

Ukrainian History through Literature

Tamara Hundorova, in conversation with Manuel F  rez Gil

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Manuel F  rez: *Could you start by telling us about the origins of Ukrainian literature, what were its key themes and who were its founding authors?*

Tamara Hundorova: Ukrainian literature has a longstanding tradition, both published and spoken, dating back to between the 11th and 13th centuries, the period of Kyivan Rus. However, it began to develop more actively from the end of the 18th century. Hryhori  Skovoroda (1722–1794), often called the “Ukrainian Socrates”, was a recognized writer, philosopher-mystic, and traveler. The main themes of his dialogues, fables and parables were self-knowledge, goodness, the harmony of the macrocosm (the universe), and the microcosm (the human soul). Skovoroda was also known for developing the concept of “congenial work”: a natural form of human activity that meets the needs of the soul and brings freedom and happiness.

The writer Ivan Kotliarevsky (1769–1838) marked the beginning of the modern period in Ukrainian literature. He is known primarily as the author

of the burlesque *Eneida*, the first parts of which were published in 1798. This is a parody of Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid*. However, instead of using the Latin language and a high epic style, Kotliarevsky employs vernacular Ukrainian language and burlesque, humorously narrating the adventures of Aeneas. *Eneida* gained great fame and was distributed in handwritten copies. At the same time, the poem also contains a more serious form of historical subtext and allegory. The adventures of Aeneas in the *Eneida*, when translated into the Ukrainian language, were very much reminiscent of the Cossack wars and the Cossack freedmen of early modern Ukraine, with much of it being set against the backdrop of traditional Ukrainian life, particularly that of the small *panstvo* (nobility). Indeed, *Eneida* is often called the "encyclopedia of Ukrainian lifestyle": Kotliarevsky used much of the text to record the richness of the Ukrainian language and provided whole lists of dishes, drinks, clothes, card games, and other aspects of everyday life which were popular at that time. Although Virgil's main themes and ideas remain largely unchanged in the Ukrainian adaptation, with Aeneas still being charged with a mission to found Rome and glorify the Roman Empire, Kotliarevsky's work ultimately serves as a literary vehicle for praising the inherent value and autonomy of Ukrainian history, language, and traditional lifestyles.

Taras Shevchenko (1814 – 1861), who was born into a serf family and only gained his freedom at the age of 22, emerged as the first Ukrainian national poet of the period of Romanticism. His first book, *Kobzar*, was published in St. Petersburg in 1840 and reveals him as a talented artist and poet who relies primarily on folklore and identifies himself with a kobzar, a traditional folk singer and bard. In the center of Shevchenko's artistic world is the Ukrainian world, which he imagines and fantasizes while being abroad, in the capital of the Russian Empire and later in exile as a soldier of the Imperial Russian Army. Despite this, he is nourished by the memories of his native Ukraine, memories of his childhood, and stories of the Cossack past enshrined in traditional folk tales and songs. At the same time, Shevchenko's poetry has a lyrical tone and becomes a symbolic autobiography of the author that reflects a life split between his native Ukraine and the foreign land where he had to live.

Having visited Ukraine, the poet is especially concerned about the suffering and tribulations of his compatriots. He also speaks sardonically of the Russian imperial family and the colonization of Ukraine, which destroys the world of the people by uprooting their heroic sense of history. The popular imagery employed in Shevchenko's work includes the following: the fate of the offended woman and mother, pity for one's native land, scenes of a popular uprising, and

the historiosophy of a Ukrainian national history that intersects with those of the Poles and Jews, as depicted in his poem *Haydamaky*. Shevchenko also widely uses biblical plots and imagery in order to create national myth while also addressing the moments of collective memory and identity.

Ukraine in Shevchenko's poetic visions is often identified with a *pokrytka*: a girl who gave birth to a child out of wedlock. The remnants of Ukraine's autonomy have been destroyed, the Ukrainian world is distorted and far from God's heavenly kingdom, the family is devastated, and motherhood is threatened. In Shevchenko's romantic vision, Ukraine is also tragically split in half and dislocated: it seems to be, on the one hand, an ideal community, a paradise, and on the other it is a hell. For rebellious poems and anti-tsarist sentiments, Shevchenko was sent to the army for ten years while also being banned from writing and painting. Yet his personal voice is still associated with that of the entire nation; the cult of Shevchenko, which was formed during his lifetime, has been preserved throughout the ages.

