

CRITICAL FORUM: POETRY AND AESTHETICS IN A TIME OF WAR

VIEWPOINT

Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry: Wartime and Poetic Time

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Abstract

“Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry: Wartime and Poetic Time” raises questions about the significance of new technology, new media, and the concept of “real time” by showing how poetry, even the new forms of poetic reportage coming out of present-day Ukraine, makes its own time.

It is difficult to write about poetry’s response to the suffering of wartime. Poets themselves doubt the value and even the possibility of writing poetry about war. To give one example, in a poem titled “decomposition” (*rozkladannia*) Ukrainian poet Lyuba Yakimchuk writes: “there’s no poetry about war” (*pro vijnu ne buvae poezii*).¹ Yakimchuk decomposes the language of her poem, splitting words into nonsense syllables. The poem provides the framework of its own undoing, demonstrating the unmaking and making of worlds and meaning that poetry and war strangely share and thus showing why poetry may be the best genre for writing about war.

Regardless and perhaps more importantly because of these challenges, the articles in this forum on contemporary Ukrainian poetry provide a timely intervention in response to Russia’s war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and exploded into an invasion in February 2022. Amelia Glaser and Paige Lee’s “Archive of the Contemporary” and Lyudmila Parts’ “Russophone Antiwar Poetry of Witnessing,” although different in scope and focus, draw attention to questions about the relation between war and literature, war and language, the challenges of writing and bearing witness in the language of the adversary, and more broadly, different forms of reading. Glaser and Lee’s database offers a remarkable wealth of opportunities for readers to encounter a range of poems from Ukraine written and translated into many languages, especially welcome to readers like myself who would otherwise not have access to these works. Glaser and Lee’s database of 1000 poems makes numerous reading encounters possible. The wide-ranging database also makes new scholarship possible, including work that would compare the poetry of other wartimes, both in Ukraine and elsewhere, to this body of work. One could imagine a study that would read contemporary Ukrainian poetry against the backdrop of work from a hundred years ago, for example, Pavlo Tychyna’s *Instead of Sonnets or Octaves*, published in 1920.

¹ Lyuba Yakimchuk, *Apricots of Donbas*, trans. Oksana Maksymchuk, Max Rosochinsky, and Svetlana Lavochkina (Sandpoint, ID, 2021), 85.

For an ongoing project on temporal experience in wartime, I have searched the database using the keyword “time.” This essay focuses on the topic of time in the two articles, both of which emphasize the significance of “real time,” which I take to mean the ongoing actuality of a particular moment as it unfolds. I explore the temporality of poetry and its relation to this concept. Glaser and Lee note, “in East Europe, Facebook is an accepted forum for sharing, discussing, and even translating work in real time.”² Social media reduces the temporal gaps that would otherwise accompany the publication and distribution of poetry. The interval of time between the composition of a work and its reception by an audience has evaporated. The rapid availability of ongoing poetic responses to Russia’s war against Ukraine has led to the emergence of poetic reportage and made possible new forms of poetic witnessing and testimony. Poets can directly convey the immediacy of their experience to their reading audiences.

This new temporal framework raises fascinating questions about the experience of reading both as an act that takes place in a specific interval of time and the relation between the moment of reading and the past. Each time I read a work of literary art—whether it was published a hundred years ago or yesterday, the experience of reading takes place in real time. This is not to say that I have access to the immediacy of the author’s experience. When I read or listen to a poem, I am not a blank slate upon which the work is imprinted, even if it was written a day or a few hours ago. The poet’s time never simply flows seamlessly into mine. Delay and deferral, the slippage of meaning are always part of writing and reading. I bring to bear on my act of reading my time frame, my language, my emotions, my memories, and the sensations of my body—as did the author over the course of the composition of the work, again, no matter how recently it was written. The gaps between us persist, regardless of the timeframe. From another perspective, however, even though our contexts may vastly differ, no matter how wide a gulf between us, the moment of reading offers a unique encounter in which something is communicated between us, a moment of “real time,” so to speak. In a talk given at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign in 2024, the American poet and prose author Ben Lerner commented that reading miraculously makes author and reader coeval. If this choice of words sounds theological, to quote Franco Moretti, who disparages close reading, so be it. In our moment of war, encounters such as these are devoutly to be wished for, and I use religious language deliberately.³

