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Author(s): GEORGE G. GRABOWICZ

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## Commentary: Exorcising Ukrainian Modernism

GEORGE G. GRABOWICZ

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a True Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.

(William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

For all its apparent limitations—especially a somewhat *ad hoc* and hardly systematic focus—and for all the deeper problems that are barely touched upon, the present discussion of Ukrainian Modernism may well be a significant step toward addressing the fundamental issue of Ukrainian literary studies. That issue is nothing less than the reassessment of the canon of Ukrainian literature. Given the two-fold historical reality that, first, the prerevolutionary sense of the canon of Ukrainian literature was hardly consensual or conscious (and more a *fait accompli* of such histories as Jefremov's)<sup>1</sup> and, second, the collapse of the Soviet order now brings with it an implosion of historical scholarship and a melding, as rapid as it is uncritical, of the Soviet with the non- or anti-Soviet literary-historical traditions (each in its own way exclusionary, dogmatic, and Manichaeic), we should, in fact, be speaking not of a reassessment of the canon but of its creation, entirely anew. The process, clearly, has already begun in Ukraine, with, characteristically, the primary focus on the basic reconstitution of the record, on simply filling in the “blank spots” (or, as some poets have corrected it, the “bloody spots”) in a literature devastated by seven decades of the Soviet experiment.<sup>2</sup> Understandably, too, the conceptualization of a new canon—or even merely a more analytical approach to literary history—is difficult; more than just working against entrenched dogmas and ingrained and largely unconscious stereotypes, it means, essentially, working without a sophisticated theory or methodology.<sup>3</sup> In the gamut of historical periods and topics, it is only the early Soviet period, the decimated renaissance of the 1920s, that receives concerted revisionist attention.

<sup>1</sup> Serhij Jefremov, *Istorija ukrajins' koho pys' menstva* (Kiev and Leipzig, 1919).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the permanent rubric, “Pys'mennyky Ukrajinjy—žertvy stalins'kyx represij,” in the Kiev weekly *Literaturna Ukrajinajina* for the year 1991.

<sup>3</sup> A striking example of this is the attempt at reevaluating Socialist Realism. Cf. *Radians'ke literaturoznavstvo*, 1989, no. 8, pp. 3–24.

(While this appears more an elemental than a programmatic priority, it is also undeniably correct, for it focuses on the first act, the paradigm of the Soviet degradations, and at the same time entails a cathartic and traditional, albeit still problematic, identification of literature with martyrology.<sup>4</sup>) The preceding decades, the period of so-called Modernism, though hardly at center stage, have also been afforded a degree of rehabilitation.<sup>5</sup> One hopes that the present discussion may contribute toward the establishment of a new consensus and, in time, a new canon of Ukrainian literary history.

An examination of a constituent part invariably draws on a sense (albeit implicit or intuitive) of the whole. In earlier non-Soviet treatments of Ukrainian Modernism, and in this discussion as well, one sees an implicit acceptance of the received paradigm of Ukrainian literary history—even while the manifest (populist, Soviet) values of that paradigm are roundly rejected. The issue of a canon, and all that it circumscribes, appears as a devilish (in the native tradition, Gogolian) enchanted circle from which one cannot escape unless one reconceptualizes—demystifies, exorcises—the intellectual space of the drama in question. At issue, specifically, is not just the fact, which is touched upon or alluded to by all the discussants, that Ukrainian Modernism was demonized by its populist, civic-minded, and utilitarian contemporaries and by its later, equally populist but much more reductive and vulgar, Soviet critics; more to the point is the demonization of the process, of the very mode of identification and definition, of Ukrainian literary history. Again, the division into Manichaeic opposites, into Soviet and émigré, or, even more basically, into “progressive” and “reactionary” forces, was but the surface, the setting for the morality play. The deeper structure, the plot and script, was the identification of literature and its inspiration and essence and meaning with the demon of ideology—and, even more significantly, not just with ideology in the conventional sense of a system of thought and values but in the broadest sense of manifest attitudes and positions, and, beyond that still, the exclusionary (as well as moralistic and idealistic) premise of integrity. One could, in short, be in either the camp of the devils or the camp of the angels, one could be either a “decadent” or a “realist,” or one could move from one to the other (and be praised or damned for it). But one could not remain in both; their marriage was quite unthinkable. For Ukrainian literature and culture, given its historical complexity and particularly its periodic and systemic syncretism, this exclusionary model of canon-building seems singularly inappropriate. On

