhbit removes the ban from images of “frailty, physical disability, manifestations of sexuality,” the absence of which was a feature of Soviet time drama.<sup>38</sup> Vorozhbit’s writings erase the gap between corporeal experience and dramatic texts implementing faithful representation of life into theatrical performance. The playwright is convinced that “the audience needs to be hurt” in the meaning of being educated as theatre’s overarching task is to teach the viewer thinking and empathising.<sup>39</sup> Among her other dramas, Vorozhbit’s play on the Russian-Ukrainian war is an integral “combination of personal experience and research on the basis of her interviews with eyewitnesses; yet the personal absorbs the researched.”<sup>40</sup> This viewpoint is complemented by Molly Flynn, who briefly describes *Bad Roads* as a fusion of “fact and fiction into an unsettling montage of loosely connected scenes about women in wartime,”<sup>41</sup> singling out the opening sequence in the form of a soliloquy of Natasha, a dramatis persona “who shares her name, appearance, and biography with Vorozhbit.” The need to describe herself is justified by the wartime: if something happens to the woman, her body will be identified. The physical self-portrayal is brief and comparable with that of a playwright. Perhaps at this point in the narration, the ego-documentalist component of the text ends making way for accountability connected with diverse functions of identity.<sup>42</sup> Her physical drive (sexual desire) towards Sergei, an experienced officer from the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which motivates her trip to Donbas and back to Kyiv, is an excuse to give an account of herself and of collective Ukrainian women identity: “Our women have gone crazy for soldiers this last year. A girl I know even got a tattoo: ‘I heart the airborne.’ And now I’m crazy, too. <...> Women leave comments [on FB – A.G.] like ‘my hero’ and ‘I want your babies.’”<sup>43</sup> The protagonist’s soliloquy is highly confessional, revealing Sergei’s impotence on their first night and his patriarchal dominance through sexual practice.<sup>44</sup> Natasha is quite pessimistic about the development of the relationship with the object of her desire: “Still we hardly have a future together. I close my eyes and I see no future for us.”<sup>45</sup> It corresponds to the ‘anxiety of future loss’ highlighted by Temple in her reflections on the salient features of women’s autobiographies. Flynn underlines “a strand of self-reflexivity”<sup>46</sup> and “the practice of speaking and

<sup>38</sup> Олександр Михед, “Наталка Ворожбит «[Кіборги], «Погані дороги», «Спіймати Кайдаши». Демони і Кайдаші,” *Станція 451: The Village Україна* #10 [Oleksandr Mihed, “Natalka Vorozhbit «[Kiborgi], «Pogani dorogi», «Spijmati Kajdaši». Demoni i Kajdaši,” *Podkast «Stancija 451» The Village Ukraina* #10], 2021 [in Ukrainian], <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6X-lu0pLdQXx5rzcPWB7nbq?si=dgpbz9bRS5evSnW4qp7zXw&end=1> (accessed 26 March 2024).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Flynn, “Ivan Vyrypaev and Natalia Vorozhbyt. Language, memory, and cultural mythology in Russian and Ukrainian new drama,” 236.

<sup>42</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Natalia Vorozhbit, *Bad roads*, trans. Sasha Dugdale (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017), 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Flynn, “Ivan Vyrypaev and Natalia Vorozhbyt. Language, memory, and cultural mythology in Russian and Ukrainian new drama,” 240.

listening as a path to self-reflection” of Vorozhbit’s dramatis personae, too: “Her plays give voice to those who are not often given the space to speak in national media or on international stages, and they offer audiences an insight into private spaces that are frequently hidden from public view.”<sup>47</sup>

Indicative of life narrative, retrospection<sup>48</sup> is represented by recollections of the protagonist of her childhood<sup>49</sup> and her father’s funeral.<sup>50</sup> The latter provides a jumping-off for the female adult’s self-reflection resulting in ‘anxiety of future loss’ when Natasha models a scenario of Sergei’s death. In this respect, Vorozhbit’s opening sequence in *Bad Roads* may be categorized as a Ukrainian version of New Narrative, US-American “self-identified literary group [who] shares with new audacity writing an interest in the self, in emotions and affect, and in politics and the body... the blurring of life and fiction.”<sup>51</sup> Recapitulating the close reading of Vorozhbit’s text, it is important to see the relevance of Flynn’s inference about the nature of her drama, which is “a fine line between fiction and non-fiction.”<sup>52</sup>

