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The Ukrainian Literary Scene Today

The past decade was a time of intense change in the intellectual climate of the Soviet Ukraine. The roots of the change go back to the Twentieth Party Congress and Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policy. After 1964, when the political course hardened considerably, Ukrainian writers and intellectuals were still carried on by the wave of discontent released by earlier events. The discontent with Stalinism was coupled with a search for new values and ideas, and in the world of art, for new forms and expressions. Despite reimposed controls, this search in the 1960s was successful and left its mark on contemporary Ukrainian literature and literary criticism. During the last seven years it has also given birth to a widespread movement of dissent.

In order to understand the current literary situation in the Ukraine one must cast a glance over the past decade and detect the nature of the intellectual ferment during that period. One need not dwell here on those features of intellectual discontent with Stalinism which were also apparent in Russia, since they are generally well known. Demands for more creative freedom and voices raised in opposition to the sterile doctrine of socialist realism and party control over the arts were heard throughout the Soviet Union. In the Ukraine, however, the "thaw" had a distinctive flavor. National awareness—sternly suppressed under Stalin—reasserted itself, and a partial rehabilitation of the Ukrainian literature of the 1920s intensified the feeling of national identity. Yet—at first at least—the national element in Ukrainian literature was rather subdued. Not only because "nationalism" was still a dangerous label for those to whom it might be applied, but also because nationalism is asserted more subtly today than it was half a century ago.

The most notable literary event of the 1960s was the rebirth of Ukrainian poetry. A group of young poets who were called *shestydesiatnyky* ("sixtiers") came into existence. Among them were Lina Kostenko, Ivan Drach, Vitalii Korotych, Mykola Vinhranovsky, and Vasyl Symonenko. Their greatest achievement was the rediscovery of the function of poetry. Stripped of socialist realist clichés, the poem was re-established as an essentially lyrical expression of the individual person. True, philosophical and social overtones are occasionally present, but the poem is judged first on its artistic and linguistic merits, not on any ideology, which indeed is absent. Some of the young poets (espe-

cially Symonenko, Vinhranovsky, and Drach) show strong national sentiments. Their concern with the Ukraine is combined with the theme of nature or of social justice.

The popularity of the “sixtiers,” great as it was, was short-lived. From 1962 on they were attacked as “formalists” and treated with suspicion in the press. Symonenko died in 1963, Kostenko was rarely published, and the others in the group chose “safer” themes. Yet their impact on literature could not be erased. After their successful reinvigoration of the poetic language, a return to socialist realist verbiage proved impossible. They had kindred spirits in Ukrainian prose (Ievhen Hutsalo, Valerii Shevchuk, Volodymyr Drozd), which was experiencing a renewal.

That the new wave of poetry and prose rose out of a sea of mediocrity and conformism proves the vitality of Ukrainian literature. It also raises important problems in relation to the past and future. Older writers, on the whole, remained aloof from the strivings of the younger generation. Most of them remained loyal to socialist realism, fearing no doubt that the “thaw” was only temporary. A notable exception was Maksym Rylsky, who on several occasions before his death in 1964 openly supported the young poets. Another older poet, Mykola Bazhan, suddenly returned to his earlier, pre-Stalinist poetic manner in “Opovidannia pro nadiiu: Variatsii na temu R. M. Rilke” (“A Tale About Hope: Variations on a Theme by R. M. Rilke,” 1966). A posthumous publication of Pavlo Tychyna’s *Hryhorii Skovoroda* (Kiev, 1971) made available a long poem written over a period of two decades (1920–40). Early passages in this well-conceived but poorly executed “symphony” are of great power. However, the attempt to represent the historical Skovoroda as an active fighter against the establishment is not very convincing, unless one applies it metaphorically to a more recent situation. Another older writer, Iurii Smolych, indulged in a spate of memoirs about the 1920s: *Rozpovid' pro nespokii* (*A Tale About Restlessness*, 1968), *Rozpovid' pro nespokii tryvaie* (*A Tale About Restlessness Continues*, 1969), and *Rozpovidi pro nespokii nemaie kintsia* (*The Tale About Restlessness Has No End*, 1972). It is a pity that these memoirs are not as informative as they could be. Much more valuable is a study of the greatest Ukrainian playwright, Mykola Kulish, who perished in the purges of the 1930s (N. Kuziakina, *Piesy Mykoly Kulisha*, 1970).

