

## Reflecting on Late & Contemporary Poetry from Ukrainian

By Love Lee, Butler University Class of 2025

### **Trigger Warning: War Crimes, Violence, Death**

The first three poet bios and poetry selections below are from the book *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*, published in hardback in 2017 by Academic Studies Press and Harvard Ukraine Research Institute. The book is edited by Oksana Maksymchuk & Max Rosochinsky, and features an introduction from Ilya Kaminsky. All except for Taras Shevchenko – the information in his bio and poetry selection comes from the Taras Shevchenko official museum website. The last poet bio and selection is from an essay written by or about the author.

During war time, poetry is a way for people to find comfort in chaos. We may find an array of things comforting, and painting our stories with words is that thing for some of us – his is poetry. In reflecting on these poems from the West, Oksana Maksymchuk & Max Rosochinsky write:

Most of us in the Western world have little firsthand knowledge of war. Normally, we are not forced to face war, fight in a war, flee from war... [but] Many of us in the West have lived with wars for significant parts of our lives, wars that mostly remained out of sight. These hidden wars have become a part of us, shaping our minds, affecting the words, images, and concepts with which we think. The ways in which we create meaning have undergone shifts and mutations in an attempt to represent this new reality, outer as well as inner.

This quote may or may not reflect our individual experiences, although it describes a distinction in the experiences of us in the West and them in the East. War is a formative part of many Ukrainian's experiences, especially those living in the Eastern part of the country itself. War to an America is a separate entity that does not breach our territory. We think it is important to acknowledge those struggling in the U.S. though, as there are silent wars being fought here against things like poverty, illness, and isolation. When reading the poems below, we can all find solidarity with the emotions of their authors– if not the content. In reference to the historical importance of *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*, Oksana Maksymchuk & Max Rosochinsky:

Like broken furniture and mutilated bodies, these poems are traces of what had happened, as well as evidence that it did really happen. They are a form of testimony, even if what they testify about is not ordinarily witnessed historical events but rather cognitive transformations and semiotic shifts experienced by people in liminal situations.

Poetry not only helps to make sense of present conditions, but ensure they are remembered through time. Remembrance of war after it is over is vital to making certain it doesn't happen again. You can't learn from the past if you forget about it. Luckily, especially in this era of technology, poetry tends to outlive its author. In the case of Taras Shevchenko – his poetry has

outlived him stored in digital databases that didn't exist when he was alive. Learn more about him below:

### **Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861)**



One of the most famous Ukrainian poets to date – Taras Shevchenko is a national treasure for the country of Ukraine. Born in Moryntsi, Ukraine, he lost both of his parents by age eleven, and became a servant to Pavlo Engelhardt, the inheritor of his father's estate, at age fourteen. He was released from serfdom at age 24 with the help of some fellow artists who devised a plan to buy him out of it. He released his first collection of poetry *Kobzar* two years later, and went on to release many more in the years following. In 1843, he moved to Ukraine and travelled back between there and St. Petersburg for many years. After joining the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius secret society in Kiev, him and other members were arrested in 1847. He was exiled to the military, forbidden from producing anymore art, and then he passed away in 1861 on account of unexplained illness. During his life, he wrote poetry that reflected his feelings toward the oppressive tsarist Russian regime and the fight for independence.

The poem selection below is a portion from “My Testament” (1845):

*When I am dead, bury me  
In my beloved Ukraine,  
My tomb upon a grave mound high  
Amid the spreading plain,  
So that the fields, the boundless steppes,  
The Dnieper's plunging shore  
My eyes could see, my ears could hear  
The mighty river roar.*

*When from Ukraine the Dnieper bears  
Into the deep blue sea  
The blood of foes ... then will I leave  
These hills and fertile fields --  
I'll leave them all and fly away  
To the abode of God,*

*And then I'll pray .... But till that day  
I nothing know of God.*

...