The Revolution of Dignity became a watershed in the lives and choices of many Ukrainians, contributed to the emergence of a new level of perception of Ukraine’s multicultural identity, and stimulated efforts to promote multilingual literature.<sup>53</sup> The language of Vorozhbit’s dramas is a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian. Her frequent techniques include the use of obscene vocabulary (Sergei’s narratives, Natasha’s memories of the first kiss on the seashore, etc.) and pop songs. The playwright’s choice contributes to the authenticity of linguistic heterogeneity in the country. The lines of some dramatis personae in Russian in the original text written in Ukrainian (they are highlighted with quote marks in the English translation) carry the additional verbal connotation of Ukrainian-ness in terms of its linguistic identity: Natasha recollects her childhood<sup>54</sup> which, if correlated with the playwright’s biography, occurs in the Soviet Ukraine, when the national language was treated as minor and unprivileged. In her study of cultural hybridity in Ukrainian imagery after Independence, Rewakowicz pinpoints “a visual discrepancy between language practices and ethno-cultural identities.”<sup>55</sup> Though the scholar focuses on two poles of authors, among them those writing in the state language “for whom the Ukrainian language constitutes the essence of their artistic identity and itself becomes a hero of sorts” and “a handful of Ukrainian Russophone writers,” yet:

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>48</sup> Tippner, Laferl, “Einleitung,” 9.

<sup>49</sup> Vorozhbit, *Bad roads*, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 11–12.

<sup>51</sup> Jennifer Cooke, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: the New Audacity* (Loughborough: Cambridge University Press 2020), 16.

<sup>52</sup> Flynn, “Ivan Vyrpae and Natalia Vorozhbyt. Language, memory, and cultural mythology in Russian and Ukrainian new drama,” 241.

<sup>53</sup> Wallo, *Ukrainian Women Writers and the National Imaginary: From the Collapse of the USSR to the Euromaidan* 2019, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Vorozhbit, *Bad roads*, 9.

<sup>55</sup> Rewakowicz, *Ukraine’s Quest for Identity: Embracing Cultural Hybridity in Literary Imagination*, 141.



In between these two extremes lies a vast majority that uses variants of language(s) for stylistic purposes, employing as many linguistic devices as creatively justified – from *surzhyk* to various dialects, from standard Ukrainian to other foreign languages – with Russian and English being the two most prevalent ones.<sup>56</sup>

To the latter group pertains Duda's novel *Daughter*, manifesting the issue of language choice in the context of Donbas national identity and serves as a connecting point for the readership (the Ukrainian-speaking protagonist is quite comfortable in a predominantly Russian-speaking environment).

### Approaching heterobiography

The Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance published *Girls Cutting Their Locks*, a book of memories compiled by Yevgeniya Podobna of twenty-five women who took part in the Donbas war from 2014 to 2018. Similarly to Vorozhbit's drama, each entry (story) is a stand-alone narrative. Although the book is a homogenous collection with approximately the same volume texts, each narrative is individual and unique. They comply with "a practice at the intersection of autobiography and essay, a movement between the narratively self-centered imperatives of the former and the worldly discursiveness of the latter"<sup>57</sup> characterized by "fragmentariness and provisionality... various narrative foreshortenings and dispersals."<sup>58</sup> Podobna claims that the stories, recorded from November 2017 to July 2018, had no censorship and most of them were documented at the frontlines.<sup>59</sup> Due to the limitations of the article only one account is read closely in the framework of auto/biographical nature.

In general, all the twenty-five stories from *Girls Cutting their Locks* can be categorized as veteran and/or combatant literature with a rich visual paratext. Each account is supported by a number of photos of story-tellers, who are armed and in pixel camouflage uniforms. Some of them hide their faces in balaclavas; others are with their children or pets; some of them lack limbs; some of them have already passed away. These photos serve partially as documentary evidence of the events narrated in the book. The article studies fictional textual characteristics other than factuality, evidence, and naturalistic nature, which all the entries (stories) in the book share, on the example of the first account.

The book opens with a story of Yuliia Matviienko with a code name of Bilka (Ukrainian for squirrel), a woman-sniper. Her account is preceded by Yuliia's entry from Facebook which contains an appeal to her comrades who were killed in the fight. Two paragraphs describe what happens in and after

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>57</sup> Lydia Fakundiny, "Autobiography and the essay," In *Encyclopedia of life writing (1): A-K* (London: Routledge, 2001), 80.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Yevgeniya Podobna, *Girls cutting their locks. A book of memories*, trans. Mariia Kovalenko (Kyiv: Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, 2020), 7.