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Mykola Žulyns'kyj's *Iz zabuttja—v bezsmertja* (Kiev, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> See Tamara Hundorova, “Rannij ukrajins'kyj modernizm. Do problemy estetyčnoji svi-domosti,” *Radians'ke literaturoznavstvo*, 1989, no. 12, pp. 3–7.

reflection, however—and here Modernism can serve as a telling and rewarding illustration—it may well have been inevitable.

Each of the three papers in this discussion addresses the question “What is Ukrainian Modernism?” with an eye to different specific problems but within an expanding focus, moving from the nature and quality of programmatic texts (the journal *Svit*) to the issue of intellectual and aesthetic legacy, and hence the question of the articulation and the meaning of modernist ideology, to, finally, the question of Modernism as a style and aesthetic system, specifically in prose but by extension in other genres as well. Some basic aspects tend to recur, in particular the opposition of Modernism/populism, which appears here as the major defining feature and point of consensus; others, such as the question of the historical and comparative context, arguably central to a conceptualization of the phenomenon, are barely touched upon. Both the opposition and the context merit closer examination. It may, however, be helpful first to reconsider some of the authors’ conclusions and the light they shed on the basic question of definition.

Danylo Husar Struk’s examination of the short-lived *Svit* is useful for the way in which it recapitulates not only the checkered content and fuzzy aspirations of this rather feckless journalistic venture but also the militantly parochial, indeed philistine, literary climate that assured its quick demise. If *Svit* was a barometer, as Struk argues, one must conclude that the pressure being measured was too negligible to constitute any weather at all and the instrument itself was not much more sophisticated than the tube used by Torricelli. The question that Struk’s dismissive (although, judging from the narrative, amply justified) conclusion seems to beg is: To what extent was this bleary effort representative of the phenomenon of Ukrainian Modernism as a whole? Alternatively, if it was not representative, if “even the three most talented members of *Moloda Muza*. . . were at best second-rate authors,” then the entire anatomization seems misdirected. In short, both we and the author share a profound, if seldom tested, conviction that—as with individual creativity—a broader, collective literary phenomenon such as a movement or school qualifies as historically significant only when it attains a certain (still to be determined) level of aesthetic achievement. (That this may at times be problematic, that a phenomenon like Socialist Realism—which by its very nature is limited in or bereft of aesthetic merit—may be historically quite significant is, of course, a separate issue.) To be sure, Struk does not base his judgment only on aesthetic criteria: quoting Rubchak, he notes the inability of the members of this stillborn group, and, presumably, of programmatic Ukrainian Modernism, to choose between the very antipodes they themselves conjured up—“art” and “social

duty.” Their failure is taken to be both artistic and ideological.

Apart from the basic issue of typicality or of representation—let us grant for the moment that *Svit* and *Moloda Muza* were indeed perceived as representative of Ukrainian Modernism—there is the still more fundamental question of what kind of thing that Modernism was. For, as much as we are chary of establishing “essential” features, it is indispensable to have at least a preliminary, working sense of that phenomenon.

For *Struk*, the defining features are the program, the ideas, and the attitudes of those deemed to be within the canon of Ukrainian Modernism; his very focus on a journal (and particularly on its role as an organ, presumably defined solely by its stated mission) exemplifies the paradigm of Modernism-as-ideology. The textual (in effect, aesthetic) and the intentional are taken as complementary and sufficient bases for defining the phenomenon. However, while the literary-historical object and its rather modest impact are highlighted, the question of the literary process and the crucial question—not the overarching one of “What is Ukrainian Modernism?” but, here, the more specific and pressing—“When and on what basis does Modernism become significant?” (significant at least to merit our attention) remain unaddressed. For, as things stand and as *Struk*’s conclusions certainly suggest, the “Modernism” represented by *Svit* and *Moloda Muza* is not significant in either the historical or the literary framework.

