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Metaphor in a Time of War and Climate Crisis: Halyna Kruk's "Crash Course in Molotov Cocktails"

Abstract: In Halyna Kruk's 2023 bilingual collection of poems, *A Crash Course in Molotov Cocktails,* words and images function simultaneously as metaphors and as signs that point to a real world that itself operates on more than one level. As Kruk's particularly complicated metaphoric practice sets the material world reverberating with multiple levels of meaning, the effect is a de-centering of the human. In "No Milk, No Love" (2022) Asia Bazdyrieva writes of the historical "resourcification" of Ukraine and Ukrainians that justifies the "slow violence and environmental damage" of the war that Kruk's poetry also describes. Kruk's response in this collection of poems is to return agency to Ukrainian humans and non-humans alike as two parts of a single whole.

Keywords: Ukrainian literature, world literature – small literatures, translation

In her introduction to Halyna Kruk's 2023 bilingual collection of poems, *A Crash Course in Molotov Cocktails*, Amelia Glaser describes Kruk's images as "straightforward, bold in their lack of metaphors" (Kruk 2023: v); as Kruk herself explains in a 2022 talk of the same name: "War is not a metaphor" (World Media 2022). Despite her own claims, however, figures of speech are not entirely lacking in Kruk's account of the ongoing war in Ukraine; indeed, as American philosopher Richard Rorty would argue, they can't be. When Kruk begins "there and back again" («туди й назад») "i traveled there on tranquilizers, / back on painkillers / there were no other routes",[1] for example, it's not that the poem offers nothing in the way of metaphor. Like the "emer-

1 «туди їхала – на заспокійливих, / назад – на знеболювальних / інших маршрутів не було» (Kruk 2023: 36–37). Note: all quotations from Kruk's poetry, in the original Ukrainian

gency backpack" that grows lighter in the poem "with each passing day of war" («з кожним днем війни»), Kruk's pills function instead both as metaphors and as real items in the world that operate in turn as three-dimensional objects and as the less tangible physical and mental effects that those objects produce. The result is a reimagining of what materiality itself might entail, as Kruk's shifting metaphors charge reality with a spiritual dimension evident also in her tendency to animate the apparently inanimate.

Like the ficus that "registers events from the window"[2] in "the story of a ficus" («історія фікуса») or the sycamore that the speaker is not in "i am not this stripped sycamore" («це не я, оббілований стовбур»), Kruk's metaphors lend animacy to a material world more often cast as an object for human consumption. As a direct response to what Asia Bazydrieva calls the historical "resourcification" of Ukraine (Bazydrieva 2022), this attention to the non-human as an agent in its own right reaches past the immediate context of war to undo its very premises. As a political statement, Kruk's poetic practice finally also operates in scientific terms, as what Rorty would call her "metaphoric redescription" (Rorty 2009: 16) serves a project that extends well beyond the borders of Ukraine: a decentering of the human in the larger landscape shared by humans and non-humans alike.

As Glaser writes in her article "The Shadow Theater: Translation in a Time of War", the very first poem in the collection "dangles" a metaphor only to remove it. "<B>ifurcation point" («точка біфуркації») begins on a lightly mocking note: "in wartime Lviv, (they'll write later) / there was a strong literary milieu, / most likely, they published as a group (like those modernists in 'Mytusa') / or gathered for readings (because what else would poets do in wartime!)."[3] As Kruk adds: "you couldn't take a step without winding up in each other's poem, / in nightmares, in history, in the news, on the floor sharing a mattress, / under a single borrowed patchwork quilt / (what a perfect

and in English translation, including the titles of the poems, are taken from the 2023 bilingual edition.

2 «фіксує події з вікна» (Kruk 2023: 40–41).

