

Traditionalism and Experimentation in Ukrainian Literature of the 1920s:

The Bohdan Jurij Krawciw Memorial Symposium Discusses Ukrainian Literary Renaissance in the Past and Prospects for the Future

On May 5, 2003, The Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute held the Bohdan Jurij Krawciw Memorial Lecture in Ukrainian Literature. Established in the mid-1970s in memory of Bohdan Jurij Krawciw, poet, journalist, literary critic and a HURI associate from 1973 until his death in November 1975, the Lecture seeks to encourage scholarly discussions of Ukrainian literature by inviting literary critics, writers, and librarians to address the issues that were of lasting interest to Bohdan Krawciw.

Poet, Scholar, and Visionary

Bohdan Krawciw was born in the Dolyna region of Western Ukraine on May 5, 1904 in a priest's family. He attended gymnasium and university in Lviv. His literary career began with the editorship of the newspaper *Molode Zhyttia* in 1919. His poetry and contributions to literary and public affairs journals were first published in the 1920s. After World War II, Krawciw continued his literary and journalistic careers in West Germany. In 1949, he and his family emigrated to the United States, settling in Philadelphia. He became editor of *Suchasnist*, the Ukrainian literary journal published in Munich, and served as editor of *Ukraine: A Concise Encyclopedia*, the two-volume reference book published by the University of Toronto Press, in both its English and Ukrainian versions. For a number of years Mr. Krawciw was also editor of the Ukrainian daily newspapers *America* and later, *Svoboda*. He was a member of several scholarly organizations, including the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in the United States and the Shevchenko Scientific Society, in New York, NY. In addition, Krawciw was an active and productive supporter of the Ukrainian Research Institute

in the early seventies, participating in the Seminar in Ukrainian Studies and, most importantly, donating his extraordinary library of Ucrainica and personal archive to the collections of the Harvard University Library.

This year, the Krawciw Memorial Lecture was given the format of a symposium under the title "Traditionalism and Experimentation: Aspects of Ukrainian Literature in the 1920s ". Incidentally the symposium occurred on the day when the person it is meant to honor was born exactly ninety nine years ago. Six literary scholars from the United States, Canada, Poland, Germany, and Ukraine discussed one of the most exciting periods in the history of Ukrainian letters – the 1920s – and its consequences for modern literary process.

In his tribute to this remarkable HURI benefactor, George Grabowicz, Dmytro Cyzevs'kyj Professor of Ukrainian Literature at Harvard, said that this year's symposium is a reflection not only on Krawciw but also on the ongoing interests and the nature of the research group that is now working at HURI.

Grabowicz then offered an overview of Krawciw's life and activities as poet, scholar, bibliographer, and editor. In his opinion, Krawciw was "a very fine minor poet, whose stature and role is delimited not so much by his own talent and limitations but also by the incomplete and somewhat truncated nature of the émigré literature, of which he was a part and on which he also reflected in other guises. Krawciw, if he could have lived in Ukraine, would have been a much more significant poet."

Grabowicz subsequently touched upon Krawciw's scholarly interests, including his work on Ukrainian mythology and folklore and their resonance in *The Tale of Ihor's Host*; Taras Shevchenko and his importance within Ukrainian culture; Ivan Franko and nineteenth century Ukrainian history; and Ukrainian literature of the 1920s and 1930s, and on emigré literature. What is interesting and somewhat poignant, noted Grabowicz, is that Krawciw's scholarly and academic work truly

comes into its own at the very end of his life when he got involved as a researcher and scholar with HURI.

Krawciw was a Research Associate and Fellow at the Institute during the academic years 1973-1974 and 1974-1975, coming to Cambridge several weeks on end, during which time he presented two seminars. Both of them resulted in articles that still represent a significant contribution to Ukrainian studies: one on the state of Ukrainian literary criticism in the diaspora; the other on the period of Renaissance and humanism in Ukrainian literature. At that time these were subjects receiving scant, if any, attention.