It is not only the recent past which holds a fascination for the Soviet reader. There has been a flood of historical fiction, which was always a reasonably safe subject for Ukrainian writers. Some historical novelists try a more sophisticated approach, which often falls flat. A good example is Pavlo Zahrebelny’s *Dyvo* (*A Marvel*, 1968), which combines two plots, one set in the tenth and eleventh centuries and the other during and after the Second

World War. The focus of the book is the cathedral of St. Sophia in Kiev, its erection in ancient Rus', and its defense by a Soviet art historian during the German occupation. The work is replete with false profundity. Is the reader naïve enough to believe that the Soviets cared so much about the preservation of St. Sophia? Behind a calculated drive to show the artistic urge through the ages there is a hollow emptiness. Much less pretentious are some novels about the Cossack Ukraine. Roman Ivanychuk's *Mal'vy* (*Hollyhocks*, 1968) is set in the time of Khmelnytsky. Stanislav Telniuk's *Hraie synie more* (*The Dancing Blue Sea*, 1971) is about the Zaporozhians. It reads like a detective story.

Despite the gray mass of prose and poetry churned out by the old socialist realist dream machine, there are today clear tendencies toward showing more complex, personal points of view and using subtler techniques. The acceptance of greater sophistication is admitted by literary critics reviewing the latest poetry and prose: Marharyta Malynovska, *Liubov do zhyttia* (*Love of Life*, 1968), Vitalii Donchyk, *Hrani suchasnoi prozy* (*Aspects of Contemporary Prose*, 1970), Anatolii Dimarov, *Rozmaittia tendentsii* (*Different Tendencies*, 1969). Another interesting critical study is H. Syvokin's *Khudozhnia literatura i chytach* (*Literature and the Reader*, 1971), which reveals the preponderance of Russian books in Ukrainian libraries and the relatively little interest in contemporary literature among readers.

While Ievhen Hutsalo remains the best representative of the "village prose," with his *Serpen', spalakh liubovi* (*August, the Flare-Up of Love*, 1970), other short-story writers concentrate on urban life. Valerii Shevchuk, author of the novel *Naberezhna 12* (1968) and the collection of short stories *Vechir sviatoi oseni* (*Evening of the Sacred Autumn*, 1969), is the most promising in this field. A long story of his entitled—like Camus's novel—*Mor* (*The Plague*) remains unpublished. Shevchuk's writing contains a strong antidote to the poetic prose which has always been prevalent in the Ukraine. Another writer in this category is Iurii Shcherbak, a doctor by profession, who gives a good glimpse of the Soviet scientific establishment in *Iak na viini* (*As During the War*, 1966). His latest novel *Barrier nesumisnosti* (*The Barrier of Incompatibility*, 1971) has attracted much attention. Simplistic ideology, so common in earlier Soviet literature, is absent. In the words of the critic Donchyk, "The new approach to the depiction of negative phenomena shows itself in the fact that writers are not so preoccupied with a balance of good and evil, knowing full well that positive ideas may also be expressed by negation, by criticism." Indeed, less attention is paid to ideas and more to personal experiences. Two other prose writers with good prospects for the future are Roman Andriashyk, author of *Poltva* (1969), and Hryhir Tiutiunnyk, who wrote the long short story *Obloha* (*Siege*, 1970). Andriashyk's novel, especially, offers new types

of narration and characterization. It is set in the interwar period in Galicia and portrays very well the radical intellectual milieu in Lviv, without in the least sacrificing the complexity of human relations for political ends.

Among the younger generation of poets who are continuing the tradition of the "sixtiers" the following ones enjoy a high reputation: Borys Necherda, *Barelefy* (*Bas-reliefs*, 1967), Roman Kudlyk, *Vesniany biliard* (*Spring Billiards*, 1968), and Volodymyr Mordan, *Den'* (*Day*, 1968). But the best poetry written in the Ukraine today remains unpublished.

A signal achievement of the 1960s was in the field of translation. Classics of West European literature have been masterfully translated into Ukrainian, some of them for the first time. The translators are Mykola Lukash (*Faust*, *Decameron*, *Madame Bovary*), Borys Ten (Homer, Aristophanes, Sophocles, Shakespeare), and Hryhorii Kochur (*Hamlet*, Tuwim, Czech and Slovak poetry).