3 «у Львові часів війны, – потім напишуть вони, – / було потужне літературне середовище, / напевно, вони щось видавали гуртом (як колись там «Митуса») / або збиралисьа на літературні читання (бо що ще робити під час війни поетам!)» (Kruk 2023: 28–29).

metaphor for human coexistence in wartime, too bad it's worn out!)."[4] With the tools of their trade apparently rendered obsolete, poets can only meet and ask "– how are you – how are you (not a word about literature)",[5] as the poem concludes: "this is how they'll describe the early '20s in the relevant chapters on Ukrainian literature / the main thing is not to forget that none of this was about literature."[6] While the sixty-four poems that follow immediately contradict that premise, Kruk's "bifurcation point" nonetheless marks a sharp shift in context: what defamiliarizes even the most "worn out" of Kruk's images are the extra-literary events that loom over the collection as a whole.

When Kruk submitted the poems that make up *Crash Course* to her translators, she arranged them in reverse chronological order, starting in 2022 and working backwards to 2012. She also suggested a title: «Букwar», combining the English "Book War" and the Ukrainian «буквар» (alphabet book). Faced with a pun unlikely to work for an English-speaking audience, Glaser and Yuliya Ilchuk took for their title instead a line from one of the poems, their as-always elegant solution departing from Kruk's original only to serve the same end: either way, the title points to the real war that frames Kruk's writing and our reading.[7] As Tamar Yacobi argues, metaphor, any metaphor, relies on its context for meaning, and a context that can change. The penultimate poem in the collection, "i dream about a bomb shelter" («сниться мені бомбосховище»), for example, was written in 2013 about "a bomb shelter on memory's margins, / the last one standing from those grade school war drills";[8] as Kruk herself has noted in recent public readings, subsequent events have lent that same structure ever more material dimensions.[9] The changed context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine also insists on a re-reading of Kruk's many Biblical references.

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4 «на кожному кроці можна було втрапити одне до одного в вірш, / в тривожні сни, в історію, в новини, на одну підлогу зі спільним матрацом, / під одну перехідну клаптикову ковдру / (яка точна метафора людського співіснування часів війни, / але жаль, вже зужита!)» (Kruk 2023: 28–29).

5 «як ти – як ти – ні слова про літературу» (Kruk 2023: 30–31).

6 «так про це напишуть у відповідному розділі української літератури початку 20-х / основне не забути потім, що все це було зовсім не про літературу» (Kruk 2023: 30–31).

7 Ilchuk, Yuliya. Personal communication. 6 April 2025.

8 «на околиці пам'яті, / останне вціліле зі шкільних уроків воєнки» (Kruk 2023: 75–76).

9 At the Universität Tübingen, Germany, 14 June 2024 and at the Jordan Center at NYU, 7 November 2024.

Although the characters and events of the Bible are so well-known as to risk their own degree of "worn-out-ness", in the wake of the full-scale invasion, Kruk's re-purposing of old images produces a distinct effect. As "and Jesus ascended" («і зійшов Ісус») begins: "and Jesus ascended at the Mount of Olives / in the city of Bucha, in the city of Irpin";[10] "and for this pain" («а для цього болю в мене для вас нема назв») ends, "i'm Lot's wife, who looked back at the world one last time."[11] If Kruk's figures often derive their force from the context of contemporary Ukraine, however, they equally strikingly work the other way, not as a reflection of the material world, but as its reimagining.

In "eat away at yourself" («їсти себе») Christ appears not by name, but by implication when Kruk writes, "God, i have no clue what one says to someone pulled from the cross."[12] In "phantom pain" («фантомний біль») Christ appears as an unnamed combatant who "annoys them limping / in the hospital yard missing / a limb, as if he didn't need one".[13] "Phantom pain" in Kruk's rendering is as real as the leg that it replaces, if not more so: while the imaginary pain, "like a hemostatic […] holds him back / over the abyss in the rye, / at least alive",[14] the missing leg is present above all as metaphor. The final lines read: "women bring him food, clothing, medicine, / and out of habit, they sit at his feet"[15], "out of habit" because Christ, even as pulled from the cross, comes with both legs, not that the literal meaning is the one that matters. While Mary, sister of Martha, really sat at Jesus's materially-existing feet, the true significance of her act operates in the symbolic terms that still hold in Kruk's Ukraine: like Mary, Kruk venerates those who suffer for the sins of a world that turns away in a carefully constructed confusion or conflation of levels or kinds of reality that reverses the direction of our meaning-making. It is now not the real world that impacts our reading of Kruk's metaphors, but Kruk's metaphors that transform our reading of the world, a process also at work in the "metaphoric redescription" that marks Kruk's many references to digging.