battle. The narrator uses present time and positions herself as the second person singular – you: “you’re not running, you’re praying silently for this young boy to die.”<sup>60</sup> Yuliia understands too well the horrific truth of her comrade’s future and has no hope: “he doesn’t deserve to live as a vegetable...”<sup>61</sup> Her prayer of quick death for her comrade makes way for the thoughts of the enemy, who is “clever, impudent and experienced”, and the revenge. To outsmart him, Yuliia uses the body of another young soldier killed the day before. The female adult ends her narrative with the words: “You’re asking those who have died to help you, silently, so no one would know. You don’t believe God, you believe them, you believe that they’re gone, but they didn’t leave you. They can help you to avenge them from above.”<sup>62</sup>

The opening sequence of Yuliia Matviienko’s account is far from being purely documentative: built on contrasts (comrade vs. enemy, life vs. death, prayer vs. disbelief), this emotional and confessional text is a recollection of one episode from the narrator’s life. First posted in the virtual space, it is incrustated into a basic account of Yuliia, which starts from the present, switching to the past, and is full of self-reflection: “I am a sniper. How did that happen? Well, that’s a long story.”<sup>63</sup> In 2014, Yuliia traveled as a volunteer to numerous cities, towns, and villages across Eastern, Southern, and Central Ukraine: her topography is backed up with exact dates. Yet after the tragic battle in Debaltseve in the winter of 2015, the woman decides to join the people who became a family for her: “You just need to be standing beside them with a weapon in your hands and keeping this war away from home.”<sup>64</sup> Yuliia’s determination faces a lot of predicaments on her way to becoming a professional sniper, including the patriarchal attitude toward women in the Ukrainian army. The narrator confesses that women are not wanted during the war, in the army, or in combat occupations. Even though her training was demanding and Yuliia felt and looked like “a piece of chopped meat,” she acquired the necessary skills and even found advantages of women snipers (“Due to physiology we are a little more resilient and attentive”<sup>65</sup>), thus debunking firm patriarchal stereotypes about women at war.

Yuliia’s factual account interchanges with her direct questions addressed to the recipient:

By the way, what do you think the main difference between men and women snipers is (in sports as well, I think)? If a man is exhausted, he needs to rest, to restore, to take some time. If a woman is exhausted, she is capable of anything, she feels fresh and strong somehow. It is a mystery of nature. We are capable of pretty much anything.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 16.

The narrator's self-reflections abound, too. The auto/biographized subject deems the difference between soldiers and civilians to whom she herself belonged recently. The woman sniper has an individual approach to every person apart from "them," the enemies, who deserve no name. Yuliia's account does not ignore the inability to protect Ukrainians on the occupied territories; she is desperate that they are "forced to break our vows."<sup>67</sup> Nor does she forget about the so-called patriotic "couch soldiers" who stay at home and treat the narrator as a subaltern because of her gender. The woman sniper has a good point, answering them that she will return home as soon as the "couch soldiers" get up and replace her at the frontline.<sup>68</sup> Her story has an open ending: Yuliia will persevere without any doubts, and "If the God exists, he will forgive us all."<sup>69</sup>

If *Bad Roads* is clearly defined as drama (though an auto/biographical and naturalistic one to a great extent), *Girls Cutting their Locks* can be regarded as an auto/biographical essay despite its strong nonfictional framework.

### Interaction of auto/biography and heterobiography

In 2019, *Daughter*, "a testament to the Russian invasion of Ukraine,"<sup>70</sup> was recognized as the BBC's book of the year, which is an important distinction for the debut novel of Tamara Duda. In addition to the fact that this award is one of the most influential in Ukraine, popularizing new texts by living authors from among Ukrainians, it helps outstanding novels gain publicity outside the country, primarily in the English-speaking world. Duda writes in a brief preface of the novel that its "events and stories ... are not fictional."<sup>71</sup> Biographical material forms the basis of the work: in 2014, people with a traumatic experience of the occupation shared with the author their honest accounts, full of fundamental changes in their lives and often death. Duda claims that "their style and prose differ to the novel's."<sup>72</sup> The author incorporated her personal experience as a volunteer and intelligence agent for the Ukrainian army in her novel, too. *Daughter* is an extremely powerful text woven from various prototypes like gems sands: all sixteen chapters have relevant titles, e.g., ruby, gold, aquamarine, etc.

The narrator and the main character, the daughter,<sup>73</sup> is a Ukrainian-speaking girl who grew up in Western Ukraine, and it is only when she turns 17 that she discovers the East of the country for herself. Her first impression of mainly Russian-speaking Donetsk is depressing:

The soot was everywhere... Every outing would turn into an ordeal, a battle against the dust, mud and the dry wind. Instead of walking to places,

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>70</sup> Tamara Duda, *Daughter*, trans. Daisy Gibbons (Kyiv: Bilka Publishing, 2021), 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Also known as 'Elf,' the generalized character of the daughter functions as a trope and is frequently referred to as 'my daughter' or 'my child' due to her extremely thin body.