The other two papers go a long step further toward articulating this paradigm. For both *Ilnytskyj* and *Tarnawsky* Ukrainian Modernism is implicitly and explicitly seen as an ideology (a stance and a poetics) that clearly transcends its historical time and cultural setting and reappears, with essentially the same qualities, in the Soviet 1920s. While breaking new ground, these papers also incorporate and reactivate various traditional, albeit “canonic,” premises that, I submit, require basic reevaluation.

The main thrust of *Oleh S. Ilnytskyj*’s well-argued paper is to demonstrate an essential continuity between the pre- and postrevolutionary periods of Ukrainian literature and, by doing so and by focusing on the striking and complex figure of *Xvyl’ovyj*—the all-but-official guru of early Soviet Ukrainian literature, the canonized “founder” of its prose, later official *bête noire*, and now culture hero *nonpareil*—to discover in Ukrainian Modernism a vitality and centrality that few, and certainly not its various detractors, could have expected. His paper is also most direct and programmatic in stating the thesis of Ukrainian Modernism-as-ideology. While he notes at the outset that “prerevolutionary trends persevered well into the new political era, giving the literary front a semblance of ideological and stylistic continuity for several years,” his focus is exclusively on the former kind of continuity. Given the fact that *Xvyl’ovyj* was not just the major spokesman

and organizer, critic and arbiter of the Ukrainian renaissance of the 1920s but was also, arguably, its most avant-garde and productive prose writer—and thus the only Ukrainian writer of this period who could be ranked in stature with the paradigmatically modernist (as Tarnawsky subsequently puts it) Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, and Pound—it seems highly revealing that this essential side of him is ignored. And, since the issue is not Xvyl'ovyj (where such a delimitation would simply be wrong) but Ukrainian Modernism and its ramifications (for which reference points and criteria are being established *ab ovo*), we can only note how hypnotic the paradigm of ideology has become.

One of the first issues raised by Ilnytzyj's paper concerns literary (and cultural) continuity. What establishes it and what constitutes sufficient ground upon which one can argue it? Is typological similarity sufficient? Can one infer from Xvyl'ovyj's apparent recapitulation and polemical use of ideas formulated in previous decades a continuation of modernist *ideology* or even its impact? While the Literary Debate of 1925–1928 may indeed offer, as Ilnytzyj suggests, “any number of tantalizing analogies to the modernist polemics that occurred before the First World War” and while one may be disposed to accept the debate “not as an isolated event triggered by immanent Soviet circumstances but as the culmination of literary and cultural processes begun at the turn of the century” (such processes do, in fact, transcend literary and political periods and provide a matrix for them), what do these analogies, continuities, and similarities do for our model of Modernism? One rather unfortunate possibility is that, while expanding its range and again recommending it to our attention, they make it murkier.

One specific answer to some of these questions is that, while a continuum does exist, the actual cultural and social, not to say political, differences far outweigh the similarities. Xvyl'ovyj is not a Voronyj (although both were political activists and literary impresarios), and he is certainly nothing like the untalented and ineffectual *molodomuzci*. Aside from talent, however, and temperament (both his own and that of his age), there are the more fundamental issues of social role and the model of socio-literary activity. Not only did Xvyl'ovyj never attempt to liberate himself from a propaedeutic role, he avidly took upon himself (in a curious denial of the essentially oblique, questioning, almost solipsistically text-centered style of his fiction) the task of leading and exhorting, urging on and riding herd on his fellow writers. To be sure, there is interpenetration between these two stances, and the role of hectoring critic is made somewhat more palatable by ironic wit and whimsy.

As much as Xvyl'ovyj's style in art and life, and especially his last desperate and profoundly telling gesture, may echo an earlier modernist style, as ideologist (and this, to my mind, is clearly the lesser part of him) he is far removed from the modernist *Gestalt* as it appeared in the Ukrainian and, even more importantly, general East European context. Its most essential literary, as opposed to philosophical or culturological, feature—one that would be stated with greater or lesser militancy or, at the very least, implied—was a sense of the autonomy of both art and artist. Without that the notion of Modernism ceases to be coherent. For Xvyl'ovyj the ideologist (though certainly not the writer), this is not an issue. He is attuned to the social function of literature, to literature's role in effecting social change, social differentiation, and, ultimately, national existence. In *Ukraina čy Malorosija* as a whole, and, literally, in the very passages cited by Ilnytkyj, he clearly speaks of the earlier Modernism as a vehicle for such change and of Jackiv as exemplifying "the struggle against philistinism."<sup>6</sup> Thus, in Xvyl'ovyj's polemics there is no validation of the aesthetic in and of itself and no discussion of literature—whether of the past or the present—apart from its social, indeed political, function.