To the end Krawciw was also a bibliographer, and a contributor to anthologies of which he edited two, even before the publication of the major Ukrainian anthology of the twentieth century -- Iouri Lavrinenko's *Rozstriliane Vidrodzhennia* (Executed Renaissance). In 1955, Krawciw publishes *Obirvani struny* (Rent Strings), a book of Ukrainian poetry of the totalitarian period, and, in 1966 – *Shestdesiat poetiv shistdesiatykh rokiv* (Sixty Poets of the Sixties), a book that reflected the new-found enthusiasm and genuinely important contributions of the new wave of Ukrainian poets of the 1960s. There is a whole volume, noted Grabowicz, still unpublished, of Krawciw's writings, polemicizing with the Soviet regime, a one-man conscience, responding to events, outrages, censorship, attempts of suppressing the culture.

Bohdan Krawciw's relation to the period discussed at the symposium is manifest in some of his published articles. For example, he wrote the introduction to the Suchasnist' edition of the, at that time, still unpublished and barely accessible poem *Sliptsi* (The Blind Men), a major poem not only of one particular writer, Mykola Bazhan, but of the entire literature of the 1920s. Krawciw also devoted considerable attention to Mykola Zerov and the neo-classicists. A study that to this day is valuable, though it too was overtaken by further research, is his review of the repression of Ukrainian writers under the Soviet system entitled *Na bahrianomu koni*

revoliutsii (On the Crimson Horse of Revolution). In short, Grabowicz concluded, Krawciw was one of those living, highly articulate and sensitive witnesses, who along with people like Sheveliov, Lavrinenko, and Kostiuik articulated a deep sense of an age, one which was formed by its understanding of, and relationship to the most important period in twentieth-century Ukrainian history, which are the twenties.

Symbiosis between Arts and Letters

Myroslav Shkandrij, Professor at the Department of German and Slavic Studies, University of Manitoba, approached the subject of the symposium from the perspective of the interaction between art and the literary avant-garde in Ukraine during the 1920s. In his paper "Dangerous Attraction: the Avant-Garde Temptation in Ukrainian Literature and Art of the 1920s", he argued that the discourse of the avant-garde played a central role in three of the "best experimental novels produced in or around the year 1928": Iurii Ianovs'kyi's *Maistr korablia* (Master of the Ship), Maik Iohansen's *Podorozh uchenoho doktora Leonardo* (Journey of the Learned Doctor Leonardo), and Viktor Domontovych's *Divchynka z vedmedykom* (Girl with a Teddy-Bear).

The thought that the Ukrainian culture also has its avant-garde still seems to many in Ukraine and outside it an oddity. Those artists of the Ukrainian avant-garde who were not physically destroyed by the bolsheviks, were purged of all signs of "bourgeois decadence" and terrorized into collaboration with the Soviet regime, others who survived abroad, or whose works were rescued from the communist censorship came to be known as part of the "Russian avant-garde" often despite the fact that they considered themselves Ukrainians, like Kazimir Malevich or were "enormously proud of their Ukrainian origins", like David Burliuk

In his presentation, Shkandrij went to considerable length to restore to the Ukrainian avant-garde its rights and accomplishments. That such restitution is still the order of the day is clearly suggested by the latest exhibit of Malevich's works at

the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where Malevich is presented as, not unexpectedly, a "Russian suprematist".

Shkandrij reminded his audience that the "artistic avant-garde emerged in Ukraine in the years 1908 to 1928. Ukrainians organized one of the first avant-garde exhibitions in the Russian Empire - the Link Exhibition held in Kyiv in 1908. They also made major contributions to the international avant-garde movement, and could be found working among fellow avant-gardists in Paris, Munich, St. Petersburg and Moscow. Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism, Vladimir (Volodymyr) Tatlin's Constructivism, David Burliuk's Futurism, Alexander Archipenko's Cubist sculptures, Alexandra Exter's theatre art, and Mykhailo Boichuk's Monumentalism are only some of their more prominent achievements.