The impact of the 1960s on the contemporary literary scene was, above all, in the field of intellectual dissent. The first dissenters were found among the original "sixtiers," who often organized informal literary gatherings, sometimes in commemoration of nineteenth-century Ukrainian poets such as Taras Shevchenko or Lesia Ukrainka. Some of them may have been instrumental in smuggling out the diary and some unpublished poems of Vasyl Symonenko, an idol of Ukrainian youth at that time. These were later published abroad as *Bereh chekan'* (*Edge of Anticipation*, New York, 1965). Symonenko's stance epitomized the Ukrainian intellectuals' strivings for cultural freedom, social justice, and de-Russification. These demands became widespread in the eastern Ukraine and especially in Galicia and Volhynia, where nationalist sentiments were quite strong. To counteract this movement the Soviet authorities conducted a series of arrests early in 1966. Among those arrested were the literary critics Ivan Svitlychny and Ivan Dziuba, the historian Valentyn Moroz, and the writer Mykhailo Osadchy, as well as scores of journalists, artists, young scholars, and students. Although secret trials of these men held in 1966 (the year of the Siniavsky-Daniel trial) attracted little attention abroad, they produced an important collection of documents, similar to Ginzburg's "white book," by Viacheslav Chornovil, under the title *Lykho z rozumu* (*Woe from Wit*, Paris, 1967; translated as *Chornovil Papers*, New York, 1968). The most interesting part of the collection deals with Soviet justice. The literary parts (poems by Mykhailo Masiutko and Osadchy) are of little merit. Most striking is the contrast between these early literary works of Ukrainian *samvydav* (*samizdat*) and those appearing now.

The repercussions of the trials (most of the accused were deported to concentration camps in Mordovia) were widespread. Protests in the form of letters and appeals were made by many writers and scholars, as well as by ordinary

citizens. One other publication was smuggled to the West. This was a long treatise by Ivan Dziuba, *Internatsionalizm chy rusyfikatsiia* (translated as *Internationalism or Russification*, London, 1968). Arguing from Marxist and Leninist premises, Dziuba dissected the Soviet nationality policy in the Ukraine with fine scholarly acumen. Like Chornovil, he is primarily interested in securing civil liberties and cultural freedom, as promised by Lenin. They both call for drastic reform, not for a revolution. Dziuba's style, free of Soviet jargon, is very refreshing. His published articles on Skovoroda and Shevchenko are among the finest in modern Ukrainian criticism. Another dissenting literary critic whose works have found their way through clandestine channels is Ievhen Sverstiuk, author of a critical article on Oles Honchar's novel *Sobor* (*Cathedral*, 1968). Published abroad as *Sobor u ryshtovanni* (*Cathedral in Scaffold-ing*, Paris, 1970), it discusses many historical, sociological, and ethical problems in a reappraisal of Honchar's remarkable novel. Sverstiuk's more recent essay "Ivan Kotliarevsky smiietsia" ("Ivan Kotliarevsky Is Laughing," 1969) is an attempt to reinterpret the beginnings of modern Ukrainian literature. To him Kotliarevsky's *Eneida*, the Ukrainian travesty of Vergil, appears more complex in its allegory than scholars have thought up to now. In a brilliant argument Sverstiuk points to the true foundation of Ukrainian culture, which, he believes, is as threatened by Russian centralist policies today as it was in Kotliarevsky's day.

A writer who occupies a special place in Ukrainian dissent is Valentyn Moroz. His long essay "A Report from the Beria Reservation" (available in English in Michael Browne, ed., *Ferment in the Ukraine*, London and New York, 1971) alone puts him in the front rank of contemporary protest writers. Reminiscent of George Orwell, the "Report" offers a superb analysis of totalitarianism. The chapter dealing with the "cog," the man-automaton produced by the Soviet system, is particularly Orwellian. Moroz ends his essay optimistically. He claims that a great awakening has taken place in the Ukraine and that the authorities are powerless to suppress it. This was written in 1967. Since then Moroz spent several years in jail and in 1971 was once again arrested and sentenced to a new prison term of fourteen years. Between 1967 and 1971 Moroz's outlook changed. In the beginning he was chiefly concerned with human freedom. Later he focused more on national identity, until he became a fanatical nationalist. In 1970 he wrote clandestinely three short essays "Khronika sprotyvu" ("Chronicle of Resistance"), "Moisei i Datan" ("Moses and Datan"), and "Sered snihiv" ("Amid the Snows"). The central theme of these works is the reiteration of Ukrainian national identity and cultural freedom in the face of Russification. An incident concerning Soviet misappropriation of an old village ikonostasis, a Belorussian writer's too friendly feeling for Russia, and the lack of steadfastness among Ukrainian intellectuals provide

an opportunity for Moroz to preach the gospel of integral nationalism. He even attacks other dissenters (Dziuba) for not being militant enough. There is great vigor in Moroz's writing, and he may yet become a spiritual leader of Ukrainian youth, if the channels for reform remain blocked as they are at present. Moroz is not a bad poet (see "Soniachna chervin'," "Sunny Redness," *Suchasnist'*, 1972, no. 2), but his main strength lies in prose. There is not much clandestine fiction in the Ukraine. The only noteworthy work is Osadchy's *Bił'mo* (*The Cataract*, Paris, 1971), an autobiographical novel about concentration camp life.