I developed a habit of scurrying from wall to wall; not raising my head, not looking anyone in the eyes, not attracting attention.<sup>74</sup>

This is a metaphorical representation of post-Soviet life and not only in the East of the country. However, one day the daughter radically changes the grayness of her existence. Having bought bright colours, she paints the windows in her apartment, thereby choosing a new path in her life: unpredictable, instinctive, but creative and full of freedom. As Vira Valle claims, “The whole history of Ukraine is the history of struggle for freedom”<sup>75</sup> and “Ukraine has become synonymous with freedom, and to be Ukrainian means to be a free man.”<sup>76</sup> Yet the writer who is a human rights defender, mentions the difficulties in both understanding and implementing the tenets of liberty for the nation.<sup>77</sup> Despite that, Ukrainian opposition to the Russian world is a primary struggle for their decolonization and freedom of choice. It correlates with Prysivok’s inference that freedom, in some texts, becomes one of the main values without which life has no meaning.<sup>78</sup>

Thus the daughter becomes a stained glass artist. This is reflected not only on the verbal plane in the names of the chapters of the novel, but also on the paratextual plane in the multi-coloured cover of the book. It seems that the changes in the life of the protagonist are accompanied by changes in the city: the autumn harvest turns Donetsk into a fairy-tale fair. The daughter is engaged in her favourite business, gets to know many local people, and Donbas becomes an attractive space for living until the invaders come. The protagonist refuses to be evacuated, stays in the city and starts volunteering, unlike those locals who have “everything going well.” She helps both civilians and the Ukrainian military. Her creativity and desire for freedom for herself and others make her a genuine heroine despite “unspoken hierarchy, [in which] women are given a place in the kitchen” or “get caught in the cross-fire.”<sup>79</sup> The daughter demonstrates the important role of Ukrainian women in the war, debunking their image of “a private men’s club.”<sup>80</sup> Not only does the protagonist liberate the constraints of women in the war, but also decolonizes the linguistic and, therefore, existential being of Donbas Ukrainians: in her novel, Duda changes the ideological rhetoric of Ukrainian as a medium of manipulation into existential and consciousness category<sup>81</sup> as the daughter speaks Ukrainian as naturally as she breathes (in this respect, Serhij Zhadan’s

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>75</sup> Віра Валле, *Свобода та її вороги. Нотатки під час війни* (Харків: ВД «Фабула», 2022) [Vira Valle, *Svoboda ta її vorogi. Notatki pid čas vijni* (Harkiv, 2022)] [in Ukrainian], 182.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>78</sup> Присівок, 38.

<sup>79</sup> Duda, *Daughter*, 227.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>81</sup> Оксана Пухонська, *Література війни на Донбасі як культурний простір зустрічі Свого / Чужого / Іншого*. In *Inny/inność we współczesnej literaturze europejskiej* (Siedlce: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UPH, 2022), 108. [Oksana Puhons'ka, *Literatura vijni na Donbasi âk kul'turnij prostir зустрічі Svogo / Čužogo / Inšogo*. In *Inny/inność we współczesnej literaturze europejskiej*, Siedlce 2022, C. 105–117] [in Ukrainian].

2017 novel *The Orphanage* about the war in Donbas is indicative of raising the issue of coming to terms with and accepting the Ukrainian language by his protagonist, Pasha, who is paradoxically a school teacher of Ukrainian).

## Conclusion

This research witnesses the therapeutical effect of auto/biographical Donbas narratives upon both the authors (in releasing their anxieties and first/second-hand military experience) and the readers (in raising their awareness of the war, anxieties of soldiers, volunteers, writers, and/or sharing the unspeakable). Auto/biographical and documental in nature, fictional texts by Vorozhbit, Podobna and Duda serve as true-to-life case studies for therapy: taking into account the reception of the books (*Bad Roads* performances are played in front of a full house both in Ukraine and internationally; the e-book *Girls Cutting their Locks* is downloaded numerous times; *Daughter* is rated among the best Ukrainian novels), one may claim their relevance and importance in understanding of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The analyzed texts depict "anxiety over the future loss" spurred by the current war, demonstrating at the same time the construction of national identity. Self-consciousness and self-reflexivity along with retrospection become frequent markers of auto/biographical narratives. The interaction of the narrator and the autobiographised subject, defined as heterobiography, is a salient feature of the closely read texts. No less significant is the creation of collective national autobiography on the background of individual accounts with the help of adequate language choice.

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