Shkandrij dwelt at length on the interaction between avant-garde experimentation and the Ukraine's rich cultural tradition. This is amply exemplified by the avant-garde's fascination with primitivism. According to Shkandrij, "The avant-garde used primitivism to assert the marginalized, which for them (in contrast to the Western Europeans) included their own unique cultural traditions. Primitivism, from the first, became a major current. Exter, Maria Syniakova, Malevich, Petrytskyi, and the Boichuk school in different ways linked the avant-garde to an ancient folk culture that still played a vital part in daily life."

Blueprint for Cultural Revival

The clash between conformity and experiment found its particularly dramatic manifestation in the great Literary Discussion of 1925-1928, that resulted in an unprecedented outpouring of books, pamphlets, and articles, as well as mass public discussions.

In her paper "Avant-garde Not: The VAPLITE Blueprint for Cultural Revival," Halyna Hryn, Research Fellow at HURI, analyzed the modernist literary movement known under the acronym of VAPLITE (Vseukrains'ka Akademiia Proletars'koi Literatury (the All-Ukrainian Academy of Proletarian Literature)). In Western scholarship VAPLITE has been traditionally regarded as the embodiment of the "restless revolutionary spirit of the twenties". The group headed by the charismatic personality of Mykola Khvyl'ovyi despite its professed proletarian credentials, in essence stood in opposition to the basic rules of Soviet cultural life and espoused the aesthetic by which, as Hryn noted, "artistic quality is the primary criterion for judging a literary work; true art is a high vocation, the product of genius and fully accessible only to the developed intellect; the creation of the new Ukrainian culture should be entrusted to intellectuals and not semi-literate hacks hiding behind the banner of ideological purity. The new literature was to measure against the canon of Western civilization, and this meant a knowledge of literary technique and of the art of the past, including the heritage of Western Europe. Only a culture created on this basis would be able to fulfill the messianic role that Khvyl'ovyi envisaged for it: to lead the great cultural revival of the East, the 'Asiatic Renaissance.'"

Hryn noted that recently published correspondence between the communist Khvyl'ovyi and the preeminent Kyiv intellectual Mykola Zerov demonstrates that there was no fundamental difference between the two camps and that strategies for the Literary Discussion were generated in tandem. At stake was the creation of an atmosphere conducive to cultural development in a rapidly deteriorating political situation, an attempt to hold the line against the rising militancy of party-minded critics with their anti-intellectual, anti-Western stance and in their guise the onset of what we now know as Stalinist culture.

VAPLITE's programmatic principles, as Hryn perceptively suggests in the title of her paper, do indeed sound very much like a blueprint for the cultural revival in

post-Soviet Ukraine today: "Experimentation with literary technique was encouraged and its members followed with interest developments abroad. They longed for direct dialogue with Western Europe, breaking the Russian monopoly over such contacts in the past. As a nationally conscious intelligentsia, they looked forward to the day when their own fully developed culture would take its rightful place in Europe. In this regard they were direct heirs to the aspirations of several generations of writers that had preceded them."

Spengler and Khvyl'ovyi

A fascinating instance of such a dialogue between Ukrainian intellectuals of the 1920s and West European thought was addressed by Alexander Kratochvil, Assistant Professor at the Department of Slavic Studies (Section on Ukrainian Studies) at Ernst-Moritz-Arndt University of Greifswald, Germany, and Eugene and Daymel Shklar Fellow at HURI. In his presentation at the symposium – "'The Decline of the West' in Ukraine: Mykola Khvyl'ovyi's Eurasianism in Light of Spenglerian Thought", Kratochvil analyzed how Oswald Spengler's ideas on the Western decline and simultaneous Russian ascendancy got refracted in Mykola Khvyl'ovyi's vision of Ukraine's future cultural development, and in his philosophy of "romantic vitaism".