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10 «і зійшов Ісус на Оливну гору / у місті Бучі, у місті Ірпені» (Kruk 2023: 34–35).

11 «я жона Лота, яка востаннє озирнулась на світ» (Kruk 2023: 56–57).

12 «Боже, я розгубилася, що тут кажуть з хреста знятим» (Kruk 2023: 92–93).

13 «їм дошкульно шкутильгає / на задньому дворі лікарні без / кінцівки, мов кінцівки й не буває» (Kruk 2023: 162–163).

14 «як кровоспинне, щось його спиняє / над прірвою у житі / хоч в житті» (Kruk 2023: 162–163).

15 «жінки приносять їжу, одяг, ліки / й за звичкою, сідають у ногах» (Kruk 2023: 162–163).

In the reverse chronological order that dictates the presentation of the poems in space, the image of digging first appears in the nearly untranslatable "mama–i'm a–pit" («мама–яма–я») written in 2022. Glaser notes the challenge that Kruk's "distinctive word play and phonetic slippages" present to translation. Although the first line of "mama–i'm a–pit" reads more literally "mama–pit–i", Glaser explains, "<i>n the Ukrainian grammatical structure, not only is the article nonexistent (making specificity ambiguous), but the hyphen can also stand in for the predicate"; in this reading, the line is made up of two sentences as if spliced together: "mama is a pit". "I am the pit". More important to the already slippery meaning of the poem, Glaser argues, are the phonetic repetitions in the original Ukrainian. "The *yama* (pit) is a hybrid of two phonemes meaning 'I' and 'mama'", Glaser writes: "<f>rom dust do we come, to dust do we return" (Kruk 2023: x-xi). Although real death is indeed everywhere in a book about war, as we read the collection forward in space and backwards in time, Kruk's *yama* also complicates the very idea of what Ukrainian reality might entail.

Still in 2022 but four poems later, "it's like i'm digging" («і ніби вигрібаю») begins: "it's like i'm digging around, but can't / find the sad memories in the cache / from the past, which has no date."[16] "Cache" in our current English-language usage only barely retains its original sense of an actual hiding place in the world; in Kruk's original, the pre-computing meaning is gone entirely: «кеш» is nothing more than "cache" as written in Ukrainian letters and pertaining to an area of computer memory alone. If computer memory doesn't partake of the same degree of materiality as an actual hole in the ground, as made up of metal and plastic, semiconductors and pulses of electricity, it isn't exactly immaterial, either. By the same token, the "sad memories" that the poet seeks move us a little further along the im/material spectrum, although again without departing from materiality altogether: for all its intangibility, human memory enjoys a corporeality of its own, both as located in our flesh-and-blood bodies and as constituent of our personal identities. Memory, in the latter sense, is who we are in the world or, in 2020 and "we stopped digging deep" («ми давно вже не копаємо глибоко»), who we aren't.

16 «і ніби вигрібаю, але ні / знаходжу в кеші спогади сумні, / з минулого, яке не має дати» (Kruk 2023: 84–85).