M.F.: *What role did Ukrainian writers and poets play in the development and evolution of modern Ukrainian nationalism?*

T.H.: The national idea has been one of the dominant themes in Ukrainian literature since the time of Shevchenko. The affirmation of the identity of the people, history, language, the right of Ukraine to exist, and its division between two empires – with the western part belonging to Austria-Hungary and the eastern part to the Russian Empire, is at its core. While Shevchenko formulated a romantic image of Ukraine, the writer and poet Ivan Franko recreated a more realistic social and psychological understanding during the second half of the 19th century. Franko carried out an analysis of Ukraine, being influenced by writing of Emil Zola, in particular the region of Eastern Galicia (Halychyna), where he lived, showing real imagery depicting the transformation of the traditional rural society, the formation of national intelligentsia and the lives of different social strata: workers, peasants and the nobility. He also illustrated the various ethno-national groups and environments, notably the Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews and planned to create an epopee of the social life of his time. Franko embodied his national ideal in the poem *Moisey* (Moses), having been nicknamed “Moses” during his lifetime, where he depicted the deep personal drama of a national leader who is not understood and rejected by his people. Franko also endowed the national ideal with an existential and personal character, paying attention to the psychological and moral doubts and bifurcation

of the Ukrainian intellectual. An important theme in his work is international relations and conflicts, particular those between Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews. The diversity and multifaceted nature of Franko's work also heavily evokes that of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whom he translated, while Franko was known to have written in Ukrainian, Polish, and German.

The idea of nationalism continued to fuel Ukrainian literature throughout the 20th century, occupying a particularly special place in the 1920s during a period known as the "Red Renaissance". The key figure in this movement was Mykola Khvylovy (1893–1933), who proclaimed the slogan "Get away from Moscow!", calling for Ukrainian authors to move away from simply imitating Russian literature and to focus on what he termed "psychological Europe". Being a follower of Oswald Spengler, he also called for an "Asian renaissance" in Ukraine. A romantic and a communist, Khvylovy's works of the 1920s reflected the clash of socialist ideal with the bourgeoisie, conveying a sense of disappointment in the ideas of the revolution, as well as the utopian nature of the "Blue Commune", which represented the dream of socialism for him. Notable among his achievements was creating a phantasmagoric image of the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, which appears on the border between reality and hallucination, city and steppe. Committing suicide on his birthday, Khvylovy sought to present his death as a protest against the repressive Stalinist campaign launched against the generation of Ukrainian writers to which he belonged.

M.F.: *Could you identify any similarities and differences between contemporary Ukrainian literature and that of other nations, which became independent after the dissolution of the Soviet Union?*

T.H.: Post-Soviet Ukrainian literature is characterized by its post-colonial and post-totalitarian nature. During the 19th century in the Russian Empire, the Ukrainian language was considered unsuitable for literature. Indeed, it was even illegal to publish serious literary work or perform plays in the theater that were scripted in Ukrainian (*The Ems Ukaz*, 1876). This policy stemmed from the belief that language and culture served as agents of nationalism and separatism. Later, in Soviet times, entire cultural strata, such as the Ukrainian avant-garde, were erased from memory, with the names of its representatives being incorporated into the history of Russian culture while many Ukrainian writers were repressed or killed, especially during the Stalinist era.

All this determines the relevance of post-colonial criticism in post-Soviet Ukrainian literature as a way of restoring the national tradition, renewing the literary canon, and reclaiming the names of previously banned authors and literary works. At the same time, a new literature is being formed starting from the 1990s, devoid of official pathos, didacticism, and socialist ideology. The field of literature is being transformed thanks to rewriting the national tradition and connecting it to the experience and dictionaries of world culture. As a result of the break with the socialist realism and its heroic narratives the tradition of burlesque and avanguardism performances, the experimental character of Ukrainian literature, is being revived. As a whole, it represents different social strata, time periods, psychological and cultural transition coming to embody the development of a new modern nation.

The process of “carnivalization” in the 1990s encompasses all spheres of life and serves as a means of restoring a full-fledged national entity and more positive literary models of self-perception. It also helps to banish the lingering consciousness of a totalitarian person. An important cultural role in this process is played by the group “Bu-Ba-Bu”, whose name stands for “burlesque, bala-gan, and buffonada”. Its members Yuri Andrukhovych, Viktor Neborak, and Oleksandr Irvanets use gamified types of communication, creating new types of characters that serve as guides between the past and the present, between physics and metaphysics, one’s own and someone else’s. The group’s stated goal is also about forming a new Ukrainian-speaking readership, which has been achieved during the years of independence.

Alongside this, Andrukhovych’s postmodern novels, *Recreations*, *The Moscoviad*, and *Perversion*, in which he traced the adventures of his hero-trickster in times of global changes, also became literary iconic for this period. The author allows him to undergo trials at home in Ukraine, in Moscow – the capital of the already dead Soviet Empire, and in the new Europe of the late 20th century. Andrukhovych proves the polymorphic and protean nature of the character, close to bohemian, and presents his bifurcation and play as an attempt to overcome post-totalitarian trauma. The dialogic structure of the novels, quotability, pastiche, stylistic play – all this ensured the enduring popularity of Andrukhovych’s works.

Colonial trauma destroyed generations, affected language, destroyed the intimate space of the family. Consequently, the post-totalitarian period in Ukrainian literature is characterized by a generational conflict. It also creates a sense of homelessness and resentment towards the world of adults who comprise what Serhii Zhadan (born in 1974) called “the last Soviet generation.”