There are two lines of Khvyl'ovyi's ideas inspired by Spengler, argued Kratochvil. The first is present in Khvyl'ovyi's pamphlets and the novel *Val'dshnepy*. This line advocates the Western, or, more specifically, Faustian cultural type as the only way out of the crisis in Ukrainian culture. The second line combines elements of Western cultural tradition with Asian temperament and develops -- using historical analogies -- a Ukrainian cultural messianism, for example, in *Ukrajina chy Malorosija?* (Ukraine or Little Russia?).

Clearly inspired by Spengler, Khvyl'ovyi shows that Ukrainian culture of the 1920s shares similarities with the eighteenth-century literary movement *Sturm und Drang* in Germany. The political and cultural decline of Germany following the Thirty-year War was stopped and reverted in the eighteenth century by a strong movement against the French cultural hegemony in German intellectual and spiritual life (*Geistesleben*), especially in literature. In Khvyl'ovyi's analogy, this recalls the political and cultural decline in Ukraine during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries caused by the growing hegemony of Russian politics and culture. In Khvyl'ovyi's case, the denial of Russian cultural influence, cautioned Kratochvil, should not be understood as the denial of Russia itself or an anti-Russian attitude.

Khvyl'ovyi explains that Ukrainian writers' orientation towards Europe resembles the earlier German writers' quest for new sources of inspiration. Like the German Stuermer and Draenger (representatives of the Storm and Stress movement, the "rebellious geniuses" as Khvyl'ovyi refers to them, got rid of unproductive traditions and found an inspiration in English literature, especially in Shakespeare's works, so that contemporary Ukrainian writers – rebellious geniuses too – could liberate themselves from the unproductive tradition of Ukrainian provincialism, that of being a Little Russian.

Cherchez la Femme

There is one aspect that sets the Ukrainian literature of the 1920s sharply apart from both the early modernist period of the *fin de siecle*, and the later forms of modernism of the 1960s and early 1970s, and that is the glaring absence of women. In her paper "Gendering Ukrainian Modernism: Images of Women in the Poetry of the 1920s and 1950s", Maria Rewakowicz, Assistant Research Professor at Rutgers University-Newark and Shklar Fellow at HURI, called attention to the surprising fact that "the period of the avant-garde twenties has so little to offer as far as women's

literary discourse is concerned." In the list of some forty writers whose works were anthologized in Iurii Lavrinenko's famed *Rozstriliane Vidrodzhennia* (Executed Renaissance) there is not a single woman.

Rewakowicz did a comparative analysis of the representation of women in the poetry of the 1920s and that of the New York Group of the 1960s and early 1970s. Poets like Mykhail Semenko, Valerian Polishchuk, Mykhailo Drai-Khmara, Maik Iohansen, Pavlo Fylypovych, Mykola Zerov, Vasyl Ellan-Blakytnyi, Ievhen Pluzhnyk, and Volodymyr Svidzins'kyi, despite the wide variety of their styles and approaches, have one thing in common when it comes to the subject of women: their representations are almost always rooted in a concrete reality, their images of women have either autobiographical provenance or correspond to the types observed in everyday life. Therefore, went on to say Rewakowicz, intimate personal accounts of love relationships co-exist with detached, occasionally parodied and ironized, depictions of urban existence with all its dubious mores. Women in their poetry can appear as prostitutes, sex objects, also as friends and companions. None of the poets devised or promoted a specific paradigm of female subjectivity, which is very much the case with the poets of the New York Group.

Love and women, Rewakowicz pointed out, play a prominent role in the poetry of the New York Group's male contingent, with each individual poet having his distinct vision of a woman: Bohdan Boichuk's is mystical, Bohdan Rubchak's classical, and Iurii Tarnavskyi's decadent.

Boichuk's paradigm of woman is that of fertile goddess and the feminine is approached by the poet with an awe reserved usually for the sacred and the unknowable. His response to the female subjectivity is, if not mystical, then certainly metaphysical, for through sexual love or carnality, whose essence is characterized by impermanence, acquires transcendental qualities.

