

CRITICAL FORUM: POETRY AND AESTHETICS IN A TIME OF WAR

Poetry as Conversation: Introduction to the Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Archive

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Abstract

Social Media did not invent poetry. But in some ways, it reinvented it. Much like the explosion of small journals in the modernist period, social media platforms have created interconnected networks of writers who share their own and others' work, in real time, sometimes writing poems directly onto their Facebook pages or in the comment thread. This article introduces the Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Archive, an interactive web platform, which catalogues Ukrainian poems posted to Facebook since 2013. The roughly 100 poets featured in this archive were either born in Ukraine or moved to Ukraine before 2014. The archive is multilingual, and organized by poet, theme, and language. It is also searchable by text string. This growing web resource enables and encourages scholars to engage with contemporary writing shared to social media.

“What can we talk about,” asks Marianna Savka, “when Facebook has already shared/what I was thinking about this morning”?¹ In a world where everything feels public, poems posted to a Facebook thread meditate on the space between intimacy and public display. Social media has a way of marking time, both for the reader and the poet. The Odesa-based poet Vladislava Ilinska writes, “you read the thread—laziness comes, summer goes/and it flies over your head in flocks of fonts.”² Other poets find in Facebook a metaphor for community. Iya Kiva posted a tongue-in-cheek poem in 2016 about likes and algorithms: “Wrote a post at 8:00. Who will read it at this early hour? Deleted it.”³ As Maurice Blanchot wrote in “The Gaze of Orpheus,” “A writer is not free to be alone without expressing the fact that he is alone.”⁴

Poetry, whether written for one person or for the world, is a conversation. In the wake of a traumatic event, it bears witness. As Carolyn Forché has written, “What the poem lays open to the other is an unending address, a call to the other, which manifests *that-which-happened*.”⁵ The desire for poetry as witness has been particularly strong in the wake of

¹ Marianna Savka, *Optika boha* (Lviv, 2019) 12.

² Vladislava Ilinska, “Letnee,” Facebook post, March 6, 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/vilyinskaya/posts/10208552171621117> (accessed August 9, 2024).

³ Iya Kiva, “написал пост в восемь ноль ноль,” Facebook post, October 9, 2016: <https://www.facebook.com/iya.kiva/posts/689232977910235> (accessed August 9, 2024).

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, “From Dread to Language” in *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, Lydia Davis, trans. (Barrytown, NY, 1981), 3–20, here 4.

⁵ Carolyn Forché, “Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art,” in *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English, 1500–2001* (New York Norton, 2014), 17–26, here 26.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine of February 24, 2022. Soon after the invasion, publishers around the world sought translations of Ukrainian poets. The goal was clear: to amplify the voices the Kremlin was attempting to silence. Moreover, war poetry helps to explain Ukrainians' struggle for security and self-determinacy. Teachers outside Ukraine sought translations to share with students, and artists looked for words they could incorporate into their work. Slavic literature scholars lamented the relative absence of strong translations of canonical Ukrainian poets, which they hoped to teach in undergraduate courses. Ukrainian poetry was suddenly and urgently in demand—both as a means of illustrating the conflict in Ukraine, and as a way of coming to terms with the human experience of war.

Ukrainian literature has thus far been so fully eclipsed by Russian that Amazon.com lists Ukrainian books under “Russian” literature, history, or poetry. Even in Ukraine, the relative dearth of literary journals has prompted poets to self-publish much of their work online, often posting new work to social media accounts. The Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Archive is designed to facilitate translation and scholarship on a dynamic literary movement. This interactive online resource aims to make a grass-roots publishing practice in Ukraine more accessible to an international audience by gathering the work of active, contemporary poets in a single corpus. Drawing from an existing social media forum that Ukrainian poets have long used for self-publishing and commenting, the archive streamlines the process of finding contemporary poets for scholars and translators. It is our hope that by making this interactive tool available to fellow scholars, the archive will facilitate real-time collaborations between poets in Ukraine and readers outside Ukraine, including translators, scholars, and fellow poets. By way of introduction, I will briefly describe the origins of the project; our choices of specific poets and features to include in this interface; the potential uses of this archive as a translation and teaching tool; and plans for future development. Having used this tool for my own research and translation for the past three years, I hope that making it publicly available will help to increase the visibility of Ukrainian poets and facilitate their translation across languages.

The Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry (UkrPoetry) Archive began as an organizational tool for one scholar studying the uses of Facebook by contemporary poets. My goal, when I sat down with Paige Lee, then an undergraduate student of Computer Science and Slavic Studies at Harvard and my research partner at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, was to create a searchable database where I could track the growing number of Ukrainian poets I was following on Facebook. This was in the fall of 2021, before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and I was on sabbatical, writing about contemporary Ukrainian poetry. As a scholar of Ukrainian literature, I was hoping to develop a searchable corpus where I could easily find the texts of poems I was studying, as well as responses to these poems as a means of better understanding this evolving genre. Lee not only set up a sophisticated interface, but after she and the other students in my research group had begun collecting poems from Facebook posts, she investigated models of analyzing the text we had collected as data, using statistical and natural language processing tools to better understand how these poems were changing over time. Our process for cataloging the poems has, thus far, been entirely manual. We use a Google form to enter each poem and describe it by theme, language, date, and author. A larger, still private, database includes metadata, such as readers' responses and translations that appeared in the comment field. By February 24, 2022, the archive included around two hundred poems, and we were beginning to consider methods for examining this material both qualitatively and quantitatively. The war has quickly made this material relevant to a large number of publishers, scholars, and translators who are eager to identify authors and texts to consider in their own work.

Since 2022, a team of students at my home institution, UC San Diego, has been working to expand the archive and make it more broadly representative of the growth of Ukrainian poetry since 2014. While the archive is still limited in scope, we continue to enter new poets and poems, and we believe that over time it will reflect the changing field of contemporary Ukrainian poetry. For some, it might fill the role of a matchmaking service to pair

prospective translators with Ukrainian poets. For others it will help to identify poets whose work merits greater scholarly attention. We are pleased to make this archive widely available to readers of Slavic literature.

How to Use the UkrPoetry Archive

We have taken some necessary precautions in creating this archive. All posts included from social media platforms were designated “public” by their respective authors. We have also incorporated an opt-out feature, allowing poets to remove any or all of their posts from the corpus. In order to allow users to search the corpus of poems for keywords, we have copied the full text of the poems into our archive. However, we have also included a link to the original Facebook post, and viewers can find the most accurate version of the original poem by following this link, as authors may have edited their post since we recorded it. Whereas users of our archive need not have Facebook accounts, only Facebook users will be able to fully view updates to the original posts and responses to them. There are, of course, a great many poets who do not use Facebook to publish their work. Although this tool is currently limited to work shared to Facebook, we believe that highlighting these online poetic conversations will help to spur interest in Ukrainian literature more broadly.

The poets of contemporary Ukraine have given their readers new reasons to value literature in an age of global communication. Like the Arab Spring of 2010–12, Ukraine’s 2013–14 Maidan gave new meaning to the short poetic form as a tool for articulating the struggle against authoritarianism. These poets continued to write and publish poems in the immediate aftermath of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and many of their works were quickly translated and amplified across languages. Lyuba Yakymchuk was invited to read a poem at the 2022 Grammys, accompanied by the US pianist John Legend; Serhiy Zhadan began posting regular interviews with fellow Ukrainian poets, as well as soldiers and ordinary Ukrainian civilians to his social media pages as he worked to coordinate the volunteer resistance effort. Since enlisting in the spring of 2024, Zhadan has focused on fundraising for the army. Ukrainian poetry, since the outbreak of war in Ukraine’s Donbas region in 2014, has helped to articulate collective values in a time of increased tyranny. These poets tell a story of how Ukraine’s self-conception has changed in years of revolution and war, and with better access to their work, more scholars and translators can learn from them.

The poets who make up the archive reflect a range of poetic circles. Kateryna Babkina has written multiple volumes of poems in addition to fiction and children’s stories.; Vasyl Makno, a celebrated poet since the 1990s, has lived in New York since 2000; Pavlo Vyshyhaba is one of several popular poets writing from the front. To ensure a measure of objectivity, we have included samples of poems by all poets affiliated with the PEN Ukraine writers’ union who have active Facebook accounts (most do). We also included poets who have been published in major Ukrainian anthologies over the decade between 2014 and 2024, as well as several Ukrainian poets who are connected on Facebook to this core group of published poets. We find ourselves constantly adding new voices to the archive, and welcome suggestions of new poets to include. At a moment when machine translation is too often the only bridge between readers and contemporary writers across languages, our archive includes creative translations of contemporary Ukrainian poetry across languages, often produced by other poets, some from eastern Europe and others from around the world. By following the links to the original Facebook post, users will often find active conversations about the poems, or poetic responses. These responses may be translations, new poems, or re-postings of earlier poems that resonate with the post. In some cases, an original post is itself a translation, and readers often supply either the original poem or another translation in the comment field.