In the 2000s, Zhadan becomes the biographer and leader of this generation. In his published works, *Quotations*, *Depeche Mode*, *Anarchy in the Ukr*, and *Voroshilovgrad*, he depicts the consciousness of a teenage character who experiences disappointment in the world of his parents, who are associated with the post-Soviet country and its diminished values. The protagonist lives in a fragile house of existence, considers himself a loser, distancing himself from society, and does not want to become an adult; Zhadan's work very much records the evolution of this generation.

The appearance of women's writing and a number of prominent female authors, among whom Oksana Zabuzhko (born in 1960) has been the most prominent, is also a characteristic of post-Soviet Ukrainian literature. In her novels, *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*, as well as numerous essays, Zabuzhko expresses how colonization, including that of the Soviet period, destroys generations, leads to demasculinization, and erases collective historical memory. Her typical heroine is an intellectual who wears different masks, has different guises, maintains a dialogue with past eras and sometimes aggressively fights for her freedom.

M.F.: *What are the most notable stereotypes that contemporary Ukrainian literature had to overcome? Historical prejudice about Poles, Jews, Russians, and other minorities for example, often come to mind.*

T.H.: Modern Ukrainian literature actively works with memory narratives. Moreover, the latter is increasingly associated with the international, multi-cultural history of Ukraine. At the same time, specific stories from the lives of different ethnic groups acquire a meta-historical character and unfold on different levels – from private to transgenerational, multinational, and post-colonial. Thus, Sofia Andrukhovych's novel *Felix Austria* is addressed to the rather complicated history of Polish-Ukrainian relations through the fate of one household consisting of both Poles and Ukrainians. This is also a story of two girls, Stefa and Adele. Both are around the same age and could almost be considered sisters, although the Ukrainian Stefa plays the role of a servant, while the Polish Adele is her mistress. The novel was written on behalf of Stefa and depicts in detail the atmosphere of a provincial Galician town at the beginning of the 20th century. However, the story is not only about sisterly love and devotion, but also explores issues inequality and hidden jealousy set against the political passions and nationalist conflicts raging across the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although this is nominally a Galician text that

focuses on the province of Halychyna, at the same time it also describes the reasons for the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy. Small conflicts, innocent at first glance, jealousy manifest as hidden catastrophe, which eventually explodes on the outskirts of Europe and destroys the Habsburg idyll.

Another novel, *Vichnyi kalendar* (*The Eternal Calendar*), by Vasyl Makhno, shows how destinies and events are intertwined and the landscape of memory is transformed over the course of three centuries in one small town in Podillia, an area inhabited by Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, and Turks. Although these communities periodically fight, they also intermarry, convert to one-another's faiths, work together, and raise their children. *Vichnyi kalendar* describes the key events of recorded history, which is often demarcated by wars, but also records individual names, dates, and events on a smaller scale that are otherwise erased from memory and forgotten.

The Jewish theme, which has been silenced for a long time, is actively present in Ukrainian literature. In particular, the development of modern urban prose clearly testifies that Jews are an important part of the urban community and the urban landscapes of both Kyiv and Lviv. Zabuzhko and her contemporaries Larysa Denysenko and Yuriy Vynnychuk, present their stories not only as a clash of one's own and someone else's, but also because of the similarities of the traumas experienced and the shared experience of survival. This common sense of shared Ukrainian-Jewish past appears after decades and almost mystically echoes across generations, as in Zabuzhko's novel saga *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*, where, as if in a kaleidoscope, patterns of destinies and parallel worlds are formed.

M.F.: *Russian aggression and the invasion of Ukraine will have many effects, what do you think will be its long-term impact on Ukrainian literature in the future?*

T.H.: The war in Donbas, which has been ongoing in Ukraine since 2014, brought another important topic to Ukrainian literature and resulted in many prose and poetic works on the subject of war. A large proportion of them were written by participants in the war in Donbas such as *Tochka nul* (Point Zero) by Artem Chekh and *Svitlyi shliach* (Bright Way) by Stanislav Aseyev. These publications are often autobiographical and documentary, while also being written by both men and women, and include various genres such as non-fiction, poetry, prose, and adventure literature. For example, Olena Herasymyuk, a participant and volunteer, performed a live reading of the collection *Tiuremna Pisnia* (Prison Song), which combines almost folk melodies

with harsh military vocabulary in a completely hybrid way. In the poetry collection *Abrykosa Donbasu* (Apricots of Donbas), Liubov Yakymchuk describes the Luhansk oblast in Donbas region, where she grew up, its landscapes and signs, and dedicates her poems to her parents who remain in the occupied territory. Tamara Horikha Zernia in her narrative *Dotsia* (Daughter) describes the story of a female volunteer who dedicates her life to helping soldiers and challenges the traditionally militaristic discourse of war in terms of gender. To date, the most famous novel about the war has been Serhii Zhadan's *Internat* (The Orphanage), where the author depicts, against the background of a story about male initiation, how the “last Soviet generation” grows up and learns to defend its “last” territory.

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