This poem begins, "we stopped digging deep long ago, / but only a couple fingers down / we leave the plowed earth unturned, / so the fertile soil won't blow away."[17] While these first lines suggest that we do better not to dig too deep, the poem in its entirety argues otherwise. As Kruk continues: "we stopped digging deep long ago / in this, our-your uncertain field / because all kinds of junk can turn up: / human bones, horse heads, unexploded mines / a battle axe, a peg where the border was / between our side and yours / we don't go there."[18] Certainly, the collection as a whole tells of dust and real digging, someone "buried between three pines",[19] "the body that will turn to dust".[20] As in the border that otherwise goes unexamined, Kruk nonetheless more often associates digging with an essential act of self-knowing.

As the "the truth is on your side" («правда на твоєму боці») begins, "the truth is on your side, but it's your buried side / few have seen it, at least among the living / the grass pulls coarse soil up onto its mounds / tree stumps send out shoots, like talons".[21] The poem "evil loves when human memory's short" («зло любить, коли пам'ять людська коротка») is still more direct, not just in its title, but in its closing lines: "here, in this place, my child, dig, in this godforsaken place / which bears no fruit, / but bitterness".[22] In the 2012 "be honest with yourself" («сказати собі чесно»), last in space and first in time, what digging lays bare is not just an individual, but a Ukrainian sense of self.

Selfhood is not something that we can dig up with a spade, not that it's not real in terms of our functioning in the world. The poem begins: "be honest with yourself, honest as you can, like there's nothing left to lose: / we've leaned too long on others – so it's written, so folks say, / we're so used to embroidered straitjackets / to elaborate church feasts and rites / to flipping the bird behind

17 «ми давно вже не копаємо глибоко, / тільки десь на два пальці / не перекидаємо скиб, / щоб родючи ґ'рунт не вивітрювався» (Kruk 2023: 116–117).

18 «ми давно вже не копаємо глибоко / на цьому непевному полі нашому-вашому / бо можна викпати різне небажане: / людські кості, кінські голови, невибухлі міни, / сокиру війни, кілок, де були межі / між нашим і вашим не ходимо там» (Kruk 2023: 116–117).

19 «закопаным поміж трьох сосен» (Kruk 2023: 92–93).

20 «тіла, що станется прахом» (Kruk 2023: 96–97).

21 «правда на твоєму боці, але це твій найтемніший бік / мало хто бачив його, принаймні, із тих, що живі / трава підіймає черству землю на своєму горбі / культі дерев випускають пагони, як пазурі» (Kruk 2023: 86–87).

22 «ось у цьому місці, дитино, копай, / у цьому глухому місці, / яке не дає інших плодів, / крім гіркоти» (Kruk 2023: 146–147).

our backs in defiance."[23] With the stakes set, the final lines send us back later in time and earlier in space to "mama – i'm a – pit", now in the context of a reconstituted Ukraine. The poem ends:

> tell yourself:
> i am я – last letter in the alphabet, without which there can be no me
> i am the last land
> i am what i can't give up
> i am the carpenter of the beam in my own eye
> i need not build a cross from it if i don't want
> i can't give away what isn't mine
> i belong to this people, i am this people
> i don't want us to walk toward a dead end forever,
> and so, i begin with me, break bounds
>
> i am we, я ми, *yamy*: holes in the ground.
>
> сказати собі:
> я – остання буква абетки, без якої мене не буде,
> я – остання територія, / я – те, чого я не можу зректися,
> я – тесля колоди у власному оці
> я не мушу тесати із неї хреста, якщо не хочу
> я не можу віддати того, що мені не належить
> я належу до цього народу, я – цей народ
> я не хочу, щоб мы довіку ходили такими глухими шляхами,
> отже, я починаю від себе – я розорюю межі
>
> я – ми, я – ми, ями.
>
> (Kruk 2023: 178–179)

23 «сказати собі чесно, якомога чесніше, так ніби уже немає чого втрачати: / ми надто довго жили, покладаючисж на інших–як книжка пише, що люди скажуть, / ми надто звикли до цих вишитих гамівних сорочок, / до цих пишнихч церковно-гастрономічних обрядів, / до цих дуль у кишені, які часто видаємо за спротив» (Kruk 2023: 178–179).