To navigate the Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Archive, users may choose to search the dropdown list by scrolling chronologically (from newest to oldest). They may also filter results by an author’s name, or by one of several dozen themes, curated by our research group. They may also choose to use the search box to filter poems by a specific word or text

Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Archive:

Directed by Amelia Glaser, UC San Diego (Twitter)

Site design by Paige Lee

Advisory Board

- Yuliya Ilichuk
- Ilya Kaminsky
- Marci Shore
- Alicja Rose

This archive is a collection of poems publicly shared to Facebook by Ukrainian poets. Our team has focused on those poets formally associated with the Ukrainian PEN club, as well as other poets who are close contacts on Facebook. This digital archive of poetry is still under development, and we are continuing to augment the archive and improve its usability. We have focused on poems published since January 2014.

Contact

Submit a poem or translation for the archive

The screenshot shows the website's interface. On the left, there is a 'Filter by theme or author:' section with a dropdown menu for 'All authors' and 'All themes'. Below it is a search bar for text strings and a 'Search' button. A 'Reset Filters' button is also present. Underneath, it states '1786 poems from newest to oldest' and lists language filters: Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Hebrew, English, Georgian, Polish, and Other. A list of poems follows, each with a date and author name, such as 'December 27, 2023: Danik Zadorozhnyi, я не сделал ничего / / плохого / / кроме ...'.

On the right, a specific poem is displayed. The date is 'April 05, 2019, Iryna Shuvalova' and the title is 'Щасливі люди/ щасливі люди випивають очима з повіт...'. It includes the text 'Is translation?: No' and 'Author of FB Post: Iryna Shuvalova'. Below the text, it says 'Language of poem below: Ukrainian' and provides a 'Link to original post'.

The poem text reads:

щасливі люди

щасливі люди випивають очима з повітря всю сінь

самими кімчатками пальців сміються, самими кутиками вуст

уміють зарізати

такого сонячного дня вони вихлопуються на вулиці з відсутнє:

люди без болю і страху,

люди, що, задихавшись на бігу,

впиваються в тебе губами – й лишають у роті присмак заліза

вони м'які шарфи, вони красиві зрадливий тіла

мильні бульбашки альвеол набрякають в легенях – і лускають

я їду поміж ними – несподівано мертва й мала

і від його щастя на вулицях вузько вузько

з кожним кроком я розчиняюсь, наче і не була

люди такі щасливі, що дивитись на них – болить

їх не сміш взяти за руку, й за рукава поторсати страшно

і ти так само бувачи майже щаслива, аж доки приходиш

додому, коли

свисти до дзеркала, ретельно змиваєш із себе шкіру стару

але під нею – та ж сама ти вночішній

а світ сміється – його лоскотує вони щасливі хроні легкі

люди п'ють одне одного так жадно, що приростають вустами

до вуст,

люди зашпортовують кілецьками, й переплутуються, як нитки,

і тільки я одна розлучилася сплітатися: я – реуся

але коли гаснуть вогні, зачинаються двері, кохані відвертаються

до стіни

кожен щасливий намагає під подушкою свою темну маленьку

біду

наранок я надгаю своє денне обличчя – і в дзеркалі я на вигляд

така ж, як вони

розмішкують, в виплюють на вулицю ...

string. The poems have been color coded by language and may be filtered by language. In choosing poems to enter, we have focused most heavily on the years 2014 and 2022, which offer readers a sampling of work written during the outbreak of the war in Donbas, and the full-scale invasion, respectively. As we continue to build the archive, we attempt to enter a representative sampling of poems by the over 100 poets reflected in this growing corpus.

Social Media did not invent poetry. But in some ways, it reinvented it. Much like the explosion of small journals in the modernist period, social media platforms have created interconnected networks of writers who share their own and others' work, in real time, sometimes writing poems directly onto their Facebook pages or in the comment thread. It would be easy to dismiss this practice as overly ephemeral—writing of a moment that has not yet stood the proverbial test of time. However, at least to some extent, what it lacks in longevity, the database makes up for in breadth: by viewing a large set of contemporary texts together, the reader is able to identify some poetic trends even as the proverbial ink is still fresh. It is also necessary to bring a heavy dose of skepticism to Facebook as an institution. Videos can be doctored, local news can be dangerously amplified. After all, this American company has a history of altering election results, facilitating bullying, and negatively affecting mental health, particularly among its youngest users. Despite its many failings, Facebook has emerged, at least for now, as the chosen venue for a discussion, among poets, about the direction of eastern Europe.

Access the Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Archive at ukrpoetry.org. (Figure 1).