Translated by John Weir

Although he lived as a floater, exiled time and time again – Shevchenko knew where he wanted to end his journey. His vivid recounting of Ukraine as a beautiful land with mighty land and water systems,

### **Lyudmyla Khersonska (1964-Present)**

Born in Moldova, Khersonska was living in Odessa when the war started. She now lives in Italy, as part of an artist residency. Her poetry books, although written in Russian, have received acclaim in all of Eastern Europe, several literary awards, and they have been translated into English, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and German. In an interview with her friend from July of this year, she speaks of her relationship to the war by saying:

We all are a little bit mortal and eternal at the same time, regardless of what's happening to us. Normally you have time for thinking, praying, repenting, reading, for talking to people. But when there is a war, you have no time to process anything... So yes, mortality and eternity are forever. The thing with war is that war distorts our way to both of them. (Livshin 2023)

The poetry selection below is from the 2017 book *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*:

“One night, a humanitarian convoy arrived in her dream. . .” (2014)

*One night, a humanitarian convoy arrived in her dream.  
Legs drawn to her chest, head under the sheet,  
she sleeps on her right side, back braced by the wall,  
the way people sleep during humanitarian wars.  
The same exact way all tribes sleep at all times,  
waking only because of silence, that awful silence,  
during that silence, don't open the gates —  
behind them, little humanitarians, heads facing the wrong way.*

This poem speaks to the anxieties and uncertainties perpetuated by living in a place of war. This mesh of worries ties back to the interview response Khersonska gave, as war puts the victim at the bridge between life and death.

Translated from the Russian by Katherine E. Young

### **Kateryna Kalytko (1982-Present)**

Born in Vinnytsia, Ukraine, Kalytko's work is widely acclaimed. Since publishing, her books have been translated into English, Polish, German, Hebrew, Russian, Armenian, Italian and Serbian.

The poetry selection below is from the 2017 book *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*:

“Can great things happen to ordinary people?” (2015)

*The rotting boards of knowledge creak underfoot.  
Now you know, for example, how in wartime  
lights pulsate on Christmas trees in squat homes,  
how the deadly wind blows from a burning field  
burrowing like a stent between aorta walls  
how Gaspar, Balthazar, Melchior  
rush in an ambulance with a bullet-riddled headlight  
how the thick magic forests appear out of compassion  
for the prisoners of war  
and spread in a layer of peat over the darkened souls.  
Daylight, a clawing puppy, whimpers by the pillow,  
the light is faint and snowy, snow will cool the faces  
and capture them turning into icon-like images  
that cut through the heart of the earth.*

*If there is no warmth  
until spring, let this shroud remain.  
Was everything, everything that happened, for a greater good  
or would all the agony cause a tall tree to grow — bleeding  
berries, pounding against apartment windows at night?  
Where did you get this glistening moonlight skin, my love?  
From starvation, despair, and milk, and mercury.*

Translated from the Ukrainian by Olena Jennings and Oksana Lutsyshyna

### **Borys Humenyuk (1965-Present)**

Born in Ostriv, Ukraine, Humenyuk is a poet, writer, and soldier. He has been involved in military activities in the Donbas region since the 2013 Revolution of Dignity, also known as the Euromaidan, and serves in an autonomous military unit mainly comprised of volunteers. Much of his poetry speaks to his experiences at the front, and what that looks and feels like from various angles.

“An old mulberry tree near Mariupol. . .” (2014)

*An old mulberry tree near Mariupol  
Has never seen so many boys in her life  
Boys picking her fruit, boys dancing in the branches,*

*And the smallest boy climbing  
To the very top.*

*RPGs, a machine gun, sniper rifles, helmets, bullet-proof vests  
All laid carefully down.*

*The boys laughed, gave each other piggyback rides,  
Smearing mulberry juice all over their faces  
Sometimes on purpose — to look  
like characters from Hollywood movies.*

*RPGs, a machine gun, sniper rifles, helmets, bullet-proof vests  
All laid carefully down.*

*Beyond the horizon some mortars went to work  
Making a funny noise: “one, two, three,” “one”  
Like a young lover knocking on a girl’s window.  
A flock of ravens rose into the sky with a shriek  
But maybe those weren’t ravens, maybe  
Those were airborne clumps of earth, tilled by the explosions.*

*The boys abandoned the old mulberry tree  
Left it whirling in a solitary dance  
Changed into grown men.  
They sped off to assume their positions  
Beyond the horizon, where the earth cried out to the sky  
And the sky shook.*

...

Translated from the Ukrainian by  
Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky

Mulberry trees are all over Eastern Ukraine, and they typically produce fruit in early summer. The fruit is sweet, resembling a sort of narrow blackberry. This poem animates intermittent scenes of battle alongside a sort of playfulness and youth that is invoked by the mulberry.