One could even go further and say that, while making positive references to Modernism as part of his polemics, Xvyl'ovyj, precisely as an ideologue, has much less in common with the Modernists than do their contemporary opponents, such as Franko. The reason, quite simply, is that the divide between the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods, the cultural and social space subsumed by each, is much more final and impermeable than both Ilnytkyj and Tarnawsky suggest. As a result, the whole tenor of Xvyl'ovyj's discourse, the radical politization of his thought, is such that, despite surface analogies or similarities, it shares little with the previous age and is, in fact, a very different language. If Xvyl'ovyj does offer an "apologia for Modernism," as Ilnytkyj claims (in itself a somewhat risky supposition), the content and the purpose he gives it are quite different from that which the Modernists themselves saw in it. And this leads us to the more fundamental issue: if Ukrainian Modernism is to have a coherent meaning, it simply cannot be taken out of its time.

The perils of identification-by-analogy, as signaled by the fact that Xvyl'ovyj's anti-*xutorjanstvo*, while shared with the Modernists, does not in itself make of him a Modernist, are also exposed in the example of Zerov. It is generally accepted that Zerov not only inspired Xvyl'ovyj's much more vocal and polemical attack on Ukrainian provincialism and his turning to "Europe," but that Zerov himself, through his own work, his

<sup>6</sup> Cf. "Ukraina čy Malorosija," *Slovo i čas*, 1990, no. 1, p. 10.

poetry, criticism, and translations, exemplified these values. If the values of profound respect for and belief in the autonomy of art, of its role as a source of strength and basis for a national culture, and of impassioned anti-provincialism and “Europeanism” are to be applied to anyone, they would, of course, apply to Zerov. (And, indeed, much more to him than to Xvyl’ovyj, given the latter’s political and social imperatives.) Yet Zerov is not called a “Modernist” but a “neoclassicist.” And, for all the difficulties with that term,<sup>7</sup> it is still appropriate for him—in large measure because “neoclassicism,” though defined by a range of stylistic features and values and attitudes, is firmly rooted in its time and cultural space. In fact, I would argue that one of its most basic, defining features is its principled opposition to Soviet mass culture, not only ideologically but in style and modality. This rootedness in its period—even if in terms of “dissent”—is what gives Ukrainian neoclassicism cultural resonance and specificity as well as literary-historical validity. In general, it seems clear (and I will return to argue the specifics) that such notions as “neoclassicism” and “Modernism” cannot be taken out of their cultural and temporal settings.

In his free-ranging and at times provocative paper on Modernism in Ukrainian prose, Maxim Tarnawsky recapitulates and expands some of the premises already encountered in Ilyntzkyj’s paper. On the one hand, as already noted, he declares that “Modernism is not a period designator. It identifies only a group,” but then goes on to cast doubt on the latter half of this conventional wisdom. On the other, he does reconstitute the notion of period (the first half was apparently also in doubt), except that in his view it is a period that extends from the late nineteenth century to the first three decades of the twentieth and has, therefore, two subdivisions, “roughly prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary.” What makes both these shifts and the short shrift that is given to various attempts to define Ukrainian Modernism somewhat plausible is Tarnawsky’s actual focus, which is modernist prose or, specifically, the issue of technical innovation within it. In fact, the latter is taken as the defining feature of the former. Within these narrower confines and as directed to those prose writers—Jackiv and Xotkevyč in the earlier period and Johansen and Janovs’kyj in the later one—who are taken as exemplifying technical innovation (it is not clear whether this category is to be fleshed out with others), various judgments ring true. The linking of the aesthetics of realism with the politics of populism in the earlier period and the tentative, “weak” nature of Ukrainian Modernism resulting from the overarching burden on each and every writer to effect the national