Poetry structures my time in specific ways. I wonder about the difference between the encounter with a poem as a unique artwork versus the encounter with data points provided by a study of hundreds of works. I as a reader can only experience the emotional, sensory, intellectual, historical, or philosophical importance of the new or the newly prevalent metaphor in the context of the work, and not as a data point. The encounter with poetry as a repository of searchable items is different from the encounter with a poetical work, as Lee and Glaser’s analysis shows. The difference is worth dwelling on, even if only briefly. Poetry—really all art, but poetry especially, because of its focus on the immediate material dimensions of language—commands attention, engaging the body, mind, and heart in ways the analysis of data points does not.⁴

The question of time and the encounter between author and reader is central to Parts’s discussion of the poetry of synchronous witnessing. Parts distinguishes between past acts of witnessing, which took place after the fact, from the witnessing of our contemporary moment, which occurs in “real time.” She emphasizes the significance of synchronous poetry written from within ongoing experience, arguing for the distinctiveness of what she terms the “poetry of witnessing.” Modern technologies allow authors to reach audiences

² Amelia Glaser and Paige Lee, “Archive of the Contemporary: Ukrainian Poetry and Digital Solidarity on Facebook,” in this forum, p. 2.

³ Franco Moretti is cited in Glaser and Lee, “Archive of the Contemporary,” in this forum, p. 3.

⁴ The argument about poetry’s unique command of the reader’s attention is made by Lucy Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention* (New York, 2020).

with “almost no time lag.” Parts writes, “when everyone can see live footage and hear the victim’s voices, who is not a witness?”⁵

I cannot help but remark that language strikingly close to this statement can be found in the opening of “A Witness,” a 1947 story by the Yiddish author David Bergelson. Set in postwar Kyiv, the Yiddish story describes the collaborative transcription and translation of Holocaust testimony. A survivor of a death camp narrates his experience, and a woman transcribes his testimony, translating it to Russian as she writes. Their initial meeting contains the key language in question. The survivor stands on the street mumbling to himself, and the woman who will take on the task of transcription and translation stops to talk to him. The old man names himself the “only surviving witness.” She however, objects, “Who today is not a witness?”⁶ A distinction should be made between the universal witnessing Parts describes and the statement in the Bergelson story. It is one thing to watch footage and another thing to survive what the footage depicts, but a larger point emerges. To be a surviving witness is to experience acute isolation—the sense of one’s utterly unique position. Witnessing, however, because it requires an audience, also contains the potential for solidarity with witnesses from other times and places. The sense that everyone is a witness keeps replaying historically.⁷ Solidarity is an important concept to Lee, Glaser, and Parts. I suggest only that while technology may enhance the potential for its development, technology alone does not make solidarity possible.

The distinction between after the fact testimony and testimony from within ongoing experience in Parts’s article and the emphasis on the importance of disseminating poetry in real time in Glaser and Lee’s article open a set of questions about poetic time and its relation to catastrophic time. Contemporary Ukrainian poetry written in response to Russia’s war of aggression and indeed poetry generally that is produced under conditions of mass public violence tends to focus on the shattering and distortion of time. The emphasis is less on the primacy of immediate experience and more on its loss, including the loss of one of the most basic categories through which experience takes place: the sense of time. Time has been broken and wounded; in a poem I discovered only because of the Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Archive, Serhii Zhadan compares time to “the skin of an exhausted man.”⁸

Writing in response to anti-Jewish violence in Ukraine in 1919, Yiddish poet Leyb Kvitko opened his book of pogrom poetry with the observation that in Uman’ in 1919, “the moments were different.” Kvitko is mostly known as a poet for children, but he wrote other, much more disturbing work before turning to children’s literature.⁹ In a poem from the pogrom collection titled “How many hours in a day” he writes, “moments burst, shatter to pieces.”¹⁰ The implication for the meaning of poetic testimony is important. Poets use the full repertoire of rhythm, imagery, sound, register, and syntax to make the moments different for readers, even shattering them.

⁵ Lyudmila Parts, “‘In the Language of the Aggressor, I Cry for its Victims’: Russophone Anti-War Poetry of Witnessing,” in this forum, p. 4. For another discussion of contemporary Ukrainian poetry as a form of witnessing, see Yuliya Kazanova, “A Solidarity Narrative: The Soft Power of Ukrainian Wartime Poetry,” *Czech Journal of International Relations* 59, no. 1 (2024): 127–52.