That the *yamy* in "mama–i'm a–pit" can be read retroactively as caches of memory both real and virtual is not to say that those same holes don't function also as graves and as gardens. It is rather to argue that Kruk's oscillation between different levels or kinds of reality sets the material world itself reverberating with multiple meanings, as her recourse to a particular form of metaphor, like the collection as a whole, offers not just a literary, but a political statement.

In "No Milk, No Love", Asia Bazdyrieva outlines the historical "resourcification" that both prompts and justifies the current invasion. Bazdyrieva's essay is written too early to include Donald Trump's 2025 offer of a degree of national security only in exchange for future revenue earned from Ukraine's critical mineral reserve. In 2022, her example is instead the special permission granted to Eastern European workers to cross borders closed by COVID in order to harvest German asparagus. In Bazdyrieva's summary, "<f>or decades, Western Europeans have cast Eastern Europeans as bodies that perform cheap labor – bodies to prostitute, bodies made to sustain the pollution of the West's outsourced industries; they are to wear second-hand clothes from the EU and drive old cars that are no longer considered safe or ecological" (Bazdyrieva 2022). As far back as Lesia Ukraïnka and "Forest Song" («Лісова пісня», 1911), the Ukrainian literary response to "resourcification" has been to reanimate both the people and the land that Russia, Europe and now the United States would put to their own imperialist ends, and *Crash Course* accordingly tells of "simple plantish pleasures",[24] a house "maimed by shelling",[25] an old jacket, "left hanging on a nail", that "lay her heavy sleeve on his shoulder / comforting him as best she could".[26] In a time of climate change, this practice of reanimation also insists on a fundamentally different approach to the material world in scientific terms.

When Richard Rorty understands scientific revolution as "metaphoric redescription" (Rorty 2009: 16), he relies on literary effects to make a larger point. Even as science, Rorty writes, language is not something "which can be adequate or inadequate to the world or to the self" (Rorty 2009: 11), but

24 «звичайних рослинних утіх» (Kruk 2023: 40–41).

25 «скалічений обстрілом дім» (Kruk 2023: 44–45).

26 «повішена на гвіздок / клала йому на плече свій важкий рукав – / підбадьорювала, як могла» (Kruk 2023: 112–113).

instead evolves in the same Darwinian terms. "Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness", Rorty writes, "and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors" (Rorty 2009: 16), as what he calls "intellectual and moral progress" is nothing more than "a history of increasingly useful metaphors" (Rorty 2009: 9). Not just in a post-imperialist world, but in a time of climate crisis, it may be that the most "useful" kind of metaphor is the kind that casts the material world as an agent in its own right.

In poems like "citing anthracite" («антрацит як цитата») and "mitosis" («мітоз»), Kruk expands into a time frame that well exceeds the war. In the latter poem, "he sits there sawing out from under himself / that dead-end branch of evolution / because he doesn't understand / because he can / someday the planet will be cleansed / and we'll finally start / dividing again / like intelligent cells."[27] In the former, the poet remembers a time when "nothing predicted the arrival of humankind".[28] "<S>omeday you'll dig me up in a slab of coal", Kruk warns, "and you won't even know what i'm burning about."[29] Or, in Rorty's terms, maybe we will. "Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics", Rorty writes, "<r>ather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others" (Rorty 2009: 6; emphasis in the original). As we look to the future as Ukraine, as Europe, and as a planet as a whole, it may be that Kruk's "metaphoric redescription" will prove not hers alone.

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27 «сидить і / пиляє під собою / тупикову гілку еволюції / бо не розуміє / бо може / колись планета очиститься / і почнемо нарешті знову / ділитися / як клітини розумні» (Kruk 2023: 134–5).

28 «ніщо не передбачало появи людини» (Kruk 2023: 110–11).

29 «колись ти викопаєш мене у пластині вугілля / і навіть не зрозумієш, про що я горю» (Kruk 2023: 110–11).

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