### **Victoria Amelina (1986-2023)**

Born in Lviv, Ukraine, Amelina made her debut as a writer in 2014 with *The Fall Syndrome, Or Homo Compatiens*. She went on to write a children book, a novel, and many poems, as well as essays. Her work has been translated into English, Polish, Italian, German, Croatian, Dutch, Czech, and Hungarian. On top of being a writer, Amelina became an activist and human rights investigator later in life, speaking out because:

In the same way, our grandparents never talked in detail about the Holodomor, also called the Great Famine, which took place from 1932-33. Popular lyrics about love, peace, and

brotherhood are always easier to utter than the true story. But only true stories include all of us in a grand narrative that makes up a country and allows us to be truthful with each other and regain each other's trust... silence creates cracks so deep that it is hardly possible to feel at home. When such stories as of Holocaust or Holodomor are not fully revealed, we're bound not to trust each other. Who were you? ... There were silences instead of the much-needed stories. And where there's a lack of true stories, there is a lack of trust. We are bound to believe the propaganda and draw all the wrong borders again and again, never feeling completely home.

She was an active participant in the 2013 Revolution of Dignity, which took place in Kyiv during February 18<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup>. After these protests, Amelina expressed feeling like the silence had finally been broken. In 2022, she was not in Ukraine at the time of the initial invasion, having been travelling with her son, although she later returned. Later in 2022, her team launched the "Fight Them with Poetry" initiative to supply military units defending Donetsk. Also later in 2022, she found the war diary of deceased friend and writer, Volodymyr Vakulenko, and published it in hopes he would not be forgotten.

The poem below was written during the recent and ongoing invasion:

“The Town of Women”

*only the women testify in this strange town  
one tells me about a missing child  
two talk about those who were tortured in the basement  
three say they haven't heard of any rapes and look the other way  
four speak of shouts heard coming from the commandant's building  
five tell of those shot in the yards  
six are talking, but nothing they say can be understood  
seven are still reckoning the food they have in stock out loud  
eight say that I am lying and there is no justice  
nine people talk among themselves while going to the cemetery*

*I'm going there too, because I already know everyone in this town  
and all its dead are my dead also  
and all of the survivors are my sisters*

*ten people talk about a man who survived  
he was taken away also  
he could be a witness*

*I knock on his door, but a female neighbour comes out  
and speaks for him:  
he only seemed to have survived she says  
go and talk to the women*

When men are conscripted during war, often what is left are towns of their moms, grandparents, sisters, and wives. While describing a scene of confusion amid the chaos, there is still this sense of community. This could be seen as a by-product of the war, but at the same time here is nothing to be gained in war – families suffer only loss – loss of life, property, and home. In the summer of 2023, Amelina was seriously injured in Kramatorsk while meeting with a delegation of Columbian journalists and writers at a local restaurant. She died not long after on July 1, 2023. The aforementioned information can be found in her essay “Expanding the Boundaries of Home: A Story for Us All” and “A Story That Will Never End; An Obituary for Victoria Amelina” (Amelina 2022, “A Story...” 2023).

We encourage you to look further into these poets, as well as other Ukrainian writers you may come across. More poetry from Khersonka, Kayltko, and Humenyuk can be found on the *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine* project website.

We stand in solidarity with all victims of war and pay our respects to the late Victoria Amelina.

### **Recommendations for Further Reading**

Andrey Kurkov – *Grey Bees*

Taras Shevchenko – *Kobzar, The Poet of Ukraine: Selected Poems of Taras Shevchenko*

### **Sources**

Livshin, Olga. “A Poem as a Shield and a Prayer: An Interview with Lyudmyla Khersonska” *The Rumpus*, July 24 2023, <https://therumpus.net/2023/07/24/lyudmyla-khersonska/>.

“Words For War: New Poems from Ukraine” Academic Studies Press & Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2022, <https://www.wordsforwar.com/new-page>.

Amelina, Victoria. “Victoria Amelina” IWP, 2022, <http://www.iwpcollections.org/victoria-amelina>.

“A Story That Will Never End; An Obituary for Victoria Amelina” Poetry School, 2023, <https://poetryschool.com/stanzas-for-ukraine/a-story-that-will-never-end-an-obituary-for-victoria-amelina/>.