⁶ David Bergelson, *Naye dertseylungen* (Buenos Aires, 1949), 47. The translation is by Harriet Murav and Sasha Senderovich.

⁷ Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca, 2006).

⁸ Serhii Zhadan, “Chas, iak shkira vtomlenoho cholovika.” Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Archive, UC San Diego. See also Facebook, February 19, 2022, at www.facebook.com/serhii.zhadan/posts/522264615922560 (accessed July 30, 2024).

⁹ Parts refers to Kvitko’s “Dos fidele” (The Violin) in her discussion of Igor Bulatovsky. For more on Kvitko, see Gennady Estrakh, Harriet Murav, and Myroslav Shkandrij, eds., *Building Modern Jewish Culture: The Yiddish Kultur-Lige* (Oxford, 2022), 78–94; and Harriet Murav, *As the Dust of the Earth: The Literature of Abandonment in Revolutionary Russia and Ukraine* (Bloomington, 2024), 73–122.

¹⁰ Leyb Kvitko, *1919* (Berlin, 1923), 28. My translation.

As Glaser and Lee point out in their discussion of Halyna Kruk's 2022 poem, war introduces new horizons into key temporal experiences of daily life, including the act of waiting. Families wait for the birth of a baby, a pizza delivery, but under the new conditions of war, another possible object appears on the list: "for the world to end." Ordinary life events take place in tandem with the world-shattering event of war, changing the nature of waiting and expectation under normal conditions. I cannot agree with Glaser and Lee that "expectations of the worst do not interfere with the flow of a peace time life-cycle."¹¹ When war takes place in residential neighborhoods, the most banal events are freighted with the possibility of disaster, and the immediate potential for death changes everything.

Anastasiia Afanas'ieva, Ukrainian poet and translator, born in Kharkiv in 1982, articulates the specificity of wartime waiting in "Nova pisnia tyshi" (A New Song of Silence). The poem starts in Russian, changing to Ukrainian at the midway point. My focus is not on her use of language, but her fine-grained depiction of waiting during wartime. It is important to note that Afanas'ieva spent two weeks in a bomb shelter before fleeing her native city. I quote the from the middle section of the poem:

We were the last from our bombshelter
 who dared to jump
 into the car—cats, dogs, mothers
 a snake wrapped into a wool blanket
 we were the last who
 stopped

listening to the whistle of bombs, stopped
 falling to the floor with prayers
 on a torn lip
 in the half-second when a bomb is already dropped but hasn't reached
 the target

The first who stopped memorizing the noises of airplanes
 distinguishing
 the sound of a missile from that of a bomb
 between the sound of a shattered tea-cup
 and the tune of an iron wing
 the difference between quiet and waiting¹²

To be the last to do something suggests a prolonged period of indecision and uncertainty in any context, but in the context of this poem, being the last one also suggests an ending, or even, an end time. Waiting too long has potentially fatal consequences. The acute acts of attention required to survive shelling—distinguishing the sound of a tottering tea-cup from the plane carrying a bomb—fragments time's flow into particulate matter. The poem compels readers to attend to these minute differences, thus bringing us closer to the poet's own experience. The original uses sound mirroring to suggest the closeness of flying glass and a shattering teacup, for example.

The temporal proximity of experience and composition, composition and dissemination are significant, but no less so than what the poet does to draw attention to the experience. Poetry is not burdened by the limitations of real time, even when the experience giving rise to the poem depends on on-time decisions. The historical parallels and echoes that I and the

¹¹ Amelia Glaser and Paige Lee, "Archive of the Contemporary," in this forum, p. 15.

¹² Anastasiia Afanas'ieva, Katie Farris, and Ilya Kaminsky, "New Song of Silence: A Poet Remembers Leaving Ukraine," *Atmos* (blog), July 11, 2022, at atmos.earth/ukraine-war-refugee-russia-poetry/ (accessed July 30, 2024).

other contributors to this forum discuss add yet another dimension to the act of reading not limited to the immediacy of the present. Readers can find themselves in multiple time-zones all at once, because poetry makes its own time.

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