Rubchak's treatment of women in many ways evokes that of Fylypovych's. Woman to him is first and foremost a Muse, someone who inspires, leads and protects. This classic paradigm, however, only partially reflects the complex nature of his poetic oeuvre. Rubchak's ruminations on love invariably betray existential underpinnings: according to him, loneliness and alienation are so rooted in human existence that even a union between a man and a woman (no matter how passionate) cannot alleviate them.

Tarnavskyi's woman is a quintessential femme fatale, who brings misfortune to her lover. But she also becomes an existential category, a kind of Sartrean nothingness, which cannot be avoided and must be faced. Love, by the same token, although quite banal, is at the same time ontological. Tarnavskyi's lyrical hero is doomed to say: "I love you" because he is simply man. The interesting aspect in their treatment of women, noted Rewakowicz, is that each male member of the New York Group managed to create a clearly defined paradigm of female entity.

Continuity and Prospects for Revival

In his paper entitled "The Laying On of Hands: Ukrainian Literature from the 1920s to the Present" Volodymyr Dibrova, Writer-in-Residence at HURI, and Preceptor in Slavic Languages and Literatures, Harvard University, looked at the problem of continuity in the Ukrainian literature since the 1920s. Continuity and tradition are indispensable for the development of every new writer, for as he argued, at any given moment in the life of each literary generation there are two simultaneous processes at work: one is the search for teachers or role models; the other, an adolescent rebellion. (Because, in the words of Ogden Nash "Children are unhappy with nothing to ignore. This is what the parents were created for.) There is a need for a laying on of hands, the process of transmission of messages, ideas, and

values from one literary generation to another. Securing such spiritual continuity is essential for the survival of every literature.

What happens, Dibrova asked, when that line is broken, the chain is severed, and there are gaps and craters everywhere, as is the case with Ukrainian literature? As a result of the repression in the 1920s-1930s, all the best artists were exterminated, purged, imprisoned, or spared only to be coerced into cooperation. The works of the best of Ukrainian writers were destroyed, banned and burned. To comprehend the impact of the bolshevik purges on Ukrainian culture one can try to imagine American literature without Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, E. E. Cummings, John Dos Passos, Eugene O'Neal, Wallace Stevens, T.S.Eliot or Robert Frost.

Yet the transmittal of the literary baton continued, at times with great delays, at times skipping a generation, but eventually catching up. Today Ukrainian literature, free of ideological and institutional constraints, has to deal with the legacy of the Soviet domination. In this respect Dibrova shared his view of how to maintain the oft-interrupted literary continuity today – "you have to come back to the area of rapture and you have to pick up where the previous generation left off. And most likely you have to face and tackle the same set of problems that were dropped unresolved by your predecessors way back then." Dibrova pointed to the signs of exactly such a gap-bridging, drawing parallels between Yuri Andrukhovych and Mykola Khvyli'ovyi in their openly pro-West orientation; their elitism and rejection of popular culture; Khvyli'ovyi's disdain for philistines (*mishchanstvo*) and Andrukhovych's for people with a Soviet mentality (the so-called *sovok*). Here Dibrova sounded a note of caution addressed to those who profess such elitist aesthetic today. What elitists, like Khvyli'ovyi or Andrukhovych do not realize, he argued, is that that this much despised populace is their natural constituency that needs to be won over. Without that victory Ukrainian literature has no future.

Speaking of the future, Dibrova concluded his remarks by painting an optimistic vision of Ukrainian literature: "There is a country in the grip of an acute, but healthy and long overdue, identity crisis. There is a culture waiting – in fact, begging! – to be discovered, first of all by Ukrainians themselves. The process of laying-on of hands is well underway. For example, Krytyka Press has just published a book of poetry which brought together three authors: Y. Andrukhovych, 42, who is, probably, the most famous contemporary Ukrainian writer, and two of his young colleagues, Andrii Bondar and Serhii Zhadan, still in their twenties. As long as there are living "literary priests" and those who wish to be ordained into "literary priesthood", life will go on, and the rest will take care of itself."

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