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jurij Šerex, “Legenda pro ukrajins’kyj neoklasycyzm,” in *Ne dlja ditej* (New York, 1964), pp. 97–156.

awakening are points well taken. The notion that “one of the key features of modernist prose is antitraditional technical experimentation” is also true, although I would submit that it, like any other value, inheres in a broader systematics of values. In turn, the attendant notion that “the driving idea of Ukrainian Modernism is the rejection of populism and village realism,” a notion that all three authors seem to take as axiomatic, is much less certain and is especially dependent on the meaning that one invests in the entity that must be seen as underlying it all, the populism, the “village realism,” and the national awakening, i.e., the *narod*. Ultimately, however, all these things rest on an adequate sense of Ukrainian Modernism itself, and in this regard Tarnawsky’s paper also falls short.

A basic issue alluded to, but not really addressed, in the papers is that of placing Ukrainian Modernism within the broader context. While passing mention is made by Tarnawsky to Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, the aptly and archly styled “legendary demons of modernism,” and while, for example, he concedes a certain influence of Nietzschean ideas (even if he judges their “channels” to be “shallow, narrow, and very muddy”), any real sense of a non-Ukrainian literary context is missing in his paper and is not even implied in the others. This is regrettable for several reasons. For one, Ukrainian literature, a product of a complexly structured society that was politically dependent, only minimally enfranchised, and split between the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, does share common ground with these larger *Kulturkreise*, in the West the Polish and the Austrian and in the East the Russian. Given the fact that Modernism is in many ways a quintessentially cosmopolitan, transnational phenomenon (especially in contrast to the *sui generis* ethnocentrism of the preceding realism and, in a sense, romanticism as well), highlighting even some of these features would have been useful. More specifically, and keeping in mind the implied goal of postulating a model of Modernism, it would have been instructive to see how that literary-historical issue was treated in Polish and Russian literature. And, even if one is relentlessly committed to focusing only on Ukrainian matters, it is of central import precisely for *Ukrainian* literature to remember that it participated in and was modulated by two very different literary contexts, again the Polish and the Russian. One can further hypothesize, and I believe the mass of data bears this out, that there are two distinct models of Ukrainian Modernism, the western and the eastern. (It is a testament to the deficiencies of Ukrainian literary history that this issue has never really been posited, let alone investigated. While even a preliminary statement of the problem is beyond the scope of these comments, one may venture to say that neither *Moloda Muza* nor *Ukrajins’ka xata* was genuinely representative of their respective variants, although *Moloda*

Muza, given its truly striking lack of talent, was by far the less important and less representative.)

The question of talent, of aesthetic achievement and coherence, is undoubtedly central to a discussion of Ukrainian Modernism, and any persuasive argument regarding the resonance, even the very presence, of Modernism in Ukrainian literature will ultimately rest on it. Judging from the verdict of these papers, that presence and resonance is muted indeed. It is quite telling that Tarnawsky, who is basically correct in focusing on innovation (I would only demur at calling it “technical” and suggest that it be qualified, if at all, as “artistic”), is obliged by his own criterion to expand the historical parameters of the concept in order not to be confined to discussing only Jackiv and Xotkevych. But surely the inclusion of Johansen and Janovs’kyj begs the question: by what possible criteria can one include them and not Xvyl’ovyj, the author of the paradigmatically modernist “Ja (Romantyka),” “Arabesky,” and *Val’ dšnepy*? As far as Ukrainian prose of the early Soviet period is concerned, these are no less and are probably rather more innovative than *Majster korablja*. But, if the Soviet period is to be considered, why arbitrarily stop with this trio? Why not consider (the divide between Soviet and pre-Soviet having been breached) such eminently innovative, cosmopolitan, and in their own way modernist writers as Petrov-Domontovyč (whose *Doktor Serafikus* was written in the 1920s and published in emigration in the late 1940s) or (with that wall breached) such members of the émigré MUR as Kosač and his *Enej i žyttja inšyx*? With the loss of historical signposts, the very notion of “Modernism” runs the risk of becoming one of those “semimeaningless” terms about which Tarnawsky seems to warn us.