It is underground poetry which best expresses the spirit of contemporary Ukrainian literature. Several of the "sixtiers" have found difficulty in publishing their work, and some of their poems have been circulated clandestinely. First among them is Lina Kostenko, although there are rumors in Kiev that her latest collection is to appear soon under the title *Kniazha hora* (*A Princely Mountain*). The Soviet censorship forces poets to publish underground because of two considerations. First, the critical boldness of the "sixtiers" was followed by a new wave of experimentation, which in official eyes amounts to "empty trickery." Second, there has been a noticeable return to "meaningful" and even civic poetry, and this new trend was considered dangerous because of the questions it raised.

Of the five leading young poets whose poems are disseminated through underground channels none is mentioned in the latest reference book on Soviet Ukrainian writers (*Pys'mennyky radians'koi Ukrainy: Biobibliohrafichnyi dovidnyk*, Kiev, 1970). Although officially they do not exist, their works are eagerly read in clandestine publications. All of them had some poems published in Soviet journals in the late 1960s, and some had separate collections appear in book form. The most prolific of them is Ihor Kalynets (b. 1939), whose first collection, *Vohon' Kupala* (*Kupalo's Fire*), was published in Kiev in 1966. Since then two collections have appeared abroad: *Poezii z Ukrainy* (*Poems from the Ukraine*, Brussels, 1970) and *Pidsumovuiuchy movchannia* (*Summing-up Silence*, Munich, 1971). The first of them imitates somewhat the structure of the old Ukrainian puppet theater *vertep* in interweaving three serious "acts" with two "intermedia." With great poetic virtuosity Kalynets evokes nostalgia for the past (the striking image of the dilapidated well in his first poem "Water Well") and reflects on religion, love, and the process of history. His latest collection, which he calls a "book of lyrics on contemporary themes," though dedicated to Valentyn Moroz, is free of overt political themes. The agony of suffering, imprisonment, betrayal (Judases), corruption of the spirit, hypocrisy, the poet's role, and some Christian allusions fill the best of his poems. They are usually laconic, pervaded by a spirit of confidence and peace. Mykola Vorobiov (b. 1941) is the author of the collection *Zolota lypta*

(*The Golden Lime Tree*, in *Suchasnist'*, 1971, no. 11). He recreates a world of his own time and place. Much more "relevant" is the poetry of Vasyl Holoborodko (b. 1942), whose first collection, *Letiuche vikontse* (*Flying Window*), was to have been published in Kiev in 1965. It appeared eventually in Paris in 1970. Dziuba was the first critic to point out Holoborodko's achievement as a lyricist, which is based on the revelation of the unconscious world of man. Images of nature and of childhood, reminiscent sometimes of Bohdan Antonych (1909–37), are part of that world. The feeling of wonder at creation only occasionally gives way to contemporary allusions ("we pray to the fire which is dead . . . , we want to lend our embers to others, but find only ashes . . ."). Altogether different is the poetry of Hryhorii Chubai, whose long poem "Vidshukuvannia prychetnoho" ("Search for an Accomplice," *Suchasnist'*, 1970, no. 11) is a meditation on the themes of guilt and suicide. His poems have a strong intellectual undercurrent. Vasyl Stus (b. 1938) is the author of *Zymovi dereva* (*Winter Trees*, Brussels, 1970). Less sophisticated than the other four poets, he excels as a lyricist, although occasionally historical and social themes appear in his poems (cycle "Kostomarov u Saratovi").

Underground poetry in the Ukraine is predominantly lyrical, although there is some interest in a return to civic and historical themes. Its main achievement is its revitalization of the poetic language and the enrichment of human sensitivity. Both are dangerous commodities under a totalitarian regime, and are therefore especially banned in a country whose cultural policy is geared to mediocrity. As in the 1930s, so today repression of the Ukrainian dissenters is carried out ostensibly to crush "bourgeois nationalism." In both instances, however, nationalism played a secondary role. To be sure, the assertion of national rights is demanded in the Ukraine today. But, above all, the fight of the dissidents is for the goals of civil liberties and universality in literature and art. The protest is essentially against both national discrimination and cultural deprivation.

Early in 1972 a new wave of arrests in the Ukraine reached its peak. Over a hundred dissenters were jailed. Among them were Dziuba, Chornovil, Svitlychny, Sverstiuk, Osadchy, Chubai, and Stus. The KGB made a determined effort to suppress and incriminate the opposition by alleging actual contacts with émigrés from the West (Ia. Dobosh from Belgium) and to suppress the underground periodical *Ukrains'kyi visnyk* (*Ukrainian Herald*). As usual, the Soviet press carried no reports of these police measures. It is too early to say what repercussions the latest arrests will have. It is not impossible that Valentyn Moroz might have been right when in 1970 he wrote, admonishing the KGB: "You only add fresh oil to the fire you want to extinguish." It is hard to believe that after the current upheaval in the Ukraine literary life will be quite the same.