To put the matter directly, I believe that Ukrainian Modernism—if that notion is to be meaningful and not confined to its loudest proponents, the bad poets of Moloda Muza and the mediocre to poor critics of *Ukrajins’ka xata*—must be understood primarily as a concept defining both a period and a style, with a flexible rather than schematic sense of a system of themes and, above all, values and artistic devices and stances. It must also be understood that it is precisely because of the deep dynamics of Ukrainian literary culture that Ukrainian Modernism was indeed considerably weaker than, say, Polish Modernism and was further weakened (this the papers in the present discussion touch upon but do not fully address) by the constricted and hobbled initial discourse on Modernism. At fault were not only those like Franko and Jefremov, who seem to have done their utmost to arrive at an unenlightened and obtuse position, but also those highly talented writers then living—Kociubyns’kyj and Stefanyk, Lesja Ukrajinka and Ol’ha Kobyljans’ka—who, while drawn to and in some cases quite

enmeshed in this poetics, did little to articulate it and thus support it. One could postulate that a fundamental problem with Ukrainian Modernism is that, from the first, it was held hostage to ideology, with the usual result: polemics and extreme positions confused the real picture and left a legacy of schematism and partial vision.

A period-and-style concept of Modernism, which basically now obtains in Polish literature,<sup>8</sup> would also help in reconciling seeming contradictions that come from an exclusionary and fundamentally ideological paradigm. If one is a “populist” or “positivist,” one cannot be a “modernist”; if Franko writes his diatribes (some of them even good-natured) against Voronyj and his ilk, he cannot then also write “Ziv’jale lystja,” or “Poxoron,” or, for that matter, that oddly realist and moralist-cum-fantastic “Jak Jura Šykmanjuk briv Čeremoš.” Similarly, the notion that Modernism connotes some kind of mandatory, exclusionary thematics—where, in order to be a true Modernist, one must eschew village themes (for these lead to the fire and brimstone of “village realism”)—will be revealed as rather flimsy dogma. In Polish modernist literature, the period of *Młoda Polska*, such writers as Kasprowicz, Tetmajer, and Orkan, for whom the peasant and regional themes predominate, are all members in good standing. It would never occur to a critic to excommunicate them on thematic grounds. And yet Stefanyk and Čeremšyna and Martovyč, each of whom in greater or lesser measure (and Stefanyk in great measure indeed) qualify as Modernists, are so excluded. Such exclusion, moreover, militates against common sense: if it was natural for Kafka to write about Prague and Joyce about Dublin, what is unnatural, i.e., intrinsically “unmodernist,” about Stefanyk writing about his peasants?

A more flexible, historically oriented model of Ukrainian Modernism will also show that there are more writers than one may have assumed who fall (although perhaps not altogether) into this category. Apart from those already named, there are Osyp Makovej, Antin Krušel’nyckyj, and Ahatanhel Kryms’kyj, and, looming large on the scene (though hardly always excellent), Vynnyčenko. There is also, above all, the greatest Ukrainian poet of the twentieth century, Pavlo Tyčyna who, in his earliest poetry, up to and including his pathbreaking *Sonjašni kljarnety*, was nothing if not a Modernist. In all of them, poets and prose writers, the modernist poetics was articulated in a range of attitudes and stances that have already been

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kazimierz Wyka’s *Modernizm polski* (Cracow, 1958).

noted, with the added indispensable common denominator of artistic innovation.<sup>9</sup>

The one thing this list will not provide is consistency: Ukrainian literature was not programmed for it and it seems specious in the extreme to search for it. Even the “pure” Modernists, like Voronyj or Jackiv, were hardly consistent, and, in the end, Karmans’kyj wrote good Soviet anti-Vatican verse. The obverse of the fact that all of the Modernists also wrote in a “patriotic” vein is that many writers, in at least some of their works, were of the modernist party without knowing it. This should not discredit them. Neither should it discredit the concept: it needs only to be refined, or perhaps deconstructed.

*Harvard University*

<sup>9</sup> A useful overview of artistic innovation in short prose is provided by I. O. Denysiuk, *Rozvytok ukrajins' koji malozi prozy XIX–poc. XX st.* (Kiev, 1981).